

CHAPTER 26

Cain and Abel

In the Bible there is a famous story of two brothers who quarreled, with one killing the other. The themes of this story are familiar to us from our own struggles with people. The following is an adaptation of the biblical story based on Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Bible*. Alongside the written Torah (the Old Testament) Judaism recognizes the spiritual authority of an oral tradition that includes many details and elaborations of the stories of the Patriarchs. The oral Torah was written down and became known as the Talmud from which Ginzberg drew much of this story.

Cain and Abel

Adam and Eve had a son whom they called Cain. Some time later they had another son, Abel. While they were still children, Eve had a dream in which she saw the blood of Abel flow into the mouth of Cain who drank it avidly. Adam was worried in case the dream foretold the murder of Abel by his brother. To try to avoid this fate, he separated the two lads and taught them each a different occupation.

Cain became a tiller of the ground and Abel became a keeper of sheep. The bad feeling Cain felt for Abel began when they both made offerings to God. Abel offered the best of his flock for the sacrifice; but Cain first ate his lunch and then offered God the leftovers. God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Cain, though, thought he had been wronged and he became very angry.

Then God said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, won't you be accepted too? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but it depends on you whether you master it or it masters you."

Cain still felt that he had been treated unfairly and later got into an argument with Abel. "I believed that the world was created



through goodness,” Cain said, “but I see now that good deeds bear no fruit and that God rules the world with arbitrary power. Otherwise, why would God accept your offering and reject mine?” Abel disagreed. “God rewards good deeds,” he said. “If your sacrifice has not been accepted but mine has, it’s because my deeds are good and yours are wicked.”

These harsh words were not the only cause of Cain’s hatred toward Abel. Love for a woman also inflamed their relationship. Their parents wanted Abel to be married to an exceptionally beautiful girl whom Cain desired for himself. Therefore he was constantly brooding and thinking of ways of getting rid of his brother.

Before long the opportunity arose. One of Abel’s sheep had trampled on a field that had been planted by Cain. In a rage Cain shouted to his brother, “What right have you to live on my land and let your sheep pasture over there?” Abel retorted, “What right have you to use the products of my sheep and to make garments for yourself from their wool? If you will take off the clothes made from the wool of my sheep and pay me for the meat you have eaten, then I will leave the land.” “Who is to stop me from killing you?” demanded Cain. “If you do, God will avenge me and punish you for your wicked deed,” replied Abel.

At this Cain threw himself upon his brother. However, Abel was stronger and soon Cain was begging for mercy. Abel released him, but scarcely was Cain free than he turned against Abel and killed him.

Cain decided to run away because he could not face telling his parents what had happened. However, God spoke to him and said, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper? It is true that I killed him, but it is your fault for accepting his offering and rejecting mine. If you had accepted my offering, then I would not have felt envious and would not have killed him.” So Cain refused to acknowledge his responsibility and refused to repent.

Whether the story of Cain and Abel is historical or not, the theme of two warring brothers is repeated in countless families. It also occurs in various forms in the myths of different cultures, and reappears in literature and drama to this day. These stories are not to be dismissed because they are myths. Myths have an important role to play in our understanding of human nature. Like all myths, the story of Cain and Abel reveals timeless wisdom about the human dilemma.

Cain and Abel’s relationship was severely challenged when Cain’s offering was rejected. If they had been able to love each other, they could have established a tradition of brotherly friendship and reconciliation for future generations to follow. Instead they set up the pattern of murder and revenge that remains common in society today.

There were three things that Cain and Abel quarreled about: justice, love and possessions. Cain felt that he had been treated unjustly, which led him to deny the goodness of God. Abel disagreed and the first ideological argument occurred. They were rivals for the love of the same woman. And finally they argued over who owned what.

When we read this story, complex emotions are often aroused. On the one hand, Cain was obviously wrong—murder is never justified. Killing his brother was a terrible crime and it did not solve the problem. Cain became burdened with guilt

Myth

A traditional story of unknown authorship, which seeks to describe, explain and give meaning to some important question that arises from human experience, such as how the world and people were created, and the origin of evil.

from which he could never escape. But on the other hand, there were reasons why he did what he did. Let us think about ways in which the conflict between the brothers could have been resolved.

In doing so, we should discuss the role of Abel. What was his responsibility? In a way he seemed blameless. He made the offering correctly, and clearly the disputes over his bride or his sheep wandering on Cain's crops were not reasonable grounds for murder. Nevertheless, Abel should have been sensitive and realized that his elder brother felt hurt and rejected. He should have seen that his brother needed to be comforted and understood. He should have loved Cain. If Cain had recognized that Abel loved him more than anyone else, he would have given up his false ambitions and arrogance. Having won Cain's trust, Abel would have been able to explain to Cain why his offering had been rejected and to help Cain to make a pure offering. Instead, through his insensitivity and arrogance he antagonized his older brother even more.

Self-righteousness is a common flaw among those who perceive themselves to be blessed by fortune or the gods. As the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev pointed out, Cain's agonized question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is the very question that Abel should have asked himself.

Cain should have been more self-critical instead of becoming angry and judgmental. He was self-centered and thought that what pleased him was good, and what upset him was wrong. He was unable to see things objectively. No matter how angry he felt, he should have remembered that Abel was his brother.

Something to
think about



The story we have read describes the deterioration of a relationship between two brothers. Questions that arise are relevant to each of us. Let us think to what extent we ourselves, when relating to other people, express the attitudes of Cain and Abel.

- Why did God accept Abel's offering but reject Cain's offering?
- When a friend gives you a present, do the motives for giving matter? What is more important to you—the present itself or the heart behind it?
- What caused the conflict?
- How often does envy cause problems in your relationships?
- How could Cain have discovered why God rejected his offering?
- What do you do when you fail in something?
- How might Abel have responded so that Cain would not have become so angry?
- What do you feel when you do something much better than your classmates?
- Why was Cain so reluctant to accept responsibility for what he had done?
- When you know that you have made a mistake, what do you do? Are you ready to acknowledge it or do you prefer to hide it out of fear of losing the love and respect of others?
- What would have changed if Cain had repented?
- How can a conflict between two people be solved when one of them has made a serious mistake, betrayed or deeply hurt his friend?

- How could Adam and Eve, the parents of Cain and Abel, have acted to prevent the tragedy?
- When there is a problem between you and one of your friends, do you ask for help from a mediator (parents, other friends, etc.)?
- How do you resolve interpersonal conflict in your life?

Group Exercise



- Act out the story of Cain and Abel and discuss their feelings.
- Rewrite the story so that there is a happy outcome.
- Find examples from daily life, newspapers, etc., that contain the themes found in the story of Cain and Abel.

What does the story of Cain and Abel teach us?

Let us look at some patterns in human relationships that can be traced back to the story of the fight of two brothers.

Jealousy and envy

The source of much human conflict is jealousy and envy. When we envy someone, for whatever reason, our feeling toward that person changes. Envy can poison even the best people, and can easily lead to anger, resentment and hatred. As a result, people end up doing terrible things. We saw that Cain's problem with Abel started when Cain envied Abel.

There are different causes of envy. We may envy a brother or sister if they are receiving the love we think belongs to us. We may feel jealous if someone we love finds satisfaction in a relationship with someone other than ourselves. Jealousy is like the shadow of love. It is not something we can easily control.

Tanya is angry with Boris, her boyfriend. She was a few minutes late meeting him, and found him chatting with two girls outside the cafe. They were both very attractive and Tanya was jealous.

Katya was envious of her younger sister Natasha. The presents their parents gave Natasha were always much more expensive than the ones they bought for her.

Nikolai was furious with Alexia. They had just had a blazing row at the disco, and she had deliberately danced during a slow number with one of his friends.

Jealousy can be extremely destructive. Some people treat their loved one like a possession. This possessiveness denies the other person's independence and freedom.



One man's recollection of being the eldest son

I was the eldest boy. I remember that there was sunshine and bliss for the first four years until my brother arrived. It was as if a bomb went off, and after that for a long time the general feeling was gray and dismal. Like many eldest children, I'm sure I was "spoiled" at first but therefore resented the new arrival even more. Because of that I got myself in everyone's bad book as a result.

Jealousy can also be positive. It can act as a warning signal, telling us to protect a precious relationship.

The only real cure for jealousy is personal growth and maturity. When we love someone unselfishly, we are happy to see that person happy, even if we are not the cause of that happiness.

An elder brother might react to the birth of a sibling by being jealous because the love that he monopolized is now shared with a rival.

In order to overcome such jealousy, one has to understand the happiness that the baby brings to one's parents and love the baby because one's parents do. How will that make the parents feel? They will be proud of and love their oldest child even more. If we sincerely love someone, we are not jealous. We are happy that they have companions other than ourselves.

Anger

Have you ever felt like hitting someone when you are in a temper? Or kicking the dog? Do you ever slam the door when you are in a bad mood? Are you ever overcome by the desire to smash something really expensive when you are mad?

Anger is a very common emotion. But anger is not merely a personal matter. Like a stone thrown into a pond, it sends out ever widening ripples, affecting our personal lives, wrecking friendships and families. It can lead to disruptive behavior, vandalism and even violence.

When we are angry, we feel a terrible sense of aggression. We feel like a volcano ready to explode. When a person loses control of his anger, he can do terrible violence to those who threaten what he regards as precious.

Anger can be expressed in different ways:

- ✗ Angry actions such as slamming the door or hitting someone.
- ✗ Angry signals such as giving someone the "cold shoulder" or a "look that can kill."
- ✗ Angry words such as hurtful insults.
- ✗ Angry tones so that pleasant words are filled with venom.

There are three types of anger: rage, resentment and indignation. Rage is destructive anger. Uncontrolled anger is very frightening to the person who is angry and to those around. It can easily result in violence. For this reason people often try to suppress their anger and to deny that they feel angry. Often this leads to resentment, which quietly seethes beneath the surface. Although less obvious than rage, it can be more destructive, not only to the person's own physical and mental health but also to others. Indignation is anger that is used creatively and for goodness. It is a righteous anger that refuses to let others be mistreated.

We all have to learn how to deal with anger, both within ourselves and in others. As we saw in the story of Cain and Abel, neither brother was successful in this respect. Cain could not control his anger, and Abel responded to Cain in a way that made Cain even angrier.



The causes of conflict

Human conflict has many causes. One of these is envy—resenting others for something that they possess, for example, money, a good car, fashionable clothes or even a beautiful face. It seems unfair that they have more than we do. If something bad happens to them and they lose what they have, we are secretly glad. When we feel this way, it is easy to see only their bad aspects. We feel critical about them and denigrate the good things they do. Everything about them grates on our nerves. We see things only from a self-centered point of view. Even though these kinds of conflicts are often hidden, they are very powerful and can lead to mutual hatred.

Another cause of conflict is pride. Suppose we have been asked to do something that we feel is “beneath us” —a menial task, which someone of our intelligence should not have to do. We may sulk and not do what we have been asked to do. We just abandon our responsibility. We cannot let go of our sense of pride to cooperate with others on a project.

Conflict may result also from arrogance. We think that we can run things better than the person whose job it is to do so. We spread rumors about him to destroy his character, and oppose everything he does. Next we elbow him aside, taking over his position and making ourselves the leader. Having done this, we try to win everyone else’s support for what we have done. Anyone who disagrees we ostracize.

Most likely each of us is to some extent familiar with these feelings. There is no need to pretend that we don’t have them. It is better to learn to deal with them, to overcome them with dignity, so that we won’t repeat the tragic story of Cain and Abel. From this discussion we can see that there is more to conflict than physical violence. Violence is just the expression of uncontrolled feelings of jealousy, envy, arrogance, hatred and the desire to take revenge. How can we learn not to be enslaved by these feelings? Is there any other way out of this situation?

In the next lesson we will discuss another biblical story of two brothers—Jacob and Esau. This one is an example of how enemies can be reconciled.

Individual Exercise



Andrea is a figure skater of 15 who has been competing in a regional figure skating contest. She began skating seriously at the age of 9 and greatly admires all the top Russian skaters, hoping someday to become like them. Most of the participants in the contest are excellent skaters. Andrea has been training for several years with her coach, John, who is also a friend of the family. He has not charged Andrea’s parents any fee for his time and effort.

Andrea’s parents take her to the local skating rink two nights a week and every Saturday morning at 6 a.m. to practice. Because Andrea has been away so much lately, her sister has been taking on Andrea’s chores at home.

Everyone’s sacrifice pays off and Andrea wins first place in the freestyle, sixteen years and under category. The following is a list of statements that Andrea might make in her acceptance speech when she is presented with her award.

Which statements would you include in your speech if you were Andrea? Why?

Which statements would you omit from your speech? Why?

What statements, if any, would you add?

Individual Exercise



continued

1. I just can't believe I won.
2. I guess I was lucky.
3. Training for this competition has been hard work.
4. I am very proud of myself.
5. I think I'll probably win the national championship as well.
6. My parents have been a great help in many ways.
7. I'd like to thank my coach.
8. Some of the other contestants could have worked a little harder.
9. I'd like to share this honor with...
10. Without the support of my sister Helen, I probably would not have made it.
11. I feel privileged to have competed with the best in this area.
12. I guess I just have natural talent.
13. I'd like to become a professional skater and make some money to pay for all my hard work.
14. Many thanks to...
15. This has all been very exciting. It's going to be hard to go home to my humdrum life again.
16. Winning this competition is the result of a team effort.
17. I've had fun all the way.
18. Even though we were competitors, I regard the other skaters as my friends and I'm proud of them all.
19. I'd like to thank the judges and the organizers who sponsored this competition.

For Your Journal



Describe a time when you became very angry with someone and lost your temper. How could you have dealt with the situation differently?

If

by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, but don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream — and not make dreams your master;
If you can think — and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken,
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stop and build 'em up with worn out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings — nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And — which is more — you'll be a Man, my son!