

The background of the entire page is a white surface covered with numerous red splatters and streaks, resembling blood. The splatters vary in size and shape, some forming thin lines and others larger, more irregular shapes. The overall effect is one of chaos and violence.

**What Have You Done
That The Blood Cries Out
From the Earth**

**A High Holiday Story by
Rabbi David Kosak**

There are only a few of us who were left this way.

There's Chanoch and Eliyahu, though I haven't see either for ages. Besides, we really aren't that alike--I mean, apart from the obvious fact that none of us died. Perhaps a few of you have studied the mystical writings--or come across that venerable tome, "The Book of Chanoch? Then you'd know that the one born of the 7th generation counting from Adam never died. He walked with God. Remember that now, **cycles of seven stand outside of nature and time**; only by the greatest of difficulties can you humans be in the presence of seven. It's why you ignite flames to welcome in and usher out the holy seventh day. Those flames protect you, allow you to have a few timeless moments and even then, time keeps creeping in for most of you. Chanoch fell between the crevices of the clock, fell out of blessed mortality.

Something similar happened with Elijah, and some of your attentive Sages read between the lines of the Tanakh, of your Bible and guessed that he too never died. Which is true, mind you, but it doesn't particularly tell you anything of value. When your human breath and step extend not much farther than a leaf's life, I suppose it is natural enough to imagine that immortality is what matters. But I'm here today to say it isn't. In this you have to grant me the authority. It has been five thousand seven hundred and sixty two years since I came into this world.

My father Adam was sixteen, you see, when I was born. He was just a child himself, he and my mom Chava, when they became parents. They didn't really have anyone to show them the way either, no parents of their own to ask advice from. About the only real guidance they had came from watching the animals that my father had named. I have nothing against the animals mind you, but most of them don't stick around to parent their offspring--my parents followed that model and were sort of missing as my brother Abel and I grew. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not blaming them for my action--for my eternal, unceasing action. Still,

might they have been able to help me overcome my urges, tame or make friends with that blood darkness which raucously hammered against my chest? Of course even if dad wasn't there, that Great Bodiless Voice was, reminding me that there is uplift, that I could master the ceaseless rage I felt towards my brother. If I wasn't able to hear that Great Voice, I'm not sure any sound could have penetrated my roving, willfully deaf and furious ego.

It's just I wanted to know my parents' love. Even after these thousands of years, I turn my memories over, seeking those small flecks of attention they gave me when they weren't chasing each other around after they had to leave the garden. I hungered for more love than I received. There was a greed in that desire also, crouching and urging me not to be a man. It's taken me these many years, countless of your lifetimes, to come to terms with what I did.

Part of my ceaseless burden is that there are some sins of such severity that only your own death can properly atone for them. That's why you've gathered here today, whether you understand that or not. This day of Yom Kippur itself is an atonement, a kapparah. And the ancients understood that for those things which even Yom Kippur can't atone for, your death still can. Which speaks of the weight I carry. For thousands of years the blood of my brother keeps calling to me and there is no answer I can give. I wait for the death which is ever denied me, knowing that in it's cold embrace I'd find the first hint of real warmth since that day my shadow overtook me.

I know, it sounds overblown. Here's what you have to understand. It's not just that I killed my brother, though that is the sort of self-inflicted blow even mere mortals might never recover from. It's worse. I INVENTED murder, you see. When I rose up against Abel in that field--which is still stained to this day--no such thought had ever arisen in a human heart before. And the heart is nothing if not a quick learner. It watches what

others do with their unbearable emotions, then seeks to mimic them.

From the second I passed control of my hands over to my festering jealousy, from that very moment I squeezed the air out of my brother's body, everything changed. The earth itself watched me, and news of my crime passed from plant to plant, from animal to animal. Stored in the memory of the world itself was the idea of murder, created by me. As each human heart peered at it, the story was retold over and over until murder became a possibility that every one of you is now capable of. Like a virus or a meme, it has traveled into every one of your souls. There it waits, hoping the proper conditions will arise so that you too will give birth to another killing.

That was also the last time the Great Voice, the First Father, the Primeval Mother, spoke to me. That cry echoes through me to this day, “meh asita, kol d'mei achikha tzoakim eilay min ha'adama!?”

מה עשית קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן-האדמה ; ועתה ארור אתה

[מה ...] What have you done?! The voice of the blood of your brother screams to me from the earth. And now you are cursed from the earth, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand...You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.

You have no idea how true those words became...are...to me. When the Great Bodiless Voice speaks, there is no alternative narrative that can be told. Your fate is locked in. Like Jonah trying to run away from Nineveh, trying to escape his duty, his obligation, his prophetic calling. Yes, he took a circuitous route inside the belly of that Big Fish, but still, he lived out the dictates of The One Who Lived Before We Lived.

I've been wandering ever since. If you had more time--perpetual time--I could tell you every detail of everyday. I was here when Noah was old, already 500 years old, and when those divine beings, almost lost from your human memory, began to descend and take human wives. Or the

progeny of that union--the Nefilim, the fallen ones. Were they heroes, demigods or demons? I think a little of all. How evil spread then like lightning in your human society, seemingly overnight and you fought against anyone who thought different--who was different from you.

And though I told you that I never again was in the presence of the One Who Came Before Many, I still heard the chatter. The plants were full of the news and the animals too--how the One planned a flood to end this human wickedness once and for all. How Noah heard the command to build a little something...

Then I snuck on to the teva, on to that planet-saving little ship that Noah built, a castaway among castaways. That life preserver of species and genes, and the sheer terror that Noah and his mortal family experienced as the waves of the rising sea crashed against their one fragile hope, their "ark."

I watched everyone I knew die; my heart was already so chewed up from what I had done, that I never let anyone get close to me again. But still I watched them die, generation after generation. Some days were better. Some were worse. These are bad times now, but I've seen worse.

I don't want to give you the sense that I wasn't growing or changing. I was. When the earth was still young, I blamed myself for bringing murder into the world, for seeing how my idea caught fire and spread, unstoppable. I still do, but I was more self-indulgent back then. Now, I look first at your brokenness rather than mine. I am so moved by your human struggle. I know that I may be a large cause of it, but feeling bad about that doesn't help you. So I try to fix around the edges what I can. Seeing you, speaking to you, warning you to do better than I did, to love better than I did--for a man condemned to wander forever, this is my only exit. It is the way through my fate. It is my way back to the light, and hope.

There's rarely a straight line back, but my own zig zag path started sometime after I discovered the Jewish people. You have to remember, I'm not Jewish, at least not how you mean. I was old long before Abraham was born, before there were any Jews. But even then, I found myself gravitating to this semi-nomadic shepherd kid. He wasn't quite royalty, but his father wasn't hurting for gold either. The family was doing fine and even so those material trappings never mattered to Abraham. He had this impassioned, seeking quality about him that was addictive to be around. We'd sit by the campfire beneath that endless canopy of stars that are barely visible in your time, in this time--but back then, they lit the night sky. Abraham was on to something, this idea about the One. He'd give these talks at the trading posts and people couldn't help but be captivated. Many of them picked up and followed him across the sands.

Well, ok, I did too, but it was different for me. I'm not an atheist or a pagan. Long before Abraham, I knew the One, heard the Great Bodiless Voice. No, on this holy day of Yom Kippur, everyone of you can seek forgiveness, can turn in a better way, can open up so that the Voice will make its way into your life and into your hearts. Except I had been condemned to live with this eternal wall between me and Ole' Timeless.

I've stopped thinking of it as punishment though, and maybe that's hard to understand. After all, you think of your God as one always ready to forgive and grant atonement, so why am I the only person for whom that's not possible? That's how I used to think, even as recently as a few hundred years ago.

Something's opened in me though, is opening even now. Yes, I have to wander the world forever, endlessly. But what if it's not punishment? What if it's my atonement? My actions have taken hundreds of millions of people. I took my brother's life, watched him slowly turn blue, relished it...and so I taught you that it is ok to kill, ok to hate, ok to let whatever's

on your mind be spoken no matter how coarse it is.

I watched murder repeated on increasingly large scales. I saw them pillage your small villages and burn your shtetls in Mainz, and Speyer and Worms. I watched them gather your women and children and your men as a miasma of poison gas clawed its way down your resisting lungs. I felt the stabbing, the choking, the pummeling that I gave to my brother in each one of your bodies. I died with each one of your six million and with each death, the pain of my brother scorched this mark I wear at every turn.

There where the stench of the crematoria filled your noses, you sang, “Ani Ma’amin...Ani Ma’amin...” I watched you and I learned. It would seem that my heart is not such a quick learner when it comes to hope. Yet mine has watched what you have done with your unbearable emotions, your unbearable history. Yet still you did not give up hope. If you could stand in the presence of an evil even my soul could not imagine and still believe...

Then when your little country came back to life--that land I once wandered when David and Solomon were its kings, and lived in when the Greeks and Romans scourged it, burning and polluting your Holy Temple--when your country came back to life, I discovered I had developed a new ability. I could consider every moment of my long life in a single glance. I saw Abraham at Mount Moriah, his forehead covered with beads of sweat and his labored breathing as he held that curved blade at Isaac’s throat. I watched from the tangled brush where I held a ram in waiting. In an instance, this premonition struck me. I counted the years to make sure. Yes, from the time my father was born till Abraham’s birth...it was exactly one thousand nine hundred and forty eight years after the birth of Adam. That’s 1948, a number of some significance on your secular, Gregorian calendar.

I stopped wandering. I wanted to see what would happen once you returned to your land. I saw you drain the swamps--the real malaria-infested swamps in the north. Marveled at your collective idealism as kibbutzim and moshavim flourished. I was happier than I had been in centuries. Until that fateful day. I found myself standing by the Kotel in 1967 late one evening after the unification. It was after the soldiers left, and I was alone, faltering, and suddenly found myself prone upon the ground, my body shimmering with sobs. I recalled the very last time I had tasted the sharp metallic salt of my tears, when I stood over my dead brother and finally understood what forever meant. There among the joyous soldiers, I offered my tears up to God, our first connection in 5762 years. I prayed again.

I think that was the moment it crept in, just a point, a speck really. It was cold and warm simultaneously. My own mortality. It's been growing in me ever since, this certainty of my own demise. How my days are filled with gratitude now! I'm going to die, and that is the greatest gift I've ever received. I cherish and value each moment as I never did during my long years of wandering. Time matters again, and therefore how I use my time matters. The Holy One of Mystery has even let me sense the time of my own death. I thought it would forever be denied me. During all those cycles of seven I stood outside of nature and time, caught between the seconds, beyond humanity. I didn't know that there could be a reset, if you will. This year, though, Israel turns 70, 10 sevens, the completion of completion. I don't know why that should matter, but within me, I sense this spring wound tight and understand it is waiting to unwind. This sense that I exist once again within time. It's hard to explain--or maybe this is the only part of my story you really can grasp. But blessed mortality has crept back in. This will be my last year on this plane of existence. My last Yom Kippur.

And although murder remains part of the human experience, even within your holy land, it does not need to define the totality of our humanity.

We are more than our worst acts, more than the most vile doings of our shadow. We are our hopes, our faith, our faltering steps to love a little better. We are our best efforts at teshuvah, our finest attempt to turn our souls back to the One Who Lives After We Have Lived.

For me, that is life enough.

Study Questions and Insights

You may find it helpful to review the Cain story in the Bible, as this modern midrash assumes the reader's knowledge of the Biblical version. It is found in chapter 4 of Genesis. Pay particular attention to verses 1-16

There are thirteen questions here. Read through and choose those that interest you. Some of the questions ensure you understand the biblical and rabbinical material the story is based on. Others ask ethical questions you may want to ponder. There are questions that highlight the theological beliefs that the Cain character puts forth. These may spur your own thinking about such matters. One question asks you to consider your thoughts about destiny (and therefore freewill).

Feel free to discuss these questions with friends during this time of year. I suspect that doing so will help you clarify your own answers to the very central themes of guilt, forgiveness, atonement and our own sense of mission. Those topics, while we may not think about them on a regular basis, should occupy us as we try to solidify our moral and spiritual ambitions for this new year.

1. Why has Cain lived so long? What is the Biblical source for this?
2. Cain, at the beginning of his tale, speaks of "blessed mortality." What does that mean to him? Would you agree with his assessment and if so, why?

3. One branch of medicine is focussed on prolongevity, or the attempt to extend the human lifespan. If this is successful, what would be the advantages of a long life. Base your answers on Cain's case and statements.
4. In Genesis 4:12, we are told that Cain will be a ceaseless wanderer. In 4:16 we are told he settles in Nod. There is a Hebrew pun here. In 4:12, he is doomed to be 'na va'nad'--nad comes from the verb to wander, nod seems to derive from the word for a wall or mound. What is the Torah trying to say with this pun? How can we resolve the apparent contradiction between 4:12 and 4:16?
5. Cain views himself as the inventor of murder, and holds himself responsible for its existence in the human imagination and thus for future murders far removed from himself. What sort of responsibility do inventors have for their creations?
6. Elaborating on question 5, above, Cain puts forth a theory about human behavior that states, in short, that we mimic those behaviors we see, especially when we are experiencing similar emotions. Can you think of examples in your own life where this has been true? What about counter-examples that demonstrate when you didn't repeat a given behavior that you were exposed to? What explains the difference? Finally, do you think that as a general rule, Cain's theory is correct? Why or why not?
7. Continuing the themes explored in questions 5 and 6, Cain states, "Stored in the memory of the world itself was the idea of murder, created by me." What is the Biblical source for this notion that an idea (murder) can exist apart from human minds? What do you make of this notion? Note that Cain repeats this idea when talking about the upcoming flood and Noah's ark.
8. Cain is apparently well-versed in Judaism. He says that there are sins that Yom Kippur can't atone for but that death can. First, it is important to know that for interpersonal sins, Yom Kippur only atones after you've apologized to the person you've wronged. Second, Maimonides says in his Laws of Teshuvah that death atones for those sins which

are a desecration of God's name (Hilkhhot Teshuvah 1:12). How has Cain desecrated God's name? [You can read Rashi on Yoma 8:7 for his answer]

9. We live in an age of alternative facts, alternative media, and alternative politics (the alt-right and the alt-left). In part, this highlights how differently we all see the world, how we each "read" the world differently. In contradiction to this sort of moral and factual relativism, Cain argues that God has a direction and a plan for his (our?) life that isn't open to an "alternative narrative." He uses Jonah, which we read on Yom Kippur afternoon, as his case study. What do you make of this claim? When have you tried to take a different path in life only to find that the very thing/career/person/destiny you tried to avoid came back at you in another time or place?
10. On page 3, when Cain is still presenting himself as immortal, he offers his approach to redemption and forgiveness that he calls his "only exit." What is this path that he describes? How is it supposed to work? For those familiar with the works of the French existentialists, you may want to compare it to Sartre's play which has the English title of "No Exit." Does Cain provide an answer to Sartre?
11. Cain presents himself as a fellow traveler with the Jewish people and hints at the ways that has served him at different points of his life. In particular, he makes mention of the towns of Worms, Speyer and Mainz. These Jewish settlements are mentioned in most texts of the Eleh Ezkerah, the martyrology that is traditionally recited after the Yom Kippur Musaf service. What is the significance of this history to Cain?
12. Most of us find it difficult to reflect on our transgressions for any length of time. It is far easier and more pleasant to push those thoughts aside. Cain is unable to do that. What does his example teach us during these Days of Awe and Teshuvah?
13. What are your final take-aways?



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