

## Derashah - A Spiritual Inquiry Through Sermon

Shabbat Bereishit 5784 - 10/13/23

Thank you all for being here, for coming together on this Shabbat. This Shabbat is Shabbat B'reishit - the Shabbos when Jewish communities all over the world read again from the beginning of our Torah.

Of course, this shabbat also marks one week since the world of the Jewish people was upturned, by an experience of inhumane cruelty and brutality which we had led ourselves to believe was no longer a feature of Jewish experience.

Tragically, our people - 'am yisrael - have suffered and survived through many periods in which people, who imagined us as less than human, butchered men, women, and children indiscriminately. In far too many generations, from Rome to Spain, from the Crusades to Khmielnicki, empires, kingdoms, and mobs have rallied around a false story that our small people was the source of their suffering.

Yet, so many of us believed that with the new geo-political reality of the Jewish people established within memory of our elders - within this past century - these kinds of killings - of evil massacres of Jews - were purely a thing of the past. We believed - or at least hoped - that the world's guilt for centuries of oppression and violence - and the military might of the State of Israel - rendered such an attack an impossibility.

Tragically, this belief - this hope - was dashed on the rocks of human cruelty and hatred.

How can we understand this heart-breaking realization? How should we respond to such a horrifying and painful moment?

These questions are enormous, and so many voices are entering into a continually fraying conversation. For many of us, or at least for me, this adds to the pain of this moment in history.

So, today, I want to ask a slightly, yet significantly different question - the kind of question you might expect a rabbi to pose and respond to:

- How can our parasha - this first portion in our Torah which recounts our inherited ancient stories about the origins of humanity - shine some light on these dark conditions of our day?

In the first chapter of Bereshit, classically the first aliyah of the Torah which we read last Sunday on Simchat Torah - G-d creates the world in an orderly fashion through speech. "Let there be light - and there was light."

Yet, tonight, I want to bring to our attention the images of humanity in parshat bereishit which we will read tomorrow morning, in the second year of our triennial Torah reading cycle.

In these stories, it does not take long before we are tempted to wrongdoing and act on these temptations. For example, we read this week the story of the first brothers to walk the face of the earth: Kayin and Hevel - Kain and Abel. I expect we all know that this story is a tragic one. After G-d responds favorably to an offering of Hevel and not the offering of Kayin, Kayin comes upon Hevel in the field and kills him.

Our first story of human brothers is also our first story of murder. But why? Why does the Torah center this tragic story?

Surely, this story speaks to the power of human anger and envy; it reveals to us the depths of our instincts to violence and reflects a zero-sum attitude. Despite G-d's explicit message to Kayin in the previous verse, that if he does good he too will be lifted up, Kayin gives in to his anger, or as several commentators emphasize *his envy*, and slays his brother. Kayin falsely assumes that only he or his brother can be in G-d's good favor. But,

tragically, his violent lashing out leads to his eternal exile from his homeland.

This story could lead us to despair of human nature. We might conclude, pessimistically, as G-d seems to in the generation of Noah, that “humanity is wicked by nature.” We might learn that we can always expect human beings to lash out with violence, and simply resign ourselves to this as a tragic truism.

However, our tradition of interpretation resists this conclusion. According to one Midrash, Kayin did not realize the repercussions of his action. He had never before witnessed human death, by any means, and so he did not understand that his striking of his brother would bring about his demise.

According to this midrash, Kayin’s words in response to G-d’s question of “where is Hevel your brother” is truly a lament, rather than an obfuscation of his responsibility. The midrash envisions Kayin in tears saying “I did not know... was I supposed to guard my brother?” In this midrash, even the cruel, plotting killer Kayin becomes somehow sympathetic, because he was not provided with all of the information that he needed to grasp the scope of his responsibility.

The Midrash suggests that if Kain truly realized that he was his brother’s keeper, he would never have killed his brother. By extension, the Midrash suggests that we all have yet to realize that we are indeed the guardians of our siblings; we are responsible not only for our safety and well-being but for the well-being of all of our brothers and sisters.

It is for this reason, according to another more widespread midrash which is brought in the Mishnah in Sanhedrin in the context of describing procedures of courts in cases of capital punishment, that Adam was created singularly, as one individual, before Havah was created to be his mate.

לְפִיכָּהּ נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי

This is why Adam was created individually.

[...] לְלַמְדָּךָ, שְׂכָל הַמְּאֲבָד נִפְּשׂ אַחַת כְּאֵלוֹ אֶבֶד עוֹלָם מְלֵא

To teach you that anyone who destroys a life destroys an entire world

וּמִפְּנֵי שְׁלוֹם הַבְּרִיּוֹת, שְׂלֵא יֵאמֶר אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ: אָבִא גְדוֹל מֵאֲבִיךָ

And for the sake of peace among all of humanity, so that no man can say to another “my father was greater than your father.”

In fact, in the Quran, Muhammad teaches this lesson in the context of interpreting this same story of Kain and Abel.

There too (in Surah 5, Aya 32) it is taught that one who kills a person has destroyed a whole world, and one who saves a life has saved a whole world.

I pray that we may all realize this Divine truth and integrate it into our behavior soon and in our days.

May kol yisrael and kol yoshvei tevei - all of Israel and all of the world's inhabitants - cherish the Divine imperative to see the humanity of each and every child of Adam and Havah and dedicate ourselves to the preservation of this precious world we have inherited from them, through G-d's abundant compassion.