

“AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?”

A commentary on *Parashat Bereshit*

By Alexander Goldberg

Am I my brother’s keeper? This is a fundamental question that the Torah poses to us. It is a question that is left hanging throughout the entire Torah: Who is our brother or sister? How am I responsible to them? Why am I responsible? When do I need to respond?

Parashat Bereshit provides us with the beginnings of an answer.

Rashi famously asks why the Torah starts at all with the Book of Genesis. His own view is that it should surely start at Exodus XII with the first Commandment given to Israel, the nation. Before we can explore this relationship between Israel and Hashem we need to understand the one between humanity and Hashem. In essence, we are taught that all of humanity comes from common ancestry created in the Divine Image:

“And G-d created humanity in His image, in the image of G-d He created humanity; male and female He created them.” Genesis 1:27

The sages understood that from this we learn that to destroy, hurt, starve or commit an injustice to another human being is a desecration of that image: a desecration of the Divine. The Mishnah says *“Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”* (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9).

We learn that each and every one of us is minted from the same mould and yet is different: and yet if two humans were the sole people left on this earth

then they could create a world

entire: hence to destroy a human is to destroy that world of possibility.

It is this concept that is carried down throughout the ages.

During the Enlightenment, they were developed by

Thomas Jefferson and the America’s Founding Fathers and beautifully restated in the US Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

Today, there is a universal understanding of the equality and solidarity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights expresses this as: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The Torah itself recognises that it is not enough to simply state the connectivity between humanity and G-d and between human and human. There remains a tension that is exposed with this early section of the Torah within the Cain and Abel story. Cain’s anger and jealousy, his wish to overcome his brother with violence ends in tragedy. It is when Cain is challenged by his actions does he ask Hashem whether he is his brother’s keeper? It is a question that is posed to us individually and collectively in every generation. Do I utilise the enormous power that I have for good or simply use it to advance my own cause regardless of who it might hurt?

It was the same question posed to America’s Founding Fathers by the anti-slavery movement and by the suffragettes a hundred years ago. It is the question that we still ask ourselves today in terms of global inequality that results in hunger that claims 21,000 lives each day or treatable diseases that take the lives of millions each year.

In essence, G-d’s gift to us is the power of free will. We are ultimately judged by how we utilise the power of human agency: on how we keep our brother and our sister.

“And G-d created humanity in His image, in the image of G-d He created humanity; male and female He created them.” 1:27

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