

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Parashat Bereshit 5787

הַשֹּׁמֵר אֶחִי אֲנִי

Hashomer achi anochi?

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” — Genesis 4:9

Central Question: What responsibility do we have for one another? What happens when the people to whom we are connected are also the people who challenge, disappoint, compete with, or even hurt us?

1. From Creation to Conflict: The First Human Family

The Torah begins with God creating the world. Humanity is created **b’tzelem Elohim — in the image of God** — and God declares creation *tov me’od*, “very good.”

But almost immediately, human relationships become complicated.

Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge. When God confronts Adam, he blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden and begin life outside of paradise.

Then they become parents.

Their first two children are Cain and Abel.

Remarkably, **the Torah’s first story about siblings is also its first story about murder.**

Genesis 4:1–5 — Two Brothers

Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gained a male child with the help of Adonai.”

She then bore his brother Abel.

Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil.

In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to Adonai from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock.

Adonai paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering God paid no heed.

Cain was much distressed and his face fell.

Genesis 4:6–7 — God Warns Cain

Adonai said to Cain, “Why are you distressed, and why has your face fallen?

Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door; its desire is toward you, yet you can master it.”

Genesis 4:8–10 — The First Murder

וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בְהִיּוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ:

Cain said to his brother Abel... and when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן אֵי הָבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי:

Adonai said to Cain, “**Where is your brother Abel?**”

Cain answered, “**I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?**”

וַיֹּאמֶר מָה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה:

God said, “**What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.**”

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does God favor Abel’s offering? Does the Torah ever really explain?
2. Cain is angry with God, but he takes his anger out on Abel. Why?
3. Why does God ask Cain, “**Where is your brother?**” if God already knows?
4. What does it mean to be someone’s *keeper*? Is that different from being their protector or caretaker?
5. **Can we be responsible for someone we resent?**

2. What Were Cain and Abel Fighting About?

Bereshit Rabbah 22:7

There is a striking gap in the biblical story.

The Torah tells us:

“Cain said to his brother Abel...”

But it never tells us **what Cain said**.

The rabbis fill in the missing conversation.

An Argument Over Possessions

The midrash imagines Cain and Abel dividing the entire world between themselves. One takes the land; the other takes movable possessions.

The one who owns the land tells his brother:

“The land upon which you are standing is mine.”

The other responds:

“The clothing you are wearing is mine.”

One demands, “Take it off!”

The other responds, “Fly off my land!”

Their conflict escalates until one brother kills the other.

An Argument Over Religion

Another interpretation imagines that Cain and Abel were fighting over the place where the future Temple would one day be built.

Each brother wanted the sacred place to belong to him.

Their argument over **who possessed holiness** ultimately led to violence.

Adapted from Bereshit Rabbah 22:7.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the rabbis imagine that the first murder was caused by arguments about **property, territory, and religion**?

2. What happens when protecting what is “mine” becomes more important than preserving a relationship?
 3. Why can being **right** sometimes become more important to us than the person standing in front of us?
 4. What might these interpretations suggest about the roots of human conflict?
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3. One Person Is an Entire World

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

The rabbis notice something unusual in God's response to Cain.

God does not say:

“The **blood** of your brother cries out.”

The Hebrew actually says:

קול דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי

Kol d'mei achicha tzo'akim elai.

“The **bloods** of your brother cry out to Me.”

Why **bloods**, in the plural?

The Mishnah explains that God is referring both to Abel's blood **and to the blood of all of the descendants who might have come from him.**

Cain did not destroy only one present life. He destroyed an entire possible future.

The Mishnah goes on to teach that the creation of a single human being teaches us the immeasurable value of every individual life: destroying a single life is compared to destroying an entire world, while sustaining a single life is compared to sustaining an entire world.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the rabbis focus on the lives that **might have come from Abel**, rather than only the life that was lost?
2. What does it mean to think of another person as an **entire world** rather than simply as one individual?
3. Does this teaching change the meaning of Cain's question, “Am I my brother's keeper?”
4. Is recognizing another person's full humanity itself a form of responsibility?

4. Who Counts as My Brother?

Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai

The rabbis debate what should be considered the Torah's greatest principle.

Rabbi Akiva points to Leviticus 19:18:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ
V'ahavta l'reacha kamocho.
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But **Ben Azzai** points instead to Genesis 5:1:

זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם
Zeh sefer toldot Adam.
“This is the record of the generations of Adam.”

Why might Ben Azzai think this is an even greater principle?

Genesis does not begin the human story with Abraham, Israel, or the Jewish people.

It begins with **Adam — humanity**.

Rachel Farbiarz, “Becoming Every Brother’s Keeper”

Contemporary Jewish writer Rachel Farbiarz argues that Cain's famous question is never directly answered in the biblical story:

“The Torah has set up its audience ingeniously here.”

Rather than giving Cain a simple answer, the Torah allows the story of humanity itself to answer him.

Farbiarz connects Cain and Abel to the Torah's insistence that all humanity descends from a common ancestor. Cain may try to distance himself from Abel — *Why should I be responsible for him?* — but Genesis keeps collapsing that distance.

If all humanity ultimately belongs to one family, the category of “brother” becomes much larger than Cain imagined.

Farbiarz suggests that this is part of the power of Ben Azzai's teaching. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is extraordinary, but it may still leave us wondering: **Who exactly is my neighbor?**

Genesis offers a more radical answer: humanity itself is one extended family.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why might Ben Azzai consider **shared humanity** an even greater principle than "love your neighbor as yourself"?
 2. Is our responsibility to another person based on how much we **love** them, or on the fact that they are human?
 3. Do we owe more to our family than our community? More to our community than to strangers?
 4. **Who counts as my brother?**
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5. Is There a Limit to Responsibility?

Pirkei Avot 1:14

Hillel teaches:

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי?

Im ein ani li, mi li?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי?

U'chshe'ani l'atzmi, mah ani?

But if I am only for myself, what am I?

וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אִמְתִּי?

V'im lo achshav, eimatai?

And if not now, when?

Hillel refuses to choose between two competing responsibilities.

I am responsible for myself.

And:

I cannot be responsible only for myself.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you hold together Hillel's first two statements?
 2. When does caring for another person become too much?
 3. When is setting a boundary an appropriate recognition that *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"*
 4. Is there a hierarchy of responsibility — self, family, community, Jewish people, humanity?
 5. How do we decide where our responsibility for another person ends?
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6. A Surprising Answer: God Becomes Cain's Keeper

Genesis 4:11–15

God punishes Cain for Abel's murder:

"Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth."

Cain responds:

"My punishment is too great to bear!"

Cain fears that once he becomes a wanderer, anyone who encounters him will kill him.

But something surprising happens.

God protects Cain.

Adonai said to him, "Therefore, whoever kills Cain shall suffer vengeance sevenfold."

And Adonai put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him.

The Torah's first murderer receives punishment — **and protection.**

Dr. Tanya White, "Yes, I Am My Brother's Keeper"

Contemporary Jewish scholar Tanya White notices the irony at the end of Cain's story:

“God becomes the very keeper Cain refused to be for his brother.”

Cain asks whether he is responsible for Abel.

And after Cain fails catastrophically in that responsibility, God nevertheless assumes responsibility for Cain.

White connects Cain's story with a much later episode in the Torah. In Numbers 32, the tribes of Reuben and Gad want to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan rather than entering the land with the other Israelites.

Moses responds:

“Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?”

The tribes ultimately agree that they will help their fellow Israelites before returning to establish their own homes.

White sees this as a different answer to Cain's question.

Unlike Cain, these Israelites do not have to give up what they want. They can pursue their own interests — **but not at the expense of abandoning responsibility for their brothers.**

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does God protect Cain?
2. Does someone who has committed a terrible wrong still deserve protection?
3. What is the difference between **accountability** and **vengeance**?
4. What do the tribes in Numbers understand about being their brothers' keepers that Cain did not?
5. Does being someone's keeper require putting their needs ahead of our own — or can both responsibilities coexist?

7. Bringing the Texts Into Our Lives

The Struggling Friend

You have a friend who is clearly struggling. You have reached out several times, but the friend insists everything is fine and does not want your help.

At what point have you fulfilled your responsibility?

The Difficult Relationship

Someone you care about has repeatedly hurt you. They are now experiencing a crisis and need support.

Are you obligated to help?

Competing Responsibilities

You have an opportunity that would significantly benefit you and your family, but accepting it would mean stepping away from responsibilities that other people depend on you to fulfill.

How do you decide what you owe yourself and what you owe others?

Discuss

- What does being someone's **keeper** actually require?
- What **doesn't** it require?
- Can responsibility exist without affection?
- Can it exist without agreement?
- Can it exist even when a relationship is broken?