

From One Bechor to Another

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A verse that identifies the challenge posed by being endowed with free choice

While the Parsha of Beraishit contains many well-known, seminal stories with respect to the universal human condition,¹ the verse to which I find myself being drawn year after year, is Beraishit 4:7. After Kayin is crestfallen as a result of his younger brother Hevel's sacrifice being Divinely Accepted, while his own is rejected, God tells him, "Halo, Im Teitiv Se'eit. Velm Lo Teitiv LePetach Chatat Roveitz VeEilecha Teshukato. VeAta Timshal Bo" (If you do well, you will be uplifted. And if you do not do well, sin crouches at the door, and to you shall be its desire. Yet you can rule over it.) Unfortunately, Kayin does not heed the warning that he is given, and in the very next verse (4:8), he eliminates his competitor once and for all.

An advantage Given to Kayin that his parents never were afforded

Although Adam and Chava also sinned (3:1-7) and suffered dire consequences as a result (v. 16-24), there apparently never was a prior opportunity for them to

¹ Ch. 1: The relationship of man to the rest of the Creation.

2:15 Man's responsibility to take care of the world, balanced by (1:28) man's mandate to benefit from and rule over the world.

2:16-17 Man responding to a Divine Commandment entailing the restriction of his desires.

2:18 Man's need for companionship/community.

Ch. 3; 4:10-15 Sin and its consequences.

3:7, 21 Man's need to be clothed.

3:22 ff. Exile from a person's home.

4:3-5 The impetus to bring sacrifices to God.

4:8 Fratricide/murder in general.

4:20-22 Seminal developments in the history of human civilization.

4:26 Origins of idolatry, polytheism.

5:22-24 A human being who develops an intensely close relationship with God.

6:1-4 A description of an imbalance among social classes leading to the exploitation of the weaker by the more powerful.

6: 5 ff. God's negative Evaluation of the entire Creation.

learn what is implied by a God-Given Commandment. Kayin's parents originally received a single warning concerning eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as well as a threat of mortal consequences in the event that the warning is not heeded (2:16-17). They were not told about human nature's susceptibility to temptation; neither were they instructed regarding the best means by which they could avoid error, nor the possibility of repentance following improper behavior. Perhaps God Deemed it "sufficient"² to threaten them with death (v. 17) as a necessary and effective deterrent against their ignoring the Divine Command. Subsequent events, however, offer ample evidence that informing man of such a punishment, as dire as it sounds to contemporary man, proved ineffective. Perhaps because Adam and Chava could not imagine the state of death, something that with which they had no experience, directly or indirectly, rendered the threat moot.

Comparing the Divine Warnings Issued first to Adam and Chava, and then to Kayin

It is consequently possible to view 4:7, the Words Imparted to Kayin anticipating future desperate, drastic actions on his part, as a refinement and reworking of 2:17. This time, life and death are not made part of the calculus concerning sin and redemption with which the Divine Confronts Kayin. The lesson Taught to him after the Rejection of his sacrifice emphasizes the issue of free choice and the possible sequence of events, both good and bad, resulting from earlier actions. Whether or not Kayin gives in to his feelings of anger and frustration or rises above them is posed as a portent for an entire series of profound choices throughout his life, where the individual is constantly tempted and tested.

Challenges testing one's moral fiber can arise as the result of even virtuous behavior

It is notable that the action that initiated the unfortunate chain of events that leads directly to Kayin's slaying his brother Hevel, is an inherently positive one, reflecting admirable commitment and a proper religious sensibility. The Bible records

² The issue of the interaction between God's Omniscience and man's free choice arises as soon as the first Commandment is given. Meshech Chachma on Beraishit 2:26 interprets "BeTzalmeinu" as God's deliberate Intention to engage in "Tzimtzum" (a contraction of His Qualities) to the point where human free choice, "KiDemuteinu" becomes possible.

no sacrifices offered prior to Kayin's bringing produce as an offering to God. And obviously, Kayin therefore was also never explicitly told or could emulate others with respect to bringing the "best" when presenting a sacrifice to God.³ Hevel, on the other hand, watched what his brother did, copied him but also improved upon his brother's actions by going out of his way to offer sacrifices of superior quality. Perhaps God Assumed that since Kayin had been the first to offer sacrifices, just as his brother had emulated him with respect to the general process, he in turn would readily emulate Hevel with respect to on succeeding occasions similarly not only sacrificing in general, but deliberately presenting his best possessions to God. It would appear that this was in essence what God Attempted to communicate to Kayin in 4:7—one should always look to improve upon what one has done in the past, and in this manner become ever-uplifted. Something apparently in Kayin's nature unfortunately prevented him from learning either from his brother's example or from God's explicit Instruction.

A possible barrier preventing Kayin in particular from being open to instruction and correction

Yehuda Kil, in Da'at Mikra,⁴ notes the literary parallels between God's Words to Kayin—"Im Teitiv Se'eit", and what Yaakov tells Reuven in his final blessing to him (49:3)—"Yeter Se'eit VeYeter Az" (exceedingly uplifted and exceedingly powerful.) The commentator suggests that the term "Se'eit" reflects the special status of priesthood and being a first-born son.⁵ An additional literary reference to the status of the firstborn in God's Message to Kayin is the usage of the word "Petach" (doorway, opening) in 4:7, which R. Kil understands as the opening of his mother's womb that the Bechor accomplishes when he is born. The reason that "sin (especially ?) crouches at the opening of the mother's womb" specifically with respect to the Bechor, is this particular child's assumption that he must be special.

³ The reason for Kayin's sacrifice being rejected in favor of Hevel's can only be inferred by the manner in which each of their respective sacrifices is described. Furthermore, only upon contrasting the two descriptions is anything negative implied about Kayin's offering. Beraishit 4:3 "...and Kayin brought from the fruits of the earth an offering to God" appears to be perfectly respectable and appropriate. It is only when this verse is compared to the one immediately following, (v. 4) "And Hevel also brought from the first born of his flock and from the fattest thereof..." that the absence of comparable superlatives describing Kayin's offering becomes noticeable. Consequently it could be concluded that this shortcoming was a subtle one, which one could easily correct, were s/he so disposed.

⁴Beraishit, Vol. 1, Mosad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, 1997, p. 109.

⁵ Originally, the Jewish priesthood was to have been comprised of the firstborn. Only as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf was Aharon and his descendants chosen to replace the firstborn in this role. See BaMidbar 3:12.

Consequently, from the moment that the first siblings on earth, Kayin and Hevel, interact with one another, the biblical story leads the reader to posit that the Bechor expects special treatment and status due to his having been first on the scene. While one way to read many of the stories of the bible would be to understand them as a negation of primogeniture and inherited privilege, making the case that chosenness should be based upon merit rather than genealogy and birth order, it is equally significant, and quite poignant, to consider these stories from the point of view of the first-born children themselves who are regularly stymied in their aspirations for leadership. One might even ultimately conclude that being born first, with the accompanying expectation of entitlement and sense of superiority, is actually a handicap rather than an advantage! While 4:7 is a message relevant to every human being, it might be of particular importance to those who, like the first-born, have some sense of superiority or expectation of privilege.

Kayin is the first of a long line of first-born who are stymied in their pursuit of privilege

Just as Kayin's assumption that he by definition is meant to excel beyond his brother, is thwarted by his brother's sacrifice being accepted and not his own, so too all of Leah's children in general, and Reuven in particular, experience a similar rejection when the latter is replaced by Yosef as Yaakov's firstborn (See 48:5. By Yaakov's designating Yosef's sons Efraim and Menashe into full fledged tribes, he in effect confers upon Yosef the double portion of the firstborn, which technically belonged to Reuven.) Yaakov's justification for Reuven's demotion, (v. 4) "Pachaz KaMayim Al Totar" (unstable as water, you shall not excel)—the verse then refers to Reuven's impetuous interference with Yaakov's conjugal life following Rachel's death (35:22)—could be just as easily applied to Kayin in the sense that he is unable to pay attention to the Divine Instruction being given to him, but rather continues to wallow in his emotions of jealousy and frustration leading to his violently ending his competitor's life.

Others may have been complicit in creating Kayin's mindset

The significance of the naming of Kayin further suggests that the attitude of specialness on the part of a firstborn is not something that exclusively resides in the child's mind, but rather that it is often aided and abetted by parents. In 4:1, Chava exults upon the birth of her first child, and proclaims, "Kaniti (I have acquired, brought into existence) a man together with God." As for his brother, we are left to use our own imaginations and associations in order to account for why the name

“Hevel” was chosen, particularly in light of its meanings including vapor, steam, and nothingness. MaLBIM even suggests that Hevel was Kayin’s twin, paralleling the births of Eisav and Yaakov, since the text implies not that she conceived a second time, but rather (4:2) “She continued giving birth...” Although the second child came forth momentarily after the first, he nevertheless paled in significance in the mind of the mother, for no other reason than he was second! This is also suggested by the description of the births of Peretz and Zarach, (38:28-30), where the child that extended his hand beyond the womb first, earns privileged status, even if his body enters the world after his brother’s.

Yishmael’s mocking disposition and possible teasing of Yitzchak (21:9) could be understood to stem from a similar feeling of the oldest being suddenly supplanted by a younger child upon whom the parents shower great displays of affection. The imagery of Yaakov’s name being given to him as a result of his holding on to his twin’s heel at birth (25:26) is not lost on Eisav when he cries out after Yaakov’s trickery in obtaining Yitzchak’s blessing, (27:36) “For this reason is his name Yaakov, for he has usurped me (held onto my heel and gotten unfair advantage) twice...”

The Jewish people as a whole as first-borns

In light of the experiences of Kayin, Yishmael, Eisav and Reuven, when God tells Moshe to express the Jewish people’s specialness to Pharoah in the following manner: (Shemot 4:22) “Beni Bechori Yisroel” (Israel is My Son, My Firstborn Son), should this not only be a source of pride for us, but also an implied warning? Should Jews assume that their status as chosen people is inviolate, and therefore they will live lives of unabated privilege and favoritism? At least certain periods of Jewish history have appeared to not bear out such an assumption. All first-borns, individuals as well as nations, must be careful not to sit back on their laurels and presume that they don’t have to actually continually earn their special status. Such a cautionary tale could be understood to begin with the words directed at Kayin in Beraishit 4:7.
