

There's been a lot written recently about the difficulty of the human transition from a nomadic hunter gatherer society to an agrarian economy. Though in many ways a great step forward for human kind, it came at a high price. It was a risky move, narrowing the diversity of food sources and increasing the potential for famine. Initially humans got sicker and smaller as their nutrition was poor. But ultimately agriculture allowed not only for human population growth but also for the division of labor that permitted other developments including art, writing and the building of communal structures, many of the things we believe make life worth living.

It is possible to read the story of Cain and Abel as a reflection on the tension at the edge of this major human transition. Though that transition took place many millennia ago, we still see small remnants of the conflict today. Think of the experience of the Bedouin, not so long ago a nomadic people, or the recent tragedy in the interior of Brazil. The modern world is difficult for nomadic peoples and it is challenging for the countries in which they reside given that the world is now structured in a very different way.

Some believe that we are today going through a transition of equal magnitude, as our common interests as those who share a planet may become more significant than our other identities. The pushback against these global concerns may be a reflection of how far things have already

come: after all you don't find any rabbinic sermons against gambling, in eras when it wasn't a popular vice. The images of the blue earth from the Apollo space missions which so captured the human imagination seemed destined to create a new identity which would be wrapped up in a commitment to preserving our planet. We would realize that we are all in the same boat, quite literally, and that what one community chooses to do affects us all.

Unfortunately we have not taken that lesson to heart and instead I fear that we will be remembered as the generation that fiddled while Rome burned. Somehow we have not been able to convince our own government of the importance of protecting our planet, or find our way out of longstanding animosities long enough to address serious problems. The story of Cain and Abel is not optimistic on the question of whether the farmer and the cowman could be friends, casting a shadow forward on our own efforts to bring those responsible for the management of our resources into an appreciation of the dangers of the present moment. Can nationalists and globalists, environmentalists and the fossil fuel industry, be friends? One of the great ironies of this moment is finding much of the business community light years ahead of the present administration and seeing how market forces have brought about changes that reduce the further destruction of

our planet. Yes, it is true that major transformations cause hardship and we must provide a safety net to those caught in the transition, but unless we take the steps that we need to take for the future of all of our children and grandchildren we are jeopardizing their security and even survival.

I can remember when environmental protection was a Republican issue . Not not President Teddy Roosevelt, but the global warming ads run by John McCain when he ran for president. It has been renounced in great measure because of the pledge the Koch brothers require for their donations, “ I will oppose any legislation relating to climate change that includes a net increase in government revenues,” this to prevent even the most market driven of remedies, cap and trade. In our Torah portion this morning, God’s message to Cain is Timshol, you can rule over it, Timshol, you must rule over it, and that is the message to us as well. We must take this issue off the political football field where current donors have put it and return it to a bipartisan platform informed by contemporary science.

But to read the story of Cain and Abel only on a societal level on Yom Kippur, as critical an issue as our planets survival remains, is to miss some of its most important messages.

How do you picture Cain, in your imagination, in the moment after he has struck his brother? There he is standing up after their tussle. He sees Abel on the ground, not moving. I don't imagine a smile of satisfaction on his face, a grin –“there now I showed him”. Instead I imagine a shocked expression. We were just having this argument....Now he's dead....what happened.

I think at least some of the classical Jewish commentaries agree with me. They point out that Cain had never witnessed a human death, perhaps didn't even realize that this could be the outcome of their fight. And translating his cry- gadol avoni minsoa, my sin, my wrongdoing is more than I can bear, supports the idea of his regret for how things turned out, even if his initial response to God, , “am I my brother's keeper”.

was defensive.

Thankfully most of us have not personally been involved in an escalation of conflict with such devastating results, but we may have had the same feeling of shock when a conversation or other interaction goes south. We were just talking and all of a sudden, this wasn't the conversation that we meant to have. Perhaps the other person took offense, or became much

more emotional than we expected. Sometimes when it is over, we are reeling, that wasn't how we meant things to end up.

And after our teenager has slammed the door, or our partner has said the fateful words, "I'm leaving", or the aggrieved member of our book club or running group has said, "I quit", we may try to figure out how we got there, from where we thought we were.

One interesting commentary on the story of Cain and Abel notes that often when siblings fight, it is because it is safer to take it out on a brother or sister, than to confront the real problem, mom or dad. They have power and crossing them can be dangerous and so we often look for the safer alternative.

And isn't that what happened in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain wasn't really mad at Abel at all, but at God, who had disrespected his offering. How often is it, when there is a dispute among siblings after a death, that it is really about things the parents did or did not do, the favoritism, real or perceived?

Among all the squabbling siblings in the Torah, and there are many, the Five Books of Moses gives us two examples of brothers who get along, Menasheh and Ephraim, the last two brothers in the book of Genesis, the

one's in whose name we traditionally bless our sons on Friday nights, and Moses and Aaron, at the beginning of Exodus. Menasheh and Ephraim are said in our tradition to be the tikkun, the repair for Cain and Abel, loving each other and wanting only for their brother. Maybe that is because Joseph, after having suffered so much from the favoritism and jealousy in his family of origin, did better with his own sons. Having no resentments against their father, they could humor their grandfather, the dying patriarch when he played favorites.

Moses and Aaron seem a more challenging pair. Wouldn't Aaron the older brother be jealous of his more dominant sibling? The way the story is told in Exodus would lead you to think that there was a large age gap between Aaron and Moses. Did that make it easier when God chose Moses to be the greatest of the prophets? Also Moses was raised in the palace, so the boys didn't spend time together as children. Did that keep them from experiencing, the "mommy always loved you best" jealousy.

It may also have been something about their personalities. Moses was very humble and Aaron was someone who went out of his way to make peace.

Or perhaps their loyalty to each other was forged in the crucible of Egypt, in the danger of a common enemy. I have seen that with siblings. Don't you

hit my brother, says the older sib, having just swatted him himself. Woe to the young spouse, hearing his or her partner criticizing mom and jumping on the bandwagon.

Of course Aaron was more than a mouth piece for Moses. Ultimately he becomes the high priest, a role that he passes down to his children while Moses leaves his own son no legacy. The Midrash has them each rejoicing in the other's success, Aaron in Moses's leadership and Moses in Aaron's investiture as High Priest. Would that we could bottle that and rejoice in each other's successes!

The jealousies and resentments, the murderous rages that we feel, cannot be fully denied. But if we can think more about the origins of these feelings, we can understand them better. And if we can reframe our experiences, being more aware of our own ego's and focusing on the better angels of our personalities, we can avoid the worst of consequences.

In the coming year we pray that this will be the case, not only in our homes and local communities, but in our larger governmental structures as well, so that deep tensions can be overcome and work for the common good can go forward.