YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur #12: Kayin and Hevel**

With all of its complexity, the story of Kayin and Hevel is not usually regarded as central to the early chapters of *Sefer Bereishit.* The "stars" are Adam, Noach, and Avraham, as reflected in the mishna that enumerates the generations between them. The story of Kayin and Hevel is one of many points along this continuum.

To Manitou, however, the Kayin and Hevel narrative is a formative episode. He maintains that humanity's journey is directed entirely towards a repair of Kayin's sin, rather than the sin of Adam, as many scholars maintain. Before addressing the narrative itself, we might point out that Manitou's theory in this regard reflects the same general trend that we have seen in previous shiurim. Adam's sin was primarily a sin between man and God – i.e., in the religious sphere. The focus on Kayin and Hevel, on the other hand, highlights the inter-personal, moral sphere. Manitou presents the idea thus:

*The moral criterion is a key to understanding the biblical narrative from the beginning of Chapter 4 of Sefer Bereishit. I usually start my Chumash instruction with a study of this chapter, since it presents, for the first time in history, a moral problem, in the form of the story of Kayin and Hevel. This problem remains to be solved over the course of history. I know that many people emphasize the sin of Adam, but that is a mistake, because on the collective level this problem was resolved already by King David. All of world history is a repair of the sin of Kayin, and this is the problem that should concern us on the collective level throughout the generations: repairing the fraternal relations between people*. (Sod Midrash ha-Toladot III, p. 151)

Further on in the *shiurim* we will address more extensively Manitou's conceptual focus on this biblical narrative, shifting the emphasis away from the sin of Adam. In the meantime, let us turn our attention to his commentary on the narrative itself.

**The main son and the other son**

The narrative begins with the birth of Kayin and Hevel:

(4:1) “And Adam knew [was intimate with] Chava his wife, and she conceived and bore Kayin, saying, I have acquired a man from [or ‘with’] God.”

It is easy to miss the importance of this moment, but it is critical – the climax of Creation. The birth of Kayin and Hevel is the first birth in the history of humankind; human beings create human beings. We might regard this as the realization of man’s purpose – to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Manitou draws our attention to the wording of the text concerning Kayin’s name: “… she conceived and gave birth to Kayin” (*Bereishit* 4:1). As he points out, the Torah usually notes the birth of the child and only afterwards records the name given to him. But Kayin is born as Kayin: “… and gave birth to Kayin.” He is born with his name, with his essence. From the continuation of the verse, “I have acquired a man,” we understand this essence. ‘Kayin’ is derived from ‘*kinyan*,*’* acquisition. This name defines Kayin’s outlook on the world–it belongs to him. After all, he embodies the fulfillment of the life purpose of Adam and Chava. Thus, according to Manitou, Kayin sees himself as the center of the world and it, as his possession:

*Kayin is the first to be born from the womb of a woman, and in his mother’s eyes he is fully realized or “acquired.” He recognizes himself as existing in his most perfect form.[[1]](#footnote-1) The whole world belongs to him. There is no room in his existence for anyone else: not for a brother, and not for the Creator. He himself is the world. Just as “Adam” is the name of mankind (adam) in the first generation of humanity, so “Kayin” is the name of mankind in the second generation. From his point of view, he is the entire world; he is the essence of the world in the second generation, and he is perfect. Hence, as he sees it, there is no need for any sort of moral exertion. He has no need to acquire or earn his life. Someone who sees himself as ”fully realized” – ‘kanui’ – is guilty of the sin of pride*. (ibid.)

Kayin’s worldview runs counter to the fundamental orientation of Creation as discussed in the previous *shiurim*: man’s obligation to acquire the right to his existence. A person is meant to see his existence in the world as a Divine *chessed*, or kindness, and he should exert a moral effort to become worthy of it. Kayin ignores the Divine beneficence that brought him into the world, and takes his existence for granted. Manitou explains why the commandment to honor one’s parents is so central to the Ten Commandments. A person must be grateful to his parents who brought him into the world, thereby also becoming aware of the Divine beneficence that gave him existence. Ramban uses this idea to connect the commandment of honoring parents to the first commandment, “I am the Lord your God”: Just as you may not deny or turn your back on Him Who brought you out of Egypt, so you may not deny or turn your back on those who brought you into the world. This however, is not Kayin’s perception.

The birth of Hevel is described differently:

“And she bore further his brother, Hevel” (4:2).

It comes as a sort of afterthought: “And she bore **further**.” There is already a child in the world; what need is there for another son? Kayin is the primary focus; Hevel is an addition. He enters the world as Kayin’s brother, secondary to him. He is called “[Kayin’s] brother” before his own name is even mentioned. And he is merely “hevel,” vapor, breath, not meant to occupy any space in the world. Behind the birth of Hevel as a mere addition lurks a question: For what purpose is he born? What is missing from the world without him? What right does he have to exist? In contrast to Kayin, who is born into a world that is waiting just for him, Hevel is born into a world already filled with someone else.

This apparent lack of identity actually creates identity. The existence of someone else in the world requires morality. Hevel arrives in a world in which there is an “other,” and he must interact with him. But the relationship is not symmetrical. Though each brother has another who exists alongside himself, the existence of one brother is obvious and self-evident, while a question mark hangs over the existence of the other brother – in the minds of both.

The brother who is born second enters a world in which the other already exists. Morality is thus part of his nature. The first-born brother comes into a world in which he is the one and only. Kayin and Hevel are the son and the brother, the primary and the secondary. Hence the former tends toward arrogance while the latter tends toward self-deprecation. By virtue of being an “extra,” Hevel lives with the existential fear of being superfluous.

**Occupation as expressions of identity**

The difference in identity between the two brothers is also reflected in their occupations: “…and Hevel became a shepherd, while Kayin was a tiller of the land.” (4:2) Kayin, as his name suggests, is a man of “acquisition” (substance), while Hevel, in keeping with his name, is a man of spirit. Kayin possesses land; he has a place. Moreover, he perceives the entire vastness of place as his own. This leaves Hevel with no share of the land, and therefore he is constantly on the move, like the wind. He is a shepherd who wanders with his flocks. His default state is the same as that imposed on Kayin as a punishment – he is a “nomad and wanderer.” Later on, Kayin is unable to bear the thought of this nomadic existence; he appeals his punishment, and tries to build a permanent area of settlement despite God’s decree.

The respective characteristics of Kayin and Hevel are also expressed in the language of the verse: “Kayin was a tiller of the land.” This defines him. Hevel, on the other hand, “became a shepherd,” in an expression of action and development. What we have is stability and permanence versus fluidity and movement.

Manitou asks, at what juncture is mankind at this stage? What is the challenge, mankind’s first, facing Kayin and Hevel? Adam and Chava, after all, belonged to a pre-world, pre-humanity reality. The first generation of mankind in our world is deliberately set up by God within the reality of two brothers, one, whose existence is self-evident, and one whose existence is in question. The great question is whether each of them can emerge from the state that defines him. Kayin needs to achieve a sense of brotherhood towards Hevel and give him space, while Hevel has to overcome his self-abnegation in relation to Kayin:

*The question at stake is whether Hevel is indeed a superfluous ”extra” – in which case he is in perpetual danger of his life – or whether the ‘owner’ of the world, Kayin, understands the special, unique purpose of Hevel in Kayin’s world. This is the same question that has echoed ever since in every generation: is there place for the other in the world of the party who sees himself as owner of the world? This question reaches its climax in the relationship between the nations of the world, which regard themselves as the owners of the world, and Israel*. (ibid.)

Kayin and Hevel, according to Manitou, were not required to erase their respective identities, rather to choose the direction in which to develop them. Hevel could be either “a waft (*hevel*) and a striving after wind” (*Kohelet* 1:14), or “the breath (*hevel pihem*) of children studying Torah,” a spirit with presence and influence. Kayin, for his part, could embody either “acquisition” (*kinyan*) and ownership, or the properties of a “nest” (*ken*), using his solid presence and permanence to give a sense of security to others. Here, too, we see an example of Manitou’s “alternatives theory” that emphasizes man’s free choice about the direction in which to propel history. Even the names Kayin and Hevel symbolize the crossroads at which each of the brothers will have to decide how to imbue their respective identities with meaning. Will Kayin maintain his “acquisition” consciousness, or will he offer a stable “nest” to his brother? Will Hevel remain a waft of air, with no real presence, or will he develop into the spirit that advances the world?

**The Sacrifice – Relating to others**

Kayin and Hevel bring offerings – Kayin of the fruit of the ground, and Hevel of the firstlings of his flock:

And it came to pass after some time that Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground as an offering to God.

And Hevel, also, brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And God heeded Hevel and his offering.

But He did not heed Kayin and his offering, and Kayin was exceedingly displeased, and his countenance fell. (4:3-5)

The contrast between them is unclear from the verses. On the surface, Kayin appears to do what he is supposed to do, while Hevel goes above and beyond in his efforts. In other words, we might say that Kayin is a tsaddik, while Hevel is a chassid. But *Chazal* expose a gap that is far more profound, and we must more closely examine the language of the verses in order to understand it.

First, we see here again the difference between the first son and the second. Kayin initiates the sacrifice, while Hevel joins afterwards bringing “also”. Second, the incident is introduced with a phrase that is seemingly insignificant: “And it came to pass, after some time” (literally, “at the end of some days”). A deeper look at this seemingly neutral description indicates the end of a period that is referred to in the Torah as “days,” meaning a year. Kayin first takes of his produce for his own use. Only at the end of a full year does he bring an offering to God from the remainder. Hevel brings “of the firstlings of his flock.” This tells us something about not only the timing of the offerings, but also their quality. Kayin offers his leftovers, while Hevel brings his first produce.

Each offering also reflects the mindset of its owner. Kayin is conscious first and foremost of himself; only afterwards does he take note of others, in this case, God. Hevel first takes note of the other, and afterwards takes care of himself. Their fundamental perceptions of themselves and their relationship to others are now reflected in their perception of their relationship with God. Offerings of the sort brought by Kayin were common among pagans who saw sacrifice as a way of dealing with a problem. In order to cope with the forces of nature they had to give up something for the gods, and saw no need to offer up the best of what they had. It is clear, then, why Hevel’s offering is accepted by God, and Kayin’s is not.

**Lost opportunity for dialogue**

God now speaks to Kayin:

And God said to Kayin, Why are you displeased, and why is your countenance fallen?

If you do well, shall it not be lifted up? And if you do not well, sin crouches at the door, and its fervor is towards you, but you may rule over it. (4:6-7)

Here, too, Manitou applies his exegetical principle of a “fresh reading” and notes that this was not the necessary next stage. Kayin and Hevel could have spoken with one another and this was apparently the obvious course of action, since Hevel ultimately had something that Kayin lacked. So far Kayin has regarded Hevel as extraneous, but now he sees that Hevel’s offering is accepted while his own is not. Should not Kayin engage Hevel and try to understand why? Hevel, for his part, should seize the opportunity to explain. The situation demands dialogue, and this demand is made of both brothers. But they remain silent, and God must intervene. God responds to Kayin’s “fallen countenance” in the wake of his failure, and He speaks to that state: ‘Your outlook is naturally that of a firstborn, it is understandable that you find it difficult to acknowledge your failure; you must recognize that you erred, but you can make amends. In contrast to classical tragedy, where a single critical mistake on the part of the hero leads inevitably to downfall and disaster, God tells Kayin: Your fate is not sealed; at every stage repair is possible. History is not a snowball that rolls inexorably downhill, but rather a series of exit lanes along the way. You can change the future if “you do well.”

Here God reveals to Kayin the essence of teshuva. In the natural course of events, the future is determined by the past, but the present holds a point of free choice that can change its direction. Regret, in the Jewish worldview, is not the tragic perception that a misstep is irreversible; rather, it is an optimistic drive that leads to repair.

Between God’s words to Kayin and the murder, there is a verse that has troubled all the commentators:

“And Kayin said to Hevel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Kayin rose up to Hevel his brother and killed him.”

Many commentators have endeavored to understand what it was that Kayin said. Manitou stresses that Kayin began a dialogue, opening a narrow window in which Hevel could respond. But Hevel remains silent, missing the opportunity to be a meaningful presence and influence Kayin. The dialogue fails; Hevel becomes “hevel”; Kayin becomes the first murderer in history; and mankind misses an opportunity for coexistence.

From this point onwards, according to Manitou, the main question facing humanity is whether people can make room for the other, instead of trying to wholly possess everything. This question pertains to nations no less than it does to individuals. Wars between nations ultimately stem from the fundamental question of how wielders of power and morally sensitive spirits can build a complete world together.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. In this respect Esav is similar to Kayin. Commenting on the verse, “And they called his name Esav” (*Bereishit* 25:25), Rashi explains that this is what everyone called him, since he was ‘made and finished like someone who had lived for several years.’ He is already ‘made’ (*asuy*), just as Kayin is already realized or ‘acquired’ (*kanui*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)