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Does our parents' choice of names set a path for our future?

by rabbi judah dardik

Bereishit

Genesis 1:1-6:8

Isaiah 42:5-43:10

"Talula Does the Hula From Hawaii" is just not a fair appellation for a baby girl. In July, the Associated Press reported that a family court judge in New Zealand ruled that the daughter given this name by her parents had to be renamed (though the new name was not released in the papers to protect the girl's privacy).

Names are carried through life as part of the identity of a child, and pushing the normal limits of naming, however meaningful or amusing for parents, places a lifelong burden on a young person.

It is noteworthy that the first baby namings in the Torah, those of the children of Adam and Chava, are complete disasters. The elder son is named Kayin, because "I have acquired (kaniti) a person with the help of God."

And as if naming their first child by a name that indicates he is their possession wasn't enough, his younger brother is given the name "Hevel," which means emptiness or nothingness. How awful! What were Adam and Chava thinking, to name their sons "mine" and "nothing"?

Matters become more complicated when one considers that Kayin is envious of Hevel and murders him in his jealous rage. What in the world would the older sibling have to resent in the younger? Kayin's name indicated that he was his parents' pride and joy, and his brother's name intimates that he was forgotten. What threat does Hevel's existence represent that he would commit fratricide?

There is a fascinating midrash found in the Pirkei D'Rebbe Elazar that implies a pattern of behavior at work here. It picks up on the fact that Chava tells the snake that she isn't allowed to touch the Tree of Knowledge, a restriction that had never been stated in the narrative. The midrash suggests that after HaShem commanded Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, Adam relayed the message to Chava with additional stringencies (not to even touch the tree), without informing her that those additional rules were his own and not Divine in origin.

He didn't trust his wife enough to handle the prohibition as it was, and in the end this backfired: Chava touched the tree, and upon doing so saw that no consequences had befallen her from her actions. At that point, she felt free to continue on and eat its fruit, which was exactly what Adam had hoped to avoid. Had he simply talked with her honestly and directly, she would have known that contact was allowed and that the ability to safely touch the tree did not imply that the rule against eating from it was an empty command.

Sometimes we hold back those we love because we love them and can't bear to see them get hurt. Adam holds Chava back too much in his fear for her safety, but this turns out to be a destructive move on his part. So, too, in dealing with their children, Adam and Chava seem only to have two modes. They feel that they can either make them in exactly their own images, like Kayin ("mine"), or completely let them go without input or guidance, like Hevel ("empty").

The result is that Kayin has it deeply engrained in him from birth that things must go one way and one way only, and he flies into a murderous rage when it does not. Hevel, in the meantime, seeks out some sense of companionship and caring by tending to a flock, which is all that the Torah ever tells about him.

Loving those close to us and caring for their well-being requires us to walk a fine line. It is challenging to offer guidance and values without smothering others or forcing them to do it exactly our way. Recognizing the need to let others do, explore and learn for themselves has been a challenge for every loving couple and set of parents since the very beginning. We are in good company indeed.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is the spiritual leader at Orthodox Beth Jacob in Oakland. He can be reached at Rabbi@BethJacobOakland.org