

FACING RESPONSIBILITY

Beresheis: In the Beginning
(Genesis 4:9–4:16)

Am I my brother's keeper?

—Genesis 4:9

Emmanuel Levinas places great emphasis on the responsibility that each person has for the other. There is virtually no limit for such responsibility. He frequently cites an expression found in Dostoevsky: “[E]ach is responsible for each, and I more so than all the others.” The contemporary popular Jewish writer Joseph Telushkin advances the notion that the whole of the Jewish Bible can be read as an elaboration of an affirmative response to Cain’s original question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). In a way, we might reasonably argue that the religious philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas demonstrates why and how this is the case. By elevating responsibility to an ethical-metaphysical category, Levinas frames one of the key arguments of his philosophy reflected in biblical sources. At the heart of Levinas’s transcending humanism is the governing idea of human fraternity. This involves no less than rethinking the kind of responsibility we have for the death and life of another person.

The first death recorded in the Bible is also a fratricide. When Cain responds by hiding from the divine question, “Where is Abel, your brother?” he answers evasively and with what Levinas calls the “stone coldness of indifference.” Clearly, it is an affirmative answer that is called for. As Levinas puts it, “To be the guardian of others, contrary to the vision of the world according to Cain, defines fraternity” (BTV 1994, 104). Still, “the personal responsibility of man with regard to man is such that G’d cannot annul it” (DF 1990, 20). This is why, according to Levinas, “the rabbinical commentary tradition does not regard the question as a case of simple insolence. Instead, it comes from

someone who has not yet experienced human solidarity and who thinks, like many modern philosophers, that each exists for oneself and that everything is permitted” (DF 1990, 20). The American Levinas scholar, Richard A. Cohen, speaks of the identity of the human person as the most basic expression of the “I” as the “for-the-other.”¹ In other words, identity becomes distinctively human as “I exist for-the-other.”

Abraham Ibn Ezra, the Jewish medieval commentator and grammarian asks, given the language and context of Scripture, whether Abel, the victim of the first homicide, also bears some responsibility toward his brother (Eisenmann 2002, 104–9). The repetition of the expression “his brother” (*achiev*) serves to alert us to the question of guardianship for another even when the other has expressed hostility toward me. Consider that when Cain is crestfallen because his sacrifice has been rejected by G'd that he is told that if he does *teshuva* (“turns himself around”), things will go well for him. It is at this moment that Cain is described as going out to the field to “speak with his brother.” The text gives no expression for any kind of response on the part of Abel. Is it not possible, asks Ibn Ezra, that Cain wished to share with Abel G'd's encouraging response, as well as or more than the divine rebuke: “If you lift yourself up, will it not go better for you” (Eisenmann; Gen 4:6)? Is it not likely, Ibn Ezra continues, that Abel did not turn toward Cain to listen to him, let alone to speak with him (Eisenmann 2002, 104–9)? The “stone-cold indifference” would apply then, to Abel as well as Cain.

In no way does this collapse the distinction between victim and perpetrator. Cain emphatically and unequivocally is the perpetrator; Abel, the victim. Nonetheless, Abel, according to the reading of Ibn Ezra, followed in part by Nachmanides, bears a degree of responsibility toward his brother, in the moment preceding the fratricide by refusing to turn toward his brother. Responsibility is the personalizing of justice, where I become responsible before justice is installed and after it is created. It is justice, the stabilizing of responsibility, that makes fraternity and society possible. In this way, there must be room for me to have a place under the sun as well as the others.

With Cain condemned to be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth, the language of the “Face,” so central to the thinking of Levinas, is introduced. The Hebrew for “face,” *panim*, is given a three-fold expression in the exile of Cain. Maimonides explains that the word for “face” is derived from the biblical verb

1 Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 212.

panah meaning “to turn or to aim”² (GFP 1956, 15). We see this in everyday language when we speak of “facing” the future or “facing” one another. Regarding his punishment, Cain complains to God that “from Your Face I will be hidden.” This is the ultimate punishment with which Israel is later threatened if it goes contrary to the morality inscribed in the divine law. *Hester panim* (the hiding or concealing of the expression of the divine face) is a worse punishment than all the illnesses, plagues, and persecutions: “[A]nd I will surely turn My Face for that day, and all the evil which they have wrought” (Deut. 13:18). This means that human beings will experience everything that happens as though with divine indifference, and therefore only according to the laws of nature.

The rabbinic tradition associates this kind of exile with the reversion of the interhuman order to the each-against-each and the all-against-all. This includes the natural realm as well, understood as brute force. The earth, its foliage and its fruit, will take on an indifferent, rather than benign, expression, and in this way, the earlier admonition, “You will eat your bread in the sweat of your face,” becomes intensified.

Cain expresses what is perhaps his deepest existential fear. Other people, seeing that he has lost divine favor, will seek to kill him. He responds, “He who sees me will slay me.” Cain is given a divine mark upon his forehead to protect him from exactly this kind of eventuality. To use the categories of Levinas, the infinite mark upon Cain’s forehead is perhaps meant to make his own humanity visible once again, at least to other people. Cain will eventually succumb to the hands of a blind descendant, one who cannot recognize this mark and who mistakes Cain for an animal.

Levinas speaks at length of the face as an utterly irreducible category that serves as the beginning of all ethical relations. This sign of the Infinite marks every human being as “holy”—even Cain. Levinas observes that the face of the other person appeals to me, before all else: “Do not kill me!” Without this primary expression, we cannot begin to explain how morality registers within the subject’s awareness. The human countenance is vulnerable beyond any other kind of nakedness. It is also the origin of all expression. The human face permits all human discourse to proceed, assuming that this first imperative is met. When only the animal is expressed in the human, the Infinite contracts immediately into the finite, where the interdiction of killing the other is no longer visible. Even knowledge is subordinate to responsibility. The more I learn, the more responsible toward others I become for what I have learned.

2 I first heard this at a public Saturday evening gathering at the Maimonides School from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in Boston, MA, in the fall of 1972.

To explore this a little further, the scriptural text uses the plural of the Hebrew word for “blood,” *demei*, in the statement usually translated as “your brother’s blood cries from the ground to me.” The Talmudic commentary tradition is virtually in agreement in arguing that this means that not only has Cain murdered his brother, but also all future progeny that could have come from him (BT, Sanhedrin 37a). In the language of Levinas, we can say that this raises the issue of generational responsibility. More precisely, are we responsible for the future of the other? We might similarly ask, could we possibly be considered responsible for the pasts of other people before we encounter them?

For Levinas, the past of the other, like my own, inheres in the present and therefore shapes our expectations for the future as well. It would be very odd to say to another person, “Yes, from the moment I met you, I became your friend. But, however you got to be who you presently are before our meeting, for that I am not responsible.” This is not only to deny his or her past, but his or her present and, in a way, his or her near future as well. Embodied friendships and human relations of all kinds have an intersubjective dimension that is central to their description.

To amplify what this means for generational responsibility, “to be my brother’s keeper,” indicates the way that this pertains to the future as well as the present—that is, “I will remain my brother’s keeper.” Or, in a transposition to alterity, we might say that the other *IS* my future, just as his or her past has awaited my present. This argument needs to be formulated and explicated.

1. Levinas affirms, “I am responsible for the future of the other.”
2. If 1, then my responsibilities continue in (or are implicated in) the future of the other.
3. If 1 and 2, therefore the other *IS* my future insofar as he or she is the subject of my continuing responsibilities.³

I cannot guarantee the hopefulness of a future that I cannot foresee. However, this “deep future,” as we might call it, corresponds in Levinas, but is not identical to the immemorial past that I cannot remember. The deep future cannot be anticipated but is perhaps the promise of infinite time that is a necessary if not sufficient precondition for human hope. The full measure of the humanity of the human is to be measured in the ultimate “not-yet” that requires refinements in the realm of ethical elevation.

³ I am indebted to my colleague, Robert J. Anderson, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Washington College for the formulation of this argument.