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Why Did Kayin Offer Flaxseed?

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1.

KAYIN'S FLAXSEED OFFERING

On the verse:¹ “Kayin brought an offering to Hashem of the fruit of the ground,” Rashi quotes the words, “of the fruit of the ground,” and explains: “From the poorest. There is an *aggadah*² which says that it was flaxseed.”

The rationale behind Rashi's explanation — “from the poorest” — is obvious (as *Re'em*³ explains):⁴ “If this was not the case, why did Hashem ‘not turn to Kayin and to his offering’?”⁵

However, we need to clarify why Rashi quotes the *aggadah*, which says that Kayin's offering was flaxseed. Of what relevance is it to the *pshat*⁶ whether Kayin's offering — “from the poorest” — was flaxseed or any other produce?

We cannot ask: What is the **proof**, based on *pshat*, that Kayin's offering was flaxseed? For the fact that Rashi quotes this from the *aggadah* — whereas Rashi does not record the source of his explanation, “From the poorest” (even though this is also written in the *aggadah*)⁷ — indicates that the *pshat* of the verse does not, in fact, prove that Kayin offered flaxseed (and the source for this is only in the *aggadah*).

But Rashi does quote the *aggadah* in his Torah commentary. We must, therefore, conclude that this is (in **Rashi's** words),⁸ “an *aggadah* which

¹ *Bereishis* 4:3.

² {*Aggadah*, sometimes synonymous with *midrash*, is a method of exegesis that uses homiletics to explain the Torah. Rashi will quote an “*aggadah* that clarifies the words of the verses” only when the simple interpretation does not suffice.} *Targum Yonasan ben Uziel*, on the verse; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Elazar*, ch. 21; *Midrash Tanchuma, parshas Bereishis*, sec. 9; *Zohar*, vol. 3, p. 87a; *Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 59* (p. 112a).

³ {An acronym for Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, a preeminent commentator on Rashi.}

⁴ *Re'em* on Rashi, *Bereishis* 4:3; *Sefer Zikaron*, commenting on Rashi, also says this.

⁵ *Bereishis* 4:5.

⁶ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” When the plain meaning is understood clearly, Rashi does not comment. Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

⁷ *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 22, sec. 5.

⁸ *Bereishis* 3:8, et al.

resolves the words of the verses.” Meaning, a difficulty in this verse is resolved by the *aggadah* that says Kayin’s offering was flaxseed.

2.

NOT DOING THE BEST OR DOING BAD

In some editions of his commentary, Rashi’s remarks continue (in parentheses): “Another explanation: *From the fruit* — whichever fruit came to his hand, neither good nor choice.” Although the earlier editions of Rashi’s commentary do not include this explanation, it is understood that this second explanation also has its place. For this reason, some editions do include it as part of Rashi’s remarks here.

One can posit that the reason Rashi is not satisfied with the first explanation and adds the second is as follows: If we assume that Kayin sinned by bringing an offering “from the poorest,” why does the verse write ambiguously that he offered “from the fruit of the ground,” without specifying that he brought “from the poorest,” or something to that effect (as the verse immediately **specifies** regarding Hevel’s offering — “from the **firstlings** of his flock and from their **choicest**”)?⁹

For this reason, Rashi offers a second explanation: Kayin’s offering was not “from the poorest,” but, as the wording of the verse — “**from the fruit**” (without specifying) — indicates, “whichever fruit came to his hand, he offered, neither good nor choice.” This was his failure. He did not ensure to offer the best and the choicest to Hashem.

But on this basis, something else then seems surprising: We can appreciate why Hashem did not turn to Kayin or to his offering according to the first explanation, “from the poorest.” This is because Kayin offered **specifically** the poorest (which not only demonstrated a lack of respect for Hashem, as otherwise he would have felt obligated to offer from the best and choicest fruits, but even

⁹ Bereishis 4:4.

worse, he offered from the poorest). This was disrespectful and **disgraceful** to the One to Whom the offering was brought.

But how can we say that Hashem did not accept his offering **at all** — Hashem “did not turn to Kayin and to his offering” — because he had not put in the effort to offer from the best and choicest but sufficed with offering from “whichever fruit came to his hand”?

3.

TRYING TO SPITE?

The following, we can say, is the explanation: Rashi is not content with the interpretation, “from the poorest,” since this interpretation is very difficult: In bringing this offering, Kayin sought to express his thanks to Hashem. Why, then, would he offer “from the poorest”?¹⁰ This would be the opposite of his motive for bringing the offering.

Furthermore, after Kayin noticed that Hashem “did not turn to his offering,” the verse says that “Kayin got very angry and dejected.” This is surprising: After Kayin brought his offering specifically “from the poorest,” did he really expect his offering to be accepted?

We must conclude that although Kayin’s offering was of the type that was not worthy enough to be accepted, it would still need to have been something that **Kayin** could mistakenly have thought would have found favor.¹¹

Rashi, therefore, explains and interprets this in two ways: The offering was: (a) [although of the poorest] “flaxseed”; and (b) [not of the poorest, but] “whichever fruit came to his hand {he offered},” not the best and not the choicest, as will be explained.

¹⁰ See *Gur Aryeh*, *ibid.*

¹¹ Note that *Ramban* on *Bereishis* 4:3-4 says: “‘Kayin offered... Hevel offered...’ — These men understood the great secret of sacrifices and offerings.”

4.

AT WHAT POINT WAS HE AT FAULT

On this basis, we can also answer a question regarding the **order** of the passage:

Scripture first says, “Kayin brought an offering to Hashem.” Subsequently, Scripture continues, “Hevel also brought... Hashem turned to Hevel and to his offering...” Only after all this, it says that Hashem “did not turn to Kayin and to his offering. Kayin got very angry...” Seemingly, the clause recording that Hashem “did not turn to Kayin” should be placed immediately after the verse, “Kayin brought an offering to Hashem” (before the verse tells of Hevel and his offering).

Even if we assume that the Torah wants to tell us first about how both offerings were brought, and only afterwards how they were received — in that case, the Torah should first tell us that Kayin’s offering was rejected, and then afterwards, “(Hashem) turned to Hevel,”¹² to parallel the order of the offerings.

On a simple level, we can suggest¹³ that this is because only after “Hashem turned to Hevel” (“Fire descended and consumed his offering”),¹⁴ did Kayin realize — because the fire did **not** descend... — that Hashem hadn’t accepted his offering, and for this reason, “Kayin got very angry...”

But based on the above, we can answer that by relating this narrative in this order, Scripture seeks to allude that the true {rejection of Kayin} — “Hashem did not turn (to Kayin)” — occurred only after “Hashem turned to Hevel.” This is because when Kayin brought his offering, there was room to mistakenly think that he had no sin, as discussed.

¹² As *Or HaChaim* asks regarding our verse.

¹³ See *Radak* on our verse.

¹⁴ Rashi on our verse.

Only after Kayin saw how Hevel brought an offering “from the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest” (and therefore), Hashem “turned” to Hevel and his offering – something that had not happened with him – did it dawn upon Kayin that his own conduct had been improper. At this point, Kayin still did not regret his deeds and did not do anything to correct his behavior (by bringing a second offering of the best and choicest, or the like). Therefore, only here does the Torah emphasize the result of **this** sin — Hashem “did not turn to Kayin and to his offering.”¹⁵

5.

THE SPECIES

We have discussed on numerous occasions that Rashi composed his commentary for (even) a five-year-old beginning to learn Scripture.¹⁶ Thus, the reason Rashi writes “it was flaxseed” without specifying in what way flaxseed is advantageous over other “fruits of the ground” must be because the five-year-old **already** knows.

As Rashi explained **earlier**: The verse, “The name of the first is Pishon.”¹⁷ Rashi explains (in his second explanation) that the river was called Pishon “because it grows *pishtan* {flax}.” The fact that a river (the first river, in fact) was called by the name of the flax that it grew indicates that flax is a very valuable material.

Now we can understand Kayin’s thought process in bringing his flaxseed offering: Kayin presumed that the primary factor in bringing his offering was the **species** of the offering — the best and choicest of the species. Therefore, he chose flaxseed, because flaxseed is an important and choice item. But within the species itself, he brought “from the poorest.”

¹⁵ See, too, the comments of *Alshich* here.

¹⁶ *Pirkei Avos*, end of ch. 5.

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 2:11.

This, then, was the advantage of Hevel's offering. From the species of his offering, he chose, "**from the firstlings** (of his flock) **and from their choicest.**"

6.

WE NEED BOTH EXPLANATIONS

This explanation, however, is not altogether smooth: Since Kayin sought to embellish his offering by bringing a more preferable species, why did he bring the poorest (of that species)?

This question is not terribly strong, for the verse, further on, continues:¹⁸ "At the entrance, sin crouches; its longing is toward you." The evil inclination involved itself in this issue and caused Kayin to sin.

However, its involvement was in the manner expressed by the verse, "at the **entrance**, sin crouches." Meaning, the evil inclination's control was only "at the entrance," meaning, from outside. The evil inclination knew that it could not dissuade Kayin from bringing an offering entirely, nor have him bring an offering from the most inferior species. The evil inclination could only trip him up slightly — he would be content to bring an offering from a superior species, but from the poorest of the species.

However, in order to further smooth out this issue, Rashi brings (as many versions include, as mentioned) a second explanation: "*From the fruit* — whichever fruit came to his hand {he offered}, neither good nor choice." According to this explanation, we can **easily** understand why Kayin thought that Hashem would accept his offering.

[The reason why Hashem **did not** turn to Kayin and to his offering was because even later, after Hevel brought his offering of the finest sheep and

¹⁸ Bereishis 4:7.

Hashem accepted his offering, Kayin still had no regrets, and had no desire to correct his behavior.]

However, this explanation is also difficult to understand. In fact, it is more difficult to understand than the first (and for this reason, most editions of Rashi omit it entirely). It does not make sense to say that simply because Kayin brought an offering of mediocre quality as opposed to the best, Hashem **completely** rejected his offering. Therefore, we need the other explanation, and it is placed as the first and primary explanation.

7.

THE MOST PROMINENT SPECIES

Rashi's comments contain wondrous matters¹⁹ (in the context of halachah). From Rashi's comments here, we derive an idea that explains (the nuanced wording of) something that Rambam says:

Rambam rules:²⁰ "One who desires to gain merit for himself... should bring his offering from the nicest and most admirable {specimens} of the species that he is bringing." He then quotes a verse,²¹ "All of the choice parts for Hashem." Rambam then brings proof for this, "Hevel brought from the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest... Hashem turned to Hevel and to his offering...."

His nuanced wording, "from the nicest and most admirable {specimens} **of the species** he is bringing," indicates that "all of the choice parts for Hashem," would require the person to bring of the most superior (choicest) from within the species that he is bringing, but not that he must (also) choose the choicest species that he could possibly bring.

¹⁹ *Shnei Luchos HaBris*, "Maseches Shavuot," 181a.

²⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilchos Issurei Mizbeach," ch. 7, par. 11. This ruling of the Rambam is cited in *Shulchan Aruch*, "Yoreh Deah," end of sec. 248 (except the paragraph about the bringing of a sacrifice, etc.; and the proof-text from Hevel, is omitted, possibly, because this point is not relevant nowadays).

²¹ *Vayikra* 3:16.

[We find a similar example of this regarding pledging a sacrifice.²² “When one makes a vow without specifying {the type of animal he is bringing}, he should bring from the full-grown animals in the species he vowed to bring.” For example: “If a person vowed to bring an *olah*²³ from cattle, he should bring an ox” (as opposed to a calf), that is, the choicest of the species he pledged. However, even a rich man can, from the outset, pledge to bring a sacrifice from a less expensive or a smaller species — even a burnt-offering from a bird. This is true to the extent that if a person said, “I promise to bring an *olah*” **without specifying** {what kind}, then if the practice of the people of that locale is to use the term “*olah*,” unqualified, to refer even to a bird *olah*, he may bring even a bird *olah*.]

We need to clarify: Seemingly, the verse “All of the choice parts for Hashem” also requires a person to bring from the most choice and select species. As such, why do we say that the verse “all of the choice parts for Hashem” only requires the person to bring from the best of the species that he will bring?

Based on the above, we can posit: Rambam infers this law from the offerings of Kayin and Hevel. He brings the narrative of their offerings as proof, in general, for this law, as mentioned (and discussed above).

Hevel brought his offering from the choicest (“from the firstlings... and from their choicest”) within the species of sheep, but he did **not** go further to bring an offering from a better species (cattle). On the other hand, Kayin selected a choice species — flaxseed. But “Hashem turned (specifically) to Hevel” ; “He did not turn” (**at all**) to Kayin. This proves that the verse “all of the choice parts for Hashem” only obligates a person to bring “from the nicest and most admirable {specimens} **of the species** he is bringing.” But it does not obligate him to bring from the choicest **species**.

²² *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Maaseh HaKorbanos*,” ch. 16, par. 3, and *Lechem Mishnah*, loc. cit.

²³ {Commonly translated as “an elevation offering,” it was consumed completely on the altar.}

8.

ALL THE CHOICE PARTS GO TO HASHEM

But we need to clarify this matter further: What is the reason for this? Why is an offering “from the nicest and most admirable {specimens} of the species he is bringing,” better than an offering brought from the best species?

We can say as follows: The meaning behind the command, “All of the choice parts for Hashem,” is that in this way, a person realizes that “the world, and everything that fills it, is Hashem’s.”²⁴ Everything belongs to Hashem. Therefore, a person gives Hashem (the first)²⁵ and best of everything he earns.

Now, the maxim. “The world, and everything that fills it, is Hashem’s.” includes **everything** in the world, both the beautiful and praiseworthy species, as well as the mediocre species, etc. Therefore, the command, “All of the choice parts for Hashem” refers not only to the best **species**.

This would not adequately express the recognition of Hashem’s ownership of the world that extends to **every** created species. [In addition, had this been the case, it would emerge that a person who does not own any choicest species cannot fulfill the commandment, “All of the choice parts for Hashem.”]

Therefore, the obligation is to give Hashem “from the nicest and most admirable {specimens} of the species he is bringing” — from any species that the person wants to give. In doing so, he demonstrates that everything he owns belongs to Hashem.

²⁴ *Tehillim* 24:1.

²⁵ See *Sefer Hachinuch*, “*Mitzvah* 18, *Bechor*”: “In order that all should know that everything is His.... a person’s first fruit is beloved to him like the apple of his eye, he immediately gives it to Hashem.”

9.

ECHAD AND YACHID

On this basis, we can also appreciate the deeper reason that Kayin did not choose an offering from the choicest of species (instead, he just chose the choicest species, flaxseed).

In *Likkutei Torah*,²⁶ the Alter Rebbe explains that the flaxseed that Kayin offered is similar to the white linen garments (made of flaxseed) worn by the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. These clothes allude to the “world of unity.” The unity of linen ({made from flax fibers} which grow “a **single** stem from each seed”),²⁷ is not a unity from division [like the four kinds of the *lulav*, whose unity is expressed by their growth together, and so forth, “but their growth itself is separate and distinct”]. Rather, it is {representative of a unity that reflects} “essential singularity.”²⁸

Kayin wanted to elicit into this world the aspect of singularity that **transcends** division into parts. Therefore, it did not matter to him to bring the choicest of that species. For that would have given credence to divisiveness (best, ordinary, worst). Since Hashem is the owner of every species in the world (as mentioned above in Section 8), Kayin chose the choicest.

But this was not what Hashem wanted. For the ultimate purpose is not so much to feel Hashem’s unity as He exists singularly {where nothing else truly exists but Him}, which would compel a person to separate himself from worldly matters. (For this shows that when humanity does engage with the world, it severs itself from Hashem’s unity.) Rather, the ultimate purpose is *echad* {the

²⁶ *Likkutei Torah*, “*Acharei Mos*,” p. 28c.

²⁷ Rashi on *Zevachim* 18b.

²⁸ For an elaboration of these ideas, see *Ateret Rosh*, “*Shaar Yom HaKippurim*,” ch. 2. (See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 19, p. 359.) On this basis, the precision of Rashi’s wording, quoted above, is appreciated, “a single stem” (and not one).

Divine One}.²⁹ This oneness requires mankind to give to Hashem, “the nicest and most admirable {specimen} of the species he is bringing,” as elucidated above at.

10.

THE DIRECTIVE

This is also the lesson for each person in their *avodah*³⁰ — how careful each person must be in the matter of performing mitzvos in the most beautiful way.

Kayin was on a spiritual plane whereby he could sense the “singularity” {of Hashem’s existence} (symbolized by flaxseed). Nevertheless, since he lacked the beautiful manner of performing the mitzvah by bringing the choicest (of that species), he stumbled. For instead of Hevel’s offering encouraging him to upgrade his offering (in accord with the adage, “Envy among scholars increases wisdom,”³¹ and had he done so he would have earned both advantages: the choicest species (flaxseed) and the choicest of that species), he, Heaven forbid, succumbed to jealousy, and “Kayin rose up against Hevel...”³²

Certainly, this applies to every one of us. We must constantly climb higher in our *avodas* Hashem (like a mountain climber; if he stops for a moment, he may fall, G-d forbid,) and constantly increase in beautifying our performance of mitzvos. Every holy matter should be from the “best and choicest,” and “from the nicest and most admirable.”

When a Jewish person gives away his best to Hashem, Hashem repays him copiously with everything good — materially and spiritually — with His open and generous Hand.

²⁹ {*Yachid* represents Hashem’s transcendence of Creation; hence, He is singular. *Echad* represents how Hashem’s unity exists within the plurality of Creation, and how all of creation is *battel* to the G-dly light within it.} (See *Torah Or*, p. 55b; *Imrei Binah*, “*Shaar HaKerias Shema*,” ch. 8 ff.; et al.) See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 19, Sec. 8, regarding the superiority of this unity.

³⁰ {Divine service.}

³¹ *Bava Basra* 21a.

³² *Bereishis* 4:8.

— Based on talks delivered on *Shabbos parshas Bereishis* 5735 (1974) and *Simchas Torah* day 5730 (1969)