

EXCUSES

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

B'Simana Toba -- with a good sign we begin a new year of Torah learning.

In the first parashah of the Torah, which starts with the story of the six days of creation and the first Shabbat, we see many "firsts" unfold. The first wedding, the first sin, the first clothing, the first murder and the first excuses to name just a few. An analysis of each event reveals the essence of each of these incidents as a paradigm for all other sins, weddings and excuses etc. etc.

On the first day man spent on this Earth, Havah gave in to the wiles of the serpent and violated Hashem's command not to partake of the fruit of the forbidden tree and then she went even further by seducing her husband Adam to eat some of the forbidden fruit. When asked why he behaved negative to the wish of G-d, Adam answered with the first excuse -- "The wife that you gave me gave me of the fruit and I ate." By the same token, when Havah was asked why she made the sin she transferred blame to the snake. Herein is revealed one of the basic problems of human behavior. When one does wrong one finds it very difficult to accept responsibility. The man -- who should have thanked Hashem for the helpmate He provided -- a wife -- instead, blames his spouse for his wrongdoing. The woman, similarly, failed to accept responsibility for her actions and places blame on the serpents wiles. Should one transgress a command of the King the first reaction should be one of remorse and the remedy and resolve not to repeat the sin. Before one can successfully do so, however, one must accept personal responsibility for the failure. Human nature says: "Deny it" and the Torah replies "Admit it".

There is another incident of wrongdoing, which can expand our understanding of ourselves when we commit sinful deeds. Kayin and Hebel were originally the only two children of Adam and Havah. Kayin chose to work the land and Hebel chose to tend to sheep. Kayin had an original thought. "Perhaps I should offer a portion of my produce to G_d", he thought. He then proceeded to take from flax, a cheap abundant and mediocre offering and place it on an alter before Hashem. G-d rejected his offering. Hebel, after seeing what Kayin did, decided to give from the best of his sheep to the Lord in thanks. Hashem accepted his offering. When Kayin saw what transpired he became infuriated and his face fell -- expressing his displeasure. Hashem told him that it was his choice to make and that Kayin must be ready to accept the consequences of his actions. Kayin, in a deceptively brotherly fashion lured his unsuspecting brother out to the fields. The verse continues, "And Kayin said to Hebel, his brother; and it was when they were in the field that Kayin arose against Hebel, his brother, and he killed him." The commentators ask: "What did he tell him?"

The Targum Yonatan relates a long conversation in which Kayin denies the existence of a just system of reward and punishment and of the World to Come. Hebel failed to convince him otherwise and then Kayin rose up and murdered his brother. Yet the Torah does not reveal any of the details of this crucial conversation in the text. Why not? Some might reply that Hashem did not want Kayin's words of heresy to be inscribed in the Torah forever. This makes sense -- except then we might ask -- so why reveal that Kayin said something to Hebel -- Isn't it better to leave it out altogether?

Rabbi Yosef Harrari-Raful -- Rosh Yeshivat Ateret Torah -- answered that the Torah wanted to teach that people want to do good and really have trouble doing what they know is wrong. Therefore, when one misbehaves one feels compelled to make excuses. The entire conversation between Kayin and Hebel was rationalizing the murder. So why not give the details in the Torah? Answers the Rosh Yeshivah, "Because what one says is not important -- it is only important that one realize that whatever is said -- the truth is that it is only an excuse. What the excuse is -- is not crucial -- what is important is that one not be fooled by one's own fabrications.

Accept responsibility -- feel regret -- admit your error and resolve never to repeat your misdeed. These are the elements of repentance -- teshubah. Excuses lead to death and destruction. One who accepts responsibility for his or her actions can be moved to make the right changes to yield a long life in this world and the next. Shabbat Shalom

DID YOU KNOW THAT

On Shabbat night [Friday evening] one does not close the blessing "Haskeebenu" with the words: "The One who guards His nation Israel" as we do during the other six nights of the week. The reason for the change is that Shabbat provides an extra measure of protection for the Jewish people.

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