



SIMCHAT TORAH, THE CAIN MUTINY, AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY

Simchat Torah is a celebration of the world's largest book club. Jews across the globe unite in joyfully commemorating completion of the yearly Torah-reading cycle and starting it again. Though the current pandemic has unfortunately precluded a regular completion of the cycle and the usual festivities will also be curbed, we nonetheless unhesitatingly begin reading our holy Torah again.

As we reread of God's creation of the

world and the creation of the first man and woman, we might consider, amid our current socially distanced moment, how lonely, isolated, and precarious Adam and Eve must have felt in navigating a new world. And, as we proceed to read *Parashat Bereshit*, we come across a heroic and inspiring act of one of the earliest humans, a moving gesture amid uncertainty. Cain brings a sacrifice.

(ג) וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה

מִנְחָה לַיהוָה: (ד) וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמִחֲלֵבֵהוּ וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל הֶבֶל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ: (ה) וְאֶל קַיִן וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו:

In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell.

Cain, we recall, was so named by his mother, because, as she said, “I created (*kaniti*) a male child with the Lord.” Blessing God for the fruit of her womb, Eve thanked God for His help in allowing the child to be born. And so, as Jonathan Grossman notes in his *Creation: The Story of Beginnings* (YU Press and Maggid Books, 2019), her son, after growing up, follows suit. Cain too has produced fruit, this time of the agricultural variety, and, just like his mother, thanks God for what has flowered. And he did so while fulfilling his parents’ mission, having been commanded to work the ground and toil in it. As a means of thanking God, he innovates the central ancient religious ritual, a practice that inspired our own daily prayers. He brought a *korban*.

At this stage, Cain seems poised to be a religious hero. Clearly the focal point of the narrative (his brother Abel’s name, unlike his own, was given no explanation), he movingly offers to God a sign of gratitude. As Moshe Halbertal has written, “The gift of sacrifice to God, who is in the first place the provider of the good and in no need of it, functions as a token of submission and gratitude.”

But Cain’s act is met with brutal disappointment. God, for reasons unexplained, does not accept Cain’s sacrifice. But Abel’s is accepted. “Religious sacrifice is a costly act of self-giving, in denial of natural inclinations, that is offered in suspense, under conditions that threaten failure, for the purpose of establishing a relation with the transcendent reality” writes scholar David L. Weddle. And Cain’s sacrifice failed.

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל קַיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לְךָ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ: (ז) הֲלוֹא אִם תִּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב לְפָתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאַלֶּיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקְתּוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ: תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ:

And the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you distressed, And why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right, Sin crouches at the door; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master.”

Following the sacrifices, Cain is the one God addresses, not Abel, whose offering had been received. God is invested in Cain’s potential, encouraging continued efforts at goodness despite disappointment and unrequited entreaties. But then things go south. History’s first religious hero becomes mankind’s first villain. Cain murders his brother.

Cain’s decision to be not his brother’s keeper, but his destroyer, amid what was surely anger and disappointment, receives, later in Sefer Bereshit, a comforting and restorative echo.

In a tale with literary and thematic parallels to the first sibling rivalry and fraught jealous rivalry, Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery.

Like with Cain and Abel, rulership is at stake:

Joseph & His Brothers בראשית פרק לו	Cain and Abel בראשית פרק ד
(ח) וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אָחִיו הַמְלֶךְ תִּמְשָׁל עָלֵינוּ אִם מִשׁוֹל תִּמְשָׁל בָּנוּ וְיִוָּסְפוּ עוֹד שָׁנָא אֶתוֹ עַל חֲלֻמֹתָיו וְעַל דְּבָרָיו: His brothers answered, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.	(ז) הֲלוֹא אִם תִּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב לְפָתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאַלֶּיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקְתּוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ: Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right, Sin crouches at the door; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master.”

There is the seeking of brothers:

(טז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אַנְכִי מִבְּקֵשׁ הִגִּידָה נָא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רַעִים: He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?”	(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אַנְכִי: The Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”
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Isolation in fields holds the possibility of danger:

(טו) וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲבָד בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלֵהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מָה תִּבְקֵשׁ: A man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?”	(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֵל הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בְּהִיּוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקֶם קַיִן אֵל הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ: Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.
(כ) וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלְכֵהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוּתִים וְאִמְרֵנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָהוּ וְנִרְאָה מִה יִהְיֶה חֲלֻמֹתָיו: “Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!”	

And the blood of brothers stands to be spilled:

<p>(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל אָחָיו מִה בְּצַע כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת אָחִינוּ וּבִסִּינוּ אֶת דַּמּוֹ: (כז) לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרנוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאלִים וַיְדַנוּ אֵל תְּהִי בּוֹ כִּי אַחִינוּ בְּשָׂרנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אָחָיו:</p> <p>Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed.</p>	<p>(יא) וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אַתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת דַּמִּי אַחִיד מִיָּדְךָ:</p> <p>Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.</p>
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And yet, as we know, Joseph does not seek vengeance against his brothers. In this story, the answer to the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is met with a resounding yes. Joseph assumes responsibility for his brothers and provides for them, despite their earlier antagonism and cold-heartedness. Stability for their family amid uncertain economic and social times is achieved.

Their familial future is assured.

As we, on Simchat Torah, begin Bereshit anew in the context of our own societal, financial and communal precariousness, the stories of Cain and Abel, and Joseph and his brothers, remind us of the stabilizing force of individual responsibility. Kindness toward another, now as then, can be the antidote to despair, anger, doubt, and uncertainty.

In a sermon delivered in 1955, Rabbi Norman Lamm, my wife’s grandfather, spoke of the true nature of holiness. It, he said, “is for those whose hands must come to grip with real situations cold, brutal, unattractive, unfeeling; and who can wrest from them cleanliness, warmth, pleasantness, kindness.” As we begin once again reading the holiest of books, amid a dark and disappointingly long period of instability, we are reminded how religious heroism, and our societal future, relies on our ability to bring kindness and light to our brethren.