

The Beast That Crouches at the Door

Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, and Beyond



Rabbi David Fohrman

THE BEAST
THAT CROUCHES AT THE DOOR
ADAM & EVE, CAIN & ABEL, AND BEYOND

Maggid Books
Aleph Beta Press

The Beast That Crouches at the Door

Third edition, 2021

Maggid Books

An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

Email: info@alephbeta.org

Website: www.alephbeta.org

PO Box 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA

& PO Box 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel

www.maggidbooks.com

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-59264-569-5

Printed and bound in the United States

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Acknowledgments

This book had its beginnings on a cold winter's night about ten years ago, in the parking lot of Johns Hopkins University, just outside Shaffer Hall.

I had been teaching a class on the Book of Genesis. That night we had been talking about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and a group of students stayed afterward to continue the discussion. Two of them – LeRoy Hoffberger and his wife, Rebecca – stayed longer than the others, and walked me to my car. In the Never-Never Land somewhere between my car and theirs, we lost ourselves probing the implications of this mysterious story. Bundled up against the cold, our conversation lasted well into the night.

That conversation was the beginning of a long friendship between the Hoffbergers and me. LeRoy and Rebecca cared deeply about the underlying meaning of this story, and more generally, about how knowledge of Torah could and should inform one's life. LeRoy envisioned creating an institute devoted to the kind of Torah study we had been doing in our class at Johns Hopkins – and over time, he brought this vision to fruition. LeRoy founded the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies, and asked me to serve as its resident scholar.

Teaching biblical themes had always been a passion of mine, but I never thought I would be lucky enough to devote my

professional life to this dream. The Hoffbergers have made that intense desire a reality for me. Through their efforts, a conversation in a parking lot has blossomed into countless classes – and now, at long last, a book. Along the way, they have become close friends, devoted students, constructive critics – and surrogate grandparents to our kids. Gratitude is perhaps too pedestrian a word to express my feelings toward LeRoy and Rebecca. But maybe it's a start. I am deeply privileged to call them partners in my life's work.

Although LeRoy has been the driving force behind the foundation, he has not been alone in pursuing its aims. He and I would like to express gratitude to its other principal funders, including the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Hoffberger Family Foundation, and The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore.

There were many others who participated in the process of bringing this book from the realm of vision into reality. Carol Wise skillfully edited the manuscript, and Azriella Jaffe, herself an accomplished author, reviewed the entire book and made innumerable meaningful suggestions. Daniella Barak capably managed the production process.

A book begins long before an author writes down what is on his mind. Before that, he has to actually have something on his mind. In that spirit, I want to acknowledge those who, over the years, helped shape my way of thinking, and guide my development as a student of Torah.

The person who perhaps most profoundly influenced my life and way of thinking was my late father, Moshe Fohrman, *zt'l*. He died before I became a Bar Mitzvah, but in those early years, taught me much of what I know about what makes life worthwhile, and how to practice the art of living in a meaningful way. He was not a scholar in the technical sense of the word, but he was one of the wisest persons I have been privileged to know. I hope that he would regard this book as a worthy expression of his spiritual legacy.

As I was growing up, I was lucky to be exposed to Rabbi Yosef Leibowitz, who now lives in Kfar Saba, Israel, but then was the rabbi of the shul in the San Francisco Bay Area to which our family belonged. I was fascinated by the way he read biblical text, and found myself captivated by his sermons. I can still remember our preparing my Bar Mitzvah speech together. He asked me to read the Torah portion on my own, and to come back to him with questions about it that were of greatest concern to me. With these questions in the background, the words of the ancient commentators somehow seemed to jump off the page and brim with life. The whole process made me feel alive, and gave me a taste of a kind of learning I knew I would want to try and pursue.

I spent many years studying at the Ner Israel Rabbinical College, and I feel honored to count the Rosh Yeshiva of that institution, the late Rav Yaakov Weinberg *zt'l*, as a mentor. As a young high school student, I didn't know you weren't supposed to call the Rosh Yeshiva up on the dorm phone to ask if you could drop by his home and chat about some questions. Somehow, that approach didn't display the proper degree of reverence. But he graciously extended himself to me, and I was very fortunate to benefit from years of his guidance, wisdom, and concern. Other faculty members at Ner Israel – including Rabbis Tzvi Berkowitz, Moshe Eisemann, and Nachum Lansky – introduced new vistas of thinking to me. And weekly *hashkafa chaburos* – sessions in Jewish philosophy – given by Rabbi Ezra Neuberger, grounded me in oft-overlooked “basics” of Jewish thought, and opened my mind to possibilities I found both tantalizing and profoundly meaningful.

While at Ner Israel, I benefited from an enduring relationship with Rabbi Hermann Neuberger *zt'l*, who – it sounds like a cliché but it's true – was really like a father to me. I was often a guest at his home for Shabbos meals, and found myself intrigued by the conversation and inspired by his persona. I am profoundly thankful for the strong interest he took throughout the years in

my personal development and welfare, and for his wise counsel, of which I availed myself frequently. I count myself fortunate in that I came to know not just him, but virtually all of his children as well. R. Sheftel, R. Shraga, R. Yaakov, and R. Ezra each opened their homes and hearts to me, and were mentors to me in their own right.

In later years, I came to treasure a friendship with Rabbi Yehezkel Danziger, editor-in-chief of ArtScroll's Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud. The observations he shared with me about life and Torah are precious – but besides that, he taught me much of what I know about writing with concision, precision, and care. His ability to express complex ideas with elegance and simplicity is something I admire and seek to emulate.

Throughout the years, my mother has been a beacon of love and compassion, and an emotional bulwark of support to me and to the rest of our family. All mothers strive to do this, I suppose, but she has done it exceedingly well. When she married my stepfather, Mr. Zev Wolfson, she brought into my life a man who has come to share her intense interest in my welfare and development. Over the years, he has guided my growth as a Jew and as a person, and I deeply cherish his love for me. For the last ten years or so, we have been *chavrusas*, study partners, together – sometimes in person, and sometimes by phone – and this has brought another, added, dimension to our relationship. I am proud to have become part of his family. My wife Reena has been simultaneously my greatest fan and most incisive critic. If I can convince her of the merit of an idea, then I can convince anybody. Her loving attention to our children has helped us raise six wonderful kids. Her love for me and belief in my work have given me the strength and emotional sustenance to go forward in life. I am privileged to have her as my life's partner, and hope and pray we shall celebrate many more milestones together.

Rabbi David Fohrman
Written for First Edition, 2007

PART I

Serpents of Desire:
Good and Evil in the
Garden of Eden

🌀 Introduction

Beyond the Lullaby Effect: Reading the Bible with Open Eyes

Paradoxically enough, a great problem that faces us when we study the Torah is that its stories are so familiar to us. No matter where you grew up, no matter what level of education you've had, you've come across the story of Adam and Eve tens, if not hundreds, of times. We've heard the story in school, and we've learned it at home. We drink Adam and Eve apple juice and see Adam and Eve icons repeatedly in advertising. We know that story, we assure ourselves. Indeed, we know the story too well for our own good.

When we know a story too well, we become easy prey to a syndrome I like to call the Lullaby Effect. The Lullaby Effect blocks our ability to ask, or even to see, the really important questions that the Bible begs us to ask of it. The Lullaby Effect anesthetizes us through the stupefying effects of familiarity.

Here's how it works. When was the last time you bothered thinking about the words of the lullabies you've known since childhood? Stop for a moment and think – really think – about what their words actually mean. For starters, try that perennial favorite, “Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop.” Imagine your child was actually paying attention to the words you were singing: “... when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all.”

Now, you can certainly get a kid to sleep by singing this. But if we bothered listening to what you were singing, lots of questions, I imagine, would quickly come to mind. “Exactly how far off the ground was the cradle when it fell?” “Did anyone call 911?” “Who put the cradle on the bough in the first place?” “Was the parent trying to get rid of the child?” “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

But no one asks these questions. Few of us are even remotely disturbed by the violence we sing about when trying to get our children to sleep. Why? Because we've simply stopped listening to the words. We have heard them too many times. We heard them as children before we even knew what they meant; and even as adults, they fail to shock us.

Biblical stories are a lot like lullabies in that way. Almost every major story in the Torah has its “elephant in the room” – some major problem, or a series of them, that cries out to be addressed. Why would God tell Abraham to take his son and kill him, only to retract at the last moment and say He didn't really mean it? What, exactly, did God have against the building of a tower in the Land of Babel? Why would God bother bargaining with Pharaoh to let the Jews go, only to harden his heart once the Egyptian monarch finally agreed? But the stories are too familiar to us. We've heard about them so many times, they've become part of our cultural fabric. We absorb the stories through osmosis, the way we unthinkingly develop accents that reflect the place where we grew up. We fail to see the problems anymore.

In this book, I'm going to challenge you to change all that. Come along with me on a journey, an adventure through biblical text. Let's read these stories that we thought we knew with fresh eyes and ask the questions that any intelligent reader would ask about them.

If this idea makes you nervous, relax. We needn't fear these questions, for they are not really problems; they are opportunities. They are windows that the text gives us to perceive its deeper meaning. Sure, you can keep the window closed and pretend it isn't there. But if you don't open it, the treasure that lies beyond – a richer, three-dimensional understanding of the Torah, not to mention the entire world of rabbinic literature – will remain sealed off to you forever.

So here's the deal: Before you go any further, I invite you first of all to reread the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. If you know Hebrew, read it in Hebrew; if you don't, any translation will do. Yes, I know, you know the story already – ever since sixth grade, you've had this image in your mind of the snake wound around the tree, offering Eve an apple. But that's precisely the point. You need to forget all that. You need to erase those images and read the story anew. You need to break the Lullaby Effect.

Read the story slowly and carefully. Just the text; no commentaries. And as you do, ask yourself these questions: If I were reading this for the first time, what about it would strike me as strange? What are the “big questions” that the Torah wants me to ask about this story? What are the elephants in the room? Take some time to think about it. I'll meet you right back here and we'll compare notes.

Chapter One

Adam, Eve, and the Elephant in the Room

Okay, let's say you've taken some time to reread the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake. (If you haven't, you can read my short summary below.) Hopefully, you've read it with fresh eyes and asked yourself that very basic of questions: "What is strange about this picture?" Before getting to your conclusions, let's take a moment to revisit the basic storyline together. In a nutshell, here it is:

After creating a world, God fashions two human beings and places them in Paradise, the Garden of Eden. God gives them virtually free rein over the territory. There's only one restriction: A certain tree is off-limits – the tree labeled "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." The fruit of this tree must not be eaten under any circumstances.

It doesn't take long for the human beings to transgress the only prohibition given to them. At the behest of

a mysterious snake, Eve eats from the tree and shares the fruit with Adam. The Almighty becomes angry and hands out various punishments: The snake? No more walking upright for him; he must crawl on his belly and eat dust. The woman? Generations of her kind will endure pain in conception and childbirth. And the man? He and his progeny will have to work by the sweat of their brow to make bread. And just to round things out, death is meted out to all the parties; nobody gets to live forever anymore.

Moreover, Eden is placed off-limits; everyone has to find somewhere else to live now. The great Life-guard in the Sky has blown His whistle, and it's time for everybody to get out of the pool. Why? Because there's another mysterious tree in the Garden – the Tree of Life – and the last thing God wants is anyone eating anything from *that* tree.

Well, what are the issues here? Does the story sit well with you, or do you find yourself uneasy with it? If you *are* uneasy, can you identify exactly *why* you are uneasy?

As I mentioned earlier, many biblical stories have their “elephant in the room,” an obvious, deeply troubling, “why-didn't-I-think-of-that” question at the heart of the story. Is there a question of this sort, a question of this magnitude, that we need to address when reading the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? I think there is.

Let's talk a little bit about this mysterious tree in the Garden, the one that God places off-limits. It has a name. It is known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. By any measure, that's a pretty strange name for a tree, but if that's what the Bible calls it, then that's presumably what it is. It somehow conveys a knowledge of good and evil, an ability to distinguish right from wrong, to those who partake of its fruits.

But there's a big problem with this. Why would God want to deny this knowledge to people? Think about it. Are human beings better or worse off for their knowledge of good and evil? Is knowing right from wrong an asset or a liability for humanity?

Imagine a world in which people are pretty much the same as they are now. They are smart; they can walk; they can talk; they can drive cars and become investment bankers. They are missing only one thing. They don't know right from wrong. We have a word for people like this. We call them sociopaths.

A person with all the faculties we associate with humanity except for the capacity to understand right and wrong is someone who could slaughter people with an axe the way you and I mow the lawn. Did God really want to create a society filled with such people? Clearly, people are better off when they know the difference between right and wrong. So why would God want to withhold this knowledge?

A tempting way out of the dilemma would be to suggest that somehow it was all a set-up. God really *did* want people to have the knowledge the tree would give them and was in fact glad when they ate from it. But this approach is deeply problematic. For the way the Torah tells the story, the Almighty seems pretty disappointed with Adam and Eve when they eat from the tree. In fact, He punishes them severely. How are we to understand this disappointment? It seems rather perverse to imagine the Almighty secretly chuckling with pleasure that Adam and Eve finally ate the fruit He put off-limits while hiding this joy behind a mask of displeasure and anger.

Clearly, God really did want Adam and Eve to avoid the Tree of Knowledge. But that brings us back to our question: Why would the Lord want to deny humanity an understanding of good and evil?

CATCH-22 IN THE GARDEN

Actually, the question goes even deeper. It's not simply that it seems strange for God to have put a Tree of Knowledge off-limits

to Adam and Eve. Rather, the very existence of such a tree seems to create a basic contradiction in the story as a whole. Here's why:

What happens immediately after Adam and Eve eat from this tree whose fruits confer knowledge of good and evil? The Almighty becomes angry with them and punishes them. But if Adam and Eve were punished for what they did, this presupposes they knew their actions were wrong. You don't punish people who are unaware that they did something bad. So Adam and Eve evidently *had* some knowledge of good and evil before eating from the tree. At the very least, they knew it was right to obey God when He told them not to eat from it, and it was wrong to disobey Him.

But now we're really stuck. For if Adam and Eve already understood the categories of good and evil before reaching for the fruit, well then, they already possessed what the tree was supposed to give them. What, then, would be the purpose of the tree?

It's a catch-22.

This is a very serious dilemma. This is not like wondering why the Torah included an extra word in a verse or why Rashi quoted one midrash over another. Those are interesting questions, but if you don't have the answer to them, you can still sleep at night. On the other hand, the question we have just raised – *didn't* Adam and Eve already have the knowledge the tree was supposed to give them? – is fundamental. It's basic. It's the kind of question that you *do* lose sleep over. For as long as you are stuck with this question, the story of Adam and Eve simply fails to make any sense at all.

So how are we to deal with this problem? I'd like to sketch the outline of an approach that we may ultimately find useful.

A WORLD BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Perhaps we've been the victims of faulty premises. We've casually assumed that we knew what kind of knowledge the tree gave to Adam and Eve – a knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong. But on second thought, just because it's called a Tree of Knowledge

of Good and Evil doesn't mean that Adam and Eve were ignorant of morality beforehand. It just means that they didn't call morality "knowledge of good and evil." They called it something else.

The approach I am suggesting here is not my own. It is, in fact, the approach taken by Maimonides, the Rambam. Indeed, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Rambam considers the very same question we have advanced here: Why would God want to withhold knowledge of good and evil from us? And the answer he gives is this: The tree didn't *give* us an understanding of right and wrong when we had none before. Rather it *transformed* this understanding from one thing into another. It transformed our earlier understanding of right and wrong into something called a Knowledge of Good and Evil.

If this seems a little obscure, try thinking about it this way: Nowadays, when we do something right, we think of it as "good." And when we do something wrong, we think of it as "evil." But, Rambam contends, those are not the most natural terms one could possibly use. Those terms became relevant to us – they became part of our vocabulary, as it were – only after we ate from the tree and assimilated knowledge of good and evil. In the world of Eden, in the world before "the Tree," the words "good" and "evil" would have seemed strange and inappropriate. Yes, we would have been *aware* of right and wrong, but we would not have called this "good" and "evil." We would have thought about it differently. We would have called it something else.

What exactly was that "something else"? What would it mean to think about right and wrong in the world of Eden, in the "pre-Tree" world? That, indeed, is the \$64,000 question. To some extent, we are reaching beyond ourselves even to ask this question. To ask is to try and understand a world we no longer know, a world in which right and wrong looked, felt, and seemed vastly different than they do now. But try we must, for the Torah suggests that it was *that* world which was the more genuine one. And it is to that world that we strive to return.

Uncovering the nature of right and wrong in the pristine world of Eden will be one of the central tasks before us in the chapters ahead. But before we tackle that complex issue, we need to assemble some more data. So for now, it's back to the drawing board. It's time to explore some of the *other* questions the story of Adam and Eve holds out to us.