

**Anne:** Can you briefly introduce yourself?

**Reuven:** My name is Reuven Kimelman. I'm a professor of classical Judaica at Brandeis University, and I'm also a rabbi of a congregation in Brookline in Massachusetts. My field of major interest, I teach at Brandeis University, Greek literature, biblical, the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Liturgy. My main work is in the Liturgy. And my most recent book, which is going to be out soon, is entitled, *The Rhetoric of the Jewish Liturgy, A Historical and Literary Commentary to the Daily Prayer Book*. It's a historical and literary analysis of the Jewish Liturgy, underscoring that understanding this history affects its poetry, and its analysis of poetry and that. Otherwise, I write quite a bit about the Bible and its meaning, and my third area of concern is the history of the relationship between early Judaism and early Christianity. I'm very much concerned to what degree they are tied liturgically, not just historically, and how they pray sometimes similarly, how they pray sometimes differently, and what are the implications of the differences, just as what are the implications of the similarities.

**Anne:** Can you give an overview of Eve's story?

**Reuven:** Eve is probably one of the most misunderstood characters in the Bible. Almost everybody thinks she's secondary to creation. The popular understanding is that the original entity was male, and female is a supplement to the male and therefore secondary to it. This is a misreading of the original Hebrew. The original Hebrew says the original entity was male and female.

Now the problem is that Hebrew has no word for it and the default gender in Hebrew is male. Therefore when it says God created it, people translated God created him. The trouble with that is, the "it" is called male and female. So the original entity was a humanoid, he came, or she came, or it came from the *adamah*, which is earth, therefore called Adam. So one word for earth in Latin is humus. So we should call the original entity humanoid or android.

Now this android was overwhelmingly lonely. So what did God do to solve the problem of loneliness? Split it in two. The female He merged out of the android became the sidekick of the remaining part, which was the male. Now, normally we think of male and female as necessary for reproduction. But now we know about cloning, so maybe even God knew about cloning. But even if you cloned, the original entity would be overwhelmingly lonely. So the reason we have two genders in the Bible is to solve the problem of human loneliness. And thus we have male and female.

Female and male really are co-partners in the original entity, and there's no reason to argue for the primacy of male over female or female over male, especially if the problem is human loneliness, which it takes two to tango, and therefore two to solve.

**Anne:** How does Eve's recap of God's instruction about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil differ from the original, and why might that difference matter?

**Reuven:** So the real question is, how much is the original woman - who's not called Eve until the end of the story - like the reader? And how much are Adam and Eve reflecting of the human condition as it still is, or only the human condition as it once was? So one of the great

debates in the interpretation of Scripture, are Adam and Eve before they eat of the tree like us, or are they only like us after the eat of the tree? Is there a fall of Adam and Eve from their status or is there continuity of their humanity?

So if you look at what Eve says - the snake turned to Eve and said, "Did God really prohibit eating of the tree?" Now first, it's interesting, because it means the snake is privy to information that we thought the only original android was. Now I say android, because the commandment not to eat of the tree was given of male and female. So they equally heard the commandment, which is why Eve, the woman, never says, "Well I didn't know about the commandment, you told it to Adam, and he messed it up when he told it to me." She doesn't use that excuse because she knows that she was a recipient of the original command as much as he was. They were both together.

So the original command says - very interesting - it says, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat. But as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat of it. For as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." Now, first God underscores how much He liberally lets them eat everything. The prohibition is limited to one tree. What's the one tree? The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. And you're not to eat it, and if you eat it, you will die. And this is a commandment.

Now, what does Eve say when she responds to the snake? Eve says, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, you shall not eat it or touch it, lest you die." Now the question is, is she correctly transmitting what was heard? Or is she changing the text in light of her understanding or her self-interest?

Let's examine the differences. The original statement says, God commanded. She says God said. The original statement called it a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a very ominous tree. She reduces this great, significant tree to its location. It's the tree what? Only in the middle of the garden. The original commandment had her dying on the spot, imminently, and she has her dying subsequently. Now, the question is, how do we account for these changes? Are they the normal type of changes when people talk, like they're playing telephone and they change it a little bit? Or do the changes add up to something? And if they add up to something, does it tell us something about the inner workings of Eve's mind?

Well, almost all the differences are trying to reduce the absolute nature of the commandment. They try to trivialize it. Instead of calling it the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, it's nothing but what? The tree of the Garden of Eden, the tree in the middle. Instead of being by a commandment, it's "God said." Now once you can reduce and trivialize something, you make it no longer absolute. If it's no longer absolute, you can add to it as much as you subtract from it. So what does she add? Don't touch. In other words, an absolute commandment by God cannot be touched up by human beings. But if it can be reduced in significance, or if it can be reduced in severity, it can be increased. Either way, it makes it not absolute.

Now the question is, why would anybody try to reduce the forcefulness of a commandment from God? So if it's nothing more than an expression of human nature, most people, when they contemplate transgressing a prohibition, they rationalize it and reduce its severity. "Ah,

it's not that important. It's not that significant." In your own mind, to reduce your guilt, you reduce the severity of the commandment. So it's no longer the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it's nothing but what? A tree in the middle of the garden. "What do you mean God commanded? He just said." "Oh come on, what do you mean I'm going to die on this spot? Oh of course we will die, but not what? Now."

So that means already she has reduced the significance and she's calculating her self-interests. What are her self-interests? Before, she thought the tree prevented her from dying and when she was thankful to God to say, don't eat it. It's like what? Poison! But now she's told by the snake, if you eat of it, you can do what? You become like God.

So she says, you know what? Why did God deprive us of the tree? You know why? Because he wants to be the only God around. But every human being desires to play God. And now the snake is giving me this opportunity to play God. And the only reason God withheld this tree for me is he doesn't want competition in divinity. It's remarkable.

Now what does it mean to be divine in this case? In most ancient stories, to be divine means to be immortal. But this story does not talk about the mortality of the first couple. It talks about, that they do not have the authority to determine what is good and evil. And if they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they disobey God. In disobeying God, they set themselves up as the authorities of what is right and wrong. And therefore they do what? They determine what is good and they determine what is evil. They play God, but what? They don't become God.

In fact, as soon as they eat of it, what do they do? They start hiding from God. Now remarkable, they don't hide from each other. So if the issue was nakedness, they would hide from each other. What do they cover up? They cover up their differences. By covering up their differences, they hope to reestablish commonality. But as soon as God asks them, "Where are you?" What does Adam do? He blames Eve. Well, Eve learns from Adam, what does she do? She blames a snake. What's the common denominator? There's no member of humanity that takes responsibility. Everybody's blaming others.

And when it comes to the snake, God doesn't even talk to the snake. He's almost a non-entity. Remarkable. So in that sense, Eve is like us before she ate the tree and after she ate the tree. Does she decide to eat the tree on her own will? Yes. So she has free will. Does she realize the consequences of her act? Of course she does. Otherwise, why would she hide and why would she blame others? So Eve reflects the human condition before and after. And the whole point of describing Eve is to eliminate the human condition. What is that human condition? Everybody has a desire to play God. Everybody likes to displace God by their own authority. And everybody when they get caught, they do what? Deny it and blame the first person down the road. And that is the story of Eve.

**Anne:** What are some of the clues in the text that you find to support the idea that Adam and Eve have had a sexual relationship before eating of the fruit, and that show that the fall isn't about sex or shame?

**Reuven:** Now this is an extraordinarily important question you're asking because it's popularly believed that the story condemns sexuality or the direct connection between sin

and sexuality. In fact, there's a very strong reading of the story which argues no sin, no sex. Therefore all sexuality takes place outside of the Garden of Eden. The trouble with that interpretation is near the end of chapter two, it says, "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh."

Now why does it say one flesh? Because the original entity was split in two. The function of sexuality is the restoration of the original unity. So when people are very involved in sexuality, there's a strong drive for meaning, and that meaning is the overcoming of individuality, and the merging of two into one. Because, biblically speaking, sexuality is understood as the restoration of the original entity, which was split in two because of loneliness. How is loneliness overcome? Through reunification. And this takes place before the story of Adam and Eve, before the story of the Garden of Eden. In fact, according to some interpretations, Cain and Abel were born in the Garden. They have to be born in the garden, because as soon as they got together, they related to each other to restore the original unity. Otherwise, they never would have overcome their loneliness.

So this important verse which says, "Hence a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife so they become one flesh." That should be the end of the story, and the story of Garden of Eden should begin with the last verse of chapter two, which is, the two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame. So the key characters are who? The man, and his wife. Who is subsidiary? The snake. But if you begin chapter 3, as many people do, saying, now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts it made, you'll think the snake is the important element, and humanity is subsidiary. So it's very important to read chapter 2, verse 23, along with the story, to realize this is a story not about a snake, but this is a story about human nature as reflected in Adam and Eve.

**Anne:** What is some of the wordplay that readers who aren't reading in the original Hebrew are missing out on?

**Reuven:** This is quite remarkable. The whole story is full of puns. Even the word Adam comes from the word *adamah*, which means earth. So if you wanted to translate it literally, you would call Adam an earthling. Secondly, the snake is said to be *arum*, which in Hebrew, it sounds just like the word for naked. So now the question is - is the snake naked, which is, of course, absurd, or is the snake shrewd? Or is there connection between the two, because the previous verse also says the original human beings were naked. So the choice of the language in Hebrew underscores the commonality between the snake and Adam and Eve. They both share the same word *arum* but if you translate *arum* in one case shrewd and in the other case nude, you miss the point! So the English misses much of it.

Moreover, they ate from a tree. The tree is called *etz*. The word *etz* caused pain. Pain is *etzev*. It's the same word as *etz*, add one more letter, *etzev*. And then it says to Eve, the punishment was, in giving birth to children, you experience intense pain. That's *etzeven*. So in Hebrew, I go, *etz*, tree, *etzev*, sadness, *etzeven*, pain. So you can almost see how the Hebrew explains how the experience of one causes the other. Something you totally miss in the English, or any translation, but the richness of the Hebrew is there.

And most remarkable is her name. Her name in Eve - in Hebrew it's called Chava - it is only told at the end of the story, when one would suppose it should've been told where? At the

beginning of the story when she first shows up! You don't talk to somebody for a long time and at the end of the meal say, "Oh, what's your name?" Kinda peculiar! Or, "I'll give you a name," even worse! Now the word Chava - it says she's called Chava because she was the mother of all life. But the word in Hebrew for mother of all life is *chaya*. Right? *Chaya*, not Chava. It sounds very similar. The beginning and the end are the same, but the middle consonant, *chaya*, Chava, right? A little bit different.

What's remarkable is that one of the ancient words for snake in Aramaic, and sometimes in Hebrew, is *chivya*. So now I have three words. She is called Chava, but she should have been called *chaya*. And her name now sounds halfway like *chivya*. So if I go *chaya*, what she should have been called, Chava, what she is called, *chivya*, the sound of snake. So phonologically, she's halfway between the mother of all life and halfway between what? The snake.

So then I ask myself the question, why is she called Princess Snake? Very peculiar. So I ask myself, who was she talking back there? Was she talking to a real snake? Or was she talking to her name-sake? Follow closely, a real snake? Or a name-sake? Maybe she was talking only what? To herself and she's reflecting the human desire to play God, to replace God, to be among those who what? Know good and evil. Now to know is not just intellectual. It means, I know the source of, I determine what is good and I determine what is evil.

Now according to Genesis, God endows humanity with extraordinary power - to conquer the world, to master the universe - but he does not give humanity the authority to determine what is good and what is evil. That is a divine prerogative and if you try to grab that, you're encroaching upon a divine prerogative, and that, of course, is prohibited. So the reason you play on words is because you realize that things have multiple meanings. And when you only take it as a single meaning, you misunderstand the import of the full word. So her name is Eve, which is really Chava which sounds like *chivya*. That's why she could be called, in English, Princess Snake. Get it?

Meaning, her name, reflects that ancient debate she had with this entity, which we thought was a snake, and at the beginning of the story is a snake. But if it really was a snake, when God asked Adam the question, where are you? And then he asked Eve the question, what have you done? He should have asked the question to what? The snake. She is, or the snake is, the third partner in the crime. But God does not deign to talk to the snake, because he knows, although we don't know, that the snake ain't real, right? So how do you talk to that which you know is unreal? Get it? So he doesn't talk to the snake. So the snake reduces its reality as the story goes on. And by the end, it turns out the snake is Eve's alter ego. And that alter ego we all have. We all have the temptation to play God and believe that if we disobey divine authority, we would set up our own authority as the ultimate authority.

**Anne:** In your writing, you refer to Eve as the hero of the story and the representative of humanity. I would love it if you could expand on that.

**Reuven:** First, if you read all the stories, we have quite a few of them, of the ancient origins of humanity - all of them are stories of the male. It's remarkable. The Bible, as far as I know, is the only story which not only talks about the creation of the female, but makes the female the central character. You get it? In other words, what does Adam, the male, do in the story?

She gives him food and he eats. And like every other husband, when things go wrong, what does he do? He blames his wife. So now we have an eater and a blamer, and that is the male portrait here.

What does the woman do? She discusses, she calculates, she reasons, she makes a decision. So what's remarkable is, not only is the woman in the story, but, beyond all doubt, she is the central character. She is the engineer or the hero of the story. She makes things move. Adam is pretty passive, and therefore she is central. Now why they chose a woman to reflect the human condition more than man is peculiar. I wouldn't be surprised if it's tied to her name. Because she's called Chava, I could connect her with what? The snake. And say that the voice of the snake is the voice of the evil - a temptation, as it were, which constantly tempts humanity to displace divine authority and replace it by one's own authority when it comes to determining what is good and what is evil.

So, what is amazing is the centrality of the woman in the story, when other stories just mentioned women were created. And why were women primarily created in antiquity? For sexuality - you need it for reproduction. For the biblical story it doesn't mention that, it says, why was woman created? Well, woman wasn't created, she was the second half of Adam. She's the sidekick, as it were. So you got two halves - now, this is remarkable, because the word for sidekick in Hebrew is frequently translated in modern English translation as rib. Okay? Now if the woman is the rib, then the man is the whole. Then the woman is subsidiary to the whole. That's why she's ribbing him all the time.

But if she's a sidekick, all that means is there was an entity which has two sides. Now the word for rib in Hebrew is *tse/a*. *Tse/a*, every place elsewhere in the Bible means side, so the sanctuary had a side. Get it? The side of the sanctuary is called a *tse/a*. Nobody would call the side of the sanctuary a rib. Otherwise every sacrifice probably would have been a barbecue. So this mistranslation - and it functioned because initially almost all the translators were male, and therefore the male-dominated understanding was thought to be the human understanding, not just the male understanding.

So the woman is equally part of the initial entity. Now when one side emerges, the leftovers become what? Male.

**Anne:** I was just wondering if you think that there's anything I've missed or anything that you wanted to add that I didn't ask about.

**Reuven:** Oh yes, one more thing that's extraordinarily important is, what is her punishment? Why is she punished the way she's punished?

So there are three punishments. One to the snake, one to Eve, and one to Adam. Now the punishment to the snake - people think that there's a conflict between women and snakes, but if you look at the verse closely, it says there'll be conflict between the descendants of the snake and the offspring of women. Now the offspring of women are not women. The offspring of women are male and female. Almost everybody born comes from a woman. So you can't call the offspring of women, women.

Therefore there's a conflict between snakes and humanity. If the snake is a real snake, there is no ongoing conflict in antiquity, nor in modernity, between the serpentine and the human. But if the serpentine becomes metaphorical for a mode of thinking, right, like snake-sneak, and it is a temptation to displace divine authority by human authority, and that's symbolized by the snake, then it's clear there's an ongoing conflict between what the snake symbolizes and its role in the story and the human desire to play God. That's a given conflict.

Now. What is woman, what's her punishment? Her punishment is the experience of pain in birth. Not just some pain, it says more than normal, extreme pain. Why would that be an appropriate punishment? It fits in perfectly. Woman, that is, Eve, in this case, is trying to play God. Now when does a woman most think that she's close to divine? When she's giving birth - she's bringing life into the world. There is no more divine-like activity in the whole wide world than giving birth to what? Another human being. So precisely when she thinks she verges on the divine, the Bible underscores her human vulnerability. Right? Therefore she experiences pain and she realizes what? She ain't God, even though she's involved in a God-like activity. So it's a kind of a tit for tat. You want to play God? You have a divine-like role? Precisely when you're fulfilling your divine-like role, I'm going to underscore your humanity.

Now, this explanation accounts also for the punishment of Adam. When does an ancient man feel most divine? When he reaps the produce of his labour. When he brings in the crops. I made this tree. I made this vegetable. I made this crop. Get it? I am bringing life to nature. Another divine-like activity. So what's the punishment? By the sweat of your brow you will eke out a living, it will not be easy - in fact, you are reminded of your vulnerability and your humanity and your inability to totally control nature.

So originally speaking, man should have been working, and got fruit very easily, and food very easily. And woman should be giving birth without any pain. After all, according to the first chapter, giving children is a blessing. Why should a blessing come with pain? But woman is cursed, and there's another element of her curse. It says, your desire will be towards your husband and he will rule over you. That is a curse.

According to chapter 2, husband leaves his parents, joins his wife and becomes one flesh. So the original model was a model of equity. But in a cursed world, men will exploit sexuality to dominate the woman, assuming that the woman is more needy, because she wants to become pregnant, than the man. So therefore, it's a curse, meaning male domination of the female, or female domination of the male by virtue of sexuality, is a reflection that we live in a cursed world. In the ideal world, sexuality would have one goal and one goal only: overcoming loneliness to establish the original entity. It's a very significant point. It should be heard by ancients and by moderns.