"*Bereishit*: Lessons of the Garden of Eden"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

The Torah was never intended to be a Science text book, and its account of Creation is obviously no more than the broadest statement of the order in which the earliest organisms evolved, from simple, single cells to more complex formations, from insects to man.

The story of that first man, Adam, is most intriguing. He was placed into the Garden of Eden, and given the solemn instruction, *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*, 'to tend and protect it.' He was to enjoy all its fruits, with the exception of two: the fruit of the tree of life and of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fruit of the first tree would give man immortality; the fruit of the second tree would transform him from a being programmed to do only good into one with a knowledge of, and inclination towards, evil.

Adam disregarded God's mission. Not only did he not protect the unique trees, but he appropriated the fruit of the tree of knowledge with a view to probing the mystery of good and evil. The punishment imposed on him - banishment from the Garden and loss of its benefits - may seem harsh, but it is one that our generation, more than its predecessors – can appreciate.

Like Adam, we have also squandered so many of the world's natural resources that we've had to undertake emergency conservation and re-cycling measures to safeguard our planet for future generations. And we've found ourselves in conflict with nature through our insatiable mining of her minerals, destruction of her rain forests, and pollution of her rivers with our domestic and industrial waste.

Because Adam – archetypal man – could clearly not to be trusted to live in harmony with nature, banishment became inevitable. And his offspring has suffered the consequences of that exile ever since, as reflected in the interminable battles with nature that we've had to wage to feed the world's population, to provide our industrial raw materials, and to survive the onslaught of nature's earthquakes, Tsunamis, floods, famines and pandemics.

One of the lessons of the Garden of Eden episode is what happens when man fails to attend to his mission of *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* – 'attending to and protecting' what is entrusted to our safe-keeping: be it our environment, our way-of-life, our religious and moral values, our heritage, and our family relationships,

Our society's philosophy seems to be that pleasure must involve change; that satisfaction can only be achieved by sweeping away the familiar and constantly replacing them with more modern and advanced versions, even at the cost of squandering our natural resources. We hardly have time to enjoy what we have acquired today before we are being told, by alluring and sophisticated publicity,

that those who are truly ‘with-it’ have already discarded that model for one that is much closer to the cutting-edge of fashion or technological progress.

We may suppose that we have Adam to blame for that, since he was the first to reject God’s call to him to conserve and protect the environment and to be content with the gifts bestowed. But, instead, he preferred to experiment, to taste fruits whose effects he could not possibly have anticipated. God had called it, ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’ Adam gambled on its fruit being ‘good’ for him, and he conveniently ignored the reference to evil. Perhaps that was not surprising, given that he had hitherto never experienced evil and could not have anticipated its consequences.

Every God-given soul, mind, and personality, is unique, as is the potential that invests us all. But, like Adam and Eve, no one seems satisfied with who they are, how they look, what they have achieved, or the direction in which their life seems to be taking them. And that dissatisfaction lies at the root of the problems that so many people take to psychiatrists and counsellors these days. They are obsessed with what they are missing rather than enjoying what they have. They do not appreciate the Garden of Eden they may already be inhabiting; in the form of the blessings they already possess.

To work and provide for one’s family is, of course, essential; but when work becomes obsessive to the extent that one becomes one’s spouse and family’s

banker, rather than their husband, wife, or parent, then the seeds of strife are being sown. When one puts office social activity ahead of spending time with one's family – especially during those magical early years of one's children's lives - then one is squandering the fruits of one's potential Garden of Eden. When one works harder on what one 'has' than on what one 'is,' then one's values are clearly skewed, and one's character flawed. The seeds of marital discord are often sown by the replacement of the 'person' who once held primacy in our lives by the 'things' that now hold primacy.

Ben Azzai expresses this so succinctly: *Eizehu ashir? Ha-same'ach b'chelko* – 'Who is rich? He who is satisfied with what he has - as it is said: *When you enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper* (Psalms 128:2).'

The instruction given to Adam in this context - *l'ovdah ul'shomrah,* 'to serve and to preserve' the world he inherited - may also be applied to our own microcosmic worlds, primarily those of our families and our work-places.

First, *l'ovdah*: We also have 'to serve', that is 'to work at it', by according priority and demonstrating love to our family, and loyalty to our employers and colleagues. This is subsumed under the overarching biblical prescription, *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamokha* – 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19:18), which includes serving the best interests of those who guarantee either our happiness or

our livelihood and security. In today's highly competitive work-places this provides no small challenge.

Secondly, *l'shomrah*: We have 'to preserve' our individual world-in-miniature: by protecting the persons, the feelings, the rights, and the happiness of all that inhabit it; and by ensuring that the Torah's mandated love is palpably and equally felt by every member of our family.

Family life has never been so tenuous and varied in its structures as in our age. A recurring psychology exam question is 'Describe five types of families,' the answer to which is 'nuclear families, extended families, single-parent families, reconstituted families, and childless families.' The problems inherent in this fragmentation of family life, and their negative impact on wider society and the strain on social and other services, are immense.

The poverty and misery of such a high proportion of those families is heart-rending. According to Aristotelian philosophy, neither an individual nor a society can flourish without being happy and feeling valued. The corollary of that is that unhappiness is incompatible with well-being or mental health. It also follows that, if citizens are in a state of deprivation and unhappiness, the safety of wider society is threatened.

So, when Adam was given the mission of *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* – serving and protecting his society – it was an all-encompassing mission which included the creation of loving and unified families, as well as just and fair societies and work-places wherein everyone feels valued and appreciated.

L'ovdah ul'shomrah. Two simple challenges that society throughout the ages has yet to achieve!

Shabbat shalom,
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