The Beast That Crouches at the Door: Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, and Beyond
By Rabbi David Fohrman
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Reviewed by Hillel Goldberg

Macro and Micro
A few times in a person’s life, a book comes along that truly makes a difference. Rare is the book that unveils something genuinely fresh and exciting about eternal themes, and that has style and verve to boot. The Beast That Crouches at the Door is one of these rare books, a provocative reading of Torah like none I have read in many a year. At the same time, it is a page-turner. My advice: Do not pick up this book unless you have time ahead of you, for you will not likely put it down once you begin.

Quality commentary on the Torah usually falls into one of two frames, the micro or the macro. The micro level embraces the perception of a double entendre or a new layer of meaning in a Scriptural word or phrase; a new question on a verse or on a traditional commentator, and a penetrating answer; a dazzling take on a Scriptural incident; or a nuanced reading of a line of Biblical poetry. The skills of the writer of Torah commentary on the micro level tend to be close cropped, finely attuned to detail and language. The macro level takes the broader view. It may offer a comprehensive exploration of a Biblical personality or narrative, or of the links between many narratives. It may offer a philosophy, theology or psychology of an entire book of Torah. The skills of the writer of this kind of commentary tend to be expansive, sensitive to ideas and to the issues of life.

Rare is the writer who possesses both skill sets—who focuses on the nuances of the text; who asks questions that at first glance may appear small, even insignificant; and who then builds from his small insights, one by one, to paint a broad canvas. Rabbi David Fohrman is multi-skilled, a master of both the micro and the macro, of the details of the text and of the complexities of life. In this analysis of the stories of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel, Rabbi Fohrman blends the micro and macro into a glorious vista of ideas. Nuance by insightful nuance, he uncovers powerful Torah teachings.

Rock-a-bye Baby
A graduate of Ner Israel Rabbinical College and a talmid of the late rosh yeshivah Rav Yaakov Weinberg, Rabbi Fohrman titles his introduction, “Beyond the Lullaby Effect: Reading the Bible with Open Eyes.” He cites: “Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop, when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all.” Who’s listening? To the words, no one. For if they were, not sweetness and dreams but terror and perplexity would seize both mother and child. Who left his child on the top of a tree? How is a child falling out of a tree soothing to a baby? Rabbi Fohrman maintains that some of the most important narratives of the Torah have fallen prey to the “Lullaby Effect.” We are so familiar with many of the Biblical stories that we stop listening, can no longer see the big questions, and have trouble learning from them.

Questions that Rabbi Fohrman poses are right in front of our noses, so to speak. For example: After God commanded Adam not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, how could Adam be punished for doing so? Doesn’t his action presuppose that he knew his action was wrong? “If Adam and Eve already understood the categories of good and evil before reaching for the fruit, well then, they already possess what the tree was supposed to give them. What, then would be the purpose of the tree? It’s a catch-22.”

And so the questions unroll: Why is the Tree of Life fine to eat from before partaking from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but not after? Why do cherubs with a flaming sword guard the way back to the Tree of Life—but also, in their only other appearance in the Torah, guard another “tree of life”—the Torah? Is there a relationship between the two “trees”? Moreover, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil seems to tell us that man would originally have lived forever, because “on the day that you eat from it, you will surely die.” But the Tree of Life seems to tell us that man was originally a being that would die, for if he ate of the Tree of Life, he would then live forever.

And the questions are not just logical. They are textual. Here is the snake’s approach to Eve: “af ki amar
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Most translations render these words: “Did G-d really say that you may not eat from any of the trees of the Garden?” But that’s not a precise translation of the Hebrew. A better, more literal translation would read: “Even if G-d said do not eat from any of the trees of the Garden…” Note that’s not even a sentence. It just trails off into nothing-ness. What is being said here? Besides, what’s so bad about eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Wouldn’t knowledge of right and wrong make a person more godly, not less? Wouldn’t G-d want us to have this knowledge?

Attention Chocolate Lovers
These questions, ripped from context, do not convey the systematic unveiling of critical issues that Rabbi Fohrman finds in the story of Adam and Eve. These questions, however, do convey the sense that the story can slip right past us, familiar as it is, leaving us bereft not just of the challenges the Torah presents, but of the answers, teachings and lessons it conveys.

Nor do these questions begin to capture the author’s alluring, engaging, cannot-put-it-down style. When reading this book, a critical teaching of Reb Yisroel Salanter came to mind: The Torah must be conveyed with parables and dazzling language—it must be conveyed in a way that is attractive to people, a way that excites you. Rabbi Fohrman has met Reb Yisroel’s criteria, indeed.

At the beginning of Part II of the book—on the relationship between Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel—the chapter title is “So Whose Picture Do You Like Better: Mine or Debbie’s”?

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the human, historical and psychological journey.

The snake, Eve’s tempter, originally appears as a walking, talking, upright being, suggesting an absence of difference between the human and the animal kingdoms. The snake asks Eve, “Even if God said, do not eat from any of the trees of the Garden . . . so what?” The snake claims that it is not what God says that counts, it is what one desires that counts, since God placed desires in man and animal. Claims the snake: Ignore God’s words; instead, follow the desires God put in you. According to midrash, the snake seeks to marry Eve, for, to the snake, there is no line dividing human from animal. As the story plays out, and both Eve and the snake are punished; the snake is reduced to a crawling creature, no longer able to speak. The Torah conveys a message: Yes, man has an animal side, but his human side is not his capacity for speech per se, nor even his intelligence; but his capacity to distinguish between the moral imperative and the base instinct, between the God Who speaks through the Torah and the God Who speaks through one’s desires.

The snake is arom, which means both naked and cunning. The snake is naked in the sense that he knows only the given, only the obvious, which, to him, is the equivalence of both the human and the animal since both are ruled by God-given desires. But the snake cannot see beyond that. He cannot perceive the higher side of the human being, and that inability is what makes him an animal. And so, for all his cunning, his clever influence over Eve, he cannot bridge the unbridgeable: the line between man and animal.

“The temptation of loneliness is to seek solace where it ought not to be sought,” writes the author.

For Adam, this would mean seeking companionship among the animals, pretending, if only he could, that he is one of them. . . . In allowing Adam to name and search for a mate among the animals, God was seeking to inoculate humanity from the temptation it would soon face, to convince Adam through experience that he could never really be one with the animal world. Only after such a trial could Adam truly appreciate the unique compatibility of Eve.

Lest this seem an issue settled already at the dawn of humanity, some contemporary “ethicists” claim that animals have more inherent worth than some humans—those born with major defects, whom we ought to kill. The struggle for humanity continues.

Not Shame, But Fear
Adam passes the test, marrying Eve, establishing the inerasable line between man and animal, but both fail the second test when they eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, acquiring passions and desires which, yes, they may and must work to elevate, but which, before they disobeyed God’s command, they already transcended. And so, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge they become conscious of their nakedness. They hide, but not out of shame; rather, they hide out of fear of the power of their newly acquired passion.

God asks Adam, “Where are you?” Why would God ask a question he already knows the answer to? The author observes that there are two Hebrew words for “where”: eiphoh and ayeh. Eiphoh simply seeks a location. This is not the word the Torah uses when it records God’s question, “Where are you?” Ayeh does not seek a location. It connotes something else: not to find out where something is, but to express wonder that the thing is not here. As in Isaac’s question to Abraham when they trek to Mount Moriah: “Here’s the fire, but where is the lamb for the offering?” Isaac knows that there is no lamb. His point is not to ask if it was left back at the shack. His point is, there is no lamb here when, by rights, there should be.

This apparently innocuous remark by Isaac packs emotional punch, because in it Isaac begins to realize the terrifying truth—there is no ram here, after all, and that maybe, therefore, he is the ram.

And so, when God asks Adam, “Where are you?” God means: What happened to the Adam who possessed a moral capacity, the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood? Where is the crown of My creation? What happened to him? In Hebrew, this “where” can also mean “lament.” It is the opening word in the Book of Lamentations, read on Tishah B’Av. “Where are you?” is, in this instance, less a question than a lament.

Not Two Stories, But One
With this, I have reviewed half of The Beast that Crouches at the Door. Under the masterful arc of Rabbi Fohrman, the Cain and Abel story is not merely that which follows the Adam and Eve story. Rather, the two are integrally linked, and, in fact, the second intensifies the first. Cain struggles with the desires that now rage within the human being, due to Adam and Eve having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge. Except that Cain’s struggle is harder. Because Adam and Eve faced a challenge and failed, the new challenge—that of Cain—is more intense.

The abundance of parallels between the stories of Adam and Eve and of Cain are not, strictly speaking, parallel. Cain’s challenges are more severe than even those of Adam and Eve, who, after all, were expelled from Paradise.

Rabbi Fohrman unfolds the levels of Cain’s challenge this way: Both Adam and Cain hear the Divine question, “ayeh,” but while in the Garden of Eden, God seeks the whereabouts of a temporarily missing person (Adam); in the story of Cain and Abel, the person God seeks (Abel) is gone for good. Both Adam and Cain express fear and hide from God, but while Adam hides from God momentarily, Cain intuits that he will spend his whole life hiding from God. Both Adam and Cain suffer exile, but while Adam and Eve will have to leave Paradise to build their home elsewhere, Cain will never be able to call any place home. Both Adam and Cain are condemned to experience difficulty farming, but while Adam hides from God, Cain,
however, is told that even if he works the land with mighty toil, “it will not continue to give its strength to you.” Cain will experience a fundamental loss of agricultural potential. The land simply won’t produce anymore what it once did.

**Cain Is Never Named**

All this is hinted at by the mere fact that Cain is never named. “And Eve conceived and bore Cain…”–he is just born Cain. Why? “Kain in Hebrew connotes acquisition, and Cain wishes to acquire the fruit of the ground. There is nothing more real than real estate, and when Cain becomes a worker of the earth, he relentlessly seeks to share in its permanence. He seeks to become “grounded,” both in the sense of partaking of its nourishment, and in the sense of having a place to be. Cain is not a woman; he cannot share in the fruit of the womb. But he can do the next best thing. He can cultivate the fruit of the land. He can do through land what Eve does through her body. “There is great joy to be found in farming,” writes Rabbi Fohrman, “a joy that many of us moderns have become too jaded to see.”

For his murder of Abel, Cain is cursed through the ground–why? “If Abel’s blood had fallen on the kitchen floor instead, would Cain have been cursed through linoleum tiles?” Hardly so. Cain is cursed through the ground because Cain desires the ground, desires acquisition and “grounding.” Cain’s act of murder is severe, and the punishment fits the crime. “And Cain said to God: ‘My sin is greater than I can bear. Here you have cast me away today from upon the face of the earth and from Your face I will hide; I will be a wanderer in the land, and everyone who finds me will kill me…” (Gen. 4:13-14).

Cain is denied everything he wants; indeed, everything he is.

We may now return to God’s acceptance of his brother’s offering and rejection of Cain’s. Abel offered the best of his fruits, yet, in fact, God never compares Cain to Abel. The Torah merely notes that Cain gave some of his produce to God and that Abel gave his best. Perhaps Cain’s average was better than Abel’s best. We simply do not know. When God rejected Cain’s offering, it was not because Abel’s was better. God compared Cain to Cain, and found Cain’s offering wanting. Cain, who had the spiritual genius to discover the religious gesture of an offering, nonetheless did not give of his best.

**“Go and Learn”**

Why? Because Cain was born *Kain*, in deep lust after land and grounding. Cain did not give a gift to God; rather, he made an offering as a prudential, if glorified, insurance policy. Cain gave to God because Cain wanted security in return. With that, Cain distanced himself from God, rather than the other way around. God rejected Cain’s gift masquerading as gratitude, but offered valuable guidance along with the rejection. If Cain “does well,” as God puts it to Cain, if Cain directs his passions properly, then, “lift up!” says Genesis.

Cain can lift up his face and look at himself in the mirror in the morning. But if he does not do well—if he fails to direct these passions, if he stays neutral and lets them run wild in his soul—well, that itself may not be a sin, but sin lies crouching at the door. It is only a matter of time before the engine we call passion…drives its rider over the nearest cliff…

Cain is contending with a deep passion, a force of dizzying power, that wishes, so to speak, to bond with him and fill him with its life-affirming power. Cain, for his part, must realize that as benevolent and tantalizing as this force is, he is not the same as it; he is distinct from it. He must affirm his identity outside of it, and somehow, he must rule over it. He must direct its power.

“…its desire is unto you, yet you can rule over it,” God tells Cain. That, in a nutshell—minus beautiful supporting insights and brilliant readings of associated verses in the Torah—is Rabbi Fohrman’s argument.

As my namesake said some 2,000 years ago: Zil gemor. Go and learn.

Go through this book; find joy in the study of Torah.
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