

Bereishit 5778

One summer, while driving on the freeway in Los Angeles, I began to see advertisements on enormous billboards for two new television shows on cable. The ads featured the lead actors from the two shows, both naked (depicted within the bounds of taste, of course), with the man being offered an apple and the woman wrapped in a long snake. I thought to myself: Would it have ever occurred to the rabbis of the Talmud that one day we would have 50 foot high depictions of Adam and Eve hovering over the 405 Freeway as TV ads? Probably not, but I'm not sure if it is their loss or ours.

There are few images from the Torah that are used as frequently as are depictions of Adam and Eve. What else can compare? How often do you really see Abraham, Sarah, or the rest of our early ancestors used as metaphors in stories or advertising? Despite their literary and religious importance, they get very little play in popular culture. Only Noah and his ark can possibly give Adam and Eve a run for their money when it comes to public exposure (pardon the pun). The reason has to do not only with our mental image of naked people in *gan eden*, but also with the themes that emerge from their story: Disobedience against God, banishment from Eden, sexual awareness and the relative power between men and women.

The Torah and its later commentators saw the relationship between the sexes explained by the events in *gan eden*. They see the story of Adam and Eve as explaining how we came to be who we are: Why must men and women, each in their own way, labor? Because of what Adam and Eve did. Why are men dominant over women? Because of what Eve did. But the story has important implications for us if we see it not only as an explanation but as a justification for male dominance. The question for us is: Does the Torah teach us something we already know, that in

most societies over the course of human history men have had, or have been understood to have, the upper hand? Or does it create a new reality that did not exist before, and thus establish a model for how things *should* be?

In order to answer that question, I have to cite the words of Ramban, a 12th century sage from Spain, at length. In his Torah commentary, Ramban quotes the earlier comments of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and then rejects them as not properly interpreting the text:

‘Yet your urge shall be for your husband: For sex, and moreover you do not have the brazenness to demand it aloud, but rather he will rule over you, everything is from him and not from you,’ the words of Rashi. But he is not correct, for this is praise for a woman, as they stated ‘This is a positive characteristic among women.’ [1] And Rabbi Abraham (Ibn Ezra) stated: ‘Your urge: Your obedience. The reason that you will obey all that he commands you is that you are in his domain to perform his will.’ But I have only found the terminology of ‘urging’ as concerns sexual desire or lust. In my view, what is correct is that God punished her so that she would yearn terribly for her husband, not that she would feel the pain of pregnancy and birth, but that *he* would regard *her* like a servant. But it is not customary for the servant to desire to acquire a master for himself, but rather gladly flees from him. Thus this is measure for measure, as she too gave to her husband for him to eat according to her command, and was punished so that she would no longer command him, but he would command her concerning his every desire.

Wow. There is a lot there. The most fascinating aspect of Ramban’s comments is his understanding of human sexuality. In these few verses, he sees an explanation for the ‘facts’ that 1) Women yearn sexually for their husbands; 2) women don’t customarily ask for sex; 3) men treat women as servants; 4) unlike other servants, woman don’t flee from their ‘masters’ but rather yearns for them; 5) just as the original Eve commanded the original Adam to eat, now ‘Adam,’ meaning every man, commands ‘Eve,’ meaning every woman. The punishment is a case of measure for measure, fitting the transgression exactly.

But all of those ‘facts’ deserve much more discussion. Is it true that women yearn for sex with their husbands? Is it so that they don’t ask for sex with words? Is it accurate that men treat women as servants? Do women themselves feel like servants who yet yearn for the master? We

cannot take the time to address each of these issues now, but I want to share some thoughts with you from my own perspective.

First of all, the Torah certainly does want to explain why things are the way they are. That is one of the themes of Genesis generally, and it is certainly so concerning Adam and Eve. But as to the question of justification for how things should be, I am not convinced of the Torah's or the rabbis' desire to prop up existing power relationships. When it wants to do that, it knows how. Many is the time that the text will tell us that a law, or a class of people such as the priesthood or the judiciary, should be obeyed. 'This is an eternal law for you' is language the Torah is very much willing to deploy, but does not do so here. That is one reason that I do not read Bereishit as telling us how men and women ought to relate, but how it sees them as relating. It provides a social observation and an explanation.

In addition, because I do not generally experience life as men dominating women, though that is certainly a reality in some relationships, the verses cannot possibly justify anything for me. Unless I am already living a life where that kind of dominance is normative, I cannot read the text as supporting that dominance. I can only read the text for what it can teach me about reality, not about the theoretical. When I read that a woman's urge is for her husband, despite the pain of childbirth, I read that as reality. Humans are sexual beings; childbirth and its pains complicate that reality, but do not alter it. I am aware that some dominant men, in our culture and in others, do feel that their dominance is natural, right or God-given, and I know that reading the account of Adam and Eve can provide such people with a feeling of justification. But their reality is not mine, and I have no problem arguing that Genesis teaches *about* the human condition, but does not *dictate* that condition.

The Torah depicts Adam and Eve's punishment as an illustration of the interlocking themes of desire and the urge for control. Ramban taught us that Eve's fateful command to Adam to eat the fruit resulted in her becoming the one commanded. That is a way of saying that, *from its point of view*, since the time of Eve, women have been under the control of men, and of explaining why that is. From my point of view, I don't require an explanation of a dominance I don't experience, but I do appreciate its insights into the connection between desire and control.

It is the function of art to use specific stories to illustrate universal truths, so when the Torah can create a parable that explains all of these things in an artful way, I truly appreciate it. I do experience a world in which women indicate sexual desire differently than men, not as explicitly as men. I experience a world in which women know the pain that will result from childbirth, yet go on having sexual relations with their husbands. I also *want* to experience a world in which people's sins are revisited upon them, as Ramban suggests Eve's sin is revisited upon her. The Torah is teaching us what life is and who we are, from its perspective, using the account of Adam and Eve. As we begin to read the Torah again this Shabbat, it again reminds us that its word is truth.

Shabbat shalom.