

A Murderous Brotherhood:

Cain vs Abel

Rachel Sharansky Danziger * October 19th 2021 * Bereshit: The Birthplace of Human Relationships #3

1: Act one - brothers

Genesis 4:1-2

(1) Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gained a male child with the help of the LORD.” (2) She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil.

בראשית ד': א-ב'

(א) וְהָאָדָם יִדַּע אֶת־חَנוֹתָה אֲשֶׁתֽוּ וַתֵּהֶר
וַתַּלְדֵּד אֶת־קַיּוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־
יְהֹוָה. (ב) וַתִּסְפַּר לְלָדֶת אֶת־אֶחָיו אֶת־הַבָּל
וְיִהִי־הַבָּל רֹעֶה צָאן וְקַיּוֹן הַיָּה עֲבָד אֶדְמָה:

2: Act 2 – enter jealousy

Genesis 4:3-5

(3) In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the soil; (4) and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD paid heed to Abel and his offering, (5) but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell.

בראשית ד': ג-ה'

(ג) וַיְהִי מִקְצֵץ יְמִים וַיָּבֹא קַיּוֹן מִפְּרִי הָאָדָمָה
מִנְחָה לִיהְוָה: (ד) וְהַבָּל הָבִיא גַּם־דָּרוֹא
מִבְכָּרוֹת צָאן וּמִחַלְבָּה וַיַּשְׁעַז יְהֹוָה אֶל־
הַבָּל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ. (ה) וְאֶל־קַיּוֹן וְאֶל־
מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיַּחֲרֹב לִקְיָן מִאָד וַיִּפְלֹן
פְּנָיו:

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence:

The primal act of violence is fratricide not patricide. Sibling rivalry plays a central role in human conflict, and it begins with mimetic desire, the desire to have what your brother has, or even be what your brother is. (96)

Sibling rivalry exists in nature because food is in short supply. It exists in human society because material goods – wealth and power – are, at any given moment, zero-sum games. It exists within the family because we are human, and sometimes parents have favorites. But can the same possibly be said about God’s love or forgiveness or grace? Are these in short supply, such that if he gives them to you he must take them from me? There is something odd, discordant, about such an idea.

Yet the Hebrew Bible does talk about sibling rivalry. It is the dominant theme of the book of Genesis. The point could not be made more forcefully. *The first religious act, Cain and Abel's offerings to God, leads directly to the first murder.* God does seem to have favorites. There does seem to be a zero-sumnes about the stories. (109)

3. A paradigm for competition

Rashi on Genesis 4:8:1

ויאמר קין אל הבל AND CAIN SPAKE TO ABEL — He began an argument, striving and contending with him, to seek a **pretext** to kill him. There are Midrashic explanations of these words, but this is the plain sense of the text.

Ramban on Genesis 4:8:1

AND CAIN SPOKE TO ABEL HIS BROTHER...Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said that the interpretation that appears most likely to him is that **Cain related to Abel all the chastisements with which G-d had reprimanded him [and Cain accused Abel of having brought them upon him].**

But in my opinion it is connected with the following words of Scripture: *and it came to pass, when they were in the field*, meaning that Cain said to Abel, “Let us go forth into the field,” and there he secretly killed him.

It is possible that his intention in killing Abel was **that the world be built up from himself** for he thought that his **father** would not have any more children. He also feared that the main building up of the world might be from his **brother**, [which seemed likely since it was he] whose offering had been favorably accepted.

Bereishit Rabbah 22:7

(7) “And Cain spoke to Abel his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field...” (Genesis 4:8) What were they arguing about?

They said: come let’s divide up the world, one will take the land and one will take the moveable property. This one said: the ground you are standing on is mine. The other one said: what you are wearing is mine. This one said: take it off! The other one said: fly! Because of this “...Cain rose against his brother Abel and killed him.” (ibid.)

R’ Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of R’ Levi: they both took the land and the moveable property. What were they arguing about?

One said: the Holy Temple will be built in my boundary. The other said: the Holy Temple will be built in my boundary. As it says “...when they were in the field...” (ibid.) and the field only refers to the Holy Temple. This is what it says “...Zion shall be plowed as a field...” (Micah 3:12) Because of this “...Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.”

Yehudah bar Ami said: they were arguing about the first Eve. R’ Ibo said: the first Eve returned to the dust. Then what were they arguing about? R’ Huna said: an extra twin sister was born with Abel. This one said: I will take her because I am the first born. The other one said: I will take her because she was born with me. Because of this “...Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.”

4: Relationships and power

Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, The Story of Kayin and Hevel:

(<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-bereishit/bereishit-story-kayin-and-hevel>)

Obviously, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with such a desire. Quite the contrary, it is commendable that someone should want to have more opportunity for expression of spiritual longing and connection to God. Similarly, Kayin's original desire that God accept his sacrifice is legitimate. Do we not pray three times a day for God's acceptance? **But where Kayin failed was in his motivation. Kayin did not want God's acceptance for its own sake, nor did he desire the Beit Ha-mikdash for spiritual gratification. The same actions which can demonstrate one's desire for a connection to God can also result from an egocentric approach applied to the religious realm.** Such actions are flawed at their core, and lead to a rejection of true morality and spirituality that can culminate even in murder. In our own service of God, we should be very, very careful of this fine line. While Chazal do say that "Kin'at sofrim tarbeh chokhma" ("The zealousness [or jealousy] of scribes increases wisdom"), we should also remember that when handled inappropriately, it is also "marbeh kin'a" (it increases jealousy). Only by being exceedingly vigilant in this area can we be assured that our worship will be accepted, and that we can build our personal mikdash "al taharat ha-kodesh," in holy purity.

Harav Amnon Bazak, "Kayin, Hevel, and Shet": (<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-bereishit/bereishit-1-kayin-hevel-and-shet>)

Throughout *Sefer Bereishit*, we encounter many instances where the jealousy of an elder brother is aroused when a younger brother is awarded a higher status. Here the situation has a unique dimension in that preference is shown towards the younger brother not by the parents, but rather by God. It seems that Kayin took the rejection especially hard in view of the fact that he had been first to bring an offering, and Hevel had simply followed his example ("and Hevel – he also brought..."), upgrading the gift along the way. Obviously, this feeling is amplified in someone who is acquisitive to start off with. A connection is forged between acquisition (*keniya*) and jealousy (*kin'a*). The stronger a person's sense of and drive for acquisition, the more powerful his jealousy towards someone else's achievements and attainments, especially if that person is his younger brother.

5: Act 3 – intervention

Genesis 4:6-7

(6) And the LORD said to Cain,
"Why are you distressed,
And why is your face fallen? (7) Surely, if you do right,
There is uplift.
But if you do not do right
Sin couches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master."

בראשית ד':ו-ז'

(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲלֵיכִים לֹמַת
תָּרַח לְהָ וְלֹמַת נִפְלֹן פְּנֵיךְ: (ז)
הַלּוּא אִם־תִּטְבִּשׁ שְׂאָת וְאִם־לֹא
תִּטְבִּשׁ לְפַתֵּח חַטָּאת רְבָץ וְאַלְיָךְ
תִּשְׁנוּקָתָז וְאַתָּה תִּמְשַׁלְּבָנוּ.

6: Act 4 – the first murder

Genesis 4:8

(8) Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

בראשית ד:ח'

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קָנָן אֶל-הַבָּل אֶחָיו וְיִהְיֶה בְּהִזְמָתָם
בְּשֶׁלֶד וַיַּקְרֵם קָנָן אֶל-הַבָּל אֶחָיו וַיַּהֲגִיד לוֹ:

7: Act 5 – consequences (part one)

Genesis 4:9

(9) The LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

בראשית ד:ט'

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קָנָן אֱלֹהִים
אֶחָיך וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַדְעַתִּי הַשִּׁמְרָר אֶחָי
אָנֹכִי:

Rashi on Genesis 4:9:1

WHERE IS ABEL THY BROTHER — thus entering into a friendly conversation with him: perhaps he might repent and say, “I have killed him, and sinned against You” (Genesis Rabbah 19:11).

Rabbi Lord Jonahthan Sacks, “Taking Responsibility”:

Many of the great religions and civilisations are based on acceptance...Judaism was and remains the world's great religion of protest. The heroes of faith did not accept; they protested... That is how God wants us to respond. *Judaism is God's call to human responsibility*. The highest achievement is to become God's partner in the work of creation.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God called out “Where are you?” As Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointed out, this call was not directed only to the first humans.^[2] It echoes in every generation. God gave us freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility. God teaches us what we ought to do but He does not do it for us. With rare exceptions, God does not intervene in history. He acts *through* us, not *to* us. His is the voice that tells us, as He told Cain, that we can resist the evil within us as well as the evil that surrounds us.

The responsible life is a life that responds. The Hebrew for responsibility, *achrayut*, comes from the word *acher*, meaning “other.” Our great Other is God Himself, calling us to use the freedom He gave us, to make the world that is more like the world that ought to be. The great question, the question that the life we lead answers, is: which voice will we listen to? Will we heed the voice of desire, as in the case of Adam and Eve? Will we listen to the voice of anger, as in the case of Cain? Or will we follow the voice of God calling on us to make this a more just and gracious world?

8: Act 2 – consequences (part 2)

Genesis 4:10-16

- (10) Then He said, “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!
- (11) Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.
- (12) If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.”

(13) Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is too great to bear! (14) Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!” (15) The LORD said to him, “I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him. (16) Cain left the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Rashi on Genesis 4:10:1

THY BROTHERS BLOOD — **דְּמֵי אֶחָיךְ** is plural — “bloods” — his blood and the blood of his possible descendants (Genesis Rabbah 22:9). Another explanation of why the plural is used: he inflicted upon him many wounds, because he knew not whence his soul would depart (i. e. which blow would prove fatal) (Sanhedrin 37b).

“I think childhood is to everyone a lost land.”

Dennis Potter

בראשית ד:י"י-ט"ז

- (י) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה עֲשִׂית קֹול דְּמֵי אֶחָיךְ צַעֲקִים אֱלֵי מִזְהָאָדָם:
- (יא) וְעַתָּה אַרְוֹר אַפָּה מִזְהָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר פִּצְתָּה אֶת-פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת-דְּמֵי אֶחָיךְ מִזְבֵּחַ:
- (יב) כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאָדָם לְאַתְּסָר תִּתְכַּחַה לְךָ נָע וָנֶד תַּהֲגֵה בָּאָרֶץ:
- (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר קַנְׁן אֶל-יְהוָה גָּדוֹל עָזָנִי מִבְשָׁא: (יד) הָזֶן גָּרְשָׁת אֶתְךָ הַיּוֹם מִעַל פָּנֵי הָאָדָם וּמִפְנֵיךְ אָסְתָּר וְהִלִּתְיִ נָע וָנֶד בָּאָרֶץ וְהִיא כָּל-מִצְאֵי יְהֻרְגָּנִי: (טו) וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְהוָה לְכָن כָּל-הָרָגֶג קַיִן שְׁבַעֲתִים יַקְנֵם וַיֹּשֵׁם יְהוָה לְקַיְן אֶתְזָה לְבָלְתִי הַכּוֹת-אֶתְךָ כָּל-מִצְאָו: (טז) וַיַּצֵּא קַיִן מַלְפָגֵי יְהוָה וַיַּשֵּׁב בָּאָרֶץ-נוֹד קָדְמָת-עַד: