



What If Adam Had Reacted Differently?

On Responsibility and Being Together

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Two children are fighting in the playground. Called into the principal's office, each insists: "It all started when he hit me back."

This familiar joke captures something deeply human: our tendency to avoid responsibility by blaming others.

R. Asher Wassertheil,¹ reflecting on Adam and Eve's words after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, "The woman You put at my side, **she** gave me of the tree..." and "The serpent duped me" (Bereishit 3:12-13), cites his teacher R. Yonah Merzbach²:

ברכת אשר בראשית ג:יב

דרש מכאן על נטית האדם לגלגל מעשיו הרעים על זולתו. ואכן דומה שבענין זה לא השתנה דבר מאז ראשיתו של עולם זה ועד ימינו אלה.

¹ Israeli educator who was one of the builders of the religious Zionist school system (1921-2008).

² German-born rabbi and scholar who fled Germany and co-founded Yeshivat Kol Torah in Jerusalem (1900-1980).



Birkat Asher on Bereishit 3:12

These verses illustrate the human inclination to blame one's bad actions on others. And indeed, in this regard, it seems that nothing has changed from the beginning of the world until this very day.

The story of humanity's creation is also its first account of human relationships. It reveals basic patterns of human behavior, especially the failure to take responsibility and the tendency to blame others for our actions and choices.³ The cost is dear. Instead of seeing the other as an opportunity for connection, richness, and growth, people choose to blame, which leads to isolation, emptiness, and pain.

A. “Yes, from the tree that You commanded me not to eat—I ate.”

After the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God addresses Adam directly and asks: “הֲמִן הָעֵץ אָכַלְתָּ - Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?” (3:11). Instead of answering, “yes”—which would have been the simplest truthful answer—Adam replies: “הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי הוּא נָתַתָּה לִּי מִן הָעֵץ וְאָכַלְתִּי - The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (3:12).

Commentators highlight not only the avoidance of blame but also the striking ingratitude in Adam's response: a gift from God is turned into complaint. “All ingrates,” says one *midrash*, “are disciples of Adam.”⁴

³ This is succinctly captured in the Hebrew word *adam*, which refers both to the name of the first human Adam and the concept of “man” or “human” more generally. Every action of the original *adam* therefore comes across as a blueprint for humanity at large.

⁴ Avot de-R. Natan (version B) 46. See also, for example, Sifrei Devarim #13.



We do not know what would have happened had the first humans taken responsibility, or had Adam admitted: “Yes, I ate from the tree, even though You commanded me not to.”⁵ All we know is what happens when Adam deflects blame and shifts responsibility onto another. First, his answer launched a pattern of evasion that persists through humanity. Eve follows in his footsteps, passing responsibility to the serpent. Assigning blame to another seems to be a human tendency that spreads.

Second, consequences unfold immediately. Enmity is introduced into creation: “I will put enmity between you (the snake) and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.”

Third, and this is essential, shifting blame undermines companionship itself.

Before creating Eve, God saw that “It is not good” for humans—literally “the *Adam*”—to be alone: “וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים לֹא טוֹב הֵיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבִדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה לוֹ עֶזְרָא כְּנֶגְדּוֹ - Lord God said: It is **not good** for the Adam/the human to be alone, I will make a helpful counterpart to him” (2:18).

The words “not good” echo—negatively—the repeated phrase “and God saw that it **was good**” throughout the days of creation⁶; without an “other” creation was not good, so He created “a helpful counterpart for him.” The creation of a second human being is both essential and positive.

Indeed, the woman’s instinct seems to reflect God’s insight regarding partnership and goodness: “וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל... וַתֵּתֶן גַּם לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ וַיֹּאכֵל - When the woman saw

⁵ One might speculate: if Adam had taken responsibility, he might have been able to fix his relationship with God and maybe even stay in the Garden of Eden? Accepting responsibility, acknowledging one’s mistake (וִידוּי - *vidui*) is the first step in *teshuvah*. If Adam and Eve had done *teshuvah* for their mistakes, maybe God would have forgiven them, allowed them to remain in the Garden, and not imposed the other punishments that, as discussed below, harmed their relationship with God and each other.

⁶ See, e.g., Bereishit 1:4, 10.



that the tree **was good** for eating.... **she gave** some to her partner, who was with her, and he ate” (3:6). The woman encounters something good—something desirable and appealing—and is moved to share it with the one who shares her life. It seems her motivation is the desire to give from the good she experiences.

Yet Adam, the human, blames her, and the relationship is transformed. The shared experience of reproduction will now be accompanied by sorrow. And in addition a complex dynamic of desire and domination is introduced into their relationship: “אֶל הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר ה' בְּרָבָה - אֶרְבֶּה עִצְבוֹנָה וְהָרִנָּה בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוִקְתִּיךָ וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל בָּךְ - I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16).

As a result of failure to accept responsibility, togetherness is transformed into a challenge, one filled with ever-present potential pitfalls: sorrow, control, imbalance, and a rupture in the mutuality of relationship. Even that which can only take place within a shared life—introduced in the verses by relating to producing children—will now be accompanied by profound sorrow.

It looks like in this story, the woman fulfills the human calling: a life of sharing good and the potential of having a helpful counterpart (*ezer ke-negdo*), albeit in a misguided way. Adam, by contrast, chooses blame and ingratitude.

B. Two Models of Relationship

It seems that God wants us not to be alone, but our choices lead to imbalance and sadness. And so, at the close of this story, two models of human relationship emerge. The first is based on responsibility: sharing the good, acknowledging error, remaining a “fitting counterpart,”



and living in the joy of partnership. The second is based on blame: standing righteous alone, at the cost of domination, sorrow, and fracture.

From one perspective, Adam appears justified. After all, Eve gave him the fruit. Yet in stating this he violates something deeper: the mutual respect that makes relationships possible. As long as I define myself as blameless and another as guilty, I destroy the shared space between us.

We often imagine ourselves as essentially right, led astray only by others. This is the logic of: “It all started when he hit me back.” But Genesis teaches otherwise. God creates the other not as temptation or threat, but as blessing—an opportunity for goodness. Accepting responsibility means abandoning the fantasy of standing alone in righteousness. God’s purpose in creating a second human was life with “a helpful counterpart.” To blame another is to warp that purpose, denying the foundation of companionship. In life, mistakes usually do have multiple contributing factors: Adam is not entirely wrong to say Eve gave him the fruit, just as Eve is not entirely wrong to say the serpent deceived her. Yet both fail by refusing to admit their own role.

So it remains in our hands: one may always point to outside pressures: bad influences, parental failings, difficult conditions, the insistence that “everyone is doing it” or “they started it.” But replacing responsibility with blame has terrible costs. An environment may make wrongdoing more tempting, but it never removes the moral obligation to resist—or, if one fails, to take responsibility and repent.

The true failure in Eden was not eating the fruit, but avoiding and shifting responsibility which distorts the idea of what life together was meant to be: good.



C. Conclusion

In Genesis, we glimpse humanity's dual possibilities. One is the path of responsibility and companionship, where life is shared and "it is good." The other is the path of blame, where togetherness is twisted into enmity. The story of Adam and Eve asks us to choose, whenever possible, the first way: to live in responsibility and in partnership.

May we strive to see in others not a source of fault, but counterparts, companions, and opportunities for goodness. And may we never forget the lesson that blame isolates, but responsibility allows us to live together.

