

“Paradise,” retold by Rabbi Edward Feinstein, in *Capturing the Moon*.

From the day Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, they lived together east of Eden, tilling the earth, raising children, and struggling to stay alive. After those many years of struggle, when their children were grown, Adam and Eve decided to take a journey before it was too late and see the world that God had created. They journeyed from one corner of the world to the other and explored all of the world's wonders. They stood upon the great mountains, trekked across the vast deserts, walked amid the mighty forests, and traversed the magnificent seas. They watched the sun rise over the endless wilderness and saw it set into the boundless ocean. All that God had created they beheld.

In the course of their journeys, wandering from place to place, they came upon a place that seemed so familiar. They came upon the Garden of Eden, from which they had been exiled on the very first day of their lives. The garden was now guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. This angel frightened Adam and Eve, who fled.

Suddenly they heard a voice, a gentle, imploring voice. God spoke to them: "My children, you have lived in exile these many, many years. Your punishment is complete. Come now and return to My garden. Come home to the garden."

Suddenly, too, the angel disappeared. The way into the garden opened, and God invited them in. But Adam, having spent so many years in the world, had grown shrewd. He hesitated and said to God, "You know, it has been so many years. Remind me, what is it like in the garden?"

"The garden is Paradise!" God responded. "In the garden there is no work. You need never struggle or toil again. In the garden there is no pain, no suffering. In the garden there is no death. In the garden there is no time-no yesterday, no tomorrow, only an endless today. Come, My children, return to the garden!"

Adam considered God's words. He thought about a life with no work, no struggle, no pain, no passage of time. And no death. An endless life of ease, with no tomorrow and no yesterday. And then he turned and looked at Eve, his wife. He looked into the face of the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home. He read in the lines of her face all the tragedies they had overcome and the joys they had cherished. He saw in her eyes all the laughter and all the tears they had shared.

Eve looked back into Adam's face. She saw in his face all the moments that had formed their lives moments of jubilant celebration and moments of unbearable pain. She remembered the moments of life-changing crisis and the many moments of simple tenderness and love. She remembered the moments when a new life arrived in their world and the moments when death intruded. As all their shared moments came back to her, she took Adam's hand in hers.

Looking into his wife's eyes, Adam shook his head and responded to God's invitation. "No, thank you," he said. "That's not for us, not now. We don't need that now. Come on, Eve," he said to his wife. "Let's go home." And Adam and Eve turned their backs on God's Paradise and walked home.¹

The story is a beautiful expression of love. It suggests that the struggles, tragedies, challenges, and grief – in life, in a marriage – are essential to a life of joy, meaning, and love. It turns pain into a necessary component for deep companionship. And it makes me ask: How can this be achieved?

Dr. Edith Eger, a Holocaust survivor and psychologist, published her first book at age 90. In it she writes, "Our painful experiences are not a liability. They are a gift." As she told Oprah Winfrey, "You have the

¹ Capturing the Moon: classic and modern Jewish tales. United States: Behrman House, 2008, 7-8.

choice. ... to really see the light and see a gift in everything.” “Even in Auschwitz you could find that?” asked Oprah. “Even in Auschwitz.”²

There may be other ways, but I think Adam and Eve – with all the hardship in their lives - had the courage to transcend a mentality of victimhood, a mentality of I deserve better, a reaction of “Why me?” I think they were able to do this by seeing the challenges of life – extreme as they may be – as opportunities for self-discovery, learning and growth.

Some say: the thing we want most in life is connection. Whether it’s with a lover, a child, or a friend, we will experience tears, crisis, heartache, and loss. May we find a way to transform these moments into gifts that make holding another’s hand better than life in Paradise.

L’shana tova u’metuka – wishing you a good and especially sweet year.

² Winfrey, Oprah. “Dr. Edith Eva Eger: The Choice.” Oprah's Super Soul. Podcast audio, June 24, 2019, <https://super-soul.simplecast.com/episodes/dr-edith-eva-eger-the-choice-4TiKPh7A>.