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Nothing but Evil all the Time

The Torah is not a book of theology written by people. It is a book of anthropology written by God. The Torah is likewise not a book of philosophy and is not a book of history and is certainly not a book of geology or biology. Torah means “instructions” and the Torah is instructions for the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The stories in Sefer Bereishit, including the account of the creation of the world and the earliest generations of humanity, and including the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and their families, are in the Torah to teach us something we need to know about what it means to be a human being living in a world created by God and what it means to be a Jew whose ancestors stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah.

When we open the Torah to learn about humanity we find two perspectives in the opening chapters of Sefer Bereishit. All of human history has been built upon navigating between those two poles and responding to the two realities.

Human beings are created in the Image of God. And human beings possess the capacity for great evil.

In the very first chapter of Bereishit, human beings are introduced as a special and unique creation:

בָּשָׂר שָׂאֵל אֶת־אָדָם בְּצִלְמָנוּ בְּצִלְמֹתֵנוּ

“Let us make humanity in our likeness and in our Image”

This is elaborated in the fifth chapter in a passage that Ben Azzai in the Mishnah claims is the “klal gadol” or the orienting point of the entire Torah:

זֶה סְפִירַת תּוֹלְךָת אָדָם בַּיּוֹם בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־אָדָם בְּצִלְמֹות אֶל־הָיִם עֲשָׂה אֶת־
זֶכֶר וּנְקָבָה בְּרָא אֶת־אָדָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת־אָדָם וַיְקָרָא אֶת־שְׁמָם אֶת־אָדָם בַּיּוֹם הַבָּרָא מ: (ס)

This is the Book of the generations of humanity on the day that God created humanity, humanity was created in the Image of God. Male and female were created and God blessed them and called their name “humanity” on the day that they were created.

I know the Torah is a Divine book because these *pesukim*, and their insistence that each and every human being is an individual created in God’s own Image, deserving of infinite dignity and respect and love reflect no human society that has ever existed. The Torah sets a standard for the dignity that we owe to others that is nearly impossible to meet but that we are obligated to strive towards. Can you imagine spending just the next half-hour as though you believed that the Torah is true and each and every human being is created in God’s very image and deserving of infinite dignity, respect, and love? (For starters, you probably wouldn’t talk when the man standing two feet from you was trying to finish his amidah or when the woman in the row behind you was reciting mourner’s kaddish). Can you imagine living your life that way? Could you imagine an entire society structured around and built upon that foundation?

But if our potential is nearly infinite, so is the possibility of great evil.

I’ve shared with you before in some context the remark that I heard from the evolutionary biologist, the late Steven J. Gould who declared, “they don’t understand what DNA is!” when describing certain popular scientists who explain and even excuse violence, cruelty, and infidelity as being vestiges of our caveman ancestors who depended on rape, pillage, and murder to survive and spread their genes.

Everything that humans are capable of doing, by definition, is because of an element in our DNA that makes that possible. Everything that humans are capable of is within our DNA. Good and bad alike. We already know that people are capable of great evil which means that there are elements of our DNA that make that possible. But we also know that human beings are capable of honesty, kindness, altruism, and loyalty. That too is because of the potential that lies within us.

ויאמר קיו אל-הבל אחיו זיהי בהיותם בשדה ניקם קיו אל-הבל אחיו זיהו ויהרגהו

"And Kayin said to his brother Hevel when they were in the field...and Kayin arose against his brother Hevel and he killed him."

What did Kayin say to Hevel that precipitated this first murder? What were they arguing about? The midrash supplies several answers:

אמרו בואו ונחלק את העולם, אחד נטל הקרקעות ואחד נטל את המטלטלים, דין אמר ארעה דעתך אם עלה דידי, דין אמר מה דעתך לביש דידי, דין אמר חלץ, דין אמר פרח, מתווך בך (בראשית ד, ח): ניקם קיו אל הבל אחיו זיהו ויהרגהו

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."

רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר שנייהם נטלו את הקרקעות, ושניהם נטלו את המטלטלים, ועל מה היו מדינין, אלא זה אומר בתחומי בית המקדש נבנה וזה אומר בתחומי בית המקדש נבנה, שנאמר: ויהי בהיותם בשדה, ואין שדה אלא בית המקדש, היך מה דעתך אמר (מיכה ג, יב): ציוו שדה תחרש, ומתווך בך (בראשית ד, ח): ניקם קיו אל הבל אחיו זיהו וגנו

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."

מר רבינו תאומה יתרה נולדה עם הבל, זה אומר אני נוטלה שאני בכור, וזה אומר אני נוטלה שנולדה עמי, ומתווך בך ניקם קיו

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."

The Torah seems to skip over the reason for the murder. The Midrash notices this gap and offers three possible motivations.. These represent three paradigms for future conflict and murder and warfare throughout history. The Midrash says that men fight over wealth, over religion, and over women. Once we are banished from Eden, scarcity and competition define our existence and lead, inevitably to conflict.

I had an experience on an airplane once that supports this theory. On one occasion I found myself on a transatlantic flight from Israel on a half-empty plane. Each of us could take one full row of seats to lie down and sleep comfortably. We could get up and walk around in comfort. It was an experience that has not been repeated but that I shall never forget. On the flight with me were two women traveling with very young children. One was Hassidic and one seemed to be fairly secular and non-observant. In Israel, the communities of these two women are locked in a fierce zero-sum struggle for resources and legitimacy and families from Hassidic communities and secular communities do not socialize. But on this edenic airplane, when we had space to move about and we didn't have to compete for every inch of our armrests, there was a generosity of

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spirit and as I strolled down the empty alleys of the plane I saw these two women in friendly conversation, their toddlers playing together at their feet.

It was heartwarming. But, it isn't sufficient.

The Torah doesn't tell us why Kayin killed Hevel because there doesn't have to be a reason. The gap in the verse is the most frightening, but the most true explanation of all. We kill because we can. We are cruel to one another because it's in our DNA. And we kill because killing is just one point on a continuum with other violations and we don't like being told "no."

Umberto Cassuto, the 20th century Italian Torah scholar noted that there are similarities in the names between the descendants of Kayin and the descendants of Adam and Chava's third son Shet (Seth). This is most striking with Lemekh. Lemekh is one of the descendants of Kayin and is one of the worst people described in the antediluvian descent of humanity. He is the first person in the Torah to marry two wives. Rashi says one was for procreation and one was to be a trophy wife. I'm speaking euphemistically but Rashi is far more direct. He composes the first poem or song in the Torah. It is a song in which he brags about his past violence and his impunity from any repercussions. According to Malbim, the great 19th century Orthodox rabbi and Torah commentator, Lemekh's song was intended to intimidate and silence his wives so that they would be obedient and subservient to Lemekh out of fear of his violence. And, his cousin, Lemekh, the descendent of Shet is the father of Noach who understands something of what makes Noach special and understands something of why the world needed someone like Noach.

The names are the same because each one of us, with the names that we have, can be wicked or righteous. I can be wicked David or I can be righteous David and that choice is within my power.

Here we are. We are created in the Image of God and owe infinite care and respect and dignity to one another. Here we are, created in the Image of God such that every human death, no matter how natural or how peaceful, leaves behind a void that can never be filled and a circle of grief for surviving family and friends and community that extends as well in infinite circles. As the Mishnah in Sanhedrin says, "It was for this reason that humanity was first created from one person, to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world."

And here we are, adding to the sadness and tragedy inherent in creation through our own violence and our own wickedness.

I attended the funeral on Thursday of one of the men murdered in West Rogers Park this week. Eliyahu Moscowitz was from a very prominent and connected Chabad family and the funeral was attended by rabbis and rashei yeshiva and also by those who had worked with him at the deli counter at Jewel. There is something so striking about standing amidst hundreds of people who are facing unimaginable grief and sadness. It reminded me of the reality that there is a certain quotient of grief and suffering that is baked into the world as it was created by HaKadosh Baruch Hu. We live in a world with cancer and aneurisms and car accidents and heart attacks and r"l little children who choke on grapes. And, in time, most of us must confront that burden of grief and sorrow that is an unavoidable part of the world as God has made it. But how much worse, then, to add to that measure of grief and suffering through our own all-too-human choices to turn on one another in cruelty and violence.

The Torah is a book of anthropology written by God. We must remember the evil that human beings are capable of inflicted on one another. The Torah is a book of instruction and inspiration. We must remember the dignity that each and every human being deserves.