

Bereshit: Insurgence in the Garden

Only one area in the Garden of Eden was off-limits to the first man and woman. Yet, as we know, they woefully could not help themselves, and ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik puts in simple terms what we have all asked ourselves at one point or another: “What was the substance of the original sin? *Prima facie*, Adam simply wished to acquire a little intelligence. Why was that culpable?”[1] He answers that they did not simply desire more knowledge but the very power to determine what is good and what is evil:

They themselves wanted to determine what constitutes a crime and what does not constitute a crime; what is culpable and what is good; what is morally deserving and what is immoral. In a word, man wanted to write his own moral code. This was man’s rebellion against God. Man was unwilling to submit himself to God’s commandments.[2]

Drawing on the philosophical work of the Rambam, the Rav points out that the consumption of the forbidden fruit endowed man with the capacity to discriminate specifically between good and evil, rather than between truth and falsehood.[3] The first man, emblematic of all mankind, sought to be master of his own moral domain by establishing his own moral code. He asked himself: “Why must I be bound by doctrines and practices that run counter to my own sensibilities and logic?” This was not only a rejection of the divine code for living, but a rebellion against God as King.

The Ongoing Rebellion against Heaven

This sin was not a one-off event but a paradigm. In a number of places throughout the world, this rebellion against God has been politically mandated and enforced. In the Rav’s words, “Marxism expresses itself through its denial of God’s sovereignty and its substitution of man’s sovereignty in place of God’s.”[4] In the West, citizens are free to recognize God’s kingship and laws, but cultural norms and institutions are such that the choice to acknowledge God requires swimming against a riptide.

Psalm 24, which is dedicated to God’s kingship, is fittingly recited on the nights of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, holidays on which we coronate God. The end of the psalm mentions two apertures through which God is to be let in, the gate (שַׁעַר) and the opening (פֶּתַח). The Rav suggested that the Eastern Bloc had shut their “gates” to faith. God was barred from these countries, and still is from some of their successor states. The Western Bloc had no gates at all, but the openings through which God could enter were tiny indeed: “their concept of divinity is so narrow, so middle class, so selfish and so superficial, that God does not wish to squeeze through this opening.”[5] Citizens of the free world “have rebelled against morality, against the fact that the human being must surrender himself to God and give God his full obedience.”[6]

(Re-)Coronating God

Rosh Hashanah is the day on which we undo the sin, so to speak, by accepting God’s sovereignty. We declare that God is the Creator who determines the laws of nature and the laws governing human life. One of the emotional climaxes of the prayer is the *piyut* (liturgical poem), often festively sung, about how all the nations of the world will come to recognize God’s kingship—“they shall give You a royal crown” (וַיִּתְּנוּ לְךָ כִּתְרֵי מְלִיכָה).

It is one thing to pay lip service, however sincere, to the notion that God is our true King, but it is quite another to live it. The demands of our King can be onerous, and that is when our fervent declarations of Rosh Hashanah are put to the test. Is God really our King? The Rav once related the following personal story on the topic of conversion in an address to the Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni Organization in 1975:

The Torah summons the Jew to live heroically. We cannot allow a married woman, no matter how tragic the case is, to remarry without a *get* (divorce document). We cannot allow a kohen to marry a *giyoret* (female convert). Sometimes these cases are very tragic. I know this from my own experience.

I had a case in Rochester, N.Y. of a gentile girl who became a *giyoret hatzedek* [righteous convert] before she met the boy. She did not join our nation because she wanted to marry somebody. Then she met a Jewish boy who came from an alienated background and had absolutely no knowledge of *Yahadut*. She brought him close to *Yahadut* and they became engaged. Since he was now close to *Yahadut*, the boy wanted to find out about his family, so he visited the cemetery where his grandfather was buried. He saw a strange symbol on the tombstone—ten fingers with thumbs and forefingers nearly forming a triangle. So he began to ask—he thought it was a mystical symbol—and he discovered that he was a *kohen*.

What can we do? This is the Halachah. A *kohen* may not marry a convert (*Shulchan Aruch, Even ha-Ezer* 6:8). We surrender to the will of the Almighty. On the other hand, to say that the Halachah is not sensitive to problems and is not responsive to the needs of people is an outright falsehood. The Halachah is responsive to the needs of both the community and the individual. However, the Halachah has its own orbit, moves at a certain definitive speed, has its own pattern of responding to a challenge, and possesses its own criteria and principles.

I come from a rabbinical house—the *beit ha-Rav*. This is the house into which I was born. Believe me, Reb Chaim used to try his best to be *meikil* [lenient in his halachic decisions]. But there were limits even to Reb Chaim's *kulot*. When you reach the boundary line, all you can say is: "I surrender to the will of the Almighty."

With sadness in my heart, I shared in the suffering of the poor woman. She was instrumental in bringing him back to the fold and then she had to lose him. She lost him. She walked away.[7]

Hope for the Best

Not everyone possesses as much courage as this young woman. The demands of Halachah are great, and sometimes we fall short. The Rav notes that there is an uplifting motif in our Rosh Hashanah prayers, namely, that Judaism has faith in man. "It believes that man will finally change, and man on his own accord will recognize his folly and will begin to strive for God and move towards God." [8] This reflects, in turn, God's faith in each and every one of us, because we are all endowed with the fortitude and resilience to amplify our positive, moral inclinations.

This is evident from the Eden story. After their disastrous downfall, Adam and Chava realize that they are naked and pick large fig leaves to fashion loin cloths and rudimentary clothes. The Talmud claims that these leaves came from this very tree with which they sinned.[9] According to the Rav, the act of taking the leaves of the specific tree symbolized that they now "identified with the hedonic pseudo-personality that they had created through eating the fruit." [10] That is to say, man and woman further distanced themselves from God and were self-indulgent. But given that they had made themselves garments, why does it then say that "the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21)? One explanation offered by Rashi is that this was real clothing. It was soft and warm, affording both a measure of

comfort and better protection from the elements.[11] One Midrashic reading, attributed to Rabbi Meir, reads “skin” (עור) as “light” (אור).[12] The Rav explains that God provided light for man and woman to illuminate their true essence, because God has faith that man will, in the end, demonstrate loyalty to his Creator.[13]

The Rambam expressed this same idea about our entire nation:

The Torah has promised that Israel will ultimately repent at the end of their exile and will be immediately redeemed thereafter. As it says, “It shall be when all of these things come upon you... You shall return to the Lord your God... The Lord your God shall bring back...” (Deuteronomy 30:1-3).[14]

We are not bidden in these verses to return to God in our exile, but we are promised that it will happen. If this is guaranteed on the national level, it is certainly within our individual reach.

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

Two complementary beginnings mark this time of year on the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah inaugurates the new year; its shofar blasts shake us awake so we can recognize and maintain a lasting awareness of God’s sovereignty and rededicate our lives to fulfilling His word. Around the same time, we restart the annual cycle of Torah reading with *Parashat Bereshit*. This Torah reading includes the tragic episode of the Garden of Eden, cautioning us against replacing the divine will with our own. It is our responsibility to surrender to God and His Halachah, the compilation of His royal edicts.

[1] Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:71.

[2] Ibid. Evidence of this can perhaps be found in how the Torah describes Chava’s perception of the Tree of Knowledge. In Genesis 3:6, we read that it was a “desire” (תַּאֲוָה) for her eyes and understood to be a means to enlightenment (לְהַשְׁכִּיל). The combination may indicate that Adam and Chava wanted to be deciders of good and evil in areas of their own desire. For the Rav’s detailed exposition of these terms, see Soloveitchik, *Emergence of Ethical Man*, 95–128.

[3] See *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:2.

[4] Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:82.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 9:83.

[7] Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:35–36.

[8] Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:73.

[9] *Sanhedrin* 70b.

[10] Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:35.

[11] Rashi on Genesis 3:21.

[12] *Genesis Rabbah*, 20:21.

[13] Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, 204–208.

[14] *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 7:5.