G-d rejected Kayin's sacrifice but accepted Hevel's offering. Kayin was angry that Hashem found favor in Hevel's offering, and remained angry despite Hashem's explanation. The narrative abruptly turns to a scene which takes place in the field where Kayin rises and kills Hevel. What happened between the time that the two brothers brought their sacrifices and the ensuing murder?

The Midrash offers numerous points of view as to what occurred between Kayin and Hevel. One opinion offered by the Midrash is that Kayin and Hevel struggled over land ownership. A second opinion maintains that the two brothers were quarreling over who would have the Bais HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, built in their territory. A third opinion posits that Kayin and Hevel disputed the right to marry Chava, Adam’s first wife. This presupposes that Adam had subsequently married a second woman named Chava. The fourth and final opinion cited in the Midrash is that the first Chava had already died and Kayin and Hevel were arguing over who would marry the extra sister that was born to Hevel. What is troubling about the Midrash, however, is that all the opinions appear to ignore the original cause for contention. Kayin was upset because G-d had rejected his offering and preferred his younger brother's offering over his. Would this not have been sufficient reason for Kayin to kill Hevel?

A rabbi once related that when he was first hired by a synagogue, he ambitiously took on the issue that seemed to be the most troubling issue in the community at the time. For many years, two of the wealthiest members of the community were not speaking with one another. Unexpectedly, the rabbi summoned the two adversaries to his office with the intent of getting to the root of their dissent. The rabbi questioned each of them as to what they thought the catalyst had been that led to the long-standing feud. To the rabbi’s surprise, neither man was able to recall the exact point in time when the feud began. However, they both insisted that “such a fight only could have occurred if there had been good reason for it.”

Sadly, people often have fallouts in their relationships because of “something that happened long ago,” but have a hard time explaining why it had such terrible repercussions. While the Torah omitted the actual dispute that occurred between Kayin and Hevel, the rabbis in the Midrash debated the nature of the quarrelling brothers’ discussion. It would seem that the Biblical omission and the sage’s elaboration demonstrate the idea that one can easily become embroiled in a dispute over trivialities. Clearly, something occurred between the brothers that instigated the tension. Nonetheless, they allowed the dispute to escalate to the point where the origin of the debate was irrelevant.

This incident is a lesson in how to maintain harmonious relationships with friends and relatives. While differences and disputes are sometimes inevitable, it is essential to recognize that what unites us is more important than what divides us.

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Talking Points

BEREISHIS

1. FROM GOOD TO VERY GOOD

"And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good. It was evening and it was morning, the sixth day." (1:31)

It was very good – At the conclusion of each of the other days of creation it only says, "And G-d saw that it was good." Why at the end of the sixth day does it refer to the creations of that day as "very good"? Until the end of the sixth day, each creation was only one part of an incomplete whole. Independently each was "good," but no more. Upon the conclusion of the Six Days of Creation, when all was completed, it was appropriate to comment on the entirety of creation and state that it was "very good." – Rabbi Pinchos Jung

It was very good – Although it referred to all prior creations as "good," it referred to the creation of man as "very good." This is because man is the pinnacle of creation and the reason for all the other creations that were only created to assist him in his mission to serve his Creator. Their creation was only meaningful if there would one day be human beings who could utilize them for his ultimate purpose. Once man was created, their existence was validated and now their creation too, attained a status of "very good." – Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lurshitz

2. OFF WITH HIS HEAD

"And Hashem said to the serpent...And I will put hostility to the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall strike you on the heel, and you shall strike him on the head." 3:14-15

He shall strike you on the head, and you shall strike him on the heel – When he is a "head" – i.e. a leader because of his observance of Torah and Mitzvos, then he will succeed in striking and eliminating you. However, when he is a "heel" – i.e. lovely and disrespected because of his abandonment of Torah and Mitzvos, then you will be able to strike and eliminate him. – Or HaChaim (Rabbi Chaim ben Atar)

The commentators explain that "He will strike you. 'Rosh,' [on the head]" can also be understood as a technique to successfully vanquish the evil inclination as represented by the primordial serpent. If we refuse to engage him in conversation or even contemplate his sinister suggestions, then we will swiftly dispatch him and be rid of his influence. This is called striking "Rosh," i.e. first, before he has a chance to penetrate our consciousness. If however, he is allowed to peddle his wares among us and we do not banish him immediately and only seek to rid ourselves of him once he’s well-ensconced, then victory will be his. He will strike us from the "heel" i.e. when his threat is only dealt with in delayed fashion.

3. SUFFER NOAH LONGER

"Lamech lived one hundred and eighty-two years and had a son. He named his son Noah, saying, "This one will bring us rest from our work and the anguish of our hands, from the soil which G-d has cursed."" 5:29

This one will bring us rest from our work – Prior to Noah’s time they had no agricultural tools and he invented such tools for them. Furthermore, the earth had been producing thorns and thistles when wheat was sown as a result of Adam’s curse. This sorry state ceased in the days of Noah. – Rav

This one will bring us rest from our work - Were they prophets that they knew that this child would accomplish this in his lifetime?

• They did not call him this name at the time of his birth. Rather, this was the name that was given to him when they saw the ground change its habits during his lifetime time – Aderes Elyahu (Rabbi Elyahu ben Slomo Zalman – The Kaon of Vilna)

• When Adam was cursed, the Almighty said to him, ‘The soil will be cursed because of you. In sorrow you shall eat from it all the days of your life… until you return to the ground...’ The first child born after the death and burial of Adam was Noah. Thus, it was obvious that the birth of this child heralded the removal of the curse of Adam. – Riv’ah

• Until the birth of Noah, all men were born with their fingers fused together in web-like fashion. Noah was the first one born with separate digits. This left him too weak to plow the ground using his hands. Forced to innovate, he invented the plow, which in turn, made life easier for all of mankind. – Rav Yehudah HaCohen

When Adam was cursed by the Almighty, he inquired how long the curse would be in effect. The Almighty responded that it would continue until a child is born circumcised. Noah was the first child born circumcised so they knew that he must be the one who would herald the new era. – Midrash Rabbah

Sforno offers an explanation more basic than all of the above. The name given Noah was simply a prayer offered to the Almighty asking that this child spell relief from the agony they had encountered until his time. The Almighty saw fit to grant their request and the curse of Adam was lifted. Such is the power of a heartfelt prayer that it can eradicate the most serious of decrees.

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Dear Rabbi,
As we embark upon another year of reading the Torah beginning from Bereishis, I was hoping you could give me some background on how this custom developed. Thank you so much for your help!
Grace B.

Grace,

Your excellent question is the subject of a discussion in the Talmud [Tractate Bava Kama 82a] which explains that after traveling three days in the desert without devoting time to studying Torah, the Jewish people found themselves spiritually weak. In response, the prophets among them arose and decreed that from then on, three days could not pass without a public Torah reading which would ensure that this would not occur again. The designated days were Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday. Either one person would read three verses, or three people would read three verses each, corresponding to the three classes of Jews: Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites.

This number corresponded to the ten public servants who spent their days immersed in Torah study in the synagogue and ensured that a minyan (quorum of 10 men) would always be present.

Indeed, in Mishnaic times, it is clear that these public readings were already standard practice including many others such as those for festivals and fast days.

The custom of reading an entire parsha wasn't always universal either. The Talmud [Tractate Megillah 25b] makes reference to the people in the west [i.e. Israel] who would complete the entire Five Books in three years. Rashi comments that their practice was unlike ours which is to complete the entire Torah in one year's time and restart on the Shabbat following Sukkos.

Already in the times of Maimonides it was common practice to complete the entire Five Books in one year as he writes, "The common custom throughout all of Israel is to complete the [reading of] the Torah in one year. The cycle is begun on the Sabbath after the Sukkos festival, reading the sidrah, Bereshis. On the following Sabbath, Eileh toldot; on the third, Vayomer Hashem el Avram...We continue reading according to this order until the Torah is completed, during the Sukkos festival. There are those who finish the Torah reading in a three-year cycle. However, this is not a widely accepted custom."

More recent Halachic authorities [Shu"T Reme"z, Perach Shoshanim etc.] have ruled that we must abide by the widely accepted practice to complete the Five Books each year and may not opt to adopt the custom of doing so over three years.

Initially, the reading was done by the individual who was called up to the Torah. Over time, the situation deteriorated to the point where not all were capable of reading from the Torah, and it became standard to appoint a permanent reader who would read on behalf of all who were called to the Torah. They, in turn, would recite the appropriate blessings. [Note: In order to serve as the reader on behalf of the congregation, the reader must be obligated in the mitzvah as well. This effectively disqualified a minor from serving in this capacity. To symbolize his transition into the world of adulthood, it has become customary for a Bar Mitzvah to read from the Torah, something unavailable to him heretofore.] Furthermore, unlike today, the reading was accompanied by a translator who would translate the Hebrew into the language spoken at that time which was usually Aramaic. The translation was called, "Targum," and the translator was called, the "Meturgamon." Eventually, this practice too, was discontinued.

Since the Five Books are broken into 54 sections, it was necessary to combine some portions and read two together on one Shabbat. During a leap year, this is not always the case because of the additional weeks that are added.

Aside from the weekly reading, there are special readings that occur on Festivals and designated Sabbatot. Some of those have their origin in the Torah, such as Parshas Zachor, wherein we recall the mitzvah to destroy the wicked Amalek.

May we celebrate the completion of this Torah-reading cycle together with all of Israel in a rebuilt Jerusalem!

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LOOK WHO MADE PARTNER...

Recent Sampling of People Who Have Joined as Partners:

JUDY WALDMAN -- FORT LAUDERDALE, FL
MORDECHAI LEVINE -- SPRING VALLEY, NY
LISA HALPERN -- WEST BLOOMFIELD, MI
ISAM NUTOVIC -- BROOKLYN, NY
BONNIE MELDEW -- SPRING VALLEY, NY
ILANA LEFF -- PHOENIX, AZ
JOSEPH REICH -- LAKEWOOD, NJ
YEHUDAH SOMER -- BROOKLYN, NY

Making Partner has never been this easy!
Soul Talk

The Mishnah in Avos (5:1) states that the world was created with ten utterances. Based upon this, Rav Yochanan addsuces the obligation of reciting the verse of the heavens and earth mentioned in the verse came about through speech, as indicated in the verse, "By the word of Hashem, the heavens were made." Why is the statement made that the world is suddenly "very good." Why is the all of creation called "very good" when each of the previous individual day's creations were merely "good"?

One answer would coincide with the popular understanding of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Alternatively, "very good," according to the Midrash, refers to death. "Very good," according to the Yetzer Horah, positive inclination, and "very good" to the Yetzer Tov, the negative (or evil) inclination! What is a reishis' statement is made that the world is suddenly "very good." Why is the world was created with ten utterances, the obligation of reciting the verse avoided?

Rav Itzele of Volozhin (Peh Kadosh) wonders, why, in fact, the Torah did not use the straightforward form of the verse, "Let there be declaration that there would be only excellence to attain mediocrity or excellence. This final retort in this easily imagined dialogue is that of the father, who explains, "What you say is true, and indeed, even if you were to sin you would be called a Jew. But the goal that I was working for and seeking from you was excellence in Torah study and service of Hashem, not mediocrity and complacency!

In a similar vein, when Hashem created the world "for Israel and for Torah," the idea was not that it would be sufficient for each Jew to perform a mitzvah from time to time, or to study some subject of Torah on occasion. The intent was that all Jews would engage themselves in the study of Torah and performance of mitzvos to attain a level of Torah Excellence - pre-eminence, elevation, and distinction. Just as Hashem cares for all our needs unstintingly, He expects that we too will use all our resources and talents in observing the mitzvos and attaining knowledge of the Torah, and not be satisfied with levels that are "adequate" or "acceptable."

In this light, it is understandable why the verse could not say, “For the sake of the Torah and Israel, both of which are called Master Hashem, the heavens were made.” Yet, this is understood as His Word, yet still leaving the aspect of creation is thus presented in a way that man have free choice to perform good or evil, and to attain mediocrity or excellence. This distinction. Just as Hashem cares for all our needs unstintingly, He expects that we too will use all our resources and talents in observing the mitzvos and attaining knowledge of the Torah, and not be satisfied with levels that are "adequate" or "acceptable."

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