

A brand new world sullied so soon by human conflict! The story of Cain and Abel has intrigued and puzzled generations of people, spanning cultures and religions and bringing forth a multifarious array of interpretations. For us Jews, midrash fills in the gaps and interprets our biblical texts by creating imaginative stories around them. Today, some of our midrashim seem farfetched, but they offer us insight into the minds of our sages as they grappled with the contradictions, omissions, and inconsistencies in those texts. The disturbing narrative of the first murder is best understood through stories about dissent. The Babylonian Talmud Chullin 60b recounts the rivalry between the sun and the moon. "It is written, And God made two great lights, and in the same verse, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night, indicating that only one was great. Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi explains: 'When God first created the sun and the moon, they were equally bright. Then, the moon said ... is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? One of us must be subservient. God therefore said to her, if so, go and diminish yourself.'" The moon pleads eloquently, and the dispute is settled equitably, with the moon receiving the important function of marking the months. This is the ideal, elusive world of peaceful compromise. Enter Cain and Abel, the opening act in an ongoing drama about the excesses spawned by rivalry, jealousy, and dissention that runs like a blood-red thread through our biblical texts and through the history of humanity. In our midrashim, dissent begins with the separation of the waters on day two of creation. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 4:6 notices that only on this day is HaShem's declaration "it was good" missing. "R'Chanina said: Because on this day schism came into the world, as it is written, 'And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters ...'" Separating light from darkness is a different matter, because they are two completely different entities. Likewise, the moon and the sun are essentially different from each other. However, water is still water, no matter where it is. But there still are profound differences, just as there are in all life forms. No two snowflakes, spiders, dogs, or humans are exactly alike, no matter how closely related they are. Sadly, paradoxically, it is the subtle differences in our commonalities that create conflict. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 22 discusses the birth and lives of Cain and Abel, and the argument that led to Abel's crime: "And Cain spoke to Abel ... They said, 'Come, let us divide up the world; one will take the land and one will take the moveable property.' This one said, 'The ground you are standing on is mine.' The other said, 'What you are wearing is mine.' This one said, 'Take it off!' The other one said, 'Fly!' Because of this ... Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." The midrash elaborates further: "R'Huna said, 'An extra twin sister was born with Abel. This one said: I will take her because I am the first born. The other one said: I will take her because she was born with me. Because of this ... Cain rose up against his brother Abel and slew him.'" The midrash tells us that each child born to Adam and Eve had a twin sister, but Abel had two twin sisters. Sexual rivalry, the bane of many an existence up and down the food chain, is born. It too, has a twin: sibling rivalry, especially regarding inheritance. Since women were considered property, Cain claims firstborn rights, i.e., double the inheritance of Abel. But this extra sister was given by HaShem to Abel. Echoes of this conundrum reverberate through our stories. Midrash Tanchuma has a similar explanation, but adds a new dimension by elaborating on Cain's, "Am I my brother's keeper?" "This may be compared to a thief who steals during the night but is not apprehended while committing the crime. When the watchman seizes him the next morning and asks him why he stole, the thief replies, 'I am a thief and I did not neglect my profession. Your job is to keep watch. Why did you neglect your duties?' So, Cain retorted, 'True, I slew him, but you created the evil inclination within me. Since you are the guardian of all, why did you permit me to slay him? You killed him, for if you had accepted my sacrifice as you accepted his, I would not have been envious of him.'" And thus, shifting blame completes this unholy trio. Tragically, we humans have devised countless ways to absolve ourselves of responsibility – one more depressing thread running through our history. As we moved through the soul-searching month of Elul, and through Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, our weekly Torah portions recounted the many failings of our ancestors and reminded us of our responsibility toward ourselves, our fellow human beings, and to all of creation. We have publicly acknowledged our wrongdoings and have made atonement. In a new year, and with a clean slate, we enjoyed the bounty of Sukkot, but this year the holiness of Shemini Atzeret and the joy of Simchat Torah were shattered by the devastating terrorist attacks in Israel, and once again the human propensity for cruelty is unleashed, destroying lives and causing untold anguish. It is tragic and profoundly vexing that there are still human beings who have so little regard for life in general and human life in particular, that they engage in acts of indescribable brutality, even against their own. One statement I read during these days eloquently expresses the deep pain and frustration so many of us are feeling: "I may be able to forgive you for killing my children, but I can never forgive you for forcing me to kill your children." As we try to process the horrific reports of the depravity running rampant through this tiny sliver of land, let us also be aware of and encouraged by the many positive reports of boundless strength and humanity that prove that our resilience and determination are grounded in our holy teachings: "Shun evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:15). Sadly, sometimes that means engaging in war. Let us fervently pray that we may soon emerge from this darkness into a new and peaceful world of light. *AM YISRAEL CHAI!*

Shabbat shalom!