A key verse not only in Parashat Beraishit, but the entire Tora.

While the Parasha of Beraishit contains many well-known, seminal stories with respect to the universal human condition, the verse to which I find myself being drawn year after year, is Beraishit 4:7. After Kayin is crestfallen because his younger brother Hevel’s sacrifice has been Divinely Accepted, while his own was rejected, God tells him,

Halo, Im Teitiv Se’eit. VeIm Lo Teitiv, LePetach Chatat Roveitz VeEilecha Teshukato. VeAta Timshal Bo.
(If you do well, you will be uplifted. And if you do not do well, sin crouches at the door, and to you shall be its desire. Yet you can rule over it.)

Unfortunately, Kayin does not heed the warning that he is given, and in the very next verse (4:8), he eliminates his competitor once and for all.

Kayin was informed about the choices that lay before him in greater detail and depth than his parents were.

Although Adam and Chava also sinned (3:1-7) and suffered dire consequences as a result (v. 16-24), there apparently was no prior opportunity for them to learn how to deal with

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1 Beraishit 4:3-5
And in process of time it came to pass, that Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Hevel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Hevel and to his offering; but unto Kayin and to his offering He had not respect. And Kayin was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

2 And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

3 Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had Made. And he said unto the woman: 'Yea, hath God Said: Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden?' And the woman said unto the serpent: 'Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath Said: Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.' And the serpent said unto the woman: 'Ye shall not surely die; for God doth Know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil.' And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves girdles.

4 Unto the woman He said: 'I will greatly Multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.' And unto Adam He Said: 'Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I Commanded thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.' And the man called his wife's name Chava; because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God Made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and Clothed them. And the LORD God Said: 'Behold, the man is become as one of us, to
God and His Commandments, or for that matter their own desires and aspirations. Kayin’s parents originally received a single warning concerning avoiding the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and a threat of mortal consequences (2:16-17), and then were left to their own devices to either comply or transgress. They were not told about human nature’s susceptibility to temptation; neither were they instructed regarding the best means by which they could avoid error, nor the possibility of repentance following improper behavior. Perhaps God Deemed it sufficient to threaten them with death (v. 17) as a sole deterrent against their ignoring the Divine Command.

The possibilities set before Kayin are significantly different from those set before first Adam and then Chava.

Life and death do not enter into the calculation with which the Divine Confronts Kayin; the lesson taught to him after the rejection of his sacrifice emphasizes the issue of free choice and the consequences, both good and bad, of earlier actions, rather than the threat of a premature end to the life of the sinner. Furthermore, Kayin is never explicitly told either that it was his responsibility to bring the best of his produce when presenting a sacrifice to God—

know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.’ Therefore the LORD God Sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He Drove out the man; and He Placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life.

And the LORD God Commanded the man, Saying: ‘Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.’

While HaShem may be “Aware” of the choices that lie before man, can He fully “Understand” what takes place in man’s mind when confronted with such choices? Does being human include a certain type of awareness that is unique to only human beings? (Just something to consider.)

The text does not record how the information about not eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was conveyed to Chava. Rabbinic thought attributes to Adam an addition to the prohibition when he explained to Chava what he had been told:

Avot D’Rabbi Natan, Chapter 1 on Beraishit 3:3 “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath Said: Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.”

What was the additional prohibition that Adam added to HaShem’s Words? …Adam did not wish to say to Chava in the manner in which HaShem had Spoken to him, but rather this is what he said to her: “From the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden do not eat from it and do not touch it lest you die.”

See Sanhedrin 29a as well.

Just as in other cases of Rabbinic prohibitions, the intention is to further distance an individual from sinning, it is assumed that Adam’s intentions was similar. Little did he know that the serpent would use this extra stringency to demonstrate to Chava that she had nothing to worry about, when he intentionally caused her to bump into the tree and observe that nothing happened. This becomes a proof case of the principle, “Whoever adds, actually detracts.”

The reason for Kayin’s sacrifice being rejected in favor of Hevel’s can only be inferred by the manner in which each of their respective sacrifices is described in the Biblical text. Furthermore, only upon contrasting the two descriptions is anything negative implied about Kayin’s offering. Beraishit 4:3 “…and Kayin brought from the fruits of the earth an offering to God” appears to be perfectly respectable and appropriate. It is only when this verse is compared to the one immediately following, (v. 4) “And Hevel also brought from the first born of his flock and from the fattest thereof…” that the absence of comparable superlatives describing Kayin’s offering becomes noticeable. Consequently it could be concluded that this shortcoming was a subtle one, which one could easily correct, were he so disposed.
the story it appears that bringing sacrifices was his own idea rather than a fulfillment of a Divine Order— or even that murder is wrong, in contrast to the clear injunction against eating from the prohibited tree, explicitly told to Adam. Furthermore, and more fundamentally perhaps, the Kayin story conveys the impression that what God is telling him does not have to do with one particular sin or another, but rather with one’s general approach to living a good and exemplary life.

**The instructions to Kayin parallel instructions provided to another who demonstrated poor judgment in his personal actions. Is being the first-born particularly morally challenging?**

Yehuda Kil, in Da’at Mikra, notes the literary parallels between God’s Words to Kayin—“Im Teitiv Se’eit”, and what Yaakov tells Reuven in his final blessing to him (49:3)—“Yeter Se’eit VeYeter Az” (exceedingly uplifted and exceedingly powerful.) The commentator suggests that the term “Se’eit” reflects the special status of priesthood and being a firstborn son. While one way to read the stories of the bible would be to understand them as a negation of primogeniture and inherited privilege, making the case that chosenness should be based upon merit rather than genealogy and birth order, it is equally significant and quite poignant to consider these stories from the point of view of the first born children who are regularly stymied in their aspirations for leadership. One might even ultimately conclude that being born first is actually a handicap rather than an advantage!

Just as Kayin’s expectation of birth order privilege is thwarted by his brother’s sacrifice being accepted instead of his own, so too all of Leah’s children in general, and Reuven in particular, experience a similar rejection when the latter is replaced by Yosef as Yaakov’s firstborn (See 48:5.) By Yaakov’s designating Yosef’s sons Ephraim and Menashe into full-fledged tribes, he in effect confers upon Yosef the double portion of the firstborn, which technically belonged to Reuven.) Yaakov’s justification for Reuven’s demotion, (v. 4) “Pachaz KaMayim Al Totar” (unstable as water, you shall not excel)—the verse then refers to Reuven’s

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9 RaMBaN on Beraishit 4:3 points to Kayin and Hevel’s sacrifices as an indication that it is a very spiritual— even if HaShem Rejected Kayin’s sacrifice, He Accepted Hevel’s as well as those of Noach after the Flood— and completely original—since there were so few people in the world at this point, it cannot be maintained that Kayin and Hevel were imitating anyone—action to undertake, as opposed to those (most notably RaMBaM in The Guide to the Perplexed) who suggest that the practice was barbaric, beneath the dignity of the truly holy individual and results from emulating other nations and cultures.

10 Sanhedrin 56b cites a Baraita that posits that all seven Noachide commandments, including the prohibition against taking a human life, are to be derived from the verses commanded to Adam and Chava regarding the Tree of Knowledge. Specifically in terms of murder, the phrase in 2:16 “Al HaAdam” (upon man/Adam) is paralleled with 9:6 “Shofeich Dam HaAdam Damo Yishafech” (He who spills human blood of a man, his own blood shall be spilled) to posit that the prohibition of murder predated the flood to the time when the first sensate human strode the earth. Whether this was a tradition of which Kayin should have been aware or whether this is simply part of natural law and the most fundamental of social contracts, the Biblical story obviously takes him to task for his act of fratricide.

11 See fn. 7.


13 Originally, the Jewish priesthood was to have been comprised of the firstborn. Only as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf were Aharon and his descendants chosen to replace the firstborn in this role. See BaMidbar 3:12.

14 And now thy two sons, who were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasheh, even as Reuven and Shimon, shall be mine.
impetuous interference with Yaakov’s conjugal life following Rachel’s death (35:22)—could be just as easily applied to Kayin in the sense that he is unable to pay attention to the Divine Instruction being given to him, but rather immediately proceeds to give in to his emotions of jealousy and frustration and violently ends his competitor’s life.

An additional literary reference to the status of the firstborn is the usage of the word “Petach” (doorway, opening) in 4:7, which R. Kil understands as the opening of his mother’s womb that the Bechor usually accomplishes when he is born. The reason that “sin crouches at the opening of the mother’s womb” specifically with respect to the Bechor, is the child’s expectation of privilege and special consideration. From the moment that the first siblings on earth interact with one another, God suggests that the Bechor expects to be special due to his having been first on the scene. The significance of the naming of Kayin, as opposed to Hevel, whose naming sounds like an afterthought, without even an attempt made by Chava to account for this choice, further suggests that the attitude of specialness on the part of a firstborn is not something that exclusively resides in the child’s mind, but rather that it is often aided and abetted by parents. In 4:1, Chava exults upon the birth of her first child, and proclaims, “Kaniti (I have acquired, brought into existence) a man together with God.” As for his brother, we are left to use our own imaginations and associations in order to account for why the name “Hevel” was chosen, particularly in light of its meanings including “vapor”, “steam”, and “nothingness”. MalBIM even suggests that Hevel was Kayin’s twin, since the text implies not that she conceived a second time, but rather (4:2) “She continued giving birth...” The second child came forth momentarily after the first, but nevertheless paled in significance. This is also suggested by the description of the births of Peretz and Zarach, (38:28-30), where the child that extended his hand beyond the womb first, earns privileged status, even if his body enters the world after his brother’s.

If Kayin grew up believing that he was special and that his brother was insignificant and worthless, the shock of having his sacrifice rejected in favor of Hevel’s must have been all the more devastating. When another sibling appropriates the specialness that the first-born believes is his alone, it is difficult for the biological first-born child to cope with what he perceives as his usurpation. Yishmael’s mocking disposition and possible teasing of Yitzchak (21:9) could be understood to stem from a similar feeling of the oldest being suddenly supplanted by a younger child upon whom the parents shower great displays of affection. The

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15 And it came to pass, while Yisrael dwelt in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Yisrael heard of it. Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve:
16 If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? and if thou doest not well, sin coucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it.’
17 This assumes that there have not been miscarriages or daughters born first.
18 Beraishit 4:1-2
And the man knew Chava his wife; and she conceived and bore Kayin, and said, ‘‘Kaniti’ (I have gotten) a man with the Help of the LORD.’’ And again she bore his brother Hevel. And Hevel was a keeper of sheep, but Kayin was a tiller of the ground.
19 And it came to pass, when she travailed, that one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying: ‘‘This came out first.’’ And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold his brother came out; and she said: ‘‘Wherefore hast thou made a breach for thyself?’’ Therefore his name was called Peretz. And afterward came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand; and his name was called Zerach.
20 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Avraham, making sport.
imagery of Yaakov’s name being given to him as a result of his holding on to his twin’s heel at birth (25:26)\(^{21}\) is not lost on Eisav when he cries out after Yaakov’s trickery in obtaining Yitzchak’s blessing, (27:36) “For this reason is his name Yaakov, for he has usurped me (held onto my heel and gotten unfair advantage) twice...”\(^{22}\)

**The Jewish people as a “First-born”**.

In light of the experiences of Kayin, Yishmael, Eisav and Reuven, when God tells Moshe to express the Jewish people’s specialness to Pharoah in the following manner: (Shemot 4:22) “Beni Bechori Yisroel” (Israel is My Son, My Firstborn Son), should this not only be a source of pride for us, but also an implied warning? Should Jews assume that their status as chosen people is inviolate, and therefore they will live lives of unabated privilege and favoritism? At least certain periods of Jewish history have appeared to not bear out such an assumption. All first-borns, individuals as well as nations, must be careful not to sit back on their laurels and presume that they don’t have to actually continually earn their special status. If the original first born son had more carefully listened to what God Was Telling him, there is no telling how different our world would be today!

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\(^{21}\) And after that came forth his brother, and his hand had hold on Esav's heel; and his name was called Yaakov. And Yitzchak was three-score years old when she bore them.

\(^{22}\) In addition to obtaining Yitzchak’s blessing via trickery (Beraishit 27), Yaakov also forced Eisav into assigning him his first-born status (Ibid. 25:29-34).