

**Title:** Cain and Abel: Bereshit 4:1-16

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**Age Group:** Years 6-9

**Format:** Lesson Plan

**Categories/Topics:** Texts/Written Torah, Weekly Torah Portion/Bereshit, Bible Stories/Adam and Eve

**Description:** Lesson 2 of Torah Bekiut, a course designed to give students a basic grounding in some of the key Torah texts and to engage students with vital moral, interpersonal and religious issues in order to transform Bible study into a relevant activity and the Torah itself into a source of meaning.

### Introduction

The story of Cain and Abel is an account of the first murder, but also the first story about family relationships and about human beings' relationship with God. As such it provides us with an opportunity of discussing issues of family conflict, sibling rivalry, parenting and moral responsibility - all live issues for pre-bar/bat mitzvah age students. The story encourages us to ask who is responsible for the murder. Who and what brought about the conflict between the two brothers? What was God's role in the emerging tension? Where were the parents, Adam and Eve, at the crucial moment? And finally, what passed between the brothers moments before the murder took place?

At this critical moment, the Torah is silent. We are not told what was said in the brothers' last conversation. On one hand, this silence acknowledges that violence and conflict cannot be rationally explained; there is always an element of irrationality and internal emotions that cannot be fully understood. And on the other hand, this gap in the text provides an opening for our own creative interpretations, enabling us to bring to the story our own experiences of family conflict.

### Learning outcomes

*Students will*

- Read the story of Cain and Abel and discuss it as a story of sibling conflict
- Discuss which of the characters is responsible for the first murder
- Confront the idea that the Torah presents God as one of the characters in its stories
- Notice the "gaps" in the biblical text and write creative midrash as an interpretation of the story

### Lesson plan

#### 1. Stories about fights between siblings

The students are asked to recall a time when they have fought/argued with one of their brothers or sisters (if they don't have a brother or sister, they may think of a fight they had with a friend). The students share their stories with the class.

## 2. Brainstorm - who's to blame?

The teacher asks the students to brainstorm the causes of conflict between siblings (or friends). The goal is to highlight as many potential causes of sibling conflict as possible and write them on the board. If necessary, to spark discussion, the teacher can split the discussion into several categories: what feelings causes sibling conflict? What events or occasions? What kinds of treatment by parents? and so on....

## 3. Text study

The teacher informs the class that the Torah tells us a story that explores the issue of conflict between siblings, and what happens when it gets out of hand. Their task will be to study the story and work out who's to blame. The students are split into hevrutot and are asked to read the Cain and Abel story. The teacher hands out a task sheet which directs the students to focus on the issue of responsibility for the murder. They are asked to search for verses which attribute responsibility to one of the characters involved: Adam and Eve (even though they are not mentioned), Cain, Abel and God.

### Task sheet

*Go through the story of Cain and Abel and note down verses or phrases which attribute responsibility to one of the following characters:*

Adam and Eve	Cain	Abel	God

## 4. Reportback

The teacher asks each hevruta to report back what they have learned. If it emerges that there were comprehension difficulties, the key events should be recapped with the whole class to make sure everyone understands. The teacher compiles a big, class table on the board and writes up the students' comments (similar to the table on the task sheets). During the reportback stage, the teacher should encourage students to articulate their feelings and opinions as to who was responsible for the murder, and should challenge them to find evidence for those opinions in the text.

Here are several key points that students should be encouraged to think about, if they do not come up in the reportback stage. If there is not time to discuss them all, the teacher should decide what to emphasise in light of the prior discussion and what is likely to engage the students.

**Where are Adam and Eve in the story?** The answer is that after giving birth to Cain and Abel (verses 1-2) they are not mentioned. Does this mean they are

irrelevant to the story, or does their absence place on them some of the responsibility for the crime? What are a parent's responsibilities in such circumstances?

**God's role (verses 3-5)** Why does God accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's? Is he showing favouritism or is there a reason for the discrimination? Perhaps a difference can be discerned between the way in which Cain and Abel present their offerings: Abel's is from the "choicest" of his flock. A second question is how God's behaviour affects the relationship between the two brothers. Did God take this into account?

**Am I my brother's keeper? (verse 9)** When God asks Cain where Abel is (thereby implicitly accusing him of the murder) Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" How should we understand this phrase? One way is as a genuinely naive question: given that Cain and Abel were the first brothers in the world, and that this was the first murder ever, perhaps Cain was genuinely ignorant as to his fraternal responsibilities and of the consequences of his actions. God's accusation makes him suddenly aware of what he has done. Another, more cynical interpretation is that Cain's question is rhetorical; he rejects responsibility for his actions and for his brother's wellbeing. How do we evaluate Cain's response?

## 5. The gap in the text

However many or few of the preceding points the teacher manages to discuss with the class, the following issue is an important focus of the lesson.

The teacher tells the class that in trying to establish why the crime was committed and who was responsible for it, we realise that not all the information is at our fingertips. There seems to be a bit missing from the Torah's account. The students are asked to find this gap in the text. If they do not manage this, the teacher can direct them to verse 8: "Cain said to his brother Abel, and when they were in the field..." What seems to be missing is the words Cain said to his brother. These words, the subject of the brothers' last conversation, would be critical for understanding the conflict between them - but they are missing.

The teacher asks the students to fill in the gap. Each student writes an account of the brothers' last conversation, in an effort to illustrate what brought about the situation in which Cain killed Abel. The dialogue should start with the words, "Cain said to his brother Abel..." The teacher then asks several students to read out their accounts.

## 6. Concluding discussion

In light of their readings of the story, the students discuss who they feel is responsible for the murder: Adam and Eve, God, Cain, Abel, or a combination of several characters.