

Forward

As with Cain and Abel, the blood of our brother Alex Petti is crying out from the ground

The lies our government is telling us have a biblical precedent



Flowers are left at a makeshift memorial for Alex Petti. Photo by Octavio JONES / AFP via Getty Images

Contributing Columnist Jay Michaelson January 26, 2026

We don't have to quote Pastor Niemoller anymore.

Because Alex Petti could have been any of us. He could've been me, you, your neighbor, or your rabbi. In fact, many of my rabbinic colleagues and friends are on the streets of Minneapolis at this very moment. They are brave, patriotic and principled, and having known some of them for many years, I know that they, like Petti, would protect the most vulnerable, even at unfathomable cost.

And what was Pretti doing? He was protesting peacefully, recording ICE agents with his iPhone. He tried to protect a woman the agents were attacking. He never drew the gun that he legally carried in its holster. He was beaten, and once on the ground, he was shot 10 times. His last words were “Are you OK?”

No longer are “they” coming only for “illegal” immigrants, legal immigrants arriving at their court dates, permanent residents, Latinos, Asians, Somalians, veterans, and Black off-duty police officers.

“They” are now coming for us.

And they hate us. They lie about us, calling us assassins and terrorists. Their rage is palpable, and egged on by right-wing podcasts and right-wing media. We hate America, we are rioters, we are terrorists, we are Antifa. “Have you not learned? This is why we killed that lesbian bitch,” an ICE agent said to a protester two weeks ago, referring to Renée Good.

Even after Pretti’s murder, the Fox News headline was “Minnesota ICE official warns of unrest ‘like nothing I’ve ever seen before.’”

Other than the murder itself, the lies have been the most disturbing part of this spectacle; the immediate rush to lie about and vilify Alex Pretti, a VA nurse described by everyone who knew him as kind, caring, altruistic, and just the sort of person who would put himself in harm’s way to protect a stranger.

Stephen Miller called him a “would-be assassin” and a “terrorist.”

Commander Gregory Bovino (who parades around in a military “greatcoat” that is popular among neo-Nazis online) said that Pretti planned to “massacre law enforcement” and had “violently resisted” before his men killed him, despite the video evidence flatly contradicting the latter claim.

DHS Secretary Kristi Noem said “this looks like a situation where an individual arrived at the scene to inflict maximum damage on individuals and to kill law enforcement.” Yet Pretti had his iPhone out to record what the ICE officers were doing.

There are two reasons these lies are the second-worst part of this episode.

First, it is morally repellent to drag Pretti and his family through the mud — and, if Renée Good’s family is any example, expose them to doxxing, death

threats and defamation. Just imagine what they will say about me if they kill me at a protest. Or you. Or your rabbi.

Second, this isn't one ICE agent. This is an entire apparatus of dehumanization and deceit. And though polling says only 20% of Americans believe that Pretti deserved to be shot, large swaths of America believe this extremist propaganda. We all have targets on our backs, painted by the government and its media apparatus.

There is a teaching in the Torah about this. It is, in fact, the first teaching in the Torah about the violence people do to one another: the story of Cain and Abel.

You know the myth, in all its brevity and primal truth. Cain and Abel are brothers. Both have offered sacrifices to God, though the text suggests Abel gives of his best while Cain does not. And so, Abel's sacrifice is accepted and Cain's is not. *Vayichar l'kayin me'od*; Cain is infuriated, filled with rage. God speaks reprovingly to Cain, telling him in essence that he has gotten what he deserved, that he must curb his desires more. But Cain does not accept this lesson and kills his brother in jealousy and rage.

As we all know, God asks Cain where Abel is — though of course, God already knows. Cain replies "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

But God responds, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

Read closely and see. Cain is lying, of course; he knows exactly what he has done. He also denies responsibility; it's not his job, he says, to take care of Abel. *Ha-shomer achi anochi*, he asks. Literally, am I my brother's guard? His protector? Am I supposed to keep him safe?

Cain's lies are like those of Miller, Bovino, Noem and the rest. They are transparently preposterous. We are not God, but we can all watch the videotape; we can all inspect the freeze-frames of Pretti lying on the ground being beaten and then being shot.

And we can all easily learn that Pretti, like Abel, was innocent. He was not violently resisting; he posed no threat to these officers. He was no more a "terrorist" than I am — indeed, the word "terrorist" has now become just a slur, drained of actual meaning, as if a non-violent activist is no different from the Bondi Beach terrorist or the Tree of Life terrorist. What a disgusting sidenote, that the government has rendered this word meaningless.

Pretti's blood cries out from the ground. And it is louder than the lies of the murderers.

One final epilogue. There is a midrash (Genesis Rabba 22:9) that blames God for Abel's murder, because God could have prevented it but chose not to do so. When God says that Abel's blood is crying out, the midrash says, it is crying out at God.

This is a bold midrash, accusing the Almighty of complicity in murder. But it is aimed at us, not God. None of us individually has the power to stop the next murder in Minneapolis, or Iran, or Gaza, or anywhere else. But collectively, we have the power to rise up against this injustice. We are made in the image of God, and with that similitude comes responsibility. We cannot turn away anymore. The blood cries out from the ground — to each and every one of us.

**Rabbi Jay Michaelson is a contributing columnist for the Forward and for Rolling Stone. He is the author of 10 books, and won the 2023 New York Society for Professional Journalists award for opinion writing.*