

REFLECTIONS OF READERS

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

MORRIS ROSMAN

In Genesis, the first interpersonal question in all of Torah is raised. In verse 4:9, God asks Cain where Abel is, and Cain answers by asking, '*Am I my brother's keeper?*' In so doing, Cain raises what I see as the basic question of Genesis. God does not answer Cain, but tells him that he has done a terrible thing and tells Cain how he shall be punished for what he has done. The fact that the question is not answered right then and there does not mean the question is to be disregarded. The question is answered, indirectly, a few times over in the Torah.

Later in the text, we have the relationship between Esau and Jacob. They fail to get along with each other even in the womb, and Jacob conspires with his mother, Rebekah, to cheat Esau out of his birthright. So much does Jacob fear Esau's wrath that he runs away to a foreign land. They do eventually meet again and Jacob contritely faces Esau, who has decided to forgive his brother. Esau could have attacked Jacob, as Jacob feared might happen, but in an act of good will he kisses his brother.

In the story of the life of Joseph, we have the great enmity between Joseph and his brothers. So much did they hate Joseph that they sold him into slavery so they could be rid of him. Yet, when Joseph ultimately finds himself in a position of total power over his brothers, he treats them with great kindness. Joseph offers them friendship in spite of their fear of retribution.

In each of these episodes we go from an absolutely terrible relationship between brothers to a magnanimous one. The point that is being made is the answer to the question of being one's brother's keeper. The answer is an emphatic YES! It is taught to us in slow halting steps, so that we may come to see the change that our ancestors went through to reach God's wish for our growth as human beings.

In another way we have a repetition of the question, but we have it in the larger sense of Brotherhood.

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In the story of the Flood, God decided that except for Noah, who is beyond reproach, the rest of humanity is so corrupt that it does not deserve to be allowed to continue to live. God tells Noah to build an Ark into which he is to take his family and *two of every living creature* (Gen. 6:19). The passengers of the Ark are to be the only survivors of what had been life on earth. Noah does not attempt to argue or try to persuade God to save more than his own family.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, when God tells Abraham that the cities are to be destroyed, Abraham pleads on their behalf to try to save those people. Finally, God agrees to spare them if ten righteous people can be found among them. There are not the ten people needed, and both cities are destroyed, but Abraham did try to save them.

In Exodus, we have God telling Moses that he must go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to set the Israelites free. Moses tries to avoid the task but he is not permitted to refuse. Moses thus becomes his Brother's Keeper for the whole nation.¹ It is interesting to note that Moses is explicitly called a brother to the Israelites: *And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren* (Ex. 2:11).

In each case the Torah takes us from someone who is self centered to someone who looks out for the greater good. We are our Brother's Keeper.

NOTE

1. The relationship among Noah, Abraham, and Moses is thoroughly discussed in the Zohar and *Likkutei Sifot*. See: *Bi'urei ha-Hasidut al ha-Shas* on Sanhedrin 8a (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1975) p. 484.