Next Dor Kol Nidre 5777: Lessons from Eden

Picture the Garden of Eden. Maybe you see a Medieval European tapestry with Adam and Eve covered modestly in fig leaves. Or a textbook illustration you recall from Hebrew school. I can still picture a mural that hung in the stairwell of my elementary school: a classic portrait of Adam and Eve, in vibrant acrylic paint, surprisingly well-coiffed, and smiling, fig leaves and all. What does your image look like? Lush, fertile, gorgeous, abundant? Life in the Garden was easy, when everything you could ever want or need is within reach.

Ten days ago, on Rosh Hashanah, we commemorated the birthday of the world; we reflected on Creation: everything that the Garden of Eden contained. We envisioned creation renewed. Eden encompasses the ideal of what the world was, and perhaps what it could be. If you close your eyes you can almost see it.

But, of course, we must live in the present, with our eyes open. We’ve moved on, and now it is Yom Kippur. Now we are faced with the world as it actually is; we realize how far we’ve come from that original Paradise. It can be depressing to ponder. Why are we so fallible, so unreliable? Why do we so often destroy our own chances for happiness? It seems a tragic loss, because it is easy to fantasize about a time when everything was easy. But here’s the thing: Eden was great, but we were never meant to stay there.

Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were the first paradigmatic people. Their story is a lesson for how we live our own lives. We are of the same stuff that they were, and just like our imperfect biblical role models who were kicked out of the Garden, we cannot stay in paradise. We were meant to face some struggles, to wrestle with our own capacity for sin—especially in today’s world; especially on Yom Kippur. And we have to figure out how to live well, beyond Eden’s unrealistic perfection.

For us, Eden is an idea—a vision for a world that we can work hard to create. There is even an ancient extra-biblical text called, “The Life of Adam and Eve,” that envisions Adam and Eve trying to return to the Garden! But that is not a part of the story that was canonized into our Torah.¹ That episode is not

¹ The Bible’s Cutting Room Floor: The Holy Scriptures Missing from Your Bible, by Joel Manuel Hoffman
contained in our holy books. This orientation is a choice—a statement. We believe that we were never meant to stay.

So here we are. Our world is imperfect, and our legacy is one of imperfect role models and messiness. And as we celebrated the world's birthday on Rosh Hashanah we were reminded of all of the work we need to do to continue the act of creation as God's partners. That we left Eden is not the tragedy. The tragedy would be settling for the world we live in now.

But where do we go from here?

They say, “When in doubt, go back and read the directions.” Now, on Yom Kippur, we can learn from our origins in Eden how to shape our journeys today. We can look to the idyllic Garden for lessons on how we can bring out the best in humanity in the real world.

Here are three lessons from the text of Genesis—the story that begins in the Garden itself—that show us a way forward. We can’t go back to Eden, but we benefit from its guidance. We can bring alive its wisdom in 5777 and beyond.

**Gen 2:18 Our Relationships are Essential**

*In the beginning, Adam was created—one human being in the Garden...*  
Then the Eternal considered, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helpmate like himself.”

- Not just a friend or lover, but a partner who will collaborate—we are meant to need each other, and to discern what it is that we can offer other people
- The *midrash* tells us that Adam earned this helpmate: If he was worthy, she would be a helpmate. If he was not worthy, she would be against him, to fight him. (from *Breishit Rabbah* 17:3, *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 12. See also *Yevamot* 63a) This teaches us that we have to earn people’s trust and merit their loyalty. Only then can we function as true partners.
Gen 3:8-11 We are Responsible for our Actions

Adam and Eve have done something they are not proud of...

At the breezy time of the day, they heard the sound of God Eternal walking about in the Garden; and the man and his woman hid themselves from God Eternal among the trees. But God Eternal called out to the man, saying, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of You in the Garden; I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.” Then [God] said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the fruit of the tree that I forbade you to eat?”

- Why did God ask where Adam was? The *midrash* tells us that, of course, “He knew where he was, but [He asked him this] in order to enter into conversation with him…” (*Tanchuma Tazria* 9) God gave Adam a chance to take responsibility. This is the first lesson in owning our mistakes.

Gen 4:9 We are Responsible for Each Other

Adam and Eve’s children take these lessons to the next level...

And the Eternal said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

- Another rhetorical question from God. And a rhetorical question in response. The answer, of course, is yes.

- The message of Adam and Eve’s life—from their creation, to their time in the Garden, and even to their sons’ lives beyond—is one of interconnectedness and interdependence. Adam and Eve might never have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge if each of them had been acting completely independently- they could have never influenced each others’ motivations and concerns. And Cain and Abel’s story highlights how interpersonal relationships can be infinitely frustrating and fraught with rivalries. But we are nevertheless responsible to try to understand our fellow human beings, and even to care for them. We are responsible for our own actions, and the way we interact with others.

These three quotations from Genesis represent a progression: people were created to be in relationship with one another; yet, as soon as there is more than
one person, that individual’s actions have a greater impact, either for better or for worse. The possibility for conflict is present, but the potential for cooperation, connection, and greatness, abounds.

This is the message we can take with us into the new year: to push through the complexities and challenges of interacting with other people, and delve into the vulnerability that nourishes true connection. If we refuse to let our frustrations get the best of us, we can reach out to something greater than ourselves. We can work together to join social movements that are meaningful, to get involved in our neighborhoods and congregations, to enrich relationships in our families of origin and our families of choice.

On Rosh Hashanah we looked inward, choosing *middot*, special virtues to cultivate within ourselves in the New Year. Now we turn our focus outward and reevaluate our relationships with other people. Let’s see if we can avoid the pitfalls our proverbial ancestors encountered in Eden. This non-Eden world is imperfect, and we cannot change it alone. But we can improve it, together.

We human beings were created in God’s image, to be God’s partners. The first chapter of Creation took place within the Garden, and now that we’ve left, we continue the work of Creation in our own lives, in the way we interact with each other in the world. Take a moment to connect to one of these lessons of Creation and envision how it will influence and shape your work of creation in this new year. Will you renew your connections with loved ones? Will you find a way of giving back to the community that is motivated by a sense of our collective responsibility? Will find some way to look out for others, in a way that also enriches your sense of self? The choice is yours.

*Take a few minutes now to connect with one of these lessons, and write your commitment at the bottom of the page.*