

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT BEREISHIT

Why Did God Not Accept Kayin's Offering?

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. THE QUESTION

"For a long time the story of Kayin and Hevel has distressed me: Why did God 'accept Hevel and his offering' but not Kayin and his?" So begins an article entitled, "The Concept of Property and Acquisition in the Holy Scriptures" by Hillel Zeitlin hy"d (an important thinker who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto). He continues:

"I have examined the commentaries on this matter and have not found a satisfying explanation. To the early commentators it was clear that Kayin brought unfit produce (see Rashi on 4:3, quoting Bereishit Rabba 22:5). This may be true, but a literal reading of the text – 'And after some time Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to God' – in no way suggests that his offering was of inferior quality".

Let us pause for a moment and consider this last point. It is true that verse 3, quoted by Zeitlin, does not explicitly describe the poor quality of Kayin's offering. But Rashi's explanation is based on a comparison between verse 3, describing Kayin's offering, and verse 4, which describes that of Hevel. Two qualities of Hevel's sacrifice are lacking in that of Kayin: firstly, the double emphasis on the finest quality - Hevel brings "the firstlings of his flock" ("bekhorot tzono") and "the fatlings among them" (Rav Sa'adia Gaon's understanding of the term "u-mechelvehen") - and secondly, the fact that Hevel brings the finest of "HIS flock," emphasizing the personal aspect of his sacrifice.

Still, the conclusion drawn by the Midrash that Kayin brought a sacrifice of inferior quality is not necessarily inevitable. An accurate examination of the verses tells us only that Kayin did not invest the same effort in his offering as Hevel did; he simply brought what he had on hand. The Midrash and Rashi are therefore perhaps exercising some liberty in their interpretation, which relies solely on this literal comparison.

Moreover, we may even comment in Kayin's favor that he brings his offering first. Should this fact not balance somewhat the qualitative advantage of Hevel's offering? This suggestion is raised by R. Avraham Sava (one of the Spanish exiles) in his commentary "Tzror Ha-Mor:"

"It appears that Hevel followed his brother's example. Since Kayin had brought an offering, he did too – it was not his own initiative".

This troublesome question concerns more than just one difficult aspect of the story, or an understanding of one of its verses. The question concerns the principal event which is being narrated: fratricide. The acceptance of Hevel's offering and the simultaneous rejection of that of Kayin gives rise to Kayin's motive for murder. His terrible psychological reaction expresses anger against God and jealousy of his brother. (According to Midrash Tanchuma [Bereishit 9], following Hevel's murder when God asks, 'Where is Hevel your brother?' Kayin explicitly responds, "...It is You who killed him ... for had You accepted my offering as You did his, I would not have been jealous of him.") God's words of appeasement to him (4:6-7) cannot find their way into his stormy and angry heart, and he does not answer God. It appears that the rebuke and warning not only fail to achieve their purpose, but by Kayin's unfortunate choice they become an impetus in his decision to kill his brother.

II. SOME PRINCIPLES IN SEEKING AN EXPLANATION

It is clear from the narrative that Kayin's action is not a sudden and unexpected sinful outburst, but rather the final deterioration in a process that began long before. This becomes apparent from God's words of rebuke and support to him in verse 7. Although the details are unknown to us, they indicate that there is some sin relating to Kayin that goes back to the beginning of the story, and that there is some possibility that Kayin will "improve." Is the Torah trying to hide Kayin's first sin, introducing us straight into the middle of the story, at the point of the Divine reaction to his sin expressed in the rejection of Kayin's offering? This does not seem to be the case, for then the story becomes rather disjointed and opaque.

It would seem, then, that the Torah is explaining – or at least hinting at – the reason for the criticism of Kayin. The key must lie somewhere between verses 1-4 of chapter 4, because verse 5 already contains the result of his sin: "And Kayin and his offering God did not accept, and Kayin was very angry..." The continuation of the story is also significant for a clarification of the mystery: God's words to Kayin in verse 7 not only confirm the existence of his earlier sin (as explained above), but perhaps also contain some hint of the

actual nature of the sin. The second half of the story (verses 9-16), dealing with his punishment, may be meant to teach us about the root of his sin.

III. AN EXAMINATION OF VERSES 1-5

Let us first examine verses 1-5 and see what we may discover from them. The description of the bringing of the offerings by the two brothers in verses 3-4 has already been discussed, and we concluded that this account does not provide sufficient reason for the rejection of Kayin's offering. The description of the birth of the brothers and their names, in verses 1-2, likewise fails to provide us with a reason – for surely their birth and their names cannot burden one of them with moral culpability. Thus, by a process of elimination, we are left only with the single characteristic of each brother as described in the text (4:2): "And Hevel was a keeper of sheep, and Kayin was a tiller of the ground." The choice of a profession, and the lifestyle which it entails, is made when a person reaches maturity, and it teaches us something about his moral tendencies. And thus we find here the key to the mystery of our story.

Close scrutiny of verses 1-5 confirms this. These verses contain, in quick succession, four symmetrical contrasts between the two brothers. Let us study these and their structure:

...and she gave birth to Kayin, and she said: "I have acquired a man from God".
vs.

And again she gave birth, to his brother Hevel.

And Hevel was a keeper of sheep
vs.

and Kayin was a tiller of the ground.

And it happened after some days that Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to God
vs.

And Hevel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and from the fatlings among them.

And God accepted Hevel and his offering
vs.

but Kayin and his offering He did not accept

)and Kayin was very angry and his face fell.(

The parallel contrast between the brothers is expressed in four areas: a. their birth and names, b. their professions, c. their offerings, and d. the Divine reaction to these offerings.

The most noticeable – and significant – phenomenon here is the way in which the brothers are presented in alternating order: a. Kayin-Hevel, b. Hevel-Kayin, c. Kayin-Hevel, d. Hevel-Kayin.

Is this chiasm simply an artistic device – a stylistic decoration, or does it also bear some significance with regard to the content and message of the story?

It seems that the Torah seeks to emphasize that in each area in which they are compared, one brother has an advantage over the other, and the Torah lists that brother first in that area. This structure hints at the comparison and inner connection between areas a. and c., in which Kayin has the advantage, and areas b. and d. where Hevel has the advantage. Let us explain this in more detail.

AREA A:

The emphasis on the fact that Kayin is the firstborn of Adam and Chava is obvious. Hevel's secondary status in this regard finds expression in several ways:

.1The introduction to Kayin's birth, "And Adam knew Chava his wife and she conceived," is lacking with regard to Hevel.

.2Before stating the fact of Hevel's birth, the Torah adds "again" (in Hebrew: va-tasaf), hinting at the fact that Hevel's birth was an "addition" (in Hebrew: tosefet) to Kayin's birth - an event of secosignificance.

.3The baby is called "... his brother, Hevel" – implying that his own name is not as important as the fact of his being the brother of the firstborn.

.4In contrast to the reason supplied by the mother for the choice of Kayin's name, no reason is given for the choice of Hevel's name.

.5The literal meaning of the two names chosen also hints at Kayin's advantage over Hevel.

All of these points emphasize the preferential status of Kayin, the firstborn, in contrast with the inferior status of Hevel, "his brother".

AREA B:

"And Hevel was a keeper of sheep, and Kayin was a tiller of the ground." This parallel – "And Hevel was... and Kayin was..." hints at the disparity between these two occupations. They involve opposite lifestyles: the tiller of the ground remains close to the ground and is enslaved to it; he lives in a house. The keeper of sheep wanders with his flock over great distances; he lives in a tent. The tiller of the ground is nourished by the produce and fruit of the ground; the keeper of sheep enjoys the meat and wool of his sheep.

But the contrast between them is also socio-historical in nature: human society in ancient times was divided between landed tribes (or nations which worked the earth) and wandering tribes (or nations which made their living from shepherding). There was constant tension between them, arising not only from the obvious conflict of interests but also from the conflict of mentalities between these two lifestyles. All these differences – in lifestyle, social culture and economic interests – already find expression in the division between these first two brothers, Kayin and Hevel.

What, then, is the significance of Hevel's advantage in this area? Is this because this younger son was the first to choose his occupation? This does not seem likely. Immediately prior to this, the time sequence is quite explicit: "And she gave birth... and AGAIN she gave birth...", whereas here there is no mention made of any specific order in which the brothers chose their occupations. On the contrary, it appears that areas a. and b. are connected with a causal link: Kayin, because he is the elder, is given land and becomes a tiller of the ground. Hevel, since he is the younger, becomes a shepherd. (Similar causal links also exist between areas b. and c. and areas c. and d.)

Why, then, is Hevel mentioned first? Let us leave this question for later.

AREA C:

Kayin brings some of the fruit of the ground, which he has been tilling, while Hevel brings some of his sheep, since he is a shepherd. We had already discussed the difference in

quality between their respective offerings. But if the juxtaposition here hints at the superiority of Hevel's offering, why is Kayin mentioned first?

The answer is that Kayin brought his offering first. His advantage is in the dimension of time. This is hinted at in the words, "And Hevel brought, ALSO HE." Hence, area c. resembles area a. not only in that Kayin is mentioned first, but also because of the common reason for this: his being first chronologically. Earlier we read, "And AGAIN she gave birth"; here we read, "and Hevel brought ALSO HE".

Here we find the solution to the paradox presented by Kayin's offering coming first chronologically while Hevel's offering is qualitatively better: Kayin brings his offering first because he is the firstborn. The right of the firstborn is due to him not only in his status in the family (including both the choice of profession and his inheritance of the land), but also in the area of the annual religious ceremony – "And it happened at the end of some days..." His younger brother is secondary to him – "also he," just as his birth was secondary in importance to that of Kayin.

AREA D:

"And God accepted Hevel and his offering, but Kayin and his offering He did not accept." The intention here behind mentioning Hevel first is obvious: God prefers Hevel and his offering; this implies that God ignores Kayin and his offering, and hence we deduce that they are not desired by God. The contrasting structure – "And He accepted... He did not accept" creates a dramatic and surprising climax, concluding the four juxtapositions between the brothers. From here on the narrative focuses on a discussion of Kayin's reaction to his "deprivation" and God's words of appeasement and rebuke to him.

Having noted that area c. is parallel to area a., echoing and propagating Kayin's precedence owing to his status as eldest, we may assume that area d. - parallel to area b. in that both mention Hevel first - will likewise continue the theme of b. In other words, God accepted Hevel, the younger and secondary son BECAUSE he was a shepherd, but did not accept Kayin BECAUSE he was a tiller of the ground. For this very reason, the Torah mentioned Hevel first in area b: because a shepherd is preferable, spiritually and morally, and his lifestyle is more acceptable to God, while the lifestyle of the tiller of the ground is fundamentally flawed.

Thus, areas a. and c. highlighted the SOCIAL superiority of the firstborn and his rights of preference concerning those matters related to his firstborn status, while b. and d. reveal the SPIRITUAL superiority of the younger – chosen – brother, owing to his positive qualities and characteristics. God is not "impressed" by the firstborn, and the preferential

treatment that Kayin receives as the firstborn from his parents (and society), as well as his personal economic and cultural power as expressed in his name and his choice to be a "tiller of the ground" – someone who owns land and develops human civilization – likewise do not influence God's view of him. Even Kayin's right to be the first participant in the religious ceremony (also an expression of social superiority) is not regarded by God as important.

God chooses specifically the younger brother, the weaker and secondary, who enjoys neither social respect nor real estate power but rather runs his life modestly and with a genuine seeking of God. And indeed, this superiority of Hevel is even hinted at in the two areas in which Kayin is mentioned first. In area a., Hevel's name implies modesty and self-deprecation, almost the direct opposite of the perspective implied by Kayin's name. In area c., his personal effort is emphasized when describing the offering he brings to God, appearing to cancel out the pride of Kayin's place as the first of those bringing offerings owing to his status as firstborn.

IV. "GROUND" (ADAMA) AS A THEME IN THE STORY

The word "ground" (adama) appears six times during the course of the story, and once the word "field" (sadeh) is used instead (referring to the specific land, owned and worked by Kayin, where the murder takes place). Let us look at the list of these instances and then look at their various contexts:

)*verse 2) And Hevel was a keeper of sheep, and Kayin was a TILLER OF THE GROUND.

(3) **And Kayin brought of THE FRUIT OF THE GROUND an offering to God.

(8) ***And Kayin talked with Hevel his brother, and it happened when they were IN THE FIELD, that Kayin arose upon Hevel his brother and killed him.

(10) ***The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me FROM THE GROUND.

(11) **And now, you are cursed FROM THE GROUND which has opened its mouth to accept your brother's blood from your hand.

(12) *When YOU TILL THE GROUND it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a wanderer and a vagabond on the earth.

(14) You have driven me out today FROM UPON THE GROUND and I shall be hidden from Your face, and I shall be a wanderer and a vagabond on the earth.

The "ground" is not merely Kayin's place of work and the source of his income of his offering to God. It is also the scene of the murder. (Verse 8 fails to reveal what it is that Kayin says to Hevel; the ancient Targumim explain that Kayin said, "Let us go out to the field" [see Targum Yonatan and Ramban]. Thus Kayin purposefully drew his brother out "to the field" in order to kill him there).

The first half of the story (verses 1-8) makes mention of the word "ground" three times, in its description of Kayin's connection with the ground (his tilling of it, his use of its fruits as an offering, and his murder of Hevel upon it). The next three instances of the word in the second half of the story (verses 9-16), in God's words to Kayin, parallel the first three in the inverse order:

4-3 In light of the murder of Hevel in the field (it also appears that his blood and corpse were buried there), God says to Kayin, "Your brother's blood calls to Me from the ground." In other words, you cannot hide your deed; "the ground" will not cooperate in this venture.

5-2 In the past, the ground offered Kayin its fruits (compare further on, verse 12: "it will no longer yield its strength to you"), and Kayin made use of them for the purpose of bringing an offering to God. "Offering" (mincha) is used interchangeably in the Torah with "blessing" (berakha) (compare Bereishit 33:10-11). Now, in light of the murder, the ground has "opened its mouth TO ACCEPT (TAKE) your brother's blood from your hand." The ground will henceforth no longer be a source of Divine gifts and blessing; it will now become the source of Kayin's curse: "You are cursed FROM THE GROUND." (See Seforno on verse 11 for a similar view of the parallel.)

6-1 Kayin, who chose to be a "tiller of the ground," will now be forced to cut himself off from it. And the ground will no longer respond to his working of it: "When YOU TILL THE GROUND it will no longer yield its strength to you." As a result, "You will be a wanderer and a vagabond upon the earth" – Kayin will be forced to adapt himself to the lifestyle of Hevel who, as a shepherd, would wander upon the earth in search of pasture for his flocks.

In the seventh – and final - mention of the word, we hear from Kayin himself the significance of his punishment: "Behold, You have driven me out today from upon the ground, and I shall be hidden from Your face".

Thus we learn that the tilling of the ground and the relationship between man and ground are at the heart of the story, and they join all its stages. Both the sin and its punishment are connected with this cultivated ground. The story comes to teach us that the ground cannot tolerate a person who uses it for a negative purpose, and it vomits him out from upon it. This is the relationship that God has set out since the beginning of days to exist between man and ground.

V. "SIN CROUCHES AT THE DOOR"

It is difficult to divorce the discussion of this concise expression from a comprehensive explanation of all that God tells Kayin, and we have no intention here of dealing with verse 7, which is particularly obscure and requires a broad framework for its interpretation. Nevertheless, let us try to illuminate just one word here: "petach" (door.)

The word "petach," in the biblical context, generally appears in the construct form: "the door of the ark" (Bereishit 6:16), "the door of the tent" (18:1), "the door of the house" (19:11), etc. Even where the actual construct form is absent, a glance at the context reveals that the noun to which "door" is appended is not far away: "door" means the door of something. In very few instances does the word appear alone without the context indicating what the door belongs to. One such example is this verse, and several commentaries have offered different opinions as to what this "door" refers to (the "door of the grave", the door of the house, the opening of the mouth, and others) but none represents a satisfying answer.

In his book "Our Forefathers' Labor, or: Hebrew Agriculture in the Holy Scriptures" (Tel Aviv 1949), Dr. M. Zagorodsky writes (chapter 2, "The Ground," subpar. "Layers of the Ground," p. 37:)

"The 'opening' (petach) is the uppermost level which is loosened by means of the plough. Thus in Bereishit 4:7, 'Sin crouches at the door' means that the sin is crouching in the field. Likewise Yishayahu 3:26, 'Her doors shall lament and mourn' refers to the fields. Shir Ha-Shirim 7:14 reads, 'upon our doors are all types of fruits' – here again the reference is to the fields. Hence the name 'pituach' (opening) for the ploughing of the uppermost layer, as in Yishayahu 28:24, 'Open and harrow his ground'.

"In this list of verses, the word 'petach' is not used to imply something else of which it is the opening; the opening (door) stands alone, and therefore it refers to a ploughed field".

If this interpretation of the word "petach" applies to our verse, then God's intention may be to teach and warn of the moral danger that attends the "petach" of a tiller of the ground. This danger is the "sin" that crouches in the field. The degree of its realization in the social

reality depends to the degree to which the tiller of the ground rules over this qualitative "sin" which accompanies his tilling like a shadow.

VI. THE DISADVANTAGE OF LABOR ON THE GROUND

What is this danger, this moral disadvantage, related to the working of the ground to which our story hints? Two personalities both felt, in light of our narrative, that the biblical attitude towards labor on the land is ambivalent, while its attitude to shepherding is positive. One is Hillel Zeitlin, already quoted at the start; the other, preceding him, is Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch in his commentary to this biblical text. Their commentaries are similar in many ways, but each of them has a slightly different perspective. Rav Hirsch says (with some omissions:(

"Agriculture demands all a person's physical strength... he needs to devote his whole life to his bodily existence. The concept of 'Kayin,' i.e. 'kanah' (acquisition) – self-recognition and the pride associated with acquiring – are most evident in the farmer. By the sweat of his brow he has made his ground bear fruit, and it becomes something of ultimate value for him – it becomes part of his personality, he holds onto it and settles... The farmer is a slave to his field, and the field draws him towards it. Once he has placed the yoke of pursuit of acquisition upon his neck, his spirit also becomes subservient... This leads to slavery... Moreover, he will easily be brought to admiration of the forces of nature, upon whose influences the success of his field depends. Faith in God and in the superiority of man was first lost among the agricultural nations. It was there that idol worship first developed.

"In contrast, the life of the shepherd is most elevated. He is concerned principally with living things. His care of them arouses within him humane feelings and sympathy for suffering. His acquisitions are portable. The flock needs the shepherd's care, but their existence is not in his hands. Thus, the shepherd is protected from the danger of overestimating his own value and that of his property. His profession does not occupy all his strength and efforts. His spirit is invested in his labor to a lesser degree, and remains open to Godly and humane values. For this reason our forefathers were shepherds, and Moshe and David also shepherded flocks. In contrast we find, 'For every shepherd is an abomination to Egypt' (Bereishit 46:34). All the problems associated with agriculture which we mentioned above existed in Egypt. Egyptian culture was based on agriculture. This found expression in paganism on one hand and enslavement of people on the other. Faith in God, human freedom and the Divine image existed only in the hearts of our shepherd forefathers"...

Zeitlin states as follows (also with some omissions:(

"The Holy Scriptures almost always prefer a shepherd to a tiller of the soil. Kayin was a tiller of soil while Hevel was a shepherd; Hevel's offering is accepted while Kayin's is not. We are told that Noah was a 'man of the ground,' obviously not in his favor, since we read later that 'He drank from the wine and became inebriated and he was uncovered inside his tent.' The forefathers were shepherds; Yaakov was a 'dweller in tents' while Esav was a 'man of the field.' Yaakov's sons were shepherds; 'Moshe kept the flock...' (Shemot 3:1); David tended his father's flock. Mishlei speaks in favor of shepherding... (see 27:23-27); Amos was one of the herdsmen of Tekoa (Amos 1:1); Yonadav ben Rekhev commanded his sons... (see Yirmiyahu 35:6-7.)

"But why does the Torah prefer shepherds to tillers of the ground? Did God not place Adam in Gan Eden in order 'to work it and to guard it?' Is it not true that God 'did not create it (the world) a wasteland' (Yishayahu 45:18?)

"The key to understanding this lies... in the socio-moral reasons... Working the land involves the concept of private ownership – acquisition – by the farmer, and the Holy Scriptures do not recognize a private individual's rights over land, except under the known conditions and limitations".

Both Rav Hirsch and Zeitlin sensed the inherent problem in what they were saying. In the words of Rav Hirsch,

"Man's natural labor was agriculture. Man needed to 'work the land' in order to provide himself with food for sustenance... This is also Israel's destiny, according to the Torah".

But most of the examples brought by both commentators of great men who were shepherds are taken from the period preceding Israel's settlement of the land. Both offer a similar explanation for this. Rav Hirsch's response is as follows:

"The Torah anticipates the chronic dangers inherent in agriculture and prescribes the remedy, legislating against deification of property. Shabbat and shemitta (the sabbatical year) forever testify that the earth belongs to God, and man is His servant. The agricultural laws, such as the prohibitions of kil'ayim (mixing seeds) and orla (fruit of young trees) on one hand and the positive injunctions of leket, shikecha and pe'ah (leftover produce for the poor) on the other, remind man of God's presence, cautioning him to maintain brotherly

and neighborly love. Thus the Torah solves the moral problem of agriculture; in this way a society of God-fearing farmers is created, all sharing brotherly love and equality. But outside of the Torah framework a danger is presented to faith in God and to the freedom and equality of all men”.

)Zeitlin in this regard chooses to highlight the mitzvot of Yovel, the Jubilee year(.

According to both of these commentators, Kayin is therefore the representative and founder of the culture of tillers of the earth, before this culture became sweetened and refined by the mitzvot of the Torah. For this reason, Kayin's very choice of this negative lifestyle – as well as its influence on his character – are what caused God not to accept his offering, and they are the root of the deterioration to the point of fratricide.

As an aside to the words of the above commentators, let us add the following two points of clarification.

We have already noted above that most of the examples of great personalities who were also shepherds lived prior to the settlement in the land. Indeed, our forefathers – starting from Avraham and until his descendants who left Egypt – were shepherds. This has significance with regard to the question we have dealt with. The laws of the Torah are not the only means designated to guard the nation of Israel dwelling in its land from the moral disintegration characterizing a farming culture of self-satisfaction and pleasure. Even the historical declaration of remembrance concerning the infrastructure of our existence as a nation (*mikra bikkurim*) is meant to remind us continually that we are descendants of a tribe of nomadic farmers ("Arami oved avi" - "My father was a wandering Aramean") who, by God's grace, became a nation with an inheritance, working its land. This declaration was meant to protect Israel from this very same deterioration.

From God's words to Kayin, we may intuit what was to be revealed later on in the Torah's laws to a nation working the land: that involvement in working the ground does not necessarily have to involve sin. Sin does indeed "crouch at the door" – at the ploughed field of the tiller of the soil – but nevertheless "you shall rule over it." Man's free choice and moral freedom afford him the possibility of being an upright worker of the soil with a deep religious consciousness. The mitzva of bringing the first fruits, including the declaration made by the person who brings them (*Devarim 26:1-11*) is the precise counterweight to Kayin's sin; it is made wholeheartedly by the bearer of the fruits and is accepted by God.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(