

I am My Brother's Keeper (2004)

As our New Year's celebration draws near, I once again find myself pondering the enigmatic story that our tradition places before us at this time—the story of the Binding of Isaac. Once again, I walk for those three long days with father Abraham and ponder the meaning of his journey with his son to the mountain. And once again, I find fresh meaning in the story. At the heart of Abraham's tender and troubled relationship with Isaac, I find guidance for the tender and troubled relationship between Israel and Palestine.

I bring to this contemplation a deep love for Israel. As a devoted lover of Israel, I am profoundly disturbed and deeply fearful for Israel today. My primary concern is not that the Palestinians and their Arab allies will drive Israel into the sea. Israel possesses the fourth most powerful military in the world. Rather, I fear that the current struggle will drain the lifeblood out of Israel. With each terrorist bombing, as innocent blood spills out onto the streets of Israel, the lifeblood of every Israeli--and perhaps every Jew-- becomes thinner. Israel becomes a little weaker, from the inside.

And, with each Palestinian orchard that is destroyed, with each Palestinian home that is demolished, with each innocent that is wounded or killed, while we stand by in silence, some of the moral fiber of every Jew goes slack and begins to fray. Here is the full tragedy of the current situation: many of the actions Israel currently takes to defend the body of our people, aggressively eat away at our soul.

At the time that I write this piece, we see a glimmer of hope. Prime Minister Abbas has taken some steps to restrain Palestinian terrorists, and Prime Minister Sharon is moving forward toward a withdrawal from Gaza. We can hope and pray that we now witness the beginning of a process that will lead to a full peace between Palestine and Israel. At the same time, we know that, at best, the path to peace will not be easy. Israel will face many challenges and difficult decisions. The current lull in violence makes the present moment a good time to clarify the moral compass that Jewish tradition offers us to guide our choices in the face of the severe challenges that Israel faces.

Even at this more hopeful moment, we can recognize the fact that a heart wrenching on-going challenge confronts Israel and the Jewish people. From Israel's earliest pre-State days, Israel has faced this challenge: how to defend Israel and her people and at the same time honor the moral imperatives of our Jewish tradition.

Our people cannot afford to blind itself to this challenge. Just as the Jewish people cannot allow Israel to falter, so too the Jew cannot destroy homes, livelihoods and innocent lives without doing grave damage to his and her own heart and soul. Judaism itself is under attack by some of the very actions we take to defend ourselves from attack.

This challenge now reaches crisis proportions, but it is not new to our people. At the very beginning of the Zionist movement, over one hundred years ago, most Orthodox Jews vigorously opposed the Zionist effort. The Orthodox rabbinic leadership cited the traditional Jewish belief that the return of the Jewish people to their homeland would come with the arrival of the Messiah. Only the Messiah, as distinct from a humanly planned political movement, could bring the People back to the Land.

History proved these opponents of Zionism tragically wrong. The Jewish people could not wait for the Messiah to return to its homeland. On behalf of the survivors of the Holocaust, as well as millions of Jews from Arab lands, from Russia and around the world, we are deeply indebted to Theodore Herzl and the political Zionists who built the state of Israel.

But, the early Orthodox opponents were not entirely wrong either. Along with a number of pro-Zionist thinkers, these people foresaw that the establishment of the political State of Israel would impose a significant challenge to the spiritual state of the Jewish people.

What makes that so? When a state and a religion are closely aligned, the needs of the state to secure and defend itself puts enormous pressure on the religion to conform its teaching to the needs of the state.

We see this effect today in the position of many Jewish religious establishments in Israel and in the United States. By and large, our highest leaders in the organized Jewish world have offered either support or tepid opposition to several morally questionable policies of the Sharon government. I do not condemn these leaders. They face a terrible dilemma. WE all face a terrible dilemma. How do we hold on to the moral teachings of our tradition at the same time that we defend ourselves?

How do we walk this tightrope? This is the question at the center of the current moral crisis among our people. Of course, there is no simple answer. Would that there be AN answer. But I do find that our tradition points out a direction that might lead us to an answer. That answer lies at the heart of the story of Abraham and Isaac.

But first we must put that story in its proper context. We begin at the beginning of the human journey as Scripture recounts it. We begin with the first story post-Eden, the story of Cain and Abel. In the Bible, the first story is often the *rosh*, the head of all the stories that follow. The head story raises the issues that the subsequent stories will explore. As you will see, the story of Cain and Abel is such a story.

You know the story. Cain and Abel are brothers. Cain is enraged and jealous because God rejected his offering and accepted Abel's. Overwhelmed with pain and grief, he rises up and kills his brother Abel.

And God said to Cain, "Where is your brother?" Cain replies, "I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?" This question, Cain's question, stands at the center of the entire book of Genesis, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain's question sets the stage for all the stories that will follow: Abraham and Lot, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Dina and her brothers, and Joseph and the same brothers. Genesis is an exploration of Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" What are my responsibilities to my brother and to my sister?

Only at the end of Genesis do we come to the answer. The answer is provided by Judah at the crisis point in the story of Joseph and his brothers. In the Biblical account, Joseph had been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. In time, Joseph, the dream interpreter, rises to become Pharaoh's chief administrator. When famine strikes the entire region, Joseph's brothers, minus

Benjamin, are forced to go down to Egypt in search of food. When the brothers arrive, Joseph recognizes his kin, but he does not reveal himself to them. Instead, he forces them to go back to Canaan and to bring to him Benjamin, now the father's favorite. The brothers bring Benjamin down. Joseph hides his goblet in Benjamin's satchel only to be later discovered by Joseph's guard. And then the brothers are brought before Joseph. Joseph says to them, "The man in whose hand the goblet is found, he shall be my servant, and the rest of you go in peace."

This critical moment is a turning point in the history of our people. If the brothers return to Canaan and appear before their father without Benjamin, the loss of Benjamin would surely destroy Jacob and the family. Our people's journey with God would have ended before it even had begun. At this point, Judah literally steps forward and says, "Take me instead of the boy." After many generations of destructive sibling rivalry, Judah steps forward and answers Cain's question. Yes. I am my brother's keeper. This is the beginning of Judah-ism, the religion of the descendants of Judah. Four thousand years later, we Jews carry that name with great pride because we are the people whose ethical foundation stone is "I am my brother's keeper."

Judah is the hero at the conclusion of the Genesis story, but as we see so often in Biblical stories, a powerful woman, in this case his mother, Leah, stands behind Judah's achievement. Leah was herself deeply enmeshed in sibling rivalry. She stood in her sister Rachel's place and married Jacob first. And Leah battled Rachel for Jacob's love in the years thereafter. We see the struggle even in the remarks that Leah makes when she names her sons. At Reuben's birth she says, "Now my husband will love me." When Simeon is born she says, "Because the Lord heard I was hated by my husband he has given me this son also." When Levi the third born came along, she said, "This time my husband will become attached to me." Each of the names of these three sons, Reuben, Simon and Levi, carry that sense of sibling rivalry. But look what happens when Judah, her fourth son is born. She says, "This time, I am grateful to God," and she calls her son Judah, gratitude. What a shift! Leah removes herself from sibling rivalry. She takes her eyes off of Rachel and she turns towards God. "This time, I am grateful to God", she says. In this story, we see that Judah was born to be the answer to Cain because his mother Leah took the step that Cain could not take. She stopped comparing herself to her sibling and opened her heart to receive the blessings that were hers to receive from God.

So our ancestor Judah, son of Leah, steps forward. He leaves generations of sibling rivalry behind. His answer to Cain's question is a resounding YES. I am my brother's keeper.

From this perspective, we can shed light on the *Akedah*. The Binding of Isaac. If we look at the Torah text carefully, we notice a fascinating connection between Abraham's initial challenge and the Akedah, his tenth and last challenge. When we meet Abraham, then Abram, in Genesis 12, God says to him, "Go forth from your land, from your kindred, from your father's house." Ten chapters later God says, "take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac". You notice the parallel progressive structure the two stories share. The Torah is signaling us that these two stories are the bookends, the beginning and the end of Abraham's journey as the father of our people. So we can measure Abraham's spiritual growth by noting an interesting contrast between the stories. In the first story God says, "Go forth to the land that I will show you". Abraham's vision is still limited. He cannot see clearly. God needs to show him the land. In the latter story, Abraham "sees the place from afar". Abraham can now fully see; he has vision. Abraham's vision is a central element to the story. The place of the sacrifice itself is called Mt. Moriah, Mountain of Vision. At the conclusion of the story, Abraham renames the place Adonay Yireh,"God He will see". And the Torah continues, "as it is said unto this day, 'In the mountain

of ha-shem it shall be seen.” What shall be seen? What did Abraham see? This is truly the question at the center of the Akedah.

The answer is that Abraham saw the world as God would have him see it. That is why Abraham no longer needed God to show him the place or to tell him what to do at that place.

What did Abraham see through God’s eyes? Let’s imagine ourselves in Abraham’s shoes and find out.

In the years preceding the *Akedah*, despite many years of faithful service, Abraham is still not fully at peace with his God. In fact, he is under enormous pressure. Many of the spiritual leaders around him had fully demonstrated their devotion to their god. They had sacrificed their children. Abraham’s neighbors taunt him, “You claim to be a man of God, and yet you hold back both of your sons from God. What kind of holy man are you?”

Clearly, Abraham was tempted. He doubted himself.... “Am I willing to give up my son? Do I truly love God with all of my heart, all my soul and all my might?” He needed to know. So he took his son and began the journey to the mountain.

For two long days of walking God was silent. Then, on the third day, “Abraham saw the place from afar”. He gazed, as it were, through God’s eyes and saw. What did he see? He saw that Isaac had his own journey to make before God. Isaac’s journey was no less important to God than Abraham’s. Even to save his own soul, to prove himself utterly committed to God, Abraham could not lay a hand on the boy. He could not kill his son.

Immediately he said to the two servant boys, “You two stay here, the boy and I will go the place, bow down, and *we* will return to you”. Likewise, Abraham reassures Isaac, “God will provide the sheep my son.”

A question remains: why did Abraham continue on to the mountain? Why did he not turn around and take his son home? The answer is the key to the story: Abraham knew that the pattern of sacrificing another person for one’s own benefit runs deep in human nature. The rivalrous blood of Cain runs through our veins. On Yom Kippur we catalogue the sins of Cain that we enact:

We have dealt treacherously with our neighbor
We have tread on the weak and oppressed the poor
We gossip, we scapegoat
We judge others harshly
And so on

Under stress, we see the world through the rivalrous eyes of Cain, rather than through the loving eyes of God. We too easily run over our brother or sister because we truly do not see them. We fail to see that our neighbor is precious in God’s eyes. We fail to see that his life and her life are as dear as our own. We fail to see that we are all a part of God’s creation. We fail to answer, yes; I am my brother’s keeper.

Abraham saw; he knew all this. He knew that God had called upon him to transcend this rivalrous web and to perform an act that would reverberate through history. He would perform a ritual that would shock future generations, and hopefully open their eyes. So he took Isaac to the mountain as a ritual act, a theo-drama, which would sear the human consciousness with the

command: “Do not kill the innocent”. You may not, you must not, sacrifice an “other” person—even to save your own soul or your own skin. God loves this one even as God loves you. You are your brother’s keeper.

Judaism is the sacred vessel that contains this vision—this command.

Here is one of those painful ironies of history. The Jewish people are the proto-typical “other person”, the endlessly scapegoated people. We have been Abel to the Cains of the world.

And so, our role in history is to stand up and expose Cain for all the world to see. Our role in history is to expose the viciousness of prejudice, persecution and scapegoating. We carry the vision of Abraham. Our covenant binds us to the fact that all people are equally precious before God. We carry a vision that has worked through and transcended rivalry. We carry the affirmative answer, “I am my brother’s keeper”.

With this guidance from father Abraham, I would like to turn back to the current struggle in Israel. If we wish to live by the Covenant of Abraham, our people faces a terrible dilemma: How do we live our Jewish values, how do we be our brother’s keeper, in the face of sustained attack?

Faced with this dilemma, some Jews blind themselves to the level of threat facing Israel. They say the fault is primarily on Israel’s side. If Israel would only end the occupation, then there would be peace

Many more Jews resolve the moral dilemma by practicing a kind of spiritual schizophrenia: the teachings of our tradition apply over here, but not over there, not to our neighbors on the other side of the green line. And so we dehumanize our neighbors:

They don’t love peace as we do

They do not love their children as we do

They send their sons and daughters off to be homicide bombers.

When we adopt either view, we have lost Abraham’s vision. Abraham would have us see that the Palestinian people are human beings, mothers and fathers who love their children. Abraham would have us see that the Palestinian people are equally precious to God. God loves Ishmael and wants Ishmael to thrive no less than Isaac.

As a people, we cannot afford to shut our eyes to Abraham’s vision. For if we do, we will forfeit the entire reason for our existence. If we fail, repeatedly and grievously, to look at the Palestinian through the eyes of Abraham, we stop being Jews and our people’s spiritual journey enters a time of deep and dangerous darkness.

In the light of Abraham’s vision, we can ask ourselves this question: How do we defend ourselves, how does Israel defend herself, and at the same time treat each Palestinian as a precious child of God?

I do not know the answer to this question. But I do know this. We must not flee from the question. Painful as it is, we must hold on to both ends of the dilemma—Israel’s security, and Judaism’s moral imperative. Rather than flee, we must ask ourselves some tough questions, like the following:

Before we condone a military incursion or a missile attack, we must ask, “What if the Israeli attack against terrorists was to take place on the streets of Tel Aviv or Haifa and innocent Jews would be wounded or killed, would we condone the action?”

Before we condone the demolition of a house we must inquire: “What if the house is a Jewish home in Jerusalem or Netanya, would we stand by?”

What if the orchard to be uprooted is on kibbutz land? What if the protective wall was to go through your village?

These are tough and painful questions. but nonetheless questions that we must face. The Palestinian is our brother. We must be as concerned for the welfare of the innocent Palestinian as we are for the innocent Jew.

Beyond these questions, we can also take a very strong and positive action. We American Jews can look at the Palestinians and proclaim, “I am my brother’s keeper”. Clearly, few people in the world truly care about the fate of the Palestinians. The Arab nations, the Europeans, the Russians, what people has devoted themselves to helping the Palestinians build a positive future for themselves?

And so we Jews must find creative ways to stand up for the Palestinian people:

- We can call upon our government to become vigorously and continually involved in the effort to end the Israeli Occupation and bring about a workable peace.
- We can call upon Israel to resettle the settlers from the Occupied Territories and give the settlements to the Palestinians as a partial compensation to Arab refugees for their homes that are now in Israel.
- We can insist that any final peace create a Palestine that is an economically, politically and socially viable entity.
- We can call for massive funds to build a modern infrastructure and economy in Palestine.
- And, we should go and visit our Arab brothers and sisters living in Israel and Palestine. We need to let them know that we are concerned about their welfare.

What I speak of here is most challenging. It is not easy to hold both ends of this tragic dilemma. It is not easy to take care of ourselves and stand up for the welfare of the other. What could be more difficult? But this is what it means to be a Jew. Moreover, this is what it truly means to be Israel. Like our ancestor Jacob, we are wrestlers. We wrestle to live by our highest values even in this war torn, rivalrous world. We struggle to be Judah in a world that still lives by the rules of Cain. This is what Israel, the people and the land, is called to be.

Of course, this struggle is not new to us. 2000 years ago, Rabbi Hillel encapsulated this message in his familiar teaching:

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

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And, if not now, when?

We are called to be Jews. We are called to be Israel.

If not now, when?