YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Parashat Bereishit**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Kayin's Act**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. The Sacrifice and the Sin**

The first two acts of humanity recounted in the Torah are humankind's first two failures. Adam lived 930 years, and we know nothing about what he did all those years apart from his failure when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge and attempted to hide from his Creator in the aftermath of that sin. Kayin, too, must have done many things over the course of his life, but the Torah focuses exclusively on the shedding of his brother's blood and his failed attempt to hide this from God. With these failures, the Torah intends to teach us the great challenge of living righteously before God, both in man's relationship with his Creator and in his relationship with his fellow man.

What can we learn from the shedding of Hevel's blood, its motives and its consequences? According to the plain sense of the text, Kayin murdered his brother out of jealousy when Hevel's offering was favorably received while his was not. It is not entirely clear why God looked with favor upon Hevel's offering and not on Kayin's, but it appears from the passage that sin crouched at Kayin's door, Kayin desired it, and the sin ruled over him:

But to Kayin and to his offering He had not respect. And Kayin was very angry, and his face fell. And the Lord said to Kayin, “Why are you angry? And why are you crestfallen? If you do well, shall you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin crouches at the door, and to you shall be his desire. Yet you may rule over it.” (*Bereishit* 4:5-7)

Because of Kayin's sin, God had no desire for his sacrifice. This is the morality of the prophets in many places (*Yeshayahu* 1, *Yirmeyahu* 7, *Mikha* 6), and it is explicitly mentioned in the Torah (*Vayikra* 26:31), which asserts that during a time of sin and exile, God will not accept Israel's offerings. A sacrifice does not cover up a sin; and even when it comes to atone for a sin, as do most of the offerings mentioned in the book of *Vayikra*, it is only one part of the whole atonement process, which deals primarily with the repair of man's actions.

A striking example of this idea is found in the sacrificial service performed on Yom Kippur. The service atones, according to what is stated explicitly in the Torah, together with the fast. Nevertheless, the prophet Yeshayahu clarifies that even this is not enough:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him, and that you not hide yourself from your own flesh? (*Yeshayahu* 58:6-7)

The fast and the sacrificial offering must rest on the repair of one's actions.

Kayin is unaware of this; he sees the sacrifice as the entire story. He was prepared to kill his brother, thinking that in that way he could force God to accept his offering, for Hevel would no longer sacrifice his offering to Him. God, however, sends Kayin away, not wanting his sacrifice.

Perhaps this is the meaning of the Torah's insistence on the natural wholeness of the stones comprising the altar:

And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones; for if you lift up you tool upon it, you have profaned it. (*Shemot* 20:21)

Since the days of Kayin, the altar had to be clean of even the slightest suspicion of bloodshed. For the same reason, King David was barred from building the Temple:

But the word of the Lord came to me, saying: “You have shed blood abundantly and have made great wars; you shall not build a house to My name, because you have shed much blood upon the earth in My sight.” (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 22:8)

Moreover, the altar will not help or save one who has shed blood and is now liable for the death penalty:

And if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbor, to slay him with guile, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die. (*Shemot* 21:14)

**II. Civil War**

A mistake similar to that committed by Kayin in the first civil war in history is found in the first civil war among the people of Israel in the wake of the splitting of the monarchy – the war between Yerovam the king of Israel and Aviya the son of Rechavam, the king of Yehuda:

And Aviya joined battle with an army of valiant men of war, even four hundred thousand chosen men; and Yerovam set the battle in array against him with eight hundred thousand chosen men, who were mighty men of valor. And Aviya stood up upon Mount Tzemarayim, which is in the hill-country of Efrayim, and said: “Hear me, O Yerovam and all Israel; ought you not to know that the Lord, the God of Israel, gave the kingdom over Israel to David forever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?... And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David; and you are a great multitude, and there are with you the golden calves which Yerovam made you for gods. Have you not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aharon, and the Levites, and have made you priests after the manner of the peoples of other lands? So that whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bullock and seven rams, the same becomes a priest of them that are no gods. But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken Him; and we have priests ministering to the Lord, the sons of Aharon, and the Levites in their work; and they burn to the Lord every morning and every evening burnt-offerings and sweet incense; the showbread also set they in order upon the pure table; and the candlestick of gold with the lamps thereof, to burn every evening; for we keep the charge of the Lord our God; but you have forsaken Him. And, behold, God is with us at our head, and His priests with the trumpets of alarm to sound an alarm against you. O children of Israel, fight you not against the Lord, the God of your fathers; for you shall not prosper.” But Yerovam caused an ambush to come about behind them; so they were before Yehuda, and the ambush was behind them. And when Yehuda looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind them; and they cried to the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets. Then the men of Yehuda gave a shout; and as the men of Yehuda shouted, it came to pass, that God smote Yerovam and all Israel before Aviya and Yehuda. And the children of Israel fled before Yehuda; and God delivered them to their hand. And Aviya and his people slew them with a great slaughter; so there fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 13:3-17)

The oration delivered by Aviya the king of Yehuda oozes with religiosity. Mostly, it praises the sacrifices brought in the Temple, the incense, the placing of the showbread on the pure table, the lighting of the candles, the trumpets, the priests, and the Levites. The speech sets proper sacrificial service in the Temple in Jerusalem in the kingdom of Yehuda against the service that God does not want in His Temple, the worship of the calf in Bet-El in the kingdom of Israel.

However, the perfect sacrificial service of Aviya and his people had one deficiency. In the name of its ideology, it took the lives of five hundred thousand brothers, sons of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. It was based on an idea similar to that of Kayin when he came in the name of his birthright to kill his brother (though Kayin killed his brother because his own offering had not been favorably received, whereas Aviya killed his brothers because his own offering, in his opinion, was favorably received). What is the point of this sacrificial service, and how can it find favor in the eyes of God?

The Talmud tells of a similar phenomenon during the Second Temple period, in the generation of the destruction of the Temple:

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that two priests were equal as they ran to mount the ramp, and when one of them came first within four cubits of the altar, the other took a knife and thrust it into his heart. R. Tzadok stood on the steps of the Hall and said: Our brethren of the house of Israel, hear you! Behold it says: "If one be found slain in the land... then your elders and judges shall come forth" (*Devarim* 21:1). On whose behalf shall we offer the heifer whose neck is to be broken – on behalf of the city or on behalf of the Temple Courts? All the people burst out weeping.

The father of the young man came and found him still in convulsions. He said: "May he be an atonement for you. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become unclean." This [his remark] comes to teach you that the cleanness of their vessels was of greater concern to them even than the shedding of blood. (*Yoma* 23a)

The two priests competed with each other for the removal of the ashes from the altar, which is part of the sacrificial service. One priest killed his fellow priest in order to win this contest. The father of the deceased fits in to this picture when he shows more concern about the purity of the knife than about the killing of his son.

**III. Egla Arufa**

R. Tzadok reproaches his brothers of the house of Israel about the bloodshed and raises questions relating to the laws governing *egla arufa*, the heifer that is killed in an atonement ritual after someone has been killed by an unknown perpetrator. This passage is connected in its very essence to the story of Kayin; common to both of them is the attempt to conceal a murder that took place in a field, with nobody witnessing the event. The attempt to hide the murder was Kayin's second sin. He buried his brother Hevel in the ground, claiming: "I didn't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The heifer is not slaughtered, but rather its neck is broken; the ritual is performed not in the Temple, but in a valley. These two laws express the very opposite of a sacrifice. That is to say, God will not be appeased with any sacrifice with respect to the double sin of bloodshed and covering up the crime. The murderer must be found and justice must be carried out!

Another parallel between the passages is found in the punishment imposed upon the ground:

And now cursed are you from the ground, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield to you her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be in the earth. (*Bereishit* 4:11-12)

And the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer to a rough valley, which may neither be plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. (*Devarim* 21:4)

The ground participates in the crime by swallowing the murder victim's blood, thus helping the murderer escape punishment. Had he killed his victim in the city, the victim's cries for help would have brought people to the site of the crime, and they would have prevented the murder or captured the murderer after the fact. But the field and all that grew therein dulled the victim's cries, and so the ground had a part in the crime. Therefore, the fertile, water-filled valley may never again be plowed or sown, and the curse, "When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield to you her strength," will rest upon it, for the voice of the blood of the murdered party cries out from the ground. This is how the passage concludes:

So shall you put away the innocent blood from the midst of you, when you shall do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord. (*Devarim* 21:9)

**IV. The Mark of Kayin**

There is still room for another question: If the Torah is so stringent regarding the law of a murderer, why did God set a sign upon Kayin, so that anyone finding him should not smite him, and why did He say that "vengeance shall be taken sevenfold" on one who kills him?

It is possible that God was lenient with Kayin because Kayin could not have known and understood the severe meaning of striking his brother, of death, and of the fact that death is irreversible. Whoever is smitten to death will never rise up again! Certainly, when God so desires He will bring about the resurrection of the dead. But this event is beyond the horizon, and from our perspective, murder is murder, an act that cannot be undone. Kayin, the first killer and the first to encounter the phenomenon of death, could not have known this, however, and even if he knew this, he could not have understood its significance.

Perhaps this is the reason that the Torah refers to the resurrection of the dead only by way of allusion. Resurrection of the dead is not an event that is present in human life, and it therefore cannot serve as a consolation for the abhorrent crime of murder. This idea, of course, teaches us how precious human life is.