



Parshat Bereshit
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Seth or Abraham?
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Our Torah reading today is loaded with characters who get lots of press: God creating the heaven and the earth; Adam and Eve and the serpent in the garden of Eden; Cain and Abel. All these stories are well known. But the character who speaks most powerfully to us now, in our time—in month eight of the pandemic, in the last month before an epochally divisive election—the person who has the most to say to us now is the one person most of us have never heard of. His name is Seth.

Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. But Cain killed Abel. If we pause here, and take this epoch narrative seriously, imagine what it would be like to be Adam and Eve, the parents of this murderously dysfunctional sibling pair. One child is dead, murdered by your other child. The other child has blood on his hands and is sent away by God *nah v'nad b'aretz*, to wander the world.

One can imagine how this double blow of murder and exile might cause Adam and Eve to give up on life. But they don't.

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, meaning, God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel.

From the point of view of Adam and Eve, Seth's very existence is an affirmation of life.

But from the point of view of Seth, look at all the complexity he inherits from day one. He grows up and asks his parents: Mom, Dad, what kind of name is Seth? What does Seth mean?

Oh, honey, Seth means that God placed you in our lives in lieu of your brother, whom you never met, Abel, because he had been murdered by another brother whom you also never met, Cain. Seth, you are such a gift to us! You are our replacement child!

How is Seth supposed to absorb this? I am the replacement child! I had a brother named Cain, who murdered another brother named Abel. All this drama. I didn't create it. I inherited it. All this tension. I didn't create it. I inherited it. But it is mine.

Isn't that where *all of us* are now? We have inherited a world of mess and complexity and brokenness that we did not create. We inherited it. But it is ours.

Coronavirus, pandemic, lockdown. Economic meltdown. Deep social unrest. Fires burning and hurricanes wreaking destruction. We did not create it. But it is ours.

What does Seth do about all the drama that he did not create and cannot solve? Seth minds his own business. There is a grand total of **one verse** devoted to Seth: "And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh."

What did Seth do? He just lived his life. He got married and had a child and raised him, and was then blessed to see and raise his grandchildren.

The Seth move is very tempting. The Seth move is very seductive. It is hard enough to make it through the day, any day, but especially in a pandemic. It is hard enough to raise children, any day, but especially in a pandemic. It is hard enough to get your work done any day, but especially in a pandemic. Everyone of us can say my plate is full. I am doing the Seth move. I am going to keep my head down, mind my own business, and not worry about the broader world whose problems I did not cause and cannot solve.

In fact, the Seth move is so seductive, I am so personally deeply comfortable with the Seth move, that in my first drafts of this sermon, my message was: be like Seth. We didn't create this mess. We can't solve this mess. Be like Seth. Get through your day.

But then I showed the draft to my 25-year old daughter Jordana. She said: it's morally untenable. And she was right. Her reaction caused me to reread passages of the book *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* by Ariel Burger, who was Wiesel's student and disciple.

Wiesel's first question, on the first day of his BU classes, was: the German people were so advanced, so cultured, so sophisticated, so accomplished in the arts and humanities and the sciences, how could they permit it? Ariel Burger quotes Elie Wiesel as saying:

"One of the darkest days of my life after the war was when I discovered that many of the killers, high-ranking Nazi officials and front-line murderers alike, had advanced university degrees." Many were students and scholars of Goethe and Kant, those great thinkers who explored the concepts of ethics and morality. We have records of SS officers attending church, playing with their children, treating their pets with tenderness, then going off to do their terrible work. p. 12

So how did all these people with advanced degrees who went to church do what they did? Wiesel's class boils down to his statement: "For evil to flourish, it only requires good [people] to do nothing."

But wait a minute. Isn't that statement itself an inner contradiction? If they are good people, why do they do nothing in the face of evil? Answer: Seth. What can I do? I didn't create this mess. I can't solve this mess. I am going to keep my head down. I am going to live my own life. Seth.

The Seth move is very seductive, but it comes at the biggest price: we forfeit our ability to shape the moral contours of our world. Perhaps that is why the Torah gives Seth only one verse. His move is not worth more.

Perhaps that is why we are not descendants of Seth, but of Abraham. Next week we will be introduced to Abraham, and Abraham is explicitly charged with the mandate *la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat*, to do justice and righteousness. When faced with God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham could have pulled a Seth. Abraham could have said: I did not create the mess of Sodom and Gomorrah. I inherited it. And their dysfunction is so deep I cannot solve it. Therefore, I am going to try to save my family and leave those towns to their fates. But famously he does not do that. He negotiates passionately to save the few innocent people in a town he never lived in, to save people he did not know, because he is committed to justice and righteousness.

We are now living in a pregnant moment. We are now living in a moment with unparalleled urgency.

For the first time in our nation's history, there is a question about whether we can hold a free and fair election whose results will be accepted by all.

For the first time in our nation's history, elected officials are openly questioning how important democracy itself is. Mike Lee, Senator from Utah, on October 8 tweeted the following, and I quote: *Democracy isn't the objective; liberty, peace, and prosperity are. We want the human condition to flourish. Rank democracy can thwart that.*

That should terrify us. That should cause us to lose sleep. A U.S. Senator is saying, less than a month before the election, that democracy is not the objective. What is happening to our country?

If we respond like Seth—again, tempting, because this is all so scary and unpleasant—we will allow evil to flourish. We will allow our democracy to die.

Elie Wiesel was once asked, at a Facing History event in Chicago, by a teen in attendance: our world is so broken, where do I start? Wiesel answered: it does not matter *where* you start. It matters *that* you start. If you never start, you won't go anywhere. Because if you start, will keep on going.

The Torah offers us two models.

Seth says: I didn't cause this mess. What can *I* do?

Abraham says: I am here to do justice and righteousness. What can I *do*?

Seth or Abraham? That is the question of our time. Shabbat shalom.