



Home, Exile, and How to Wander Together

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Human beings don't have to be told that we are living outside of paradise.

It's not just the fact that the world is not perfect: it's that deep inside many of us, we feel a longing for a place that might be. Within each of us there is a longing for a home we have never fully found.

Midrashically, this human experience of exile begins almost immediately, on the eighth day of creation, immediately after the first Shabbat.

בראשית רבה יא:ב

וְרָבֵן אֲמַר... וּמוֹצָאֵי שַׁבָּת נִטְלָה מִמֶּנּוּ זִיווּ וְטָרְדוּ מִגֵּן עֵדֶן, הִדָּא הוּא דְכֹתִיב (איוב יד, כ): מִשְׁנֵה פָנָיו וְתִשְׁלַחֵהוּ.

Bereishit Rabbah 11:2

But the Rabbis say: ...on Saturday night, [God] took from [Adam] his splendor and banished him from Gan Eden. This is what is written, "He changed his face and sent him away" (Iyyov 14:20).



In this midrashic understanding, the human longing for home becomes clear. Humanity, created on the sixth day, has only ever experienced one complete day in the paradise that was supposed to be its permanent home, and it spent that day knowing that as soon as night fell, it would be lost. This feeling that so many of us have, a longing for home that we have never fully known, is part of the human heart from the very beginning of our time on this earth.

This might be what lurks behind the question Rashi asks at the beginning of the Torah. Why does the Torah need to start from Bereishit?

רש"י בראשית א:א

אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל את התורה אלא מהחדש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו בה ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית?

Rashi on Bereishit 1:1

R. Yitzhak said: The Torah **which is the Law book of Israel** should have commenced with the verse (Shemot 12:2) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months,” which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation?

On a literal level, Rashi is asking why we need to begin the Torah with stories if its presumed purpose is to tell us God’s will. Why not start the Torah in Shemot if all we need to know are the commandments?

But read in a different way, Rashi’s question takes on a different meaning. Why does the Torah need to tell us about a lost Eden? Don’t all of us know that this world is not what it should be? Don’t we all feel at times that we are like Adam and Eve, living in the wake of a lost utopia?

Rashi answers:



מִשּׁוּם כַּח מַעֲשֵׂיוֹ הַגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתֵת לָהֶם נַחֲלַת גּוֹיִם (תהילים קי"א), שָׁאֵם יֹאמְרוּ אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל
לְסֻטִּים אַתֶּם, שֶׁכָּבַשְׁתֶּם אֲרָצוֹת שִׁבְעָה גּוֹיִם, הֵם אוֹמְרִים לָהֶם כָּל הָאָרֶץ שֶׁל הַקֹּב"ה הִיא, הוּא בְּרָאָהּ
וְנָתַתָּה לְאִשְׁרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵינָיו, בְּרָצוֹנוֹ נָתַתָּה לָהֶם, וּבְרָצוֹנוֹ נָטְלָה מֵהֶם וְנָתַתָּה לָנוּ:

Because of the thought expressed in the text (Tehillim 111:6), “He declared to His people the strength of His works (i.e., He gave an account of the work of Creation), in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations.” For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan,” Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.”

Literally, Rashi’s answer is about the struggle between Israel and the nations of the world over the Land of Israel, a struggle so pitched that the Torah must tell the story of creation just to justify Israel’s possession of the land. God gives and God takes, but no matter what, we maintain the knowledge that the Holy Blessed One gave us the land, and that no matter where we might be in the world, no matter how much the nations might deny it, it remains our home.

But when that same answer is read again and reapplied to the individual, Rashi’s words take on a different tenor: they are about the possibility and promise of permanence, of finding a stable, lasting home. We might feel, all too often in this world, that we are wanderers. But, Rashi tells us, there is a place, a home, that is our heritage, our birthright. In this world that so often feels like lonely exile, we must maintain faith, even in the face of those who would deny it, in the possibility of homecoming.

Ramban, though he shares Rashi’s question, gives an answer with a different slant:

רבמ"ן בראשית א:א

כְּלוֹמֵר, שֶׁגֵּרַשׁ מִשֵּׁם מוֹרְדִי, וְהִשְׁכִּין בּוֹ עוֹבְדֵי, שֶׁיֵּדְעוּ כִּי בְּעִבּוּדָתוֹ יִנְחִלֶהָ, וְאִם יִחְטְאוּ לוֹ – תִּקְיָא אוֹתָם הָאָרֶץ כְּאִשָּׁר קָאָה אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיהֶם.

Ramban on Bereishit 1:1

That is to say, He expelled those who rebelled against Him, and settled therein those who served Him so that they know by serving Him they will inherit it, whereas if they sin against Him, the land will vomit them out, just as it vomited out the nation before them.

For Ramban in this answer, there is no permanent, final homecoming. There is always the possibility of further loss and expulsion. Human beings cannot rest content in the promise of home: home is something that must be constantly maintained, and the threat of its loss always looms. Exile is cyclical, the way of the world as long as humanity is subject to sin.

We pray that Ramban's answer is never again literally true for the Jewish people on a national level—but on an individual level, this is painfully true for all human beings. Home is something that, throughout our lives, we find and lose again and again: literal homes, as we move for jobs or dreams; but also more metaphorical homes, the routines, comforts, and dreams we settle into in life that, just when we begin to feel that they are permanent, change in a way that leave us feeling adrift. We create families only to see them shift throughout our lives as we welcome new members through marriage and birth and lose loved ones to distance and death. We find meaning and passions only to realize that our interests shift over time and that we need to find new areas to fill our souls. We think we finally understand those around us, only to realize, again and again, that we don't even fully understand ourselves.

To be human, in this understanding of Ramban's answer, is to constantly lose the homes we work so hard to find.

What, then, do we do in the face of that constant cycle of loss? What does it mean to live in a world where we know that no matter how hard we try, we can never find the permanence of Eden again in this lifetime?

We might find a gesture towards a pathway forward in revisiting the *midrash* about Adam and Havah's expulsion, specifically its insistence that the expulsion took place on the eighth day.

The eighth day, in the life of a Jewish male, is also a sort of Edenic expulsion. After an extra eight days of womb-like embrace, our boy babies are brought into contact, for the first time, with the world at large and, in as small a way as we can manage, its pain.

But this time, the expulsion is different.

Adam and Havah faced the first pain of the world alone and bereft, but we give our children this promise: being part of the covenant means that, while there will surely be loss and pain, there are also, alongside it, community, and love, and hesed. While every human being, until messianic times, must live in the reality of the loss of Eden and the knowledge that we are never fully home, we affirm that even if we cannot find permanence, we can find God—and just as importantly, that God seeks to find us.

As much as we wish we could, we cannot expect a life without exile, loss, and pain.

But while we might seek all our lives and never find Eden again, being part of the covenant means that the Jewish people are committed to helping us find home wherever we are.



This is the message the covenant reminds us of as we begin the Torah again and re-experience Adam and Havah's expulsion: whatever we might face in this world and wherever, in its cycles of homecoming and loss it may bring us, we will never have to wander alone.

