Bereishit 5781

Kayin the ~~Villain~~ Anti-hero

I grew up believing that in the story of Kayin and Hevel, the hero was Hevel, tragically murdered by the villain of the story, his evil brother Kayin. But the truth is that Kayin is not the villain in Hevel's story, he is an anti-hero in his own story, in which Hevel's role is as insubstantial as his name (which means "vapor"). All we know about Hevel is that he is a shepherd who copied his brother in offering sacrifices to G-d, which were found acceptable, and that was killed by his jealous brother.

Kayin is a much more meaty character. The Torah vividly portrays his envy of his brother, which leads him to commit the first murder. After hearing that he is to be condemned to wander the face of the earth, Kayin declares גָּדֹול עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשֹׂא "my sin is too great to bear," and pleads with G-d (successfully) to protect him from those who might seek to harm him, perhaps as recompense for his past misdeeds. Many commentators, assuming that Kayin is an unrepentant villain, interpret Kayin's statement "my sin is too great to bear" as something other than remorse. Ibn Ezra says the word עון means not sin, but the consequences of sin, and that Kayin is merely complaining about the severity of his punishment. Rashi says Kayin is asking a rhetorical question "Is my sin too great [for the Creator of heaven and earth] to bear?" While these commentators are in keeping with a venerable stream of biblical interpretation that assumes that the righteous are perfectly righteous and the wicked are perfectly wicked, their interpreations are difficult to square with a simple read biblical text.

By contrast, Ramban (Nachmanides) writes that Kayin was indeed acknowledging his own guilt prior to pleading forgiveness, before pleading for divine protection. Ramban's interpretation, besides being easier to square with the biblical text, is also supported by a midrashic tradition that Kayin indeed repented. In Vakira Rabbah, Rav Huna teaches in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Yitzhak that after his colloquy with G-d, Kayin departed joyfully. When his father, Adam, met him, he asked "how did your trial go?", and Kayin replied "I repented and my debt is settled." At this, Adam began slapping himself on the face saying "Repentance is so powerful, and I never knew it!"

Adam, seeing his son receive clemency for committing murder, because of his repentance, laments that he himself never repented of the crime he committed. Thus it seems, Kayin was not only the first murderer, he was also the first Baal teshuvah—the first repentant sinner. When G-d called Adam and Chava to account for eating from the tree of knowledge, they had resorted to finger-pointing. Adam blamed Chava and Chava blamed the snake. Each of them sought to pass the buck onto someone else. While they spoke the truth in describing the influence others had exerted over them, each one of them failed to acknowledge their own culpability, much less to express remorse for their choices. The first person to be able to do this was Kayin.

Frankly, I find Adam and Chava are much easier to relate to than Kayin, not just because I have plenty of experience eating things that I shouldn't have eaten, but I've never killed anyone. I relate to them more easily, because, like them, I find it very difficult to admit when I've done something wrong. When someone tells me that I've done wrong, my first instinct is to argue or explain or deflect, or to remind them that they're no saint either. I don't think I'm alone in this. Most of us, I think, are really bad at acknowledging our faults and failures.

When we talk about any problem facing our society, most of us are inclined to focus on what other people are doing that contributes to or causes that problen far more than our own contributions to it. I invite you try an exercise. Take a moment to think of something you believe to be a serious problem facing our society. When was the last time you spoke or wrote about what someone else was doing wrong in regard to that problem? When was the last time you spoke or wrote about your own role in contributing to that problem? I suspect that for the vast majority of us, the last time we spoke about someone else's misdeeds was much more recent than the last time we spoke about our own misdeeds.

Why should that be? After all, we each have very little ability to do anything about other people's misbehavior. Why should be spend all of our time focused on that, instead of focusing on the only people whose behavior we have any control over: ourselves?

I believe that the answer is paradoxically rooted in our desire to be good. We all want to believe we are good. Unfortunately, instead of letting that desire to be good motivate us to improve ourselves, we find it easier to start with the assumption that we already are good. By choosing to believe we are already good, we eliminate the need to improve ourselves, and we then have to blame any evil in our lives or in the world on someone else.

Hillel said אל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך "do not believe in yourself until the day of your death." Believing in our own goodness is dangerous in many ways First it removes the motivation to try to improve (to do teshuvah), then it motivates us to deflect any critisism of ourselves onto others. At its worst, it can allow us to feel justified in mistreating others, who we see as less good than ourselves.

Before Kayin killed his brother, when he found himself disappointed that G-d had accepted Hevel's sacrifice but not his own, G-d spoke to him and encouraged him אם תיטיב שאת "if you will improve, there will be uplift." The Creator didn't tell him to be good תהיה טוב, He told him to improve תיטיב. In other words, it's not about how good or bad we are. It's about whether we are becoming better. Whether or not we are doing teshuvah. Interestingly, שאת, the word translated as "uplift" is from the same root as to bear a burden as in "my sin is too great to bear." In other words, as long as we are improving, then it doesn't matter how bad or good we have been, anything can be born. Instead of worrying about whether we are good, which encourages us to be either complacent if we think we are or despairing if we think we are not, and which leads us to judge other people we see as being less good than ourselves, we should focus on whether or not we are improving.

While he didn't learn this lesson right away, with tragic consequences for his brother and him, it seems that eventually Kayin learned that the key to overcoming sin is improvement (i.e., repentance). When we read his story, instead of focusing on how bad he was, which allows us to feel good about ourselves by contrast, lets focus on how he was able to acknowledge his own sins in the end, and to repent, which ought to inspire us to do the same.