

Bereshit October 2, 2010 / 24 Tishrei 5771

Shabbat Shalom! It is good to be with you here today, to not be driving around as I have most of the week. Did you hear that there is a new auto insurance policy just for Jewish mothers? It's called, "MY Fault."

Today we read a story of blame. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and Gd blames all three. These are, of course, the earliest stories of our people; stories that we know by heart. In fact, they are so familiar to us that we tend to overlook the details. They are a little like those "Terms of Agreement" on I-Tunes on your computer - you know they have some important message in them, but it's really not worth reading.

But when it comes to the opening chapters of Genesis, that's a shame, because some of the most important concepts in the moral history of humanity are laid down in these opening chapters: in particular, the issue of fault, and blame and accountability in the eyes of Gd. It is from the story of Adam and Eve that we learn to fear Gd, and it is that fear of Gd that I want to speak about this morning. I want to speak about the fear of Gd because I think that phrase gets a bum rap. The word for "fear" in Hebrew - Yee-rah - is also the word for "reverence", and in truth, the second definition is more accurate than the first.

We talk about "fearing" Gd because Gd will punish us, that if we do wrong bad things will happen. And that's in the Torah, but at the same time we know it doesn't always work that way. Plenty of people get away with doing wrong, and good people sometimes suffer even though they have done good. No, "fear" of Gd really means revering, or respecting Gd above all else. No matter what other people think or do, or even try to get you to do, you are accountable first and foremost to Gd, and not to the will of other people.

In this morning's Torah portion Gd asks the very first couple one simple question, a question that has them cowering in fear. They have eaten from the forbidden fruit, and knowing they have messed up they try to hide from Gd. And Gd asks one simple question: "Ayeh-kah? Where ARE you?" Now you and I know that this question is rhetorical. Gd knows where they are hiding. He's Gd! He's got the best view! What Gd is really asking is, "what kind of people are you? What have you done? Where are you at "as people"?!"

And naturally, they are afraid. They are afraid because they know that they are accountable to Gd. And that one simple phrase, "Ayekah -Where are you at?" has brought out the best in people, and changed the world for the better more than any other single phrase. Who are you in Gd's eyes? - that's what matter most.

Throughout history, a disproportionate percentage of dissenters to authoritarian rule have been religious. They have acted in ways nothing short of heroic, precisely because they feared, or rather they respected, (they had reverence) for Gd above all else. The righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust who saved Jewish lives at tremendous risk to their own lives did so because Gd's question: "Ayekah" - "Where ARE you as a person?" was more important than "Where are you hiding the Jews?" Martin Luther King stood up to racism and segregation because answering to Gd, his "fear" of Heaven, outweighed his fear of the police and their dogs in the segregated South. Two midwives named Shifrah and Poo-ah saved the greatest leader of the Jewish People from certain death because, as the Torah says, they feared Gd, and

could therefore not follow the laws of Pharaoh and kill the infant named Moses.

But this one word question isn't just for extraordinary heroes, it's for everyday people as well. It's not just about standing up to authoritarianism, it's about not being authoritarian yourself! Fear of Gd does not simply mean fear of punishment, it means respect for the highest levels of morality **PRECISELY YOU THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH LESS**. That's when you need to be reminded of the fear, reverence and respect for Gd. That's your own personal "Aye-kah" moment. When does the Torah remind us that we need to fear Gd? Here are some examples: "You shall honor the old and you shall fear Gd." "Take no interest from people who have fallen on hard times and you shall fear Gd." "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear Gd." "You shall not rule over your servants mercilessly, but you shall fear Gd."

What do all these have in common? When you think no one is watching, when you think no one cares, when you think you can get away with being less - remember that you are accountable to someone more than yourself -- you shall "fear" Gd.

These opening chapters of the Bible are the foundation for our religious civilization, in fact for civilization as a whole. In an age when religious extremism seems to overshadow and out shout the voice of religious pluralism, moderation and tolerance, we need to reassert the religious principles that have served as the bedrock of our Jewish lives for millennia. Reverence for Gd means walking, not in fear, but with quiet strength knowing that we are living the life Gd wants us to live; that at any given moment we can answer "Aye-kah" - "Where are you at?" - with pride and self-respect. That's the kind of life we are looking for, and these ancient stories help point us in the right direction.