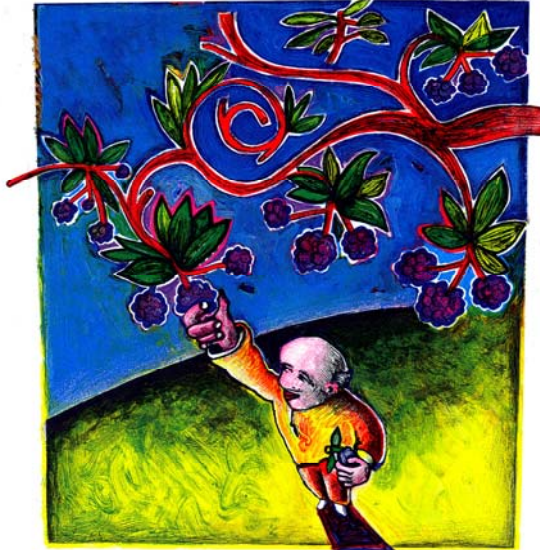


Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

The Stained Hands
Genesis Rabbah 22:9



Background to the Fable “The Stained Hands”

The Murderer and the Mulberry Tree, By Aesop

A bandit who had killed someone on the road abandoned his victim and ran away covered with blood to avoid being caught by people who had seen him. When he encountered some others, they asked him why his hands were stained. He said he had just climbed down a mulberry tree. While he was speaking, his pursuers arrived, seized him and hung him from a mulberry tree nearby. The tree said to him, “It doesn’t bother me to cooperate in your death, because you wanted to use me to clean off the blood of the murder you committed.”

? What is the moral in Aesop’s fable?

Catch Someone Red-Handed

From: Marvin Terban: Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms. Scholastic, February 1998

Meaning: to catch someone in the act of doing something wrong

Origin: At first this expression referred to someone caught in the middle of a murder with blood on his or her hands (“red-handed”). Latter the saying grew to mean any kind of wrongdoing, not just a criminal action. If you were nabbed sneaking one of your grandmothers freshly baked brownies, for instance, your fingers might be covered with chocolate, but you’d still be caught “red-handed.”

Genesis 4:1-10

1. Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, and she said, “I have acquired a man with the Lord.”

2. And she continued to bear his brother Abel, and Abel was a shepherd of flocks, and Cain was a tiller of the soil.
3. Now it came to pass at the end of days, that Cain brought of the fruit of the soil an offering to the Lord.
4. And Abel he too brought of the firstborn of his flocks and of their fattest, and the Lord turned to Abel and to his offering.
5. But to Cain and to his offering He did not turn, and it annoyed Cain exceedingly, and his countenance fell.
6. And the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you annoyed, and why has your countenance fallen?"
7. Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it."
8. And Cain spoke to Abel his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.
9. And the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"
10. And He said, "What have you done? Hark! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the earth."

? Are you familiar with the story of Cain and Abel?

? Please explain the underlined verse (Chapter 4:10)

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? How does the man of our story look in the drawing?

The Stained Hands Genesis Rabbah 22:9

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה כב סימן ט

ויאמר ה' אל קין אי הבל אחיך וגו' משל לאיפרכוס שהיה מהלך באמצע פלטיא, מצא הרוג ואחד עומד על גביו, א"ל מי הרגו, ואמר ליה אנא בעי ליה גבך, ואת בעי ליה גבי, א"ל לא אמרת כלום, משל לאחד שנכנס לגינה וליקט תותין ואכל, והיה בעל הגינה רץ אחריו, א"ל מה בידך א"ל אין בידי כלום, א"ל והרי ידיך מלוכלכות, כך אמר לו קין להקב"ה השומר אחי אנכי אמר לו הקב"ה הא רשע קול דמי אחיך צועקים וגו'

A man entered a garden and, seeing some delicious mulberries, picked and ate them. The owner of the garden ran up to him and asked, "What do you have in your hands?"

The man replied, "There is nothing in my hands."

The owner of the garden then said, "So why are your hands stained?"

Genesis Rabbah 22:9

This fable is used by the author of Genesis Rabbah to amplify the dialog between God and Cain after Cain kills his brother Abel. When God asks Cain for his brother Abel, Cain, trying to elude all responsibility, replies, "I know not; am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Therefore, God says to the assassin, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10).The

symbolism is clear: God is the owner of the garden, Cain is the one who dirties his hands with his brother's blood as the thief stains his hands with the mulberries, and in the end, the intent to elude responsibility for their actions doesn't help either of them.

In Aesop's version of the fable, we see the theme of the mulberry tree and that of the bloodstained hands fused. The moral is also somewhat different from that of Genesis Rabbah, although the common theme that sustains both traditions can be seen. Aesop's version suggests that even naturally good men, when they see themselves slandered, do not hesitate to show spite towards those who have slandered them.

? How is the moral of the fable in Genesis Rabbah different from the Aesopic one?

Wrapping Up

? Can you think on any other situations in our daily lives, in which we act like the man of our fable?

Bibliography

Jones, V.S. Vernon, trans. Aesop's Fables. New York: Avenel Books, 1988.

Marvin Terban, John Devore (Illustrator): Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms. Scholastic, February 1998

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K- 3rd GRADES:

- 1) What do you think the man with the stained hands did that was wrong?
- 2) Why was it wrong? What do you think he could have done instead?
- 3) Have you ever tried to hide something or lie about something you had done that you were not supposed to do? Tell about it and what happened. How did you feel? What do you think you learned from this?

4th- 6th GRADES:

- 1) Why do you think the man lied to the owner of the garden?
- 2) What do you think might have happened next if the story were to go on?
- 3) Why do you think the artist illustrated the story this way? (Look at the picture and discuss what it shows about the story.)

7th-12th GRADES:

- 1) At what point do you think there is a climax in this story? (Several answers are possible—give your reasons.)
- 2)

Compare this with other Biblical stories of deceit—e.g., Jacob pretending to be Esau to receive his father Isaac’s blessing (Gen 27), Rachel hiding the idols of her father Laban and denying it (Gen 31:33-35), Joseph’s brothers telling their father Jacob a lie about Joseph’s “death” (Gen 37: 31-35). What was the result of each of these incidents? What message does the Bible seem to be giving us about lying and about responsibility?

3)

Why do you think lying is destructive to a society?

4)

What do we learn from this story about judicial process? Where do you think this is lacking in our world today?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading Drama Exercise: The Mirror Game

(Beach, R. and J. Marshall. Teaching Literature in the Secondary School. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace, 1991.)

- Find a partner and face one another. One person is the leader, and the other is the mirror.

- When the leader lifts her right arm, the mirror lifts his left. If the leader bends to the left, the mirror bends to the right. The idea is to have them work together so that we can’t tell who the leader is and who the mirror is. Make certain that at some point the leader raises his/her hands directly at the partner and leaves them flat as if staring at stained hands.

- After 1-2 minutes, switch roles.

- Switch several more times.

- Finally teams switch on their own.

- Last time, leader places palms straight toward the partner. Moves palms in a circle.

- Discuss how stained hands cannot be hidden.

Post Reading: Discussion

Students and teacher could discuss Lady Macbeth’s obsession with the blood stains on her hands.