

Lech Lecha 5781

BS"D Parashat Lech Lecha 5781

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The Inseparable Bond between Avraham & Sarah, and Kayin & Hevel

We meet our illustrious grandparents Avraham and Sarah in the last verses of parashat Noach, but there is no information regarding what made them the chosen human beings of HaShem and progenitors of HaShem's chosen nation – Am YIsrael.

In actuality, the story of Avraham and Sarah is inseparably bound to the episode of Kayin and Hevel, even though they are not mentioned by name as follows...

Fratricide

In Parashat Bereishiet, the Torah relates that Kayin was a farmer and his brother Hevel a shepherd. Kayin initiated an offering to HaShem, consisting – according to Rashi – of poor-quality vegetables, while Hevel brought “the best of his flock” (Bereishiet 4:4). When HaShem preferred Hevel's gift, Kayin grew angry to such a degree that HaShem had to warn him to put aside his frustrations lest he sin. At that point, Kayin murdered Hevel.

The Midrash reveals that Kayin and Hevel were fraternal twins. In Kayin's amniotic sac there was a twin sister, and in Hevel's there were two twin sisters. In the course of time, Kayin married his twin sister and Hevel married one of his own twin sisters. Kayin demanded Hevel's second twin sister; and when Hevel refused, Kayin murdered him.

HaShem asked Kayin: "Where is your brother Hevel?" (v. 9) and Kayin responded, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9).

The Midrash teaches that Kayin repented, and HaShem meted out just half of the punishment he would have received as a murderer. Kayin would forever be a wanderer, incapable of settling permanently in one place (v. 12).

Each stage of the story is puzzling:

1. The name "Kayin" is derived from the word *kinyan* (acquire), a halachic-legal concept through which Chava expressed her gratitude to HaShem for presenting her with a child. By contrast, "Hevel" is a derogatory name meaning nothingness. King Shlomo in *Kohelet* describes the worthlessness of man's deeds using the expression, "Utter futility! [*hevel havalim*], all is futile" (1:2). Why did Hevel's parents give him such a name?
2. Why did the Torah inform us that Kayin was a farmer and Hevel a shepherd?
3. Kayin offered poor-quality vegetables. Is that the sort of gift one brings to the Creator of the Universe? Why was Kayin dejected when HaShem preferred Hevel's excellent offering?
4. Would Kayin really have killed his brother over which sister to marry?
5. In response to HaShem's question, "Where is your brother Hevel?", Kayin responded disrespectfully, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Is that how one responds to the Master of the Universe?
6. Why did HaShem only punish Kayin for half of his crime?

If the murder was justified, he should have been totally acquitted. If not, what room was there for forgiveness at all?

7. How was the punishment of “restless wandering” appropriate to the crime of fratricide?

I suggest:

Rabbi Eliezer in Tractate Chagiga 12a says that before Adam sinned, he reached “from heaven to earth”, reflecting the spiritual bond that linked him to the celestial realm. Following his sin, HaShem placed His hand, so to speak, on Adam and made him smaller, as it says in Tehillim 139:5: “... You placed Your hand upon me.”

Kayin and Hevel differed on a fundamental issue: Just how much did HaShem diminish Adam and Chava, and after them all mankind?

Kayin argued that although mankind was no longer what it had been prior to the original sin of Adam and Chava, humans were still connected spiritually to HaShem – sort of angels with shortcomings.

Hevel argued that HaShem had cut Man off totally from the spiritual realm and, from that time on, relegating the human race to just one more rung on the Darwinian ladder of all biological creatures to survive according to the “laws of the jungle”. Man, though more sophisticated, more talented and more conniving but essentially no different from any other animal. Man became a sort of highly developed monkey.

The main characteristic of an enlightened society is its ability to enact and enforce just and moral laws. In contrast, the “animal kingdom” lives according to the “law of the jungle” – the survival of the fittest.

The older brother gave expression to his belief in man's spirituality by adopting the name "Kayin", connoting legal purchase and ownership. His brother preferred the name "Hevel" (nothingness), which expressed his worldview that humans are no longer connected to the spiritual universe but are just another type of animal that exists according to the law of the jungle. Hevel believed that when all was said and done, values and ethics would be forever meaningless.

In accordance with their outlooks, Kayin chose to be a farmer and Hevel a shepherd. Kayin plowed, sowed, harvested, ground and kneaded to make dough, baked bread and enjoyed his involvement in the unfinished world that he had received from HaShem. Had he the ability, he would have built jets and established institutions of higher learning for the study of chemistry and physics. He was HaShem's full partner in developing and refining the world.

Hevel, the shepherd, accepted the natural world as it was. He would go out each morning with his flocks and return with them in the evening, seeing himself as just another of the plethora of creatures – a smarter one but devoid of a spiritual soul after his parents' sin. He did not develop anything, and he did not improve anything. He was a fine, highly developed monkey.

Kayin brought poor-quality vegetables (Rashi) as a gift to HaShem, and Hevel brought fat, healthy animals to appease the Creator of nature. Here, as well, each brother was following his own worldview.

As a proponent of the halachic-legal approach, Kayin had no need for nice vegetables or plump animals, because any offering would be acceptable as long as the act was performed in accordance with the rules of Halacha.

Hevel viewed himself and all mankind as an eternal part of the world of nature, in which esthetics and external beauty are

the defining characteristic. Therefore, he brought the best of his flocks.

HaShem chose Hevel's gift, signaling that Hevel's view in the philosophical argument between the brothers was the correct one, that after the sin in the Garden of Eden, mankind was no longer the preferred creation but just another one of all the biological creatures.

Kayin refused to accept that determination, even though it came from HaShem. He was incapable of seeing himself cut off from HaShem's holiness, and he struggled in vain to find a suitable definition for himself and for mankind – the words "Israel" and "Jew" had not yet descended to the world.

Kayin demanded the second sister born in Hevel's placenta, but Hevel refused. Hevel argued that she belonged to him due to the natural reality of her having been born with him.

Kayin argued that she was his, due to his being the firstborn, such that halachically he deserved a double portion. Hevel rejected this claim, just as he rejected anything based on law and Halacha. Kayin rose up against his brother Hevel and murdered him.

HaShem appeared to Kayin and asked him, "Where is your brother Hevel?" Kayin responded, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Hebrew word for "keeper" is shomer and derives from the world of Halacha (Tractate Bava Metzia), where it is commonly translated as "a legal agent". Kayin, so to speak, was castigating HaShem by saying, "If You have really established that people are just another type of animal, operating according to the laws of the jungle, then I am no longer my brother's keeper."

Kayin admitted to his brother's murder and pleaded innocent based on the following argument: Since Hevel lived according to the laws of the jungle – not bound by the principles of justice and morality – sooner or later strong emotions would

have compelled Hevel to murder Kayin. Hence, Hevel was halachically classified as a rodef, an assailant, and it was a mitzvah to kill him.

Even though HaShem accepted Kayin's halachically-correct arguments, He ruled as follows: Had Kayin advocated using the laws of the jungle, he would be exempt. Instead, Kayin conducted himself according to the Torah, which was forbidden to him just as it is forbidden for a non-Jew to keep the Sabbath. Therefore, he was partially exonerated of murder (fratricide), but was punished for adopting Torah approaches outside his authority. Kayin was condemned to a life of wandering like a forest animal, for this was HaShem's decree against the human race.

And so it was for twenty generations, until Avraham appeared on the stage of history. Out of HaShem's love for Avraham and Sarah, the spiritual souls taken from Adam and Chava were restored in them. From that time on, their children, and children's children forever would be privileged to a heavenly portion as had existed before the primal sin. In addition, because of Avraham and Sarah, a degree of spirituality was restored to all of mankind, albeit lower than that of Avraham and his descendants.

As a mark of this change in mankind's elevated status brought about by Avraham, HaShem added the Hebrew letter "hei" to Avram's name, rendering him "Avraham", which is short for "Av Hamon Goyim" – "father of many nations," father of mankind. Later Sarah received her full name, changed from Sarai.

Humanity today is somewhat connected to the spiritual world, having been elevated by Avraham and Sarah's efforts above the animal world of Kayin and Hevel.

One day, when the nations realize what they owe to the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, they will willingly and sincerely lift up the Jewish nation to the

status promised us by HaShem in this week's parasha.

Remember the three Bs:

Be healthy, Be careful Be here, and

JLMM – Jewish lives Matter Most

Shabbat Shalom and have a happy and healthy winter,

Nachman Kahana

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