

East of Eden

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It happened late last fall, in that most stressful part of the pandemic -- when everybody was on edge, and every day felt as if we were living in a pressure cooker. We could not see many of the people we love or do the things that bring us joy -- and without those familiar comforts, we began to no longer recognize ourselves. For many of us, the boundary between work and home completely disappeared -- and we ran ourselves ragged trying to keep up the pace. With infection rates skyrocketing, and the promise of a vaccine still several months away, it seemed, during those dark and dreary days, as if this exhausting ordeal might never come to an end. And it was in that incredibly stressful context that I did something I am not proud of -- the moment from this past year that I most regret.

The particular thing that I did is almost irrelevant. The point is that we all have done things that we are not proud of. We all likely have a moment from this past year that we most regret. And I wonder: what is yours?

It might make us feel uncomfortable to talk about such things. In our religious idiom, there is a word we use to describe the things we are not proud of. We call them "sins." But it is not only the word that might make us feel uneasy. The whole topic makes us feel uneasy. We prefer the friendlier spiritual practices, like cultivating gratitude or noticing beauty. We do not like to dwell too much on the things we have done wrong.

And yet, wrongdoing is one of our most distinctively human traits. There is no other animal that is conscious of wrongdoing -- no other creature on earth that has the capacity for feeling guilt.¹ Sin is a uniquely human problem.

If it does nothing else, Yom Kippur asks us to get more comfortable with this particularly uncomfortable topic. It asks us to claim the things we have done wrong -- to acknowledge our own participation in the uniquely human problem of sin.

¹ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/thoughtful-animal/do-dogs-feel-guilty/>: "There is plenty of evidence for what scientists refer to as primary emotions - happiness and fear, for example - in animals. But empirical evidence for secondary emotions like jealousy, pride, and guilt, is extremely rare in the animal cognition literature." | Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Ph.D., *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, p. 14: "Back in 1899, when psychology was still in its infancy, Kaufmann Kohler, the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York, ... defin[ed] sin as 'the power of evil dwelling in no other being but man.' It is a part of human (and only human) nature. 'The angel, as we conceive him, who cannot do wrong, and the animal, which cannot be good in a moral sense, are both free from sin.'" | John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, ch. 22, p. 269: "The human is the only guilty animal."

It has been said that the Hebrew Bible is not primarily a work of theology, but rather, is a work of religious anthropology.² That is to say: it is not primarily a book about God, but rather, it is a book about what it means to be human. It is a book in which flawed human characters struggle to make sense of their lives. They rise and fall, try and fail -- doing things that they likely would not be proud of, filling the scroll with stories that they likely would rather we forget.

To help us achieve our task on Yom Kippur, let us look at two different stories from the Hebrew Bible that, when taken together, present us with two contrasting views of sin. Let us start our examination as the Bible does. Let us start: "In the beginning...."

We likely all know one of the Bible's first stories: in the beginning, Adam and Eve are placed in the luxurious Garden of Eden, where all of their needs are met, where no effort is required of them.³ Trees of every kind, which they did not plant and need not tend, are always ripe with fruit -- with plums, cherries, mangos, and avocados ready for the picking and always in season. Only one tree, at the center of the garden -- the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil -- is off limits to them. But of course, because they are human, the one tree that is off limits is the one tree that most captures their interest. A talking snake convinces them to eat the forbidden fruit -- and the rest, we might say, is human history.

This story describes not only the creation of human beings, but also, along with them, the creation of original sin and the fall of man. For classical Christian thinkers, in particular, the story of Adam and Eve shows that sin is so inextricably a part of human nature that we are completely powerless over it.⁴ Our only available defense, in the Christian worldview, is for God to take on human form in order to save us from our sinfulness.

But even outside of this religious context, we might recognize other parts of our culture that similarly view human beings as powerless. In the world of literature, for example, we talk about the hero's fatal flaw -- that narrative device where a protagonist is stuck with a character defect that, try though they might, they are never able to overcome, and will ultimately lead to their downfall. Whether it is Achilles's heel, Medea's thirst for vengeance, or Hamlet's indecisiveness -- great writers throughout history have depicted a human nature in which we are doomed to failure, and the final, insurmountable obstacle is ourselves.

We might sometimes see ourselves this way. Each of us has our Achilles' heel. Whether it is with anger, sarcasm, anxiety, or perfectionism, each of us might sometimes feel as if we are on

² Alan L. Mittleman, *Human Nature & Jewish Thought: Judaism's Case for Why Persons Matter*, p. 18: "This is a book about philosophical anthropology, not theology per se. (Pointedly, the modern Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel called the Bible a book about human beings, not about God.)"

³ Genesis chs. 2-3

⁴ The Apostle Paul argues that because we are all descended from Adam and Eve, we have all, as a matter of lineage, inherited their sinful nature (Romans 5:12-21). Saint Augustine later adds that, because of original sin, even newborn babies enter the world already tainted by wickedness (Saint Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Book II, Chapter 24, "What Covenant of God the New-Born Babe Breaks").

the losing end of a lifelong battle -- that we are powerless over some character defect that is always leading us astray, always causing us to do things that we are not proud of.

Well, what did we expect? We are, after all, the children of Adam and Eve.

The idea of original sin might be prevalent in our culture -- but Judaism has always been a force for counter-culture. The late Rabbi Dr. Eugene Borowitz has argued that the core disagreement between Judaism and Christianity is not Hebrew Bible versus New Testament, not the supposed Jewish focus on actions versus the Christian focus on faith, as it has so often been described -- but rather, Dr. Borowitz argues, the core disagreement on which the others stand is that we Jews do not believe in original sin.⁵

If we look carefully at the Book of Genesis, we will find that the word "sin" does not appear even once in the story of Adam and Eve. That word does not make its first appearance in the Bible until one story later⁶ -- until after we have left the luxurious fantasy world of Eden, until after we have entered the harsh reality that waits for us outside the Garden. We Jews trace the origins of sin to Cain.

His story is short, only 16 verses -- and yet, it is perhaps one of the most well-known stories in all of Western literature.⁷ While his parents enjoyed the sumptuous Garden of Eden, where their every need was met and nothing was required of them, Cain must learn to survive in the unforgiving conditions of the real world. To earn his food, he must become a farmer -- laboring for his own meals with his own muscle and sweat. When, at last, his efforts bear fruit, he is grateful for his hard-earned success -- and decides, at his own initiative, to offer a sacrifice of thanks to God, who had helped him bring forth bread from the earth. And his brother, Abel, recognizing a good idea when he sees one, copies Cain's initiative, and also makes a sacrifice to God.

But here is where the reality outside of Eden begins to show how truly harsh it can be. For reasons that are never fully explained,⁸ and despite the sacrifices having been Cain's idea in the

⁵ Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, p. 125: "The general Jewish view of humankind differs radically from that of Christianity and many scholars consider this difference the root disagreement between them. For Judaism, sin is heinous but not the central reality of humanity's relation to God. The classic Jewish sources reveal no more than an intellectual flirtation with the doctrine of original sin."

⁶ Genesis 4:6-7: "And the Eternal One said to Cain, "Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin (*chatat*) couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." | See also the entry on "*chatat*" in Avraham Even-Shoshan's *New Concordance of the Hebrew Bible*.

⁷ Genesis ch. 4

⁸ Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, comment on 4:1-16 (p. 31): "This narrative has often been interpreted as a reflection of the traditional conflict between the farmer and nomad, and its supposed bias in favor of the latter is seen as representing a nomadic ideal in Israel. This is unlikely. The

first place, God delights in Abel's offering, and completely ignores Cain's. And it stings, this act of rejection. It hurts down deep to the core -- humanity's first encounter with the pain of feeling unloved, unwanted, invisible.

How well do we know this feeling -- the pain of feeling unseen? Even while we condemn the violent reaction that we know is coming, in our gut, we might be able to identify with Cain's painful feeling of being invisible. We spend every free minute helping our child, with rarely so much as a thank you. We grind at our job to the point of exhaustion, but someone else gets the promotion. We burn ourselves out trying to take care of others, but no one, it seems, ever thinks to take care of us.

And feels unfair. It hurts in a way that defies reason. The pain of feeling invisible runs down deep to a place in the human soul that is beyond all rational thought -- down to the primal pit of raw and conflicted feelings, where we are at once both shy and fierce, at once both bruised and on the attack.

And it is from this place beyond reason that Cain commits an act beyond reason. Although it was not his brother who had caused the hurt, although it does nothing whatsoever to redress his grievance, Cain goes out and kills his brother, Abel -- and the Bible records its first sin.

This is a serious crime -- much more extreme, I imagine, than the moment from this past year that any of us most regrets. But even if our misdeeds are drastically less severe than Cain's, we nevertheless share more in common with him than we might realize. Like Cain, we never had the luxury of the Garden of Eden. Like Cain, we have always been forced to contend with the harsh conditions of the real world -- where we are susceptible to great pains, and find ourselves capable of grave misdeeds.

These two stories present us with two contrasting views of sin: one that traces the origin of sin to Adam and Eve, the other that links sin to Cain; one that believes that sin is our inescapable fate, a cruel legacy over which we are powerless -- the other that believes that sin arises from the harsh conditions of the real world, a reaction to the overwhelming pains that come with being human.

evidence for such an ideal in biblical literature is extremely flimsy. Further, there is not the slightest suggestion in the text of any comparative evaluation of the vocations of Cain and Abel, nor is there the slightest disparagement of the tiller of the soil. On the contrary, agriculture is regarded as the original occupation of man in the Garden of Eden as well as outside it. ... Finally, the three pillars of seminomadic culture, as set forth in verses 20-22, are actually said to have originated with the descendants of Cain. The narrative, which is extraordinarily terse and sketchy here, gives no explicit reason for the unacceptability of Cain's offering." | While the text does say that Cain brought only "an offering" (4:3) and Abel brought "the choicest" among his flock (4:4), no reason is *explicitly* given to Cain (as Sarna notes) for God's rejection of Cain's offering and acceptance of Abel's; at best, the reason can only be inferred.

To help us see the differing implications between these two ideas, the ancient Rabbis created a midrash⁹ -- an imaginary scene that they invented, which does not appear in the Torah. The ancient Rabbis imagined a reunion between Adam and Cain, to see how life might eventually unfold for each of them -- a reunion that might have some wisdom to offer us in our observance of Yom Kippur.

Many years have passed before father and son meet again. Cain is no longer an explosive teenager, and Adam has, by now, become a grizzled old man.

They have not seen each other since the fateful day that Abel died. And although they have spent the intervening decades physically estranged, they have, in ways they do not recognize, shared more in common than they know: each of them expelled from his home and forced to wander the earth, each of them forever searching for the meaning of his guilt -- one who ate a forbidden fruit, the other who rose up and killed his brother, but each of them forever filled with regret over the singular mistake that had so profoundly shaped each one's life. Like parent, like child.

They are surprised to see each other. And quickly, Adam is filled with bitterness and rage. Seeing Cain's face stirs up something painful in Adam. It reminds him not only of his son's bitter crime, reminds him not only of the anguish of losing one child by the hand of the other, reminds him not only of the insatiable fury at his son he has carried for all these decades -- not only this, but also, on some deep level that he does not quite understand, seeing Cain's face reminds Adam of his own feelings of guilt. He sees in his son the consequences of original sin, the proof of the fall of man -- an inescapably sinful person, condemned to a life of wrongdoing. He always knew that Cain would be a failure. And now, standing face to face with his son, he is filled both with rage and with guilt.

But then, something unexpected happens. Something quiet. Something gentle. "I'm sorry," Cain says softly. "I was my brother's keeper."¹⁰

⁹ *Genesis Rabbah* 22:13

¹⁰ A faithful translation of the midrash is provided by Rabbi David Flatto, <https://images.shulcloud.com/727/uploads/sermons/RDF/RDFBereishitSermon5767.pdf>: "And Cain departed from before the Eternal One' (Genesis 4:16) ... Adam encountered Cain, and inquired 'What was your punishment?' Cain responded, 'I repented and settled [with God].' Adam shuddered and exclaimed, 'So potent is repentance, and I knew it not!' Thereupon Adam arose and proclaimed: 'A song for the Sabbath: it is good to confess unto the Eternal One!' (Psalm 92:1-2)." | The biblical/textual evidence for Cain's repentance is threefold: (1) See Cain's comment to God, "My punishment is too great to bear" (4:13), which, according to Sarna (*JPS Commentary*, comment to 4:13, p. 34), could also faithfully be translated as: "Is my sin too great to be forgiven?" (2) Flatto argues: "Cain's very communication with God after sin is in itself a form of restoring their relationship after it has been ruptured." Flatto directs us to Rashi's comment on Genesis 3:9: "God said Adam: 'Where are you?' (3:9) -- God knew where Adam was, but God asked this in order to open up a conversation with Adam, that he should not become confused in his reply if God were to pronounce punishment against him all of a sudden. Similarly in the case of Cain, God said to him: 'where is Abel thy brother?' (4:9)." (3) Flatto adds: "Cain's repentance is manifest in his absolute determination to not be destined to doom. Instead of dying

What Cain has learned in the intervening years -- and his father, Adam, has not -- is that we human beings are more than just our sins. An idea like the fall of man might help to explain why we are so prone to error. But it also creates a problem. It causes us to feel guilty not only for what we have done, but also, for who we are. It causes us to feel not only guilt, but also shame.

On Yom Kippur, we confess not to the sin of being bad people, but rather, to the sin of having done bad things. And with that comes the promise that we do not have to be forever defined by our own worst action. There is some core part of us that always remains unscathed,¹¹ some better part of ourselves to which we always can return.

Jewish tradition teaches that through the act of repentance, willful sins from our past are transformed -- and are accounted as if they had been merits.¹² This is a bold, if counterintuitive, idea. It means that the things we have done wrong do not need to be sources of shame, but rather, can be transformed into opportunities for pride. This does not mean that we are pleased by our misdeeds. Rather, it means that we can feel deeply proud of ourselves when we learn to overcome them.

This is why our hearts are so powerfully stirred when we hear stories of people who stumble and recover: the father who has struggled to show his emotions at last telling his children how much he loves them; the friend who has wrestled with substance abuse celebrating the achievement of a decade of sobriety; the siblings who have not spoken to each other in more than twenty years slowly finding ways to warm the icy waters between them. Or Cain -- admitting to his guilt, apologizing to his father, realizing that he was, in fact, his brother's keeper.

It may be true that sin is a uniquely human problem. But it is equally true that these moments of triumph are also uniquely human -- these moments of recovery, a summit so high that they cannot be reached by any other creature on earth.¹³

This is the reason why we Jews do not trace the origins of sin to Adam and Eve. We believe that when our mythic ancestors ate the forbidden fruit, they did not curse us with original sin. They did not induce the fall of man. Rather, when they ate the fruit of that tree -- the Tree of

the murderer's deserved death, he secures a promise of life from God; instead of living a nomadic existence, he builds a city; instead of extinguishing more lives, he creates life. In this same vein, the midrash adds, instead of defiling others with sin, he lifts his father with spiritual inspiration."

¹¹ Mittleman, p. 68: "The assertion [in the daily morning prayer *Elohai N'shama*] that the soul is pure (*tehora*) is usually understood to be a rejection of the Christian claim that all souls are corrupted by original sin. The daily return of a pure soul allows one to confront the moral choices and challenges of the hours ahead."

¹² Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86b, in an aphorism attributed to the sage Reish Lakish -- who, appropriate to his aphorism, spent his adolescence as a bandit and a gladiator, before eventually devoting his life to Torah study.

¹³ Hoffman, pp. 31: "We have seen above how another nineteenth-century advocate of Enlightenment Judaism [Kaufmann Kohler] defined sin as 'the power of evil dwelling in no other being but man.' Nobility is its opposite, for, as [Kohler's older German contemporary, Rabbi Gotthold] Salomon tells us, nobility too is distinctively human. Admission of one entails admission of the other."

Knowledge of Good and Evil -- they gifted us with a uniquely human ability.¹⁴ They blessed us with the capacity to distinguish right from wrong, to know when we have made a mistake, to feel a sense of regret -- and thereby, to do the most human thing of all: to change.

On Yom Kippur, we observe a fast, to help us focus our attention on the things we have done wrong this past year. As the hours go by, and our bellies begin to cry out in hunger, perhaps in place of food, we might instead find sustenance by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Then, although our bellies will still be empty, we will have nevertheless filled our hearts with insight. Although we will be newly conscious of all the many moments from this past year that we regret, we will nevertheless have no reason to feel ashamed. After all, we cannot change the things that we have done. The only thing that we can change is ourselves. This is what makes us human. And what could be more beautiful than that?

¹⁴ For a similar argument, see Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, "Grandmother Eve," p. 275: "Eating the apple made possible an enormous change in Grandmother Eve's lifestyle. She no longer needed to live in God's house in the nursery to be safe. She was able to leave this protected environment because she carried God with her. She could hear Him if she was willing to listen. When she ate the apple, she became an adult, and gained the freedom of an adult to go out into a world of complexity, adventure, responsibility, and change. To have her own life and make her own choices."