

# Parshat Bereishit

## *The Original Marshmallow Test*

Imagine you are presented with a puffy and fluffy, delicious, sweet-smelling marshmallow. You are told that you have a choice. You can either eat this marshmallow now, or, if you can muster the self-restraint and hold off eating it for a while, you will eventually get a second marshmallow to enjoy along with the first. What would you do? Eat one now, or constrain yourself to double your fortune?

Social psychologist Walter Mischel initially conducted this famed Marshmallow Study back in the 1960s with preschool aged children. He then tracked them for years afterwards. The children who demonstrated self-control by waiting until the researcher returned to the room had higher standardized achievement tests, lower body mass index (BMI), decreased substance abuse, and lower rates of divorce later in life, as compared to those who took the first marshmallow right away. Those who exhibit self-control are generally more successful, healthier, and have better relationships than those who choose instant gratification.

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb (*The Person in the Parsha*, p. 7–10) notes that we can sum up the story of Adam and Chava in the Garden of Eden in contemporary psychological terms by saying that they failed the first marshmallow test. God told Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Yet the snake's incitement and the aesthetic enticement of the fruit led to Chava's, and then to Adam's, failure to exercise self-control.

This reading is appealing from the basic sense of the verses and has basis in the commentaries. For instance, when the verse informs us that Chava took the fruit and ate it (Bereishit 3:6), the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin) explains that “she was not able to strengthen herself over the desire.”

Still, just looking at this episode as a test in self-control overlooks

another essential element and an important character in the story, namely, God.

In an updated version of Dr. Mischel's study, published in the journal *Psychological Science*, researchers explored other variables besides sheer self-control that may contribute to a child's success in the equivalent of the marshmallow test. They were particularly interested in finding out to what extent a child's ability to delay gratification was dependent on "reputation management," meaning to what extent the child was concerned about what other people would think of them. Researchers divided children into three groups: (A) children who were told that the teacher would find out what choice was made, (B) children who were told that their peers would find out, and (C) children who weren't told anything about who would find out. When children believed the teacher would find out, they exercised greater self-control than the other two groups, and children who believed their peers would find out exhibited greater self-control than those who believed their choice would not be disclosed.

The story of Adam and Chava is not just a failure in self-control; it is also a failure in reputation management. They fell short in their ability to be concerned with what God commanded. They ignored the fact that He would find out the results of the experiment.

If we are looking for self-control strategies that could help us along our own journey to overcome our struggles with delaying gratification, we would be wise to keep in mind reputation management. Be it food, drink, procrastination, or other temptations, if we truly care what God thinks of us and believe that He knows the results of the test, perhaps we would do a better job at not eating whatever our metaphoric marshmallow may be.

## *Healthy & Unhealthy Emotions*

We all try to avoid negative emotions. We don't want to feel sad, nervous, or frustrated, so we ignore, escape, or repress. Yet negative emotions are often functional. They provide important feedback about how we relate to ourselves, others, and our environment. If understood and utilized properly, negative emotions can help us become more successful and meaningful people. However, when unhealthy, negative emotions can distance us from our goals. Depression, anxiety, and anger can be overly distressing and impede our productivity and growth. Navigating the line between healthy and unhealthy emotions is essential, yet often difficult.

After God did not pay any attention to Kayin's offering, we are told that Kayin was "very distressed" (*va-yichar le-Kayin me'od*) and "his face fell" (*va-yiplu panav*) (Bereishit 4:5). This verse is clearly describing two psychological factors, but it is unclear what each phrase means. Sforno interprets "distressed" as referring to jealousy that his brother's offering was accepted, and "his face fell" as feeling shame for his own offering having been rejected. Other commentators suggest the former phrase refers to anger, and the latter to depression.

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (*Daat Torah*, pp. 26–27) sidesteps the question as to which emotions were experienced, and instead he focuses on the different functions the two emotions serve. After we fail, it is natural and healthy to feel a negative emotion, such as sadness, frustration, or remorse. This functional negative emotion – represented in the verse as Kayin being "distressed" – can motivate us to improve our ways for the future. While this "distress" can be positive, it then transforms into an unhealthy emotion of "his face fell."

This, Rabbi Levovitz argues, is the way of the evil inclination. It doesn't just want to knock us down; it wants us to stay down. Instead of the negative emotion leading to improvement, it leads to despondency.

In fact, when God addresses Kayin afterwards, He informs him that if he chooses to improve his ways, all will be forgiven, but if he doesn't, then sin crouches at the door, ready to pounce again. It is here, Ramban contends, that Kayin is introduced to the concept of repentance. Sforno adds that God is telling Kayin that it is pointless to brood over the past; rather, one should correct one's behavior for the future. Our emotional response to sin should be functional. It should lead us away from future

sin and toward improved behavior. If we respond to sin in an emotionally unhealthy way, it will just lead to more sin.

One strategy for keeping our emotional response to sin healthy is to not let the sin corrode our sense of self. As the Midrash states, “Praiseworthy is the person who is higher than his sins, and not that his sins are higher than he is” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 22:11). We must keep our core identity above our sins, and not permit our sins to define who we are. As Rabbi Shimon tells us in *Pirkei Avot* (2:13), “Do not be wicked in your own eyes.” If we identify ourselves as wicked, evil, or sinful, it will lead to an unhealthy emotion and destructive response.

From the story of Kayin, we learn the need to respond to failure and sin in a functional, and even positive, way. We can do this by acknowledging the sin and feeling an appropriate amount of negative emotion about the past. If we relate to our failures internally in a healthy fashion, that will enable us to refocus our energy on fixing what went wrong and improving ourselves for the future.