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CAN MORAL EDUCATION BE FRUITLESS?

A Dvar Torah *I'llui nishmat* Dr. Molly Klapper

by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Kayin kills Hevel after speaking to him, while they are in a field, after G-d has rejected Kayin's sacrifice and explained why. The Torah provides no direct information about what Kayin said to Hevel. However, Targum Yonatan (=Pseudo-Jonathan) to Bereishit 4:8 inserts an extensive debate between the brothers:

Kayin said to Hevel his brother when the two of them had gone out to the field:

"I see that the world was created with mercy, but it is not ruled in accordance with reward for good deeds, and there is favoritism in judgment, as can be seen from the fact that your sacrifice was accepted with favor and mine was not."

Hevel responded to Kayin:

"The world was created with mercy, but it is ruled in accordance with reward for good deeds, and there is no favoritism in judgment, and it is because my deeds are superior to yours that my sacrifice was accepted with favor and yours was not."

Kayin responded to Hevel:

"There is no judgment and no Judge and no Other World and no reward for the righteous or punishment for the wicked."

Hevel responded to Kayin:

"There is judgment and a Judge and an Other World and reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked."

They were arguing about these matters in the field when Kayin arose against Hevel his brother and buried a stone in his forehead and killed him.

On this reading, Kayin either failed to understand or else utterly rejected G-d's explanation for preferring Hevel's sacrifice to his. Here is how Targum Yonatan understands that explanation:

Behold,

if you improve your deeds –
your sin will be forgiven;

But if you do not improve your deeds in this world –
your sins will be preserved for the great day of judgement,
and your sin will lie across the gates of your heart.

I have given you authority over the evil inclination,
but it will desire you
and you will have power over it, for virtue or for sin.

The core of G-d's argument to Kayin is that he must improve his deeds to avoid ultimate judgment. The core of Kayin's rejection is that G-d must demonstrate justice in this world in order to convince him that there will be justice in the next, and His apparent preference for Hevel in this world is unjust.

In 1821, many centuries after Targum Yonatan, British poet Lord Byron also made the idea of another world central to Kayin's fate.

Byron was bothered by Kayin's ability to sin without first being seduced by the snake. His solution was to write the snake/Devil, whom he calls Lucifer into the story. *Cain: A Mystery* is a drama of infernal temptation patterned after Goethe's "Faust"¹.

Byron's "Preface" to *Cain* states as a premise that "there is no allusion to a future state in any of the books of Moses, nor indeed in the Old Testament.² Building on this premise, Byron suggests that at the story's outset, Kayin is aware of his body's mortality, but not of his soul's immortality. Kayin sees no purpose in a life that will inevitably end. In a "midrashic" scene, he refuses to join his parents and Hevel in prayer because he has "nought to ask" and "nought to be thankful for".

Lucifer seeks to take advantage of Kayin's frustration to turn him against G-d. However, Kayin's initial thoughts of rebellion are suicidal rather than murderous, and he is self-aware that suicide is not a psychological possibility.

A loathsome, and yet all invincible Instinct of life,
which I abhor, as I despise myself, yet cannot overcome —
And so I live. Would I had never lived!

¹ See my mother's book *The German Literary Influence on Byron*, p. 104. "Both [Mephistopheles and Lucifer] promise to show Faust and Cain respectively more in one hour than they could experience in a lifetime, and to beguile them with wonders no mortal had ever seen before." See there for many further similarities.

² Byron sends the reader to William Warburton's *Divine Legation* for a frum Christian explanation of this "extraordinary omission", with the comment that "whether satisfactory or not, no better has yet been assigned". Frum Jewish readers can compare it to their own favorite explanations, but the play is at core a new explanation for the omission.

Lucifer responds that suicide would be pointless. There is no escape from G-d.

Thou livest—and must live for ever.

As Lucifer anticipated, Kayin is made distraught rather than comforted by learning this. Had this life been all there was, perhaps he could have become reconciled to it and made a virtue of necessity. But corporeal life now stands revealed as an indignity imposed on an immortal soul!

For what must I be grateful?

For being dust, and grovelling in the dust, 'til I return to dust?
If I am nothing – for nothing shall I be an hypocrite and seem
well pleas'd with pain?

The stage is thus set for the confrontation of the altars. Kayin is the son who wears a kippah and goes to shul only when he comes home for yom tov; he (brings) sacrifices to get along with family. Hevel sacrifices to a G-d whom he loves. G-d responds with favor to Hevel and not to Kayin. An enraged Kayin seeks to destroy Hevel's altar, and when Hevel resists, kills him.

Abel: Brother, give back! Thou shalt not touch my altar with violence; if that thou wilt adopt it to try another sacrifice, 'tis thine.

Cain: Another sacrifice! Give way, or else that sacrifice may be –

Abel: What meanest thou?

Cain: Give – Give way! Thy G-d loves blood! Then look to it; give way, ere he hath *more*!

Abel: In *his* great name, I stand between thee and the shrine which hath had his acceptance.

Cain: If thou lovest thyself, stand back till I have strew'd this turf along its native soil; else –

Abel (opposing him): I love G-d far more than life.

Cain (striking him on the temples with a brand that he snatches from the altar): Then take thy life unto thy G-d, since he loves lives.

In Byron's reading, Kayin apparently believes that G-d preferred Hevel's sacrifice because it involved killing. His murder of Hevel, while the product of anger and not calculation, carries within it a deeply ironic sense of human sacrifice, and also a sense of freeing Hevel from a burden that Kayin cannot free himself from, but that Hevel cannot even perceive as a burden.

Byron's Kayin is psychotic. The etiology of his illness is inability to integrate the reality of the soul's immortality with his experience of himself as mortal. I suggest that this should make us recognize that convincing people of true religious ideas will not necessarily improve either their actions or their mental health. We need to think of how to produce integrated religious personalities rather than believers in specific religious doctrines. This I suggest is true even if we ourselves believe,

as Rambam certainly states in at least some places, that acceptance of these doctrines is essential for admission to the World to Come.

However, I think there is a clear reason to reject Byron's reading of the text, namely that so far as I can tell it utterly elides G-d's dialogue with Kayin after He disfavors Kayin's sacrifice. Only Lucifer talks to Kayin between the rejection and the murder.

But that weakness may yield an astonishing alternate interpretation.

Rashi states that Kayin and Hevel were conceived and born before Adam and Chavah ate the fruit. He may be motivated by a desire to exclude Christian readings, or by a desire to integrate G-d's blessing "be fruitful and multiply" into the narrative without making it a response to sin. Regardless, the upshot is that Kayin and Hevel were expelled from Eden because of their parents' sin, despite having done nothing wrong themselves. **THEY NEVER ATE THE FRUIT!**

The truth is that every human death is facially a violation of the principle that children must not be executed for the sins of their parents. But under Rashi's interpretation, Kayin and Hevel have an even stronger moral complaint. The rest of us die because of an inherited flaw; our mortality is more a genetic disease than a punishment. But Kayin and Hevel were already born when Adam and Chavah sinned! Even Lamarckians do not believe that parents can transmit acquired characteristics to already-born children.

And yet – Kayin ends up committing the great sin of murder. How could this be, if he never ate the fruit?

Perhaps Kayin was a genuine innocent who does a terrible thing because he is unaware of the difference between good and evil. Perhaps that kind of innocence, or psychosis, is not dangerous in a world without death, or perhaps the Garden was not as safe as we generally imagine. Regardless, Adam and Chavah changed the world, and their descendants inherited that changed world. Human mortality is actually environmental rather than inherited.

Following that option, we might understand G-d's peculiar first dialogue with Kayin, with its apparent references to sin and the capacity to resist sin, as an attempt to teach him the difference between good and evil without having him eat the fruit. But perhaps that turns out to be impossible, because the difference can be understood only in the aftermath of sin. Perhaps that is the basis of the opinion that those who repent their sins can reach spiritual places inaccessible to those who have never sinned.

Shabbat shalom!

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