**Our Hands Did Not Shed This Blood!  Or Did They?**

**Sermon for Rosh ha-Shana – 5780 - Congregation Bet Mishpachah**

**Rabbi Jake Singer-Beilin**

“It wasn't me said the boy with the gun/Sure I pulled the trigger but it needed to be done/Cause life's been killing me ever since it begun/You can’t blame me cause I'm too young.”  The singer Jack Johnson, in his song entitled “Cookie Jar” tracks the blame for an act of gun violence committed by a young, angry man.  All along down the line, each person places the blame on another.  The perpetrator, his parent, the media guru, and the maker of violent movies all claim innocence.  A life, filled with sacred potential, is taken from this world, and no one sees themselves as responsible, or having any significant role in this act of violence. Finally, Johnson boldly proclaims, “It was you it was me it was every man/We've all got the blood on our hands/We only receive what we demand/And if we want hell then hell’s what we’ll have.”  In the end, he places the blame on all of us for creating a world in which young men choose to kill, in which violence is an unfortunate reality that we simply live with and accept.

The most striking element of the infamous story of Cain and Abel is Cain’s inability to take any responsibility for the murder of his brother.  After the killing, God provides Cain with an opportunity to own up to his actions.  Already knowing the answer, God asks “Where is your brother, Abel?”  Cain shies away from taking responsibility, and feigns ignorance.  “*Ha-shomer achi anochi*/Am I my brother’s keeper?”[1], he retorts.  This is not simply a dodge, but is instead a way for Cain to take the responsibility off of his own shoulders and to place it on a scapegoat.  Midrash Tanchuma teaches us, “Cain’s question is in fact a defiant assertion [to God]: I slew Abel – it was You who created in me the impulse to do evil.  But You are the keeper of all things – yet You let me slay him.  It is You [God] who slew him.”  Cain’s answer to God is: “I may have held the weapon, but You, God are responsible for his death, not me.”

Cain’s utter inability to see the destruction that he created with his own hands, to witness the blood of his brother that he has shed on the ground, his refusal to repent, adds to the tragedy, the heartbreak of this story.  And so we are left eternally attempting to correctly answer the question that he shot back at God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”  When Cain confronted God with this rebellious question, God’s answer was in essence: “Of course you are your brother’s keeper!  Of course you are responsible for his well-being.  His life was in your hands, and you squandered it.  You destroyed My most precious creation!”  Our Torah, our Jewish values and laws are the way God is telling us to be responsible for one another still to this day.

Later in the Torah, we read about another murder.  A body is found in a field outside of the city.  A person slain, and the killer unknown and unknowable.  No witnesses, no suspects, just a human being whose life was ended – cut short by violence, an act of needless destruction.  With no trial, no investigation to conduct, how does the community react?  What is one to do?  Deuteronomy gives us a ritual, a way to bring repair to a world that has been shattered.  The Torah prescribes a violent ritual, troubling and uncomfortable – *Egla Arufa –* The Broken-Necked Heifer.  The elders of the closest town, it says, are to take a cow to a rugged valley and behead it.  They are to wash their hands over the cow’s corpse, and declare “Our hands did not shed this blood nor did our eyes see it done.  Absolve/*Kapeir*, O Adonai, Your people Israel.”[2]  With this ritual, the townspeople remove their bloodguilt, but does everything go back to normal?  How could it?  How can the world ever be the same when a life has been taken and the perpetrator is still unknown, still on the loose?

        The purpose of this ritual might not just be to wipe away guilt.  Such a dramatic, ceremony could serve as a jolt to the system, as a way of getting people to pay attention to the terrible reality that they have allowed to occur in their nation.  As Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel, a medieval Italian Torah commentator explains, “the shock value of this ritual would prevent the people from forgetting the act and would keep alive the search for the offender.”  How simple it would be to forget this murder, to turn away and say “It’s not my problem.  I didn’t know the guy and I didn’t kill him, so I’ll go back to my life.”[3]  This ritual of *Egla Arufa* forces the townspeople to pay attention, to wake up to the reality of violence and killing in their world, and to search for a way to bring an end to it.  It would draw attention to a murder that might otherwise be forgotten, swept under the rug so that the Israelites could return to a life of normalcy.

        When read closely, though, this ritual even goes beyond that.  When the elders of the town say that their hands did not shed this blood, the verb for “shed” is actually written in the singular, as if to say, “One of our hands did not shed this blood, but the other is in some way responsible for this heinous deed.”[4]  Indeed, as modern biblical commentator Nehama Leibowitz observed, “their whole way of life, their social order, economic, educational, and security institutions are answerable for the murder.  The guilt is not confined merely to the individual perpetrator.  The whole society is directly involved.”[5]  By beheading a cow and reciting the formula over its corpse, the Israelites acknowledge that they can no longer claim innocence.  The quiet of their society has been shattered, and while they did not grip the knife and plunge it into this person’s body, they created a world in which this could happen.  One of their hands did not shed this blood, but the other hand did.  This ritual calls on the Israelite community to take responsibility for innocent blood that is shed on its land.  Having beheaded the cow and theatrically reenacting the violence that occurred, they now have blood on their hands, they have a death for which to account. When called upon to take responsibility for murdering his brother, Cain refused, and even blamed God for the act.  When the ancient Israelites were called upon to do the same, they rose to the occasion.  Cain held the rock, still dripping with blood, and put responsibility on God.  These Israelites never held the knife, and yet recognized their own regrettable role in a murder that took place on their soil.  They saw that they created a world in which an innocent person could be murdered and that they played a role in that destruction of holy life.  In doing so, when they are asked the question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, the respond in the affirmative.

        Tragically, though, the Mishna notes that Israelites stopped performing this ritual when murderers multiplied[6].  As the amount of violence in ancient Israel rose, as the need to acknowledge and combat unsolvable murders skyrocketed upward, the Israelites stopped shocking themselves into action, and perhaps they quit feeling responsible for the heinous acts that people committed in the society that they had created.  When the death of innocent people became common, the people refused to take responsibility any longer.  This has been the reality of our world since the time of the Mishna.  For 2000 years the ritual of *Egla Arufa* has been suspended because murderers have multiplied.  This is the world in which we live.  This is the society that we inherited, and allow to remain run exponentially rampant.  This is the reality that we pass down to the next generation, *l’dor va-dor*.  As Jack Johnson sang, “If we want hell, then hell’s what we’ll have.”

The key question for us, as we look deep within our souls during these 10 Days of Repentance, is this: are we Cain, dodging responsibility and placing it on others, or are we the ancient Israelite elders, carrying the heavy burden of responsibility as murder plagues our land?  When we look at the innocent blood on the ground crying out to God, will we acknowledge our role in allowing it to be shed?  Even if we do not grasp the gun, we are in part responsible for the actions of those who do.  Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the 20th century luminary and moral conscience of his generation would remind his readers constantly that “in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”  We are responsible for the evils that occur within our gates.  We are responsible for the terrible gun violence that plagues our cities and towns.  Nehama Leibowitz challenges her readers to look closely at our own role in the destruction of precious life that we allow in our world.  She writes, “The Torah desired that the loss of a single human being...be taken to heart by his fellows, [it] should shock their complacency and summon them to severe self-scrutiny…Whoever keeps to [her] own quiet corner and refuses to have anything to do with the “evil world”, who observes oppression and violence but does not stir a finger in protest, cannot proclaim with a clear conscience that ‘our hands have not shed blood’.”[7]  Can we truthfully declare as the Israelite elders did that “our hands have not shed this blood”?  Are we Cain, or are we the elders of the town?

The ritual of *Egla Arufa*, while outdated and problematic, nonetheless attuned the ancient Israelites to their collective responsibility for the world that they created.  We, too need a ritual that will shock us, will awaken our righteous indignation, and will call us to act to end the baseless hatred and free-flowing violence that we allow in our land.  We, who have become accustomed to mass shootings at schools and offices, at Walmarts and night clubs, and this past year, even in synagogues.  We need a ritual that will remind us of our own heavy responsibility to end the evil in our world.  What could it look like to reinstitute a ritual with the same intention of the Broken-Necked Heifer in our own day?  What public act could shake us out of our complicity and exhaustion, our sense of overwhelmed helplessness when we are confronted with the enormity of violence that we allow to take place in our country?

At their best, the High Holy Days can serve as this ritual.  These Days of Awe, with their high drama, and their introspective liturgy, their calls to be better humans than the year before, can be our *Egla Arufa*.  These days call us to account before God and one another.  They shed light on the transgressions that we have committed communally, if not personally.  They tell us that hope is not lost, that it is not too late to return.  The wail of the shofar, echoing the cries of too many parents, too many children, too many loved ones and friends, is meant to pierce the thick covering over our hearts, to cast off the veil over our eyes, and to see that there is blood on the ground, blood that our hands did not shed, yet still stain our skin and our souls.  If we only allow them to, our High Holy Day prayers will take the place of the Broken-Necked Heifer.  Our pangs of hunger on Yom Kippur can transform complacency into a drive for change, our mental fatigue into a refusal to accept one more murder on our watch.  On this Rosh ha-Shana, I will open my heart to the call of our tradition, not to stand idly by the blood of my neighbor, and I will pledge to do what I can to take responsibility for the gun violence that takes place in my homeland.  Please, join me.  When we let these ancient, holy words transform us from Cain into the elders of Israel, then we can truly claim, “Our hands did not shed this blood, I am my brother’s keeper.”

*Ken y’hi ratzon*, may this be God’s will, may this be our will.

[1] Genesis 4:9

[2] Deuteronomy 21:1-9

[3] Rabbi Eliezer Diamond,<http://www.jtsa.edu/our-eyes-did-not-see>

[4]R’ Yitzchak Meir Bunim, Torah Gems, p. 268

[5] Studies in Devarim, p. 207

[6] Mishna Sota 9:9

[7] Studies in Devarim, p. 206