

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [235]

You Watch Over Everything and You Let Me Kill Him. You Killed Him!

Insights into Tanhuma on Genesis 99



Background to Our Story

The Biblical Narrative: Genesis 4:1-10

¹ Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gained a male child with the help of the Lord." ² She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. ³ In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil; ⁴ and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, ⁵ but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. ⁶ And the Lord said to Cain,

"Why are you distressed,
And why is your face fallen?
⁷ 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."

⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰ Then He [God] said, "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!"

The Text: Tanhuma on Genesis 9

כִּיִּן שְׂאֵמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֵי הֶבֶל אֶחִידָּ, אָמַר לוֹ (שם) לֹא יָדַעְתִּי, הֲשִׁמַּר
אֹתִי אָנֹכִי, אַתָּה הוּא שׁוֹמֵר כָּל הַבְּרִיּוֹת וְאַתָּה מִבְּקִשׁוֹ מִיָּדִי, מִשָּׁל, לָמָּה
הִדְבַּר דּוֹמָה, לְגַנֵּב שְׂגָנֵב כְּלִים כְּלִילָה וְלֹא נִתְפַּשׁ. לִבְקֹר תִּפְשֹׁו הַשׁוֹעֵר לוֹ. אָמַר לוֹ
לָמָּה גָּנַבְתָּ אֶת הַכְּלִים, אָמַר לוֹ אֲנִי אָנֹכִי, וְלֹא הִנְחֵתִי אֶמְנוּתִי. אֲכַל אַתָּה אֶמְנוּתְךָ
בְּשִׁעַר לְשׁוֹמֵר, לָמָּה הִנְחֵת אֶמְנוּתְךָ, וַעֲבָשׁוּ אַתָּה אוֹמֵר לִי כֵּן, וְאַף קִין כֵּן אָמַר

אֲנִי הִרְגֵתִי אוֹתוֹ, בְּרֵאתָ בִּי יָצַר תְּרַע. אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵר
אֶת הַכֹּל, וְלִי הִנְחֵת אוֹתוֹ לְהִרְגוֹ, אַתָּה הוּא
שׁוֹמֵר, שׁוֹמֵר אֶתְךָ אֲנֹכִי לֹא, שְׂאֵלוֹ קִבְלָתָּ קְרָבִי
כְּמוֹתוֹ, לֹא הִיִּיתִי מִתְקַנָּא בּוֹ.

מִיָּד הֲשִׁיבוֹ (שם) מָה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אֶחִידָּ צִעֲקִים
אֵלַי.

You God watch over all of creation and you're blaming me! This is like a thief who steals things at night and gets away with it. In the morning the watchman grabs him and says "Why did you steal those things?" He replied: "I'm a thief; I haven't been remiss in doing my trade, but you're a guard; why did you fail in your duties?" Then Cain said: "I killed him, true, but You created me with the evil urge in me. You watch over everything and You let me kill him. You killed him! You didn't accept my sacrifice and I was jealous." God answered: "What have you done?" The "voice of your brother's blood calls out . . ."

—MIDRASH TANHUMA, on the Torah
reading for Genesis, Chapter 9



Explaining the Story (What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What are Cain's three justifications for killing Abel?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? From whom did Cain learn not to accept responsibility?

? Why does Cain say to God, referring to Abel: "You killed him!"?

Bonus ? God doesn't address Cain's justifications directly. Instead He replied: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" Why do you think God answer Cain the way He did, instead of addressing each of his justifications separately?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Life might be unfair and yet, at the end of the day, each of us is responsible for his or her own actions.

! You are wrong! You are wrong! You are wrong! – Or how to deal with those who are morally in the wrong and wish to justify the unjustifiable.

EPILOGUE

The Cain portrayed in this text is a cagey manipulator. He tries three different approaches in his argument with God, each one designed to draw the blame away from himself. First he tries the analogic approach. The whole situation, he argues, is very much like something else—a thief who steals from under the nose of the watchman. Clearly, it is the watchman who is to blame—the thief was only plying his own trade. Why blame him? Cain is so glib and the analogy is painted so convincingly that for a moment we do not see the flaw in the logic. Namely, a thief, after all, is a thief—he is not an admirable workman plying his trade. He is not just another hardworking fellow, as Cain would have it, who has a kind of friendly competition going with the watchman. Rather he is morally in the wrong. The criminal, in other words, cannot be excused by arguing that he is a good sport, a good workman, or an admirable person. Cain here has more than a little of the shifty salesman to him: if God is the watchman in the Cain parable, it is God who must be blamed for the murder.

Cain then turns to a second, more abstract argument. Who is to blame? Once again, it is God ... God, according to Cain, created the inclination in man to do evil

and therefore, in at least an ultimate way, He is to be blamed. But this argument too is flawed. To always hearken back to origins, to lay the guilt upon God because of the very nature of man may have some validity as a philosophical construct, as an argument to play with, but it abdicates responsibility for any individual human act. To argue that it would have been nicer or neater to have human beings without their inclination to do evil, their baser sides, misses the point. Given our situation, our existence as it stands, we must accept responsibility for the deeds we do without arguing, "I should have been made differently."

The third argument is perhaps the most subtle. For here the midrashic Cain goes back to the biblical text itself and points out a problem any reader (including, obviously, the rabbi who authored this Midrash) must feel -why does God accept Abel's sacrifice in Genesis 4.4, but reject Cain's? Is not God the true culprit in the tale by this act of favoritism?

The Midrash rejects all three of Cain's arguments, but in curious fashion. There is no reply from God, no counter argument or debate.

Instead Cain is ignored! His case is demolished by God's silent rebuff -"What have you done" (in committing this murder)? God returns and we hear the emphasis on the word you. There is no mitigating "I" from the divine, no reply like God's reply to Job, only the stem rebuke of the "voice of your brother's blood calls out to me "

Holtz, Barry W.: Midrash. In: Holtz, Barry W: **Back to The Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts. Summit Books. 1984. Pages 196 - 197**