SIN AT THE DOOR, SINAI AT HEAVEN’S GATE: A TEACHING FOR SHAVUOT.

Listen to the Torah’s aching narrative about what Elie Wiesel called the world’s first genocide:

*In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to God from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. God paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering God paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. And God said to Cain,*

*“Why are you distressed,*

*And why is your face falle**n?*

### Surely, if you do right

### There is uplift.

### But if you do not do right

### Sin couches at the door,.

### Its urge is toward you,

### Yet you can be its master.” (Genesis 4:3-7)

Because Cain and Abel is a foundation story about what causes us to be cruel and violent toward each other, understanding it clearly is vital to our ability to learn lessons from it. Yet, everything in this central scene from the story has an air of tortured vagueness about it. We sense that Cain brought a gift inferior to his brother’s, but another possible reading is that God simply decided to favor Abel for no discernible reason; Cain is distressed to the point of his facial muscles literally drooping, but is his distress motivated by anger, depression, shame, or something else? At whom or at what is he angry? What are we to make of Genesis 4:7, one of six verses in the Torah identified as inherently ambiguous by the sages of the Talmud? Who or what is Sin, why is Sin couching at the door, and to which door is God referring: the door of our hearts, our homes, our graves, or maybe perdition? Finally, what are we to make of God’s response to Cain’s anguish? If God wanted to forewarn Cain about the dangerous potential for Cain’s rage to lead to evildoing, why not just warn Cain in clear terms not to murder his brother? Why speak in such generalities about mastering Sin? If God wanted to Cain to master Sin, why would create Sin in the first place?

Reading Cain and Abel over thousands of years has generated more questions than answers. What we do know is that God holds out for Cain, and by extension for all of us, the possibility of mastering Sin. However wronged, cheated, or justifiably enraged Cain feels, however intense his anguish and longing over being rejected by God are, he has the ability and the obligation to control his impulse to lash out destructively. We have the freedom to rein in our darkest impulses, regardless of the life circumstances that motivate us to act upon them. The sages of the Talmud referred to our sexual, aggressive, acquisitive, (and in their view, even our idolatrous) impulses as *yetzer ha-ra*, our evil inclination or potential. Following God’s admonition to Cain, they firmly believed that human beings are free to civilize these drives, despite the supreme difficulty of achieving this. When *yetzer ha-ra* couches at the door and its urge masters us, the world within and around us is impoverished. We master *yetzer ha-ra* not by suppressing it but by channeling it into relationships, marriage, having children, appropriate forms of ambitious behavior, laws and procedures for advancing society.

God’s admonition to Cain made clear *that* he must master his impulses, “Sin couching at the door.” However, we human beings do not thrive on generalities. We need guidance about *how* to master them. Enter God’s revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, which we commemorate during the upcoming Shavuot holiday. Their overall structure and details are spiritually and morally transforming. As an example, let’s look at their bookends, the first and last commandments:

I am the Lord your God who bought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Exodus 20:2)

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s. (Exodus 20:14)

Traditional sources generally interpret coveting (ḥimmud in Hebrew) to mean desiring something so strongly that it leads you to coercive or licentious behavior. Leaving aside historical and moral questions about slave ownership and women’s subjugation to their husbands’ households, we can think about coveting as those sources often do: our rawest acquisitive impulses couching at the doors of our souls and actions, insisting that we are the center of the universe and that we deserve to take whatever and whomever we want. In his book, The Ten Commandments, author David Hazony teaches that this coveting rule stands in stark contrast and active tension with the first “commandment”: to accept God as our God, the One Who freed us from servitude to other humans in order to make us God’s servants in a covenantal relationship. Hazony points out that this first statement of the Ten Commandments places God - not us with our most powerful drives – at the center of the universe. Rather than a mere statement of important rules, this framework of the Ten Commandments is in fact a grand drama in which we are the actors: who will we serve, ourselves and our impulses to sin, or God? The middle commandments draw for us a preliminary road map for how to serve God.

Yet allow me to take this Ten Commandments framework to a deeper level. I imagine this drama scripted for us in the Ten Commandments list as a response to Cain and Abel’s earlier story. Spiritually, we are all Cain’s descendants, and God’s admittedly vague but ominous warning to him is really God’s warning to us. Imagine Cain standing at Mount Sinai, listening to God lay out the basic rules of civilization: don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie, all of them wrapped ultimately in that greatest principle: don’t covet what is not yours, the nefarious source of murder, theft, adultery, and lying. Listen in on Cain’s dialogue with God:

Cain: Is this what You meant when You warned me to master Sin? Control my most acquisitive impulses that were making me so angry at You and at Abel?

God: Yes, Cain, I expect self-control of you and your descendants. No matter how much you want something, no matter how much you think you deserve something, no matter how justified you might be in demanding something and in feeling wronged, you may never act on your worst tendencies to hurt or wrong someone else.

Cain: But why? Why should I control myself, especially in a situation like mine and Abel’s, where You rejected me and my offering in favor of Abel’s? What other recourse do I have other than to act out my rage and my desire?

God: As hard as it is for you to do, your other recourse is to struggle toward a new perspective about yourself, about the world and about Me. Not everything is about you, your desires, and your pain. Look at the world through My eyes and you will see that you are not at its center, Cain, you are not at its center.

I am not implying that Cain – that we – do not have the right, even the obligation, to demand justice, to express our pain and our rage, and to pursue the lives we desire. God did not make us so that we should suffer unnecessarily. Yet God did make us so that we should not cause others to suffer unnecessarily either. On Shavuot, as we reenact the Sinai revelation, I hope we’ll imagine ourselves standing at the foot of the mountain with Cain, reminding him that the most profound freedom does not derive from unfettered grasping desire. It derives from freely binding ourselves to God’s vision of a compassionate world that we – dark impulses and all – create.