

Rabbi Noa Kushner

Rosh Hashanah AM 5784

The Snake and the Garden:

לִשְׁמֹר אֶת דְּרֹךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים / To guard over the way of the tree of life¹

1.

It's a lovely day in the Garden of Eden

Everything is in harmony

The trees, the flowers, the birds

The sun is shining as Eve walks around the garden, taking it all in

Having been created recently, she's relatively new to this being alive thing

And given that she's one of the first people in the world, that seems more than reasonable

She's new but it's a beautiful day and so she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath right there where she's standing, right in the middle of the garden

The rabbis say the famous snake in the garden of eden did not actually look like a snake, at least not in the beginning

In some versions he was human sized, in others, he had feet and walked upright

And in some, they say he just looked like any other person

And from a plain reading of Torah we already know the snake could talk

So Eve was not alarmed when the snake approached her, and let's be honest

Given Eve's life until now, this snake initiated conversation was probably the *least* bizarre thing that had happened in her life so far

Eve's moment alone gives the snake his perfect opening, and the rabbis give us his words:

"New around here, aren't you? Created kinda recently, right?

Can I tell you how it works?

I mean, the part no one says out loud?

Every day God creates something that dominates whatever God made the previous day.

It's true, look it up.

So, what I'm saying is, right now you're the most powerful thing in the universe because you're the most recent addition to the garden.

But *tomorrow*

¹ Gen. 3:23

*God will make something else to rule over you.*²

"I mean, expendable is a harsh word but I'm just telling you the truth, God doesn't care about you or anything in creation, our lives are all meaningless. Sorry for jumping in, I just felt you would want to know."

Eve is quiet. Listening.

So the snake keeps on talking – because snakes never stop talking.

"See this tree? Supposedly 'off limits'?"

It's just because God doesn't want you to know the real truth.

But I'll tell you Eve, because I see who you are and I think we get each other:

Eat from this tree and be like God, Eve.

"You won't ever have to worry about being ruled over ever again, by God or anyone, you'll never have to worry about being unprotected or abandoned, following random rules you did not make, feeling powerless, because you'll rule, you'll be the ruler."

Eve is so pulled in by this strange combination of fear mongering and twisted logic that the snake almost doesn't need to say the last part, but he does anyway:

"Go ahead and eat, Eve. Everyone knows rules are for losers. We all know the only way to make it in this crazy, rigged garden is to break all the rules."

2.

You remember the story

Eve falls for the whole thing.

She eats up every snake word and then some fruit, too.

As if that weren't enough, Eve, alienated and paranoid from all the lies she's ingested, feeds the fruit to Adam, too.

Why? According to the rabbis, Eve doesn't want to be replaced, and in case she dies, she wants Adam to die too, so that he won't ever marry anyone else.³

² Beresheet Rabbah 19:4, R. Judah b. Simon, "Make haste and eat before God creates other worlds which will rule over you.", See also Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 13:5

³ Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 13:4

You see, in just a moment, Eve has gone from a person who the tradition says spanned the heavens, who filled the entire world, all of creation,⁴ someone who's relationship with God was so close

The rabbis say God did Eve's hair for her wedding to Adam,
And God led her by the hand through the garden to that huppah⁵
– God as wedding stylist, now that's some bragging rights –

But my point is that
Eve and Adam went from spanning the heavens to hiding under a bush,
Only trying not to lose more than they'd already lost

And what I want to offer on this Rosh Hashanah in America 5784
What I want to point out
Is that Eve and Adam's problem was not that they ate fruit (!)

The problem was that they believed the snake. They believed the lies.

The problem was they believed they were expendable, and could be thrown away by God

The problem was that they thought their lives were meaningless,
That their actions were only significant insofar as they helped ward off their own fear and pain

The problem was Eve and Adam believed they didn't need each other, couldn't trust each other

Couldn't help each other

And, in fact, they started to see each other only as either a liability or a threat –

3.

Once Eve and Adam believe the snake, according to the tradition, God's reaction is one of unbridled despair:

"Where are you?! Just yesterday, we used to talk, close, together! You listened to me and followed my ways, my rules! But now, you're ruled by a snake."⁶

⁴ I took a liberty here to expand the midrash about Adam rishono – as Adam and Eve are created out of one body in both accounts. Bereisheet Rabbah 8:1

⁵ Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Chayei Sara 2:1

⁶ BR 19:9

Because, see, once we believe the snake
Whether we eat the fruit, don't eat the fruit,
No matter how pretty our surroundings, no matter how protected

We're not in the garden anymore
Because if you think you're alone,
under constant threat of attack,
that God is out to get you,
And rules are for losers
So the only way to survive is to arm yourself –
To align yourself with whomever seems most powerful

The garden disappears, it just evaporates around us, it simply can't exist under those
circumstances
We can't see the world as a garden, we can't see anyone else, and we surely cannot
hear God calling, calling out our names.

4.

America too once seemed like a garden, at least for some
but for the past few years, we've all been ingesting our share of venom

And the venom comes from a lot of sources
Some we know well, some we're more reluctant to admit
There is no shortage of venom arising from many places on the political spectrum

Many who advance an idea, just like the snake in the garden,
that the world is out to get us
That the only way to be protected is to be "beholden"⁷ to their truth,
their version of things,

Many who suggest that, in order to be safe,
just like it was for Eve in the middle of the garden,
we need to demonstrate increasing amounts of loyalty,
And convert or jettison anyone who doesn't agree

Eventually it seems there's always a call to break the rules,

⁷ Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, p. 6

To “undermine or destroy what exists,”⁸
Disregard any existing social contracts, political norms –

And this self proclaimed emergency status,
this way of presenting a given case has become so common,
Online, in social commentary, in politics
We might be forgiven for acclimating
For deadening our response, or even, from time to time
just following the arguments into more questionable, destructive territory
Or, even, following our fears, setting aside our reservations and getting in line

But make no mistake
This strain of increasingly popular populism, this anti-liberal stance
Is a dangerous starting point,
One that has deadened conversation and exchange
No matter how ill or well intended the source may be

We know from our tradition, it’s right there at the beginning of Genesis,
If it sounds like the snake
No matter how cheeky or flip or of the moment the presentation seems to be
Or perhaps, especially when the presentation is meant to disarm –
– So as to better disguise the severity of the views underneath
None of it can be taken lightly
Not any more

You see, we have followed these voices, not to mention these leaders, at great cost
And we are already paying the price –
the accumulative and dramatic breakdown of social trust
in our institutions and in each other in this country⁹
Doesn’t really matter who started it
The garden of America is beginning to evaporate around us

You see, like Eve, we have a choice:
It’s either ingesting the venom or being in the garden
We can’t do both

⁸ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, p. 20

⁹ “When people in a society lose faith or trust in their institutions and each other, the nation collapses.”
David Brooks, *The Atlantic*, “America is Having a Moral Convulsion,” October 5, 2020.

5.

I just know it: The original snake in the garden had an active social media following
#treeoflifefacts (all caps)

#disruptthegarden

Snakes get all the clicks

And it seems that venom, once admitted into a garden, a community, a country
spreads everywhere

And so, in trying to protect ourselves these days or just get through the day
Perhaps we think, like Eve, it's just easier, downright practical (!), normal, even kinda
cool, kinda rogue

to try speaking like snakes ourselves, to take our turn
you know, make our own poison, fight fire with fire

Can't let the other side win, right?

I mean, they've got no shame, am I right?

and American collective moral ambition is so last century.

But by upping the ante again and again

Jumping to the worst case scenarios again and again as if on cue

We're all beginning to self destruct –

Getting into military like formations, starting wars over ideas and topics that once
might have been up for discussion

Accepting the higher and higher price of entry

Just so we can cling onto our increasingly brittle identities

But our participation in baseless accusations,

Our raising suspicion about another person rather than pushing hard on their
position or ideas

Our cynicism

Our assumption of the necessity of hostility

These are snake games

And we can't fight venom by becoming snakes ourselves

We see it right in Genesis, it is not the way

We see it right in Torah

After they double down on the reptilian version of things,

As they're getting ready to leave the garden

Or, more accurately, the garden is disappearing around them

It says God makes Eve and Adam clothes.

The rabbis want to know: *What kind of clothes?*

There are lots of ideas but I'm partial to the one that says,
Now that they were at war with each other, God, and the world
Of course, God made the new garments out of *snakeskin*.

But, see, I think God was crying as God made those clothes¹⁰

Wishing, even then, that Adam and Eve would reject the snake's view of the world –
Wishing they could understand that we will never fight venom by becoming snakes
ourselves.

6.

Because here is the bitter irony –
And if you remember one thing I say today, remember this:
The snake was wrong!
The snakes are always wrong!

God not only wants us to stay in the garden –
The rabbis point out that God calls to Eve and Adam, giving them all kinds of chances
to turn this story around
Trying to get them to admit
how they got lost,
what went off the rails,
how they are hiding from everything they care about
But Eve and Adam are so far gone, they don't ever try to stay

In the words of midrash God says,
"You could have been singing songs to me about how I created you and all I did with
you, but you *didn't sing a single word* –

“אֶשְׂרָה נָא לִדְיָי”

I was [left] singing all to myself.”¹¹

That's what's so tragic about this whole situation,
The snake was wrong!

¹⁰ Their clothes were snakeskin [Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5, p. 80. Beresheet Rabbah, 20:12
the garments were made of something that comes from skin.

¹¹ Midrash Tanchuma Buber 25:5 (to Isaiah 5:1).

"Come back!" says God, "שׁוּבִי אֵלַי ... שׁוּבִי שׁוּבִי"¹²

"There is nothing in the world I care for more than you."¹³

And the snake was not just casually wrong! The snake was completely, spectacularly wrong –

About everything!

Eve and Adam, thinking they have to each defend themselves
Blame each other emphatically and elaborately, furthering their estrangement,
but actually,
Considering they are each, quite literally, *the only two people left in the world*
They don't really need space
they don't even need to be blameless, innocent
they just need each other.¹⁴

7.

We need each other in America, too
And if we're ever going to return to the garden in any way
To allow the garden to grow around us again
We'll have to stop mainlining venom

But if there's anything we've learned from the last few years it's that this won't be an easy habit to break

See, our fears,
our yearning for protection, for answers,
All that underpins our divisiveness
All that made us susceptible
These fears are not going away.

And, make no mistake, there are those in this world, a few, who have and who will capitalize on just those fears.

¹² Shir haShirim, 7:1

¹³ Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:4:2 (p. 49): Story about an estranged couple. In a loving moment, he invites her, the night before the divorce to take anything she wants from his house. She has *him*, asleep, carried to her house. He wakes up. "What am I doing here?" he asks. She says, "Didn't you say to take any article I liked? There is nothing in the world I care for more than you."

¹⁴ Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 14:2

In the words of Anne Applebaum in her book, *Twilight of Democracy*:
"Unity is an anomaly.
Polarization is normal.
Skepticism about liberal democracy is also normal and the appeal of authoritarianism is eternal."¹⁵

In other words, Eve and Adam might leave the garden
But the snake? The snake lives forever.
The snake rocks on.

However, the rabbis point out
That while the snake remains
Even *God* does not enter an argument with it,
Even God doesn't engage that snake with questions,
the way God asked Adam and Eve questions about where they were, what they did –
Why? Because God knows the snake will always have a clever comeback¹⁶
Snakes always have a clever comeback.
So nothing will come of that argument

Still, pay attention, because God not destroy the snake either –
something that would surely be within God's power.
Think about it
Even when it comes to allowing the possibility of the kind of slander and divisiveness
and suspicion and cynicism that the snake breeds
God knows that the alternative, trying to destroy this snake, all snakes, even if they
could be positively identified and effectively silenced, is worse.
The garden is no police state
And God doesn't want loyalty only because there are no other options

So God lets the snake slither away to freedom
And, not unimportantly,
God puts the story in our torah, snake and all, letting us decide what we learn from it.

What I'm saying is that
Venom seems to be a permanent feature of our world,
And so we will have to develop the tools to minimize both its reach and its currently
rising, incontestable power in our societies and in our souls.

¹⁵ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, p. 56

¹⁶ Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 1, p. 77.

I'm saying we will have to learn to be less afraid, less reactive and more discriminating and courageous in the face of it.¹⁷

8.

There's a beautiful verse in song of songs, "אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְעָלִי תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ"
"I am my beloved's
and my beloved's desire is for me"¹⁸

And we learn from this verse

The rabbis say in *shir hashirim rabbah* that there are three strong desires in the world:

(1) We yearn for each other,

(2) We yearn for god,

and (3) the evil inclination, the *yetzer harah*, what it is that animates the snake yearns for us, that is, it yearns to take us down.¹⁹

But you see, even while the tradition names this venom
as a real threat

Even while the tradition notes along with us that this threat has always existed,
and will always be

In the same passage we're offered *the clues to the antidote staring us right in the face*,
(!)

I'm talking about the other two desires!

You see, our yearning for each other

To be recognized by each other, our needing each other,

Yes, our wanting to love and be loved

And (2) our yearning for our lives to be significant and divine

Our desire that our lives mean something in the eyes of God

¹⁷ "Let us therefore have that salutary fear of the future that makes one watchful and combative, and not that sort of soft and idle terror that wears hearts down and enervates them." With thanks to Robert Fram for this quote.

¹⁸ Song of Songs 7:11

¹⁹ Shir ha shirim rabbah, 7:2:1. [specifically, yetzer yearns for Cain and his friends]. I amended these: I changed the order, and made one more inclusive (originally it read: a woman yearns for her husband).

These two desires –
They may be what the snake manipulated to get Eve and Adam to believe the lies
– after all, had Eve not been afraid of losing Adam,
had Eve and Adam not wanted to be precious in the eyes of God, enduring –
The snake couldn't have ensnared them in the first place –

But actually
These desires – for each other, for god – are not wrong, far from it!
These are actually the clues to our strength, the keys!
Ways for us to resist taking more and more venom

You see, it hasn't been and isn't going to be enough to just refuse the poison,
to avoid and de-platform and turn off the computer and all the things
It's not a bad start
It's just not gonna do the whole job
And I already told you, our devolving into snake behavior is off the table

Instead, channeling those two desires
We will reach for the strongest tools we have
And I warn you, these are not for the faint of heart, they require courage

I'm talking about trusting in each other and seeking God.²⁰

9.
How do we trust each other?

In the Babylonian Talmud it says
"When our love was strong, we could have slept on a bed that was the width of a
sword.
Now that our love is not strong,
a bed of sixty cubits is not sufficient for us."²¹

Interpersonal trust in America is at its lowest point in decades.
You could say our American Style California King size bed is wider than sixty cubits
and it's still not enough.

²⁰ Serpent vanishes if we walk in the ways of God, *Legends*, vol. 1, p. 78; Also, rabbis note God protects us from serpents in the wilderness.

²¹ Bavli, Sanhedrin 7a:14

In a survey conducted by the University of Chicago, researchers have recorded the lowest level of social trust in this country since they began collecting the data in 1972.²²

How do we *begin* to find any trust, any love, any good will amongst us, and build from that place?

There are many ways, of course

There's no shortage of articles interviewing social scientists, psychologists and academics, many suggested ways to engender trust ranging from the utilitarian (build new civic organizations) to the granular (recommit to societal norms like saying 'Hello' on the street) to the elaborate (burning man, I'm talking to you).

But I have something to add, too

You see, we have a mechanism in our tradition

And it's so very old and so very close, so painfully obvious you may not have considered it as a source of help in these terrible times,

A viable way to respond to our yearning for each other

you might have indeed discounted it, taken it for granted –

but, while social trust is not its explicit aim, for this technology speaks in a different language

still, social trust flows from it like a river, I know because I have witnessed it

And this idea it is not only close to us, in fact, we are in it right now

You see, on shabbat

They say we enter a garden

On shabbat we sing to each other

“לָכֶּה דֹדֵי”/ come, my beloved, let's go, let's go”

As if we were all invited to the same wedding

We sing this with whomever is in the room, whomever happens to be next to us

No matter what has happened that week

We enter the garden of shabbat

And our desire to be whole with each other is not so naive

²² David Brooks, “America is Having a Moral Convulsion,” The Atlantic, October 5, 2020

And we remember again that it is possible for us even to love each other²³
That, in fact, in no small way, we already do
That we can all sleep on a bed no wider than the width of a sword, at least for a little
while

And something happens when we go back to the garden of shabbat each week
Each time we practice, we are more and more convinced of its reality
The garden of shabbat starts to form in us and it starts to form us
It starts to arise around us
Teaching us that this way of being in the world where we trust and are trusted
Is a dream that can be realized more and more

Each person looks different on shabbat, see
And in the light of shabbat we can see plainly that what the snake says is not true
The lies just fall away, we shed that skin

Instead, in that same light, we consider the garden of shabbat,
and the garden of America
And understand that it might all be part of the same garden

10.

“אֲנִי לְדוֹדַי וְעַלִּי תְשׁוּקָתוֹ” / I am my beloved's and my beloved's desire is for me

Remember, we have a second desire, too
Namely, for our lives to mean something in the eyes of God, to be close to God

To know we cannot be reduced to algorithms or salaries or astrological signs or
political affiliations or by what we consume

But rather, to know that God created each of us with great intent
And to remember that God calls to each and every one of our souls –

“שׁוּבֵי שׁוּבֵי... שׁוּבֵי אֵלַי”

“Return to me”

“שׁוּבֵי שׁוּבֵי... שׁוּבֵי אֵלַי”²⁴

²³ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, ed. Friedman, p. 4. See also Sefer Haggadah 488:24, “a man who labors for six days rests on shabbat and so finds it possible to come closer to his children and the other members of his household...”

²⁴ Shir haShirim 7:1, also the piyyut Ya’aleh Ya’aleh

"There is nothing in the world I care for more than you."²⁵

This desire to to be closer to God – if we can allow it –
This is our second antidote! Our second way to resist the venom!

You see, instead of following the snake path, doing whatever we have to do to "win"
at life, as if there is such a thing

We make decisions to try and be closer to God,
To hear our name being called, and to call out ourselves –
Maybe through study, through service
Maybe through rules, commandments, wouldn't kill you

Reaching for God won't make us invincible, pain comes with life,
there's no such thing as magic apples
But it will help us keep our gardens

And you know, it says, right in Torah
God put Adam and Eve in the garden
"לַעֲבֹדָה וּלְשִׁמְרָה" / "...to work and to guard it, to keep it"²⁶

And the rabbis ask, they want to know, what is this work?
What is it in the garden that needed guarding?²⁷
Because the trees in the garden sure didn't need us

It must have been, says Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer
as it says at the end of the story,
"לְשׁוֹר אֶת־דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים"²⁸

That is, Adam and Eve were put there in the garden
We were put there, put here
To guard the way to the tree of life, to keep it
That is, the whole point of us being in the garden

²⁵ see note 13

²⁶ Gen. 2:15

²⁷ Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 12:1,3, and Tanchuma Buber, Bereesheet Gen. 25:5.

²⁸ Genesis 3:24

Is that God wants us to guard and keep *this way of life*²⁹
The way of reaching for God, being close to God,
This way of needing and trusting each other
This is the way to the tree of life (!)
And this is a garden worth guarding

11.

I would like to submit that The Kitchen is the kind of place
where we can guard these connections with one another and god

where our efforts can regularly lead to
acts of kindness and generosity,
the building of relationships,
a commitment to learning multiple perspectives,
and a renewed fulfillment of our responsibility in the larger world –

What the social scientists call building social trust and claiming social responsibility
but we just call shabbat and torah

Let's just say once you've seen someone cry while saying kaddish
You've spent enough shabbatot with them to know they prefer the left side of SF
Friends
and you've seen them in a purim costume
Even if there's a substantive disagreement somewhere along the way,
Even when the inevitable inconsistencies and misunderstandings arise
The connections cannot only be weathered, they can be made stronger.

And if you're asking yourself, "Is she really saying by showing up at the Kitchen I can
rebuild social trust and moral responsibility in America, helping my country and
contributing to the course of the next election?"

Yes, get to know me, I am saying that emphatically and unapologetically –

I am saying that maybe that yawning societal vacuum left by religious organizations in
this country is best filled by new or re-envisioned religious organizations, yes, just like
The Kitchen

12.

²⁹ aka, Torah

Some of our sources say that the whole world is the garden
That the garden reaches over the whole world
And I think they might be right
They say the branches of the tree of life are spread over all living things³⁰

Maybe God hid the garden everywhere, in plain sight
But it can only be realized when we trust each other, and reach for God

Don't you get it? Don't you see?

*I'm saying there is no other garden
There is only this world
And we are the ones who guard it all*

³⁰ Beresheet Rabbah 15:6, and R. Bahya to Gen 2:9 says that the tree of knowledge and the tree of life were the same tree.