



Parashat Bereishit: Sitting Together as Brothers

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Dear Friends,

Welcome back to Parashat Bereishit, to autumn, and to after-the-holidays.

Adam and Chava had three sons. Hevel was murdered, leaving no offspring, the line of Cain – the murderer – is recorded for seven generations only, and the third son is the father of humanity. His name is Shet.

Hevel, like his name (which means vapor) evaporated and had no continuity.

Cain, on the other hand, fathered a line of craftsmen, artists and artisans. His offspring founded the first city. But that is the last we hear of them.

Shet's descendants were Noah, Avraham, and... us.

It seems simple, doesn't it?

Here is a description of Cain's descendants:

"And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son Enoch. And unto Enoch was born Irad; and Irad begot Mehuyael; and Mehuyael begot Metushael; and Metushael begot Lamech. And Lamech took unto him two wives; the name of one was Adah, and the name of the other Tzillah. And Adah bore Yaval; he was the father of such as dwell in tents and have cattle. And his brother's name was Yuval; he was the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe. And Tzillah, she also bore Tuval-cain, the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron; and the sister of Tuval-cain was Naamah." (Bereishit 4:17-22)

At this point Cain's line ends and disappears from the stage of the biblical drama.

The description above appears fairly straightforward, but it is actually very surprising: there are women in it! Both of Lamech's wives are mentioned by name, and the birth of a girl is recorded for the first time. Since the creation of Chava and until this moment, and from this moment on, girls are not mentioned until we read about Avraham's family. But not only girls are mentioned. The Torah generally relates nothing about the people who lived at that time unless they have something to contribute to the drama. Brothers, too, are not mentioned, unless their story has bearing on the main plot.

Therefore, Our Sages (Chazal) understood immediately that the female who is born and is the last to be mentioned in Cain's line is an important link in the story. They disagreed about her character. Some found it difficult to attribute anything positive to her because of her ancestry, and some perhaps because she was female. But others – and those are the voices I choose to hear – could not ignore the meaning of her name. Na'ama, like the word ne'ima, means pleasant.

Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun writes "And here, Chazal are relating something that is not expressly said in the Bible – that Noah's wife was that very same Na'ama, the last woman to be mentioned as a descendant of Cain. Together, Noah from the line of Shet, and Na'ama from

the line of Cain, conceived the family of humanity which was chosen to comfort and rebuild the world (after the Flood)."

Na'ama is a very significant name. This is the first time a quality is mentioned, rather than actions. While the family she comes from is responsible for the first urban society, for the arts and the crafts, Na'ama brings the quality of pleasantness, the human ability to be pleasing. It is possible to have a society without manners, but it will be a tough, alienated one. This is why Chazal determined that "Derech Eretz Kadma LaTorah". Derech Eretz, meaning appropriate manners and ways, take precedence over the Torah, which represents pure truth. The first person to combine the two, according to the midrash, is Na'ama, Cain's great-granddaughter.

Again we see how Chazal insist on distancing themselves from banal simplicity, and offer depth instead. It would be easy to remain with the simpler version, whereby the line of the evil-doer, Cain, disappears once and for all. But Our Sages did not believe in purity of race. Just as they accepted Ruth the Moabite – a descendent of a nation that Jews were prohibited from marrying and from whom King David descended - so, too they made sure that something from Cain stayed with us and in us; not the potential for murder, but rather the potential for pleasant ways.

In his book on the Marranos of Spain and Portugal, Professor Yirmiyahu Yovel claims that they were the founders of modern western culture. Such a daring claim! In his book he proves this very convincingly. The reason the Marranos were able to have such a powerful influence, he writes, is because they lived on the edge – they were both Jew and Christian. They were loyal and disloyal at the same time. Professor Yuvel suggests that multiple identities enrich and deepen the experience of life and one's world view. It isn't easy to have multiple identities, but it brings with it a deeper understanding of the complexity and the wealth of existence, and allows one to enrich humanity and carry it forward as well.

This, in fact, is the greatness of Chazal. The Gemarrah – that collection of writings that is the basis of Jewish culture through the ages – instilled in us the notion of diverse and multiple opinions. Every issue is brought together with many points of view. Even when a decision is reached, the opinion of the minority is also documented. The more opinions, the richer and the deeper the culture is. Insisting on variation means that there are also opposing positions, such as Noah, who is seen both as the first righteous person, whom Chazal insist on marrying to the great granddaughter of the first murderer. Another example is having Boaz marry Ruth, a forbidden Moabite, and having them be the ancestors of King David and of the future messiah.

Avodah Sh'Balev – Service of the Heart

Something within us seeks purity, but we confuse purity with uniformity. Something within us likes black and white, not the disturbing grey in between. True, it is simpler and easier to digest; it erases confusion and makes decisions easier. But God does not live in black and white. God is the colors of the rainbow. The Divine contains every possible hue. Any attempt to deny the awareness of such variety just reduces our lives and leaves us empty and feeling hollow. Discover within yourself another hue that you are unfamiliar with. May there be many! And the darker, shadier ones that we prefer to tuck away and ignore – Chazal

suggest that while we cannot do so, we can certainly elevate them. Jealousy such as that between brothers does not have to lead to murder. It can be the impetus for healthy, productive competition.

"Derech Eretz", which comes from the quality of Na'ama, Cain's descendant, offers us the opportunity to give space to all of our parts. When they are together in one vessel, one ark, Avraham is bound to be the result.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha