

The Return to Paradise

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You may not know this, but there is a tiny bit of confusion about the Torah reading for tomorrow morning. You see, tomorrow we'll be reading the story of the Binding of Isaac. But, in many synagogues, mostly non-Reform synagogues, that reading is reserved for the second day of Rosh Hashana. Tomorrow, those congregations will be reading the preceding Torah story, about Isaac's birth, and about his brother, Ishmael. But, some Reform synagogues do observe a 2nd day of Rosh Hashana, and most of them will still read Isaac's story tomorrow, like we do. So, what do *they* read on the second day? Most of them will read the story of creation. That makes sense — after all, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world. 5774 years ago tonight, God said, "Let there be light."

It's certainly one of the most famous stories in the whole Torah. And, of course, the story gets even more famous, and more intriguing, when God creates human beings. This part I'm sure you know — God creates Adam and Eve, or, maybe, God creates Adam, and then later creates Eve, fashioning her out of part of Adam. It gets a bit confusing, I'll admit, but never mind. The important part, for now, is that we get Adam and Eve living, of course, in the Garden of Eden. And, you know the rest — there's the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and there's this sneaky serpent who convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. She convinces Adam to eat, too, and, before you know it, God comes in, gets really angry, and kicks them out of the Garden. Exiles them from Paradise.

That's not the end of Adam and Eve's story — but it's pretty close, as far as the Torah is concerned. They have two sons, named Cain and Abel. And, that doesn't exactly go well. They have one more son, named Seth. And that's it. That's all we hear about Adam and Eve until they die. But, we're told they lived for another 800 years. 800 years! And, that's just counting from when that 3rd son was born! What happened during that time? Surely, there must be some stories about them.

Well, there are a few, and one of them, this one, in fact, is about their later years. It's about when Adam and Eve were well into their 930 years, all told, on Earth. After they had been kicked out of the Garden, they led fairly boring lives. I guess we can't blame them — their one adventure on the wild side had led to them being kicked out of the most perfect place on earth for all eternity. I guess that, after that, a quiet life on the homestead might seem like the better, safer option. It probably wasn't completely quiet, and certainly not easy. They had to learn everything for themselves, and there was a distinct lack of conveniences. And so, they fell into a life of raising the kids, tilling the fields, and probably struggling to survive. Just the way that most people, throughout history, have lived.

But, not at the end. You see, Adam and Eve must have known that they were coming to the end of their lives. Not yet, but soon. And so one of them — I kind of think it was Eve — suggested that they take a trip. Do some traveling. I mean, God had created this entire world, and they had barely seen any of it. It seemed like a good idea to wander around for a while, and see what they could see. And so, wander they did. They journeyed all over the world, seeing everything they could possibly see. They saw mountains higher than they had ever dreamt of. They saw seas as wide as their imaginations. They saw animals they had never imagined. They saw it all.

And then, just as they were tiring of their journey, and were starting to talk about returning home, they came across the strangest sight of all. A giant wall, behind which grew trees larger, more lush, and more beautiful than any they had ever seen. And, in the wall was a gate, made forebodingly, of the strongest iron. And, guarding the gate was an angel, with a flaming sword.

The sight was so fearful that they wanted to flee, but they couldn't move. Terror had them rooted to the spot. In their distress they called out to God, to whom they hadn't spoken in many years. "What is this terrible place?" they asked. And they were surprised when a voice, gentle as memory, answered them from all around. "My children," God said. "This is your home. This is the place of your birth. This is the Garden of Eden. And, at long last, your punishment is complete. Your exile is over. Come now, and return to My garden." The angel, and its sword, dissolved into thin air, and the gates swung open. And, Adam and Eve, didn't move.

You'd think that they would jump at the chance, and run through those gates as fast as possible. But they didn't. 900 years of living, most of it on your own, will teach a person to be pretty cautious. And, to be honest, the last encounter with God didn't go so well. Maybe they were just a little bit suspicious.

"God? What exactly is this Garden? What's it like in there?"

"It's paradise," God responded. "It's everything you could possibly want or need. In the Garden, there is no time. And, there is no need—everything is taken care of for you. No one gets old, and no one gets sick. No one is ever sad, and no one ever dies. It's Eternity, and it's waiting for you."

Adam thought about it. It didn't sound bad. He had certainly worked more than enough in his life, struggled more than his share. Didn't he want, didn't he deserve, an easy life at this point? Peace and rest, two things he had rarely known, were his for the taking. But then he turned, and looked at Eve. This woman who had been by his side, through it all. He noticed her stomach which he could see, even through her clothes, wasn't nearly as firm and as flat as it used to be. Life, and having a few children, will do that to a woman. And, besides, she had been little more than a girl when they had left here. He looked at her hands, and he noticed, as he always did, how her fingers weren't straight anymore. Kneading a few thousand loaves of bread will do that to a woman. She always made good bread, though. He looked to her face,

once so innocent, now covered with lines, each one telling a story of a hardship they overcame, or a tragedy they endured. Together.

Eve was looking back at him, too. She was noticing how his shoulders, once so broad, were slightly hunched over now. He had labored over every row in every field which had ever given them food, and every board in every house which had ever given them shelter. His hair — what was left of it, anyway — was silver gray. Raising a few kids will do that to a man, and losing one... well, that had left its mark on both of them, hadn't it? She looked at his eyes and noticed that, behind all of the wrinkles, and the dirt which would never fully leave his skin, there was the sparkle of intelligence and wisdom — a wisdom hard earned. Earned from a life of toil. Together.

She reached out her hand, and took his in hers. She gave it a gentle squeeze, which he gave right back. They smiled at each other — the gentle smile shared by two people who have loved each other, forever. And, without a word, they turned away from the Garden. And they walked back home. Together.