

The Innocence of Ignorance

Category: Bereishis, Bereishis

Why did G-d protect the world's first murderer? And what does that tell us about "beginner-Jews"?

Protecting the Murderer?

Today, we began reading the Torah from the beginning—or, should I say, “In the Beginning.”

In the Torah portion of Bereishis, we learn about Kayin and Hevel, more commonly known as Cain and Abel—the first brothers in all of history.

The Torah tells us that Kayin brought “from the fruits of the earth an offering unto G-d, and Hevel brought, he, too...” The Torah tells us that G-d accepted Hevel’s offering, but not Kayin’s and Kayin was very hurt. And immediately after that, we read, “And it was when they were in the field, and Kayin rose up to his brother Hevel and killed him.”

It was the first murder in history. In all, there were two brothers in the world, and the whole world was theirs—and they were already fighting over the inheritance!

So G-d immediately turned to Kayin and asked him, “Where is Hevel your brother?” Kayin answered with that very famous one-liner: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He then got punished: “You shall be a wanderer and an exile in the land.”

But Kayin complained to G-d. He said: “...and I will be a wanderer and an exile in the land, and it will be that whoever finds me will kill me.”

Then comes the biggest surprise of all: “G-d placed a mark on Cain that no one who find him slay him”; G-d saw to it that no one would be able to kill Cain in vengeance.

Why did G-d protect Kayin? After all, he did murder Hevel, did he not? And for murder, one deserves the death sentence. So not only did G-d not kill Kayin as a punishment, He even took pains, so to speak, to provide special protection for

him!

Not only that, but the verse even says, “whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be wrought upon him sevenfold”—anyone who kills Kayin will be punished. Why is G-d suddenly protecting a murderer?

The question gets even stronger. In the very next Torah portion, Noach, the Torah tells us: “Whoever sheds the blood of man through man shall his blood be shed” (Bereishis 9:6)—a person who spills blood deserves execution.

But here, in our Parshah, not only does G-d not punish Kayin, but even protects him and warns that anyone who touches him will be punished! Why does Kayin suddenly get preferential treatment?

The Midrash tells us that Kayin argued to G-d that it was G-d’s fault that he had sinned—that it was because of G-d that he had killed Hevel. As the Midrash says: “You are the one who killed him! Because if you had accepted my sacrifice like his, I would not have been jealous of him.”

Now, this may sound strange. This is a defense that every little kid uses all the time: “He made me do it!” The other kid got me angry, so that’s what made me hit him. It’s his fault.

A colleague of mine went to visit Jewish prisoners at a regional prison before the holidays. He met with many Jewish prisoners—and, one by one, each explained to him exactly how he was innocent of any wrongdoing and that he was sitting in prison with a clean record. And each one practically repeated the same words—he didn’t do anything bad to a single human being. It was almost as if they were all sitting in the “Acquitted Wing.”

But finally, he met one prisoner who was prepared to admit that he truly had committed the offense for which he was sitting in prison—but, it was not his fault... other people had forced him to do it...

It seems to be the same thing here: Kayin blames no less than G-d Himself for the crime—that because He had not accepted his offering, he had gotten angry, and that anger caused him to kill Hevel.

This doesn’t sound like a very good excuse. So why did G-d forgive Kayin—and, not only that, but also protect him so that no one would do him any harm?

I Didn't Know...

The answer to this question is in the same Midrash, just a few lines earlier: “Kayin said to G-d: ‘Master of the Universe! I neither knew of nor saw murder in all my life! Did I know that he would die if I hit him with a rock?!’”

Sounds strange—but if you think about it, Kayin is asking a powerful question: There are only four human beings on the face of the earth. They’ve just been created. Their minds are fresh, clear and innocent. They know nothing. And so naturally, Kayin had no concept of this thing called murder, or death, for that matter—he literally did not know that you can kill another human being. After all, it was the first murder in all of human history.

In short, Kayin argued that he had indeed hit his brother with a rock—but he didn’t know that this would kill him.

The fact is that every now and then, you’ll hear or read about a man who gives his good friend a hearty slap on the back—and his friend suddenly has a bad reaction: he passes out... or worse.

Did the friend mean to knock out his golf buddy or accidentally kill his old Army friend? No! He obviously had no intention of giving him a heart attack. Even in a case where two friends might have been fighting and one gets really hurt or worse, the friend who hit the other friend had no intention of killing him, G-d forbid.

This is what happened with Kayin. As the Midrash continues: “All the beasts and birds and the First Snake gathered to demand the blood of Hevel, and G-d said to them, ‘Therefore, whoever kills Cain...’—Kayin had no one to learn from, so from now on, anyone who kills Kayin will himself be killed.” That’s why G-d forgave Kayin—and not only that, He protected him too.

What can we learn from this?

Sometimes, people hurt other people without really thinking about it. They don’t know that certain words cause hurt—which is why they use those words: They have no precedent, and so they don’t know that you can’t talk like that.

A friend of mine, fresh from Rabbinical school, met a young couple. They asked

him how old he was. He told them. Then, in all innocence, he asked them how old they were. The husband told him his age, but when he turned to the wife, she gave him a sharp look; “Don’t you know that you’re not supposed to ask a woman her age?”

How was this innocent young rabbi, fresh out of yeshivah, supposed to know? Did he go to some aristocratic etiquette class? From that experience, he learned not to ask such questions.

Don’t Blame

This is true not just for societal situations, but also spiritual situations.

A Jew who didn’t grow up in an observant household that kept the Torah and mitzvos, and has no precedent for this in his or her life, cannot be blamed for not keeping the Torah and mitzvos—after all, how was he or she supposed to know what Torah and mitzvos are?

Such a person never was taught the importance of keeping Torah and mitzvos. Even if he were to meet someone who tells him about Shabbos, or keeping kosher, it’s still all new to him. It’s like telling me about global warming: It goes in one ear and out the other—because that’s not my world. I didn’t grow up being taught about global warming. No one ever told me how important it is.

So many Jew who grew up without a Jewish education can’t be blamed for his situation. The Rebbe explained at length on Asarah b’Teves 5751 (1991) that in our generation, such Jews are in the category of “kidnapped children,” like the kids in those novels you read as a kid who are snatched away from their homes and raised by others and don’t know who they really are.

The Rebbe quotes from the Rambam: “He is not charged to cling to the way of mitzvos because he is like one who was forced—and even though he later hears that he is a Jew, and he sees the Jews and their religion, he is like a forced person because he was raised in error... and so when those ‘kidnapped children’ observe even one mitzvah, it is of exceedingly great importance and value to G-d.”

So now that we have begun a new year, let no one who may have been raised in a such a situation feel that he or she is inadequate in G-d’s eyes.

On the contrary—with a new year underway, now is the best time to start something new in your new-found discovery of your spiritual heritage, your spiritual family, and your spiritual Father in Heaven.

So if you've taken on a mitzvah, by all means, keep doing that mitzvah! Enjoy it! Make it yours.

And if you haven't yet done that, pick a mitzvah that interests you, and give it a try! Do you light Shabbos candles? Do you put on tefillin? If not, give them a try! It can't hurt. And it's the best time to start.