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The Greats of Tel Aviv

Why would the very first story that the Torah relates to us of post-Eden humanity be one of murder?

We will come to this question and the answer given to it by Avraham Kariv, but first a few words about this new monthly column. I have the privilege to be the OU JLIC rabbi in Tel Aviv and in that position I get to think, learn and teach a lot about the religious history of the city. Some people might find that sentence surprising. One often hears Tel Aviv contrasted with Jerusalem - one religious, the other secular, one spiritually aflame, the other materially focused.

The two cities are of course very different from one another - but hidden beneath the stereotypes and the culture wars of recent years, Tel Aviv possesses a deep and vibrant Torah heritage and has been home over the

nearly 120 years of its history to hasidic leaders, halachic trailblazers, expert darshanim, and mussar masters. Rav Kook is world famous, many know of Rav Goren and some might have heard of Rav Amiel. But many of these great figures are unknown or forgotten today.

One of my greatest joys in Tel Aviv is to rediscover the Torah of a great teacher who lived in the city 70 or 80 years ago and to share it with our community, many of whom moved from across the world to make their lives in this city. I hope to do something similar in this column. Each time we will approach a point in the parsha through an insight of a figure who lived, learned and taught their Torah in Tel Aviv at some point since the city was founded in 1909. I hope that the column illuminates not only the parsha but also allows us to discover a side of Tel Aviv that many are unfamiliar with and a range of great figures whose Torah deserves to be remembered.

We will begin with Avraham Kariv. Kariv, 1900 to 1976, was not a rabbi but a poet, translator and literary critic. Born in Slobodka in 1900 and raised in a religious home he studied in the Telz and Mir yeshivot but later abandoned religious practice, became a disciple in Odessa of the great poet and ex-yeshiva bachur Chaim Nachman Bialik and eventually becoming himself a major figure in the development of Hebrew literature arriving in Tel Aviv in 1934. Although initially a part of the mainstream Zionist literary world, after the Shoah he became increasingly critical of

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leading Hebrew writers, past and present, arguing that their negation of the wealth of Jewish tradition and the moral grandeur of East European Jewry impoverished their writing and internalised antisemitic tropes. His forthrightness on the matter led Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook to approvingly call him ‘Abraham, the smasher of idols of the new Hebrew literature’

In parallel with this turn in his professional work, Kariv also returned to his own religious roots, under the influence of a leading Slobodka figure, also in Tel Aviv, Rav Yosef Zev Lipovitz and in the latter years of his life wrote extensively on Tanakh and hassidut. These works, containing beautiful insights and readings, are written in an elevated literary style rarely found in works of Torah scholarship.

What does Kariv say of Kayin? Why is the first story after the expulsion from Eden one of murder? His answer is a chilling one.

Human societies are constantly evolving. Beliefs and traditions, values and language, technologies and cuisines all change. Astonishing it is therefore that common to every single one of them, enduring through every age - humans kill one another. Writes Kariv:

The blood splashed upon the doorpost of the ages—before ever a human being had died at the hand of Heaven!—was the sign that the

prolonged and tragic drama called history had begun. Generation after generation, era after era, its character would remain stained red, until at last the world will be repaired, as promised by the prophets.

And Kariv goes further. The fact that the world’s human population at the time of Kayin’s murder of Hevel was essentially one tiny family is not incidental to the story but key to the Torah’s message. Kariv continues:

Just as that first murder at the dawn of history was the murder of a brother, so too every murder that has been repeated countless times since has been the murder of a brother. For “we have one father,” yet the many barriers that have arisen throughout the world of humanity have sown estrangement between those on either side of them and blurred the universal brotherhood of all who were created in the image of God. But there, at the very beginning, while humanity was still one small family, it was unmistakably clear: the murder of a human being is the murder of a brother. ■

Rabbi Joe Wolfson is the rabbi and co-director of JLIC TLV — a new, vibrant community serving young religious olim in Tel Aviv, generously supported by the Mayberg Foundation. He and his wife, Corinne, both grew up in the UK and served as directors of JLIC NYU in downtown Manhattan from 2015 to 2022.



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