

Do We Want to Build Eden or Babel?
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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There is a beauty to our Rosh Hashanah pageantry. For example, I love how we begin Erev Rosh Hashanah services. Our Past Presidents walking in the Torahs side by side with our Temple youth. I adore that tradition. I always saw it as a message that the secret to our survival as Jews is that we constantly look to the future while being grounded in the past. That past and future need to exist simultaneously for Torah to be passed down and that all of us are the custodians of Torah. There's also the music and the choir. Our *nusach* melodies that get heard once a year and the sound of the shofar. The beauty of it all has a way of bringing peace and calm. But through it all, there's been this nagging that I'm feeling. Kind of like a buzz from my inner soul yelling at me that something is just not right. For weeks I've been wondering where its coming from and I found that it was from an unlikely source: our Torah Portion. But not the piece we read today where a father almost sacrifices his son. Instead, it comes from the conclusion of the story of creation. That is not to say that I'm okay sacrificing children.

Now I assume most of you know about Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and that's the story that has me bugged and here's why. I see the first few stories of the Torah not as being a historical record but more of a preamble to our tradition.

The story unfolds with God putting the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the center of the Garden and tells Adam not to eat from it. Eve later has a dialogue with a serpent that convinces her that it's actually okay to eat its fruit. The serpent does this by snaking her down a logic pathway that enables her to find a sort of moral passage that enables them to do what they want. The fruit then gives them a sense of morality, which they didn't previously have. They realized they are naked and get dressed. Once they make themselves decent God makes noise walking through the Garden and asks them why they are hiding, how they realized they were naked and what happened. Instead of taking responsibility for their actions they blame one another and are then kicked out of the Garden of Eden. By the way, while this is happening, there is a second tree, The Tree of Life, of immortality, that remains a secret to Adam and Eve. If God didn't want them to eat from the tree, God would have hidden it. Keep in mind that God only gets mad when they say everyone else is at fault.

The story of the Garden is to tell us that the Torah that we are about to consume contains the knowledge of good and evil, of morality. It's both our Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge and if we ignore it, if we don't take responsibility for the knowledge, we acquire we will lose paradise, but if we can follow a moral path, we can build our own Eden.

Noah and the Flood is another one of those foundational stories for us. One of the earliest telling of a flood story is found in the epic of Gilgamesh. Where the Gods are going to destroy humanity because of how humanity was treating the Gods. The savior builds an ark and survives. Our story is different. In our story God doesn't care about how we treat God. No in our retelling of the flood, God cares about how we treat one another. Because we treated each other poorly, the world was destroyed.

And then the third story is again about the ramifications of what happens when we don't take moral responsibility. The story of the Tower of Babel immediately follows Noah. In this story we care more about the tower than the lives of one another. So much so that, as a midrash tells us, we are stepping over dead and dying people to continue building the structure rather than caring

for those who need aid. God sees what humanity is capable of so the tower has to be destroyed. Society pays a price when we lift up our vain pursuits or selfish ideologies over others.

These stories serve as 3 warnings: that we will never be able to build paradise if we don't lead moral lives; that God cares about how we treat one another; and that immoral actions and behaviors will only lead to the downfall of society. It's as if God is saying, "I'm giving you a precious gift, a sense of morality, be responsible for it and all will be fine."

Now, why am I so unnerved by these warnings? The world of Eden is one where we care about the difference between what is actually right and wrong and are respectable to one another. The world of Babel is one where we care only about what we choose is right and are only responsible to ourselves and not others. And I think our world is looking more and more like Babel each and every day and I'm worried that soon we might not be able to correct it.

I look out at society, and I see a world that has become mean to one another. And not just mean, but indifferent to the meanness they see around us. We just seem to either accept or lament it, but not really do anything about it. And it's not just the rise of overly entitled individuals yelling at each other or customers yelling at clerks. Dinners being thrown out of restaurants for being rude to waiters or even people being dragged off airplanes because of mean or bigoted things they said to one another or flight attendants. It's more than that. It's the rise of gun violence and the rise of hate crimes and antisemitism. Hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level in 20 years. Not to mention that social trust has been on a decline. If I were to do a poll of the words that define our country would they be kindness, altruism, or care, or would they be conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, or despair?

As David Brooks puts it in his article, *How America Got Mean*¹, "We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein." He's telling us that our culture has become the civilization from the Tower of Babel. And we all know stories of how so many of us are facing an emotional, relational, or spiritual crisis.

As Brooks argues in his paper, the cause of all of this is that we are failing at moral formation and have essentially stopped teaching it to our kids. He points out that the teaching of moral formation isn't about making people angels, it's about trying to make them better than they otherwise might be. "to focus on the question 'what is life for?'" That our sense of morality has shifted from getting in touch with one another and instead getting in touch with ourselves.

Walter Lippmann, in his collection *Essays in the Public Philosophy*² argued that we are seeing the privatization of morality, that "If what is good, what is right, what is true is only what the individual 'chooses' to invent' then we are outside the traditions of civility."

It's what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls emotivism, that whatever feels good to me is moral. Luke Bretherton, a theologian at Duke Divinity teaches that "The breakdown of an enduring moral framework will always produce disconnection, alienation, and an estrangement from those around you. The result is the kind of sadness we see in the people around us. Young adults are spiraling, leaving school, moving from one mental-health facility to another." It's what's leading the cause of our loneliness and isolation that the Surgeon General just warned us about.³ I also think that it's what's making our politics so mean as well. So much more tribal. We have lost our ability to empathize with one another and now it's either you are with or against

¹Brooks, David; *How America Got Mean* <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>

² <https://ia800407.us.archive.org/11/items/essaysinpublicph00inlipp/essaysinpublicph00inlipp.pdf>

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

me. You're either good or evil and nothing in-between. Because we now define what is good or evil on our own preferences.

This is not what a healthy moral culture looks like. To me, a healthy moral society is one that has figured out how to balance the rabbinic duality of *yetzer hara*, the so-called "evil inclination," and *yetzer hatov*, the "good inclination." It's more subtle than the names connote. *Yetzer hara* is not a demonic force that pushes a person to do evil, but rather it's a drive toward pleasure or property or security, which if left untamed, can lead to evil. When properly controlled by the *yetzer hatov*, the *yetzer hara* leads to many socially desirable results, including marriage, business, and building up the community. *Yetzer hatov* says, "Good, you've amassed a fortune, now how will you use it to help others?"

For the rabbis, adults are distinguished from children by the *yetzer hatov*, which controls and channels desires and wants. Children, like Adam and Eve before the fruit, don't have that restraint.

The rabbis also warn that having only a *yetzer hatov* is not good either. They believed that nothing would get done, there wouldn't be a drive for social advancement, for promotions, for having families and building skyscrapers. We need to have both in our lives to live a purposeful life.

This is where each of us comes into place. I'm thinking about what we teach in our Religious School. To put it simply, we ask our students questions like "What's a good life, a life worth living? To whom are you responsible? What are our moral obligations? What will it take for your life to be truly meaningful? What does it mean to be a good human as well as a good Jew in today's world?"

In truth, a plethora of our High Holy Day liturgy is asking the same questions of you. It is also trying to remind you that the world doesn't revolve around you. That it's not about you, it's about how you interact with others. We need an era of moral renewal in society, but it won't happen until we have leaders who can stand against the moral bankruptcy that's all around us. We need leaders who can merge both *yetzers*, and who can take this new moral drive towards only caring about the self and turn it towards altruism. That's Hillel's maxim when he says that the Torah can be summed up in one sentence, "That which is hateful to you, don't do to your neighbor."⁴ That's our heritage and that's how we build Eden. Building Eden is not about building a perfect world, it's about creating a world where society cares for one another and sees the divine spark in everyone. Building Eden is founded on the understanding that life is at its fullest when we are at the service of one another. Hillel balances the *yetzer harah* and *hatov* when he says, "if I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?" I love that quote, you've heard it from me many times before, but I love that caring for one another makes you a "who" and caring for just yourself makes you a "what."

The snake in the Garden of Eden is a metaphor that represents desire. I'm sure each of us has been presented with a scenario where you wanted to do something you knew you shouldn't do and eventually you did it. You most likely didn't do it because you knew it was wrong and you wanted to be bad. You did it because you found a way to justify it. That's what the snake did for Eve. And that's what we are doing as a country. We are coming up with justifications to tow party lines or excuse poor behavior all in the name of righteousness. And we see what is happening and we don't like it. And like Adam and Eve we blame everyone else for it. Our liturgy reminds us, *Al Cheit Scheatanu*, for the sins we have committed. We don't skip the sins

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31b

we didn't do. We read them all because we as a society are responsible for one another and we are responsible for engaging with those around us to correct society's behavior.

That is what I call a Jewish theology for engaging in public life. As God and our tradition teaches us:

אל תפְּרֹשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר

Do not separate ourselves off from others.⁵ You are part of a community of Jews and you are a member of the larger society, don't separate from it.

לֹא תוֹכֵל לְהִתְעַלֵּם

You shall not remain indifferent.⁶ You are your brother's keeper. Don't ignore the plight of others.

אַמֶּת וְאֱמוּנָה חֶק וְלֹא יֵעָבֵר

That "Truth and faith are imperatives that shall not be wiped away!" That there is a moral truth that shouldn't be forgotten. That there is an actual right or wrong and that we must be responsible for these truths - for our Torah.

Societal change like this may seem daunting, but in the words of Rabbi Tarfon:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמֶּנָּה

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.⁷

We are commanded to get involved with the issues that matter. The issues that matter to us and how we feel about them should not be rooted in what our political leader is preaching. They should be rooted in our understanding of Torah and Tradition.

Let us not be guided by the snake which exists within every political party and every person's heart that seduces us into believing that all we need to do to be righteous is to point a finger at someone else. Let us rise above that and be guided by our faith and teachings of our heritage.

Ours is a tradition that teaches us the proper way to live and conduct ourselves. It teaches us the proper way to care for the vulnerable and how to care for those who are food or home insecure. It tells us we need to help those who struggle with their demons. That we need to have a care for those on the periphery of society. It tells us that we need to push back against a society based on trauma and despair and instead focus it on altruism, and hope. Ours is a tradition that calls us to organize our communities to function within these value structures. It's not just to know the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, but to be responsible for it as well. Choosing a life of blessings and structure society in that manner.

Rabbi Jacon Rudin wrote, "To ask of death that it never come is futile, but it is not futility to pray that when death comes for us, it may take us from a world one corner of which is a little better because we were there. When we are dead, and people weep for us and grieve, let it be because we touched their lives with beauty and simplicity. Let it not be said that life was good to us, but, rather, that we were good to life." Our High Holy Day liturgy reminds us that life is random, and life is fragile. Our liturgy asks you that if God forbid something happened to you between this Rosh Hashanah and the next, could Rabbi Rudin's quote be read about you? If so, then you were part of a Book of a Life Well Lived - a life dedicated to others.

⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:4

⁶ Deut 22:3

⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:16

If you leave here today and only remember the pageantry and music, then you have missed the words of our service that beg you to think about how each of us, myself included, have helped contribute to creating Babel.

However, as our liturgy also reminds us that change is always possible, we just need to humble ourselves and commit to a brighter future.

I am so proud to be a part of this community. The empathy and care we have for one another is tremendous. How we have clothed people from our coat drives, how we have feed people with food campaigns, how we have helped people into homes using political action or have settle refugees. Or how we have helped families on the brink get diapers and formula for their children. We have done incredible actions, but God always requires more and asks us not just to help people by doing one off actions, but by changing the world we live in. How can we help foster a just society that cares for the isolated? How we can support those who are hurt or feel forgotten? How we can help society turn towards an era where we continue to care for one another, not just through mitzvah projects, but just truly caring and being altruistic all the time? We can and we must return to a sense of morality that was first taught to us in Eden and create a world devoid of hate crimes, devoid of trauma and mass shootings, and where all of us know of wholeness, of freedom, and of peace.

– Amen.