

TRUTHTELLING
PARASHAT BERESHEET
Saturday, October 26, 2024

Part One: The Story

1. Tell the story of the Garden: The creation of man, the planting of the garden, and putting man in the garden. The growing of trees pleasing to see and good to eat. The placing of two special trees: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A river flows through the garden and it has four tributaries. God puts the human being into the garden to work it and to protect it. God gives both permission and prohibition to the human being. He can eat from the fruit of all the trees except from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If he eats of that fruit, he will die.
2. God then is concerned that the human being be not alone. God cannot be a companion for the human being. God gives the animals for the human being to name. But they do not prove to be suitable playmates or companions for him. Thus God creates woman out of the human being. The differentiation alluded to in chapter one is made complete in chapter two. There are two kinds of human beings: male and female. They are destined to become one flesh.
3. The third act of this play opens with the Torah noting that the two human beings are both naked, but they are not ashamed. This is a pun on the next verse, which states that the serpent is cleverer or slyer than all the other animals. The words for naked and sly are homonyms in Hebrew. The serpent asks the woman in the negative, "You don't eat from any of the trees?" The woman says to the serpent, we can eat from the trees except from the tree in the middle of the garden. God said to us not to eat it, not to touch it lest we die. The serpent contradicts her, saying, "You won't die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will open, and you will be like God knowing good and evil."
4. The woman sees that the tree is good to eat, that it is delightful to the eyes, and that it is desirable to contemplate. She took the fruit, ate it, and gave some to her husband and he ate it. Their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. They sewed fig leaves and made for themselves loincloths.
5. The fourth act of the Garden of Eden story begins with the man and woman hiding after hearing the sound of God walking in the Garden. God calls out, asking them, "Where are you?" The man answers, I heard your voice and became afraid because I am naked, and I hid. God then asks him, "Who told you that you are naked? Did you eat from the tree I told you not to eat from?" The man says, "The woman whom you gave to me, she is the one who gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then God asks the woman, "What did you do?" The woman answered, "The serpent seduced me, and I ate." Then, God pronounces a curse on the serpent, the woman, and the man. Man calls his wife Havah. God makes leather garments for the man and woman and dresses them.
6. God says, that since the human being is like one of us knowing good and evil, I am afraid that he may take the from the tree of life and eat that fruit and live forever." God

expels the human being from the garden and installs the Cherubim to block the road to the Tree of Life.

Part Two: Who Is Telling the Truth?

1. Let's look at the words that each of the characters speaks. Who are the truth-tellers in this story? Does God tell the truth? Yet God tells the human being that if he eats from the tree of knowledge, he will die. He eats from the Tree of Life and doesn't die. In fact, we learn that he lived to be 930 years old. There is a discrepancy.
2. What about Adam and Eve, the man and woman? Eve embellishes the command by saying that God told them not to touch the tree as well as not eat of its fruit. When God asks Adam, "Where are you," Adam says that he hid because he was afraid and because he was naked. Somehow, that seems less than honest. He was afraid because he didn't obey God's command. He was afraid because he feared that God was angry with him. Then, when God confronts him on it, he implicitly blames the woman. He is less than honest by not accepting any responsibility. The woman similarly directly blames the serpent but is less than honest by not accepting responsibility.
3. What about the serpent? Did he speak the truth? The serpent seems to be the best truth-teller. He tells the man and woman they won't die if they eat the forbidden fruit. He tells them they will become like God, knowing good and evil, if they eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God confirms this later on in verse 22. The serpent, who is arguably the villain of the story, is the only one who speaks the truth.

Part Three: What are the Lessons?

1. Telling the truth is not an absolute value. It is important but it must be coupled with something else.
2. The rabbis understood this in their midrashic explications of the creation of the world. For instance, Rashi asks the question why there are two accounts of the creation of the world. He also asks why there the Torah changes the name of God in each of these accounts. He says that after creating the world in the first account, God realizes that the world will not last. It will not last because it stands only on truth and justice. So God created the world anew by creating the world on the principles of truth and mercy. The first chapter uses the word "Elohim" for God consistently, while the second chapter uses "Adonai Elohim."
3. A second Midrash wonders why the Torah says, "Let us create the human being in our image according to our likeness." Who is God speaking to? The Midrash answers that God was speaking to the angels. There was debate about God's command. Some angels wanted to create human beings; others did not. The angel Hesed advocated creating man because he would do acts of loving-kindness. Truth said that the human being should not be created because they are full of lies. As the debate went on, truth seemed to be winning out. God picked up truth and hurled it to the earth and then created the human being.

4. **First Lesson: We cannot live by truth alone.** What is wrong with the way the serpent spoke the truth in the story? He used truth not to increase trust among God's creatures or between God and His creatures but to sow distrust. The serpent is right when giving the rationale for the prohibition ("they will become like God"), but there is no sense of why God was concerned about their having that knowledge. The truth is spoken to arouse doubts about God, not to increase trust or explore God's truth. It seems to me that truth-telling has to have the intent of building trust, not tearing it down.
5. How do we know if that intent is there? That's where the compassion comes in. How do we tell something painful or difficult to hear to someone we care for? We think this person needs to hear that truth because it ultimately will be helpful to that person. Yet it is something that may be painful to hear.
6. **The Second Lesson is that Truth must be told with love.** We are telling people the truth because we care for them. We feel that their actions are destructive to themselves and others. We tell people the truth because we want to help them make better choices for themselves. We tell people the truth because their actions are hurting their family or their community. We tell people the truth because their actions may be offensive to God. This will work only if the people we are telling the truth to believe we are doing so because we care for them.
7. These lessons are essential for maintaining and developing our relationships with our family, our friends, and our community. How can we give feedback that is honest, constructive, and loving all at the same time? How can we receive feedback without getting defensive, angry, and judgmental? These are questions that we will always struggle with until our last breath.
8. These are questions that are not just about personal relationships. Can we in the Jewish Community tell our Israeli brothers and sisters that the ongoing war and violence in Lebanon and Gaza will be destructive to the security of the State of Israel? Can we tell them that the killing of tens of thousands of civilians will not secure the State of Israel? Can we tell them that such mass killing is a Hillul HaShem? Can we do this out of love so that they hear our message? We have to for the sake of our love of God and our respect for human life.
9. The lesson of this story about truth-telling is teaching us that truth-telling is not an absolute value. There must be compassion, and there has to be intent to create more trust, not less. This lesson affects all our personal relationships, whether in the family, at work, or in the community. It is godlike to be both honest and compassionate at the same time. It is not easy. But if we don't see that as the goal, we continue to get stuck that truth-telling is everything. Remember that God cast truth to the earth in order to create us. Shabbat Shalom.