CAIN AND ABEL: (MIS) MANAGING REJECTION AND UNMET EXPECTATIONS

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Biblical narratives have much to contribute to our understanding of human nature, social forces, and morality. The biblical drama of Cain and Abel, a case in point, has been the subject of works of theology, literature, and art. The narrative contains missing pieces and puzzling parts, making it fertile ground for a variety of interpretations. Focusing on what is explicitly stated or omitted in the text, and assuming its inherent integrity, this article will suggest a reading which illuminates the process and consequences of human mismanagement of unexpected rejection.

Before approaching the narrative itself, it is essential to establish its context. Cain and Abel grow up in a post-Eden reality. After Eve and Adam partake of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, human nature undergoes critical change. Human choices are no longer based upon right or wrong in an objective sense, but involve subjectivity – what is pleasing or beneficial from the vantage point of human emotion and desire.[1] This opens up the possibility for morally flawed choices. Cain was the first to be challenged by this new reality.

The narrative appearing in Genesis 4 begins:

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gained a male child with the help of the Lord.' She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell (Gen. 4:1-5).

This text hints at a number of reasons that may have brought Cain to hold himself in high, perhaps too high, esteem. He had the privilege of being firstborn. Eve proudly named him Cain, commemorating her partnership with God, denoting stature. In contrast, the text merely reports the birth of

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Abel, with no meaning attributed to Abel's name. His name, *Hevel*, means "vapor", something insubstantial. Cain joins hands with his father in tilling the cursed earth (Gen. 3:17), despite the arduousness of the task. Against this backdrop, Cain initiates an offering to God, confident that it will be well received.

Genesis Rabbah (22:5) explains that Cain's offering was rejected because he did not bring from the fat of the land as opposed to Abel who brought from the fattest sheep, an approach quoted by Rashi. However, an alternative reading is possible. It is remarkable that the text does not downplay Cain's offering, but rather only elevates Abel's offering by describing it as "choicest." In addition, the text states that Cain was the initiator of the offering and Abel (merely) followed his brother's example. R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin affirms Cain's sincerity with respect to the offering, but points out Cain's paternalistic regard for Abel, implied in the seemingly unnecessary description of Abel as *his brother Abel* (Gen. 4:2). Cain was convinced of his superiority to Abel in all matters, material and spiritual.[2] Cain's rejection was thus totally unexpected; he was furious due to the perceived injustice of the rejection, but also depressed due to the deflation of his self-esteem.

The story continues to unfold: *And the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you distressed? And why is your face fallen? Surely if you do right there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master'* (Gen. 4:6-7). The text gives no indication of support from either Abel or Adam and Eve, who might have eased Cain's hurt.[3] Only God himself, the "rejecter" so to speak, acknowledges the hurt. Instead of reprimanding Cain for his emotional reaction, He shows fatherly concern.[4] This is a remarkable instance of a preventative appearance by God to warn and instruct Cain. In God's opening statement, He reflects back to Cain his feelings in the form of a question, exactly as they are described earlier in the text: *'Why are you distressed? And why is your face fallen'* (Gen. 4:6). This is obviously a rhetorical question, an expression of empathy, but also something of much greater import. God is encouraging Cain to ask himself this very same question, to reflect on and understand his emotions. Are they justified, but more so, how should they in any case be managed and where can they lead if mismanaged?

According to *Midrash Aggadah*, Cain's rejection – unanticipated and unjustified in his eyes – quickly led him to a categorical conclusion: God's meting out of reward and punishment is devoid of justice.[5] Rejection, however, is not necessarily a punishment; even the worthiest of individuals do not escape it. In the words of R. Joseph Soloveitchik, "Man . . . was created for both victory and defeat – he is both king and saint. He must know how to fight for victory and also how to suffer defeat."[6] Cain's lack of humility made rejection a critical part of his edification, and not a punishment per se for any specific wrongdoing. Rejection, moreover, no less than acceptance, can and should be a springboard for growth, as the text soon makes apparent.

In order to facilitate this process, God empowers Cain to reaffirm his faith both in the possibility of a just world and in his own ability to be master of his emotions and behaviour. This He does by no less than a divine promise: *'Surely if you do right there is uplift'* (Gen. 4: 7). God simultaneously affirms both the relationship between *right* – moral behavior, and *uplift* – reward, and in Cain's ability to do *right*. *Uplift* is a multidimensional term. Ibn Ezra (Gen. 4:7) interprets *uplift* as relating to Cain's perception of himself. He will experience uplifting by the very fact of doing *right*, a built in reward. Newly gained self-confidence will empower him to cope with, "lift", the burden of the perceived undeserved rejection and use it as a springboard for growth and accomplishment.[7] Rashi and other classic commentators on this verse perceive *uplift* as reflecting Cain's ability to overcome the temptation to sin. Note that God does not mention Abel at all, implying that Cain should focus on improving himself rather than outdoing his brother. In retrospect, Cain's focus on having to outshine Abel whom he persists in seeing as a competitor is at least partially instrumental in his failure to manage his emotions and actions.

After the revelation's lofty optimistic opening, in the very same verse (Gen. 4:7), God makes Cain aware of the consequences of allowing his feelings, justified as they may seem, to fester. This will result not only in losing the opportunity for uplifting, but will open the door to moral deterioration. As emotional mismanagement becomes habitual, warding off the temptation of engaging in immoral behavior becomes more difficult. God makes clear, however, that there is no such thing as a point of no return. Cain at all times

remains capable of setting things to right and responsible for his actions: '*you can be its master*' (Gen. 4:7).

Perhaps this all should have been intuitive on Cain's part, with no need for revelation. But it is important to remember the context. Controlling emotions was a novel responsibility, as man's existence in Eden prior to partaking of the forbidden fruit was free of potentially destructive subjectivity. Cain's parents were themselves struggling with the new reality of their own feelings and perhaps not capable of edifying their children properly in this regard. The text is silent with respect to any parental intervention in this episode. The fact that Adam and Eve failed in keeping God's commandment while still in Eden may, moreover, have been disempowering for Cain. Hence God's clear message: man after Eden is capable of and expected to behave morally. Moreover, it is that which will define the nobility of his humanity and his Godly image.[8]

However, Cain, on a conscious or unconscious level, rejected the possibility of being able to regain stature and self-esteem through his own efforts at self-improvement. Instead he focuses on his brother, Abel. Cain takes advantage of Abel's presence with him in the field, far from other family members, and slays him. Cain's actions are in blatant contradiction to God's revelation that his stature and self-esteem will be regained by concentrating on self-improvement rather than eliminating his source of competition.

After slaying Abel, Cain claims not to be his brother's keeper. Cain uses God's rejection as an excuse to remove any responsibility he may have had for his brother. After the rejection, they became rivals and all was fair game. Cain places responsibility upon God to keep Abel out of harm's way. He is after all the omnipotent Master of the world.

The continuation of the narrative relates the only dialogue that takes place between God and Cain as punishment is meted out: *'Therefore you shall be more cursed than the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth'* (Gen. 4:11-12). God punishes Cain: his land will no longer bear any fruit for him. As a result, or in addition, he will be made to wander from place to place. The very

land which was with the rejection of his offering of crops led to the slaying of Abel and its cover
up. Furthermore, both the slaying and the cover up were orchestrated through the land. As part of the rehabilitative process, Cain needs to develop new self-worth, not for what he owns, but for what he is. Hence the punishment of removing him from his land contains the seeds of rehabilitation.

Cain takes the first step by admitting his sin:[9] he openly admits his feelings of being overwhelmed by his crime (*'my sin is too great to bear'* Gen. 4:13); of estrangement from God (*'I must avoid your presence'* Gen. 4:14); and of being the enemy of those surrounding him (*'anyone who meets me may kill me'* Gen. 4:14). His remorse is probably incomplete at that point, being mixed with a desire for a mitigation of the retribution, and will continue during the rehabilitative process.

Only after Cain's recognition of sin and request for consideration does God mitigate Cain's punishment by granting him the cover of a protective mark. Yet the very same mark paradoxically uncovers his act for all to see and scorn; this is the price Cain has to pay for protection. The mark is also an inescapable reminder for Cain himself. Cain has been given the opportunity to make amends, but to be a truly rehabilitating process it has to be in proportion to the weightiness of his sinful actions. Rehabilitation for Cain is built upon deep internalization of the immorality of the act and its dual consequence: Abel's death and the destruction of Cain's own Godly image, which needs to be rebuilt from scratch. God gives Cain life because he needs to make amends and those around him need to witness his actions. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Genesis 4:15) actually interprets Cain's mark as referring to Cain himself, who became a "mark" for society to see and internalize. Cain moves on to build his new identity (Gen. 4:17).

The narrative closes by relating that Cain lives to father a son whom he names *Hanoch*, meaning to edify. Cain is thankful for the underserved opportunity to become a parent. He sees a chance for a vicarious moral life through his child, whom he edifies in the hope that he become what he had failed.[10] From the birth of Hanoch and onward, Cain is engaged in building a city which he names after his son. Although Cain himself, doomed to be a wanderer, is prohibited to live in it, he builds for others, leaving them the legacy of Hanoch.[11] Through these endeavors Cain gains a semblance of closure.

FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE UNIVERSAL

On the face of it, the specific narrative of Cain and Abel is unique in that it refers to man's first encounter with a conflict between his drives and desires on the one hand and interpersonal morality on the other. Prior to Adam and Eve's partaking of the forbidden fruit, human nature was such that moral behavior came naturally. On a deeper level, however, the narrative has universal relevance. For all individuals, as for Cain, there is a first time in their lives when they are seriously confronted with this conflict, often due to rejection as is the case with Cain. This is part of the human condition.

We can speculate that some of the roots of his response to rejection were circumstances surrounding his upbringing (e.g., his parents' partiality toward Cain) and his vocational success (i.e., harvesting a crop from the accursed earth), both of which lulled him into a false sense of confidence. Cain may have come to believe in his own perfection, to the exclusion of others. On the other hand, after his rejection, no one in his family provides Cain with comfort or encouragement. Cain received ample compensation for the latter – a divine revelation in which he was promised reward if he would choose morally. However, Cain chose not to listen.

TB *Eruvin* 19a eloquently proclaims man's fragile state, in free translation: a man tends to sin even when he sees it open an abyss right under him. The potential is there for everyone to react immorally. Suffering rejection makes an individual especially vulnerable. The need for approval is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Jean Jacque Rousseau laments "Men no sooner began to set a value upon each other, and know what esteem was, than each laid claim to it, and it was no longer safe for any man to refuse it to another."[12]

Man's greatness lies in overcoming environmental obstacles and embracing morality under the most extenuating of circumstances. In his masterpiece *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck puts the biblical term "Timshel" into the mouth of Lee the Chinese servant, as he proclaims that human beings can morally triumph even in the most difficult of situations. "Timshel" is the term God used in his revelation to Cain: you can and must, in the final analysis, be master (*timshol*) of your emotions and deeds.[13] This is not to say that extrinsic

factors don't impact upon behavior; they do, and should be taken into account. Society can
capitalize on this by creating the optimal conditions to facilitate morality (i.e., equal opportunity, impartiality, resources, rewarding altruism) and may take circumstances into consideration in meting out retribution. But the individual is still ultimately responsible for his actions.

Close examination of Cain's moral deterioration reveals a paradoxical phenomenon. What initially brought Cain to be unable to come to grips with his rejection was his exaggerated sense of self-worth. His rejection-turned-dejection, however, totally negated his self-worth. This ultimately leaves him powerless, in his perception, to overcome and be uplifted. This is the tragedy of Cain and it is the tragedy of many human beings after him in history. Cain's self-worth was ephemeral because it was based upon extrinsic factors such as social status and material goods. It collapsed like a deck of cards after the first rejection. Slaying Abel was an irrational act of despair, the result of Cain's perceived inability to regain self-worth. Lack of self-worth plants the seeds for immorality.

Cain's rehabilitation had to include a number of key elements. The first of these was coming to terms with what he had done. Even the poet Byron, Cain's defender for all the injustices he suffered, admits that in the final analysis, Cain too succumbed to immorality.[14] Cain also comes to realize the despicability of his act. The means by which Cain abused his power had to be eliminated: he would become landless. Moreover, he would be shunned by others for what he had done. All would see his mark. The importance of recognition of wrongdoing by both the perpetrator and society has timeless relevance.

On the other hand, God gave Cain an opportunity for building self-worth, as without this, no rehabilitation could occur. He could marry and have children. His son becomes his focus and it is through him that he tries to make true amends, although Abel can never be brought back. Coleridge, in his great eloquence, puts the following words into the mouth of Cain's son *Hanoch*, as he protests to his father: . . . "however they do not play with me, and I groaned to them even as thou groanest to me even when thou givest me to eat and when thou coverist me in the evening…"[15] These words are indicative of Cain's fatherly devotion and caring for his son and also indicate that *Hanoch*

internalizes this behavior pattern in his interaction with others. They unfortunately also reflect the social rejection experienced not only by Cain himself but by his son. Individuals can often rehabilitate, if given inner motivation and facilitated externally by society. Society can of course be discriminatory against innocent individuals related to the guilty. While this may be understandable it paves the way for another cycle of immoral behavior.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of Cain and Abel brings home the difficulty humans have coping with rejection and defeat, ubiquitous conditions in human existence which no one escapes and everyone needs to learn to cope with. In the words of R. Joseph Soloveitchik "Modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat. He is simply incapable of retreating humbly. Modern man boasts quite often that he has never lost a war. He forgets that defeat is built on the very structure of victory and there is, in fact, no total victory; man is finite, so is victory."[16] The narrative sensitizes us to the moral dangers that lurk around all of us. It portrays the truth about social/familial forces: they impact on human emotion and behavior and habits die hard.

In the final analysis, the message is that humans are autonomous in their ability to choose the moral path, difficult as it may be. Hope should (almost) never be taken away from individuals choosing to make amends. Society needs to take responsibility for facilitating morality, but ultimately, every individual stands alone in confronting his moral challenges in life, and is held up to the challenge.

NOTES

1. L. R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2006), p. 123; Michael Friedlander, ed., Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1904), Part 11, Ch. 1; See also the commentaries of Rabbenu Bachye and Sforno to Genesis 2:9.
2. R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *Humash Haamek Davar* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1999), Vol. 1, Genesis 4: 1-4.
3. Eli Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 33-66.
4. U. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis I-VI (Pt. 1)*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961), Genesis 4:7.
5. *Midrash Aggadah*, ed. S. Buber, (Vienna: A. Fanto, 1894), Genesis 4:8.
6. R. Joseph Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility" *Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978, p. 36.

7. Benny Lau, *Etnakhta: Readings in the Weekly Portion* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sefarim, 2009), p. 23 (Hebrew).
8. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Teshuvah – The Laws of Repentance*, trans. E. Touger (New York: Moznaim, 1990), 5:3; R. Meir Simcha Hacohen of Dvinsk, *Meshech Hochmah*, ed. Y. Copperman (Jerusalem: Yehuda Kupperman, Bayit Vagan College, 1997), Genesis 1:26. (Hebrew).
9. Ibn Ezra to Genesis 4:13 states that "all commentators agree that Cain admitted his sin."
10. Yitzchack Rietbord, *Kohelet Yitzhak* (Vilna: Y. Funk, 1900), Genesis 4:17.
11. Ramban to Genesis 4:17.
12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), p. 35.
13. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 2003 [1952]).
14. Harding Grant, ed., *Lord Byron's Cain: A Mystery, with notes* (London, William Crofts, 1830).
15. Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Coleridge; Poetical Works, Poems*, ed. J. C. C Mays. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001). Poem number 160: "Wanderings of Cain", pp. 361-362.
16. R. Joseph Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility" *Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978, p. 36.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Psalms	140 – 150
	Proverbs	1 – 17
May	Proverbs	18 – 31
	Job	1 – 14
June	Job	15 – 42
July	Song of Songs	1 – 8
	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 5
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 12
August	Esther	1 – 10
	Daniel	1 – 12
	Ezra	1 – 6