Cain, Abel...and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

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The story of Cain and Abel is deeply troubling. For some unstated reason, God accepts the offering of Abel and rejects the offering of Cain. In his bitterness and jealousy, Cain murders Abel, the first homicide.

In his discussion of this story in his book, Messengers of God, Elie Wiesel considers the feelings of Cain upon God's rejection of his offering. Cain was humiliated, dejected, angry. But Elie Wiesel raises important questions. When their son Cain was so obviously distraught, where were Adam and Eve? Nowhere in the biblical account do we see the parents offering consolation or encouragement to their troubled son.

Nor do we read of any words uttered by Abel to Cain—no attempt to soothe or comfort a suffering brother. Wiesel writes: "Abel remained aloof. He did nothing to console his brother, to cheer him up or appease him. He regretted nothing, said nothing. He simply was not there, he was present without being present....Therein lay his guilt. In the face of suffering, one has no right to turn away, not to see. In the face of injustice, one may not look the other way....Though too weak to oppose God, man is strong enough to defend his fellow-man or at least to dress his wounds. Abel did nothing—such was the nature of his fault" (pp. 56-57).

The tragedy of Cain and Abel was not simply about the sin of Cain. It was about an absence of proper relationship between parents and son, between brother and brother. Had the four of them sat down together to ponder the situation, things could have turned out differently. Instead of murder and exile, we might have read about a troubled family that learned to heal its wounds...together, lovingly, thoughtfully.

The absence of meaningful communication is the source of much grief and much suffering.

The story of Cain and Abel provides an important ongoing message. Life is not always fair; bad feelings rise among people. When people do not communicate honestly and compassionately, tragedy almost always ensues. Instead of ignoring the pain of others, everyone is better served when that pain is addressed, soothed, dealt with directly.

When I was in college, a friend of mine had a cousin who was killed in a gang war in the Bronx. At the Shiva home, family members reminisced about the dead young man: yes, he was tough, but he had a good heart. He got mixed up with the wrong people, but he had so much good in him. He was respectful to his parents and kind to friends and neighbors. Everyone seemed to find something good to say about him. My friend stood up and said with great emotion: if he had heard these things from you while he was still alive, maybe he would still be alive! All I ever heard you say about him was that he was a no-good hoodlum, a bad person, a violent person. There was a great hush in the room. Indeed, that young man's self-image and self-esteem might have been very different if he had heard loving words of praise during his lifetime, if someone had taken the trouble to share his pains and frustrations.

Sometimes people go through life without ever knowing how much others love them, admire them, and see virtue in them. No one seems to understand them, or share their deepest concerns, or be tuned in to their inner turmoil.

Words of sincere appreciation and understanding can change a human life. A loving hug, a pat on the back, a smile, a genuine compliment--these things can give joy and meaning to others, beyond what we might imagine. Being sensitive to the sufferings and feelings of others is a virtue all of us can cultivate.

The story of Cain and Abel can be read as an eternal condemnation of humanity to a reality of jealousy, violence, and murder.

Or it can be read as a challenge to humanity to rise above jealousies, antagonisms and hatred. It can be read as a challenge to foster understanding, dialogue, sympathy and compassion.

The world would be a much better place if we would follow the second reading.

Angel for Shabbat