

Villains of Genesis

The Struggle with Evil and Hope for Redemption



Nechama Price

VILLAINS OF GENESIS

THE STRUGGLE WITH EVIL
AND HOPE FOR REDEMPTION

Maggid Books

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לע"נ

אליעזר חיים בן דוד ע"ה

שלא החמיץ מעולם הזדמנות ללמוד תורה

תנצב"ה

יוסף משה ורנה פרידא לנדס

In memory of

Dr. Larry H. Davis a"h

Who never missed an opportunity to learn Torah.

Yossi and Rena Landes



In loving memory of my Bubbi,

Giselle Friedman,

who passed away during the writing of this book.

*A survivor of the Holocaust, she bore witness
to the evils of the villains of her time
and lived with extraordinary strength and resilience.*

May her memory be a lasting model and inspiration to us all.



Contents

Acknowledgments *xi*

Introduction

Why Villains? *xv*

KAYIN

Chapter 1

Kayin the Villain: The Father of Murder 3

Chapter 2

Kayin and the Complexity of Brotherly Competition:
A Nuanced Approach 22

Chapter 3

The Aftermath of Murder:
The Multifaceted Story of Kayin's Descendants 44

TERAḤ

Chapter 4

Teraḥ the Villain: The Unworthy Father Figure 63

Chapter 5

Teraḥ, the Exalted Grandfather of Many Nations:
A Nuanced Approach 71

LOT

Chapter 6

Lot the Villain: The Rejected Heir 93

Chapter 7	
Lot, the Potential Heir: A Nuanced Approach	117

YISHMAEL

Chapter 8	
Yishmael the Villain: The Banished Son	141

Chapter 9	
Yishmael, the Displaced Son: A Nuanced Approach	163

LAVAN

Chapter 10	
Lavan the Villain: The Overbearing and Greedy Swindler.	193

Chapter 11	
Lavan, the Caring and Protective Father Figure: A Nuanced Approach	214

ESAV

Chapter 12	
Esav: The Ultimate Villain.	235

Chapter 13	
Esav, the Misunderstood Brother: A Nuanced Approach.	281

Chapter 14	
The Aftermath of Brotherly Strife: The Multifaceted Story of Esav's Descendants	327

<i>Conclusion</i>	
<i>The Villains Within: Lessons from Both Sides.</i>	<i>339</i>

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Dr. Nechama Price
January 2026 (Tevet 5786)
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Introduction

Why Villains?

Why should we care about the Torah's villains? Of course, we invest extensive time in studying and analyzing every action of the Torah's heroic characters, those who serve as our moral exemplars and models of virtue. For example, we learn to stand strong in our beliefs from Avraham (Abraham), we learn about sacrifice from Sarah, we learn about *hesed* (kindness) from Rivka (Rebecca), and we learn about *teshuva* (repentance) from Yehuda (Judah). Each of their stories teaches lessons that resonate with us from early childhood through old age. But what can we possibly learn from a villain?

If this premise is correct – if there really is nothing to learn from a villain – we are left baffled by the amount of attention given to them by the Torah, specifically in the book of Genesis. An entire chapter is dedicated to Kayin (Cain; Gen. 4) and Lot is a primary figure in three (Gen. 13; 14; 19). Hagar and Yishmael (Ishmael) are central to narratives in three chapters (Gen. 16; 21; 25), Lavan (Laban) is given a leading role in four (Gen. 24; 29; 30; 31), and Esav (Esau) is a focal character in five (Gen. 25; 27; 32; 33; 35). Why is such a significant portion of our precious Torah devoted to their stories?

We can further expand on the question: Why do we need to hear about them at all? Why couldn't Avraham's narrative have focused solely on his son Yitzḥak (Isaac), and Yitzḥak's narrative on his son Yaakov (Jacob), who is then blessed with the twelve tribes? Why must we also learn about the wicked sons, Yishmael and Esav? Furthermore, why does the Torah include Kayin, the rejected son of Adam and Ḥava (Eve); Teraḥ and Lot, Avraham's father and nephew; and Lavan, brother of Rivka, father of Leah and Raḥel (Rachel)? If we believe that every word of the Torah is meaningful and instructive, then there must be a reason not only for their existence, but also for the Torah's detailed account of their stories.

WHY THESE VILLAINS?

This book examines a particular kind of villain: individuals closely connected to someone chosen by God for greatness. These people are themselves given a chance, but they are ultimately excluded in the process of selecting those who will shape the chosen nation. Kayin, as the oldest son of Adam and Ḥava, is the natural choice to continue the world, yet he is replaced by his younger brother Shet (Seth). Teraḥ is set apart by God to be Avraham's father, but Avraham is instructed to leave Teraḥ behind. Lot, Avraham's nephew and adopted son; Yishmael, Avraham's oldest biological son; and Esav, Yitzḥak's eldest son, all seem to be candidates for succeeding their fathers, but they lose their presumed chosen status to a younger sibling. And Lavan – brother and father of our matriarchs – watches as his sister and daughters join the covenantal promise, while he fails to qualify. All share two salient points: Each of them is incredibly close to being chosen yet ultimately rejected; each takes up many verses in the Torah, rich with details about their stories and decisions. This naturally leads us to ask: Why?

This book presents two approaches to addressing this question.

The first approach argues that the purpose of the villains' stories is to showcase their wickedness, revealing *why* they deserve rejection. These narratives teach us, the readers, important lessons about whom *not* to emulate and how *not* to behave. Furthermore, the villains serve as foils to our heroes – the righteous versus the wicked. By highlighting the villains' extreme evil, we also illuminate the heroes' virtues.

The second approach argues that the Torah invites us to explore and wrestle with the villains' complexities – to recognize the humanity and even goodness within their stories. As readers of the Torah, we are meant to learn both positive and negative lessons from their choices and actions. Moreover, by comparing their stories with those of their chosen relatives, we may uncover new moral insights. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Even heroes have their faults and non-heroes their virtues, and these virtues are important to God."¹

For this reason, each of our villains is allotted two chapters in this book: The first chapter portrays each as a villain, pure and simple. Although this perspective is likely familiar, being the predominant view in many *midrashei Hāzal* (homiletical interpretations of the Sages), this book offers a detailed analysis of each villain's narrative along with numerous sources, to deepen and expand our understanding of them as wicked figures. Furthermore, the chapter depicts how their stories play a vital role in highlighting the virtues of the heroes they accompany. To fully appreciate why God chooses Avraham, we must consider whom Avraham must leave behind, including his brothers, father, nephew, and eldest son. To recognize the chosen status given to Yitzḥak and Yaakov, we must compare them to their rejected brothers, Yishmael and Esav. This approach sets the precedent for a future in which these villains' descendants remain at odds with the nation of Israel due to their opposing attitudes and mindsets.

However, these characters do not always appear to be wicked. At times, they even seem to possess positive traits, though ultimately, they are still not chosen. In the second chapter designated to each of the villains, we will look more closely at the *peshat*, the simple meaning of the Torah's text, to reveal a nuanced and complex reading of each villain's narrative. We will delve into the confusing picture, balancing their rejection with behavior that is not always evil. We will question why villains sometimes appear kind and generous while heroic characters may seem suspicious and deceitful. This approach will present innovative ways to understand our villains as humans – neither wholly good

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2009), 172.

nor entirely bad. We will also explore where this perspective appears within our biblical commentaries and even, at times, in *midrashei Hazal*. By the end of each villain's second chapter, we will still understand why he is rejected – but, at the same time, the complexities of his story will provide us with information that enhances the Torah's text and enriches its narrative dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

I have been blessed to teach Tanakh (Bible) at Stern College for Women and the Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud and Tanakh Studies (GPATS) at Yeshiva University for more than twenty years, and I always present my students with an array of perspectives to each story. I find that students connect with different interpretations of Torah stories and relate to each figure in their own unique way. From a young age, we are taught that not only a variety of perspectives but also opposing ideas can be found in biblical commentaries such as those of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Rashbam; each one presents a divergent approach to the biblical story. It is impossible for two commentators offering contrasting interpretations to both be correct about the factual reality of a story. Yes, we say *shivim panim laTorah*, the Torah has seventy faces (interpretations).² But what does this really mean? It is *not* possible that five different versions of the story actually took place; events must have unfolded in one way only. Thus, even when the truth of what in fact occurred remains unclear, the purpose of each interpretation is clear: They provide layered lessons and meaningful messages, allowing each of us, as readers of the Torah, to connect with the version – or versions – of the story that we feel best aligns with the text.

What methodologies do we use to uncover all of the approaches and multilayered readings in each story? First, we begin with the text itself, searching for ambiguous language and other linguistic clues that point to various interpretations. Next, we seek parallel language and

2. This idea is quoted in many places, including Numbers Rabba (13:16); Ibn Ezra (*hakdama* to Genesis; Num. 10:29); Ramban (Gen. 8:4); *Sefer HaHinukh* (77:2; 95:3; 374:3); Rabbenu Bahya (Ex. 24:12); Abarbanel (Deut. 7:7); *Or HaHayim* (Lev. 6:2; Deut. 32:1); and *HaKetav VeHaKabbala* (Deut. 1:5).

stories; when we compare words and plotlines to other similar narratives in Tanakh, we can reveal new interpretations or further support ones we have already discovered. Only then do we turn to the richness of ideas found in *Hazal*, biblical commentators, and modern Tanakh scholars. All these layers will be used in our analysis of our villains – both in our first chapters, which present the classic approach to the evil character, and in our second chapters, which challenge the traditional approach with a nuanced and complex reading.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE TWO INTERPRETIVE MODELS

Both possibilities – viewing people as either entirely good or evil and viewing them as nuanced and complex – are hinted at in the very beginning of the book of Genesis.

The first approach, in which people are categorized as good or bad, is introduced in Genesis's opening. From the very beginning of time, God differentiates between light and dark: "And God created light and dark" (Gen. 1:4).³ Later, He designates times for light and dark (day and night) by creating separate *meorot* (luminaries, the sun and moon) to be the sources of light during each of those times (1:14). Thus, the world was created with a distinction between light and dark, which perhaps signify good and evil.

This theme continues in a more obvious way when God distinguishes between "*tov*" (good) and "*ra*" (bad). The creation story emphasizes that God's creation is "*tov*" numerous times (1:4, 12, 18, 31). The word "*tov*" is further emphasized in the next two chapters in relation to Adam and Hava (2:18; 3:6). God even creates a tree that represents "*tov vara*," both good and bad (2:9), and forbids man to eat from it, keeping mankind from learning the distinction between good and evil (2:17). But after man disregards the command, "*ra*," evil, is introduced as a reality. Instead of learning how to distinguish between good and evil, humanity becomes fully corrupt. God describes the next generation using the words "*raba raat haadam*," "how great was human wickedness," and

3. Translations of Tanakh throughout the book are my own, combining multiple translations, including those of the Koren Jerusalem and others found on Sefaria (www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh).

the Tanakh notes that the people act “*rak ra kol hayom*,” “nothing but evil all the time” (6:5). God therefore decides to destroy evil and the wicked people; instead, He will build the world through one righteous individual (6:9–11).

This image – a world built through the virtuous only – could serve as a motif for the rest of the stories in Genesis: There are heroes who are close to perfect and there are villains who are morally despicable. Thus, the villains can be viewed as one-dimensional, representing the “*ra*,” the embodiment of evil that can exist in our world.

However, the same stories that open the book of Genesis can also convey a more multifaceted and complex picture. Right after God differentiates between the sun as a source of light during the day and the moon at night, the Torah tells us that one light will be bigger and the other smaller, with stars, smaller lights, to accompany it – but both *together* are given the function “to illuminate the land” (1:15). Similarly, it is not one tree that is “*tov*” and one that is “*ra*.” One tree contains the knowledge of both *tov* and *ra*, good and bad, that are introduced to the world in the time of Adam. In the new world created after the destruction of Noah’s generation, the designations of *tov* and *ra* are no longer found; rather, both can be found inside a single individual person, making humans complex and multidimensional. People are inherently flawed, possessing both good and bad qualities; each person chooses which side will prevail. Thus, the villains of Genesis teach us that even when our negative side dominates, we are still capable of redemption.

THE COMPLEXITY AND DUALITY OF BIBLICAL PERSONALITIES

The claim that there are multiple ways to view a single character of the Torah is not new. *Hazal*, in their multiple perspectives, present opposing views of certain figures. For example, a mishna in Avot (5:19) calls Bilaam a *rasha*, an evil person, and relates that his students will go to *gehennom* (purgatory). Meanwhile, *Tanna DeBei Eliyahu Rabba* (265) writes that God revealed everything to Bilaam and, in fact, that his prophecy was greater than that of Moshe (Moses). Similarly, Naama, listed in Kayin’s genealogy – identified as the daughter of Lemekh (Lamech) and sister of Tuval-Kayin (Gen. 4:22) – is assigned opposing personalities

within the same midrashic source: The first view cited in *Genesis Rabba* (23:3) states that she was married to Noah and her deeds were pleasant (*ne'imim*). The midrash suggests that Naama's inclusion as the only female in Kayin's genealogy indicates that she is a positive figure. Furthermore, since she was saved from the Flood alongside her husband and children, she must have been righteous. However, the second interpretation, found in the same midrash, portrays Naama as an idolater who used music to entice others to idol worship. This view suggests that her unique mention as the only female in Kayin's genealogy highlights a negative significance. Her mention alongside her brothers – whom the midrash also associates with idolatry, particularly Yuval, who played music for such purposes – strengthens this critical perspective.⁴

When these opposing depictions of each character are viewed together, a new picture emerges: These individuals had the potential to choose the right path, but they ultimately chose the wrong one. This can also provide insight into *Hazal's* statement in *Megilla* 11a that the word “*hu*,” “he is,” written before a person's name in the Torah can either mean that he is evil (like *Ahashverosh* [*Ahasuerus*], *Esav*, *Datan* and *Aviram*, and *Ahaz*) or that he is virtuous (*Avraham*, *Aharon* [*Aaron*] and *Moshe*, and *David*). The line between good and evil is almost indistinguishable based on the way a person is introduced in the Torah. Perhaps this is meant to underline the tremendous tragedy that occurs when someone has potential for greatness – when he or she might be considered a hero – but chooses to use his or her qualities for evil and is, instead, labeled a villain.

Furthermore, *Hazal's* characterization of someone can often diverge significantly from that of our biblical commentators. For example, *Hazal* claim that Nimrod's description as a “*gibor tzayid*” (mighty hunter; Gen. 10:9) hints at his being an evil king who leads a rebellion against God (*Sanhedrin* 109b–110a, *Genesis Rabba* 37:2), while *Ibn Ezra* (Gen. 10:9) claims that the verse is merely stating that Nimrod began the practice of hunting animals and used them to give sacrifices

4. See chapter 3 for a further analysis of Naama and her brothers and their significance in the book of Genesis.

to God.⁵ Similarly, Enosh is described by *Hazal* as beginning the practice of idolatry based on the words, “he began to call out in the name of God” (Gen. 4:26); Ibn Ezra and Rashbam (Gen. 4:26), however, claim that he actually instituted the concept of prayer and calling out to God.⁶

In fact, for many Torah personalities, the *peshat* of the textual persona stands in direct conflict with the midrashic descriptions. In Megillat Esther, Vashti stands up for her rights and dignity, choosing not to appear at Ahashverosh’s party (Est. 1:12). Yet she is vilified by *Hazal*, who state that her reason for refusing to come is merely that she grew a tail or was struck with leprosy (Megilla 12b). Similarly, in Megillat Rut, Orpa returns home as a result of Naomi’s pleas (Ruth 1:8–14), but *Hazal* claim that she leaves to live a life of promiscuity and ultimately becomes the mother of Goliath the giant (Ruth Rabba 2:20, Sotah 42b).

Thus, it is clear that the Torah is complex; multiple readings exist for every story, and the actions of each Torah figure can be understood through various motivations and explanations. Ultimately, which interpretation we choose and how we relate to the biblical characters is up to us.

Let us embark on this journey with a fresh perspective, approaching the stories of our villains with openness to both interpretive approaches: First, we will view our villains as evil (in chapters 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12) and develop their characteristics and the actions that lead to their rejected status. Then, we will delve into their stories’ nuances and the complex characteristics of each figure (in chapters 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13), to learn lessons from their moments of goodness and understand their fall from grace as well as their opportunities for repentance. Additionally, for both our first and last villains – Kayin and Esav – a third chapter is dedicated to their descendants (chapters 3 and 14, respectively). These serve to illustrate how both interpretations play out through their progeny: either as cut off, despised, and rejected or as individuals with the potential for friendship and inclusion within the broader narrative.

5. An analysis of Nimrod can be found in chapters 3 and 12, in comparison to Kayin’s descendants and Esav.

6. A more in-depth analysis of Enosh is found in chapter 3.

Introduction: Why Villains?

It is my hope that through reading this book, you gain deeper insight into the stories of the Torah and its villainous characters, recognize the multilayered possibilities within their narratives, and discover the many lessons that emerge from the text. Yes, we can always learn lessons of virtue from heroes – but the challenge I present to you in this book is this: Can you find room in your heart to learn from those figures who are not painted as heroes of the stories, just as the Torah finds room to include them in its narrative?

KAYIN

The notion of one human being taking the life of another seems unfathomable, yet we live in a world in which acts of violence are commonplace. The nightly news regularly reports on another shooting; murder is the motif of much of literature, theater, and art. This reality reflects not only on our present, but on our past as well. Sadly, murder and strife are a fundamental part of the human experience, starting with humanity's very inception. The Torah's early chapters, in the narrative regarding the world's first family, contain a drama that commences with the creation of humanity and concludes with fratricide (Gen. 1–4). The shocking tale of Kayin murdering Hevel (Abel), his own brother, leads us to speculate: What could have caused someone to perform such a villainous act? Did killing his own sibling stem from a jealous rage of sibling rivalry? Was it a fight for survival or over inheritance? Was the act premeditated or an unfortunate accident? Humanity has struggled to understand this initial murder – including the murderer's motives and mindset.

In the first two chapters of this book, we will explore various approaches to the first homicide story and glean insight into multiple perspectives on Kayin's character. How should we, the readers of Torah, view its first villain? Should we detest him and deem him the epitome of evil? Or should we empathize with him and try to grasp his story's nuance? Perhaps, through this analysis, we can come to a deeper understanding of the world we live in and find a way to apply the lessons of Kayin's story.

Our study of Kayin's story will focus on the words of the narrative, parallels to other biblical stories, and the views of *Hazal* (the rabbinic Sages) and classic commentators. The first chapter will paint a picture of Kayin as purely a villain, analyzing each detail of his story to corroborate the evil portrayal that we are typically taught as children. Next, in chapter 2, we will revisit Kayin's narrative, revealing a more nuanced, humane, and sympathetic view of his story. Finally, in chapter 3, we will explore how these conflicting perspectives on Kayin affect our view of his descendants and their fate.

Chapter 1

Kayin the Villain: The Father of Murder

As children, we are taught to view Kayin as a murderous villain; his character, intentions, and actions are portrayed as pure evil, warranting him a fate of isolation and extinction. In this chapter, we will substantiate this unequivocal picture of Kayin, elaborating on and analyzing each aspect of his narrative within the text while also examining the views of *Ḥazal* and the early commentators. Let us start at the very beginning of the story.

A VILLAIN: *TOV VARA*, THE GOOD AND THE BAD

The Torah depicts the first family as a unit of parents (Adam and Ḥava) with two children: one son, Hevel, portrayed as good, and the other, Kayin, evil. One might speculate that the evil child is a punishment or a natural result of Adam and Ḥava's sin of eating from the forbidden tree: Following the sin that introduced "*tov vara*," "good and bad" (Gen. 3:5, 22) into the world, they are granted two sons, one who is *tov* and one who is *ra*. This binary view of their two children is found in the writings of many commentators. Rabbenu Bahya (4:2) labels Hevel as a *tzaddik*, a

righteous person, and Kayin as a *rasha*, an evil individual. Similarly, Rabbi Kapah's notes on Rasag (4:2), explaining God's rejection of Kayin's sacrifice and acceptance of Hevel's, state that Hevel is "*yerei Elokim*," "God-fearing," while Kayin is "*hafkho*," "his opposite."¹ The Zohar even goes so far as to suggest that the snake is Kayin's father, while Adam is Hevel's.²

This portrayal of a family with God-fearing parents who have both righteous and evil offspring becomes a model that is replicated throughout the book of Genesis. Avraham is originally blessed with two sons, Yishmael, who is immoral, and Yitzhak, who is honorable. Similarly, Yitzhak has two sons, Esav, who is wicked, and Yaakov, who is virtuous.

To develop our unambiguous picture of Kayin as a villain, we must begin by analyzing the events and details recorded in the Torah *preceding* the murder to reveal his true persona and motives. From the very introduction of Kayin and Hevel, each event is written in comparative terms – their births, their occupations, and their sacrifices to God. On each of these three topics, the brothers are contrasted with one another and, often, these comparisons insinuate that one is evil and the other righteous.

TEXTUAL COMPARISONS: HEROES AND VILLAINS

Births and Naming

And Adam knew Hava his wife and she conceived and gave birth to Kayin, saying, "I have acquired a man from God." And she continued to give birth to his brother, to Hevel... (Gen. 4:1–2)

At the outset of our story, we find Hava celebrating the birth of her firstborn child. She gives him a name that can be perceived as her way of thanking God for giving *her* a child³ or simply taking credit for his birth,⁴ thus embarking on her role as parent to Kayin with an attitude

1. See *Perushei Rabbenu Saadia Gaon al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984).

2. Zohar, section 2, 231a; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 21 suggests it is Satan riding on the snake who impregnates Hava.

3. Radak (Gen. 4:1) suggests she is giving God credit for his part in the creation of her child. Shadal (4:1) adds that she is thanking God for His help and kindness.

4. *Bekhor Shor* (Gen. 4:1) follows this line of thought; through the pain that she suffered, he relates, she acquired the child.

of egoism and self-centeredness – a large milestone, nonetheless. When the Torah describes Hevel's birth, it does so by way of comparison to Kayin's – "and she continued to give birth." Hevel is labeled "his brother," and lives in his older brother's shadow. Additionally, his birth is not followed by any explanation of the reason for his naming. It is evident that Hava, and possibly Adam as well, view their older son as the favorite.⁵ In short, the language of Kayin's birth places him at the center; even Hevel's birth announcement is formulated in relation to Kayin's.

This comparative introduction reflects a pattern in Genesis: pairs of sons who are often identified as "good" and "evil" and are part of a conflict within a storyline that involves parental favoritism. Kayin is the favored son despite being a villain; Esav, the older twin, is evil but is chosen by his father (Gen. 25:28); Avraham's first son, Yishmael, is rejected but is beloved by him (21:11). Likewise, Hevel, the deprioritized child, corresponds to our less desired heroes, Yitzhak and Yaakov.⁶

Occupations

And she [Hava] continued to give birth to his brother, to Hevel, and *Hevel was a shepherd of sheep and Kayin worked the ground.* (Gen. 4:2)

The second half of the verse, which discusses the brothers' occupations, mentions Hevel, the younger brother, first. This is unexpected; typically, in the Torah, the elder is mentioned before the younger.⁷ Exceptions are only made when the younger is deemed more important than the older

5. See the Malbim on Genesis 4:2.

6. This pattern of the less favored sons becoming the Jewish people's heroes is also found in the stories of Yiftah (Jephthah) and David. Judges 11:2 tells the story of Yiftah, the judge, who is exiled from his father's house to prevent him from receiving an inheritance. I Samuel 16 tells the story of David's father Yishai (Jesse), who does not initially introduce David to Shmuel the prophet when he comes to their home to anoint one of Yishai's sons as the next king. The Midrash *Yalkut Mekhiri* (Ps. 118:28) and *Midrash HaGadol* (Deut. 1:17) quote the view that David is hated by his father and thus Yishai hides his son from Shmuel the prophet, believing him unworthy of leadership.

7. For example, Esav is mentioned before Yaakov (Gen. 35:29), Shimon (Simon) before

sibling(s).⁸ Thus, it is possible that the precedence of Hevel's occupation indicates that he is greater than his brother Kayin or that his profession is considered more worthy. Sforno (4:2) writes that being a shepherd requires more intelligence than being a farmer. Similarly, Abarbanel (4:2) states that shepherds, who rule over their herds, learn greater leadership skills than those who rule only over vegetation.

In this vein, it is fitting that many of our greatest heroes and leaders began their careers as shepherds, including Yaakov,⁹ Raḥel (29:9), the sons of Yaakov (37:12), Moshe (Ex. 3:1), and David (I Sam. 17:15). Why does being a shepherd lead not only to leadership but also to spiritual greatness? Sforno and *HaKetav VeHaKabbala* (Gen. 25:27) both write that the shepherd remains far from civilization, spending hours alone in nature, and thus has the opportunity to truly recognize the incredible wonders and glory of the Creator. Similarly, in the other biblical families with the good-and-evil-son dynamic, the good son is always the virtuous shepherd, like Yitzḥak and Yaakov,¹⁰ while the evil son, such as Yishmael and Esav, has a vocation that requires weaponry.¹¹

Levi (34:25, 30), Leah before Raḥel (29:16, 17), Menashe before Ephraim (48:1), and Aharon before Moshe (Ex. 6:20, 26).

8. Sanhedrin 69b, in explaining why Shem is listed before Ḥam and Yafet (Japheth; Gen. 5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18; I Chr. 1:4) as well as why Avraham is listed before Naḥor and Haran (Gen. 11:27), concludes that while neither is the oldest, both are mentioned first to signify that they are wiser and hold more significance than their brothers. This pattern is found in many places in which it is obvious that the younger brother is greater than the older: Yitzḥak before Yishmael (Gen. 25:9), Ephraim before Menashe (Gen. 48:5, 20), and Moshe before Aharon (Ex. 4:29; 5:1, 4, 20; 6:13, 27; 7:6, 10; and many more).
9. Genesis 25:27 describes Yaakov as *yoshev ohalim* (dweller of tents), which is defined by Rashbam and *Bekhor Shor* as meaning a shepherd who would sit in a tent for protection against the sun while watching the herd.
10. Yitzḥak is described as having many cattle and sheep (Gen. 26:14) and Yaakov is described as "sitting in a tent" (25:27). As stated above in note 9, Rashbam writes that this refers to his profession as a shepherd, since a shepherd sits in a tent while watching his herd. So too, later, Yaakov's sons take over the profession, shepherding their father's cattle (37:12).
11. Esav and Yaakov's professions are contrasted immediately after their births are related, much like Kayin and Hevel: "And Esav was a hunter, a man of the field, and Yaakov was an *ish tam* (a wholesome man) who sat in the tent" (Gen. 25:27). Esav

Comparably, Kayin's occupation as farmer may imply negativity like the occupations of Yishmael and Esav, even though he is not a hunter. There are two other known farmers, or "lovers of the ground," in Tanakh whose stories suggest that farming can steer a person away from God. The first is Noah, who, after the Flood, is described as an "*ish haadama*," "a man of the ground"; he plants a vineyard, becomes drunk, and exposes himself (Gen. 9:20). Similarly, King Uziyahu (Uzziah), who is described as "*ohev adama*," "a lover of the ground" (II Chr. 26:10), becomes obsessed with the land's agriculture and productivity. His pride and ego lead him to offer *ketoret*, an aromatic sacrifice only brought by a priest, and he is struck with leprosy, forcing him to step down from ruling the Jewish people.¹²

What makes the love of the land and farming negative? Rabbi S. R. Hirsch (Gen. 4:1) describes Kayin as someone whose actions reflect his name's meaning – *kinyan*, acquiring ownership.¹³ Kayin is focused on materialism and pride of possession, lacking the recognition that the fruits of his labor are gifts from God. Furthermore, farming was the profession of his father, Adam, who was originally given the job of "working and guarding the Garden of Eden" (2:15). However, after Adam's sin, the ground was cursed, and so, was Adam's profession:

To Adam [God] said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree from which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' *cursed be the ground because of you; with hard labor shall you eat of it all the days of your life*. Thorns and thistles will sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field. *By the sweat of your brow you will get bread to eat*, until you return to the ground – for

being labeled "a man of the field" is comparable to Kayin, who was "a worker of the ground." So, too, Yishmael is described as a child who "lived in the desert and was skilled with a bow" (21:20).

12. Genesis Rabba 22:3 compares these three lovers of the ground, Kayin, Noah, and Uziyahu, and concludes that the tragedy that befell all three men is that they worked the ground but got no benefit from it; they found no (spiritual) purpose.
13. All quotes from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch are taken from *The Pentateuch*, vol. 1, *Genesis*, translated and explained by S. R. Hirsch, rendered into English by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989).

from it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return.” (Gen. 3:17–19)

Kayin continues in his father’s footsteps post-curse; the text implies that he believes he can contest God’s words and successfully bring forth produce from the cursed land.¹⁴ Abarbanel (4:2) writes that Kayin’s chosen profession demonstrates his lack of fear of God and His curse. He ties this dearth of concern to Kayin’s name, which originates with “*kinyan*,” stating that Kayin’s sole focus is having an occupation that will allow him to acquire wealth.

Even though the introductory birth story might suggest Kayin as the desired son, the textual comparison of the professions highlights Hevel’s superiority, and the comparisons continue in the subsequent story, in which the two compete for God’s attention through the act of offering Him gifts.

Offerings to God

In the course of time, Kayin brought an offering to God from the fruit of the soil. And Hevel also brought the choicest of the firstborn of his sheep. God paid heed to Hevel and his offering, but to Kayin and his offering [God] paid no heed. Kayin was much distressed, and his face fell. (Gen. 4:3–5)

Both Kayin and Hevel offer a sacrifice to God, but only Hevel’s is accepted. Why? What is wrong with Kayin’s sacrifice?

The first possibility is that Kayin’s gift is inferior to his brother’s offering, leading to its rejection. The Torah emphasizes that Hevel donates the “firstborn of his sheep,” his best and most treasured animals. This would seem to indicate that Kayin does *not* give the finest of his

14. The *Midrash Aggada* on Genesis 4:2 states that Kayin is not scared of God’s curse, because he stubbornly believes that the curse only affects his father Adam, the one who sinned. Rashi (Gen. 4:2) adds that Hevel, the righteous son, purposely takes on a different profession since he accepts that the ground is cursed by God.

crop, rendering his sacrifice inferior.¹⁵ Expanding the disparity, some even say that if Hevel brings his *best* animals, perhaps it is possible that Kayin presents the *worst* of his crops.¹⁶

An additional possibility is that their gifts, objectively, are equal, but Hevel himself is deserving of God's favor, while Kayin is not; the acceptance is about the giver, not the gift. A fire coming down to accept a specific sacrifice represents God's choice of the individual bringing the offering,¹⁷ as in the Tabernacle and Temple, as well as in the stories of Gidon (Gideon the judge; Judges 6:21) and Manoah (Judges 13:19–20). Furthermore, when multiple sacrifices are offered and God sends fire to consume only one, it serves as a clear sign of divine preference for that individual over the others. For example, the sacrifice brought by Eliyahu (Elijah the Prophet) is selected over that of those who serve Baal, a false deity (I Kings 18:36–38), and the incense sacrifice offered by Aharon is accepted over those of the 250 men of the Korah rebellion (Num. 17:12).

Why would God prefer Hevel over Kayin? Hevel's giving of his firstborn animals reflects the ideals of the commandments in the Torah to dedicate the "*peter rehem*," "firstborn" (Ex. 34:19), as well as the concept of giving the first fruits (*bikkurim*) to God (Deut. 26:1–11). Both commandments display the understanding that everything we have is a gift from God and not a product of our labor, so we dedicate the first – most precious – produce to Him. Perhaps this is the vital difference between the brothers: Hevel recognizes God as the source of his success, while Kayin believes he alone is responsible for his achievements.¹⁸

15. *HaKetav VeHaKabbala* (Gen. 4:4) writes that the extra word "gam," describing Hevel *also* giving a sacrifice, comes to show his superiority. His giving is an improvement on his brother's sacrifice. Rabbi Hershel Schachter, in his book *Insights and Attitudes* (Brooklyn: Mekor Press, 2022), 6, writes that Kayin assumes that his present is merely a symbolic act, as God does not need sacrifices, so it would be wasteful to offer Him the choicest fruits and vegetables. Rabbi Schachter concludes that it is more important to perform acts properly than to be original.

16. Radak (Gen. 4:5) describes Kayin's sacrifice as *bezuya*, contemptable and loathsome, as opposed to Hevel's sacrifice, which is given with the right intentions. Rabbenu Bahya (4:3) adds that Kayin gives flaxseeds, the cheapest and worst of his crop, reflecting his stingy, selfish character.

17. *Bekhor Shor* on Genesis 4:5.

18. Rabbenu Bahya (Gen. 4:3) rebukes Kayin specifically for not giving from the first

Sforno (Gen. 4:5) combines both notions, maintaining that Hevel is more deserving *and* that his sacrifice is superior; Kayin, in contrast, is not deserving *and* brings a sacrifice that is not worthy of acceptance. This assertion – that both Hevel and his sacrifice are superior – is substantiated by the order of the words found in verse 5: “God paid heed to Hevel and his offering, but to Kayin and his offering [God] paid no heed.” The verse distinguishes between the person and the offering itself, highlighting that both, the person and the item, were accepted or neglected by God.

Additionally, the text’s order alludes to God’s preference. Even though Kayin is first to offer his sacrifice, God’s reaction to Hevel’s offering precedes his response to Kayin’s. This echoes the pattern we mentioned earlier when discussing verse 2, with Hevel’s profession stated before that of Kayin. Twice in verses 1–5, the text mentions Kayin first and Hevel second, continuing with Hevel, and only afterward returning to Kayin (a chiasmic, or A1-B1-B2-A2 structure).¹⁹ The usage of this pattern twice in the comparative narrative, where Hevel precedes Kayin in the second half, further supports the claim of Hevel’s superiority over his brother both in his profession and in his sacrifice. The Torah may be purposely putting Hevel before Kayin, his older brother, to highlight that Hevel is more deserving.

Long before we even begin to discuss the encounter between Kayin and Hevel on the day of the murder, we already notice a

fruits of the seven species (*shivat haminim*), the seven special fruits of the Land of Israel, hinting at Kayin’s rejection of the premise of the commandment of *bikkurim* (giving of the first fruits). The idea that Kayin’s gift represents his own ego and lack of understanding that God is the source of his wealth is also mentioned by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2009), 31. He differentiates between two types of gifts, one that is given to please the receiver and one that is given to grant the giver dominance over the receiver. He deduces from Kayin’s angry reaction to God’s rejection that Kayin is giving the second type of gift; his sacrifice is not intended solely to please God, but rather to assert his own dominance.

19. This pattern is first seen in verses 1–2, in the context of Kayin and Hevel’s births and professions: (A1) Kayin is born in verse 1. (B1) Hevel is born in verse 2. (B2) Hevel’s profession is revealed in verse 2. (A2) Only then is Kayin’s profession named in verse 2. This same structure is used again in the next verse when discussing their sacrifices: (A1) Kayin brings a sacrifice in verse 3. (B1) Hevel brings a sacrifice in verse 4. (B2) God accepts Hevel’s sacrifice in verse 4. (A2) God rejects Kayin’s sacrifice in verse 5.

tremendous difference between them and between their actions. As stated beautifully by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

There is no way of telling the difference externally. There can be two offerings – Cain’s and Abel’s – that look alike. They are both acts of worship, both superficially the same, yet between them there is all the difference in the world.²⁰

God’s acceptance of Hevel’s sacrifice fits seamlessly into our reading, which portrays Kayin as a villain. The worthy son (Hevel) is chosen, and the wicked son (Kayin) is rejected, along with his sacrifice. Kayin and Hevel’s story establishes the archetypal family of the book of Genesis, where evil sons (Esav and Yishmael) are rejected from the Jewish nation and exiled from the land of Canaan, and righteous sons (Yitzhak and Yaakov) are given the blessings of the Land of Israel and fathering a chosen nation.

This pattern generates the expectation that our story’s continuation will further reflect God’s choice of Hevel over Kayin. However, let us consider whether God has resolved to abandon Kayin – or to grant him one last chance for redemption.

**GOD’S WARNING TO KAYIN:
“SIN CROUCHES AT THE DOOR”**

Once God chooses Hevel over Kayin, we anticipate that the story will continue with a focus on Hevel, the chosen child. Typically, once a child is selected over his brother, the narrative shifts its full attention to the journey of the chosen one.²¹ However, in our story, the atypical occurs; instead of speaking to Hevel, God turns His focus to Kayin, attempting to prompt him to recognize the reason for his rejection as well as his own ability to fix his mistakes and move forward.

20. Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*, 31.

21. After Yishmael is removed from Avraham’s home, the Torah quickly ends his story and focuses the narrative solely on Avraham and Yitzhak (Gen. 21–22). Similarly, after Yaakov receives Yitzhak’s blessing in place of Esav, and Esav decides to murder Yaakov, the narrative highlights Yaakov’s journey to the house of Lavan; it leaves out the details of Esav’s story, as he continues living in his parents’ home (Gen. 27–28).

God understands that Kayin is clouded by anger,²² frustration, humiliation, and jealousy towards his brother.²³ Thus, God's words towards Kayin are a warning of the damage these emotions can cause – especially anger. This is why God asks, “Why are you distressed and why is your face falling?” (4:6). These reactions, He implies, will only make matters worse. God then cautions: “If you do right, there will be an uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door; its urge is towards you, yet you can be its master” (Gen. 4:7). The simple explanation of this verse is that God is reacting to Kayin's sin. Kayin gave an inferior and embarrassing present (a minor sin); now, God is warning him not to allow a modest infraction to lead to a much greater one.²⁴

A second possibility is that God's words are referencing Kayin's jealousy of his brother, warning him to not allow *his jealousy* to grow into something larger.²⁵ These words appear to be God's attempt to prevent Kayin from turning his rejection into a springboard for further adverse behavior. However, despite being granted a second chance, Kayin ignores God's warning entirely. He goes to meet his brother in the field – an act which results in mankind's first homicide.

THE MURDER SCENE

Kayin said to his brother Hevel. And when they were in the field, Kayin set upon his brother Hevel and killed him. (Gen. 4:8)

Several mysteries arise in this verse: What does Kayin say to Hevel? Why are they in the field? Why does Kayin kill his brother?

When we read Kayin as nothing more than a villain, there are two approaches we can take to resolve the ambiguities. One possibility is that this murder is premeditated: Kayin says something to purposely start a

22. The verse states, “And Kayin was angry” (Gen. 4:5).

23. See *Bekhor Shor* and Shadal on Genesis 4:5.

24. See Rashbam (Gen. 4:7). Rashi (4:7) adds that God is not warning Kayin simply about the force of sin, but about the powerful ability of the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, to foster a life of sin.

25. Ramban, Abarbanel, Sforno, and Shadal on Genesis 4:7, as well as Ralbag on Genesis 4:8, all relate this warning to the dangers of jealousy.