

Shabbat shalom! Here we are! On the other side of the high holy days and Simchat Torah, when we finished one cycle of Torah reading and begin again with the stories of Genesis, Bereishit.

Adam and Eve sit on the outskirts of Eden. The gate to the garden is locked, guarded by a fiery sword. For the first time since the world was created, the sun begins to set. Shadows stretch over the land. The air grows cold. In the darkening hour, Adam and Eve realize how profoundly unprepared they are.

Reading the parsha through the filter of this year, I was like YES!!! Adam and Eve!!! I feel you!!! Fires, floods, unnatural disasters abounding -- I feel like we're facing a whole new world. Reading the parsha this week, I felt like I was sitting shoulder to shoulder with our sweet first ancestors on the hillside: in stunned silence and disorientation.

Strangely, the parsha that we read this week, the first parsha in Torah, Bereishit, barely comments on their expulsion from the Garden. We learn that they were sent out, that the way back was guarded by angels and flaming weapons, but the Torah doesn't seem to care too much about the experience Adam and Eve in that moment.

It is in the Talmud, that collection of Jewish diasporic writings curated around the year 700, and texts contemporary to the Talmud, that we get to drop into Adam and Eve's moment. There are four times that I was able to find when Talmud discusses what happens to Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden. Each story starts the same: with terrified and bewildered ancestors, but each story imagines Adam and Eve's response differently.

In Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, a text that was written around the same time as the Talmud, the rabbis tell the story of Adam and Eve thus:

As the sun sunk for the first time, Adam and Eve sat and became worried. They said, "Oy! The serpent will come and tempt us again and destroy us." In response, God sent a pillar of fire that lit up the night and guarded them from all evil. They saw the pillar of fire and their hearts were glad and they said, "Now we know that God is with us," and they held out their hands to the light and blessed it with the blessing me'orei ha'eish. As they drew their

hands back from the fire, they said, "Now we know that I must divide between Shabbat and the rest of the week,." And so they recited ha'mavdil bein kodesh l'hol.

In Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, their terror is met with divine comfort. They experience their vulnerability but are given respite in the form of a pillar of divine fire, guarding them from all evil. Accompanied by this light, they bless. Their terror is lifted as they understand that they are not alone. Adam and Eve are able to draw from this experience of divine comfort to create liturgy, words that we still say as we leave Shabbat each week: the blessing of separation that allows us to move from the sacred time of Shabbat back into the flow of the week.

Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer imagines Adam and Eve comforted by faith in the dark times: they trust that we are met by a loving force of protection, even in the hardest and most destabilizing moments.

The story of Adam and Eve is retold twice in a single daf, in a single page of Talmud in tractate Avodah Zara. In the first story, we read:

When Adam and Eve saw the days shortening, they said: "Oy! Perhaps it is on account of my sin that the world is becoming dark and it is returning to a state of chaos! This must be the death penalty that heaven decreed upon me." They sat for eight days of fasting and prayer. When they saw that the days were lengthening again, they said: "This must be the way of the world." They went and celebrated eight days of festival. The next year, they established eight days of festival for all.

In this story, Adam and Eve understand the darkness as a punishment for their bad deeds. They sit before the darkening sky and fast and pray, for himself and for the world that they fear is returning to a state of *tohu va'vohu* - of chaos and formlessness.

But, as they sit, the days grow longer and their terror turns to joy. With gratitude, they organize an 8-day festival of lights. Chanukah!

The rabbis, just a few lines later, retell the story.

When Adam and Eve saw the sun setting, they said, “Oy! it is because I have sinned that the world around me is becoming dark; the universe will now become again void and without form. This then is the death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!” So Adam and Eve sat up all night fasting and weeping. When dawn broke, they said, “This is the way of the world!” They then arose and gave thanks.

In both of the stories told in Masechet Avodah Zara, Adam and Eve pause and mourn in the face of the unknown. They stay still and come to terms with their new paradigm: they are able to accept that the sun rising and setting is the new normal, and create a calendar with holidays and times to give thanks.

In a final telling of the story, in tractate Pesachim,

Adam and Eve sit, terrified, in the dark. In response, the Holy One grants Adam and Eve creative knowledge similar to divine knowledge, and they learn to bring two rocks and rub them against each other, and the first fire emerged from them.

In this final telling, God responds to human terror by giving Adam and Eve the power to bring fire. Rather than imagining darkness and light as being divinely given, in this final telling, humans are given the power to create and care for themselves. This power is dangerous -- fire, as we are so acutely aware, can both keep us warm and safe in the cold and can devastate our communities when out of control. In this story, they are given the power to choose: to choose to bring light even in dark times.

Why did the rabbis need to do all this storytelling? When Torah was silent on this question, why did the rabbis tell and retell the experience of Adam and Eve?

Let's remember that the Talmud was written by Jews who were experiencing a series of displacements. Talmud is our diaspora Torah. And so the rabbis who use their words to create a travelling homeland in Talmud return again and again to this moment of Adam and Eve outside the garden. They use this parable to discern how best to start again, offering not a single

strategy for coping, but a multiplicity of responses, all valid, all powerful. In this way, our rabbis give us glimpses into their own responses to grief and disorientation, into their multiple strategies of staying resilient through profoundly distressing times.

Through the imaginations of the rabbis, we see Adam and Eve pause and mourn, we see them take comfort in faith, we see them not lose heart and offer thanks through ritual and prayer, and we see them innovate, refusing to be powerless, continuing to create in the face of terror and uncertainty.

Through imagining and reimagining this story, the rabbis help us understand our own terrors in a world of displacement, disorientation and loss. They urge us to ask the questions: How do we face the fire? How do we face the flood? How do we face the senseless violence and lack of clarity? How do we keep making space for movement, for love, for joy in unstable times?

Like Adam and Eve, we have so many options when confronting the unknown: we can stay still, weep and fast. We can pay watchful attention to the world around us. We can seek to innovate: finding new teachers, new strategies. We can give what we can to those who have lost and try to strengthen the communal structures around us to prepare for the next disaster. Let us be forgiving to ourselves and our instinctual responses. Let us remember to make space in our lives for joy: to pray, sing, dance, breathe; to celebrate our remarkable young people. Even as we struggle against the abundant suffering surrounding us, let us celebrate the sparks of light shining in the darkness.

I have a feeling that I'm going to be returning to these stories of Adam and Eve again and again over the coming months, imagining them on the hillside: locked-up garden behind them and before them, the possibility to courageously face the dark and unknown world.

Shabbat shalom!