

Cain and Abel

October 17, 2020

1. FROM WRJ COMMENTARY

In the Torah, the word *sin* only enters with sibling rivalry and the murder that follows (not with Adam and Eve). Murderous conflicts among brothers runs throughout Genesis as a theme that finally finds its resolution between Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 50). Sisterly conflicts result in births.

In an ancient Sumerian story about the goddess Inanna, a farmer and shepherd compete for her affection; and she chooses to marry the shepherd. Competition between two modes of life may also account for this story of Genesis. The emphasis on brother, which appears seven times in this narrative, may be a literary ploy, a way to say that all humans are *brothers* and thus all murder is *fratricide*.

2. Genesis 4:1-17

[י"ז-בראשית ד':א'](#)

סָפָה לָלֶדֶת אֶת־אָדָם וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־קַיִן וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה: (ב) וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־אָבֶל וַיִּבְרָא לָהֶן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֶחָיו וַיְהִי־הֶבְלִי רֹעֵה צֹאן וְקַיִן הָיָה עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה: (ג) וַיְהִי מִקְצֵי יָמֵי נֹחַתּוֹ: (ה) מִנְחָה לַיהוָה: (ד) וְהֶבְלִי הֵבִיא גַם־הוּא מִפְּכֻרֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמִחֻלְבֵּהֶן וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה אֶל־הֶבְלִי וְאֶל־קַיִן פָּגְיוֹ: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־קַיִן לָמָּה תָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיְהִי וַאֲתָה תִמְשַׁל־נַפְלֹי פְגִיף: (ז) הֲלוֹא אִם־תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב לִפְתַּח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקֶתוּ יְהוָה יוֹ אֶל־הֶבְלִי אֶחָיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל־הֶבְלִי אֶחָיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ: (ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן לְדָמִי אֲחֵיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֶל־קַיִן אֵי הֶבְלִי אֶחָיִךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אֶחָי אָנֹכִי: (י) וַיֹּאמֶר מַה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹי מִזֶּה: (יב) אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה: (יא) וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אָרְצָה מִן־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת־פִּיהָ לְקַחֵת אֶת־דָּמִי אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתְּךָ וַיִּבְרָא לָהֶן אֶת־יְהוָה גְּדוֹל עֹוֹנֵי כִי תִעַבְדוּ אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה לֹא־תִסְפָּה תִת־כֹּחָה לָךְ גַּע וְגַד תִּבְרָא וְהָיָה כָל־מִצְאֵי מִנְשָׂא: (יד) הֵן גִּרְשָׁת אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּמִפְּנֵיךָ אֶסְתָּר וְהִיִּיתִי גַע וְגַד כְּלִמְרָ לֹו יְהוָה לְכוֹן כְּלִי־הַרְג לָנוּ שְׁבַע־עֲתִים יָקָם וַיִּשָּׂם יְהוָה לְקַיִן אוֹת לְבִלְתִּי הַפּוֹת־אֹתוֹ וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ: (טו) וַיִּבְרָא שְׂתוֹ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־מִצְאֵוֹ: (טז) וַיִּצָא קַיִן מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשָּׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־נֹוד קַדְמַת־עֵדֶן: (יז) וַיִּדַע קַיִן אֶת־אֶת־חַוָּה חַוָּה וַיְהִי בָנָה עֵיר וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הָעֵיר קַשֵׁם בְּנוֹ חַוָּה:

[Genesis 4:1-17](#)

- (1) Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gained a male child with the help of the LORD." (2) She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. (3) In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the soil; (4) and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD paid heed to Abel and his offering, (5)

but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. (6) And the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you distressed, And why is your face fallen? (7) Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right Sin couches at the door; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master.” (8) Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. (9) The LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (10) Then He said, “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground! (11) Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. (12) If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.” (13) Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is too great to bear! (14) Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!” (15) The LORD said to him, “I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him. (16) Cain left the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (17) Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he then founded a city, and named the city after his son Enoch.

3. Chasidic comment on 4:3

Our sages tell us that *vayehi* (and it was) denotes bad news, while *vehaya* (and it shall come to pass) denotes good news. The word *vayehi* is composed of two parts, *yehi*, which means "it will come to pass" and the letter *vav*, (the *vav hamehapekh* as it is called) which serves to change the future tense into the past tense. *When one turns one's future into the past, looking only backward and not to the future, that denotes bad news and distress.* On the other hand, in the case of *vehaya*, the verb itself is *haya*, "it was," which is changed to the future tense by the *vav hamehapekh*. *If one takes the past and builds on it for the future, that denotes good news.* **R' Zevi Tabory**

4. [Rashi on Genesis 4:3](#)

OF THE FRUIT OF THE GROUND מפרי האדמה—of the worst fruits (Genesis Rabbah 22:5); there is an Agada which says that it was linseed (Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit 9).

5. [Rashi on Genesis 4:4](#)

AND HE HAD REGARD וַיִּשֶׁע— Fire descended from heaven and consumed his offering.

6. [Ramban on Genesis 4:7:1](#)

If you improve, there is forgiveness. Alternatively, “If you improve you will rise [i.e. above your brother].” And after all, it was only jealousy of him that caused you to be angry in the first place. **But if you do not improve.** Not only will you suffer on account of your brother, but the evil inclination will lead you astray in everything you do. **Its desire is unto you.** It wishes to cling to you, but you can overcome it. In this passage Hashem teaches Kayin that a person can repent whenever he chooses to.

7. [Sforno on Genesis 4:7:3](#)

however, sin is also lying in wait for you if you will ,ואם לא תיטיב לפתח חטאת רובץ, add further intentional sin to the already performed unintentional sin. This is the way of the evil urge, that once you give into it, it will forever be ready to tempt you again.

8. Bibliodrama- Creating the Cain and Abel dialogue

9. [Bereishit Rabbah 22:7](#)

(7) “And Cain spoke to Abel his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field...” (Genesis 4:8) 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.” (ibid.) 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.” Yehudah bar Ami said: they were arguing about the first Eve. R’ Ibo said: the first Eve returned to the dust. Then what were they arguing about? R’ Huna said: an extra twin sister was born with Abel. This one said: 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.”

10. [Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Torah Shebikhtav, Bereshit, Derekh Chayim 8](#)

The lesson we have to derive from all this is that if we do perchance commit a transgression, we should repent immediately and try to repair the spiritual damage such a transgression has inflicted upon us. Failing to do so brings about the great danger that one transgression leads to another, as indicated by the verse we have just quoted. Had Cain heeded G-d's warning to mend his ways (Genesis 4,7) he would not have become the first murderer in history. Having failed once to heed G-d's advice he not only murdered but turned heretic when he responded to G-d's question: "Where is your brother Abel," with the words "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4,8-9), implying that there is neither judge nor justice in this world.

11. **Plaut p. 40-41**

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

*The question implies the answer, for by asking the question of God, Cain acknowledges a higher authority. There is someone to whom we must answer for our deeds.

The theme is human responsibility. God, by the punishment meted out, asserts that Cain is indeed his brother's keeper.

*Cain's question is essentially defiant: "How would I know --or care? Cain, the first product of the post-Eden world is a man who defies God. "The idea of ... rebelliousness, by which Genesis explains the human condition is a fundamental idea of biblical literature and of Israelite religion in general. One might call the Bible a chronicle of human rebellion."

*According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochia, when God asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain answered, "Am I my brother's keeper? YOU are God. You have created me, and it is YOUR task to watch him, not mine. If I ought not to have done what I did, You could have prevented me from doing it." Thus, Cain makes God responsible or at least co-responsible for his own actions.

Note that God does not reply. The question remains unanswered and has remained so despite the questions of succeeding generations:

Why is God silent when people kill each other?

Where does divine power begin and where does it end?

God asks us to account for our deeds. We turn the question back to God and ask:

Am I alone my brother's keeper?

Are YOU not as well?

If my brother's blood cries out against me, does it not cry out against YOU too?