CROUCHING/COUCHING

Dvar Torah for Parshat Va-Yechi 5780

Like certain melodies, there are words and phrases that haunt and provoke us during our waking hours, as well as trigger dreams within us when we sleep. Did you ever have that experience? Some tiny fragment of great music from a symphony or a phrase from a book just sticks with you -really, it sticks to you – and you can’t stop thinking about it.

The genius of a great composer or writer is to intuit when a melody or a phrase can be so addictive, it won’t let the reader or listener go. However, a great artist or writer also knows how to take that word, phrase or musical fragment and make it enchant us, move us, haunt us at different stages in different ways throughout his or her masterwork.

Bible scholars refer to these kinds of haunting repeat words as lead words. Ancient biblical society was both oral (word of mouth) and aural (reading a written text aloud and listening to it carefully). A lead word helps the one listening to a story to tie its different parts together meaningfully by showing up at different points, to make a point, in the storytelling. With that in mind, I want to take us all on a small literary and spiritual journey, from the beginning of Genesis until its end, by looking at one of these haunting words with you: the Hebrew word, *roveitz*, to couch or to crouch.

The first use of *roveitz* occurs in my favorite biblical story, Cain and Abel. On your study sheet, read what God tells Cain upon seeing how angry he has become when God accepts Abel’s offering and ignores his offering:

*“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 couches at the door;*[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Its urge is toward you,*

*Yet you can be its master.”*

*La-petach hataat roveitz*: sin couches (or) crouches at the door. The traditional commentators come up with fanciful and beautiful explanations for what this means. My favorite translation of this phrase is that of the Bible scholar, Everett Fox: “Sin is a crouching demon.” He derives this from the original meaning of *roveitz*, the ancient Akkadian word *rabitzu*. In Akkadian legend, *rabitzu* were literally demons crouching at the doors of houses and buildings who attacked outsiders and often protected insiders. God seems to be telling Cain to literally pick up his face and body that have been felled by rage, self-pity and depression. If he remains where he is, he risks Sin, that nasty crouching demon, attacking and overpowering him, leading him by implication to do the previously unthinkable: murder his own brother. If he picks himself up physically and morally, he can overpower that lustful demon waiting to lead him to do wrong.

Cain, of course, does not listen to God. Sin the crouching demon pounces on him then gets him to overpower and murder his brother. Cain and Abel become the paradigms for human violence. All shedding of human blood is now an echo of the first fratricide.

We will fast forward in a moment from the bloody dawn of humanity at the beginning of Genesis to the concluding words of Jacob to his sons at the end of Genesis on the eve of his death. First, let’s quickly summarize what happens to humanity between Abel’s death and Jacob’s old age:

God chooses Noah and company to found an old/new society after the flood destroys everything on the planet. Noah is another paradigm for you and me: possessing the capacity to do good *and* evil.

God then narrows the search for human partners in perfecting the world to one man, Abraham, and his descendants who are called to be a blessing and a witness for all people.

I suggest that Cain and Abel’s story then plays out in the deeply scarred history of Abraham’s family and descendants, each time coming so close to fratricidal tragedy, yet just missing it by a hair: Abraham forces Yishmael out of the household, to the point of near death, to protect Isaac’s inheritance; Esau threatens to murder Jacob for stealing his birthright by posing as him to their father; Joseph lords his exalted status over his resentful brothers who sell him into slavery and fake his death to their father. Each time, Abraham’s descendants are barely brought back from the brink of death.

And yet, for all the suffering and deception, each of these sibling pairs and groups seems to figure out how to manage, if not wipe out, the fratricidal impulse handed down to them in each generation from Cain and Abel. Isaac and Yishmael bury their father Abraham together; Jacob and Esau reconcile after being estranged for twenty years; Joseph reveals himself to his shocked brothers, and essentially forgives them for their treachery. Finally, Jacob seems to repeat the same pattern of divisive favoritism with which he was raised by giving his younger grandson, Ephraim, the greater blessing than he does to Menashe, his older grandson. Yet Genesis simply ends their sibling story right there, with no concomitant bloodshed, sibling strife or jealousy. Grandpa may still not have learned his lesson, but we have no evidence that the boys get sucked into the old dynamics: brothers must care for each other as brothers, family pathology notwithstanding.

And it is this critical point that the repetition of the word *roveitz*, couch or crouch, accentuates as Jacob addresses his sons before his death. In his description of Judah, Jacob compares him to a lion crouching safely and protectively at the head of the pride:

## *Kara* ***ravatz*** *k’aryeh*

# K’lavi mi y’kimenu?

## He ***crouches***, lies down like a lion

Like the king of beasts, who dare rouse him?

Then, in his description of the blessings awaiting Joseph, Jacob includes these:

# Birkhot shamayim me’al

*Birkhot tehom* ***rovetzet*** *tachat…*

Blessings of heaven above,

Blessings of the deep that ***couches*** below…

Their brother Yissachar is also described in crouching terms: he is called a jaw boned ass crouching among the sheepfolds, ***roveitz*** *bein hamishpatayim*. In a longer paper that I want to write, I’ll come back to this crouching reference as well as to one other found in Genesis 29. However, for now, let’s just focus on the crouching references being used in connection with Judah and Joseph.

These two brothers are the warring then reconciling opposites that stand out among their siblings, each as it were vying for preeminence. Joseph is the arrogant favorite of his father; Judah is the-ring leader who directs the siblings to sell him. Joseph climbs the ranks to become second in command of Egypt, thus literally saving the children of Israel. Judah redeems his family by switching from ring-leader of sibling hatred to the lead brother who saves Benjamin from prison and death. In later legend and biblical history, Joseph represents the northern tribes of Israel, Judah the southern tribes. They are two fraternal houses of Israel divided for most of biblical history until the north is exiled in 722 BCE to Assyria, never to be seen again. They also represent the two fraternal houses in Ezekiel’s prophecies who will be reunited as one nation.

Judah and Joseph, I submit, are in fact, Cain and Abel redeemed. Cain is accosted, seduced and overpowered by Sin the crouching demon who leads him to murder his brother, that paradigmatic act of fratricide. Judah and Joseph, a microcosm of the human family’s experiences, don’t eradicate Sin the crouching demon, because they can’t. What they are able to do is master Sin, as God had urged Cain to do, for the sake of fraternal responsibility.

The crouching demon (*roveitz*) of envy, hatred and bloodshed is transformed, howbeit briefly, into the mighty lion (*ravatz*) crouching peacefully in contentment; and into the blessing that (*rovetzet*) couches or crouches in the mythic depths of the seas, long overdue for the deserving, victimized brother.

Cain and Abel, Judah and Joseph: their hatred and healing, their lust and their love, crouch at the doors of our hearts waiting to see how we will behave toward each other.

What will we choose?

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)