

YOU MAY RULE OVER IT*

הָלוֹא אִם־תִּיטֵיב שְׂאֵת
וְאִם לֹא תִיטֵיב לְפִתַּח חַטָּאת רִבֵּץ
וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ:

If you do good, shall it not be lifted up?
And if you do not do good, sin reposes at the door;
and to you is its desire, but you may rule over it.

If you do good—When we are angry because we are accountable for the well-being of those around us (4:9) and for the consequences of our own behavior, and we contemplate further losing ourselves to assuage our feelings of estrangement from the Holy One, we are given a choice between atonement or greater alienation from the Divine Image that has been implanted within us. *Shall it not be lifted up*—Our “gift” or “sacrifice” that is lifted up is our choice to use our free will to do the will of God, which is what allows us to be “truly free” (Malbim). If we act with kindness and justice towards others, shall our gift not bring us closer to God? If we “improve” ourselves, surely we shall be atoned, our earlier missteps will be forgiven (Rashi), and we will again be at one with God. *And if you do not do good*—If we do not improve ourselves once we have failed to do right, we will further wrong ourselves and others. For once we waylay ourselves, walking away from the path of righteousness, we are ever more likely to move further away, “for such is the way of the evil inclination” (Sforno). *Sin reposes at the door*—It does not lurk, “lying in wait” to attack us at a moment of weakness. On the contrary, “. . . It remains quietly behind your door. It does not come in to you by itself, uninvited. . . . you must in the first instance invite it in, set a chair for it at your table. . . . All its desire is that you should master it and direct it” (S.R. Hirsch). *But you may rule over it*—The divine gift of sensuality has been given to us not that it should master and direct us, but that we “should master and direct it,” so that we “not suppress or kill it, but תִּמְשָׁל, regulate it, rule over it, and direct it” (S.R. Hirsch). Because the Divine Image is implanted in each of us, we may draw upon that image in creating the image of ourselves that we seek to fulfill (Sforno). Our “spiritual salvation lies fully within” us (N. Leibowitz). We may thus recognize our misstep and make it right; we may choose life over death; and, if we do so, we can make God present in our world.

* Genesis 4:7 (in Bereshit)