

GETTING IT RIGHT IN GENESIS.

Dvar Torah for Parshat VaYiggash, 5781

As we wind down the narratives of Joseph and his brothers, permit me to direct your attention to all the tales of sibling rivalry found in the book of Genesis that began with Cain and Abel and that conclude in this morning's parsha with the reconciliation of Joseph and his family. These stories form a unified narrative about a kind of moral reincarnation which begins with the very first fratricide and ends redemptively only with the reuniting of Jacob's family with their brother Joseph. Each tale of sibling hatred and violence is corrected by the tale which follows it, so that by the end of the story cycle we see humanity beginning to redeem itself, however imperfectly, from its own murderous impulses.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God plays the role of a parent who seemingly favors the gifts of one child, Abel, over his sibling, Cain, without offering any justification for this parental behavior. Adam and Eve, their biological parents, have no direct involvement in the story. The Torah tells us that when Cain, the jilted brother, shows signs of distress over the favoritism, God the Parent does nothing to console him. God simply reminds Cain that "sin crouches at the door//Its urge is towards you//Yet you can be its master," (4:7), making it clear that no matter how he feels about Abel, Cain must not give into his darkest impulses. Cain of course does not listen to God and he kills his brother, thus initiating fratricide –the paradigm for all human violence- as a fixture on the moral landscape of humanity. When confronted by God, Cain responds with the lame rhetorical question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God punishes Cain by

exiling him from his home, forever fated to wander the face of the earth, with no hope for reconciliation with his murdered brother or his parents.

This paradigmatic story of brother-on-brother violence sets the stage for, and can only be redeemed by, all the subsequent stories of sibling rivalry. They are not only about specific founding families of the people of Israel but are microcosms of the overall human struggle to define what it means to be responsible for each other. Looking at the next story, that of Yishmael and Isaac, we see how it develops the story of Cain and Abel. Once again, God chooses without explanation the younger child, Isaac, over the older child, his half-brother Yishmael, to inherit the household and destiny of their father, Abraham, contrary to the ancient laws of the firstborn's rights. Despite Abraham's distress about his wife Sarah's demands that Yishmael and his mother, Hagar, be exiled from the household, so as to protect Isaac's political position, God sides with Sarah, and promises Abraham that his exiled son will in fact thrive as the founder of his own nation. In exile, Yishmael, the victim of jealous maternal protection of another sibling, almost dies, only to be revived through God's intervention. We do not hear about Yishmael again until the end of Abraham's life when his two boys reunite in order to give him a proper burial. (25:9). The text there tells us only that they buried him in the cave of Machpelah. No words of forgiveness or reconciliation pass between them; only the wordless opportunity for both brothers, the one who is given hegemony and the one who is exiled, to live long enough to be together one more time to honor their tortured father who had chosen between them.

The next narrative, that of Jacob and Esau, develops these themes even further. Once again, God the Parent chooses without explanation the younger Jacob over his older full

brother, Esau, to inherit their father Isaac's household and destiny. Here the story becomes more complex, since the boy's biological father, Isaac, favors Esau, while their biological mother, Rebecca, favors Jacob. God sides with the mother, who conspires with her favored son to push the divine decree by deceiving his father and older brother into bestowing upon him the family hegemony that should, according to ancient law, belong to Esau, the firstborn. Now it is Jacob the perpetrator who exiles himself to Isaac's homeland in order to escape the murderous, "Cain-like" wrath of his jealous brother. Similar to Yishmael, Esau is promised by God and his father a glorious, yet violent, national future in which he is in constant conflict with Jacob's offspring. Note how the story of these estranged brothers ends. Jacob, the self exiled perpetrator of wrongdoing against Esau, reunites with his brother after many years. Despite all the earlier threats, both brothers live long enough to see each other again. Jacob never apologizes explicitly to Esau for what he did, but that doesn't matter. He bows down to him seven times, and they speak to each other as brothers. (Ch. 34) Unfortunately, this is as far as perpetrator and victim can go. The brothers each go their own way, and only reunite a last time to bury their father, Isaac. (35:29)

Our last narrative, the reconciliation of Joseph and his siblings, develops these themes most fully and gives them redemptive closure. Joseph's dreams tell us that he, the second-youngest child, is destined by God the Parent to assume preeminence over his father and older siblings, who will bow down to him, in violation of the ancient laws of the firstborn. Joseph's mother, the favored wife Rachel, is dead and out of the picture, as are the other three mothers of his siblings by the time we reach them in Genesis, chapter 37. Jacob not only allows God's plan to go forward, he pushes the divine decree by

explicitly favoring Joseph over his other brothers. In this last story, not only is the favored brother the perpetrator, so are the rest of his siblings. Joseph rubs his destiny of supremacy in his brothers' faces with his gossip, his publicizing of the dreams, and his active role as daddy's favorite. His brothers literally rub Joseph's face in the dirt by throwing him into a pit, contemplating his murder, then ultimately exiling him to Egypt.

The exiled brother who becomes very powerful in his new home tests his brothers by exiling them in the clutches of ancient Egyptian bureaucracy. Caught in the web of their favored brother, who indeed has achieved supremacy over them, they could abandon their brother, Benjamin, whom Joseph has framed and arrested, by leaving him in Egypt. Only then does brother Judah break the fratricidal spell of Cain and Abel by stepping forth to defend and be a brother's keeper to Benjamin, father Jacob's stated favorite of his favored wife, Rachel, and the youngest and weakest of the siblings. Seeing that they have grown in their capacity for fraternal responsibility, Joseph tearfully reveals himself to his shocked siblings. Once again, Joseph does not exactly ask or give forgiveness. Nonetheless, look at how far we have come in this cycle of narratives. The favored brother *and* his siblings have both behaved badly and both have been exiled. Obviously, Joseph's earlier crimes pale in comparison with what his brothers did to him, yet that fact does not soothe the Cain-like, hatred filled intensity of their relationship with him. Only now, after years of estrangement, can Joseph reunite with all of them. Only now can he step away from the lingering hatred and his potential abuse of his powers to reassure them of his love as their brother. This happens *despite* their past treatment of him because he has seen their repentance in action. It also happens *because* of their treatment of him. He tells them that they should not fear his revenge because their past actions

were part of God's greater plan to bring him to Egypt in order to save the world from starvation during the famine. All of these exiled brothers, each potentially Cain and Abel in his own way, are reunited with each other, and with their father who lives to see them all together once again, and who is buried by all of them at the end of his life.

We began with a brother who murders his sibling in a silent, jealous rage and who is exiled on account of it. We conclude with brothers reaching beyond jealous rage to overcome mutual exile and to be reunited with words of brotherly love in the presence of their not-so-perfect father. Embracing all of these tragic characters in their various stages of jealousy, exile, and rivalry, are parents, both earthly and divine, whose love, arbitrary choices, and grand designs are the sources of so much pain and so much meaning. The power of these stories lies in their being about each of us and our families. Like Cain, we learn the painful lesson that, sometimes, life is not fair and life in families is even less fair. The accidents of genetics, temperament, parental imperfections, social circumstance and birth order –what the Torah might call the elements of God's plan- are often beyond our moral scrutiny and our control. What is in our control is our ability to restrain ourselves and to channel our most primitive, childlike desires and anguish so that we do not become Cain and Abel. Often this does not happen until we exile ourselves or we are exiled from parents and siblings whom we have wronged or who have wronged us. Communication breaks down and people minimize contact for years. Even when physically present, our relationships with family are at times in our lives so filled with resentment and unresolved stuff that redemption and forgiveness seem impossible. Yet, as we saw in each story of the cycle, we can grow up and we can be reunited. At times this happens in silence. It is simply too painful for words to pass between siblings or

between children and parents. The air is too thick with ugly history for the words to get through. Other times, we get the words just right, and whether directly or indirectly, we agree to let the past lie in the dust so that we can move through life with each other. Somehow the love of Joseph and his brothers, our love for and loyalty to family, pierces through the murderous rage of Cain and Abel. All too often it takes the death of a parent, whom we loved *and* hated, to force us to get past the old dynamics and achieve some kind of reconciliation. Then there are the instances when we get the message early enough to reunite before daddy or mommy die, so that their lives end in peace and our lives continue that way. Behind it all stands the mystery of the life that God has given each of us, a mixture of free choice and predetermination. We can choose to live in the past, to be slaves to the open wounds, the personal limitations, and the unfinished business of who we are and who our families are. We can become Cain and wander fruitlessly in search of happiness and peace. Or we can be Joseph and his brothers, able to answer Cain's question affirmatively: "Yes, we are our brothers' keepers." The fratricide of the first family was redeemed by the love and reconciliation of the last family. This can be true not only for our actual families into which we are born, but for the entire human family. It began with murder and exile. It can break that cycle with unconditional love, responsibility, and forgiveness. Humankind can be redeemed. Shabbat Shalom.