



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# A Meaningful Omission<sup>1</sup>

The tragic story of mankind's second generation unfolds as Kayin and Hevel, the sons of Adam and Chava, each bring an offering to God.

God accepts Hevel and his offering but rejects Kayin and his efforts. Unable to accept a divine rejection which he feels is both without reason and unreasonable, a despondent and enraged Kayin lashes out. He murders his brother, forever eliminating his perceived rival. God decrees, in response to this horrific act of fratricide, that Kayin will spend the remainder of his life in exile.

A glaring textual omission emerges, however, at the climactic moment of the Kayin and Hevel story. The Torah states, "And Kayin said to Hevel his brother, and it was when they were in the field, and Kayin rose up upon Hevel his brother and killed him."

What did Kayin say? Why does the Torah introduce a conversation which it then fails to record? [Note: Had the Torah used the word *va'yedaber*, "spoke," as opposed to *va'yomer*, "said," to describe Kayin's communication with his brother, we might have argued that God simply wanted to indicate that a conversation took place. *Va'yomer*, however, always refers to a specific verbal communication, and is invariably followed in the Torah by the

content of that communication.]

Rising to the textual challenge, the rabbis in the Midrash Rabba suggest three possible conversations which might have led to the fateful physical confrontation between Kayin and Hevel.

1. The brothers determined to divide the world. One of them took possession of the land while the other claimed all movable items. As soon as the division took effect, one said to the other, "You are standing upon my land!" while the other replied, "You are wearing my clothes!" A struggle ensued, and Kayin killed Hevel.

2. Their dispute did not center upon material possessions at all but, instead, upon the Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple (which would be built by the Jewish nation millennia later). After they divided both the land and the movables equally, Kayin and Hevel both claimed dominion over the Temple, each arguing that it should be built in his domain. A struggle ensued, and Kayin killed Hevel.

3. The battle centered upon neither of the above. Kayin and Hevel actually fought over their mother Chava (or alternatively, one of their sisters). A struggle ensued, and Kayin killed Hevel.

The Midrash, however, seems to raise more questions than answers. Can the rabbis suggest that they know the content of a

1. This article is adapted from a study in my *Unlocking the Torah Text, Gefen Publishing Company, OU Press*

conversation concerning which the biblical text is completely silent? Are we to assume that the Midrash reflects prophetic vision or that the rabbis were somehow personally present at the scene of Hevel's murder?

Further, each of the rabbinic suggestions seems more bizarre than the next. How can we seriously consider, for example, that Kayin and Hevel actually argued about the Temple? The very concept of the Beit Hamikdash would not be introduced into human experience until centuries after their death. Similarly, no clue is found in the biblical text to support the contention that Kayin and Hevel argued either about material wealth or about a woman.

Simply put, how are we to understand the Midrashic approach to the struggle between Kayin and Hevel?

Counterintuitively, this seemingly strange rabbinic passage actually provides us with a perfect entrée into the world of Midrash. There is a vast difference between pshat (straightforward explanation of biblical text) and Midrash (rabbinical exegesis).

When we operate within the world of pshat, we search for the direct meaning of the text before us. In this realm, everything is literal and concrete.

When we enter the world of Midrash, however, the rules change completely. Midrashim are vehicles through which the rabbis, using the Torah text as a point of departure, transmit significant messages and lessons. As such, Midrashim are not necessarily meant to be taken literally; nor are they to be seen as attempts to explain the factual meaning of a specific Torah passage. By using the vehicle of Midrash to convey eternal lessons and values,

the rabbis connect these values to the Torah text itself. They also ensure that the lessons will not be lost and will always be perceived as flowing directly from the Torah.

*Our task, therefore, when we enter the world of Midrash, is to determine the global lessons that the rabbis intend to convey.*

In the Midrash before us the rabbis are not simply explaining the Kayin and Hevel story. They are, instead, viewing this first violent event in human history as the prototype of physical confrontation across the ages. True to Midrashic style, they express significant global observations in concrete, story-like terms.

Effectively, the rabbis make the following statement in this Midrash: *We were not present when Kayin killed Hevel. Nor can we glean any information directly from the biblical text concerning the source of their dispute. Were you to ask us, however, what these brothers were struggling about, we would be forced to suggest one of three options.*

Over the course of human history, man has killed his brother for material gain, over religion, and because of lust. All bloodshed and warfare can be traced to these three basic primary sources. We are, therefore, certain that one of these issues served as the basis of the confrontation between Kayin and Hevel at the dawn of human history.

This rabbinic commentary serves as a sobering reminder that mankind has not moved one inch off the killing field of Hevel's murder. Despite perceived social progress, nothing has fundamentally changed. The causes of human conflict have remained remarkably constant across the face of time. The Midrash remains sadly relevant, centuries after its authorship.

If the twentieth century gave lie to any assumption at all, it was to the assumption that scientific and technological progress would automatically be accompanied by moral advancement as well. The century that gave us the Holocaust serves to remind us that in many ways we have simply gotten better at killing each other. So far, the twenty-first century isn't looking much better.

As perceptive and as fascinating as the Midrash may be, however, it fails to answer the original textual question that we raised. Once again, why doesn't the Torah tell us what Kayin said to Hevel? Why introduce a conversation and then deliberately leave its content unrecorded?

On one level, we could simply answer that God wants us to fill in the blanks. Sometimes, a portion of the Torah is left unfinished in order to make us partners in the text. God challenges us to read into that text the myriad of possible lessons that are relevant to our lives. Had the Torah told us the content of Kayin's dialogue with Hevel, the questions would not have been asked, the Midrash would not have been written and its fundamental lessons would have never been conveyed.

There may, however, be an even deeper and more powerful reason for the Torah's omission in the text before us. The Torah edits out the content of Kayin's words to Hevel because God wants us to understand that those words, whatever they might have been, were of no ultimate consequence. Sometimes an act is so depraved that its cause and motivation is unimportant; no valid excuse can be offered.

Perhaps Kayin had justifiable grievances against his brother. We, however, will never know. Kayin loses all claims upon our empathy and understanding the

moment he murders his brother. Nothing can explain that heinous act, and certainly nothing can justify it. Once again, the eternal Torah text, this time through omission, delivers a message that is frighteningly applicable to our time. No matter what their cause, acts of terror, mayhem and murder perpetrated against innocent victims are inexcusable.

The perpetrators of these crimes, through their very actions, render their own potential grievances irrelevant. God wants us to know that Kayin said something to Hevel. He also wants us to know, however, that what Kayin said ultimately doesn't matter. The text conveys this lesson in the most powerful way that it can. We are told that a conversation took place, but we are not told the content of that conversation.

*When I prepared to submit this article, little did I realize how tragically pertinent it would be. Our enemies have once again shown their true colors, through the brutal murder and abduction of hundreds of innocent civilians and the wounding of thousands.*

*Nothing can justify such horrific actions, and we can only hope that the world will recognize that truth.*

*Together we pray for the safety and success of Israel's soldiers during the coming difficult days, and for the safety of its citizen's wherever they may be.*

*Once again events have shown us that, at times, the Torah teaches, not by what is included in the text, but by what is left out. ■*

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."