

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
September 30, 2019
Gen 4:1-12
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Once upon a time disciples of Rabbi Pinchas ceased talking in embarrassment when he entered the House of Study. When he asked them what they were talking about, they said: “Rabbi, we were saying how afraid we are that the Evil Urge will pursue us.”

“Don’t worry,” he reassured them. “You have not gotten high enough for it to pursue you. For the time being, you are still pursuing it”¹

The evil urge, which in Hebrew is the *yetzer ha’rah*, is the building block of sin. And if I were to ask you what story in Torah we go to, to learn something about sin, how many of you would say the story of Adam and Eve? But the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is not an original sin within Judaism, and whether it’s a sin at all is debatable.

The story that Jewish tradition goes to to understand our relationship to sin is the tragic story of Cain and Abel. In just a few moments we will hear how sin is crouching at Cain’s door, yet he has the power to master it. This is the Jewish understanding of sin. It’s an urge, a temptation that is so strong that it feels like it’s outside of us. It is, however, an urge within us, that with moral education, self-discipline and training we can control, subdue, redirect or transform. And it is our responsibility—for the sake of civility, for the sake of justice, and for the sake of peace—to do so.

(Stacy reads entire handout: 4:1-12)

There’s a lot we could say about these verses and not all of it would be directly relevant to our topic this morning, so for the sake of time, I’ll lead us through these verses, focusing on vv 1-10.

Let's start with translating the phrase in v. 1: "kaniti ish et Adonai." Our handouts from Sefaria translate this as "I have gotten a male child with the help of Adonai." Everett Fox offers a more literal translation: "I have gotten/created a man *as* Adonai." And the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), which I've included translates: "Both I and Adonai have made a man." If we think about these latter two translations for a moment, we can conclude that Eve is acknowledging a parallel between God's power to create and her own. God has made a man, Adam. Now she too has made a man, Cain.

But the more relevant question is the use of the word "kaniti" which is a pun on the name Cain. The most common use of *kaniti* is to mean "I have bought, gotten, or acquired." A second definition is: "I have made or created," all from the same verb *liknot* (l-k-h).

Cain is the first person born to the first human couple, and he receives a name presumably related to this act of creation or acquisition or ownership. To reinforce this point, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his interpretation of this story, argues that Cain represents the desire for ownership in a material, transactional, commodified way. Abel, who is born later—this may be minutes later or years later, the text isn't clear—receives no comparable explanation of his name. His mother does not congratulate herself on having created another person. Nor is he referred to as a son. Rather, Abel is called "Cain's brother." We conclude that Cain is special because he is the first humanly born child. Abel is special because his presence introduces to the world the first set of brothers. The meaning of Abel, *Hevel*, in Hebrew is "futility," "fleeting," it is one of the many names for breath, and foretells a life that will be ephemeral, cut short.

Leon Kass, in his book *The Beginning of Wisdom*, makes much of the brothers' birth order in order to understand the tragedy of this story. He suggests that as the first born, Cain is "the first carrier of parental hopes and the primary object of parental pride." As the first born,

Cain feels the pressure to meet his parents' expectations and to please them. He senses that his failures will cause great disappointment, and I'm sure many of us here understand how parental disappointment is hard to bear.²

Kass builds the psychological context that can account for, though not justify, Cain's jealous reaction that is witnessed later in these verses. Kass continues, "[With the birth of the second child, Cain] now has competition. Why, he must silently ask himself, did they (she) have another one. . . ? Because anger at the parents for his displacement is too dangerous...[Cain] lodges all his resentment with the innocent newcomer, [his younger brother Abel]. . . .For all these reasons, [Cain as] the firstborn may be expected to cherish and jealously defend his pride of place."³

We next learn that the brothers grow up and go their separate ways—avoiding competition by going into very different fields, literally. Abel a shepherd and Cain, a farmer, the brothers represent the two main sources of food and wealth that were competing with one another at that time. Then Cain has the idea to offer God a sacrifice (Gen 4:3). That it was Cain's idea to offer gifts to God is taken for granted and is seemingly unrewarded. This actually leads us to question whether God likes the idea of sacrifices at all. While much later, God will command very specific sacrifices for specific reasons, at this early stage, it's not clear that God would have initiated this practice had it not been for Cain. In any case, God heeds Abel's offering but not Cain's. The question is: why? God's unequal response also begs the questions (Gen 4:4b-5a): Is God preferring one sacrifice over the other? Animal life over plant life? Or is God preferring one son over the other?

The word that stands out in Abel's offering is the word "choicest." (Gen 4:4a). This has led commentators to conclude that Abel made an effort to offer his best while Cain must have

brought his “uglies.” But, maybe the difference lies not in *what* was offered, but in the *spirit* it was offered. Because Sacks argues that Cain represents the power we get through ownership and acquisition, he suggests that when Cain offers his sacrifice, he does so “in order to receive in return some of God’s power,”⁴ Cain is in effect saying, “I’ll give you, God, the fruits of my creative power and, in return, You give me some of your creative power.” Cain’s attitude recalls his mother’s, who saw in her creative ability a likeness with God, and so too Cain, though Cain overreaches. He crosses a line that fails to elicit a desired response from God. Sacks concludes that “[t]he sacrifice [God] accepts, that of Abel/*hevel*, is one that comes from the *humility* of a fleeting mortality.”⁵ Abel’s sacrifice is one of gratitude. Cain’s is one of grasping. Abel appreciates God’s power. Cain covets it. Thus God heeds Abel’s sacrifice.

Sacks will insist, however, that this is *not* about God’s loving one brother more than the other. He says, “Sibling rivalry as a contest for divine love is a bad idea and wrongly diminishes Abraham’s God. . . . To insist that being loved entails that others be unloved is to fail to understand love itself.”⁶ So, let’s agree this is not about God favoring one brother over the other. Contemporary commentator, Norman Cohen adds, “[W]e should also keep in mind that the text never says that Cain sinned [with his offering]. All we are told is that Cain brought an offering, that Abel followed suit, and that God *paid attention* (*vs. approves*) to Abel’s offering, but not to Cain’s. There is no implied value judgment here; no notion of acceptance or rejection by God. Cain is not accused of any wrongdoing in our Genesis text; all that he can be accused of is that he gave something of himself.”⁷ Because Cohen asserts there is no obvious value judgment expressed by God, Cohen then suggests that Cain’s reaction has more to do with how *he perceives* God’s reaction or lack thereof.

Cohen says, “Perhaps in fact the rejection is only the result of Cain’s perception or feelings; the reaction of an older sibling who is jealous when his parent pays [any] attention to a brother or sister for the first time.”⁸ So, maybe the difference noted in the story wasn’t about what was offered, *or* about the spirit in which it was offered. Perhaps it was simply the amount of attention that God gave each of them. Maybe for the first time Abel got more attention than Cain, more affirmation, and this *felt* like a slight and an injustice.

Leonard Kass builds on this thought. He ascribes Cain’s sense of injustice to his perhaps too high self-regard. He says, “Every human being, once [we come] to self-consciousness, acquires notions of self-worth; absent some corrective, one’s sense of self-worth becomes the standard by which each of us naturally measures what [we think we deserve] from another. . . . Once there is self-regard, [at some point] there will be perceived insult experienced as injustice. Once there is perceived injustice, there will be anger and the desire for revenge. And the larger the self-regard, the greater the exacted vengeance.

“Cain, treated worse than he thought he deserved, smoldered with resentment at Abel, who in Cain’s eyes was treated better than he deserved, who had in fact usurped—*de facto*—Cain’s pride of place.”⁹ Said another way: older brother has an idea to do a good deed and goes ahead and does it. Younger brother copies and outdoes him. Older brother feels displaced and humiliated.

Whether the reason for Cain’s distress was objective or subjective, the experience of being slighted provokes the *yetzer ha rah*, the evil urge (Gen 4:5b-6). The Hebrew *v’yihar* is better translated as enraged than distressed. We learn here that Cain was enraged and humiliated—perhaps enraged *because* he felt humiliated.

Of course Abel is not responsible for Cain's perception or God's behavior, but Cain is inconsolable and God is untouchable while Abel is vulnerable. What next plays out is what often plays out in our homes, our schools, and our societies—we find a scapegoat. We redirect our anger and envy, our warranted or unwarranted sense of injustice not on the cause but on a perceived competitor, or on someone or group of people we resent or fear in some way. We also blame messengers and middlemen because they are easier targets, and we can charge them with complicity.

The very first appearance in Torah of the word for *sin*, *cheyt* is in Gen 4:7. A *cheyt* is just one kind of sin. It represents the category of impulses that, when improperly directed or managed, can cause us to commit evil. And here we get an insight into the Jewish understanding of evil. Evil results from the failure of human will; from the failure to act in a godly way. Sin crouches at Cain's door waiting to pounce should Cain not master his feelings; should Cain surrender to the urge to lash out, should he surrender to the evil urge.

We all have impulses toward jealousy, toward indifference, toward lust, toward greed, toward domination, toward rage, toward selfishness. These would be the *yetzer ha'ra*: the evil impulse. These same impulses, however, can be used for good if they fuel healthy competition, the creation of a family, the building of houses and hospitals and other shelters, the pursuit of freedom, of justice, of self-improvement, and peacekeeping. These would be the *yetzer ha'tov*: the impulses for good.

In Jewish tradition, we start with one of two assumptions about the evil urge. Either we are born “pure”, “innocent” but we have within us both the desire for good and the desire for evil. Or, we are born pure but we have within us only the urge for evil, which is overseen and held in check by parents until bar/t mitzvah. In this second worldview we receive the urge for

good, the *yetzer hatov upon bar/t mitzvah* when we have presumably learned right behavior and become responsible for our actions. The human spiritual journey is largely one of *learning to tame* our own impulses and of *strengthening our own will* so that we *can* choose what is “good” in God’s eyes. For all of us: “Sin crouches at our door. . .yet we can master it.”

In our story, God obviously expects Cain to know the difference between what is good and what is evil. He is expected to know how to resist its temptation. Yet Cain in that moment is blinded by his humiliation and rage, two evil urges. There is no precedent to these feelings, what they can lead to, or how to manage them.

To this day we struggle with how and when to teach people how to manage their strong emotions. Just last month the Washington Post had a special section on parenting. In her article, “When a Child Has a Bad Day, There Are Ways to Help without Being Parent Fix-it,” author Amy Joyce offers kids mantras they can repeat to calm and reassure themselves.¹⁰ Mantras like “I am kind. I am smart. I am strong.” Or, “Write it out.” Or what seems inspired by our Torah verses, “Big feelings are great but they are not the boss of you.” That is what God says to Cain. Big feelings are great, i.e., strong, but they are not the boss of you. You can master them.

In fact, arguably, Cain’s *yetzer ha tov* is being tested. Why else would God ask him point blank why he’s so enraged? Because we expect that God knows what’s in people’s hearts, the question from God can only be an opportunity for Cain to speak up, to share his disappointment, to talk it out and be heard. And God continues as if saying, “Even if you do feel provoked, riled up, enraged, you got this. Master it. Show me your true power. Show me you have ownership over your negative emotions—that’s the kind of power I’ve endowed you with: make me that kind of offering: not the fruit of the land but the fruit of your self-control. I’m giving you a second chance. Make me another offering.”

Our sages have thought a lot about the nature of sin. They say that after acting like a guest, it can become the master of the house, dictating *all* of a person's actions: Pharaoh's hardened heart is a good example of this. Sin becomes a habit. So much so that when one is about to commit a sin, the desire for the *yetzer ha'rah* prevents one from seeing any possible punishment for the act. All of this might describe Cain.

Judaism has also worked out various systems to help us master our strong, negative emotions. To tame the feeling of envy, Rabbi Michael Berg advises that rather than dwell on what others have that you want, ask yourself, "What can I do, starting now, that will make me deserving of the things I desire in life?"¹¹

Because sin is seen as a bad habit, the twelfth century sage Maimonides, Rambam, instructs us to cultivate new habits that will result in finding a middle ground. So if you are enormously impatient, he counsels putting yourself on a patience diet. Go overboard for a month or a year—being excessively patient—to a fault. Rambam stresses the importance of repeating the positive behavior you want to acquire.¹²

Yet change will not come merely from unthinking repetition—it does require us to repeatedly put our hearts into our actions. According to the Rambam, "when a [person who wants to become more generous] gives a thousand gold coins at one time to one [person in need, but then] does not give anything to another [person in need], the trait of generosity will not come... as [much as]. . . to the person who donates a single gold piece to a thousand needy people."¹³ With respect to murder, it's not enough to refrain from murdering because it is prohibited. You need to work to actually rid the desire to murder from your soul.

Jewish tradition has additional character building strategies: counseling people with potentially evil tendencies into positive directions. For example, if a person is born with a desire

to shed blood, perhaps they would make a good surgeon. If you have a need to earn lot's of money, use the money to help others. If you have a regular desire for wine, good food and nice clothes, you can use these things to honor Shabbat. Should we harbor feelings of hatred, those too should be channeled properly. The Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Shapira who perished in Treblinka, wrote in his prewar journal that the only hate we should harbor is for our own *yetzer harah*. He says, "You cannot ward off your negative drives unless you also hate them.... When our Sages said, "Develop a wrath toward your baser nature" (Berakhot 5a), they meant it literally. Only then will you be able to control it.¹⁴

God especially loves the person who resists the temptation to anger and the temptation to get drunk (Pesachim 11b).

Cain however does not or cannot resist the temptation to anger. Who knows, maybe he even got drunk. All we know is that Cain meets Abel in the field. We don't know how soon after the offerings were made it is that they meet. The same day? The next day? Weeks later? Some words are exchanged, though what exactly, is unknown. Then Cain kills Abel. When God calls him to account asking, "Where is your brother, Abel?" which is another opportunity for Cain to tell his truth and be heeded, Cain equivocates, "I don't know. Am *I* my brother's keeper" (Gen 4:9)? Maybe he doesn't know where Abel's breath or soul went, but he knows what he did to his body. Cain reveals that oh! so human evil urge to blame others for our lapses, for he is arguably blaming God for having created the evil urge in the first place and for not protecting Abel. He reminds us of a kid in trouble who exclaims to his parents, "I didn't ask to be born!" Here Cain takes after his father, when Adam eats the prohibited fruit in the Garden of Eden and tries to blame Eve.

*Chey*t, remember, means missed the mark. A *cheyt* is unintentional—you're aiming for the bullseye but you've missed—so we give Cain the benefit of the doubt that he didn't necessarily mean to kill Abel. Maybe it was an accident, a reckless case of not knowing his own strength. But—no matter. The one who commits the *cheyt* is still accountable because they haven't done the spiritual work to keep themselves on the right path. You may not have *wanted* to break the lamp out of anger, but if you haven't learned to control your temper, then you are still responsible for repairing any damage that your enraged action causes.

Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" rings throughout Genesis and arguably off the page and off the scroll and into our own societies. Why do we even need to ask the question? Because, as both Kass and Rabbi Sacks argue, brothers are natural rivals not natural allies. What brothers have in common are parents. "True, when their father's house is under attack, brothers may band together to prevent harm to their common source. . . . But in times of peace, brothers are not natural allies. . . ."15

What we have in this story then is Torah's attempt to refashion and tame a natural human impulse for rivalry and violence. Torah comes into the world to call forth and activate the *yetzer hatov*, those competing internal urges for peace. That is, we are called to marshal our *yetzer hatov* to overpower, subdue, redirect, and transform our *yetzer harah*. This fundamental call for self-mastery goes hand in hand with the emergence of one's self-consciousness, self-worth, and the presence of brothers and sisters.

As I said earlier, the majority of commentary relates Cain to the verb meaning: acquisition, possession, creation. But there is another compelling word association with Cain, and that is with the homonyms: *kinah*, one meaning: lament or wail (kof, yud, nun, *hay*), and the other meaning: envy (kof, yud nun, *alef*). In verse 10, God says, "What have you done?! Your

brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" What we see is that Cain's sin brings about the first *kinah* that is borne of a person's *kinah*; the first lament that is borne of a person's envy. Try to imagine the heartbreaking sounds of the first grief. Cain is so named because his unchecked envy would lead to an unbridled, inconsolable, timeless wail. For this reason, it's Cain's example, not Adam's nor Eve's, who teaches us about sin.

A hero within our tradition is one who faces temptation and overcomes it (Pirkei Avot 4:1). It is a definition of hero meant for all of us not just for some of us. Though destructive urges may pound at our door, we can, we must learn to manage them. God created us and endowed us with this power. This is the offering that God heeds.

Shana tova tikateivu v'tichateumu.

May you be inscribed and sealed for a year of blessing and good health.

Endnotes

¹ Maurice S. Friedman. *A Dialogue with Hasidic Tales: Hallowing the Everyday*, Insight Books: New York, 1988, p. 40.

² Leon R. Kass. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003, p. 127.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 255.

⁵ Rabbi Jonathon Sacks. *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. Schocken Books: New York, 2015, p. 255.

⁶ Ibid, p. 264.

⁷ Norman J. Cohen. *Self, Struggle & Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and their Healing Insights for Our Lives*, Jewish Lights Publishing: Woodstock, 1995, p. 48.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kass, p. 138-9.

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, 8/29/19.

¹¹ *The Way*, pp. 139-41.

¹² *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Character Traits 1:7. See also George Leonard, *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-term Fulfillment*, Plume: New York, 1992.

¹³ Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot 3:15.

¹⁴ *To Heal the Soul*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Kass, pp. 128-9; Sacks, "Chapter 5: Sibling Rivalry," pp. 87-104. See also Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.