

Pondering the Parsha with Rabbi Leener

Bereishit: The Garden of Eden

The Garden of Eden is a mythical place that has captured the imagination of people for centuries, yet we know very little about it. Is the Garden of Eden an actual physical location, or merely a spiritual reality? Or is it both? How did it become associated with the afterlife? By exploring key sources around the Garden of Eden, we can gain a deeper understanding of our own origins and our place in the universe. But perhaps the most important question is: can we ever hope to regain the paradise that we lost in the Garden of Eden?

1) Nedarim 39b

Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of the Messiah...The Garden of Eden was created before the world was created, as it is written: "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden eastward [mikedem]" (Genesis 2:8). "Eastward [mikedem]" is interpreted in the sense of before [mikodem], i.e., before the world was created.

וְהָא תְּנִיָּא: שְׁבַע דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ
קֹדֶם שֶׁנִּבְרָא הָעוֹלָם, אֱלֹהֵי הָ:
תּוֹרָה, וְתַשׁוּבָה, גֶּן עֵדֶן, וְגִיהֵנָם,
כִּסֵּא הַכְּבוֹד, וּבֵית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, וְשֵׁמוֹ
שֶׁל מָשִׁיחַ...גֶּן עֵדֶן, דְּכֶתִיב: "וַיִּטֵּעַ
ה' אֱלֹהִים גֶּן בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וְגו'".

Questions:

- How does your understanding of the Garden of Eden change by knowing it was created before the world?
- Can you think of anything that connects all these primordial creations?

2) Taanit 10a

The Sages taught in a baraita: The area of the land of Egypt is four hundred parasangs [parsa] by four hundred parasangs. And this is one sixtieth the size of Cush, and Cush itself is one sixtieth the size of the rest of the world. And the world is one sixtieth of the Garden of Eden, and the Garden of Eden is one sixtieth of Eden itself, and Eden is one sixtieth of Gehenna. You find that the entire world is like a pot cover for Gehenna, as Eden, which is far larger than the rest of the world, is only one sixtieth the size of Gehenna. And some say: Gehenna has no measure. And some say that Eden has no measure.

תְּנִי רַבָּנִן: אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִיא אַרְבַּע
מֵאוֹת פָּרְסָה עַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פָּרְסָה,
וְהִיא אֶחָד מֵשָׁשִׁים בְּכֹשׁ, וְכֹשׁ —
אֶחָד מֵשָׁשִׁים בְּעוֹלָם, וְעוֹלָם — אֶחָד
מֵשָׁשִׁים בְּגֶן, וְגֶן — אֶחָד מֵשָׁשִׁים לְעֵדֶן,
וְעֵדֶן — אֶחָד מֵשָׁשִׁים לְגִיהֵנָם, נִמְצָא
כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלֵו כְּכִסּוֹי קִדְרָה לְגִיהֵנָם.
וַיֵּשׁ אֲמֹרִים: גִּיהֵנָם אֵין לָהּ שִׁיעוֹר, וַיֵּשׁ
אֲמֹרִים: עֵדֶן אֵין לָהּ שִׁיעוֹר.

Questions:

- Is the Talmud suggesting that the Garden of Eden is actually a physical location on Earth or some sort of spiritual "place?"
- How do you understand Gehenna in relation to the Garden of Eden?



3) Zohar 1:127b

Rabbi Yehudah said, "Abraham recognized a sign in that cave [Machpelah], and there his heart's desire focused for previously he had entered and seen Adam and Eve buried there. How did he know it was them? Because he gazed upon his image [the image of Adam], an opening to the Garden of Eden appeared, and that same image was standing nearby.

רבי יהודה אמר, אברהם ידע בהיה
מערתא סימנא, ולביה ורעותיה תמן הוה,
בגין דמקדמת דנא עאל לתמן וחמא לאדם
וחוה טמירין תמן. ומנא הוה ידע דאינון
הוו. אלא חמא דיוקניה, ואסתכל ואתפתח
ליה חד פתחא דגנתא דעדן תמן והווא
דיוקנא דאדם הוה קאים לגביה.

Questions:

- How does this clarify or complicate what we think about what the Garden of Eden is?
- Why is connecting the cave of Machpelah to the Garden of Eden significant?

4) Zohar 2:150a

The Garden of Eden is the dwelling place of holy souls, both those who have already descended to this world and those who will descend in the future.

וכל דיוקנא עלאין כלהו, מרקמן ומתצוין
בהאי גן עדן דלתתא, ותמן אינון כרובים

Questions:

- How does this source subvert your understanding of the Garden of Eden?
- What new conception of the Garden of Eden is Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai introducing?
- Is the Garden of Eden a different reality?
- Why is it important to note that it's the dwelling of souls who will descend in the future?

5) Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, "Waters of Eden"

But how does man purify himself and remove himself from this state of uncleanness? How does he dissociate himself from man's fallen state and reassociate himself with Eden? This purification is primarily through water, through immersion in the Mikvah. Water is the primary connection we have with the Garden of Eden. The Talmud tells us that all the water in the world ultimately has its root in the river that emerged from Eden. In a sense, this river is the spiritual source of all water. Even though a person cannot re-enter the Garden of Eden itself, whenever he associates himself with these rivers — or with any other water, his re-establishing a link with Eden. We thus find a Midrash which tells us that after Adam was driven from Eden, he repented by sitting in the river. Although he had been permanently barred from the Garden itself, he tried to maintain a link through the river...Thus, even before God placed man in Eden, He established a link between the Garden and the world outside, namely the river which emerged from it. Even though man has been expelled from Eden, a link remains. The concept of Mikvah is very closely associated with this link.

Questions:

- How does Rabbi Kaplan understand the Garden of Eden?
- Why is creating a link between the outside world and Eden so significant?