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Search for Meaning

with essays by

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Eden's Travelers: A Jewish Encounter with Humility, Ambition, and Arrogance

Dan Ornstein

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear—
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias"

In Shelley's cautionary tale about arrogance, the nameless traveller whom the poet meets recounts the story of the haughty ruler, Ozymandias, whose pretensions to divine power go the way of inevitable decay.[1] He does this not by telling us the backstory of Ozymandias' lust for power but by describing with great irony the last vestiges of the king's transient might and self-importance: his crumbling, decapitated statue, its stone legs erect, with the ruler's

sneering stone face cast into the punishing desert sands. The king's words and self-perception contrast starkly with his inevitable, dismal human fate.

Human beings have ego needs: we want recognition for our achievements, and we seek out power and celebrity. Yet how far can we take our quest for these things before ambition and pride degenerate into self-destructive arrogance? From the other end of the spectrum, when, if ever, does humility become excessive and self-destructive? Shelly's "Ozymandias" is an insightful reminder that the quest to be "king of kings" will result in failure because we are mortal and life is fleeting. Responding to the potential dangers of arrogance, a variety of Jewish wisdom sources strongly counsel, and even demand of us, that we cultivate humility, often extreme humility, as the Jewish religious and moral ideal.[2]

My interpretation below of the second and third chapters of the Book of Genesis, foundational texts of the Jewish tradition, will hopefully demonstrate a more nuanced treatment of humility, ambition, and arrogance. These Jewish sources do not automatically assume that we must be self-deprecating to be truly humble; nor do they necessarily equate legitimate ambition, initiative, and a sense of self-worth with arrogance and overweening pride. Ambition and initiative are recognized by Genesis as integral to human purpose, because they are built into the structure of our partnership with God in maintaining the world. In fact, as we will read, Genesis asserts that God purposely gave human beings these great powers and drives. However, they can bring us dangerously close to the line dividing us from God and push us to cross it, much to our own peril. Though God is superior to us, we often rebel against that superiority on the assumption that these God-given powers make us equal to or better than God. The cultivation of humility provides the balance that forces us back behind that dividing line. Our struggle in this balancing act is

to stay grounded as God's servants without paralyzing ourselves out of excessive humility.

One conventional approach to our subject might quote and analyze snippets or even whole passages of the Jewish wisdom tradition that counsel us to shun arrogance and cultivate humility. Yet, we learn most meaningfully by confronting our tradition's great stories, which tend to convey ideas indirectly. They often leave us with more questions than answers, and they thus goad us into life-long discussion. In this essay, I invite you along on a different kind of literary and spiritual journey. We will read together the legendary Garden of Eden story in Genesis while imagining that we are walking through the garden and meeting the first humans, Adam and Eve, who lived in Eden and who were expelled from there. We will glimpse these people struggling with the opposing choices and warring impulses that make being human so complex and so magnificent: submission and rebellion, temptation, desire and self restraint, majesty and humility.[3] My encounter with these narratives helps me in my struggle to deal with humility, pride, desire, and ambition in my life and to avoid the extremes in either direction. I hope that these texts will also help you to interpret these aspects of human character as they manifest themselves in your life. I suggest that, in visiting this vibrant textual tribute to Judaism as a living wisdom tradition, you suspend any possible concerns about its historicity. The Jewish Bible's greatest stories are not necessarily compelling because they are literally true, but because they inspire us with timeless moral and spiritual truth. It is irrelevant whether there literally was a Garden of Eden or if we even literally believe in the God we will meet in that garden. The narrative we will encounter provides us with insights about reality and about what it means to be human. It will challenge us to critically examine our many conflicting human characteristics and impulses. We can take these stories very seriously without taking them literally.

By reading them with you, I am not suggesting that they are the last word in Judaism about humility and arrogance. However, they do provide us with one important mirror to hold up to ourselves in our search for wisdom and meaning.

Warnings at the Gate of Eden

Imagine that at the beginning of our journey we are passing through Eden's gate. According to the Bible, God placed the first people in Eden with the mandate to till and to tend it, that is, to cultivate and supervise it (Genesis 2:15). Though the Bible never tells us this, imagine also that a sign is posted at that gate, with the words of the eighty-century BCE Hebrew prophet Micah, who flourished many centuries after the story of Eden is said to have taken place:

> God has told you, O man, what is good
> And what the Lord requires of you:
> Only to do justice
> And to love mercy
> And to walk humbly with your God.[4]

This is one of the earliest Jewish admonitions to us to practice humility before God. You and I wonder why this sign hangs over Eden, which only adds to the strangeness of our visit to this place where our species began. Perhaps Micah is warning us about something that we are not yet able to articulate.

Entering Eden is like entering the information center of a national park and finding ourselves in front of two movie screens. They each show different, but complementary, versions of the biblical story of how God created our founding "parents," the first humans.

The First Screen (Genesis 1:26–28)	*The Second Screen* (Genesis 2:4–17)
And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."	When the Lord God made earth and heaven…a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth. The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed…The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."

We gradually recognize that the second film is an "on the ground" version which brings the first story's aerial view into sharper focus. Screen I introduces us to an entire species, male and female, which bears striking similarity to its Creator, having been made in the divine image and likeness. This similarity is a regal one: like God, yet only with God's consent, humans are to master and rule everything in existence—a potentially intoxicating invitation to superiority through marked, hierarchical distinction from all other living things.

What a film implies through dialogue and camera work is as important as what it shows us explicitly. For instance, in the first film, whom is God addressing with the words, "Let us make man"? The rabbinic commentators on the Bible[5] who, like exacting film critics, interpret each scene closely and keenly, argue among themselves.

Some say that God is speaking to a host of celestial helpers.[6] Others say that God is speaking about or to the earth: "You bring the blood, guts, waste matter, and animal instincts; I will bring the soul, intellect, and higher behavioral capacities. We will throw them together and co-create an animal unlike any other."[7] All the commentators agree that these humans "resemble" God without being God, which is rather puzzling. God creates the human beings with powers superior to other life forms, then charges them to do exactly what those other species must do to survive: have sex and procreate. Are the humans God, are they animals, or are they to be something entirely new and different—perhaps a mix of the two?

The film playing on the second screen tries to resolve our nagging questions by showing us God, as it were, "in the lab," creating the first man, at first just the male of the species. The picture is a rather coarse one. The first film shows God conjuring the humans from somewhere mysterious and then shifts the scene to a royal commissioning ceremony. In the second film, we are treated to an ancient drama resembling the stories of the Golem and of Frankenstein. God takes water-drenched mud, fashions a mud pie into a man, breathes into him, and makes him come alive. To be sure, this second version of the first man's creation (his wife is later created from one of his ribs) is also very powerful. He is chief farmer of Eden, and later he will name every animal created by God, thus asserting control over them.[8] Yet God also makes clear that the man is expressly forbidden from eating the fruit of that strange tree of knowledge of good and bad, the meaning of whose power we have yet to discern. Just behind this scene of encounter between God and the new human at the tree of knowledge, slightly out of focus but nonetheless present, is the other forbidden tree whose shadow colors the action: the tree of eternal life.

We watch the man squint at the Creator in the newly formed sun, his mud drying and hardening. He is turning into a real person who,

unlike the other animals, stands on two feet, speaks, and acts. Yet we also notice that his Hebrew name is *Adam*, which the Torah implies is derived from the Hebrew word *adamah*, meaning "earth."[9] We ask each other if this original "Superior Man" is in danger of breaking down into nothing more than clods of earth. If so, what does this say about us, his descendants?

Lured Into The Middle Of The Garden

We could leave the garden now, for we have learned what we came here to understand about being human. God gives us near-godly power, but we are not God—even though we may try to cross the line onto God's turf. Humility means recognizing our limitations; arrogance means forgetting or ignoring them. The two movies are over and the park is closing, so why not go home? Yet something whispers to us that a grittier, more primal human drama lies just beyond what we have watched on the two screens. Our questions abound. How will these first people, our founding mother and father, play out this weird mix of similarity to God and similarity to animals? God sternly warns the man to not eat from the tree of knowledge and then leaves the tree right in the middle of the garden. This seems like a perfect set up for scandalous, rule-breaking mischief, but then why would God do it? What, if anything, does all this have to do with our questions about humility and arrogance? Beyond the two films, live theater awaits us with a tragic story that we sense is our own story, not just a near-forgotten Bible tale from Sunday school long ago.

Eden's rich lilac colors and scents pull us along with gently lustful provocation. We almost float toward the center of the garden, overcome by an insatiable desire to see, touch, and taste the forbidden

tree about which we have heard. The tree literally contains forbidden fruit, the punishment for whose consumption is death. You and I want to know what this knowledge of good and bad imparted by the tree's fruit truly is. Is it sexual knowledge, that is, the awareness of the link between our sexuality and our procreative power? Is it potentially limitless knowledge of everything? Is it the ability to distinguish between right and wrong? Is it all three? We catch a glimpse of our first ancestors standing, just at arm's length, near the tree: "Now the two of them, the man and his wife, were naked, but they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25).

How strange, this description of the first people's lack of knowledge. They clearly know enough to have been commanded by God to procreate, to exercise control over the entire earth on God's behalf, to name all the animal species, and to be warned away from the forbidden fruit by God. As we shall see, the woman will know enough—and be free enough—to reason with herself that eating the fruit at the serpent's urging is worth ignoring God's warning that one who eats it will die upon consuming it. With all this, they nonetheless have no sense of shame about being naked "in public." You and I are looking at two adults, yet we also now know that they are living in the garden literally stripped of any overt sexual self-awareness, like naked little children in a sprinkler on a hot summer day.

To help us make sense of what we have just seen, the Bible commentators, our ancient film critics, offer us some intriguing interpretations of this scene in the garden. These first people are indeed naked: they can have sex and procreate. However, the *yetzer ha-ra*, "the evil inclination," has not yet entered them, so consciousness of human sexuality, with its attendant feelings of shame or modesty, means nothing to them.[10] The Bible and these later rabbinic commentators teach that *yetzer ha-ra* is the conscious human impulse to rebel against God's will by violating the norms and

boundaries laid down by divine law. More specifically, these sages associate it with human sexual impulses, whose expression within the bounds of divine command promotes human creativity and continuity. As affirming as they are of sexuality as a divine gift, they nonetheless recognize the potentially destructive power of unchecked sexual expression. The concept of *yetzer ha-ra* is left purposefully ambiguous, referring to our morally free harnessing of sexual energy for bad as well as for good.[11] Let's contemplate this perspective of the ancient rabbis before moving on. Are they perhaps telling us that this encounter with our naked ancestors in the garden compels to us to acknowledge sexual awareness as a form of distinctively human consciousness?

While we are thinking about this, the crafty serpent—human temptation "per-snake-ified"—comes down from the tree and slyly seduces the woman into eating from its forbidden fruit. The serpent's appeal to the woman to eat the fruit will be echoed by the text twice during our journey:

> You are not going to die, but *God* knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and *you will be like God/ angels*,[12] knowing good and bad.[13]

According to later interpretations, the serpent allays the woman's fears of eating from the tree by accusing God of lying about its dangers in order to prevent humans from competing with God.[14] This much you and I infer as we eavesdrop on his seductive soliloquy. We also understand that "opening the eyes" in this context is a metaphor for enlightenment, not literal granting of sight. However, what is the content of this enlightenment? The serpent uses the Hebrew word *elohim*, which can be translated as either "God" or as "divine beings," twice in his speech. The first mention refers clearly to God, but what

is the serpent claiming the second time? Does eating the fruit make us like divine beings—angels, for lack of a better term—or does it actually make us like God? How does knowing good and bad make us this way? Most traditional translations render this second use of *elohim* as "angels," or divine beings. However, by using the same word as God's name, the text suggests that the serpent is promising the woman that the fruit will give her and her husband the capacity to become *like God*: possessing the limitless ability to distinguish one thing from another and thus to create (and destroy) things based upon this knowledge. It could make them even more powerful and "god-like" than they already are.[15] Perhaps the serpent's wily claims are not so dishonest, for why else would God tell the people to stay away from the fruit of the tree? Yet, once again, if that is God's intent, why place the tree within their plain sight and easy grasp, in the middle of the garden no less?

You and I argue these points quietly as the woman contemplates what to do, then does it, thus changing the nature of humanity and its relationship with God and the world forever:

> When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked…(Genesis 3:6–7)

We noted before that the first people's behavior follows exactly the pattern foreshadowed by the serpent: they eat the fruit, their eyes are opened with enlightenment, they acquire a powerful new knowledge of "good and bad." Yet as the Bible now describes it to us, and as our ancestors demonstrate before our very eyes, that knowledge of good and bad seems specifically to involve the sexual awareness that ensues once they know that they are naked. At this point, you and I turn to

each other, astounded. Certainly, this knowledge brings them a sense of shame at being naked, which explains why immediately thereafter they sew clothing for themselves. However, I suggest that this "knowledge of nakedness" also brings them an even more immediate sense of their almost endless power, which God has already told them they possess. Unlike all other animals, the man and woman now *know* that, as sexual beings, they can reproduce and, like God, create new life. They also now *know* that, unlike all other animals who merely mate instinctually, they can use this power for "good and bad"—that is, with a sense of conscious purpose. This makes them more than God's creatures or co-creators; it makes them potential competitors with God, or at least this is what they now believe. In fact, it is that most popular of Bible "film and theater critics," Rashi, who explicitly makes these connections I am suggesting when he interprets the serpent's words "You will be like God/angels" to mean "You will be creators of worlds."[16]

We feel a chill of awful and awesome understanding about our first parents' enlightenment running down our spines. It is our enlightenment too, as well as our potential downfall. In the purely physical world, the impulse of DNA to replicate itself is morally blind. In the world of freedom and moral action, our drive to pro/create and to destroy, however and whenever we wish, is morally fraught. This drive urges us to try to live—as it were—forever, like God. Theoretically, nothing stays the first people's hands (or ours) after that terrifying, "genie-from-the-bottle" moment when God's will is flouted, and human beings take a giant, stumbling step forward in a thrilling, dangerous direction. We humans will grasp the reins of that knowledge first bequeathed to us on that day at the tree, yet how will we use it? Human history is filled with subsequent examples of the choices we make, including our tremendous capacity for good, as well as our haughty, often evil quest to create and master the world

on a par with God. You and I have little time to discuss this, since God is now stepping onto the stage and forcing our first ancestors into the ruthless, humbling reality of death.

The Truth About Dust

The first people's encounter with the fruit and all it signifies is so complicated, yet God's confrontation with them after they eat it sounds so childlike. After God "catches up" with the rebels with a rhetorical "Where are you?" the man tells him, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid" (Genesis 3:10). And God, in what we can interpret as the feigned shock of a parent interrogating a child caught red-handed, replies rhetorically, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" (Genesis 3:11). Hiding off-stage among the trees of the garden, we listen to Adam trying to excuse his behavior by turning his wife into a blameworthy temptress: "The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). We listen to Eve responding just as defensively: "The serpent duped me and I ate" (Genesis 3:13).

We feel a kind of embarrassed empathy with the first people. This is a familiar movie plot in which people get caught, as it were, *in flagrante delicto*. We recognize those compartmentalizing self-deceptions that accompany our bad behavior. We stand naked, humiliated, and perhaps also relieved at having been found out. Driven by the desire—sexual or otherwise—for endless power, whose roots anchor this tree of knowledge, we convince ourselves that all ends justify all means. The serpent urges us on, deeper and deeper, into disconnected double lives which we try to cover with deft evasions,

lies, and rationales that are as durable as the fig leaves our first parents sewed for themselves in the moments after their awakening. Then the uncomfortable revelations rudely thrust us back into reality: we are not God; we have no right to get and do everything we want; we are not allowed to create and destroy however and whenever we like.

"Come on, let's get out of here, I can't stand to see this thing through to the end," you whisper plaintively as you pull me toward the entrance to the garden.

"Hold on," I beg you, grabbing your arm, "We haven't yet filled in the bigger picture behind the scene. Let's wait a few minutes to see how God and the people resolve this confrontation."

We listen again as God curses the serpent, the man, and the woman (Genesis 3:14–19). The serpent will slither on his belly, and his descendants will live in dangerous enmity with the humans' descendants; the woman will be sexually subservient to the man and will bear her children in suffering; the man will struggle miserably to coax new life from the earth in the form of food with which to subsist. All three curses imply or involve the biological (not divine) generation of new life and its deep frustrations. They are humbling responses to our gargantuan ambition to be the ultimate creators who are unfettered by the limits of death, powerlessness, nature, or suffering.[17] You and I listen to God's words to the first people, words that will whistle through the crumbling desert statues of every Ozymandias and into every human ear: "For dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

This recognition of humans' transient, crumbling status—one that God only implied when creating our first ancestors—is our first, perhaps most critical, lesson in humility. It is true that humanity possesses tremendous power to be fruitful and multiply, to rule and subdue the earth, to name and thus control all living things, to reflect

God's image by being God's partners-in-power through our nearly endless pro/creativity. We are mighty creators. Yet we are also mortal creatures, made of dust and returning to dust. We will furiously resist this truth, often by engaging in the most destructive behaviors toward each other and the earth, to prove how limitless our power is. Not surprisingly, our self-aggrandizement will at times play itself out sexually. Yet all our efforts will come back to the same truth: we are dust and we will return to dust. We will experience the ultimate limitation of our self-expansion, death, whose shade passes over that moment of self-exposure. Like Ozymandias, we assert that we are the kings of kings. At that tree of knowledge our feet remain standing, but they are ultimately feet without a head, roots without a trunk and branches. Unlike Ozymandias, we learn that we, along with all the mighty, will despair as well, because we will wither away, in contrast to the true King of kings, who created us.

"Lesson learned," I remark, "Now it's time to go home." Yet as I turn to leave the garden, you now grab my arm and hold me in place.

"No, let's wait. I have a feeling our parents will need us," you respond mournfully.

I suddenly sense that you are right. Unresolved questions lie ominously half-buried in the earth beneath our feet and near the roots of the tree. If God wanted our first ancestors to know their limits, why did God place the temptation and the capacity to violate them literally within their grasp? Now that they have exceeded those limits by eating the tree's fruit of awakening knowledge, what will or should happen to them? Can they stay in Eden? *Should* they stay in Eden?

The scene shifts slowly away from our leaf-clad parents shivering in the cold air of the approaching evening. We hear God speaking again, but to whom? Is God addressing God's Self, or perhaps God's celestial retinue? Is God speaking to the earth, the dust from which

all creatures were created? What seems clear to us is that we are listening to God's personal thoughts, perhaps thoughts of anguished surprise: "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and live forever!" (Genesis 3:22). Rashi, in his comment to that verse, steps in again to explain this monologue: "Just as I (God) am unique among the heavenly beings, so too this man is unique among earthly beings in his knowledge of good and bad. This is not the case with all other animal species. Now that he can (potentially) live forever, he will try to make others stray after him by telling them that he too is a god."

This, as it were, is the "third dimension" of our painful lesson about humility, arrogance, and the meaning of being human. Beneath the arrogant self-deceptions of Ozymandias, behind the repeated lessons of humility—our harsh balancing act between being creators *and* creatures—the Creator also, as it were, learns a terrible, magnificent lesson. The first humans were never completely in God's control, for they and their impulsive desires were always far more powerful than even God recognized. Perhaps God placed both trees within their easy, unfettered grasp because as a young "Parent" God honestly had no idea how unruly they could and would become. Or, perhaps God placed both trees in full sight of them *precisely* because God realized their near-limitless potential. Eden, like childhood innocence, can only last so long if we are to become real grown-ups with real power. Whatever God's initial reasoning, having eaten from that tree and acquired full awareness of the potentially limitless pro/creative power that they possess, our ancient parents have come dangerously close to being God. However, in at least one supremely significant respect they are nothing like God: they cannot yet live forever. God will see to it that they, and we, never will.[18]

East of Eden[19]

God banishes the first people—sad actors both—and us along with them from the garden, to prevent our eating from the tree of eternal life. Is the expulsion from Eden a symbol of the loss of childhood innocence, as people inevitably become older, growing through the years toward death? Is it a symbol of the horrible wages of sin, a dark acknowledgement that "in Adam's fall, we sinned all,"[20] thus losing the possibility of a perfect world? You and I argue these points quietly as we accompany them to Eden's gate. What we have come to understand is that this whole show-down at the trees points to some significant universal human truths.

Built upon our sexual desires and procreative abilities is the capacity to make distinctions, and thus to choose to create and to destroy, even rivalling God. Yet we learn repeatedly that we never really can do this limitlessly because that one feature of the human condition, mortality, places God firmly, even if not always so far, beyond our grasp. This is what informs our hard-earned humility. Our arrogance is fueled by our refusal to learn this lesson well, or to learn it at all. This refusal brings in its wake dire consequences of cruelty and destruction when we attempt to "play God." Yet God, as it were, also learns repeatedly that because of our procreative powers, we magnificent creatures wrapped in the mortal frame of our bodies are truly God's reflection and potential competition. We are God's infinite, perfect creative power made manifest—at times majestically, at others destructively—in this grossly imperfect, finite world.

This story of Eden and its aftermath is about harmony and paradise that begin in the womb but that end at birth. Real human maturation is about the anguished dance of conflict between harmony and discord, between humankind as servant-partner of God and humankind as a potential rival of God, between our sense that, through procreation,

we could live forever and our terror knowing that we must all die. We and our ancestors tragically but necessarily cannot remain in Eden if we want to become real people in the real world. Equally tragic, our lives outside of Eden will always be plagued with the constant drawing of shifting, razor-thin lines between creative self-expansion and destructive arrogance, between crippling self-deprecation and genuine humility.

As we walk, arms linked, with the first man and woman through the gate of Eden, you and I wonder aloud: What will keep these warring impulses, choices, and powers balanced? What resolves it all so that we do not destroy ourselves and the world? Toward the end of our garden encounter the Bible hints at an answer: "The Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21).

God is the ultimate Parent and Teacher, whom we are called upon to emulate. In the face of such discord and betrayal, just prior to the extreme measure of expulsion, God takes the time to make these naked rebels real clothes to keep them warm and safe. Love, compassion, and forgiveness—divine and human—balance and resolve these wars within and among us. You and I look at our parents in their new clothes. Then we look back at those words of Micah emblazoned (we imagine) on Eden's gate, and now we understand them better:

> God has told you, O man, what is good
> And what the Lord requires of you:
> Only to do justice
> And to love mercy
> And to walk humbly with your God.

Genuine humility is an arduously cultivated character trait. It comprises myriad small yet courageous and consistent decisions to

curb our most arrogant impulses to *be* God; to follow and emulate the divine imperatives and qualities of justice and mercy that allow us to *imitate* God. With the gate closing behind us, we realize that Ozymandias' tale is a part of Eden's tale, and Eden's tale is our tale, whether we humans want to tell it or not. We carry it with us, at times burying it, at others times taking it out to consider its unvarnished insights. Will we learn from it? As the Bible reminds us, that choice is ours alone.

NOTES

[1] The name Ozymandias is an ancient Greek version of the throne name of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE) who, significantly, is associated with the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt. Scholars surmise that Shelley was inspired to write the sonnet about Ozymandias just prior to the British Museum's acquisition of a statue fragment of Ramesses' head in 1821. Shelley paraphrased Ozymandias' declaration of supremacy from the Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, who wrote that on the pedestal of the king's statue were the words, "King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works."

[2] See for instance, Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Dei·ot, especially chapters 1–3. A long, anthological talmudic passage on the perils of *gasut ruaḥ*, haughtiness, can be found in the Talmud at B. Sotah, 4b–5b. The biblical book of Proverbs, an important collection of ancient Near Eastern wisdom sayings, is replete with warnings about arrogance and praise for humility. Proverbs employs the term *g'vaḥ leiv*, literally "one with a raised heart (or attitude)," to describe an arrogant person. Another significant medieval statement on cultivating humility is Baḥya ibn Pakuda's great moralistic work, *Ḥovot Ha-l'vavot*, particularly the section titled *Sha·ar Ha-k'niyah* ("The Gate of Submission").

[3] This last term is also the title of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's seminal essay, "Majesty and Humility," in *Tradition: A Journal Of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 25–37.

[4] Micah 6:8, NJPS. The Hebrew *adam* means "mortal" or "man"; as I mention below, it is also the name given to the first man, according to Genesis. I imagine this sign hanging over Eden, awaiting Adam (and by extension his wife, Eve) and literally admonishing him: "Adam, this is the kind of behavior that God demands of you."

[5] These commentators lived roughly between the first century BCE and the sixth century CE in the Land of Israel and in the Jewish community of Babylonia, present-day Iran. Modern rabbis continue to study, argue about, and apply their insights, wisdom, and legal rulings.

[6] See the anthology of rabbinic *midrashim* (creative interpretations) found in Bereishit Rabbah 8:3–6.

[7] See Bereishit Rabbah 8:11. Also see the later Bible commentator Naḥmanides' interpretation of Genesis 1:27, available in English in Charles Chavel's translation: *Naḥmanides' Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), pp. 52–53. Naḥmanides (1194–1270) lived in Spain.

[8] Ancient societies believed that the one who could name things had tremendous power over the one being named. See the comment to Genesis 1:5 by the scholar Nahum Sarna in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp.7–8.

[9] See Genesis 2:7. See also 2:19, which tells us that God created the animals from *adamah*, the earth, as well.

[10] See the commentator Rashi's comment to Genesis 2:25. Also see Bereishit Rabbah 18:6. Rashi is the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac of Troyes, France (1040–1105). He is considered the most popular of all medieval Bible and Talmud commentators.

[11] Two excellent English-language resources on *yetzer ha-ra* are Ephraim Urbach's *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), pp. 471–483 and Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends* (New York, Schocken Books, 1992), pp. 537–453.

[12] The Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible allows for this rendering of the Hebrew phrase, as well as the translation "like divine beings." Both translations emphasize that eating from the tree of knowledge gives the people the power to overstep the divine-human divide and to rival God.

[13] Genesis 3:5, with my own midrashic interpolations in italics.

[14] See Rashi's comment on Genesis 3:5.

[15] Though the phrase "good and bad" is often seen as a direct reference to Adam and Eve's new-found ability to make moral distinctions, it is also used as a merism, the pairing of two contrasting words to refer to everything between them. Knowing "good and bad" implies the endlessly expansive scope of the first people's new knowledge. Another example of a merism would be the phrase "heaven and earth" to describe the entire universe.

[16] Rashi to Genesis 3:5. As I wrote above, knowing good and bad can mean many other things that allude to the people's newly acquired consciousness of limitless power. Maimonides explains it to mean that now the people possess the limitless capacity for reason, discernment, and choice, thus making them, we may infer, more powerful and dangerous competitors of God as well. Still, what Maimonides seems to ignore is that prior to eating from the tree of knowledge, the first people already had the ability to make decisions and choose to behave however they wished. The more immediate context of their encounter with the tree alludes strongly to their consciousness of their ability to behave like untrammeled creators. See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 5:1.

[17] This presumes, of course, that the serpent in our story is not merely a snake, but a metaphor for human temptation, sexual or otherwise.

[18] However, as my wife pointed out to me, even if we had stayed in the garden we would never have been able to turn inanimate matter into living things, as the story tells us God can.

[19] The title for this section is taken from John Steinbeck's masterful 1952 novel by the same name.

[20] This phrase is found in the alphabet lesson of the 1777 version of *The New England Primer.*