

Letter from a Murderer
Parashat Bereshit; October 8, 2004

We read this week the most famous, the best known, the most told tale in all of the Torah. It is the story of creation, the shaping of the universe, the Garden of Eden, the eating of a fruit, exile from paradise, the transition of Adam and Eve from demi-gods to the foundation of human life as we know it and experience it in our lives. And then, east of Eden, a new generation, scratching out a livelihood, competing between farmer and shepherd, struggling to define a relationship between siblings, we read the story of the world's first murder.

Which reminds me of something which happened to me, just a few years ago. I went out to the end of the driveway and got the mail. I sorted through the usual assortment, but then I noticed a hand-scrawled missive, with a strange return address. There, in between the bills and the advertisements, stuck next to a flyer and a card for drycleaning or lawn care, was a letter from a murderer. And in the days following receiving it, I started to lose sleep.

Not that the letter was threatening in any personal way. No, it was merely threatening to my sense of order in the universe. How did it happen, that I got a letter from a murderer? Well, some time before that, I had written an article what was then my weekly column for America OnLine. The article was called "The Kaddish and the Grateful Dead." The piece was picked up and reprinted by Gil Mann, in his publication *Being Jewish*.

And that is why I got the letter. In the column, I tried to spell out some of the background assumptions behind the development of the Kaddish as a mourner's prayer, and to do so I needed to touch on the elusive and little-known Jewish views of life after death. At the time, I wrote the following words:

"Although we speak about it much less than they do in Christianity, classical Judaism *does* have a view of the afterlife. It is a world to come where righteous people of *all* monotheistic faiths will find themselves in a sort of waiting room in the sky called limbo. Hence the lack of proselytizing in Judaism: we do not *need* to save anyone's souls if they are already good people.

Not defined anywhere in detail in our tradition, nevertheless this intermediate stage is apparently seen as a place for us to wait before final judgment -- a place where the sins of our life are purged. [The waiting period is seen to be a year for the worst of us... hence the custom of saying Kaddish for only eleven months for a loved one. The Kaddish, a praise of God, said in the name of someone we care about, is said to, well, help ease the dear departed along into their permanent abode in the World to Come. So we say the prayer for 11 months. After all, they may have hidden sins we knew nothing about, so six months is risky, but *our* loved ones couldn't need the full year to move on. Not *our* beloved.]

Now comes the part which inspired an inmate to cry out in pain. "The ultimate evildoers," I wrote, "(murderers, rapists, idolaters) will *not* be admitted to the world to come. Nor, however, will they be punished forever. They will simply cease to be."

Now, I stand by those words. They are an accurate description of what our tradition has to say on this subject. Only I suppose, in hindsight, it is important to emphasize that this part of our tradition is highly speculative. It is not a mandated belief. Well, actually, that's an oversimplification. There *are* strands of our tradition which *do* seek to require this belief. The rabbis of the Talmud asserted that one who denies that the concept of resurrection of the dead is rooted in the Torah -- which, by the way, it is not -- is denied a place in the world to come. (I love this. It's like saying if you don't believe in the afterlife you aren't going to get there.) But I still see this discussion of the afterlife as Jewish *lore* -- it is still not on the same level as Jewish *law*.

Whatever the exact status of this eschatological speculation in Jewish tradition -- integral part of the system or late-night theorizing about the nature of reality -- I personally believe that anyone who claims to know for sure the details of what will happen to any of us in a world to come is probably trying to sell a book. The word "mystery" is for a world shrouded in mist. We hope. We pray. But we just don't know. Then comes this letter, with the following challenge:

"As a convicted murderer it is dismaying to think that the promises of salvation and forgiveness mentioned in the Psalms and elsewhere do not for some reason apply to me. I led a righteous life for X years, when worn down and exhausted I lost it in a crime of passion for 55 seconds of my life. Then, having gone to our Creator with a broken spirit and contrite heart, learn about my heritage and defend it. It seems rather arrogant and contrary to scripture that someone should pick categories of sin and pass a judgment of so foul a consequence. If an idolater may not change, convert to Judaism or otherwise be forgiven and live a meaningful life, what's the point of it all? He may as well continue to commit the most heinous crimes having not so much to lose."

And Esau, fresh from the hunt, with blood still on his hands, comes in to his father. And Isaac says: who are you, my son. And Esau says: I am Esau. And Isaac says: Your brother has come, and taken your blessing by stealth. And Esau shouts a very great shout. And Esau says: "Father. Have you not a blessing for me?"

What do we say, to such a letter? My immediate response was a bit defensive. Hey, don't shoot me; I'm just the messenger! (Perhaps, in context, this is not the best of sayings to use here.) I didn't pick these categories. And, more to the point: in Jewish terms they are hardly "contrary to Scripture." Something that comes from the Talmud is considered "Oral Torah." In tradition this is not contrary to

Scripture, but an elaboration and explication of it. But my quick response begs the question. The real issue here is a profound challenge. What does Judaism have to say... to a repentant murderer? So I turn, now, to you. What would *you* say? And what do you think Jewish tradition would say to a shedder of blood, who comes to God with broken heart and contrite spirit? An image comes to mind. It is of Bud Welch, who is circling the country, speaking out against the death penalty for Timothy McVeigh. The man lost his daughter in the Oklahoma City bombing. But, he says, he is a religious person. And he "forgives" McVeigh. Please. Does anyone else have the same problem with this that I do? Never mind that forgiveness is a two-way street, that is supposed to be an end product of a period of *repentance* and *reconciliation*, that it is utterly meaningless (at least, the way we Jews think of it) absent an expression of remorse and regret. No, the problem goes even deeper than the fact that McVeigh might still do the same thing all over again. Even if he McVeigh *were* sorry, and even if Bud Welch can go on with his life -- for which, by the way, I am glad, for I cannot imagine his pain, nor how hard his own spiritual journey has been, still -- even if Bud Welch wants to go on, *it isn't in Bud Welch's hands to grant forgiveness!*

The problem with murder is this. Forgiveness must come from the one we have offended. Guess what. Kill someone, and *they can't forgive you*. Not in this world. Not in this life. Sorry, Charlie. You *can't make* murder OK. In this way, murder is different from idolatry. You *can* repent from that, lead a better life, and

Jewish tradition says -- regarding converts, in a blunt and not-too diplomatically worded injunction -- that we are not supposed to remind them of their "pork-eating, idol worshipping past." (Remember: by idolatry we mean *idolatry* --paganism and polytheism; Judaism considers both Christianity and Islam to be sibling monotheistic religions.) A story is told of the time just before the execution of Adolph Eichman, in Israel. You remember Eichman the mastermind of the Final Solution. This is the *only time* in all of Israel's history that the death penalty was carried out. (Demjanjuk was convicted and sentenced to death, but then released.) Israel has capital punishment on its books *only* for genocide. (This has to be the case. There *has to be* an incentive for a terrorist holding a group of children hostage to give up, to face a *different outcome* if he releases the children than if he shoots them and goes down with them.) Reportedly, a pastor came to Eichman, to speak with him before the execution. The pastor was confronted afterwards by a reporter who was a Holocaust survivor: "What happened? Will Eichman go to heaven?" The pastor replied something like: "If he accepts Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, yes." The reporter asked: "Well, what about the million children that Eichman slaughtered. You know the answer. It was this: Well, they did not accept Jesus. No. They don't go to heaven. Judaism is not like this version of Christianity. (Actually, much of Christianity is not like that version of Christianity either.) Judaism is different. For us, what we do matters. Not just how we feel about it. So what hope is there? If you have

murdered once, why not kill again? What difference does it make? We can find a hint of hope, I believe, in the commentary, in the margin of the page, in the fact that Jewish law is ultimately met by the uncertainty of the future, for sinner and saint alike. This is what I mean. We are told that to save a life, we can violate *any* commandment but three. If someone points a gun to your head and says: eat that bacon cheeseburger during Pesach or I'll blow you away, well, say the *motzi* and dive in. The same is true of any other commandment -- except for the three categories I mentioned in my article: murder, sexual immorality (rape and incest) and idolatry. In these cases, even if someone is threatening your life, you do not give in. You don't murder someone innocent to save yourself. How do you know your blood is redder than his (or hers)? So someone asks: well, what if you do? What if you bow down to an idol in public? What if you even -- God forbid -- kill an innocent, to save your own life? I remember reading the answer. It was Rambam, I believe, who said that in such a case, who are we human beings to judge what to make of such a person? There are some things, he said, which God alone is able to sort out. And maybe...just maybe... we can stretch the case... to cover even a repentant murderer.

Then I came across this, from a Chasidic source. When a murderer dies, his or her parents and children say Kaddish for the deceased, their close relative, their loved one who has sinned... *for eleven months*. For once again: who are we to judge what God will do, at the end of days, at the time of reckoning?

After consultation, after thinking about it, after asking colleagues for help, this is what I will try to say, to the man who wrote me that letter: Nothing can change the past. And nothing can make up for what you have done. But in real repentance, in true contrition, lead your life from now on in the best way that you can -- whatever your circumstances -- and as the best person you can be. And we can hope, and we can pray, that when you -- or any of us -- do meet our maker, God will know what is in our heart, as well as what our hands have done. It is not a guarantee. It is not a sure thing. It is a mystery, and a challenge...and a matter of faith. Shabbat Shalom.