

# DOG-MATIC MURDER

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

In parshas Bereishis, our history as a homicidal being has its first expression in Kayin's (Cain) murder of his brother Hevel (Abel). According to the Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 22:8) an argument broke out between them that lead to a physical struggle. Hevel was the stronger of the two, and easily overcame his brother Kayin, pinning him to the ground. Kayin pleaded with his brother to release him from his grip; Hevel acceded. "And Kayin stood up," from beneath Hevel, "and he killed him." The fact that Hevel was willing to make peace, and in fact released Kayin from his grips, makes the murderous act all the more repulsive.

Kayin realizes that he has committed a disgusting crime, and worries that others may come to avenge the murder. He pleads with Hashem to spare him. Hashem acquiesces to his request: "Hashem gave Kayin a sign, so that anyone who sees him may not smite him. (4:15)" There is disagreement as to the nature of this sign. Rashi explains that Hashem etched one of the letters of His name into Kayin's forehead. Alternately, this refers to the innate fear that animals have from humans, which Kayin had lost as a result of the murder, and which Hashem now returned to him (according to this explanation his fear was from animals and not from other humans). Others in the Midrash (ibid 22:12) say the sign was a form of leprosy (that would keep others away), or a horn protruding from his forehead. Rav says: He gave him a dog.

Why a dog? True, there are dogs that will do a decent job of guarding their owners, but so would a lion, a bear, or any other type of vicious animal. Remember, dogs weren't domesticated then.

A student of the holy Chafetz Chaim zt"l once heard him chastising himself: "Yisroel Meir, do you not appreciate the kindness that Hashem has done with you that he gave you the wisdom and understanding to compile an entire sefer on the laws of lashon hara (slandorous speech)?! Aren't you thankful that by the grace of Hashem many thousands of people have purchased the sefer, and learn from it daily?! Don't you realize that if you don't show appreciation for these gifts, then the lowly dog is greater than you?!"

The next morning, the student, puzzled by his rebbe's cryptic statement, had the boldness to ask its meaning. The Chafetz Chaim explained: "The Midrash says Hashem gave Kayin a dog. Why a dog? There is no animal on earth quite like the dog - that shows such love, appreciation, and devotion to its owner in exchange for little more than a few scraps and morsels that would likely have gone in the garbage (the Chafetz Chaim lived before the times that dog foods received more supermarket

shelf- space than baby foods). No animal is more faithful and grateful to its owner than a dog. And no act could be more the contrary than Kayin's taking advantage of Hevel's kindness, and using it to kill him. By giving him a dog, Hashem was giving Kayin a constant reminder of his lack of hakaras ha-tov (recognition of kindness). That's why I told myself that if I fail to appreciate the gifts Hashem has given me, I'll be outdone by a dog!"

Perhaps we can add the following: Kayin at first refused to admit to the murder, uttering the infamous, "Am I my brother's keeper?!" Linguistically, to give thanks and to admit are identical in Hebrew (Le- hodos). Ideologically, one who has a hard time acknowledging another's kindnesses will likely not be able to admit having made a mistake. The Midrash says that had Adam immediately confessed his sin (eating from the Tree of Knowledge), he would have gained instant forgiveness. Perhaps the same can be said of Kayin's denial. Thus, G-d gave him a dog, whose trait is acknowledgement and gratitude, for it was for lack of this trait that Kayin came to deny his crime.

Hakaras ha-tov is a trait that graces its possessor in his relationships with both man and G-d. While the measly dog cowers in the presence of the ferocious wolf, the canine has flourished astonishingly over the last century, while the mighty wolf is in danger of extinction. A scientist once mused: Imagine if we were able to listen in to the conversation of a particularly introspective dog talking to his relative, the wolf.

"I get such a kick out of scaring the daylights out of man... Why, just last week, a bunch of big rowdy guys came waltzing through my neck of the woods. All I did was stand up and face them, and they went running as fast as they could..."

"Good for you!" said the dog. "But I say, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. They'll come back for you - be sure - but next time they'll have guns. My granddad did some light work for his owners way back when - you know, helping them make sure the sheep don't get out and what not. Nowadays, all I have to do is wag my tail and jump them when they come home, and they do the work for me! They take me for walks, wash me, keep me warm, and even send me to the vet once a month! You'd be surprised how far a little bit of unconditional gratitude and devotion can take you!"

Interestingly, one is not allowed to use the proceeds of the sale of a dog to purchase a korban (a ritual offering - see Devarim/Deuteronomy 23:19). The simple reason is that the dog is such a lowly scoundrel that it would be inappropriate and unbecoming that its proceeds should be consecrated. Perhaps, according to the Chafetz Chaim, we can homiletically explain this halacha: A korban is an expression of gratitude to Hashem (there are other types of korbanos as well that must be brought as a result of sin, etc.). Since the dog symbolizes the trait of sincere gratitude and appreciation, one who "sells the dog" - i.e. he fails to recognize and internalize this quality - is not ready to bring a korban.

Our prayer liturgy overflows with opportunities to express gratitude to Hashem for everything He gives us. What was it that gave the Chafetz Chaim such a hard time that he had to chastise

himself so severely about his "lack of appreciation to Hashem?"

Expressing gratitude over good health, wealth, beautiful experiences, etc. is something that (hopefully) comes naturally. One needs only to ponder for a few moments the Modim prayer, "On our lives, that are placed in Your hands, and on our souls which are deposited with You, and on the miracles that You perform each and every day..." and one is filled and awestruck by our constant reliance on Hashem's graciousness.

But what about when our "humility" gets in the way of our appreciation? We all have gifts and talents, which, if we're not completely arrogant and self-centered, we tend to downplay. Now humility is indeed a praiseworthy trait, but here it can lead to a lack of recognition that we have indeed been given a gift, and we must thank Hashem for that gift as well.

Perhaps it was this that gave the Chafetz Chaim such difficulty: To thank Hashem for allowing him to write his sefer is in some small way admitting that it indeed had an impact on K'lal Yisrael (which it certainly did), not something that came naturally to R' Yisroel Meir. From him we learn that one must spend time contemplating all the gifts Hashem has given him, and appreciate them. If not? Well just throw him to the dogs!

Have a good Shabbos.

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