

PARASHAT BEREISHIT

Religious Sin, Ethical Sin and the Punishment of Exile

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

The first parasha of the Torah conceals within it subjects which are both different and loft, all of which are characterized by their seminality - the beginning of the world and nature, the beginning of man, the beginning of man's confronting of God, the beginning of divine commandment, the beginning of sin etc. The beginning often embodies the essence of something and hence we must analyze the parasha not merely with the regular exegetical methods, but also philosophically.

In this week's shi'ur, I wish to discuss the beginning of sin - the beginning of man's rebellion against his God. In the parasha, two sins are found, committed by the first two generations on earth: Adam's sin in Eden and Kayin's murder of his brother Hevel. It seems that the Torah is attempting to draw a parallel between these two sins. This is expressed through the internal development in the two stories and through similar phraseology used in both narratives. Let us list the central similarities:

a) God turns to the sinner with a rhetorical question. The two questions are connected to the geographical location of the person for whom God is searching:

1) To Adam: "The Lord God called out to the man and said to him: Where are you?" (Bereishit 3:9).

2) To Kayin: "The Lord said to Kayin: Where is your brother Hevel?" (4:9)

b) The initial reaction of the sinner upon hearing the Divine search is to avoid an honest answer. Here too, the Torah records a similar response from both sinners - 'Anochi' ('I' - an unusual, more archaic form, as opposed to 'Ani'):

1) In Adam's words: "He replied: I heard the sound of You in the garden and I was afraid because I (anochi) was naked, so I hid." (3:10).

2) In Kayin's words: "And he said: I do not know, am I (anochi) my brother's keeper?" (4:9).

c) The two sinners mention hiding from God, albeit in different contexts:

1) Adam claims (see above) that he was hiding because of his nakedness.

2) Kayin says: "I must hide from Your face" (4:14).

d) Hashem's rebuke of the sinners opens with a similar expression:

1) God said to Chava: "What is this you have done?!" (3:13).

2) To Kayin, He says: "What have you done?" (4:10).

e) The punishment inflicted upon the sinner is connected to the fertility of the land and to the produce which it produces:

1) The punishment of Adam: "To Adam He said: "By toil shall you eat of it, all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall sprout for you, but your food shall be the grasses of the field" (3: 17-18).

2) The punishment of Kayin: "If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you" (4:12).

f) Beyond the specific punishment, in both places we find a curse which Hashem addresses to each of the sinners.

1) In Eden, God says to the serpent: "More cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts" (3:14).

2) To Kayin, God says: "Therefore you shall be more cursed than the ground" (4:11).

g) The motif of death hanging over the head of the sinner is found in the two stories.

1) Adam: "Until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return" (3:19).

2) Kayin also complains that he is in mortal danger: "...anyone who meets me may kill me" (4:14).

h) Even the framework of the stories are similar.

1) Immediately after Adam's sin and punishment, we read, "And Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived and bore Kayin" (4:1).

2) Immediately after Kayin's sin and punishment, we read, "Kayin knew his wife and she conceived and bore Enoch" (4:17).

i) Moreover, there is a striking, singular expression which appears exclusively in these two stories.

1) When Hashem turns to woman, he says to her: "Yet your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you" (3:16).

2) When He turns to Kayin, after refusing his offering, He uses an identical phrase: "Its desire is towards you, yet you can rule over it" (4:7).

It is true that the context is different in the two stories; however, from a literary perspective, the placement of such an irregular phrase in two consecutive stories clearly creates a link between them, and, as we saw, beyond this specific phrase, the two plots are woven in a very similar fashion.

What is the Torah's purpose in comparing these two sins of the first two generations of Man?

It seems to me that one must answer this question on two different levels. Firstly, it seems that the Torah is trying to compare a religious sin and an ethical sin. In analyzing the exact sin of Adam and his wife in Gan Eden, we are faced with many difficulties. The nature of the sin is not at all clear, because we do not understand what that Tree of Knowledge was. It is difficult to assume that it is a tree which imparts wisdom to man, and that man was devoid of intellectual ability before the eating (see Guide for the Perplexed, I, 2).

Other suggestions in the commentators are speculative and it is therefore difficult to decide between them. It would seem that the Torah is deliberately obscuring the exact particulars of the sin. This is crucial to the story and its message is that man should have refrained from eating from the tree of knowledge simply because of God's command.

This is the basic model of religious commandment and religious sin. There is a certain commandment to which man must acquiesce. Whether or not the reason for the commandment is clear, he has to subject his will to God's command.

In contrast to this religious sin, the sin of Kayin is of a different nature. Kayin has an excellent claim in his defense, which he does not use for some reason. He can say to God that he was never commanded about murder. How should he have known that killing is prohibited?! This is not only a good claim for Kayin, but a question for God

- how is it that He punishes Kayin without prior warning and without revealing to him that murder is prohibited? The answer to both of these questions is clear. There is no need for an explicit divine commandment to prohibit murder and thus Kayin cannot advance this defense. Every person understands that he may not take the life of his fellow. This is a cornerstone of the moral world, and it does not require an external commandment to confirm it and give it validity. The moral, ethical world obligates itself, because it is true.

Indeed, already at the beginning of the Torah we discover that one who transgresses the moral law will have to give an accounting before the creator of heaven and earth. Man is obligated to behave morally because his conscience and natural ethics obligate him to behave this way. If he transgresses this natural law, God will demand an accounting from him.

We can now return to the comparison between the sin of Adam and the sin of Kayin. The sin of Adam is the archetype of religious sin (based on an explicit divine command), whereas the sin of Kayin is the archetype of THE moral sin, MURDER. By comparing these two sins, the Torah emphasizes the innovation of Judaism - ethical sin is equal to a religious sin! Not only one who transgresses religious laws harms his relation with God, but also one who does not treat his fellow with morality and goodness. This does not require a commandment, but nevertheless stands parallel to absolute religious commandment.

(At Sinai, the relationship between the religious and the moral becomes more complicated, until the nation hears moral commandments within the religious revelation. However, this is not the place to enter into this.)

This entire discussion was based on the fact that the similar phrases which appear in both stories hint to us that we should compare the two. However, it is possible that the Torah is hinting to us that we should read the one against the background of the other - not specifically as a parallel, but as a continuance of the process.

Let us first turn to the words of the Ramban at the beginning of Parashat Bereishit. He attempts to understand why the Torah opens with the book of Bereishit and not with Shemot:

And Rabbi Yitzchak gave a reason for this. The Torah began with 'In the beginning,' and the story of creation until the creation of man and that He made man rule over all of His handiwork and He set everything under his feet, and the garden of Eden which is the choicest of places which were created on this earth was set as his place of dwelling, until man's sin expelled him from there, and the people of the generation of

the flood who by their sin were expelled from the world entire, and only the righteous amongst them and his children were saved, and their children's sin caused them to be scattered in places and distributed in lands.... If so, it is suitable when a nation sins exceedingly, that it will lose its place and another nation will come to inherit its land, because this is God's verdict in the land, since the beginning.

According to the Ramban, Bereishit comes to teach us that exile is punishment of sin. This, the Ramban claims, is active in the land of Israel, and thus the land expelled the seven nations. Even the nation of Israel is constantly under the threat of exile should it sin, God forbid.

If we return to the comparison of the two sins in our parasha, we find an additional parallel to which we did not pay attention before. In both places, the result of sin is exile and in both instances, the exile is eastwards. It is worth noting that in both cases the exile is not presented as part of the direct punishment of God, but rather as a necessary consequence of the sin, beyond the specific punishment.

By Adam we read, after the conclusion of the section dealing with the punishment: "So God banished him from the Garden of Eden to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove man out, and placed, east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword..." (3:23-24).

Similarly we read about Kayin (again after the detailing of the punishment): "Kayin left the presence of God and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (4:16).

In light of the Ramban's words, it seems to me that we should pay attention specifically to this last comparison. It is possible that the entire parallel created by the Torah between the two stories is designed to reach this conclusion. The punishment of exile continues from one story to the next. Man was exiled from the garden which was located within Eden (see 2:8: "God planted a garden IN Eden, in the east;" i.e. in the east part of the block of land called Eden, God planted a garden and this is the "garden in Eden"); however, after this exile, he still remained within the general area called Eden. In the next stage, after Kayin too sinned, another exile distances Man even more from the place where the Divine Presence "moves about ... at the breezy time of the day" (3:8). Kayin was exiled beyond the boundaries of Eden entirely. Kayin dwells in "the land of Nod, east of Eden" (4:16).

I would like to suggest that the message hidden in this link, created by the Torah between the two stories, is the continuous process of exile. In its later, "Jewish" version, this message states that there is land in which the Divine Presence dwells and

from which the sinner is driven away automatically. This Holy land cannot suffer a sinner living on it and it expels him.

Accordingly, the Land of Israel is the Garden of Eden; that is to say, it functions according to those same criteria.

Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations which I am casting out before you, defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity and the land spewed out its inhabitants ... for all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. So let not the land spew you out for defiling it as it spewed out the nation that came before you. (Vayikra 18:24-28).

In relation to murder, as well, we hear that the land itself becomes defiled, and this results from the dwelling of the Divine Presence within the place (as in the sin of Kayin):

You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I myself abide, for I, the Lord abide among the Israelite people (Bamidbar 35:33-34).

As we have mentioned, it is possible to relate to the comparison of the sins in two manners. I do not think that these two manners are contradictory; on the contrary, they complement one another. God demands of man both religious perfection and moral perfection as one. And he who wishes to dwell beside the Divine Presence must perfect himself in both areas. A failure within the religious sphere or within the moral sphere expels man from the presence of God.

To receive the parsha shiur every week, write to:
With the message:

Subscribe yhe-parsha

This shiur is provided courtesy of the [Virtual Beit Midrash](#), the premier source of online courses on Torah and Judaism - 14 different courses on all levels, for all backgrounds.

Make Jewish learning part of your week on a regular basis - enroll in the [Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

(c) Yeshivat Har Etzion 1997 All rights reserved to Yeshivat Har Etzion

Yeshivat Har Et
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il
