

Drasha on Breishit, October 10,2026

When Cynthia casually informed me, a couple of months ago, that she needed a darshan for today, I hesitated. I doubted that I might have anything new to say, when so many others over the years have had great insights. After all, this parashah is the origin story of our world and why it is the way it is. So I reread the parashah and looked at commentaries. I found much that was written about the two creation stories, and about Adam and Eve. But, when we get to the story of Cain and Abel, the discussion slows dramatically. Most commentaries start and end with noting this is the start of sibling rivalry and the first murder. That's it? Whoa, I thought. Something about this story makes the rabbis and us uncomfortable. So, I looked again. And I decided. Cain needs a defense attorney and here I am! Yes, I am a pediatrician, but I did take a class on the law and medicine, and I do have a daughter and a brother who are lawyers, so I am prepared.

Let's start with the evidence, our text.

Etz Chaim states that Cain was a tiller of the land and that Abel was a keeper of sheep. In the course of time Cain brought an offering to the Lord and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of firstlings from his flock. I will just note that humans were not allowed to eat meat till after the flood, so it is unclear how the animal offering was given.

Cain is stated to have been first to bring an offering. This seems to be a spontaneous urge to thank G-d. Abel then follows his brother with the choicest of firstlings. Question: Who is competing with whom at this time? Was Abel trying to emulate his brother or upstage him? What if you spontaneously picked flowers from your garden for your mother, and your sibling, seeing this, ran to the store to get your mother her favorite Sees candies.

Etz Chaim goes on: The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering, the Lord paid no heed. What if this was your mother's response? The rabbis, in trying to make sense of this, use the fact

that Cain's offering was not described as the "choicest" to blame Cain for the Lord's rejection. These commentators are acting just like the friends of Job, trying to make sense of G-d's actions. However, the Book of Job teaches us that we cannot understand why G-d acts as G-d does, and that bad things happen to good people.

But Cain has not read the Book of Job, and is, understandably, distressed. And now, God speaks to Cain, giving, possibly, the worst advice Cain would want to hear: Why are you so upset? "Surely if you do right, there is uplift, but if you do not do right, Sin crouches at the door; the urge is to you, but you can be its master.". Way to go, G-d. Cain is broken hearted and is told to suck it up and deal with it.

Cain knows, and we know, that Cain has been treated poorly. Anger is a natural response and clearly cannot be directed at G-d. So, Cain goes and talks to his brother. Here again the rabbis fill in the blanks as to the topic of discussion but in the end, Cain sets upon his brother Abel and kills him.

While the Torah doesn't differentiate between first degree and second-degree murder, we do. The punishments are different if the intent to kill was not there. Also, did Cain know that death is permanent? When children first learn of death, they think of it as another place that people go. It isn't until around age 9 or so that children understand that death is universal and permanent. And studies of child development show that impulse control and abstract reasoning skills develop through the teen years and early twenties. While we assume that Cain was an adult, age wise, given that Cain had not had any experience with human death, can he really be held responsible for murder? Did he have the capacity to understand the consequences of his actions? I will note, in passing, that many states are currently lowering the age that children can be tried as adults despite the evidence that impulse control and the ability to understand consequences have not yet fully developed.

When Cain asks G-d, "am I my brother's keeper or guardian?" this is commonly seen as an evasion, as an attempt to divert blame, as his

parents did after eating the forbidden fruit. The Plaut Torah commentary raises the question, without addressing it, about what responsibility G-d bears for causing the fight between the brothers and for G-d's failure to intervene. After all, G-d is described often, in Psalms, as the guardian of Israel. To me, this is one of the major theological questions of all time. Having given humans free will, does G-d have any responsibility, even indirectly, when someone exercises that free will in a way that causes harm to others? While we cannot answer that question, it is interesting that, in contrast to the attempts to try children as adults, several states have now charged and convicted parents for crimes committed by their minor children.

Nevertheless, Cain did kill his brother and must be punished. Thankfully, G-d does recognize mitigating circumstances, and sentences Cain not to death but to exile from his family and his career -he can no longer be a farmer. He is marked by G-d so that others will not kill him on sight for what he has done. A random question: who are these other people who might kill him in his exile? Is this an early biblical nod to Neanderthals – recent studies confirm that most humans living today have some degree of Neanderthal DNA. (And do I want to speculate who Adam and Eve's replacement child Seth married? - no, not today!)

Cain's story doesn't end there. While prevented from farming, Cain goes on to create the first city. His descendants are credited with the invention of metallurgy, the creation of music, and the herding of livestock, presumably other than sheep. Of course, as the tale of the Tower of Babel shows, in the next parashah, the Torah has a mistrust of cities as a source of sin and hubris; a mistrust which is often seen today in the divisions between urban and rural areas of our own country. We frequently idealize the pastoral, perhaps, as an unconscious desire to return to the innocence of Eden.

The tale of Cain and Abel is not just a sad story of the origin of sibling rivalry and murder. This story forces us to confront the unfairness in life – good people suffer. How should we respond to injustice when it happens to us and to others? Unfortunately, we are not equipped to address G-d's

role, no matter how much we try, and blaming G-d is only a step away from blaming our parents – which could be why the inventor of psychoanalysis was Jewish!

I am somewhat abashedly left with the conclusion that G-d's admonishment of Cain was, in fact, good advice. We can lash out in anger and impulse at those we blame for perpetrating injustice, or those who appear to be benefiting unfairly and in so doing, cause greater harm to ourselves and others. Or we can master those impulses and temper our anger with compassion for the victims and seek accountability for the perpetrators. We can use the moral guidance in the Torah to treat others fairly and to redress grievances on an individual and societal level. And, instead of admonishment, maybe, G-d will comfort us and give us the strength to continue this work in a world where injustice seems to prevail.

Shabbat shalom.

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