

**Failure in the Garden**  
Sermon for Erev Yom Kippur, 2013/5774  
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While waiting in the checkout line at Trader Joe's in New York one day this summer, I glanced at the display of beers. Along with the usual brand names, one screamed out in bold letters, "Original Sin." "What a clever name for the temptations of alcohol on a hot summer day!" I thought. So I looked a little more carefully and found it was even more clever, for it read, "Premium Original Sin Apple Cider." Not beer. Apple cider, as in Adam and Eve eating that fateful apple in the Garden of Eden! As you will no doubt recall, one bite of forbidden fruit and they discovered their sexuality. Teenagers, acting out an ancient genetic program, think that means finding the path to paradise. Genesis (perhaps written by cynical old married people), says that fateful nibble of sexual knowledge got them *expelled* from paradise. "*Premium Original Sin*," indeed! The extra cost was an eternity of men and women getting ourselves in trouble, generation after generation.

Now if you are a serious student of Genesis you may object to two points, the first trivial but fun, the second more momentous theologically. #1: Genesis actually does not say that Adam and Eve ate an apple. They ate the unnamed fruit of The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. I do not know where the tradition of Western art picked up the idea that it was an apple, but that is how all the great painters portray it. The rabbis in the Midrash suggest that perhaps it was wheat, or figs (they cover themselves

with fig leaves right afterwards) or squeezed grapes (which I think means they got drunk)!

The bigger point, though, is that while we can call this the first sin, add capital letters and you have Original Sin--a Christian spin which implies that our deepest human failings derive from our fleshly urges, starting with lust. There is something to that: sex gets lots of us in trouble. --Ask our legislators in Austin this past year! --All those unwanted pregnancies, and we still cannot agree on the wisdom of planned--as opposed to "collateral damage"--pregnancy, much less when or if abortion is a reasonable solution. But that is another sermon....

As we Jews read the story, it is not only sex Genesis was talking about, or even only fleshly as opposed to more subtle urges to excess. Other powerful urges dog us. Most of us dream of having at least a little more money--and a lot more would be better. When the lottery jackpot gets high, otherwise sensible people buy tickets. How much wealth is enough? Even the richest seem to define "enough" as a little more than they have. Poverty does produce a lot of misery. But money is no guarantee of happiness. Power and reputation obsess us, too--nearly all of us, not just the politicians, entertainers and other celebrities. The apes and monkeys with whom we share common ancestry never stop jockeying for power and prestige in their little groups--and neither do we, leading to insecurity, frustration and endless gossip, whether in families, offices or even synagogues. We wound one another not only over big issues, but over little ones, over control and ego, too.

As we approach the end of these Yom Kippur spiritual exertions tomorrow we shall read a meditation that says:

The passions that You Yourself (O God) have made a part of me  
have kept me rapt within the passing scene,  
and how, enslaved to passions as I've been,  
a prey to fierce and fiery hungers,  
how, I ask, could I have served You as I needed to? ...  
My nature has pursued me, possessed me, driven and flayed me,  
a doubtful friend from childhood on. (pp. 477-8)

The classic rabbis attributed all of this to our *yetzer hara*, “the evil inclination,” the selfish, competitive and lustful urges which we may learn to control in significant measure, but which never go away—often giving rise to our disobedience, willfulness and stubbornness. Christianity didn't quite get it wrong, they just limited it too much focusing on the physical! We are so often self-centered! As we grow up, we learn sharing with siblings first (if you've got little ones, you know it doesn't come naturally!), then with other family and friends, and ultimately--we teach this in Religious School, but some never quite get it—we learn the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, more generalized generosity. The Jewish sages insist that our selfish passions are all good things in moderation. Sex. Food. Money. Success. Honors. They are great if we come by them licitly. We obsess over them way too much. I would tell you how to stop obsessing over such things, except I have never figured that out, either! Which is why we have good

inclinations, the *yetzer tov*, to balance the *yetzer hara*. We cannot stop thoughts from springing into our minds. We can usually decide which may be acted upon and which should be repressed. Enjoy all of life's pleasures, says Judaism, as by-products of honorable living. We learn self-control as we mature—or at least we should; it is a lifelong process. Our desires are healthy until we let them control us rather than our controlling them.

The sins and failures we must repent this day are mostly matters of skewed priorities—are they not?—failures to do what we should have done more than blatant offenses to society. Start with 5-600 people and there must be a thief or two out there, and certainly an adulterer. But we have nearly all hurt others' feelings, failed to volunteer—or show up when we did—for something we claim is important to us. We all snap angrily at parents, children, spouses, friends, and coworkers. We pay lip service to the supreme importance of family. But do we show up at the major family occasions, and at the lesser occasions when children and grandchildren need to see us? Remember Mel Brooks' 2000 year-old man with thousands of children and grandchildren—and not one of them calls! Do we call as often as we should?

Our *machzor* will also go on at some length in the morning about sins against ourselves. If over-eating or under-exercising are sins—and Judaism does teach that we are created in God's image and thus required to take care of ourselves—lots of us are in trouble. But the more serious-sounding sins are things like "tolerating in ourselves the

sins we condemn in our children, or parents;" and "withholding love from those we claim to love."

Then there are our failures of citizenship. No need to raise your hands, but how many of us do you suppose have tossed some litter out the car window this year? How many, far more ominously, are just as apt as George Zimmerman to figure that a young person walking alone at night is up to no good--especially if he is Black?

More about government and society in the morning. Tonight I want to stay personal.

What else went wrong in your life this year? That a business deal flopped, or a job soured, is usually no sin. We cannot control all the variables, cannot predict the future. Even the marriage that went bad, or the child that got into trouble: if circumstances and events spin out of control the blame is not only ours. I like what Opra Winfrey told the Harvard graduating class this past Spring:

If you are consistently pushing yourself higher, higher, the law of averages--not to mention the myth of Icarus--predicts that you will at some point fall. And when you do, I want you to know this, remember this: There is no such thing as failure. Failure is just life trying to move us in another direction. . . . The key to life is to develop an internal, moral emotional GPS that can tell you which way to go.

The issue is not that we fall short of our goals, or even that we do not live up to our ideals as consistently as we should. That just shows that we are human. The issue is, first, did we really try? And, second, did we learn anything in the process of falling on our faces? You can't control all the variables: you won't save a marriage that only one spouse wants to work on. You will not suddenly turn into the poster child for generosity, or warmth, after years of being surly, or fearing to express love. But we can do better, can hurt or neglect loved ones less, can stop cutting ethical corners. The tough thing--which is why we set aside this whole day for it--is to stop rationalizing, to stop blaming everything that is wrong in our lives on others. Sometimes, of course, we are victims. Still, it is not others who are keeping us from being the people we would like to be. We should set a goal for ourselves and resolve to score ourselves not a year hence, but perhaps the first of every month, or--better--each Shabbat.

Adam and Eve, everyman and everywoman, failed big-time in the Garden of Eden. Having paid the price, however, they learned from their mistakes. So can we. There would be love and satisfactions in their lives. There can be more of it in each of our lives. But we will probably have to earn it. There would be work in their lives--that is honorable, and we would likely be bored without it. There would also be *tzures*--problems aplenty. But still, through it all, challenges: opportunities to make something of themselves.

How shall we flawed creatures who will never achieve perfection define success in life? When we define success and happiness quantitatively, wanting more and more

of every pleasure and sign of success, we will always be frustrated. And the corollary of that is that when we demand of family or friends that they be beyond criticism, we will always be frustrated. Rather let us set out to earn respect from people, God and ourselves. Small steps, not giant leaps, are the way forward. We can get there--or at least way closer! Even our failures can earn us wisdom. Let happiness be the byproduct, not the goal, of life. The goal is honorable living, serving God and others. As our *machzor* will phrase it at Yizkor tomorrow, pondering the failures we are trying to get over: we go "from defeat, to defeat, to defeat, until we see that holiness lies not in some high place along the way, but in having made the journey, stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage." *Keyn y'hi ratzon. Amen.*