

CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

5773

שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש

Friday 12 October 2012 - 26 Tishrei 5773
Sedra Bereishit

ABEL THROUGH THE AGES

THE FIRST SEDRA¹ IN THE TORAH TELLS US ABOUT the Creation of the Universe, the beginning of life and the first man and woman. It also focuses on the beginning of evil, and the very first crime. This account helps us understand something of the challenge facing man: how to respond.

Everyone knows the first crime ever committed: Cain killed his brother Abel. Not everyone remembers why it happened. The Torah tells us² that both Cain and Abel brought offerings to G-d. They both were seeking spirituality, some sort of contact with the Divine Creator of the universe. According to Chassidic teaching this is a natural need of all humanity.

Cain brought an offering from the produce of the ground. The Sages have a tradition that this was seeds of flax, something that could be considered particularly valuable³. However, they say that Cain did not go to much personal effort in selecting and preparing his offering.

By contrast, Abel brought an offering from the flock, seeking out the choicest and best lambs. G-d recognised Abel's offering as coming from the depths of his heart. In some way, Abel was more holy and spiritual than his brother Cain. Jewish philosophers have spoken of an



In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin
(Yenta bas Devora) ע"ה - 15 Tevet 5772
Dedicated by her Son Dr Roger Gewolb שי'

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inborn spiritual quality which, before the Giving of the Torah, distinguished some people from others, even in the same family⁴. Abel had this quality, unlike his brother Cain.

The Torah tells us that G-d responded to Abel's offering in a direct and overt way. Rashi says that fire came from Heaven and consumed the offering. This did not happen with Cain's offering. As a result, Cain became jealous of Abel's spiritual power. Eventually he killed his brother, committing the first murder in history.

This event took place thousands of years ago, at the dawn of humanity. Unfortunately the pattern has been repeated many times over. Consider, for example, the Jewish people. Their ancestor Jacob could himself be seen as a form of Abel, in that he had a special relationship with G-d and he was pursued or afflicted by both Esau and Laban. G-d's promise to him was that "through you will be blessed all families of the earth, and through your descendants"⁵. This means that Jacob and his descendants the Jewish people bring blessing and goodness to the world, in a way which, ultimately, will be recognised by all.

However, for much of our history, the spirituality of Judaism and of Jewish sacred sites - such as Jerusalem and the Temple area - has provoked envy. And envy leads to violence - horrible violence. Yet the ultimate promise of Judaism is that the power of holiness will stir the right chord in every human heart. Violence will cease. The latter-day Cain will disappear, or will be totally transformed. The world will be filled with good.

Now let us consider a different question. What advice is there for the modern form of Abel in the world? Should he or she try to give up this inborn spiritual duality? Or try to conceal it beyond recognition? G-d forbid! The task for Abel and his sisters is to strengthen their connection with the Divine, so that they and their people can become a channel of holiness from which the whole world will benefit. Through this they will bring Divine blessing into the lives and hearts of all.

1. Genesis 1: 1-6:8. 2. Gen.4:3 ff. 3. See Rashi to 4:3, and *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 15 pp.22, n.22. 4. See R. Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* I:95. 5. See Gen. 28:14.

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*SEDRA BEREISHIT***SAYING THANKS**

“Mazal Tov!” Daddy burst through the door, “Mommy just had a new baby girl!” His two daughters jumped up and started dancing and squealing with excitement. Some time later, when they had come back from visiting Mommy in the hospital, Daddy made another announcement.

“Girls, since Mommy has to stay in hospital for a while to rest up after the birth, my sister Aunt Rachel will be staying here for a couple of days to help us!” The girls beamed. Aunt Rachel was their favourite aunt! Soon, Aunt Rachel arrived. Over the next few days, she worked really hard to make sure everything went smoothly while Mommy was away. She cooked their meals, did laundry, washed dishes and kept the house tidy.

At the supper table, while Aunt Rachel was upstairs putting the laundry away, Daddy mentioned to the girls that they should perhaps prepare a small gift for Aunt Rachel to show how much they appreciate all her hard work for them.

Debbie decided she would use some of her pocket money to buy a nice gift. She bought a beautiful mug, wrapped it neatly and wrote a thank you card expressing how much she appreciated all the effort Aunt Rachel put into taking care of them.

Meanwhile, Sarah was in her bedroom looking around for something to give Aunt Rachel. But she couldn't find anything! She didn't want to use her money, or give away any of her things. She even didn't want to use her pretty stationery to write a letter. She only had twenty two sheets left. ‘Why should I give one away?’, she thought. So, instead, she just took a piece of paper from her scrap notebook and scrawled “Thank you Aunt Rachel for everything.”

The girls went downstairs to present their gifts. "Here, Aunt Rachel," Sarah handed her the piece of paper. Aunt Rachel read it with a smile. "Oh Sarah, that is so sweet of you!" she exclaimed. Then, Debbie came forward and handed her beautifully prepared gift. Aunt Rachel's eyes lit up. "Wow, Debbie! This is amazing! How beautiful! Thank you so, so much!" She unwrapped the present, obviously very pleased.

Sarah began to feel jealous. Why did Aunt Rachel appreciate Debbie's gift more than hers? She also said thank you! That wasn't fair! On the other side of the room, Daddy noticed Sarah's upset face and called her over.

"Sarah, let me ask you something. Did you by any chance learn this week's Parsha?" "Yes," Sarah replied, not sure where this conversation was going. "Well then, I'm sure you remember the part where Cain and Abel offer up gifts to G-d!"

"Oh yes, my teacher told us about it. But what's that got to do with anything?" "Well, as we know, G-d fully accepted Abel's gift, but He did not show acceptance of Cain's in the same way. Why? Because Abel gave G-d the best of his flock, his most precious belongings. But Cain only gave his second best possessions to Hashem. He wanted to keep the best for himself."

Sarah listened. Her face flushed. "So, you mean I should have put more effort into saying thank you to Aunt Rachel?" she asked. Her father nodded.

Sarah thought for a moment. Then a beautiful idea struck her. "Well, she hasn't left yet. And I've just thought of something really nice I could give her, which I think she will like..."

She began running upstairs to get it from her room. Then she stopped. "By the way, Daddy..." she said. He looked up towards her.

"Thanks!"

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