

Weekly Torah Portion-*Breishis* (Genesis 1:1-6:8)
In Wake of the Mistake that the Snake Did Make

Although most people aren't Bible experts in the Bible, unless you grew up secluded from the world, you surely know the story of Adam and Eve and the snake. The commentators are divided in understanding the snake. Do we understand it as a literal creature, a reptile similar to today's snakes, or do we understand it figuratively as a metaphor for evil? No matter which approach one takes, there are life lessons to learn from this reptile.

When we look at the story from a literal standpoint, there's an obvious textual question on the following verses, which are said immediately after Eve's creation:

They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field. (Genesis 2:25-3:1)

What is the connection of these two verses? The commentary of Rashi (11th century) points out that the first verse, which talks about their nakedness, should have been followed by "And He made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them. (ibid. 3:21). Rashi answers by explaining that the snake actually had a desire to have sexual relations with Eve and this was the cause of the snake's jumping into action and giving advice that ultimately led to their downfall. The snake intended that Adam eat of the tree and die and that afterward he have Eve. This is hard to understand when we think that every animal had its mate and we know that animals are only attracted to members of their own species. Dogs don't mate with cats, squirrels don't make with raccoons. If each species has a sensual attraction only to members of its own species, why would the snake lust after Eve?

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) in his Torah commentary answers that the snake lusted for Eve when he saw her living intimately with Adam. He expresses wonderment at how one species could be lustful for another, and especially being as the snake had its own mate. He explains that in viewing the man and woman together he perceived that their relationship was unique. **The snake realized that, unlike other beings whose mating is**

instinctive and only in times of arousal, human couples have a relationship that transcends the physical, a closeness that is born of their creation one from another (they were both once one being) and the depth of the intimacy and the relationship it creates is more dynamic and empowering than any other relationship, even that of brother and sister or parents to children. It was this unique intimacy and metaphysical connection that the serpent envied.

The subject of marital intimacy is too vast to discuss here but we see the foundation of the Jewish approach to it in the verses above. We're not just like animals, which have a physical urge and then simply mate; intimacy is an expression of love and thoughtful caring for someone an individual has chosen to commit to. Maharal (16th century kabbalist, philosopher, and Chief Rabbi of Prague) notes that humans are the only creatures that face each other during sexual relations and that hints to the connection they have every time they are together.

Until now we have understood the snake as literal, and that is the consensus of most classical commentators. However, the snake can also be seen as a representation of the *yetzer hara*, the voice in us advising us to do things that will not allow us to fulfill our potential. When we are negative and speak derogatorily about others, it means we're not at peace with ourselves. We can't use our potential if we're not at peace with ourselves. When someone is not faithful in marriage, the (original marital) relationship (s)he committed to, as well as the family, will not achieve the goals a healthy relationship does. In addition, his/her talents might not see fruition, as was the case of Anthony Weiner. He was a U.S. Congressman in New York, with good track record as a civil servant and had the potential to positively affect millions of people for years to come but his *yetzer hara* ('evil promter') convinced him to send some foolish obscene photos of himself to a college girl; that ultimately cost him his job. That's how the *yetzer hara* works; for what seems to be a small thing without consequence turns into a scandal that caused a

congressman to be dethroned and consequently forced to give up the tremendous potential he could have achieved. Adam and Eve lost unlimited potential because they listened to the “snake,” the *yetzer hara*, which convinced them that an action with seemingly little negative consequences would bring much pleasure. Elliot Spitzer, Anthony Weiner, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, all did something that seemed so inconsequential but all paid with interest for listening to the bad advice of the “snake.”

Whether it’s being an unproductive couch potato, being dishonest in business, lying, besmirching others (“If you knew what he did to me; I’m entitled to talk about him behind his back.”), or even if we’re none of the above but don’t take the intimate side of our marriage seriously, we are listening to the snake. It seeks to destroy us and the positive potential and gifts we can contribute to our families and the rest of the world. When the snake talks, don’t listen.

Good Shabbos

(Sources: Rashi; *Breishis Rabba* 18:16; *Amuk Davar Breishis* 3:1, 1:27; Talmud *Bava Metzia* 91a; Sforno from *Bava Basra* 16a,-

Although he appears small, he does much damage. The Torah describes things figuratively by various names which are similar to them, just as a king is called a “lion...” In this manner the evil inclination that tempts man is called “serpent,” for he is similar to a serpent, which is a creature with limited utility but great potential to do harm, though small in appearance... The power of lust, leading to sin, accomplishes its end through the medium of the power of imagination, which brings someone visions of physical, material pleasures, which lead him astray (turning him away) from the way of perfection intended by G-d. (*Sforno* 3:1)