

After a period of time, Kayin brought an offering to Hashem of the fruit of the ground; and as for Hevel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest. (4:3,4)

Both Kayin and Hevel brought sacrifices to Hashem. Hevel's sacrifice was accepted, while Kayin's was not. Kayin was bitter and took it out on Hevel, whom he killed. So goes the incident of the first murder in history. The commentators, each in his own manner, delineate the characterizations of Kayin's sacrifice that were unacceptable. Simply, Hevel gave of his choicest possessions, while Kayin did not. Is this a reason to lose it and kill Hevel? Furthermore, did Hevel deserve to die? Every occurrence is calculated and validated by a Divine computer. What about Hevel was inappropriate – on his lofty spiritual level – that would incur such punishment? The commentators focus on the words gam hu, he also, brought a sacrifice. It was Kayin who initiated the idea, while Hevel “also” brought a sacrifice. There was no initiative, no passion, no desire, and no enthusiasm. He “also” brought.

Perhaps we may suggest an alternative approach towards understanding this episode. Kol Simchah looks at the words mikeitz yamim, after a period of time, as being the motivating factor for Kayin's korban, sacrifice. He realized that time flies by and man does not live forever. Perhaps it would be a good idea to make some gesture of repentance before it was too late. Kayin's korban was prompted by his dim view of the future and its impending conclusion to life. It was not a vigorous, enthusiastic sacrifice. It was something he just “had to do.”

Hevel, however, brought gam hu, also he. His korban was an expression of himself in his prime of life: excited, enthusiastic – with zest and passion. In addition, as the Sefas Emes notes, gam hu, also he, is a reference to his personal involvement in the sacrifice, as if he was also sacrificing himself together with the sheep. This is the correct kavanah, intention, one should have upon offering a korban. He should view the animal which is being sacrificed as taking his place, and whatever is being done to the animal is considered as if it were happening to him. This is the appropriate manner of how a korban should be offered.

So what did Hevel do wrong? He made all of the right moves, so why did he incur the punishment of death? Once again, I think the solution may be found in the words gam hu, also he. When he saw his brother's sacrifice, he felt a need to outdo him, to present Hashem with a finer, more elite sacrifice than his brother had. This spiritual one-upmanship provoked Kayin's envy and raised his ire, catalyzing him to lose his temper and kill Hevel.

It happens all of the time. There are people who make sizeable contributions to institutions. Their actual contributions may be quite impressive and meaningful. It is the "why" that might be questionable. Is it out of philanthropic sensitivity, a desire to help the disadvantaged, an organization in need, or a worthy institution? Or is it a way to grab attention, to outdo other donors? While the subject of their philanthropic endeavor will benefit, regardless of their true intentions, the reward they receive and the spiritual status they achieve will be consistent with their personal goals.