

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

Born in a primordial garden, humanity's raging and conflicting emotions, needs, fears, lusts, pride, love and anger proved incompatible with a fantasy paradise of peace. Even expulsion did not temper our temper. Instead, the enmity between species and sexes was simply extended to siblings. Jealousy reared its devious countenance as brothers competed, argued, and battled. Contesting for Divine favor, they diminished the Divine in each other. Striving for preeminence, ignoring the evil crouching by the door, a murderous blow is struck. Humanity's first homicidal act is brushed off with a dismissive shrug, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The new Torah cycle begins with well-known stories, tales that generations have poured over and yet seem ever fresh: Creation and rest, learning and naming, first love and loss of trust, expulsion that leads to a harsher reality with which we are still floundering. Indeed, it is that piercing candor with which the Torah describes the human character that keeps these stories so timelessly relevant. We sapiens, thinking and talking apes, look quizzically into that mirror and wonder still, "Why are we not our brother and our sister's keeper? Why, nurtured in lush nature, do we foul the land, air and seas? Why, born from love, do we turn bitter with anger? Why, given a feeling and compassionate heart, are we so quick to judge and condemn?"

Adam and Eve named Cain as an expression of their delight, "I have acquired (*kaniti*) a man with God." These first two parents rejoiced that they, like God and in partnership with God, could create life. The name of their second son, Abel (*Hevel*), hints to the fragile and fleeting mortality of life. *Hevel* means breath, a wisp of air that comes and then goes far too soon. Breath is also a metaphor for our *neshamah*, our soul that God blew into us (Genesis 2:7).

The Torah presents a dynamic tension. On one hand we have our physical being, prowess and possessions that we acquire. On the other, our very essence is that sacred breath-soul that was gifted to us. We look into that mirror and we see more than just our physical presence. Look closely and we can also see our higher, nobler ideal; our personal version of *tzelem Elohim*, the reflection of that which is godly within each of us. Look closer still and we can see the reflection of our brother, our sister, our neighbor and the stranger. Their souls are no less precious than ours.

God called out to Cain, “*Ei Hevel achikha, Where is Hevel/Abel your brother*” (Gen 4:9)? Where, too, is your soul? Cain’s cold response haunts us still.

The fractures and divisions in our modern society are but the latest chapters of this story of humankind. A simple scan of history quickly dispels the notion that things are worse now. Arguably, they are much better. But that’s not good enough. As we begin this New Year 5779, it’s another opportunity for us to recreate ourselves. We are not confined to past mistakes. We are not limited to what has been. The myth of Eden comes not to tell us what was. Rather, it comes to tell us what could be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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