

Where Is Your Brother?

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Three years ago today, on 7 October 2023, Israel lived through the deadliest day in its history. On the Hebrew calendar it was Simchat Torah. This week, as the cycle begins again, today's portion brings us to the first murder in the Torah.

The first question G-d asks a human being is "Where are you?" (Bereishit 3:9). The second, a few verses later, is "Where is Hevel your brother?" (4:9). The first is about me. The second is about the person next to me. Between those two questions, much of the Torah's moral life is already set out.

Rashi explains that G-d knew the answer. He asked gently, to open a door: perhaps Kayin would turn and say, "I killed him, and I sinned before You." Kayin answered instead with the most famous shrug in history: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

G-d does not argue with him. He simply says: "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (4:10). The Hebrew says *bloods*, in the plural. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) reads it as his blood and the blood of all the descendants who would have come from him. That is why, it teaches, the first human was created alone: whoever destroys one life is regarded as if he destroyed a whole world, and whoever sustains one life, as if he sustained a whole world.

Three years on, we understand the plural. Every name carries children never born, tables never set, Shabbatot never sung.

But we also know the other half of that Mishnah. In the days and months after that morning, Israelis answered Kayin's question without being asked. People drove south toward the danger. Families opened their homes to neighbours from evacuated towns. Volunteers cooked, packed and drove for people they had never met.

The Sages gave that answer a name: *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, all Israel are guarantors for one another (Shevuot 39a). A guarantor is not a spectator. He is the one who signs his name under someone else's debt.

The same portion carries a quieter lesson. Before the murder, G-d warns Kayin that sin crouches at the door, "but you can rule over it" (4:7). Anger is not destiny. Even at the edge, a person can still choose.

So on a day of memory, the question comes back in its second form. Not only "Where are you?" but "Where is your brother?" Who in your building, your shul or your family has gone quiet since that morning? A call, a visit or a meal is a small answer. The Mishnah would call it a whole world.

Kayin asked whether he was the keeper. The Psalmist answers: “Behold, the Keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps” (Tehillim 121:4). We are asked to keep one another because we ourselves are kept.

May G-d comfort the families who carry an empty chair, heal the wounded, and guard all who guard us.

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