

Johnie Cochran, O.J. Simpson's very expensive defense attorney, I am not, and yet I've been thinking that Cain got a bump rap. It's not just because I am a first born myself, but rather our tradition is more nuanced than we often remember.

The story is more complicated, and there are details we tend to ignore.

For starters, the two young men were not asked to bring an offering, rather this was something that Cain decided to do on his own. Why he decided to do this we don't know, it wasn't something he learned from his parents. What he had heard from his parents about God might have been pretty negative, given their banishment from the Garden of Eden, yet there was something in him that wanted to express his gratitude. It's true that his brother, Abel, in following his lead outshined him, bringing his best, but isn't that how it often is, when we build on another's idea.

Secondly, even the rabbis of the Talmud admit that Cain might not have understood the consequences of his actions. He had never seen anyone die before. When he rose up against his brother, did he know that this would cause his death, and did he understand death's finality? Was he like Moses, who struck the taskmaster, without, so far as we can tell, intending to kill him?

Finally, in later rabbinic writings, Cain is known as the first person to make teshuvah, repentance. When Adam and Eve were confronted with their wrongdoing, they merely passed the buck, Adam blaming Eve and Eve the snake. But after his initial defiant response, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain rethinks what has happened and cries out, Gadol avoni minsoa.

Many Christian Bibles translate this, “my punishment is too great to bear”, but we know the word avon, from Yom Kippur, where it is one of three words – avon, pasha, chatat, commonly used for sin. Translating it this way, “my sin is too great to bear” makes Cain a more sympathetic character. “ I cannot stand the awareness of what I have done, “ he cries. The rabbis, making him the poster child for repentance, even put the words of Psalm 139: 7-10 into his mouth:

“Where can I escape from You spirit?

Where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend to heaven You are there.

If I descend to Sheol, You are there too.

If I take wing with the dawn and come to rest on the western horizon,

even there Your hand will be guiding me,

Your right hand will be holding me fast.”

Though the priestly author makes us all descendants of Seth, Adam and Eve's third child, Seth seems like a bit of an afterthought. I wonder if the original message of the Torah was that there is something of Cain in us all, good intentions, as illustrated in his initial desire to bring an offering, but also jealousy, impulsivity and anger which can lead to tragedy.

How we deal with those times when it seems that things are unfair, is a great challenge- yet few of us will get through life without that experience-- whether it is studying hard and then seeing a friend who didn't, do better than us on an exam, practicing hard but not making the cut, working hard but finding that others advance beyond us. Cain's wrongdoing acts as a reminder to us to hang in there and not compound resentment with tragedy. And if we do not always behave as our highest selves, it reminds us that we can do teshuvah, repent, and then pick ourselves up and face life again.

This very first Torah portion of the year begins with the cosmic, the creation of the entire universe, but quickly shifts its focus to the very human and very universal challenges of life and death, interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal growth. It reminds us of what a gift we have in Torah- *hafoch bo hafoch bo*, turn it over and over, for everything is within it.