

Parashat Bereishit 5783, 2022:

The Power of Teshuvah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains many subjects, beginning with the Almighty's creation of the Universe through His ominous announcement of the impending destruction of all life on earth. Amid these various themes, we find the narrative of Kayin and Hevel and their respective offerings to Hashem:

...Hevel was a shepherd of flocks, and Kayin was a tiller of the soil. Now it came to pass at the end of days, that Kayin brought of the fruit of the soil an offering to Hashem. And Hevel also brought of the firstborn of his flocks and of their fattest, and Hashem turned to Hevel and to his offering. But to Kayin and to his offering He did not turn, and it angered Kayin exceedingly, and his countenance fell. (*Sefer Bereishit* 4:2-5, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations)

We learn that Hevel was a shepherd and Kayin was a farmer. Kayin was the first person to offer a *korban* and his brother, Hevel, the second. As we would readily assume, Kayin's *korban* was "of the fruit of the soil," and Hevel's from his flocks. Yet, there was also a crucial, qualitative difference between their respective *korbanot*: Hevel's offering was a *bechor* (first born) "and of the fattest," whereas Kayin's appears to have been nondescript, as if he had grabbed the produce purely by happenstance. *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* strongly supports this reading of Kayin's behavior, stating that he took his *korban* "*min hap'solet* (from the rejected produce), like a bad sharecropper who eats the *bakurot* (first fruits) and 'honors' the king with the unripe and barely edible fruits." (22:5, translation my own, see, as well, Rashi on *Sefer Bereishit* 4:3)

We now have a better understanding as to why Hashem, “turned to Hevel and to his offering. But to Kayin and to his offering He did not turn.” This is not, however, the end of the story. Even though Hashem refused to accept Kayin’s inadequate *korban*, to the point that “it angered Kayin exceedingly, and his countenance fell,” Hashem did not reject Kayin, himself, but rather, his misguided actions: “And Hashem said to Kayin, ‘Why are you annoyed, and why has your countenance fallen? Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? ...you can rule over it.’” (4:6-7)

Hashem’s message to Kayin is truly inspiring. In these few words, the Almighty bequeathed the gift of *teshuvah* to humankind for evermore. Not only is it the case, “that if you improve, it will be forgiven you.” In addition, authentic *teshuvah* is so powerful that Hashem proclaims, “you can rule over it,” that is, you can conquer this *chate*, your deviation from the proper path, and return unto Me. This concept was given powerful voice by the founder of the Izhbitza-Radzin Chasidic dynasty, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner *zatzal* (1804-1854), in his gloss on our *pasukim*:

If you [Kayin] will improve your heart and mind so that you will yearn to perform the *avodah* (*korban* service) without jealousy [for your brother], and devoid of any personal agenda, [but rather in My service alone,] then you will be raised up, that is, your spiritual being will rise to higher and higher levels. (*Mei HaShiluach*, Parashat Bereishit, s.v. *halo im taitiv s’ate*, translation and brackets my own)

May each of us yearn to serve Hashem, *b’lave shalem* (with complete hearts), and may we be raised through our *teshuvah* to draw ever closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)