

The Overachiever Who Lost It All

By Rochel Holzkenner

It's one thing to hate your brother; it's another thing to kill him. The first brothers of mankind—Cain and Abel—didn't last more than 41 years together. Tragically, Cain killed Abel with his own two hands; it was a sad beginning for the human race. The two had the entire universe to themselves,¹ and still there was strife.

When we mess up, there are two ways it can play out

The Torah tells us exactly what enraged Cain. It all started when he brought a gift to G-d. The Torah tells us that the gift was “from the fruit of the soil.”² His brother Abel followed suit and brought a gift to G-d as well; he brought “from the firstborn of his flocks [of sheep] and of their fattest”³ as his gift. It's G-d's reaction to Abel's gift that gets Cain angry. G-d turned to Abel and his offering by sending down a fire to consume it, but to Cain and to his offering, G-d did not turn.⁴

Seeing the lack of reaction to his gift—the one that was given first—Cain is deeply insulted and angry. “And Cain was very angry and his face fell.”⁵

G-d coaches Cain through his depression. “Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it.”⁶ In one broad stroke, G-d explains the path towards self-destruction. When we mess up, there are two ways it can play out. We can have the humility to admit what we did and improve, or we can remain in denial and our demons will sit on heads longing for the next opportunity to drag us down again. After we fall, we either go up or down from there.

Cain apparently does not take G-d's advice and improve because in the next verse the Torah tells us “that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.”⁷ G-d was certainly right about the Cain's demons coming back to haunt him—this time with more aggression than ever.

There is one thing that is so enigmatic about this story. Why *did* G-d ignore Cain's gift? After all, he initiated and offered Him a gesture of appreciation. It was Abel who seems to take Cain's lead and give G-d a gift, too. So why does G-d give Abel all of the attention for his gift—the firstborn of his flocks and of their fattiest—in stark contrast to Cain's gift—the fruit of the earth, which is not acknowledged at all.

I mean, imagine if you bought your mother a gift. Then your sister got your mother something, too. At the Shabbat table that week, your mother profusely thanks your sister for her gift and gives her a hug. But your gift isn't mentioned at all. How would you feel?

Would G-d be so insensitive?

Would G-d be so insensitive to Cain's feelings? There must be a missing piece to this puzzle. Rashi⁸ is the Torah commentator who will always fill in the missing piece of any puzzle, so that the Torah is understood smoothly and logically.⁹ This story is a classic example of Rashi's crucial role in our understanding.

What was this "fruit of the earth" that Cain offered G-d? It was some of Cain's worst flax seeds, says Rashi, quoting the Midrash. Or it was Cain's average flax seeds. And with this short commentary, Rashi elucidates the entire story for us.

The first thing we now understand is why G-d didn't acknowledge Cain's gift. Sometimes, you get a gift that's more insulting than anything else. Someone gets you a baby gift that was clearly marked as "final sale" at the store. It's discolored, outdated, unattractive. Your friend was clearly excited to find a gift that was cheap—and still consider you gifted. You'll send her a "thank you" note, of course, but let's face it, that gift was insulting. G-d, on the other hand, doesn't have to send insincere cards. He can be straight up with Cain: Your defective flax seeds are not good enough.

G-d didn't even say that. He just said nothing at all. And Cain didn't realize that G-d's lack of response was a critique on his "gift" until he saw G-d's reaction to his brother's offering. That's when he realized that G-d wasn't saying thank you to him just yet. G-d was waiting for Cain to up his game a little bit.

But why was Cain so insulted and angered by G-d's lack of response? He gave G-d some dull, moldy, broken seeds. Didn't he get why G-d wasn't overjoyed? Here, too, Rashi explains, they were *flax seeds*. Flax seeds are a wonder crop. They are nutritious, they have linseed oil within them, and linen textile comes from this incredible seed. In fact, in the beginning of Genesis, the Torah tells us about a river that flowed from the Garden of Eden called Pishon.¹⁰ Rashi explains that the river is called Pishon because it causes flax (Pishton) to grow. The river's entire prominence is that it stimulates the growth of flax seeds. Clearly, these seeds are important.

Cain felt that since he was gifting G-d with flax seeds, he could get away with giving G-d the worst grade flaxseed that he could find. G-d didn't react, but waited for him to realize his error and improve. When Cain got angry and defensive, G-d told him straight out that this selfish impulse compelling you to be cheap with G-d's gift is only going to come back to haunt you more intensely if you don't push back on it now. But Cain couldn't get it together, and stayed in a place of anger and blame.

This selfish impulse is only going to haunt you

Remember, Rashi also gives an alternative understanding of Cain's gift: average flax seeds. Rashi brings this option because it's hard for us to understand how Cain would have the audacity to bring G-d the worst flax seeds. Maybe he didn't bring the worst, but just not the best. But this is Rashi's second option, meaning it's a weaker answer. Although it makes sense to say that Cain brought average flax seeds and not terrible ones, it *doesn't* make sense to say that G-d would ignore the flax seeds if they were average grade. For G-d to have ignored his gift, it had to have been pretty bad; therefore, Rashi's first answer and strongest answer is that they were the worst flax seeds possible.

Why was G-d not critical of Abel's gift as well? He brought G-d sheep. Maybe he should have upped his game as well and brought. . . a bull? A sheep is a small animal and not such a big financial sacrifice. A cow, on the

other hand, would have been an impressive offering! But no, G-d loved Abel's gift, and He showed both Cain and Abel how graciously he was accepting these sheep. Why? Because they were the firstborn and fattest sheep. Abel had carefully selected the best sheep from his bunch for this gift.

Rashi told us that Cain's gift was inferior (or average) flax seeds. Rashi teaches us what G-d appreciates and what He views as a work in progress. He appreciates when we give Him our best. Our best doesn't have to be an expensive bull; it can be a sheep. But if you're going to give a sheep, then make it the best one you've got.

In contrast, the flax seeds that were given carelessly to G-d weren't accepted. G-d wanted more personal investment from Cain.

The story of Cain and Abel gives us incredible insight into human nature and a fatal flaw that many of us share called "overachievement." Cain is the classic overachiever. He tries to reach for the best, but ends up with the worst.

The overachiever in us says that a Shabbat dinner needs to be inspiring, interactive and full of delicious food. Every family member should be happy, inspired, inspiring, helpful and loving. When the Shabbat table doesn't turn out to look exactly like that, we're disappointed and angry. We think: This doesn't even count as a Shabbat dinner!

The overachiever in us has a list of things to do that's too long to fit on one sheet of paper, much less into one day. No matter what I *have* done, I look at what I *haven't*.

G-d wanted more personal investment from Cain

My overachiever whispers, "If I were brilliant like him, I'd be an awesome teacher. If I had her social skills and sense of humor, I'd be able to connect with people better. If I had more money, I'd be able to implement all of my budding ideas."

"If my kids were winners, I'd give them all of the resources that I could find. But mine are problematic, so how can expect that much of them?"

"If my spouse was more compassionate, charismatic, holy and learned, my marriage would be beautiful. But my marriage is full of gaping holes, nothing to be proud of."

Cain wanted the best, but he overreached and ended up with the worst. Ultimately, Cain felt dejected, angry and violent, and he destroyed the person he loved and his own self-respect. Abel, on the other hand, is realistic about what he has to offer. If it's a cute furry little sheep, Abel finds reason to celebrate it. He's confident that G-d will appreciate that sheep, so he makes it the best sheep he can find.

The Abel within us can celebrate what we have because G-d gave it to us. It whispers: "Give G-d what you've got; He'll be so grateful. Don't be afraid to give Him that gift all the way; he cherishes what you have to give more than you will ever realize. It's your life that G-d wants to see, not someone else's life."¹¹

Don't let your Cain kill your Abel!

FOOTNOTES

1. Their parents, Adam and Eve, were also alive, as well as Cain's twin sister and Ebel's two triplet sisters.
2. [Genesis 4:3](#)
3. [Genesis 4:4](#)
4. [Genesis 4:4-5](#)
5. [Genesis 4:6](#)
6. [Genesis 4:7](#)
7. [Genesis 4:8](#)
8. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040-1105 CE. The foremost commentator on the Torah.
9. Rashi's self-proclaimed mission statement is, "I have only come to explain the simple interpretation of the Torah." Rashi doesn't give us any more than what is necessary to know in order to understand the Torah logically and "simply."
10. [Genesis 2:11](#)
11. Based on a talk of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, LKS, volume 15, page 20

By Rochel Holzkenner

Rochel Holzkenner is a mother of four children and the co-director of Chabad of Las Olas, Florida, serving the community of young professionals. She is a high-school teacher and a freelance writer—and a frequent contributor to Chabad.org. She lectures extensively on topics of Kabbalah and feminism, and their application to everyday life.

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.