## THE GIFTS OF ABEL AND CAIN: A MODERN HASIDIC EXPLANATION.

# By Rabbi Shalom Noach Beresovsky (The Slonimer Rebbe). From his Hasidic Bible commentary, *Netivot Shalom*, Volume I: Genesis, pp. 26-27.

### Verses For Study

# *In the course of time, Cain brought* ***an*** *offering to God from the fruit of* ***the*** *soil; and Abel,* ***he also*** *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 fallen?*

*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.”*

### Questions On This Passage Of The Torah

Let’s try to understand this matter of Cain and Abel’s offerings to God. The Torah writes that “Cain brought (his gift to God) from the fruit of the ground.” Rashi explains that Cain brought the worst of his produce. His explanation is based upon the comment found at Genesis Rabbah 22:5 that Cain brought God the worst of his produce.

The assumption that Cain acted this way at first makes no sense.

Cain, the first one to bring God a gift before Abel, brought his gift of his own volition; nothing obligated him to do so and no one forced him. If he wanted so badly to bring a gift to God why would he bring God junk?

Another question to ask about the above passage is this. The verse states that “Abel, *he also* brought a gift.” It would have been sufficient for the Torah to state simply that Abel brought a gift, without the words, “he also.”

#### Answers To Our First Question

We can find answers to this first question by closely reading the verses.

Concerning Abel, we read that “He also brought the choicest of the firstlings of *his flock.*

However, concerning Cain, we read that, “Cain brought *an* offering from *the* soil,” implying that his gift did not come from his own property.

Both of these verses imply that Abel gave a gift to God from his own possessions, those things most precious to him for which he constantly invested a great deal of work and effort. Anything in which a person invests his greatest energies is precious to him. Thus, Abel gave God “the choicest of the firstlings of *his flock*.”

This was not the case with Cain.

He merely brought an offering from the soil, without bringing the first fruits of his own property in which he had invested work and effort. This offering did not count as personally his. Even if Cain had brought the best produce it would have been of no value and would have been considered junk, because he had not invested his heart in bringing it.

Yet Abel offered to God the best and the most precious to him, “the choicest of the firstlings of his flock.”

Cain “brought an(y old) offering from the soil,” that is, he brought whatever he could grab without conscientiously choosing what to bring.

Abel brought the very best, the most pleasing and high quality of his flock to God.

**A Lesson About Serving God.**

In this passage, the Torah is trying to teach us how to serve God.

It is insufficient for you to merely offer to God a gift. You might punctiliously follow the Torah and pray to God. But if you do not offer the best of yourself that there is to offer, (thus going against your natural impulse to not part with what is precious to you), your gift becomes diluted by those natural impulses and is not fully acceptable to God.

The essence of a (true) gift to God is “the choicest of the firstlings of one’s flock.”

This means giving the very best you have to offer, for which you have invested all of your energies.

#### What If I Have Limited Or No Means With Which To Serve God *The Best*?

[Now, this teaching doesn’t imply that you necessarily have to offer the best *materially.*)

Look at this hint we find at the very beginning and end of our holy Torah:

The Torah begins with the Hebrew letter **ב**, *Bet* (the first letter of the first word of Genesis, ***B****reisheet*, “In the beginning…, Genesis 1:1)

It ends with the Hebrew letter**ל** , *Lamed* (the last letter of the last word of Deuteronomy, *Yisrae****L***, “The children of Israel,” Deuteronomy 34:12)

Take these two Hebrew letters, **בל** and switch them around, so that they now form the word **לב,** *Leiv*, which means “the heart.”

From its beginning to its end, the Torah is hinting to us that God wants a person’s heart, as we learned in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 106b.

The value of the gifts that you offer to God is measured by how much of your heart you invest in offering it.

Cain invested nothing of his heart in an offering that wasn’t even his possession. No matter how much he gave (or how fancy it might have been) it was still junk.

Abel offered the things most precious to him -those possessions after which people lust – as well as investing his whole heart in giving his gift to God.

This is the kind of gift that God wants from us: one given wholeheartedly.

#### Answers To Our Second Question: Why Add The Words, “He Also...”?

To answer this question, let me tell you a story.

One Shabbat, during the Musaf Service, our holy teacher, Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin was praying. When he got to the words, *“We will prepare and offer this Musaf offering to You,* *God*”, he was so overwhelmed spiritually that he moved heaven and earth!

Some say that he fainted.

When his students later asked him what overwhelmed him, he explained that he suddenly understood the deeper meaning of these words of the Musaf prayer:

“We will prepare an offering *of ourselves* to You, God.”

This is implied by the seemingly superfluous words, “We will prepare *and* offer...”

Either the word prepare *or* the word offer would have been sufficient to make the point in the prayer that we wish to once again offer God a proper Musaf sacrifice, as in ancient times.

Using both words implies that we wish to prepare a sacrifice for God, and the “sacrifice” we wish to offer is *ourselves*.

This story of the rabbi from Kobrin helps us to better understand these seemingly superfluous words from Genesis, as well: *“And Abel,* ***he also*** *brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock.”*

## Those words imply that Abel offered something more than sheep.

In addition to bringing the best firstlings of his flock, *Abel also* completely brought *himself* as an offering to God.

Cain offered God produce but he did not offer himself.

(That is, Abel made his offering wholeheartedly, while Cain did not.)

This now explains another seemingly superfluous part of our Torah passage:

*God paid heed to* ***Abel and his offering****, but to* ***Cain and his offering*** *God paid no heed.*

This verse could much more simply have said that God paid heed to Abel’s offering but did not pay heed to Cain’s offering. What point was the Torah making by writing the verse as it did?

The Torah is emphasizing that God paid heed to Abel, who offered himself (as it were) as a sacrifice to God, *along with* his actual offering.

But God did not pay heed to Cain. He offered a sacrifice, but not himself, to God, like his brother did.

**Rejection, Rage, Revenge: Moving On To God’s Warning 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 couches at the door*

*Its urge is toward you,*

*Yet you can be its master.”*

God said these things to Cain after he failed in his attempt to bring God his gift.

God told him, *“If you do right, there is uplift.”*

This phrase can be explained through a teaching (of my grandfather), the holy sage of Slonim.

When the evil inclination entices you to sin, more than its goal of getting you to do the wrong thing is its goal of spiritually deflating and deeply depressing you after you sin.

Now, we have learned in the holy books that, while abiding sadness is not itself a sin, it leads us to commit all types of sin.

Further, while abiding joy itself is not a commandment of God, it leads us to perform all types of commandments (though our joyful hope).

This explains what God told Cain: *“Why are you distressed and why is your face fallen? Surely if you do right there is uplift.”*

“Cain,” God was saying, “Even after failing and falling so miserably as you did with your offering, if in the future you do right by strengthening yourself with joy, you will once again rise from your depressed state. What happened to you is merely a test, through which you can do better and go higher in your life.”

*“But if you do not do right, Sin couches (low down with you) at the door…”*

“Cain,” God continued, “If you remain in a place of abiding sadness over your failure, Sin will wait, couching low, to pounce on you and enslave you.”

(Targum Jonathan on Genesis, in fact, records the conversation that took place in the filed between the brothers before Cain murdered Abel. Cain was so depressed that he declared the world to be meaningless and devoid of justice. When Abel argued with him, Cain angrily struck and killed him. See Targum Jonathan to Genesis 4:8)

This reminds me of another story about the holy sage of Lecovitch. A person who had repented of his sins came to him for advice about how not to fall back into his old ways.

“If you remain in a state of joy, you can conquer everything. If you let sadness take over your life, you’ll fall right back into the sinful place where you were.”

For about a year and a half, the man remained in a place of overall joy and was able to hold fast to his repentance.

One day, some terrible fight took place in his family. He became so depressed that his heart was literally as saddened as was God’s heart before the Great Flood. (See Genesis 6: 6). He fell spiritually and returned to his old life of sin.

**So,** **In Conclusion**

This is your task after you fail to do what is right:

Strengthen yourself with joy!

Often, the real test for your life isn’t about the bad things that you did but about whether you can grow stronger from your actions by joyously believing in your own improvement.

Do right in *that* test…and your life will be uplifted!

Translated by Rabbi Dan Ornstein, October 31, 2019//2 Heshvan 5780.

Shalom Noach Berezovsky was the spiritual leader of the Slonimer Hasidic sect, founded in Slonim, Grodno district, in Belarus. He was born on August 8, 1911 in Belarus, and died on August 8, 2000, in Israel. His most famous work of Torah scholarship is Netivot Shalom (“Paths of Peace,”) from which the above teaching is taken.

For more information about Rabbi Berezovsky, see the following Wikipedia link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sholom\_Noach\_Berezovsky