

Parashat B'reshit

Brothers

by David Katzenelson on Friday October 24, 2008

25 Tishri 5769

Genesis 1:1 - 6:8

In Genesis 14:1 a boy is born. His mother names him Cain. She declares "*Kaniti ish et ha-shem*" ("I have acquired a man with Hashem") (all translations herein are from the Stone edition of the Tanach) and continues to give birth. Cain's little brother Abel is born in the very next verse. Nothing is said about Cain and Abel's childhood. They become adults and gain adult professions in the same verse in which Abel is born.

After the birth of these brothers, both the mother and father disappear from the scene. Not until verse 25 are Adam and Eve mentioned again, a long time after Abel's death. The text does give one hint about the first family's relationships. Most modern children proudly share fine drawings or handiwork with their parents, but when Cain and Abel are successful at their work, they choose to make offerings to G-d. To me, this indicates a lack of emotional contact between the two boys and their human parents.

Adam and Eve may well have been absent parents. But can we blame them? What could they have known about raising children? No one had ever parented before them. They had no psychology books to read; no experienced friends to consult. It seems easy to excuse them, being the very first parents in history, but do modern parents really know more when they decide to become parents? On the other hand, does lack of insight free a parent of responsibility?

The two brothers, alone in a vast world, bring their offerings to G-d. Cain, the farmer, brings "of the fruit of the ground" ("*mipri ha-adama*") (Genesis 4:3). Abel, the shepherd brought "of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest" ("*mibechorot tsono u-mechalvehen*") (Genesis 4:4). G-d accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's.

The text tells that "this annoyed Cain exceedingly and his countenance fell" ("*Va-yichar le-Cain meod va-yiplo panav*") (Genesis 4:5). It is easy to understand this ambiguous phrasing as meaning that Cain was hurt. This is a very difficult and very personal rejection. The text does not plainly tell us why one offering was more acceptable to G-d than the other. Is G-d simply capricious? Or does the Divine Parent have "favorite sons"? In later centuries our Rabbis wrote

about the reasons G-d may have favored Abel's gift, but Cain wasn't alive to read this literature. G-d, seeing Cain's reaction, talks to Cain. But he does not explain the reason. What G-d says amounts to an archaic form of "Curse you! Shut up and go back to your room! Improve your behavior!" But if Cain is not told what he did wrong, how can he improve?

Can we blame G-d? He had the opportunity to see, through two generations of human existence, that humans do not behave as he expected when he created them. But this experience is limited. Has he learned how humans do behave? Has he yet learned the importance of taking on the role of *Avinu* (our father—a loving paternal image) in addition to *Malkeinu* (our king—an unyielding and demanding image)? Has he learned the importance of explaining his reasons? He liked one offering and not the other one, but no one has given him offerings before. Could this be inexperience rather than caprice? On the other hand, does lack of insight free G-d of responsibility?

Even though G-d has spoken directly to him, Cain is left alone with a feeling of rejection; alone with his frustration. G-d is far away in the heavens and has not shown much understanding of a young man's psychological needs. It is much easier to think of his brother Abel. Abel who was not rejected, who won G-d's favor, the brother who appeared to be more loved by the heavenly Parent. Or so it seems. Anyway, Cain is jealous. Cain hits his brother and kills him.

Murder is no easy matter to excuse. But, can we blame Cain? What does he know about jealousy? He has never felt it before, nor has anyone else. Can Cain be expected to understand the power and consequences of his violent emotions and acts? None has ever used violence before. But do modern young men and women understand the kind of jealousy they sometimes feel towards a sibling? Do we understand the power we have to destroy with a blow of the hand or a word of the mouth? On the other hand, does lack of insight free a sibling of responsibility?

Our story continues. Cain, who famously claims not to be his brother's keeper, denies responsibility for Abel and is punished by G-d. Like his parents before him, he is banished from his farm. He is forced to live as a nomad. Cain begs for mercy. Only then does G-d put a mark on Cain and promises to protect him. Anyone who kills Cain will experience G-d's vengeance sevenfold.

The heavenly Parent was angry and he punished Cain harshly. Cain leaves G-d's presence and settles in the Land of *Nod* (wandering), east of Eden. Even G-d cannot undo what has been said and done in anger. Even G-d is unable to return the banished son home. But the Divine mark goes with Cain wherever he may go. Once the anger has subsided G-d is still with his son, loving and protecting, in his own silent way.



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Many GLBT-people have experienced much of the same treatment in the hands of human families. Some may have good reason to feel their Divine Parent treated them poorly as well. Some of us have grown up feeling that we were less wanted than our siblings. Few have dared to ask our parents why. Very few parents ever explain the reasons for what we experience as a diminishment of their ability to love us. Few of us “less beloved” children understand the emotional complexity of the apparent rejection well enough to ask our parents about it.

Perhaps, if our parents had been asked and had the chance to think it over, they would say that we were simply too different. Can we blame a conservative parent if he found it easier to communicate with his sporty, masculine son than with the effeminate son who did not enjoy watching the World Series? Did our parents’ upbringing give them the tools to cope with GLBT sons and daughters? Did our parents have enough insight to be able to explain themselves or apologize? Did the action that seemed like a total rejection of us at our most fragile really constitute a lack of love and care? Could it have been a failure to speak, a fear of expressing one’s own emotions or an embarrassed silence, not unlike G-d’s own silence in the face of Cain’s punishment and exile? But, on the other hand, does lack of insight free a parent of responsibility?

Many of us have also felt the jealousy that comes of sibling rivalry. Why were the other siblings receiving the love we wanted? Why were they met with what seemed to be more understanding and praise? Why did my sister get the fabulous Barbie doll while I got the boring football? Mom and Dad were strong and powerful, yet they were often remote in an adult world. Sometimes it may have been easier to express –through acts of physical violence onto our siblings—the anger we felt toward our parents. As we got older we used words rather than fists, but did we ever understand that words spoken in anger also have violent and destructive power? As adults, are we able to sit together and talk over these jealousies? I wonder if Cain had the opportunity to talk things over with Abel, would he have found that Abel also felt rejected in a way not visible to Cain or to us?

Family relationships can be difficult. Many of us settle down in the land of *Nod*, be it east of Eden or any other direction from our birthplace. A family that literally pushes us out of the door forces some of us into exile. Others have chosen exile on their own, in response to having felt less loved. Such a feeling forces us to reject in return. Is it so easy to know who did the original rejecting? Does it really matter? We have placed ourselves in exile, but in many cases our family still does care for and want our presence in their lives. The mark of our family like the mark of Cain is with us wherever we may go. And if we and our other family members can find a way to talk about these things, we might be able to find a home.

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