Parashat Bereishit

Cain and Abel 1: Evading Responsibility

And Cain rose up against Abel his brother (Genesis 4:8)　　　　　ויקם קין על הבל אחיו (בראשית ד:ח)

And Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And it came to pass when they were in the field that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him. And the Lord said to Cain: 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said: 'I know not; am I my brother's keeper?'"(4:8-9)

The specific details surrounding Cain's murder are shrouded in darkness. How did Cain kill his brother? What did Cain say to Abel to lure him into the field? Why does God ask Cain "Where is Abel, your brother?" rather than directly accuse him of murder? Rabbi Moshe ben Attar, in his *Or Hachayyim* commentary on the Torah, suggests that Cain, who is a "tiller of the ground," (verse 2) knew of places where his brother would be swallowed up by the land, rather than murder his brother with his own hands. Cain chose to lure Abel to a place of danger in order to 'rise up' and kill him. Or Hachayyim writes: "This 'standing up' did not kill; rather he outsmarted [Abel] to stand above him in a place where he would be swallowed up in the earth…" For this reason, when Cain is asked, "Where is your brother?" he denies culpability, "for he thought that Adonai would not punish him for [simply being] the cause [of his brother's death]." Cain's denial, of course, didn't hold water. There is no difference between killing someone yourself or actively causing his death to occur. Both actions represent murder, and Cain's weak attempt to evade responsibility for his actions makes him all the more reprehensible.

Cain's weak attempt to evade culpability for his actions recalls a similar attempt taken today to avoid culpability for indirectly causing acts of violence. In his recent address to the United Nations, "Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Monday offered to help root out terrorism in the Middle East and said the United States and its support for Israel are a major cause of the violence," the [Washington Post reported](). Rouhani blamed the United States' support for Israel as a major cause of terrorism in the region, and failed to mention or acknowledge his own country, which is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Iran provides weapons, money and training to groups whose goals include the destruction of Israel and the establishment of Islamic theocracies throughout the Middle East and beyond. Yet, Rouhani attempts to blame the United States and Israel—two of the victims of international terrorism—for the actions of the groups his country funds. It represents a height of evil chutzpah—on par with Cain's classic denial of culpability.

It doesn't matter whether Iran "pulls the trigger," or only causes terrorism to happen indirectly. Like Cain, Iran is responsible for the terrorist sponsored murders that it causes in Syria, Iraq, Israel and throughout the world. ∎

Cain and Abel 2: The Haunting Call of the Blood

The voice of your brother's blood (Genesis 4:10)　　　　　קול דמי אחיך (בראשית ד:י)

And [Adonai] said: 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to Me from the ground.' (4:10)

Tzur Goldin, brother of fallen Israeli soldier Hadar Goldin, at a convention of pro-Israel Evangelical Christians in Washington this past July, offered an [impassioned plea for the return of his brother's body](), "what Hamas terrorists

did and are doing by holding my brother's body is a crime. It is an outrage against humanity. And I'm not going to accept it. I reject it, and all good people must reject it with me."

Does blood have a voice? Did God really hear Abel's blood calling from the ground? Rashi (on verse 10) explains the term is used as a literary device that alludes to the blood of Abel's unborn children who will never cry out for themselves. Today, the "blood of our brothers" is held in the hands of Hamas, for they have held the bodies of fallen Israeli soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul since the war in Gaza in the summer of 2014. We too must "hear the voice of our brothers' blood," and hope for the bodies of Israel's fallen soldiers to be returned to their families for proper Jewish burial. ∎

Cain and Abel 3: Suspicious Remorse

My punishment is greater than I can bear (Genesis 4:13)   **גדול עוני מנשא (בראשית ד:יג)**

And now cursed are you from the ground which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground it shall not yield unto you her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be in the earth. And Cain said unto Adonai: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.' (4:11-13)

After outing Cain for the murder of his brother and decreeing the punishment of banishment and eternal wandering, Cain responds that this punishment is "greater than he can bear." In this cryptic statement, does Cain accept responsibility for his actions? Or, do his words reflect a denial of culpability, and instead represent the claim on Cain's part that the punishment seems overly harsh? In response to Cain's claim that "whoever finds me will slay me" (verse 14), it is written, "Adonai set a sign for Cain, lest any finding him should smite him." (verse 15) What was the nature of this sign given to Cain? The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 22) offers two conflicting views: "Rav said: He made for him a sign of murderers. Rabbi Chanin said: He made for him a sign of those who repent." In truth, it's impossible for us to know whether Cain truly repented for the murder or not. Quite possibly, Cain felt no remorse for his actions, and instead hoped to mitigate the punishment that he received for his crime. According to Rav, even after being found guilty and receiving his punishment, Cain never fully accepted responsibility for his actions.

Today, the world must ask the same questions about a recalcitrant Iran who, like Cain, has never explicitly accepted culpability for its past actions and has always denied any military nature to its nuclear research program. While Iran has promised to at least temporarily change its ways, does this reflect a true change in attitude and a desire to coexist peacefully with the international community? Or, is Iran's willingness to curtail its nuclear research program merely an attempt to evade the harsh sanctions that had weakened the regime?

Because the answer to this question is shrouded in doubt, the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) must exercise great vigilance in the next phase of the agreement and the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This past week unsupervised Iranian technicians provided environmental samples to the IAEA which were used to inspect the controversial Iranian nuclear site in Parchin. Former IAEA deputy director general Olli Heinonen has described Iran as a particularly sensitive case, however, saying he knows of no other case where a country under investigation for possibly trying to make nuclear weapons was permitted to use its own personnel to collect environmental samples as part of the investigation. The IAEA must do a more thorough investigation at Parchin to clarify suspicions that explosive triggers for nuclear weapons were tested there. Additionally, newly appointed sanctions coordinator Stephen Mull must guide a complicated verification process that will require the full cooperation of numerous Americans and international agencies.

The world cannot rely on the hope that Iran has truly changed its ways, and is handing over legitimate samples to the IAEA. We must assume that the recent agreement reflects not a change in attitude but an effort to mitigate punishment and avoid painful sanctions. We must remain vigilant and train our focus and attention on the implementation of the JCPOA, in order to ensure that Iran fully meets its commitments before the world lifts any economic sanctions. ∎