

Overcoming Human Nature: What Were Cain and Abel Really Fighting About?

I will never forget the first week of November 1995. I was living and studying in Jerusalem and Sharon was living and working in New York. We were dating seriously across the ocean and sort-of getting engaged to be engaged.

On one Thursday evening, we had scheduled an internet chat with each other (that was pretty cutting edge back in '95!). But instead, Sharon surprised me by actually showing up in my Jerusalem apartment!



While there is more to that story, I was thrilled to have an unexpected week with Sharon in Israel! But while we would have wanted to go out after Shabbat, I had already made plans to spend time getting together with my rabbinical school classmates.

And doing what you might ask?

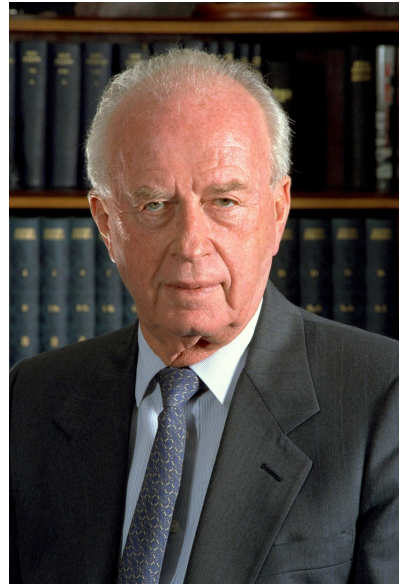
What else do rabbinical students do on a Saturday night, except study more Jewish texts!

So, after Shabbat, we met up with about 50 classmates, spouses, and friends for an exploration of a *midrash*, a rabbinic commentary, about human nature.

While the learning was good, I will never forget that night, because as we headed outside at the end of the evening, we heard people screaming and crying.

And that's how we found out – that the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, *zikhrono livrakha* – may his memory be for a blessing, had been shot.

Although it happened miles away in Tel Aviv, people were pouring out of their apartments in a state of shock and despair. And then a short time later, we learned that he had died – a Jew had assassinated the Prime Minister of the State of Israel. While that began an intense week of national mourning for Israel, in which we all participated, I want to return to the text we studied that night – for it, like that night, discusses murder; in the case of this text, the first murder in human history and it teaches us a lot about human nature.



The text was based on this morning's Torah reading: *Parashat Bereisheet*, which contains many questions including a passage that seems to be missing some critical information.

In the beginning of the fourth chapter, the Torah describes the first two brothers: Cain, a farmer and Abel, a shepherd. Each brings an offering to God – Cain's is rejected, but Abel's is accepted. Seeing Cain's distress,

God encourages him to do right and avoid sin.

And then, in the next verse: “*Vayomer Kayin El Hevel Ahiv* – Cain said to Abel his brother,” but then the Torah does not record what he said.

Very strange.

The Torah continues:

“*Vayehi bi’h’yotam ba’sadeh, va’yakom Cain el-Hevel ahiv v’ya’hargeihu* – and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.”

Why?

We do not know.

While the Torah emphasizes over and over again that Abel is Cain’s brother, it does not tell us what actually transpired. The first murder happens between two brothers for no explicit reason.

Our rabbinic sages living two millennia ago, seized upon this lacuna, this gap, in the text to offer their understanding of this murder.

In *Bereisheet Rabbah* (22:7), a collection of interpretations from the 5th century, the rabbis ask about what did these first brothers quarrel? “‘Come,’ said they, ‘let us divide the world.’ One took the land and the other all the movables. The former said, ‘The land that you stand on is mine,’



while the latter retorted, 'what you are wearing is mine.' One said: 'Strip!;' the other retorted, 'Fly [off my land!].'

Pretty intense! And we can know how things ended up!

In a second *midrash*, Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin taught that their argument was about religion. Each one wanted the future Temple built on his land.

And finally, Rabbi Yehudah ben Rebbe claims that the fight was over another woman, whom each brother wanted to marry. Don't worry, the absence of women other than Eve from the text, is also noted by the rabbis, but that's for another sermon!

These three *midrashim* reminds us that people often fight about things related to money, religion, and sex. Sexual rivalries, economic conflicts, and religious quarrels have been at the root of many acts of violence over the centuries.

In fact, as we look around at the world today, we find the same things all around the globe. Thousands of years ago or today, people act in basic ways and our inclinations are not always good.

In our own country we have seen how destructive the current political climate is. I, for one, have never seen a political campaign like this one; it has been filled with hateful rhetoric, racism, talk of sexual violence, intolerance, and lack of respect.

I never thought I would have to censor political news for my children, but this year I have wanted to.

While we have seen and heard it, it is important to note how damaging it is. We are blessed to live in a wonderful country with its

powerful office of the Presidency, but it has been debased into this. All of us have become collateral damage in this process. We have heard these terrible words, see our democracy damaged and felt its effect. It hurts us and our children.

I have been told that students in our preschool have actually said: “I just wish the election would be over already.”

And while many of us may feel the same way, it is important to note that hateful rhetoric and selfish behavior has been with us, as the Torah teaches, since the beginning of time. And it can lead to violence, even to murder – witness Abel’s murder and Rabin’s assassination.

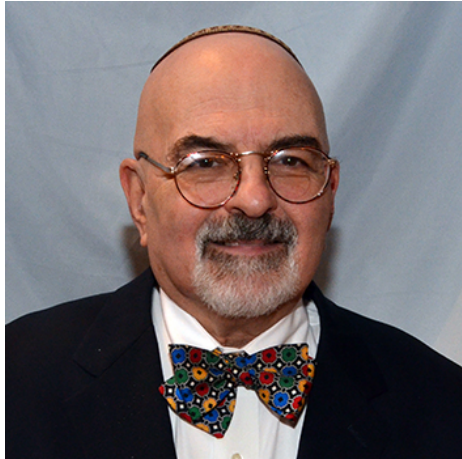
Harmful words are not a joke; they are real and dangerous.

Fortunately, our tradition offers us another path. While the Torah was teaching us that human beings have a tendency toward violence and the rabbis elaborated on how human nature can be too focused on our own selfish needs, Judaism encourages us to overcome human nature, to go beyond our inclinations, our desires, our instincts.

Our tradition reminds us of that frequently – think of the third paragraph of the *Sh’ma* – where the Torah instructs us to use our *tzitzit* – the fringes of our *tallit* as a reminder “so that you not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge.”

We are supposed to use our rituals to surpass our gut-first instinct or desire. If only we and our politicians wore *tzitzit*, forcing us and them to pause and look before we simply post, email, or tweet the first thing that pops into our minds!

Judaism explains that we have two basic inclinations – both important. There is the *yetzeir hara* – usually thought of as the evil inclination, but better understood, as my teacher Rabbi Ira Stone taught, as



the inclination towards self-preservation. This is the inclination that pushes us to take care of ourselves, to feed ourselves, that drives us in many activities from sex to pushing ourselves in our schoolwork and our occupations – it's the basic animalistic instinct, which places our needs first.

But we have another inclination – the *yetzeir hatov* – the good inclination or as Rabbi Stone explained, the inclination to help others. This is the inclination to give *tzedakah* – or charity; the desire to help others and to volunteer, to reach beyond ourselves, to engage in *tikkun olam* – healing or repairing the world.

While the rabbis taught that we might start our lives or even each day by being focused on ourselves, on our own needs, on the *yetzeir hara* – the desire to preserve ourselves, we cannot remain there. We must cultivate a healthy *yetzeir hatov* – this takes work, discipline, and dedication. And it is built into the very fabric of our tradition – by performing *mitzvot*, by performing the commandments, our rituals, we hone our *yetzeir hatov*, and this, in turn, impacts on how we treat others, and how we speak.

The model for how to be in this world is found right after Cain kills his brother. God asks him where is his brother? And Cain answers:

“Hashomeir ahi anokhi – am I my brother's keeper?”

And we all know the answer is yes. We are all our brothers' keepers and sisters' keepers. We are all charged with caring for each other. And we are all responsible for how we act and how we speak and on how we talk about and with each other. Vile and contemptible rhetoric diminishes the world and ourselves and God's Presence.

However, we can bring about another reality. We can overcome the human inclination to be overly concerned with ourselves and focus instead on our *yetzeir hatov*. As we model that for ourselves, our families, our friends, our communities, we will be part of the change that can create a better political discourse and climate in our country.