

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Qayin and Hebel

### 1. Introduction

The Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4:1-16), the classic case of man's committing the ultimate iniquity against his fellow man, is a sequel to the account of Adam and Eve's quintessential sin of disobeying G-d's command and suffering the consequences. Striking textual similarities reflect their complementariness.

These narratives are lessons in the ever present and varied temptations that confront man and may divert him from complying with G-d's will; they point toward man's responsibility to maintain the necessary discipline to have dominion over them. Together with the account of creation that informs of man's standing in the world and the immeasurable value of human life, these first chapters of the Torah comprise an integrated unit illustrating the most essential principles in regard to man's situation on earth.

Cain, a farmer, brought an offering to Hashem from the fruit of the earth. Abel, Cain's younger brother, who was a shepherd, also brought an offering to Hashem, but his was from the firstlings of his flock and from the choicest portion thereof. The contrast is clear: Cain did not bring an offering from his first fruit nor from the choicest (those that an individual has a natural desire to maintain for himself), although he was first to bring an offering. In describing Cain's offering, the text does not even specify that he brought "his" fruit or that it was from "his" land, merely that he brought "from the fruit of the earth."

Hashem acknowledged Abel and his gift, but not Cain and his gift. When bringing an offering to G-d, the offering in and of itself is not what counts. As Scripture later teaches, the critical elements are the respect for G-d that the gift demonstrates, the sincerity in expressing gratitude to Him for what He has provided and the devotion to Him that is expressed in

the quality of the gift being presented. Being first, but with a begrudging attitude that indicates unwillingness to truly sacrifice for G-d does not provide Him genuine honor. (Our narrative appears to have no significant connection to the ancient discussion regarding the advantages or superiority of farmer or shepherd.)

How the protagonists perceived the Divine preference is not described and is not important to the story; we may assume fire from heaven consumed Abel's offering, as was the case with other acceptable offerings described in Scripture.

Cain was extremely upset with the situation and his face dropped: וַיַּחַר לְמִנְחָתוֹ מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו (Gen. 4:5). The intended nuances of these phrases may be better understood when viewed together with several other passages in which they are employed. When Jacob's sons heard that Shechem defiled their sister, following the statement that they were saddened it states וַיַּחַר לָהֶם מְאֹד (34:7), undoubtedly connoting anger. When King Saul heard the women praising David more than himself, the description of his reaction included the phrase וַיַּחַר לְשֹׂאיוֹל מְאֹד (1 Sam. 18:8), depicting rage flowing from jealousy. The latter appears to be the meaning in Cain's case. The second phrase, "and his face fell" may possibly indicate sadness, but following rage and jealousy it more likely connotes dejectedness. Clearly, Cain was in a most dangerous state of mind.

Hashem addresses Cain. He begins with a rhetorical question, but one that cuts to the essence: לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָּנֶיךָ (Gen. 4:6), asking why is he reacting as he is. Without receiving a response, Hashem continues, as the explanation is obvious. He summarizes a basic feature of the human state. He informs Cain of the fundamental principle of human free will, that "improving" himself (or "doing good")

brings uplift, that if he does not do so, sin lies ever ready at hand, desirous of connecting with him, but that he has the power to rule over it. This message acknowledges Cain's mood, recognizes the potential for the evil he may feel tempted to commit and warns him; it also gives him practical hope that he can transform his situation, and encourages him to exercise self-restraint. Although Hashem communicates the message Himself, every individual can identify with it, especially in serious situations; it is identical to what human beings typically sense and what human conscience generally advises when confronting the possibility of committing an evil act.

## 2. Transgression

Cain still does not respond and there is no indication of any change in attitude. Hashem's words have fallen on deaf ears. Jealousy of one's brother may be such an overwhelming emotion that it is capable of dulling one's sensitivity to G-d's exhortation and to the possibility of an uplifted future through the renouncement of sin!

In the following verse Cain speaks to "Abel his brother." In a clipped account, that is, without the text providing any words uttered by Cain (perhaps indicating that conversation was merely a pretext), we are told that while they were in the field, Cain rose against "Abel his brother" and killed him. The text emphasizes "brother."\* The most fundamental responsibilities of brotherhood were violated.

G-d did not intervene to save the innocent victim, whose offering He had just accepted and who, indeed, was killed because of it! This detail cannot be ignored; G-d's favorable disposition to Abel was a most critical factor in Cain's act. The lesson is that in His plan for the world, G-d granted true free will to man; just as man can do real good, good that would not exist without the doer's action, he also possesses the power to do real evil. Had G-d intervened to save the innocent victim, it would necessarily obstruct the free will of the perpetrator of the crime. That is how the world is and must be for genuine free will and true good and evil to exist.

It is very sad that Abel was killed – he did not deserve it – but it was the doing of man, who, at his own

discretion, chose to do it. G-d chose to place the world at man's disposal, a great boon to man; it is man's responsibility to make it free of evil. Questions of theodicy and ultimate justice are not explicitly discussed in the Torah. How accounts are balanced in the final analysis, how to apply קל אמונה ואין ענל צדיק וישר הוא ("He is a faithful G-d, without iniquity, righteous and straight is He" Deut. 32:4) is a matter ultimately beyond human comprehension. This is as stated, הַסְתֵּרָה לֵה' אֶלְקֵינוּ ("The concealed matters are to Hashem, our G-d," Deut. 29:28). In the midrash, Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai succinctly described the message of this passage:

It is difficult to state and impossible for the mouth to elaborate. It is like the case of two athletes roughhousing with each other before the king. Had the king desired to separate them he could have done so but he chose not to. One overcame the other and killed him. He [the victim, at the moment of death] shouted, "Who will demand my justice from the king?" Similarly, "the voice of your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the earth" (Gen. 4:11)...his blood that is cast upon the woods and stones [complaining to Me] (*Gen. Rab.* 22:9).

The view that further emerges from various Biblical sources is that G-d assists man in his endeavor to improve the world and on occasion intervenes to rescue the victim from his oppressor. He responds to sincere prayer, recognizes special merit and acts to advance His plans for an individual, a nation or the world, sometimes restricting free will to promote His plans (see Rambam, *MT Laws of Repentance* 6:3-5). But in general the principle of free will abides.

## 3. Accountability

G-d deeply cares and is attentive to all that transpired. As in the case of Adam, He protested Cain's act and called him to task for it. Once again, He initiated the dialogue with a rhetorical question, "Where is Abel your brother?" affording Cain an opportunity to respond truthfully and with contrition. Cain, however, lacks integrity and is evasive. He denies knowledge of his brother's whereabouts and disingenuously asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Having become so debased he lost his sense of G-d's omniscience.

G-d then confronts him directly. He condemns his act and pronounces a curse that will plague him, decreeing that the earth's productivity will be diminished and insufficient for him; he will thus become a wandering itinerant in the land. The notion of an unproductive earth resulting from an intentional and wrongful killing of a human being entered the national consciousness. It was invoked as backdrop for the law that prohibits the acceptance of ransom to spare a murderer's life (Num. 35:32-33) and was incorporated in the rituals associated with the case of the unapprehended murderer (Deut. 21:1-9).

Cain declares to Hashem: *גְּדוֹלַת עֲוֹנִי מְשֹׂאָה* (Gen. 4:13). Rashi, following a midrash, explains Cain's statement to mean, "Is my sin too great for You to bear (or forgive)?" However, perceiving Cain in this context as somewhat sarcastically questioning G-d concerning the details of the Divine traits of patience and forgiveness, diminishing the scope of his transgression, appears midrashic. Ibn Ezra renders *עֲוֹנִי* (generally meaning "my sin") as referring to the consequence of his sin, and translates, "My punishment is too great to bear!" Ramban sees in this statement Cain's acknowledgement of the evil he perpetrated and translates, "My sin is too great to be forgiven!" Either of the latter two explanations appears possible in *peshat*.

Cain then complains about the details of his punishment, that he will be removed from G-d's presence, become a nomad in the land and be a target for retaliation, as someone may kill him to avenge Abel. Hashem, mercifully, responds to his request and declares that if someone kills Cain sevenfold vengeance will be taken and establishes a sign for him to protect him from retaliation. Cain exits Hashem's presence to dwell east of Eden, engages in procreation, builds a city and calls it according to his son's name, Enoch. No more is heard of him in the Torah's narrative.

Before proceeding we must ask: Who are all those people that Cain fears? Where did his wife come from? For whom did he build a city? Obviously, the Torah is not providing a literal account of human origins. The story is set in a primordial context at the beginning of the Torah so readers would appreciate its importance and focus on the universal lessons it

teaches. But as an allegory, it must be understood as superimposed on the reality we know and our present-day life, certain aspects of which are part of the story's background and may intrude into it at some points.

Since Cain was an intentional murderer, why did G-d not implement a form of capital punishment, in consonance with Torah law? (Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:31; Deut. 19:12). Rabbi Nehemiah answers (*Gen. Rab. 22:26*) that Cain is an exception since he had no one to learn from. This teaches an important lesson but surely it was not proffered as a straightforward explanation of our text. Again, the allegory being embedded in a primordial context does not require that all its elements be consistent with that setting at the expense of the message. Ultimately, it is a story that to a degree is to be understood as taking place in the society that we know and live in; all basic details must be assumed as we know them, such as the knowledge of death and the prohibition of murder.

It appears likely that the Torah is teaching that in an earlier time, in accordance with G-d's original hope for how human society would develop, measures less drastic than capital punishment, affording the possibility of repentance and rehabilitation, would take priority. And Cain, if he exclaimed, "My sin is too great to forgive!" did indicate the beginning of repentance by acknowledging the enormity of his wrongdoing and the difficulty of achieving forgiveness. Even if his declaration meant, "My punishment is too great to bear!" it also reflects a small degree of repentance.

It is only after the old order of society resulted in a completely corrupt world and G-d brought the Flood to initiate a new system on earth that He deemed it necessary to command Noah specific laws to protect the sanctity of life. He then declared, "But for your own life-blood, from every man for his brother will I require the life of man. He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:5-6). This formulation constitutes a major innovation. Interestingly, those verses immediately follow the concession to consume living creatures for food (with the proviso not to consume their blood), a departure from the original ideal regulation that prescribed only vegetation for food (Gen. 1:29-30).

The law of capital punishment is on the books and must be followed. However, the fact that the Torah informed its readers of G-d's original approach to the shedder of blood, an approach that was more sympathetic to the individual who was contrite than the present law officially prescribes, may influence society in how it judges and relates to those transgressors such as Cain was. The rabbinical courts of old were well-known for their infrequency of putting a murderer to death (*b. Mak. 7a*).

The same principle answers the question, Did Cain deserve a sign of protection from whoever might kill him, which, in this context, would have been a blood-vengeance retaliation for his deed? Rehabilitation is preferable. Indeed, G-d's protection of Cain may be viewed as a protest against the ancient system of blood-vengeance. History has shown that one retaliatory act often begets another. The Torah legislation regarding *go'el hadam* (a blood redeemer) was a major refinement in a problematic area; it restricted blood-vengeance to unintentional homicide while providing cities of refuge, thus greatly limiting the retaliatory cycle from the start. The Torah insisted on a court system being exclusively in charge of all cases of those accused of intentional murder.

In both the Adam and Cain narratives the core message highlights the presence of human free will, the call for compliance with G-d's wishes and the dire consequences for disobedience. The latter include a

lessening of the earth's productivity and a degree of estrangement from G-d. In each case, G-d calls to the protagonists after the sin with a similar rhetorical question: אַיִךְ ("Where are you?," Gen. 3:9) and אַיִךְ אָהֶיךָ אָהֶיךָ ("Where is Abel your brother?" 4:9), and both give excuses or are evasive. The rhetorical question to Cain מָה עָשִׂיתָ ("What have you done?" 4:10) recalls the question to Eve מָה זֶאת עָשִׂיתָ ("What is this that you have done?" 3:13). G-d's cautioning pronouncement to Cain concerning sin concludes with וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ ("Its longing is for you, but you may rule over it" 4:7), a phrase precisely based on the concluding words of Eve's punishment (3:16).

The curse to Cain begins with אָרוּר אַתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה ("Cursed shall you be from the soil" 4:11), reminiscent of the beginning of the curse of the serpent אָרוּר אַתָּה (3:14). Adam's sin also involved a curse and the soil: אָרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרְךָ ("Cursed be the soil for your sake, in pain shall you eat from it" 3:17). After the sin, Cain dwells east of Eden as did Adam, and both then "knew" their wives and begat progeny.

### Endnote

\* Cain spoke to Abel "his brother"; Cain rose against Abel "his brother"; where is Abel "your brother?"; the voice of the blood of Abel "your brother." The passage contains seven attestations of the stem *ah*, "brother."

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