



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Cain's choice

The story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) is a tale of sibling rivalry of archetypal significance. Have you ever stopped to consider what led to Cain's murderous action in the field? Two brothers. Same parents. What went wrong that led to the death of Abel? The collective wisdom of Jewish tradition offers interesting insights into this question. Let's join some of the Torah scholars in their conversation:¹

'And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard' (Gen. 4:4-5).

Why are Cain and his offering unacceptable? The text doesn't say outright, but the creative reflections of the sages find a reason. According to Rashi,² the fruit of the ground brought by Cain in verse 3 was 'from the poorest' of fruits. Contrast this with verse 4: 'the firstlings' of Abel's flock, 'their fat portions'. Note too that Abel brings from 'his' flock, whereas Cain's gift is 'the' fruit. Reading into this subtle difference the sages claim that Abel gives something closely identified with himself, whereas Cain makes no such personal sacrifice. See how a close reading of the text—attention to a single contrasting word—can affect our interpretation and draw us into the sacred story.

If we follow this line of reasoning, then, in relation to his brother's gift Cain's effort is shown up as inadequate. It is not a question of talent, but generosity, care, respectful effort. Where more was reasonably expected, Cain falls short, and this does not escape God's attention. Cain, you could say, is 'caught out' by God. What should be the response of one who is 'caught out'; whose poor behavior is exposed by someone with the authority to make the judgment? Surely it should be to admit and correct the error according to one's abilities. But Cain responds differently. 'Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell' (Gen. 4:5). He is consumed by a rage that is written all over his face.

'The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" (Gen. 4:5).

From a certain angle, God's question appears to be an annoying reference to the obvious. But, to the sages, no detail is meaningless. The Italian Torah scholar Sforno³ explains it thus: 'And why is your countenance fallen? If a fault can be remedied it is not right to bewail the past, but one should strive to mend matters for the future.'

In this light, we can detect both a warning and encouragement in the words of Genesis that follow:

'If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door;

its desire is for you, but you must master it' (Gen. 4:7).

In other words: Cain, own up to your actions. Your mistake isn't dire; you can be forgiven. But if you don't, greater sin will follow. With freewill comes a critical choice: to take responsibility for poor behaviour, to repent and make better choices in future, or to continue the destructive path and play the 'blame game.' We know how Cain chose:

'Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him' (Gen. 4:8).

What began as one poor choice ends in homicide and estrangement from God. Yet, as the sages interpret, the path was not inevitable. Things could have been different. And how different things could be in our own society. If only... •

For reflection: Consider Cain and Abel stories in the world today. What timeless wisdom does this Torah passage offer?

1. Works consulted: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994). Scripture quotations: NRSV.

2. Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac): 11th century French scholar revered as the 'prince' of Jewish Torah commentators.

3. Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno: Italian-Jewish bible scholar, Talmudist, physician. Died 1550.