

Parashat Bereshit

Text: Genesis 4:1-15

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." She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the soil and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering, God paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. And the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not to right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." Cain said to his brother Abel... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. The LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Then God said, "What have you done? Behold, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on the earth." Cain said to God, "My punishment is too great to bear! 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!" The LORD said to him, "I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him." And God put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him.

Rabbi Julian Morgenstern

The story of Cain and Abel, too, is in origin a folk-tale, answering the almost universal questions, how did men begin to worship God? And how did death come into the world? It, too, probably had its birth in the nomad period of Israel's history. This is to be inferred from the conception of sacrifice which the story pictures. Not Cain's sacrifice of the produce of his fields is acceptable to God but Abel's sacrifice of the firstlings of his sheep. Not only was this always the normal sacrifice in ancient Israel, but it also had its origin in the old, desert life, when field products were almost entirely unknown, and the only true sacrifice consisted of the best of the sheep. From this standpoint field products constituted an insufficient and unworthy sacrifice. For this reason, the story, written entirely from the nomad point of view, condemns the sacrifice of Cain and approves that of Abel.

Targum Neofiti 1

And Cain said to Abel, his brother, "Come! Let the two of us go out into the open field." And when the two of them had gone out into the open field, Cain answered and said to Abel: "I perceive that the world was not created by mercy and that it is not being conducted according to the fruits of good works, and that there is favoritism in judgment. Why was your offering received favorably and my offering was not received favorably from me?" Abel answered and said to Cain: "I perceive that the world was created by mercy and that it is being conducted according to the fruits of good works. And because my works were better than yours, my offering was received from me favorably and yours was not received favorably from you." Cain answered and said to Abel: "There is no judgment, and there is no judge and there is no other world. There is no giving of good reward to the just nor is vengeance exacted of the wicked." Abel answered and said to Cain: "There is judgment, and there is a judge, and there is another world. And there is giving of good reward to the just and vengeance is exacted of the wicked in the world to come." Concerning this matter the two of them were disputing in the open field. And Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

Midrash Tanchuman, Bereshit 9

And there are those who say that Cain said to Abel "Let's divide the world." Abel said, "Agreed." Abel took his sheep and Cain took the ground to cultivate. And they agreed between themselves that they would have no claims against each other. When Abel took his sheep, he began to graze the flock. Cain started to chase after him, from mountain to valley and from valley to mountain, until they finally got a hold of each other and began to wrestle. Abel bested Cain, who fell beneath him. When Cain saw what was happening, he began to cry out, "Abel, my brother, don't harm me!" Abel took pity upon him and let him go. Cain stood up and killed Abel, as it says, "And Cain arose," indicating that he had fallen. When he had killed him, he said to himself, "I will run from before my father and mother, for they will ask me about his whereabouts since there is none beside us in the world. Immediately, God appeared unto him. God said, "From your parents you can run, but from before Me you cannot, as it says, (Jeremiah 23) 'Can a man hide in hidden places and I not see him?' Where is Abel, your brother? Woe until him that he had mercy upon you, and did not kill you when you fell beneath him and you stood up and killed him!"

When God asked him, "Where is Abel, your brother?" he answered, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? You, the Custodian of all living beings, is asking me about him?" To what is this comparable? To a thief who stole items in the darkness of night, and was not caught. In the morning, the gatekeeper caught him and he said to him, "Why did you steal those items?" and he answered, "Why, I am a thief, and I am doing my job. But you, whose task is to guard, why are you not doing your job? And you accuse me!"

And so, too, Cain said to God, "I killed him? You created within me an evil inclination. You watch everything, yet You left him with me to be killed! You are the one who killed him, You who are called Anochi, for if you had not accepted my offerings as you did this, I would not have been jealous of him."

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

How did they exhort the witness in capital cases? ...you must know that capital cases are not cases concerning property – in cases concerning property a man must pay money and make atonement, but in capital cases, the executed person's blood and the blood of his eventual posterity lie at his door to the end of the world, for thus have we found in the case of Cain who slew his brother, as it is said, "your brother's blood cries" – it does not say "your brother's blood" but "your brother's bloods," thus indicating both his blood and the blood of his succeeding generations.

Therefore was a single man only first created to teach you that if anyone destroy a single soul from the children of man, Scripture charges him as though he had destroyed a whole world, and whosoever rescues a single soul from the children of man, Scripture credits him as though he had saved a whole world.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

My *avon* is greater than I can bear... *avon* has been taken to mean punishment. But it is by no means sure that this is its meaning. *Avon*, as a rule, means sin and not punishment. Let us take it here too as meaning sin, and the verse would then run: "My sin is greater than I can bear, see, today, you have driven me etc.". This would then give us a deep insight into the dark feelings and mind of the criminal, and, at the same time, into the justice of God. "My sin is greater than I can bear", You have shown me how great it is, "You have driven me away today, have severed the bond that gave the earth to me as the ground for human beings, and from Your Presence, too. I am not to be protected and watched over, and so, forsaken by the earth, God and man, I must fear that every creature that meets me might kill me". Imagine Cain...realizing that he had lost all this, had forfeited all this by his crime. He comes to the realization of his guilt, not by the thought of what he had done to his brother, but by what he had done to himself. He is still the same Cain, would still now have said "Am I my brother's keeper!" "My sin is too great" says Cain, had I only murdered my brother it would be bearable, but I did not know that I had thereby murdered myself, had made myself cursed, to wander and had forfeited every claim to the world or to brother-man... So Cain did not recognize the sin he had committed as being so much against his brother as being against himself. That is why he called it *avon*, wrong, crooked...Every *avon* is not only turning aside from our duty but also from our happiness. Thus God has ordered it.

God did not answer him, but proclaimed, "Listed all you that would kill Cain to avenge the blood of Abel!" Cain is punished sevenfold heavier by being left alive, the crime is atoned-for seven times more strongly, Abel revenged seven times more strongly, than by a death which is over in a minute.

And God made for Cain a warning sign. The opinion of our sages differ as to the nature of this sign according to whether they take Cain to be a remorseful penitent or the reverse... "Therefore" – because Cain's condition is such a depressing one – "let everyone who would kill him hear: thus is revenge taken on him sevenfold." Thereby God decreed a striking condition over Cain so that nobody who met him would kill him, for everybody recognized in his distressed condition a greater deterrent sign than his death would be.

Dr. Jeremy Benstein

Who is the Bible's first killer? If you said Cain, you're off by a few verses. It was Abel, who slaughtered lambs for his sacrifice. Despite the "dominion" that God granted human beings over nature, God explicitly said, in Genesis 1:29, that "every seed-bearing plant...and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit, shall be yours for food." Whatever mastery over the world might mean, it clearly did not extend to killing its other inhabitants, even for sustenance.

Much maligned Cain, then, was doing the good work in tilling the ground by the sweat of his brow, fulfilling God's prophecy. It was Abel, shepherd and sympathetic victim, who introduced the taking of life. And though the first slaughter was apparently for sublime ends – worship, not appetite – the first human murder was not long in coming.

It has been suggested that Cain ended up killing precisely because he was a vegetarian. A radical animal liberationist, in fact. Cain, the theory goes, saw no moral distinctions between humans and animals. Initially he killed neither. But once he saw that Abel's sacrifice of lambs was not only acceptable, but preferred to his own, he concluded that all was permitted, even slaughtering his own baby brother.

This was, by all accounts, a misunderstanding. Distinctions, it seems, are necessary – but what are the appropriate ones? Traditional Jewish teachings claim that our right to eat other animals stems from our difference from, and superiority over, them – a right we earn by avoiding bestial behavior. The laws of kashrut, it follows, help us retain our humanity and therefore safeguard this privilege. Certain ecological approaches, anti-animal liberation, hold the opposite: that our eating meat is precisely what embeds us in the world and natural cycles. It is vegetarianism that tries to extend an artificial human morality to the animal kingdom. The antelope eats the grass, the lion eats the antelope and eventually become grass himself: the Circle of Life. We are no different from the lions.

Or are we? In essence we are both a part of, and apart from, the rest of nature. We share a great deal with the rest of the animal kingdom while we are also uniquely human, as evidenced by human culture and the human ability to create divergent cultures. The brotherhood between people and animals, and between cultures, can be emphasized, while accepting distinctions. Distinctions often lead to aggression and exploitation, but so can their wrongful obliteration – as when the difference between animal and human is utterly erased.

Dan Pagis, Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my older son
cain son of man
tell him that i