

I've felt tense the past few weeks. Certainly, I'm getting used to new weather, new environs, still-new routines for the whole family, and the relentless demands of a new-old house. And I'm not exercising enough. But that's not all.

Bereishit is also making me tense, particularly the saga of Yaacov and Esav. Those of you who were here two weeks ago probably have a sense how badly I feel for Esav and his slight -- to put it mildly -- by our tradition. This saga goes on for three whole weeks, centered right in our greying autumn. It's a heart-wrenching, myth-busting prelude to the family reunion that comes for many of us at Thanksgiving and Chanukah-time.

Sibling rivalry is a downright euphemism for the sibling struggle of the saga. Twins are born, and they fight from day one. They are different. They don't understand each other. They don't affirm or appreciate each other's strengths and attributes. They manipulate each other's weaknesses. There's no love evident in the relationship, until the end.

Everything bad about the sibling relationship is on display, including the ultimate spectre, the possibility out there, of a Cain and Abel-like murder and elimination of a sibling rival. It's very upsetting, an anti-model that compels our attention to the state of our own sibling relationships -- how and how not to build, strengthen, reground or rebuild them -- and what Jewish tradition has to say about sibling relationships.

Before going in this direction, I want to recognize that the rabbis do not have the luxury of this focus. They spend most of their time, understandably considering the often-bitter national/religious contexts in which they lived, depicting the Esav-Yaacov rivalry as a battle between *their* enemies, the Romans and Christians, and the Jews. Esav is the archetypal violent, wild, mean-spirited and immoral *goy*, who wants to wipe the Jews out. He even marshalls his own angel, in the understanding of some of the

mepharshim, commentators, to weaken Yaacov once again prior to their ultimate reunion. Yaacov, the physically weaker sibling and Jew, avoids confrontation with his enemy as much as possible, while still determinedly pursuing his self-understood destiny.

The national battle between Esav and Yaacov certainly had its time and place, but our life and death battle against Christianity as it was is over. Like Esav and Yaacov at the end of their saga, we have, for the most part, buried the hatchet. Here in the United States, we now *share* existential concerns with Christianity and need to align even more closely with mainstream Christian denominations as we together contest the apathy of a secularized citizenry.

There is a better argument to be made for the contemporary national relevance of the rivalry which precedes this one -- that between Isaac and Yishmael, the father, in the rabbinic mind, of the Muslim people. There is certainly more to unearth, midrashically, in that relationship that we can use to mitigate tension between Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Arabs.

So this leaves the bulk of the relationship between Esav and Yaacov squarely in the realm of sibling struggle, not national/religious struggle. And it offers us an opportunity -- for tikkun in our sibling relationships, which, sadly are, as often as not, characterized by rivalry and estrangement as they are by love and fellowship. I know this well from my years in the rabbinate.

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN JEWISH TRADITION

Q: We are a tradition of mitzvot, obligations. Are there obligations inherent in the sibling relationship? What are they?

בראשית ד:ט

ט. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי:

And the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know.

Am I my brother's keeper?"

רש"י על בראשית

Am I my brother's keeper: Heb. הֲשֹׁמֵר. This is a question asked in astonishment, as is every "hey" prefix vowelized with a "chataf patach."

Q: What does it mean to a sibling's keeper, a *shomer*, guardian?

דברים טו:ז

ז. כִּי יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאֶחָיְךָ בְּאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָיְךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן:

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land the Lord, your God, is giving you, *you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother.*

A: Financial provisions

Q: Why are we inclined to harden our hearts to the needs of our siblings?

משלי יז:יז

בְּכָל עֵת אֶהֱבֶה הָרֵעַ וְאָח לְצָרָה יוֹלֵד:

At all times, love a friend, for he is born a brother for adversity.

A friend loves at all times, *And a brother is born for adversity.*

A: To be there in time of adversity

רש"י על משלי

At all times, love a friend: You should always love friends, i.e., to acquire people who love you.

for he is born a brother for adversity: *At the time of adversity, the friend will be born to you as a brother, to help you and to participate in your adversity.*

"One who loves [i.e., befriends] another is joined up with his beloved in good times and bad times. *This is part and parcel of loving: that one does not abandon one's beloved in time of trouble...* He will rejoice when [his friend] does well and assist him when things go badly. *While a brother won't be impelled to be joined with his brother in good times, in bad times [for his brother] he will come to his aid, for he is his own flesh and blood.*"

A: Mutual support, even if love is frayed. We cannot assume the love, because of the persistence of rivalry and competition. But we can assume commitment.

Rabbi Michael Gold

"Siblings are our most long-term family relationship. As children, we are sometimes playmates and companions, sometimes bitter rivals. As adults we may be close friends, or have lives that intersect at a few key family occasions. In old age, our siblings are often are *only link to a distant past*. The brother who may have been an adversary during childhood and a distant friend as we were raising our own families, can become a source of comfort in old age.

"Siblings are our most volatile relationship. We love them and we hate them, we compete with them and we care for them, they are our most consistent rivals and our closest friends. When we become parents, we try to love our children equally, yet they constantly fight and vie for our attention. Even as adults, the issues of childhood sibling rivalry continue to affect our daily lives...."

"Siblings, on the other hand, often become role models and mentors, particularly for younger siblings. Often they must be the protector, particularly when other children pick upon their siblings. Jewish tradition sees the older brother as taking over the role of a dead or absent father. In fact, the Talmud requires that just as we must honor our father, so we must honor an older brother who played a parental role in our upbringing. (Yoreh Deah 240:22)

"The Torah (the five books of Moses) never commands us to love our siblings - or any other family member, for that matter. We are commanded to love our neighbor, to love the stranger, to love God. But *family is too important an institution in the eyes of God to be subject to the vagaries of love. Love is a nebulous emotion that often waxes and wanes over time; our relationship with our siblings must be more permanent and stable.* Therefore, the Torah expects us to be our brother's keeper...."

"We need not necessarily love him, but we must be his keeper. If our brother is in trouble we must extend our hand to him. The Torah explicitly teaches, 'Thou shall not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand to thy brother who is poor.'"

"Only by caring for our own family can we learn to care for the stranger."

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"Siblings share a fate and a sense of mutual responsibility."

The relationship between Esav and Yaacov demonstrates the monster that our sibling relationships can become, without the proper care. Our tradition recognizes that these relationships are loaded, fraught with potential conflict that can eviscerate feelings of love. That being said, these relationships are critically important and highly undervalued, particularly as sources of mutual support in times of need, loss and adversity. Yaacov and Esav, Joseph and his brothers later on, reconcile for reasons additional to the future needs of the Jewish people. The pairs need each other -- to make sense of their life narratives, from their beginnings to their endings.

Sibling relationships merit our resilience and commitment. We don't choose our siblings. Through them, however, at the very least, we learn to live with others, and we learn the possibilities and limitations of relationship. And, at the very best, we learn much more.

May we all gain strength as we move toward tikkun with our own siblings, cousins, friends and others.