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The Lesson of the Snake

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

If we look through the entire sefer Torah, we find, very interestingly, that the snake escorts the world from its very creation until the eve of Bnei Yisrael's entrance into Eretz Yisrael. It is the snake who causes the downfall of Adam and Chava by convincing them to eat from the Etz Hadaat. When Yosef's brothers throw him into the pit, we find the snake once again. The passuk says, regarding Yosef's pit, "And the pit was empty, there was no water in it" (Bereishit 37:24). Chazal (Shabbat 22a) comment, "There was no water in the pit, but there were snakes and scorpions." We again find the snake in Moshe's very first encounter with Hashem. Moshe argues that there is no point in sending him to talk to Am Yisrael in Mitzrayim, since they would not believe that Hashem appeared to him. Thereupon, Hashem instructed Moshe to throw his staff to the ground, at which point it transformed into a snake. Moshe grabbed the snake by the tail and it transformed back into Moshe's staff. The snake makes one more appearance on the eve of Bnei Yisrael's entrance into Eretz Yisrael, as mentioned earlier. Am Yisrael complains that there is no bread and water, so Hashem punishes their lack of emunah with a plague of snakes, killing many of the Jews. Moshe constructs a copper snake according to Hashem's instruction, and thereafter any Jew who was bitten by a snake would be healed by simply looking at the copper snake. Why does Hashem choose the snake to appear in these different places and times ranging from Briat Haolam all the way through coming into Eretz Yisrael?

When Hashem punished the snake for enticing Adam and Chava to eat from the Eitz Hadaat, the Torah tells us that the snake was given two curses, "On your stomach shall you crawl," and, "The dust of the ground will you eat all your days." The second curse is very clear: Since dirt can be found almost anywhere, the snake would never be without food and would thus never need to turn to Hashem for help. In other words, the curse meant that the snake was completely cut off from Hashem. The first curse is somewhat more perplexing. Is this punishment the removal of the snake's legs? This isn't much of a punishment, considering that snakes can move quite fast on their stomachs, even without legs. Rather, this punishment is also one of cutting off. An animal that crawls on its stomach can only move in a zigzag. A snake therefore cannot move in a straight line. When a person walks in a zigzag, everyone who sees him avoids him, since this strange way of walking suggests deviousness. The curse serves to distance the snake from the rest of "society" in addition to being distanced from Hashem.

Understanding the snake's curses, we can now move a step further in analyzing the concept represented by the snake. We find the snake once more in Parashas Shemini, listed among the non-kosher animals. The passuk (Vayikra 11:42) says, "Any animal which crawls on its stomach … do not eat, for they are abominations". The letter vav in the word Gachon is larger than the rest of the letters, which brings Chazal to expound that this letter is at the very center of the Torah (Kiddushin 30a). This, Chazal explain, is the chiddush that the kadmonim revealed to us, and it is the reason they are called sofrim, because they counted all the letters and taught us that this letter is in the very middle of the Torah. This chiddush is difficult to understand, though, because seemingly anybody with a little patience could count all the letters in the Torah and come to the realization that this vav is the halfway point of the Torah. The explanation, rather, is that the kadmonim were not revealing technical and numerical facts of the Torah, but the lesson that everything that happens in life, whether to the yachid or tzibur, can

be seen in one of two ways. We can look at these events through our own emotions and understanding, in which case a person might see things one way at the time it happens, differently after a few months, and even more differently after several years. His views oscillate rather than remain constant. Alternatively, one can look at these events not through his own emotions and feelings, but rather through the teachings of his rabbanim, which they received from their rabbanim – the mesorah. Through this way of looking at life, one realizes that even if the journey is challenging and difficult to understand, perhaps even illogical at times, when he ultimately looks back on his life he will find that the entire way he had gone straight, living a life of yashrut.

This is the central point of the Torah. If a person follows his own heart and his own feelings, he will find himself crawling on his stomach on a crooked path. If he follows the mesorah, the guidance and direction of his rabbanim, he will find himself on a path straight like a vav. Here lies Man's choice.

Yosef understood this lesson when he saw that the pit in which his brothers placed him was full of snakes, and yet he survived. He realized that the day would soon come when he would be reunited with his brothers, yet he would not obey his emotions and retaliate against them, rather he would help them lay the foundation for their stay in Mitzrayim, realizing that only Hashem can mete out punishment.

This was also the lesson Hashem taught Moshe when he doubted that Bnei Yisrael would listen to him. Hashem transformed his staff into a snake and back in order to teach Moshe that if you follow your own beliefs, you will find yourself going in a zigzag like a snake, but if you follow Me, even when it seems difficult, even if you don't understand, you will be on a path as straight as the staff in your hand. And with this very staff, representing straight, unwavering emunah, Moshe struck Mitzrayim with the makkot and brought about the miracles of Yetziat Mitzrayim.

Am Yisrael was taught this lesson on the eve of entering Eretz Yisrael, when the nation, openly displaying their lack of bitachon in Hashem, complained about the lack of bread and water. Hashem sent the snake to show them exactly what they resemble. Appropriately, the cure for the bite of the snake was to look at the copper snake and be onnected to Hashem. This lesson was necessary before the entrance into Eretz Yisrael, because you cannot enter Eretz Yisrael without emunah, and you cannot live there without bitachon in Hashem.

We now understand why the snake escorts the world from the time of Creation until Bnei Yisrael's entrance intoEretz Yisrael. The concept represented by the snake is expressed by Noach as well. When Noach left the teivah, the Torah (Bereishit 9:20-24) says, ויחל נח איש האדמה ויטע כרם וישת מן היין וישכר וגו'. The gemara(Sanhedrin 70a) says that the letter vav appears 13 times (attached to verbs) in these pesukim. The explanation is that Noach had the opportunity to start a new world in a yashar way, enabling the world to last forever, yet the moment he got off of the teivah he began with the gefen, which, while it has a positive side, providing wine for kiddush and havdala, also has a negative side, drunkenness. In this way, Noach lost the opportunity to start the new world with yashrut. Planting the gefen was an expression of Noach's worldview, as the gefen is the only tree that grows crooked, in a zigzag. This is hardly the tree with which he should have begun the new world. Amazingly, the same gemara in Sanhedrin brings R' Meir's opinion that the Eitz Hadaat was the gefen. Hashem told Adam, "Every tree is a reflection of you, 'For Man is the tree of the field' (Devarim 20:19), except for the gefen. Every tree is yashar, except for the gefen."

Adam and Noach were both lowered because of the gefen, but then Avraham came along. The Torah tells us that Avraham planted an eshel, a tree, bringing yashrut back into the world. It is because of his yashrut that Avraham is called the pillar of the world. From Avraham's tree, Yaakov took some branches on his way down to Mitzrayim, understanding that the way out of galut is to exhibit yashrut in one's relations with his fellow man and with Hashem. Yaakov planted those branches in Mitzrayim, where they sprouted other trees, from which Bnei Yisrael built the mishkan, the place of Hashem's shechina, of atzei Shitim omdim, representing emunah, bitachon, and yashrut. This is why Sefer Bereishit is called Sefer Hayashar, as the Netziv writes in his hakdamah, because the essential quality of the Avos was not their tzidkut or chasidut, but their yashrut. With yashrut, you can attain everything, and without it, even if you have everything, there is nothing.

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The Conflict between Cain and Abel

Rabbi David Horwitz

Genesis 4:1-8 goes as follows:

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 L-RD. 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 L-RD from the fruit of the soil, and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The L-RD 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. And the L-RD 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 crouches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master.

Cain said to his brother Abel… .and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

The question that has bothered all readers of this passage has been the following: what did Cain say to Abel? The Samaritan Pentateuch, the Greek Targum Shiv'im (the Septuagint), and the Aramaic Targum all add the words that translate into "Come, let us go into the field." Thus, according to those versions, we know what Cain said. Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Ramban, each in his own way, "fill in" the gap as well.

But the Masoretic text of Genesis 4:8has nothing of this conversation. And, of course, as Jews committed to the Masorah, we must try to understand the text as it is. What, then, is the understanding of the narrative according to our Masorah? Must we "fill in" something along the lines of the Targum as well? Is the point only that the Torah omitted words that are obvious and can be gleaned from the content?

My colleague R. Ya'akov Neuberger once suggested the following explanation: The fact that the Torah does not record what Cain said to Abel precisely reflects the fact that indeed, he said nothing to him. And that is the whole point of the story. When communication between people breaks down, when people stop talking to each other, anything could result, even, God forbid, murder. (Rav Neuberger's idea was cited in Douglas B. Sagal, "'Imaginative Insight:' Midrash and African-American Preaching," Judaism 50:1 (Winter 2001), pp. 3-16, on p.7.)

What was the original dispute about? The Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (xxii:7) suggests three possibilities.

And Cain Spoke unto Abel his brother.

About what did they quarrel?

"Come," said they, "let us divide the world." One took the land and the other took the movables. The former said, "The land you stand on is mine," while the latter retorted, "What you are wearing is mine…."

R. Joshua of Sikhnin said in R. Levi's name: "Both took land and both took movables, but about what did they quarrel? One said, 'The Temple must be built in my area,' while the other claimed, 'It must be built in mine.'"

Judah b. Rabbi said, "Their quarrel was about the first Eve." Said R. Aibu: "The first Eve had returned to dust." Then about what was their quarrel? Said R. Huna, "An additional twin was born with Abel and each claimed her. The one claimed: 'I will have her, because I am the first born,' while the other maintained, 'I must have her because she was born with me.'"

It is appealing to suggest that this Midrash is portraying not just the specific dispute between Cain and Abel but from a universal perspective, presenting three reasons why wars break out. One reason is an economic one. A second reason concerns issues of power. (Like the Ramban on the parashah of eshet yefat to'ar [Deuteronomy 21:10-14], this Midrash might understand issues concerning sexual violations as essentially revolving around issues of abuse of power.) A third reason is the religious one. Who will have the right to claim the Temple?

After committing the horrible crime, Cain cries out (verse 13) "My sin is greater than I can bear." Ramban interprets these words as a confession.

Cain said, "It is true that my sin is too great to be forgiven…" Ramban writes:

The sense is that Cain said before God, "Behold, my sin is great, and you have punished me exceedingly, but guard me that I should not be punished more than You have decreed upon me, for by being a fugitive and wanderer, and unable to build myself a house and fences at any place, the beasts will kill me, for Your shadow has departed from me." Thus, Cain confessed that man is impotent to save himself by his own

strength but only by the watchfulness of the Supreme One upon him (Ramban: Commentary on the Torah: Genesis, translated by Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel, p. 91.)

Interestingly, although all his other descendants perished even after Cain's confession (and, presumably, repentance), according to one opinion in Hazal, a righteous descendant of Cain did emerge. This is in accordance with the view of Bereshit Rabbah (23:4), that Na'ama (the sister of Tubal-Cain {Genesis 4:22}) was Noah's wife. As Ramban (ad loc.) remarks, citing the Midrash:

"And why did they call her Na 'amah (which means lovely)? Because her deeds were lovely and pleasant." By this the Rabbis meant to say that she was famous in those generations because she was a righteous woman and she gave birth to righteous children. That is why Scripture mentioned her. If so, a small remembrance of Cain was left in this world (Ramban, ibid., p. 94).

Bereishit: The Origin of Human Dignity

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

More than twenty years ago, a family celebrated a bar mitzvah at a shul in Riverdale, New York.They wanted to honor a certain man with an aliyah, but this man had recently become crippled andcould not ascend to the Torah. When the rabbi told the man he could be lifted on to the bimah, the man refused, saying, "When I come to the Torah, I will come on my own, with dignity, or not at all."

This anecdote illustrates a bedrock principle of our Jewish and social lives: If we fail to provide human dignity then we keep people from our Torah, sever relationships, and undermine institutions. On the other hand, offering this most basic respect enables people to appreciate our Torah, unites families and catalyzes friendships, and encourages the growth of our communal institutions. Judaism teaches us the basics of human dignity right at the start of Creation, in describing the way Hashem designed Adam and Chavah. HaShem created them in the image of G-d." We believe that G-d doesn't have an image; rather, as Rashi explains, "the image of G-d"means "the image G-d chose specially for humanity." Human beings, with our divinely granted design, are categorically different from all other creations; regardless of our phenotypical diversity,we are created in this special tzelem, this special image. This unique Divine design mandates that we accord dignity to all human beings. The Gemara titles that basic dignity kavod habriot, and extends it to all human beings - Jew and non-Jew, man and woman, scholarly and less learned. We take this kavod habriot imperative so far that iteven overrides rabbinic law in certain circumstances.

Numerous biblical laws also teach us of the emphasis G-d places upon human dignity:

- One may not pain his friend.
- Do not pass tales about people.
- Enable needy people to live at the standard to which they had once been accustomed.
- Provide jobs and loans, rather than straight tzedakah, wherever possible.

The Netziv accentuated theimportance of kavod habriot in his introduction to Bereishit, in whichhe wrote that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were praised especially as "straight" people, saying, "Aside from the fact that they were maximally righteous, pious andcommitted to serving G-d, they were also yeshatim, meaning that they acted with the nations of the world, even worshippers of ugly idolatry, with love, and with concern for their benefit."

This is particularly important in the realm of chesed, of generosity toward others. One feature of our Divine design is that a fully self-sufficient tzelem Elokim does not exist; we all thrive with others' assistance.

Our responsibility as Jews, as acommunity and as individuals, is toseek opportunities to offer dignifiedhelp - to assist, to welcome, to en-franchise, to include. May we meetthis responsibility in the year ahead.

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Our Connection to Eretz Yisrael

Rabbi Eli Baruch Shulman

It's always a good idea to start off best food forward. People always try to make a good first impression; authors polish the first chapter of their book so the reader will want to read on. Yet, surprisingly, Rashi begins his ommentary with one of the most difficult and perplexing comments in his entire oeuvre: Amar R' Yitzchak etc.

Very difficult: First, let's grant that this explains why the Torah had to tell the story of creation. But it still doesn't explain why we needed the rest of Breishis, and the beginning of Shmos?

Furthermore, the objection of the nations of the world doesn't seem to make any sense. The Caananites weren't the first possessors of Eretz Yisrael. We know from Rashi in Lech Lecha, on the pasuk והכנעני אז בארץ - היה הולך וכובש מזרעו של שם, it was the children of Shem who first settled Eretz Yisrael, and the כנענים conquered it from them. So how that there by an objection to our conquering it from them?

And anyway, isn't that the way of the world? What people have lived in their land from time immemorial? So why should we be different?

Simple answer: Double standard.

Eric Hoffer wrote in 1968:

The Jews are a peculiar people: things permitted to other nations are forbidden to the Jews. Other nations drive out thousands, even millions of people and there is no refugee problem. Russian did it, Poland and Czechoslovakia did it, Turkey threw out a million Greeks, and Algeria a million Frenchman. Indonesia threw out heaven knows how many Chinese – and no one says a word about refugees. But in the case of Israel the displaced Arabs have become eternal refugees...

Other nations when victorious on the battlefield dictate peace terms. But when Israel is victorious it must sue for peace. Everyone expects the Jews to be the only real Christians in this world.

OK, we're לסטים, but you claim to be different. לסטים אתם, you're just like us!

More deeply:

There is a fundamental difference between the way in which Eretz Yisrael belongs to us, and the way in which other countries belong to other people. The Celts owned England only until the Saxons conquered them; and the Saxons until the Normans came. No one would suggest that we should give it back to the Celts. Nor does anyone seriously think that we should give America back to the Indians.

But Eretz Yisrael belongs to us in a different way. It is ours intrinsically. Even after we were driven into גלות it remained ours: גלינו מארצנו, but it remains ארצנו. No other people could make Eretz Yisrael theirs; Eretz Yisrael wouldn't let them. On the פסוק Rashi says: זו מ ידה טובה לישראל - ושממו עליה אויביכם שלא ימצאו האויבים נחת רוח בארצם, because it could never become theirs.

And therefore the nations say: לסטים אתם. Every other country is the common property of mankind, held by whomever conquered it last. But Eretz Yisrael was removed from the rest of mankind, and made uniquely yours. By what right?

And the answer is: ברצונו נתן לנו, When Hashem created the world, He created it for all mankind, but He created Eretz Yisrael for us.

But that leads to a new question: If Eretz Yisrael was meant to be uniquely ours, fundamentally and intrinsically ours, why didn't He give it to us right away? What did he allow other nations to settle there first?

And that question requires us to study ספר בראשית and שמות, to learn about how אברהם discovered Hashem in a world that had forgotten Him, how Hashem entered into a unique ברית with him, how that ברית required that we undergo the crucible of מצרים, how מכירת יוסף led to the actualization of that ברית, and so on. And as we read these stories we are led to understand that Eretz Yisrael was meant to be ours, by that the fulfillment of that promise and destiny was a long drawn out promise, and so Eretz Yisrael was held by others, in trust for us.

ברצונו נתן להם וברצונו נתן לנו - it was the same רצון, to give it to us, but first to them, in trust for us.

We are going to be reading these פרשיות, from בראשית until החדש, for some time to come. And as we read them we should bear in mind the lesson that Rashi is teaching us. That the fundamental lesson of these פרשיות is to teach us the story of our connection to Eretz Yisrael, deep and profound and inseparable.

In these days when Eretz Yisrael is so imperilled, let us use the opportunity of these פרשיות to strengthen that bond, to deepen it, to better appreciate it, until we shall find ourselves in Eretz Yisrael, in happiness and joy, when ובאו ציון ברינה.

The Dynamic Attraction of Kedushah

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

The opening pasuk of the Torah is so familiar to us that we take it for granted. Rashi, however, quotes Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni, Parshas Bo #187), who wonder why the Torah begins at the beginning. After all, it's not until much later, in Parshas Bo, that the Jewish people receive their first commandment, the mitzvah of Kiddush Ha-Chodesh, sanctifying the new moon. Wouldn't it have made more sense, therefore, to begin the Torah with the first mitzvah?

Rashi famously cites the explanation that the Torah begins with the creation of the world in order to reinforce the Jewish claim to Eretz Yisroel. After all, "if the nations of the world will say to Israel 'You are bandits' for you conquered the lands of the 'Seven Nations,'" we can reply that Hashem is the creator of the world – He gave the Land of Israel to the "Seven Nations" and therefore He had the right to take it away from them and give it to the Jewish people.

In the excitement over Rashi's "punch line" we may overlook something quite startling that he mentions in passing: The Shiva Amamin, the "Seven Nations," were divinely sanctioned as the initial inhabitants and rulers of Eretz Yisroel!

From what we know about the sanctity of the land and, conversely, the immorality of these nations, this is a shocking phenomenon.

What are we to make of the fact that holy Eretz Yisroel was originally given to these wicked people? Why would such sanctity be entrusted to morally bankrupt nations?

Rav Mayer Twersky suggests that, "this jarring contrast was intended to foreshadow a fundamental historical pattern – indeed, a veritable law of history – and metaphysical truth. Sanctity arouses violent opposition."

While we might have imagined that immoral and non-religious and anti-religious people would simply ignore religious holy places and sacred symbols, R. Twersky keenly observes that in truth, throughout history that has simply not been the case. "On the contrary … forces of evil and impurity are perversely drawn to holy sites. They seek to suppress sanctity by gaining sovereignty over such sacred places." One famous example of this trend is Titus, who chose the Menorah and the looting of Jerusalem to be singled out from all of his conquests, and engraved on the "Arch of Titus" in Rome.

The first example – and paradigm – of this historico-spiritual reality was the initial granting of Eretz Yisroel to the Shiva Amamin. "Precisely because of its sanctity," R. Twersky, concludes, the Land of Israel, "would arouse the forces of evil and become the focal point in the struggle between Good and Evil."

This insight was foreshadowed – and perhaps even inspired – by a drasha given by Rav Soloveitchik where the Rav made the same essential point in explaining a seemingly incidental detail mentioned by the Gemara at the end of Maseches Makkos.

As is well known, the Gemara recounts the story of a number of great sages walking in close proximity to the ruins of the Holy Temple shortly after the Churban Ha-Bayis. After the rabbis witness a shual, a fox, rummaging around the area where the Kodesh Ha-Kedoshim, the Holy of Holies, used to stand, they become overwhelmed with grief and most of the rabbis break down in tears. On the other hand, the Gemara continues, R. Akiva had the opposite reaction and laughed.

While much rabbinic attention has been focused on the vivid scene depicted by the Gemara, R. Soloveitchik wondered about the significance of the shual.

"Er hut nisht besser a pletzer tzu shpa'tziren?"

Was there no where else, he asked, for the fox to scurry? Could it be nothing more than a coincidence that the fox was in, of all places, the Holy of Holies?

The Rav answered that the presence of the fox demonstrates the significance of the Beis Ha-Mikdash.

"Az de'shual veist instinctiv az di makom is heilig."

The fox – symbolizing the kochos ha-tumah, spiritually impure forces – is instinctively drawn to this holy place; in fact there is nowhere the shual would rather be than in the Beis Ha-Mikdash.

Once again we have an example of this metaphysical truth.

Tumah is attracted to Taharah and Chol gravitates towards Kedushah.

The "Seven Nations" were originally in Eretz Yisroel and the fox was in the ruins of the Kodesh Ha-Kedoshim.

As Jews around the world continue to battle various forms of anti-Semitism and as Israel continues to face the specter of enemy attacks and diplomatic condemnation, it might be natural to wonder: why us? Why is it always us? Why can't they just leave us alone?

From the halls of the U.N. to the desert plains of Iran,

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the world's continued preoccupation with Israel and the Jewish people is but the latest example of the of the historical pattern that Rashi alludes to in his opening commentary. The perverse obsession with us is a result of the fact that they recognize – consciously or otherwise – the true holiness of our homeland and nation.

This understanding should offer us a measure of comfort, and perhaps, like R. Akiva, bring a smile to our face.

And more important than understanding the psychology of our enemies, it should remind us of these axiological truths. It's woefully inadequate if only the "shual" appreciates the holiness.

We must be aware of and committed to kedushah and we too must "veist instinctiv" that both Eretz Yisroel and Am Yisroel are "heilig."

In the merit of our increased sensitivity and dedication to this sanctity may we merit to soon see the day where there is true peace and God's presence is manifest to all.

The Torah Promotes the Work Ethic

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Bereshith, after six days of creating the world, G-d rested on the seventh day, blessed it and designated it as a sanctified day of rest to be known as Shabbat.

In Genesis 2:4, the Torah describes the state of the world after creation. Genesis 2:5 records, כֹּל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טֶרֶם יִהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ, וְכָל עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טֶרֶם יִצְמָח, כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱ־לֹקִים עַל הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם אַיִן לַעֲבֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה . Now all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth, and all the herbs of the field had not yet sprouted, for the Lord G-d had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil.

The Torah (Genesis 2:6) then notes that a mist ascended from the earth and watered the whole surface of the soil.

Rabbi Chaim Dov Rabinowitz in his commentary, Daat Sofrim, writes that human history began under extraordinarily promising conditions. The earth was full of light, radiating splendor and pleasure, and G-d's creations were free of worries, stress, and suffering. The primordial human beings were placed in an entirely spiritual setting where they could live a pure and elevated life. Only after the humans proved that they were not capable of living a fully spiritual life in the Garden of Eden, were they removed from the garden. The earth, despite its immense resources and potential wealth, was desolate, disorganized. The original splendor had vanished.

After sinning with the forbidden fruit, humankind was now destined to do battle with the powers of nature. In order to create for themselves a life in the real world, they would have to struggle to succeed. Human beings would now be constantly weary, hungry, barefoot and mortal, with the prospect of death always looming, a far cry from the utopian conditions in which they had originally been created.

When humans were first created, they emerged as kings, not laborers, and were certainly not inclined to work. In that purely spiritual environment, it was impossible for primordial man to recognize that real pleasure in life comes from work. He could not fathom the insightful conclusion reached by Ben Hey-Hey who declared (Avot 5:27), לְפוּם צַעֲרָא אַגְרָא , according to the effort is the reward.

To keep things fresh in the world, G-d had to bring a mist, for there was no man to "work the soil."

As the story evolves, in Genesis 2:15, G-d takes the human beings and places them in the Garden of Eden, לְעָבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ , to work it and to guard it. After all, every meaningful relationship requires not only work, but effort to preserve the work, to enhance it, to make it more meaningful. It is in this rather obscure statement, that the Torah reveals the subtle formula for a meaningful existence. Not only is there a need to work, but also to guard, to preserve, to conserve, and to protect the works of our hands and our environment.

This revolutionary idea that the Torah records, goes back 5778 years. Although it was revealed in antiquity, humanity today is still trying to understand and appreciate the inevitable conclusion: The more effort invested in a relationship–the greater the reward. Only through intense effort and labor can human beings re-create the original spiritual environment intended for humanity.

It was this special work ethic that played a critical role in the establishment and founding of the State of Israel.

One of the truly fascinating pioneers of modern-day Israel, was A.D. Gordon (1856-1922), a man who came from a traditional Jewish background and lived most of his life as a religious Jew. At age 48, he moved to what was then Palestine. Although he had no training in farming or agriculture, he decided that he was going to work the land with his own two hands and make it blossom. Working long days, in often brutal conditions, dedicating his nights to

study, A.D. Gordon was soon recognized as a revolutionary and came to be considered the father of "Torat ha'Avodah," proclaiming the immense value of labor, especially of manual labor. Until he passed at age 68, he supported himself as a menial agricultural laborer working every day.

In his writings he declared, "The land of Israel is acquired through labor, not through fire and not through blood." Returning to the soil, he proclaimed, would transform the Jewish people and allow its rejuvenation.

His writings boldly reflect his uncompromising commitment to these ideals:

The Jewish people have been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within city walls for 2000 years. We have been accustomed to every form of life, except a life of labor–a labor done at our behalf and for its own sake. It will require the greatest efforts of will for such people to become normal again. We lack the principal ingredient for a national life, we lack the habit of labor . . . for it is labor which binds the people to its soil and to its national culture, which in turn is the outgrowth of the people's toil and the people's labor (A.D. Gordon, Our Tasks Ahead, 1920).

As we start the new year, it is important for us to appreciate how vitally important is the ingredient of labor. It is only through our willingness to invest sincere effort into the principles we cherish that our dreams will be realized and our connection to the Al-mighty G-d solidified. This powerful message is found in the very first parasha of the Torah. We must embrace it, practice it and make certain to transmit it to the future generations.

Kayin the Strident Farmer

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

And Hevel was a shepherd, and Kayin was a farmer." (Bereshis 4:2) Rashi (ibid., from Medrash) explains that Hevel chose shepherding because he saw that the earth was cursed (when Hashem punished Adam); Hevel therefore opted for a non-farming occupation.

One can ask why Kayin did not likewise enter another field of work; did Kayin not also realize that the earth was cursed and that farming was not an opportune profession?

When one contemplates the ideas expressed by Kayin as well as the curse placed upon him for murdering his brother, one readily draws a comparison between Kayin and the Nachash (Serpent). Targum Yonasan ben Uziel (on Bereshis 4:8) explains that during his confrontation with Hevel, Kayin denied that Hashem applies justice to the world. Kayin likewise was quite brazen when communicating with Hashem, for when Hashem asked him, "Where is Hevel your brother?", Kayin disrespectfully responded, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (ibid. v. 9) In contrast with the punishments meted out to Adam and Chava , which placed them at the mercy of the domains over which they would have been masters (the earth and procreation), Kayin's punishment was a total, overwhelming curse which ruined his future and reduced him to the lowest level of society.

Similar to Kayin, the Nachash spoke brazenly against Hashem (v. Targum Yonasan ben Uziel on ibid. 3:4) and denied that He would execute judgment (Bereshis ibid.). Like Kayin, the Nachash was punished with a curse that forever changed and immeasurably lowered his existence.

Targum Yonasan ben Uziel (on Bereshis 3:1) notes that the Nachash was the most cunning of all creatures in terms of evil; comparably, Or Ha-Chaim (ibid. 4:1) quotes the Zohar (Bereshis 54a), which explains that Kayin's spiritual root was from evil. If put together, the message that emanates from these and the aforementioned sources is that Kayin was a spiritual continuation of the Nachash. The same brazenness toward Hashem and denial of His justice permeated both Kayin and the Nachash, for they shared the same spiritual roots.

It is thus understood why Kayin chose farming rather than shepherding or some other trade as his occupation. Kayin's decision was not made as a result of sloppy judgment. Rather, Kayin denied the veracity and actuality of Hashem cursing the earth. Kayin, the brazen heretic, did not accept that Man should have been punished and that the earth's fertility was at Hashem's total mercy. Just as the Nachash maintained that Man could compete with God (v. Targum Yonasan ben Uziel on Bereshis 3:4 and Rashi on ibid. v. 5), so too did Kayin challenge Hashem's mastery over the earth and the Divine curse placed thereon. By entering the profession of farming, Kayin was sending a message of refutation of Hashem's ultimate control over all, echoing the sentiments of the Nachash, whose words brought about the downfall of Kayin's parents.

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