

Parshat Breishit, *Ma Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

As I write, we are celebrating Hoshana Rabbah in school, traditionally the last day of the season to acknowledge and rid ourselves of our sins. This is a lot of pressure! What if we haven't gotten rid of all of it? What if we haven't finished those things that tempted us to act our worst in the last year? And even if we *have* done a perfect job this season of repentance, how long could our perfect behavior last? Is one good clean-up-job enough to carry us through the entire year?

When it comes to sin, it is easy to feel like Cain in Parshat Breishit, for whom "sin crouches at the door." At times it seems as though the next sin is always just around the corner. God gives Cain a warning, to watch out for the evil inclination.

Surely, if you do right, There is uplift.

But if you do not do right, Sin crouches at the door;

Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master. (Breishit 4:7)

Many Bible translations have an asterisk by this verse: "*meaning uncertain*." Beyond the translation, the idea that "sin crouches at the door" is certainly uncertain! It is perhaps terrifying that we could repent and repent and still have our worst selves show up, pouncing upon us in our low moments without warning. Could we even hope that we could be "the master" over our own evil inclination?

Here, we might look to the Ramban (Nachmanides), lover of Biblical mysteries and mysticism, who helps us to see the possibility and the optimism in the warning.

In my opinion the verse means: *if you do not do right (mend your ways)*, evil will come upon you *at the door* of your house. *Your sin crouches*, causing you to stumble in all your endeavors. *Its urge is towards you*, for your sin longs to cleave to you at all times.

Nevertheless *you can be its master*, if you so desire, for you may mend your ways and remove it from upon you. Thus God taught Cain concerning repentance, that it lies within his power to return anytime he desires and He will forgive him.

The Ramban seems to be saying, Look, sin is always going to be close by, ready to pounce. We will always have moments where it feels hard to do the right thing. If sin is at the door, though, we still have a choice. The door can open in either direction, and at any moment, we have a chance to let sin in or shoo it away.

What an important message for the end of the holiday season. The gates of repentance may be closed, but the doorway to sin remains open! This is just as hopeful as it is scary. If every day offers the possibility of sin, every day also offers a new opportunity to walk the right path. "Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master." In God's warning to Cain, we can hear the Torah offering the reader a chance to rise above our worst inclination. It's never too late to try to do better. Shabbat Shalom.