

Up until the story of Kayin and Hevel, human beings have not done anything that could be described as worship or ritual. When God fashions Eve and brings her to Adam, you would think he would say something like, *Oh my God!* But instead, he is completely self-absorbed: ***This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from man was she taken*** (2:23). Not a word of thanks. Nada. When God gives Adam and Eve their first pieces of clothing, again, no thanks. The first time we have anything that resembles a prayer is after Eve gives birth to Kayin. She says: **קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֵת ה' (ד:א)**
I have gained a male child with the help of God. (4:1) That's not quite a Psalm or a *Halleluyah*, but better than nothing! With no worship or ritual in the opening chapters of the Torah, it appears that Kayin has the distinction of being the first person who offers a formal sacrifice to God.

וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה מִנְחָה לַה'
Kayin brought from the fruit of the ground, a gift to God.

We tend to cast Kayin in a negative light. But could there be a reading of the story that is more sympathetic to Kayin, a *pro-Kayin* reading? And a reading that is critical of Hevel, an *anti-Hevel* reading? Accustomed as we are today to the polarization of everything, consider the following polarizing readings of the story:

THE SYMPATHETIC PRO-KAYIN INTERPRETATION OF KAYIN'S GIFT



Kayin's gift is pure altruism. It is instinctive, spontaneous, genuine and innovative. We don't know what it consisted of, whether it was a bunch of unwashed potatoes or a cornucopia of beautiful aromatic herbs, vegetables and luscious fruits. As a tiller of the soil, we infer that he is mindful of the curse that God has issued against the soil back when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, ***Cursed be the ground because of you***, (3:17). And yet, despite that curse, he is able to produce something from the ground to live off of and to share with his parents and his brother. Kayin has ingenuity. He has patience, because it takes time to grow food. He knows how to provide water for his produce and also depends on rain. This means he turns to heaven from time to time and looks beyond himself. Farming is hard work so he will inevitably call upon his parents and his brother to lend him a hand. He is grateful to God for what he has grown, and he has a natural desire to express that gratitude to God by sharing food symbolically with God. Since we have not seen an act of generosity up until this point, this first-ever gift to God is his invention. He sets aside a special place for this gift and has no expectation of any kind of acknowledgement from God.

THE UNSYMPATHETIC ANTI-KAYIN INTERPRETATION OF KAYIN'S GIFT

Kayin's gift is anything but altruism. At the most basic level it is a calculated gesture to elicit a response from God. Kayin must have learned this already because he lives in a the most compact social system that exists in humanity, the family, in which life is a series of negotiated activities demanding at the very least, some basic acknowledgements of others and occasional reciprocity. In every social system, people have to get along for the sake of survival, and one of the first things that human beings learn from infancy is a basic means of interacting with each other. Kayin's gift to God simultaneously acknowledges God's role as Creator, but also is intended to elicit God's future beneficence so that he will not only be able to enjoy his food this year, but for the unspecified years to come. Because this is an innovative act, its intended audience is not God but the rest of the people in the family unit. As such it is nothing but a brazen demonstration of power and a desire to assert himself by drawing attention to himself. On the surface, the gift's message is: ***Look at my produce!*** But its real message is ***Look at me! Acknowledge me! Notice me!*** He gives ***from the fruit of the ground*** which is not particularly impressive. Neither was he. Now to Hevel:

וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמִחֻלְבָּהֶן (ד:ג)
while as for Hevel, he too brought—from the firstborn of his flock, from their fat-parts. (3:4)

THE SYMPATHETIC PRO-HEVEL INTERPRETATION OF HEVEL'S GIFT

We have to admire Hevel's ingenuity and inventiveness. He has managed to circumvent God's instruction of only eating plants and fruits. As a shepherd, he has discovered a way of providing a rich variety of nutritious food and other necessities such as hides, wool, and bones, while engaged in less physically demanding work, affording him plenty of solitude and independence. He is keenly aware of his animals' vulnerability and protects them from predators and other dangers. He is attuned to the annual cycles of mating and regularly observes the generation of new life. He accords tremendous significance to the firstborns of his flock because they, more than any other creature, attest to God's control of the world. Hevel also has an altruistic impulse and is able to make a great spiritual leap: he equates his power over the animals, to God's power over him. His sacrifice of firstborns is a profound act of altruistic generosity. But more than that, because he is present before God at the precise boundary of



the animal's life and death, he demonstrates his profound awareness of his own creatureliness and vulnerability to God. This act transforms human self-perception and is thus a key moment in the spiritual evolution of humanity.

THE UNSYMPATHETIC ANTI-HEVEL INTERPRETATION OF HEVEL'S GIFT

Hevel is Kayin's younger brother (or twin, according to some). While Kayin is a source of exaltation for Eve and bears a name that is rich with meaning, Hevel's name literally means "nothingness." Hevel always has to outperform Kayin in order to gain attention from his parents and from God. It is for this reason that he becomes a shepherd, breaking the anti-meat rule that God issued to Adam. When Hevel witnesses Kayin's act, he wants to imitate him and surpass him in grandeur and quality. In this way, he seeks to usurp his brother in the family order and get his parents' and God's attention. To that end, he exercises his most important discovery as a shepherd: **his power over other creatures**. The killing of the animal is much more than a gift to God. It is an audacious act of violence, in the service of God. Then the Torah tells us: □

וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל הָאֵל הָאֵל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ.
וְאֶל קַיִן וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה (ד-ד:ה)
God paid heed to Hevel and his gift, but to Kayin and his gift, He paid no heed. (4:4-5)

How do we understand God's reaction?

It all depends on how we interpret the word **וַיִּשַׁע**.

THE PRO-HEVEL

INTERPRETATION OF GOD'S REACTION TO THE HEVEL'S GIFT **וַיִּשַׁע=Favored**

God is so profoundly **moved** by Hevel's altruism and the revolutionary nature of Hevel's spiritual innovation that he all but ignores Kayin. Midrash and classic commentators imagine a fire emerging from heaven to consume the sacrifice, as it did when the Tabernacle was inaugurated. Hevel's sacrifice was qualitatively better than Kayin's. Therefore, God favors Hevel and his sacrifice.

THE ANTI-HEVEL INTERPRETATION OF GOD'S REACTION TO HEVEL'S GIFT **וַיִּשַׁע=Noticed**

God is profoundly **alarmed** by the use of violence. God understands the consequences for humanity and becomes aware that human beings have arrived at a new boundary between good and evil, where **power over other creatures** (or humans!) can either be contained or exploited. Because of Hevel's audacity, God abruptly **notices** Hevel and his sacrifice, ignoring Kayin and his sacrifice. And then...

וַיִּסָּר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל קַיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לְךָ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ. הֲלוֹא אִם תַּיִשִּׁיב שָׂאתָ וְאִם לֹא תַיִשִּׁיב לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוָקוּ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ. (ד-ה:ז)

Kayin became exceedingly angry and his face fell. God said to Kayin: Why are you angry? Why has your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master. (4:5-7)

UNDERSTANDING GOD AS BEING SYMPATHETIC TO KAYIN:

I understand why you are upset. A moment ago, during your sacrifice I was not attentive to you. I acknowledge

that. Nevertheless, I am present with you now, and there is no greater attention than that. I care about you and the person you are destined to become. But the most important thing now is for you to understand yourself and your feelings. Rather than act out of your anger, you can exert self-control and prevent yourself from sinning.

UNDERSTANDING GOD AS BEING UNSYMPATHETIC TO KAYIN:

Let's face it, your brother presented a much more valuable sacrifice, with much more thoughtfulness and devotion. Your effort was valuable, but your motives were self-serving and transactional. You could have done better. Now I see that you are angry. But you can pull yourself out of that anger. If you don't, you will succumb to it, and you will potentially commit a grave sin. The challenge that lies in front of you is greater than any sacrifice that you could offer: take control of your desire to reassert yourself over your brother.

God's warning goes unheeded, and then, Kayin kills Hevel.

... וַיָּקָם קַיִן אֶל הָאֵל הָאֵל וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ. (ד:ח)
Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother and he killed him. (4:8)

Notice that the text uses the word **וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ**-and he killed him as opposed to **וַיִּרְצָחֵהוּ**-and he murdered him. For Kayin to have been guilty of murder he would have had to have acted with *malice aforethought* and some degree of *premeditation*. Reading the text closely, we don't see any motive or any premeditation. It only says: **he rose up and killed him**. Later we learn that Kayin is punished with exile, the penalty for manslaughter, not death. Accordingly, Kayin has committed manslaughter, not murder. But to what degree?

SYMPATHETIC TO KAYIN: CHARGING KAYIN WITH INVOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER

In this pro-Kayin reading, Kayin has thought deeply about God's reactions to both sacrifices. He understands God's warning to him, but rather than seeking to settle scores with Hevel, **he still deeply desires God's attention**. He is not overwhelmed by jealous rage, rather, he reasons soberly: **If power over another creature was Hevel's way of getting God's attention, then surely, I will get God's attention if I use power over Hevel himself!** It was Kayin's reckless use of unrestrained power, not jealous rage, that resulted in Hevel's unintended accidental death, hence this is a case of involuntary manslaughter, the less severe crime.

UNSYMPATHETIC TO KAYIN: CHARGING KAYIN WITH VOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER

In this anti-Kayin reading, while they are **together in the field**, Kayin is overcome by a fit of uncontrollable rage. Instead of exercising power over himself, he uses excessive power over Hevel, and kills him. Because his violent act resulting in death is due to passionate rage, this is a case of voluntary manslaughter, the more severe crime.

One conclusion: We can have polarizing views of this story, and yet we can still break bread together! Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS DAY 386. WE PRAY FOR THE LIVES OF THE HOSTAGES. MAY GOD SHIELD AND PROTECT ISRAEL AND THE IDF DURING THIS TIME OF WAR.