

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BEREISHIT

Raising Cain and Hevel

By Rav Ezra Bick

A.

The story of Cain and Hevel is one that is easily skipped over lightly when we think of the great themes of the early parshiot of the Torah. It is obvious to most of us that we should be searching for the "moral of the story" when considering these parshiot. The first part of Bereishit is first and foremost about God's relationship to the natural world as Creator, an obviously important point for the foundations of religious belief. The story of Man in the Garden of Eden is about obedience and sin, about the relationship of man and woman, about innocence and knowledge, and we are naturally led to ponder its significance. Next week's parasha, describing two societies and their sins and punishments, is crucial to understanding human society; and the figure of Noach, in all its complexities, serves as a launching point for understanding how the righteous man relates to a sinful world. The story of Cain and Hevel, though, poses what seems to be no particular lesson. I think that most of us quickly summarize it in our minds as about murder – with the moral being that murder is bad. Since this does not appear to a particularly "deep" moral, we quickly continue on to the next parasha.

But since this is basically the third story in the Torah, such a cursory treatment of this parasha is clearly unjustified. Our task, then, is to determine the real significance of this story and why it is here. To do this, we first have to understand the character of the "hero," Cain.

B.

Our first inclination is to catalogue Cain as a villain. After all, he is a murderer, and is cursed by God. A corollary conclusion is that Hevel must be a saint. The latter conclusion is basically based on an aesthetic desire for balance, especially in a story with two brothers (remember Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaacov and Eisav), but is also supported by the fact that God accepts his sacrifice while refusing that of Cain .

This position, at least the first half of it, is forwarded by Rashi (based on midrashim), who states that Cain's offering was inferior in quality, indicating his irreligiosity (4,3), and that he deliberately set out to kill Hevel (4,8). Furthermore, Rashi interprets 4,15 to mean that God decreed that Cain would be killed after seven generations as a PUNISHMENT (vengeance, nekama, in the language of the verse) for murder. By this, I believe Rashi is answering the question how could a tale of murder not end with the proper Divine punishment – death. Exile is not the appropriate punishment, especially if the main moral of the story is that murder is a sin which will not go unpunished. Rashi's answer is that Cain indeed suffers the death penalty, even if it is delayed.

However, the simple order of the verses indicates that the actual punishment for Cain's crime is exile and wandering (4,11-12). Only after Cain complains that this will leave him open to being killed does God give him a mark to protect him, adding that "kol horeg Cain shivatayim yukam" (4,15). Even if this does predict that Cain will be killed (which is NOT the simple reading of the verse), it is not necessarily projected as the punishment for the crime.

But the real difficulty with the position taken by Rashi is in the hints that the Torah gives us concerning the personality of Cain and Hevel.

.1Adam was intimate with Chava his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have made ("kaniti") a man with God".

.2And she continued to give birth to his brother, to Hevel; and Hevel was a shepherd, while Cain worked with the land.

.3After many days, Cain brought an offering to God from the fruit of the land.

.4And Hevel, he also brought from the first-born of his sheep and from their fat – and God turned to Hevel and to his offering,

.5But did not turn to Cain and to his offering; and Cain was very troubled and his face fell. (4,1-5.)

Our first point of interest is the Torah's description of the births of the two brothers. The birth of Cain is described as a momentous occasion, giving rise to Chava's exclamation, "I have made a man with God." While this is obviously due to the fact that he is the first-born, not only to his happy parents, but to human history, it stands in stark contrast to the birth of his brother, whose birth is described as an afterthought, and who does not even merit an explanation of his name. Compare this with other cases of the births of brothers in the Torah, such as Eisav and Yaacov (Bereishit 25,25-26), or the list of births of Yaacov's wife Leah (29,32-35), where each son is accorded an explanation for his name. It is safe to say that a character whose name is not explained in the Torah, especially when juxtaposed next to one whose name is explained, is a non-important character. If Hevel is the first individual to bring a proper sacrifice to God – in effect, the man who invented formal religion – we would expect more.

The comparison between the births and the names merely highlights the extremely problematic nature of Hevel's name. "Hevel" means "nothing, vanity, wind, vapor." Of the nearly sixty appearances of this word in Tanakh, not even one is in a positive context. The word is always used to describe something of no consequence, mere wind, vanity, or foolishness. The well-known repeated use of the word in Kohelet are typical of Iyov and Tehillim as well. Since names are descriptive in Tanakh, especially for a symbolic character, this would seem to indicate that we should not be viewing Hevel as a paradigm of virtue or human accomplishment. In fact, Cain's name could well be translated as "accomplishment," while Hevel's name means the opposite.

Now one could argue that this does not indicate anything about the Torah's attitude towards Cain and Hevel, but only about the attitude of their parents, who were excited about the birth of the first and more or less ignored the second. This "psychological" reading of the parasha would result in a picture of Cain as the favored first son, and Hevel as the ignored, belittled brother. Perhaps Chava was surprised to discover that she was bearing a second child (assuming that they were twins, as would appear from the fact that a second pregnancy is not mentioned), and perhaps she assumed that a second child was unnecessary, an

insignificant addition – in other words, "hevel." This perception of the psychological difficulties of Cain and Hevel could then be used to understand the strained relationship between them, and Hevel's "overachieving" would be seen as an attempt to gain his parent's – and perhaps God's – approval.

This would be an interesting approach, but I have a basic methodological problem with it. If it is correct, then the moral of the story will revolve around the problems of parenting, rather than the sin of murder. I have nothing against using psychological insights to understand a parasha in the Torah, but in this case, the psychological insights, the central point of the story, is barely hinted at in the text. Now that I find to be objectionable. It does not appear to me to be logical to assume that the central message of a given parasha is buried in hints and inferences.

Perhaps these insights can help us understand how these two individuals related to themselves and each other, but I do not think that they answer our question of the relative evaluation of Cain and Hevel.

But there is also a further textual indication about the personalities of Cain and Hevel, and that is in the actual bringing of the offerings (verses 3 & 4). The initiative to bring an offering to God is Cain's. The verse stresses that "Hevel, he too, brought an offering." Hevel is copying Cain, following along in the initiative of his older brother. Just as his birth appears an afterthought to that of Cain, so too his offering to God is apparently following the footsteps of Cain. Cain is the originator of the idea of sacrifice; he was the first to understand that if your work succeeds, it is only because God has blessed it and therefore one must show that one understands from where all blessing comes by giving a portion to the true owner and creator of all. Hevel merely imitates his brother. Cain is an "ish" (verse 1), an individual, a unique personality; Hevel is a "gam hu" (verse 4), an "also he" person. He is a "nochshlepper" – I wish I knew how to say that in English! But I hope those of you who are not familiar with the word can guess its meaning – an "also-shlepper-along".

C.

I think it is safe to say that Cain was the more serious individual, more creative and more substantive. This immediately brings us to the question why his offering was not accepted by God, while that of his unoriginal brother was.

The answer to this question is found in verse 7. Unfortunately, verse 7 is among the most difficult in the Torah. It appears to be deliberately cryptic, and is therefore impossible to translate neutrally; that is, the translation depends on which among the many available interpretations is adopted.

For the time being, I propose to skip this question and move on to the murder itself. My attempt to somehow rehabilitate the character of Cain will surely founder on the incontrovertible fact that he was a murderer, who killed his only brother (as well as 25% of the world's population.)

Cain said to Hevel his brother; and while they were in the field, Cain rose up on Hevel his brother, and killed him. (4,8)

The first half of the verse is obviously incomplete. It is not only that we would want to know what Cain said, while the verse does not inform us. Grammatically, the verb "amar" (said) requires a direct object, unlike the verb "dibeir" (spoke) which could be used without one. It is possible to describe someone as "speaking," without specifying what he said; but it is technically incomplete to say of someone that he is "saying," without adding an object. All commentators and the midrashim suggest different contents for what Cain said, but it seems to me that the Torah's omission here indicates that it is not important to know what specifically what was said, but only that speech preceded the act of violence. What this means is that Cain did not approach Hevel with the intention of killing him. Apparently, words led to an argument, which eventually led to Hevel being killed. This is what is known legally as manslaughter rather than premeditated murder.

This impression is reinforced by the repeated reference to Hevel as "Hevel his brother." If this had appeared only in reference to the murder itself, I would be inclined to interpret it ironically, as emphasizing the enormity of the crime. But as it appears not in the description of the murder itself, but in the previous two phrases - "saying" and "rising up" - it seems to me to indicate the opposite; namely, that at every stage up to the actual murder, Cain still related to Hevel as a brother. Following this lead, I remind you of the midrash which describes how Cain did not know how to kill. (The midrash does not claim that he did not want to kill Hevel, only that he did not know how). Expanding this somewhat, perhaps Cain did not even realize that he was killing Hevel until it was too late. One must remember that no one had even died yet in human history. Cain "rose up against Hevel," and suddenly, he had killed him .

This would explain his punishment - which is akin to "galut," exile, the punishment in the Torah for inadvertent manslaughter rather than for murder. Of course there is no city of refuge to which Cain can be sent, but basically his lot is similar to the accidental murderer of the Torah, who is uprooted from his home and sent away.

So, what is the picture that emerges? Cain is the more talented and religiously more sophisticated elder son, who is haunted by the success of his younger brother, and quarrels with him, until, either accidentally or at least without premeditation, kills him. Have I managed to rescue the reputation of Cain? Is he to be considered a "tzaddik?" Of course not! But neither is he to be considered a symbol of a "rasha," of evil personified. He should not be added to the list of great villains in the Torah, such as Nimrod, Eisav, or Pharo. Rather, he is an example of a tragic figure.

D .

If this story is not about murder and its deserved punishment, then what is it about? I think the answer is that it is about brotherhood, jealousy, competition, and the roots of strife. The message may appear extremely pessimistic and depressing, but the Torah is telling us that strife, and even murder, are rooted deeply in human nature. To put it another way, human strife is primordial, a direct result of the fact that there are at least two human beings. The very first two humans quarreled, and the result was murder. They quarreled not because they were somehow a danger to each other, but because they were in competition - one was a farmer and one a shepherd. Automatically, instead of cooperating, they entered different occupations and competed - economically and eventually religiously. For this message to be understood, for us to realize that the root of great evils does not necessarily lie in an evil personality and is not the result of some terrible decadence from a naturally pure state, it is

important to realize that Cain was a positive character, caught up in natural human impulses and emotions. The root of what happened here is not the corrupt nature of Cain, but the human family and human society. Man, in his desire to succeed and progress, is led to compete, and from this the road to strife is very short. Had we met the two brothers before the terrible end, we may well have sympathized more with Cain, rather than with his "worthless (hevel) brother. But in the end, that makes no difference, because fine qualities are no guarantee against an upsurge of emotions .

There is a recurring theme in some western philosophies that the natural state of man is simple morality, and evil results from some decadent process of progress and social complexity. The Torah is warning us of the opposite. There is nothing particularly pure in the noble savage, in primitive social structures. The seeds of evil are found in the simplest social structure of all, a simple family. Morality is not natural, instincts should not be trusted, and "just being yourself" is a recipe for trouble. On the contrary, morality is the product of a highly structured and difficult course of training and restraint - namely, the Torah. Human history begins in competition leading to strife and murder; it takes a great effort on the part of an individual, and all of history on the part of mankind, to reach a state of cooperation, with true moral peace and genuine brotherhood.

E.

Now to take a stab at God's response to Cain's despair at not being favored when bringing his offering .

First, it is crucial to notice that God precedes his response with an exclamation of surprise - "Why are you disturbed and why has your face fallen?" This would appear to be a strange question - after all, Cain has just had his offering to God rejected! Is that not a good enough reason to be disturbed? The answer is that Cain is not disturbed by the nature of his relationship with God, but by his relative standing in the competition with Hevel. Indeed, we do not know that Cain has been rejected. All the verse says is that some special sign of favor (the midrash suggests that fire came down from heaven to devour the offering) which was accorded to Hevel was absent in Cain's case. This does not mean that God is angry at Cain, only that, for some reason which we do not know, He chose to give a special sign to Hevel. As a wild piece of speculation, perhaps Hevel is depressed by the fact that he is engaged in a relatively less valuable field of occupation - remember that Adam's family, according to the Sages, is not permitted to eat meat, and has only a limited need for wool. (See the Netziv who considers Hevel's occupation with things that are only luxuries rather than staples to be the source of his name as Hevel - vanity). But the reason is not really important - which is why the Torah does not even hint at it. What is important is Cain's response, a response of jealousy derived from his choosing to measure his own value as a function of his success in competition.

God's answer is - "If you do well, you succeed, but if you do not do well, IT will lurk on the door of sin." I would like to suggest that this means that Cain should be concerned only with one thing - is he doing well, doing good, intrinsically, and be unconcerned with the competition with Hevel. If you are doing well, then that is what matters. If you are not doing good things, then your desire to succeed will be the seed of sin. The desire to produce, even to produce religious expression, such as bringing the first offering in history (surely an accomplishment), is on the one hand the secret of Man's greatness, but if expressed for the

sake of competition is on the other hand the source of sin - in this case, the second sin of history .

Rebellion against God is the first source of sin. Not realizing that one's worth is intrinsic and trying to find value by surpassing others, our brothers, is the second source. In some ways it is the more invidious, and definitely is the more common.

Cain, of course, fails this test, and his competitiveness and lack of self-worth leads him to fratricide. Having failed to find his value in the land he toils, he is removed from it and condemned to a life of wandering. Feeling that his life is worthless now (a life of hevel), he fears that any who meet him will kill him, as one would squash a worthless creature. But the message of God still holds - if he produces, if he does good, then his life has value. God gives him a sign to protect him. Cain's potential still holds true.