

How We Fall into Sin

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While Christianity focuses on how the story of the Garden of Eden introduces sin into the world, Jewish tradition takes a different approach. In a chapter titled, “Is There Enough Love to Go Around,” Rabbi Harold Kushner notes that the *Tanach*, Hebrew scriptures, or what Christians call the Old Testament, never uses the word *sin* in relationship to the eating of the fruit from the tree of knowledge. That word is actually introduced only later, in relation to the story of Cain and Abel. And what’s particularly interesting is that the word is introduced *before* Cain kills his brother.

It comes in God’s warning to Cain, when he has become jealous of his brother.

“Why are you distressed? If you do right, you will be uplifted.

But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door,

its urge toward you, but you can be its master.”

We understand this to mean that though we can’t control the things that happen to us, or the emotions we feel, we can control our actions in response to those events and those feelings. Cain is very angry that God has not favored his offering, but not unlike a child who is so jealous of the outpouring of his parents’ love to a sibling that he punches his little sister, Cain does not attack God, but instead murders his brother.

Kushner thus believes that the idea of original sin depicted in the Hebrew Bible is the belief that there is not enough love to go around. He finds evidence of this sin throughout the book of Genesis. It is there when Jacob disguises himself as his older brother, Esau, and steals his father's blessing. It is there when Judah leads his brothers, Jacob's sons, to throw Joseph into a pit, sell him as a slave to Egypt, and tell his father that he had been torn apart by a wild animal. It's the reason why Peretz pulls his brother back into the womb so that he can be born first. This sin even permeates the relationship of the sisters Rachel and Leah and Sarah's relationship with Hagar. Will there be enough of Jacob's or Abraham's love? They are not sure.

I think of a story a parent told me. His child continually asked him who he loved best, and the father consistently explained, "I love all my children equally." Unwilling to accept that answer, the child responded, "But I want you to love *me* best."

It's like the four questions at the Passover Seder. On some level the first born is glad when it's time for the next child in line to take over. It's a measure of being more grown up, no longer the littlest rabbit. But there is also sadness and maybe even a little jealousy, as the spotlight passes to someone else.

The human child is very weak and vulnerable, totally dependent upon the parents' care. Perhaps, alarm at the possibility of losing the parents' total love is part of our evolutionary make up. This fear remains with us even when we are grown up, not necessarily in relationship to our parents, but whenever it seems

that there isn't enough for us. We are pained in our guts, in our *kishkes*, sometimes more than events really dictate, when someone else gets a promotion or when a person in a position of authority gets our name wrong, thus seeming to slight us. It may even be an echo of this fear of potential parental abandonment which causes infidelity to be a greater predictor of the dissolution of a marriage than alcoholism, gambling, or even criminal activity.

Are we destined to be ever jealous? Is this why Rabbi Kushner calls it the Original Sin? There is a cure for sibling rivalry. It comes from our growing up and feeling empathy with our brothers and sisters. Eventually we come to accept that we must share our parents. From this experience, we develop a sense of justice, that extends beyond our family, the desire that all be treated fairly and with equity if not equality.

The Hassidim tell a story about a rabbi who wanted to teach his followers what it really meant to overcome jealousy. He created an extreme experience. He invited them to the "Paradise" Restaurant, but then did not initially serve them a meal. Instead, only he ate. He said:

"Paradise is where people can sit at a meal, and watch another eat with enjoyment, without fearing that there will not be enough for them. Rather than experiencing pleasure in another person's failure, Paradise is a place where people love each other enough to take pleasure in another person's happiness."

In the Book of Genesis, we do get to see jealousy overcome. Eventually Joseph's brother Judah matures, and instead of resenting his half-brother Benjamin, he risks his own life to save him from being imprisoned by Joseph, still disguised as an Egyptian. We also meet the last set of brothers in Genesis, Ephraim and Menasheh, who are without resentment towards each other.

Rabbi Kushner says that we often think about love the way we think about the food on a buffet table. If we see someone else taking more, then we fear that there won't be enough for us. Instead, he urges us to think about love as a muscle: the more we practice at being loving, the more love there is. Along with the bounty of the harvest which we celebrated last week, may we also experience the bounty of love which will enable us all to flourish and share.