

Two thousand years ago it was asked, what is the most important verse in the Torah?

Rabbi Akiva said, it is “love your neighbor as yourself,” for if we would only truly love our neighbors, our peers, our fellows, we would not be so quick to shame, hurt, or harm them.

But Ben Azzai said, it is “in God’s image, humankind was created,” for, he said, if we knew whose image we were dishonoring when we harmed one another, we would never dare to attack each other, any more than we would dare to attack God.

I wish so deeply that I had words to suggest that we as humankind may have internalized either of these verses.

I wish I lived in the world I did last week, where I was already thinking about what beautiful lessons we could pull from Bereishit because, after months of Deuteronomy and Numbers and Leviticus, a rabbi gets tired. I wish I lived in last week’s world where I assured my wife over and over that, not to worry, things would be easier after the Chagim. That come the night of October 8th, our lives would be simpler again after the intensity of the High Holidays.

So many of us prayed over and over for a sweet new year, a new year of health and prosperity for the world, only to be ushered into something wordlessly bitter.

Last week I scanned Facebook for funny Sukkot memes. This week, over and over, I see the smiling face of a cousin who I never got the chance to know, posted by people who never met him, but who are sharing the photos and stories of all those killed in the massacres committed by Hamas and in the first line of defense against them.

I found out about his death on Facebook too.

In this week’s parasha, God tells Kayin, Cain after he has murdered Hevel, Abel to listen! The blood of your brother cries out from the earth!

This week, it’s been all we’ve been hearing. The screaming of the blood of the slain. The wailing of the mourners. The moaning of those whose loved ones are missing or kidnapped, the questions - where are they? Are they alive? Will I see them again?

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-קַיִן אַי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי:

God asked Kayin, where is Hevel your brother? And Kayin said, I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?

There is a midrash about the creation of humanity. God consulted with four ministering angels - Chesed and Emet, Tzedek and Shalom. Kindness and Truth, Righteousness and Peace. God asked, should I create humanity?

Kindness said, yes, for they will be capable of immense acts of lovingkindness. But Truth said no, they will be liars of distorted speech. Righteousness said yes, for they will be able to do right by one another, be able to create a just world, and act righteously.

But Peace said no, for they will divide themselves into factions and be at war with one another.

God said, maybe so, but I will create them.

How quickly Truth and Peace were proven right. One generation and we've arrived at liars. At murderers. At brothers divided into two strangers ready for a fight.

Before Kayin kills Hevel, there is another one of those strange gaps in the text: וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִי וַיְהִיגָהוּ:

And Kayin said to Hevel his brother.... And when they were in the field, Kayin rose up to kill him.

What did Kayin say? What did Hevel say in response? One midrash teaches that already they were fighting over ownership of land and property. Kayin the farmer said, "this is my Earth and you have no right to stand on it. Fly up into the sky." And Hevel the shepherd said, "your clothing is made from the wool of my sheep. Go be naked."

And another midrash teaches that both of them fought over where God's Temple should be built - on which brother's land?

We can almost hear Peace say “I told you so” to God. Factions and fights, teams and battles and enmity. We just can’t help ourselves from picking sides, from saying because this is mine, this cannot be yours. We just can’t stop ourselves from turning to violence over it.

But the medieval commentator Rashi taught, “there are many midrashim about what Kayin said to Hevel in that moment. But the simplest answer is - Kayin used words as a weapon, looking for an excuse to fight, escalating the matter until he killed him.”

I would take this even a little farther. There is a reason that the Torah does not include the words and it is not because they are too harsh, because the Torah does not shy away from frightening words, and it is not because they would be too long, because the Torah records much longer conversations.

The Torah cuts off because it is at that moment that Kayin cut Hevel off. The Torah cuts off because it was at that moment *communication* cut off. Where words became false and brotherhood became estranged, where humanity was choked off and replaced with something unspeakable and unintelligible.

Rabbi Art Green teaches that Ben Azzai had the right of it when he said that the most important principle in the Torah is that we are all created in God’s image. That in theory, Rabbi Akiva may have had the right idea in saying that the greater principle is to love your neighbor, but that, as Peace warned above, human beings have the nasty habit of looking at a person, or at a group of people, and saying, “I do not recognize you as my neighbor. I do not recognize you as my fellow. I do not recognize you as someone who gets to live next to me.”

And if you can define someone as “not my neighbor,” then you no longer have to love them.

I believe that is what happened in that ellipsis, that gap, that speech by Kayin that elides any written record. It was in that moment that Kayin erased Hevel, *undefined* him as his brother. Categorized him instead as stranger, enemy. Collateral damage. Target.

Not a neighbor or a peer, but a representation of something Kayin hated. And so Kayin was able to kill him.

But Ben Azzai, Ben Azzai in choosing the the verse, “b’zelem Elohim bara otam,” “in the image of God, God created them,” says it doesn’t matter if a human being is your neighbor at all.

It doesn’t matter how close you feel to them. It doesn’t matter if you recognize them, if they look, live, believe, or speak like you. It doesn’t matter where they dwell or what they call themselves. It certainly doesn’t matter if you love them.

They are simply a human being. And all human beings are created in the image of God. And to desecrate them, to deny a shared humanity, to seek to do them harm - that is diminishing the only image of God permitted to exist on this Earth.

Perhaps if Kayin had understood that, perhaps if he had been told that humanity was created in the image of God, perhaps if he had truly internalized it, maybe he wouldn’t have killed Hevel at all.

Maybe they would have spoken in a way that the Torah would have recorded. Maybe they might have lived long lives alongside one another. Maybe Hevel’s blood would not have cried out from the earth, a screaming demand that something be made right, a screaming demand that we even today don’t know how to answer.

Maybe when God asked Kayin, “where is your brother,” Kayin might have answered, “As my brother’s keeper, I will tell you.”

The murder was not inevitable. The bloodshed of the past week in southern Israel was not inevitable. No one *had* to massacre anyone, infants and elderly, soldiers and civilians. No one *had* to kidnap entire families, take grandparents hostage with their grandchildren.

And the current bloodshed is not inevitable either. No one *has* to send rockets into people’s homes. No one *has* threaten torture and death on hostages. The coming bloodshed is not inevitable either.

I will even say this - no one *has* to flatten cities, to cut off food and water to Gazans who have nowhere to go after nearly two decades of blockade. Who have no real government that cares about them, their lives, their safety, because as we know, Hamas no longer pays even lip service to protecting the civilians under their own rule.

This killing is *not* inevitable, Hevel's murder was not inevitable, because while Peace and Truth were right, that humans are inherently prone to lying and dehumanizing speech, that humans are inherently prone to violence and factions, Kindness and Righteousness, the two angels who argued on our behalf were right as well.

Our instincts are not our destiny. We constantly show how we are capable of incredible acts of kindness and righteousness. Our angriest, most violent impulses are not the sum of who we are, who we are is what we choose to do after after we've stopped to take a breath. Whatever immediate emotions we have, whatever anger that bubble up inside of us, whatever numbness and exhaustion that overcome us, we always have the choice to act in a way that demonstrates our understanding *that every human being is created in the image of God.*

For every terrorist, there is a medic like Awad Darawashe that gives his life rushing to the scene. For every gunman, there are students that wait nine hours in line to give blood. For every murderer, there is an actress like Jen Parricklo who plays Skye on the national Paw Patrol tour who, as far as I can tell, is speaking herself hoarse as she is sending voice note after voice note in English and Hebrew to Israeli children, so they can hear their favorite Paw Patrol character tell them she loves them and supports them.

For every thought that might arise in our minds in reaction to fury and devastation, "just kill them all," there is the moment later where we have a chance to course correct, to take a breath, to choose something different, something kind, something righteous.

Only a couple weeks ago we prayed for a sweet new year.

We did not have one. Nothing can change that. We prayed to be written in the book of life for sustenance and health, for deliverance and redemption.

Instead, the blood of our family in Israel is crying out from the Earth.

We cannot, however much we may want to, restart the year. But we can live our lives going forward proving Kindness and Righteousness right, proving God Godself right because God chose to create us. In the image of God, God created us.

“Where are your siblings,” God asks us, every day, every month, every year.

“Right here,” we must answer. “We are their keepers.”