

Cain Killing His Brother Abel: the First Human Tragedy Retold

By Boris Burshteyn, Walnut Creek, CA, 2018

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Foreword

The Torah story about Cain killing his brother Abel is scant on details and player's motives, so this tragic mystery kept inspiring speculations for millennia. Indeed, one can read its several interpretations in traditional commentaries of Rabbinic Literature and Midrash. When looking for clues in the Torah text, I found and glued the missing links with a mix of common sense and imagination. In the end, this first human tragedy unexpectedly turned out to be driven by a conflict between hatred and indifference.

The Story Retold

After G-d had banished Adam and Hava from the Garden of Eden, they fixed their lives by following the commandments G-d gave them in the Garden. Adam and Hava became "fruitful": when Hava delivered her first child Cain, she attested to that by exclaiming "I have acquired a man with the Lord." Hava also made sure that Cain followed the G-d's commandment to work the land by becoming the "tiller of the soil." As for her second son Abel, he ended up pursuing the G-d's commandment to "rule over ... all the beasts" Abel became "a shepherd of flocks" when he followed the footsteps of his father Adam who used to study and assign names to every kind of animals while searching for Hava. Cain inherited Hava's dynamic personality (after all, it was Hava who convinced Adam to eat from the forbidden tree), yet Abel, like his father, was quiet and dedicated to being the animal's keeper.

Cain's tilling of the virgin land was extremely difficult precisely as G-d had warned his parents – "with the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." At the same time, Abel's shepherding was much easier since he learned from his father Adam how to tame the beasts. Not only Cain continued exhausting himself from the punishing labor, but the outcome of his toil was meager and poor, as G-d had foretold to his parents that the Earth only "will cause thorns and thistles to grow for you." However, because Abel's domesticated animals were fruitful beyond expectation, everything he effortlessly reaped from the flocks was of the highest quality.

As Cain's life was getting more and more unbearable year after year, his brother Abel was enjoying a non-stop good time. Nevertheless, true to his strong character, Cain did not give up. Believing in the Earth's potential for abundance, Cain strove to make his efforts less burdensome and more productive, yet he kept failing time after time. Having no one else to turn to, Cain never stopped begging Abel for advice and help, but in vain: it was more important for a tranquil Abel to keep an eye on his flocks than to ease Cain's suffering. With time, the tension between Cain's insistence and Abel's rejection had poisoned their relationship as Cain became bitter towards Abel for ignoring his appeals.

Frustrated by his harsh life and Abel's indifference, Cain decided to show G-d "the fruit of the soil an offering to the Lord" and ask to reveal the secrets of the Earth's abundance. Not to be outdone, Abel followed his brother. However, unlike Cain, Abel did not intend to ask for help but only to proudly show G-d "the firstborn of his flocks and of their fattest." Abel's offering was superior to Cain's because the beasts were abundantly fruitful: it was easy for Abel to choose the best from the vast herds. As for Cain, he could pick nothing but the dismal outcome of his exhausting labor over the unyielding Earth.

After looking at both offerings, "The Lord turned to Abel and to his offering. But to Cain and to his offering He did not turn." Already in deep despair, Cain became annoyed "exceedingly, and his countenance fell." He got upset with Abel for showing up, parading the animals, and denying him the G-d's audience. In his mind, Cain concluded that from now on he would never find help either from Abel or G-d Himself. However, the Torah tells us that G-d remembered Cain. G-d did turn to Cain and gave him four great pieces of advice. Had Cain followed G-d's wisdom, he would not have murdered Abel. Unfortunately, blinded by hatred, Cain ignored G-d's kind words. So, what exactly did G-d tell Cain?

The first advice G-d gave to Cain was in the form of a rhetorical question: "Why are you annoyed and why has your countenance fallen?" G-d implied to Cain that He does not favor Abel over Cain and that Cain's problems are just a misjudgment of the troubled mind – they *are not real*. The second advice suggested a way out from Cain's sufferings by becoming better and smarter at work: "Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you?" G-d assured Cain that with time he could improve his work's techniques and become more productive and then his life's burden will disappear.

In the third advice, G-d warned Cain that "if you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing." In other words, G-d explained to Cain the essence of his sufferings: since Cain was not able to find a way to do his job better, he had fallen into a sin of hatred toward Abel, and that sin *is a real problem*. Finally, G-d had encouraged Cain to overcome his moods: "but you can rule over it." In other words, do not blame others for your self-imposed imaginary misfortune. Instead, keep working harder and smarter. However, even if you can't improve, you can still stop hating anyway.

Alas, G-d's caring words fell on Cain's deaf ears – like Adam and Hava in the Garden of Eden, Cain disobeyed G-d. Instead of overcoming his hateful state of mind and realizing that there is nobody to blame for his hardship, Cain doubled down on hatred. Overflowed with jealousy after meeting G-d, again he cried out to Abel for help, but this time the outcome was disastrous. Abel remained indifferent as before upsetting Cain beyond reproach: "And Cain spoke to Abel, his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him."

Thus the first murder has been committed due to a total lack of goodwill between both the victim and the perpetrator. Cain and Abel were not only neighbors but even brothers by birth, yet neither one loved another. Moreover, Cain just madly hated his prosperous brother Abel while Abel hardly acknowledged the very existence of his unfortunate brother Cain.

Cain, whose name could mean a "possessed creator," dutifully followed the G-d's commandment but was not able to understand that success in his enterprise takes a long time and requires a patient application of all his physical and mental strengths. So, Cain sought help from his brother Abel, whose name could mean "vain." But Abel was oblivious to his brother's suffering: he cared only about shepherding his flocks, a task much easier and way more rewarding than Cain's tilling the soil. Once again, Cain ended up pleading in vain as *Abel only kept an eye on the flocks* -- he wasn't his brother's keeper. This lifelong chasm explains why, when confronted by G-d after the murder "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain brushed off with a diabolical sarcasm "I do not know. *Am I my brother's keeper?*"

Blinded by hatred, Cain became the prosecutor, judge, and executioner all at once. The Torah contrasted this horrible perversion of blind justice with G-d's merciful fairness when he punished Cain for his crime. While charging Cain with murder, G-d spared his life, pointedly tied Cain's offense with the source of Cain's failure – his Earthly vocation -- and forbade Cain to work the Earth for all times. G-d said to Cain: "Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the Earth... which opened its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the soil, it will not continue to give its strength to you; you shall be a wanderer and an exile in the land." Thus, Cain's fruitless quest for the Earth's fertility secrets came to a gruesome end when Abel's blood covered the Earth and forever sealed those secrets from Cain, his brother's murderer.

Afterword¹

Eventually, while wandering the land, Cain acquired a new skill of a city builder. He never returned to the tilling of the Earth. G-d punished Cain by denying him a chance to excel at the only thing Cain was craving for – discovering the farming secrets of the Earth's virgin land -- something he was ready to kill and had killed for. In effect, Cain's only genuine aspiration tragically remained unfulfilled forever.

¹ All citations in this essay are from the Torah text as seen at <https://www.chabad.org> as of the year 5778 (2018).