YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Bereishit**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

by Debbi and David Sable

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Dedicated in memory of Michael ben Avraham z"l,

whose yahrzeit is 28 Tishrei,

by Family Rueff.

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**The Song of Lemekh – The First Song in the Bible**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. Song of War**

*Parashat Bereishit* is the home of many firsts in the Torah. Among other things, it also hosts the first song in the Bible: the song of Lemekh to his wives. These are the words of the grandson of Kayin:

Ada and Tzila, hear my voice/ you wives of Lemekh, hearken to my speech;

for I have slain a man for wounding me/ and a young man for bruising me;

If Kayin shall be avenged sevenfold/ truly Lemekh seventy and sevenfold. (*Bereishit* 4:23-24)

A fine song, with well-structured hemistichs and direct parallelism. But through the beautiful artistic framework, we catch sight of rather dark content,[[1]](#footnote-1) content of killing and revenge. Like all the songs in the Bible, the song of Lemekh is a song of war. The Song of the Sea describes God's war with the Egyptian army. The Song of the Well describes, according to *Chazal* (and, in my opinion, this is in fact the plain sense of Scripture), the war fought at the Arnon streams against the army of Sichon, king of Cheshbon. The Song of Devora, the Song of David, the Song of the Kings of Canaan in *Yehoshua* (chapter 12), and the Song of the Ten Sons of Haman (*Esther* 9) are also songs of war.

In his song, Lemekh describes to his wives his own might and his ability to avenge the wound that he had suffered by killing the man who had wounded him and avenging his injury by destroying his assailant's seed, so that there not be left on earth one to redeem his blood and his inheritance. For if Kayin, the songwriter's grandfather, avenged sevenfold the desecration of his honor at the altar through the killing of his brother Hevel, Lemekh his grandson avenged his own wound and injury seventy and sevenfold.

Who wounded and bruised Lemekh? This we will never know. It is possible that his wound was accidental and not intentional. It is also possible that it involved only a relatively minor injury. But for Lemekh, this was all unimportant; the one who sinned against him will pay many times over, and vengeance will be exacted!

According to the song, Lemekh commands his wives to listen to him and warns them about the meaning of the desecration of the honor of their master, who does not pardon or let things pass, but rather lands a mortal blow upon anyone around him who dares to harm or provoke him.

Fine is the might of Lemekh, and worthy of the father of Tuval Kayin, the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron, and apparently also the father of the weapon industry. Presumably, it was Tuval Kayin who provided his father with the weapons with which he exacted revenge from the man who wounded him and from his seed.

Fine is Lemekh's song, and worthy of the father of Yuval, the father of all who handle the harp and the pipe, who presumably composed the melody of his father's song. It probably resembled one of Richard Wagner's works, to the sounds of which Jews were led to their deaths in the gas chambers seventy-five years ago. We see, then, that one can learn from the very beginning of human history the same lesson taught by recent history – the extent to which high culture and conscience do not necessarily come together.

**II. Kayin and His Seed**

Why did the Torah expand on the topic of Lemekh's song, and why are we interested in him and his actions? There are two answers to these questions – two answers that are actually one.

The first answer is that Lemekh's act opens the door to further contemplation regarding the action of Kayin, who, in his jealousy, killed his brother Hevel, for which he was expelled from the land and barred from working it, and through which he, to a great degree, sealed the fate of the world.

*Chazal* expounded that Kayin's action ended with repentance:

When Adam met him [Kayin], he asked him: What judgment was decreed against you?

He said to him: I repented and was pardoned.

Adam then began to slap his own face, saying: This is the power of repentance, and I knew not!

Thereupon Adam rose up and recited: "A psalm, a Song, for the Sabbath day. It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord" (*Tehillim* 92:1-2). (*Bereishit Rabba* 22:13)

This is also how Kayin was commemorated for later generations:

His seed erred when he spilled his brother's blood/

You punished him with being a fugitive and a wanderer, going here and there/

Then he returned to You and abandoned the evil of his ways/

You extended [vengeance] sevenfold, lest any finding him should smite him. (*Selichot* for Tzom Gedalya, Ashkenazi rite)

But Kayin's repentance was incomplete repentance. It was motivated only by the fear of punishment and not by an acknowledgment of the abominable nature of his sin, for this is what he said to his Creator-Judge:

Behold, You have driven me out this day from the face of the land; and from Your face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth; and it will come to pass, that whoever finds me will slay me. (*Bereishit* 4:14)

When repentance stems not from mental distancing from the sin, but from fear of punishment, its long-term legacy, which knows how to filter the facts so that they will accord with the myth, is not shame regarding the commission of the sin, but rather shame regarding having been caught and punished. There is a French saying about a thief who is caught and punished for his crime: He is guilty not of theft, but of having been caught. This is the idea of fear of punishment.

The sinner's test lies in his behavior subsequent to his sin and to the legacy that he leaves for his descendants. In the continuation of the thirteen Divine attributes of mercy, it is stated in the Torah:

… visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation. (*Shemot* 34:7)

*Chazal* noted that it is the sin, and not the punishment, that is liable to visit future generations:

The verse deals with children who continue in the same course as their fathers. (*Berakhot* 7a)

When repentance is incomplete and does not stem from the proper motive, the sin itself is inherited. Presumably, then, Kayin's act was passed down in the family from father to son – not with remorse and the act of repentance, but with its after-the-fact justification by way of a family myth as an act that was desirable from the outset. This is how the children explained their forefather's action to their own children: Our father Kayin was determined, and he did not wimpishly relinquish his status as the firstborn son of Adam and Chava. When he was insulted by Hevel and God, when Hevel's offering was favorably received, our father knew how to defend his honor and force God to turn to him and enter into a dialogue with him. The letter on Kayin's forehead attests to the fact that at the end of the process, even God knew to appreciate a determined person who does not give up his principles. God, they added, valued Kayin's power, and therefore issued the following warning:

Therefore whoever slays Kayin, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold… (*Bereishit* 4:15)

Thus was passed down the legacy of the sinful Kayin, who was not ashamed of his sin, but only afraid of his punishment.

Lemekh, the subject of our chapter, bore his grandfather's legacy with pride, resolutely killed the man who wounded him and also his son, and even added to what God had said to Kayin: "If Kayin shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lemekh seventy and seven." It was on this social and moral foundation of violent and indiscriminate revenge, in the sense of "the strongest wins," that the seed of Kayin built human society.

**III. The Sons of God**

We come now to the second answer regarding the importance of the story of Lemekh. The verses indicate that Lemekh did not stand out in that generation, not in his relation to his wives, not in his relation to his friends and neighbors, and not in his relation to all people:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomever they chose… The Nefilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown. (*Bereishit* 6:1-4)

The "sons of God" are powerful and violent rulers. As we find in the Pharaonic, Assyrian, and Hittite worlds, the ruler is the "son of God," and it is from this that he derives his authority. And as we find in the actions of Pharaoh and Avimelekh with respect to Sara (and almost with Rivka), as well as in the action of Shekhem the son of Chamor with respect to Dina, the sons of God saw their authority as His sons as granting them the right to take for themselves any woman they desired, even if she was married to another man. According to one opinion in the *midrash*, Kayin maintained a similar position:

Then what were they arguing about? R. Huna said: An extra twin sister was born with Hevel. This one said: I will take her because I am the firstborn. The other one said: I will take her because she was born with me. Because of this, "Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother and slew him." (*Bereishit Rabba* 22:7)

The sons of God acted like Lemekh the grandson of Kayin. When they encountered conflict, they employed force to resolve the problem. Thus was born the generation of the flood, and the flood in its wake. Kayin's action and his repentance, which was not true repentance, even though it evoked God's long-suffering mercy, was what brought Lemekh and the generation of the sons of God to rule the world. It was Lemekh and those around him who would have been seen by anyone looking out from the window of the ark built by Noach before the flood came and destroyed everything.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**IV. The Song at the End of the Torah**

Just as the Torah opens with a song of vengeance, the Song of Lemekh, so too it concludes with a song of vengeance, the Song of Ha'azinu:

For I lift up My hand to heaven/ and say: As I live forever,

If I whet My glittering sword, and My hand take hold on judgment/ I will render vengeance to My adversaries, and will recompense them that hate Me.

I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh/ with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy.

Sing aloud, O you nations, of His people; for He does avenge the blood of His servants/ and does render vengeance to His adversaries, and does make expiation for the land of His people. (*Devarim* 32:40-43)

The Torah teaches the great difference between the vengeance of a violent thug from among the descendants of Kayin and the vengeance of "the Rock, His work is perfect… just and right is He," who avenges the blood of His servants on His land. In the vengeance of the seed of Kayin, who killed father and son for the infliction of a single (perhaps unintended) wound, there is no justice or rightness. But the vengeance of the Rock, whose work is perfect, comes to avenge the blood of His servants on His land from the hands of those who spilled it like water. God will not allow those murderers to inherit His land, in the sense of "Have you murdered, and also taken possession" (I *Melakhim* 21:19). It is the people of Israel who will inherit the Land of Israel.

For God will save Zion, and build the cities of Yehuda; and they shall abide there, and have it in possession. The seed also of His servants shall inherit it; and they that love His name shall dwell therein. (*Tehillim* 69:36-37)

1. We understand Lemekh's song to his discredit, rather than to his praise; this is what follows from the comments of the Malbim. It should be noted that the Ramban expounds the words of Lemekh to his praise and even notes that he was "a very wise man in all arts." The Ramban also sees Kayin's repentance, which we will address below, in a positive light. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many years ago, I heard the question raised in a synagogue sermon: It is understandable that God decided to destroy all the corrupt and violent people of the generation. But every powerful and violent person had a powerless and abused victim. Why were they also destroyed in the flood? The answer is that it is the way of the world that the violent and corrupt constitute a small minority that cast their dread on the silent majority. The victims of their violence immerse themselves in their own personal troubles and try to spare themselves from the next abuse. There are times, however, that these downtrodden people can rise up against their abusers and build a better and more just world. In those situations, when such an opportunity presents itself and they decide for whatever reason to do nothing, the victims become part of the chain of corruption. Thus, a certain responsibility for the destruction of the world falls upon their shoulders as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)