

WHERE IS ADAM?

Dvar Torah For Parshat Shmini/Yom Hashaoh 5781

*here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my elder son
cain son of man
tell him i*

When the Israeli poet Dan Pagis was fourteen, he escaped from a Nazi concentration camp in the Ukraine. Eventually, by 1946, he had made his way to Palestine. Today, Yad Vashem, the International Holocaust Authority and Museum in Jerusalem, displays Pagis's poem "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car" right above the Nazi-era boxcars on permanent exhibit in two different sites on the campus. Visitors can barely imagine—if at all—the experience he packs into his tight poem: Mother Eve's agony scrawled in her last words on the wall of that railway car, as she and her victim child, Abel, along with all her descendants, suffocate slowly, like penned cattle, on their way to the death camps.

And yet, imagination is precisely what Pagis demands of the reader to confront the enormous evil of the Holocaust and of all genocide. Up until this point everything we know from our reading of the Torah about Cain and Abel's parents suggests very little about their relationship or their relationship with their sons. Pagis' poem suggestively fills in those gaps, developing their agonizing implications for humanity. In the boxcar, Eve, symbolic mother of all people, is bonded with Abel, symbolic ancestor of every victim of violence. Like her silent younger son, Eve too is dying at the hands of her beloved son Cain, the murdering child presumably hiding and unaccounted for.

In Pagis's retelling of the story, Eve, almost entirely absent from the original Cain and Abel narrative, is now tragically and fully present. Pagis challenges us to think about Eve longing for Cain while also indicting him for brutalizing his brother. She also has a voice, especially at the end of Abel's life. Pagis transforms her into an active participant in both her sons' lives, though in a bitterly ironic way, as she rides toward death in a cattle car, along with every victim of the Nazis.

Pagis's poem is a modern midrash, a means for us to explore the universal implications of Cain and Abel's fatal conflict through the particular lens of the Holocaust. Whenever and wherever one person victimizes another, Eve and her victimized children—progenitors of all human beings—can be found, dying together in that boxcar. Hebrew literature scholar, Anne Lerner, explains that by reworking the story of Eve and her sons in this way, Pagis "implies that from its conception, the human project carried the seeds of inhumanity." Eve suffocates with Abel in a tragic solidarity, while searching to the very end for her beloved Cain, the murderer of her family: "if you see my elder son / cain son of man / tell him i..." Tell him I . . . what? All sense, logic, and hope dissolve into the choking air surrounding Eve's amputated statement. Eve's cry against Cain, along with her desperate search for him as she waits to die with Abel, is so loud, it cannot be ignored, precisely because it is the cry of the mother of both the victim *and* the murderer. With Pagis's pen, Eve, "the mother of all life," is transformed into the eternally suffering "mother of all death."

This past week, on the morning of Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, I was finishing up a project with my middle school students for our memorial assembly to be held later than day. One of the kids had finished his work and had nothing else to do, so I showed him Pagis' poem. He got the basics of how Pagis symbolically transfers the biblical first family and fratricide to a boxcar on the way to a concentration camp. What he failed to mention, and what I always find troubling, is that the biblical character, Adam, the first father, is missing from Pagis' story. Cain is referred to as literally the son of Adam, but that's more for symbolic effect, as the Hebrew phrase "*ben-Adam*," literally son of Adam, or more colloquially, son of man, is a euphemism for human beings. Adam as a character has no real presence or voice in the poem.

A couple of my more curious students walked over to join the discussion, so I asked them: "What do you think about this?" "Eve and Abel are here in the poem, and Eve is trying to get a message to Cain. But where is Adam?"

As we traded ideas, one of my students chimed in:

"Rabbi Dan, maybe Adam is a symbol for all of the people who were absent when we Jews needed them to help us. Maybe Adam's absence is a symbol for what

happens when people don't show up anytime one group is trying to destroy another one."

This never occurred to me. Cain, the *ben-Adam*, the son of Adam, holds forth in his murderous fury because Adam his father, humanity, refuses to do anything to hold him back. Holocaust scholarship has demonstrated that many Germans and other Europeans actively participated in the mass murder of Jews out of pure hatred. But many others stood back and did nothing out of fear, survival instinct, and self-interest, turning their backs on their closest neighbors and friends to keep themselves alive. It was the rare individual, almost possessed by what Eva Fogelman has called the rescuer personality, who stood up for Jews against the Nazi regime, under the most extreme circumstances. Outside of Europe, particularly in the United States, the public has consistently taken its cues about non-intervention in the Holocaust and other global genocides from the American government, which contrary to Dan Pagis, refuses to imagine humanity's capacity for such horror. In her outstanding book on American foreign policy and genocide, *A Problem From Hell*, Samantha Power cogently argues that the government, the media, and our citizenry consistently downplay the prevalent reality of global genocide, preferring to see instances of it as unfortunate conflicts between equally guilty parties and as lost causes which are impermeable to our intervention. We, the American Adam, might have always carried a big stick, but we seem wholly incapable of using it to beat Cain off of Abel's neck.

I'm ashamed to say that I find myself slipping into this lost cause mentality all the time. Like my fellow Jews worldwide, I mouth the words, "never again" and I apply that slogan to all genocides. I'm disgusted, outraged by the stories banging on my brain's window about the fates of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Uighur in China, the Yazidis in Iraq and Yemen, to name but a few. Then the numbness, the mental fatigue and the despondency envelop me, I take another sip of coffee and I hastily turn the page in the paper: the window slams shut, my imagination switches to off. I'd like to believe that, if I were faced with having to hide people being persecuted in our own country, I would do so, but who knows what he or she would do in such an extremely dangerous situation until faced with that situation? Certainly, the explosion of White supremacism in America makes this question more relevant than ever domestically. However, the more immediately relevant question for us is how to respond to the genocides far away from our borders right now?

The wise counsel of Pirke Avot, ethics of our sages, is helpful here. It teaches that it isn't our task to finish the work, yet it isn't our prerogative to desist from that work either. None of us - individually or communally - is going to stop every genocide or ethnic cleansing from happening, nor are we obligated to take on such an enormous project. Yet what if each of us chose to speak out about *one of these atrocities* happening in our global backyards? How much effort would it take us to write some emails to political leaders, make a small donation, read some articles, and share our passion for our specific cause with our friends on social media? Yes, making this commitment requires finding time and emotional space in our lives for engaging with an aspect of human life at its worst and most terrifying. It is easier to be Adam the absent one, to stand on the side of that boxcar reading Mother Eve's scrawled message and say, "There is nothing of value that I can do." It is harder to be a "*Ben-Adam*", a child of Adam, a human being at our human best, refusing to allow the fratricidal legacy of Cain to erase the words of Eve and her children, the innocent victims of ethnic and political hatred.

"If you see my elder son//Cain, son of man//tell him i...."

Tell him what?

What do we, Adam's children, humanity's bystanders on the stage of genocidal atrocity need to tell Cain?

Perhaps this: "We will no longer permit you to keep killing your brothers, for you are your brothers' keepers."

Shabbat shalom.