



**SERMON BEREISHIT:
ABEL: THE FIRST TYCOON?**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 26 October 2019¹
Kingston Liberal Synagogue

A couple of people have asked whether I'm allowed to conduct my own wedding. I tend to roll my eyes slightly and say, "I mean, obviously not!" – but it turns out I can give the sermon at my own aufruf. So here goes...

- 1 The comedian John Finnemore has a sketch² about two siblings who each inherit half of their father's farm. The sister turns her half into a daffodil plantation; the brother raises goats on his half. It all goes wrong, however, because there's no fence between the two plots. So, every spring, the goats stampede the plantation and eat all the daffodils. The sister says it's not her job to build a fence because his goats cause the problem. The brother says that if she chooses to grow delicate flowers next to a field of livestock, she has to protect her plants from the animals. But of course, it turns out that... daffodils are poisonous to goats. So in fact, the two siblings, each too intransigent to put up a fence, are trapped in a vicious circle which sees both lose the crop that they spent the whole year growing.
- 2 Today's Torah portion tells of Cain and Abel bringing offerings before God: a plant offering from Cain and an animal offering from Abel. We're not told whether they were a daffodil and a goat, but there is a bit of a fence theme going on. It's just going on quite subtly.



- 3 Cain, we're told, brought his offering **מפרי האדמה**, from the fruit of the ground; Abel brought his **מבכרות צאנו ומחלבהן**, from the finest firstlings of his flock.³
- 4 Most biblical commentators⁴ focus on the description of Abel using only the “finest” lambs (Tesco Finest, perhaps). They suggest, essentially, that this means Cain just used any old plant he picked up at a petrol station forecourt.
- 5 But I think this is a bit of biblical sleight of hand. It distracts us from another, very significant, difference between the two offerings: Cain's came “from the ground”; Abel's came “from his flock”. His flock. How did Abel get a flock? The Hebrew text definitely uses the possessive – **צאנו** – making it the first reference to personal property in the whole Torah. But how did the fourth human ever to exist come to own a flock of sheep? He didn't buy it. He didn't inherit it. He wasn't given it by God. In what sense was it “his” flock?
- 6 The only possible answer is that Abel said it was his flock. He must have asserted a claim over it, declaring, “This is mine and it is not yours,” and somehow convinced his fellow earthlings that his new invention of ‘mine’ was one worthy of respect.
- 7 The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about this moment, the moment at which humanity came up with the idea of owning stuff: “The first man who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, ‘This is mine,’ and found people simple enough to believe him... how many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors could someone have saved the human species by pulling up the stakes and crying to their fellows, ‘Beware of listening to this impostor! If you



forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and that the earth belongs to nobody, you are lost!”⁵

- 8 A midrash fills in the rest of the story. It tells us how, straight after this episode, the idea of property caught on. After the episode of the two offerings, the brothers “said: ‘Come, let us divide up the world. One will take control of the earth and one will take control of the moveable property.’ Then, the first one said: ‘The ground you are standing on is mine! Fly away!’ and the second one said: ‘What you are wearing is mine! Strip off!’ Because of this dispute, ‘...Cain rose against his brother Abel and killed him.’”⁶
- 9 How many crimes, how many murders...
- 10 The sad irony is that none of this need have happened at all. It is understandable that, outside the Garden of Eden, with its bounty and plenty, humans found it easy to persuade themselves that it was necessary to divide finite resources amongst themselves. But they needn’t have been outside Eden at all. The way back into the Garden, the Torah tells us, was barred only by a sword-wielding cherub – and the medieval commentator David Kimchi (who has an excellent name) says⁷ that if only Adam had repented, the sword-wielding cherub would have disappeared and paradise would have been open once again.
- 11 But nobody told Adam this, so he was left to figure it out for himself. He never quite got there, and he was kept out of the Garden of Eden not by a serious physical barrier but by one that existed only in his mind.
- 12 Another sad irony is that even this need not have happened at all. Adam himself was experienced in creating imaginary boundaries. The rabbis noticed that God’s only instruction to Adam was not to eat from the forbidden tree,⁸ but he added an extra clause when he passed the rule on to



Eve:⁹ “It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it, nor touch it, lest you die.’”

- 13 This intrigued the rabbis: why did Adam extend the rule? One superb translation of their discussion suggests that Adam “made a hedge” about the tree.¹⁰ Either way, it was his decision to create an extra limit, an invisible boundary, enlarging the scope of the restriction, that led to the expulsion from Eden. For, we are told,¹¹ the serpent noticed the difference, and took advantage of it. He pushed Eve against the tree so that she fell and touched it. She knew that touching it would cause her to die... but she didn’t die. So, she reasoned, Adam must have got his instruction wrong, and there was no problem with touching the tree, or eating from it.
- 14 Adam’s invention of an extra boundary, a fence around the law, resulted in his exile from paradise. God’s decision to let Adam believe that the exile was permanent resulted in a self-imposed life of subsistence farming in the outside world for Adam and Eve’s family. Abel’s decision to label a particular flock of sheep ‘his’ and to talk his brother into believing in this distinction resulted in the first act of human killing.
- 15 And later still Sister Daffodil and Brother Goat fought over the boundary between their two plots of land, a boundary which was only invented by their late father, writing his will. No wall, no fence, not even a river or a physical marker, yet the idea of a border was enough to make the residents feel they had ownership.
- 16 The possessive voice suddenly crept into the Biblical Hebrew language in today’s Torah portion, for the first time, courtesy of ‘Abel’s’ flock. Its sudden entrance was carefully hidden by a gripping sibling dispute that resulted in murder. I don’t suggest that this means we should abandon the concept of



property. But it's a sign, perhaps, that we should question the boundaries that we observe. Why do we observe them? Where do they come from? What is their origin?

- 17 Many of them might have very good reasons to exist. Some of them might have crept in, under the radar, and would be better reversed.
- 18 Yom Kippur was about positioning ourselves rigidly within the rules. On Simchat Torah we began the process of reading the rules yet again. Perhaps the rest of the year is when we explore them, openly and candidly, and maybe push a little against those boundaries. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 26.10.19

¹ Genesis 4:1-16

² *John Finnemore's Souvenir Programme*. 2013. BBC Radio 4. 24 September, 6:30pm: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03bdsny>>

³ Genesis 4:3-4

⁴ See eg Rashi on Genesis 4:3

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind" in Lester G Crocker (ed), *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967; 4th repr, 1973), 175-246: 211-212.

⁶ Genesis Rabbah 22:7, quoting Genesis 4:8

⁷ Radak on Genesis 3:24

⁸ Genesis 2:17

⁹ Genesis 3:3

¹⁰ Judah Goldin (trans). *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955): 8.

¹¹ Avot d'Rabbi Natan B, ch 1