

Sibling Rivalry and Religious Violence¹
Parshat Toledot
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Wouldn't it be nice if today's Torah portion were about two random twin brothers who happened not to get along too well? Wouldn't it be nice if today's Torah portion simply set forth their story, and didn't have any moral or other lessons to offer us? Wouldn't it be great if it were only a human interest story, and had nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with ethnic groups or peoples or religious civilizations?

Now, why do I say that? Well, it's a troubling story, for several reasons. First of all, nobody comes across well in this story. No one. The father, Isaac, is blind in more ways than one. The mother, Rebecca, is purposeful, yes, but also devious and deceitful. Jacob is an active co-conspirator in cheating his brother out of his birthright. And Esau, who's described as a hunter with a taste for wild game, falls, by the end of the *parashah* (Torah portion), into a murderous rage.

In short, no one looks good.

Second, we're supposedly descended from these people. They are our ancestors. So perhaps we're supposed to take this personally. What, therefore, does it say about us?

But the fact is that, already at an early stage in Jewish history it was clear that this story isn't just about two individuals named Jacob and Esau. It's about two nations, the nation of Israel and its neighbor, the nation of Edom.

This tale features what are called "eponymous" ancestors. In other words, the names of the protagonists reveal that they are really stand-ins for nations. There are all sorts of clues to this: at his birth, the character Esau is described as "*adom*," which means "red"—but also explicitly alludes to the kingdom of Edom. And he's described as hairy, in Hebrew "*se'ar*," which alludes to the prominent mountain in Edom, namely, Mt. Se'ir. On the other hand, Jacob is described as "*halak*," which



means smooth (skinned), but *halak* is also the name of a mountain (“Bald Mountain”) on the Israelite border with Edom.²

And so this story is, apparently, designed to explain the origin of the age-old antipathy between Israel and Edom.

Now, that’s all well and good, ... except that it isn’t, because this is the Bible. And the Bible isn’t just supposed to describe how things evolved; it’s supposed to teach us moral lessons, right? What kind of a lesson are we supposed to learn from a tale, told apparently approvingly, of two brothers (or nations) who fight one another?

This question came up at a very interesting gathering I attended this past Wednesday. I was privileged to join a small group of clergy invited to gather at Harvard Divinity School to sit and learn with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the (British) Commonwealth. Rabbi Sacks is the author of the recently published book, *Not in God’s Name*, which is all about religious violence.³ He presented his view that although religion, particularly monotheism, which so often expresses itself in exclusivist, dualistic ways, is thought by many to be a source of evil and violence, in fact, properly understood, it can and should play a leading role in defeating evil.

But then came a question from one of the other rabbis present, Rabbi Claudia Kreiman. And the question had to do with our *parashah*: what do you do with the fact that our own Torah teaches us that the invidious comparison of Israel and Edom is built into our DNA, that hostility toward Edom is a *good* thing, that it’s *God’s will*? For when Rebecca asks God what to do about the two babies (later to be identified as Jacob and Esau) tossing and turning in her womb, God says, as it were, “Oh, don’t worry, they’ll fight, but the older (i.e., Esau) will serve the younger (i.e., Jacob).” So God’s involvement doesn’t seem that positive.

What do we do with that?

Rabbi Sacks’ answer was thoughtful and fascinating, and I’d like to share it. (By the way, it’s a précis of what he says in Part II of his book, so consider this an advertisement to go out and buy it.)

As I’m sure we are all well aware, the story of Jacob and Esau is not the only Biblical story about sibling rivalry. The Bible presents us with story after story about sibling rivalry. The Bible doesn’t try to deny that sibling rivalry exists, and

it doesn't try to whitewash the challenges it poses, but it does give us a path to overcoming them.⁴

Consider, Rabbi Sacks said, the classic stories of sibling rivalry in the Book of Genesis:

One, the story of Cain and Abel.

Second, the story of Isaac and Ishmael.

Third, the story of Jacob and Esau.

Fourth, the story of Rachel and Leah, which leads to the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers.

Each of these stories is filled with conflict and mortal threats. Think about it:

Cain kills Abel.

Ishmael is discovered behaving inappropriately ("*mitzahek*" is the Hebrew term) with Isaac. Whatever that means, it's enough to convince Sarah to have Abraham remove him from the family home and leave him out in the wilderness to die.

Jacob and Esau are in fierce competition for the birthright, and Esau threatens Jacob with death, forcing him to flee for his life.

Leah and Rachel don't physically threaten one another, but they fight bitterly, with their fertility as their weapons. They threaten one another's stature in the home they share. As a result, Joseph is almost killed by his brothers. He is only saved because, at the last minute, his brothers decide to sell him into slavery in Egypt.

There is tremendous conflict in these stories. They're filled with threats, assault, anger and violence.

And yet, Rabbi Sacks reminds us, that isn't all that they are filled with.

Lest we imagine that the Bible is blasé about this, consider the following question: with whom do we sympathize in each of these tales?

Cain and Abel? We sympathize with Cain (whose offering was rejected) and also, of course, with Abel (the victim).

Isaac and Ishmael? We sympathize with Ishmael. Who in his right mind wouldn't sympathize with that young boy left to die of thirst in the heat of the desert, his mother weeping helplessly at a distance?

Jacob and Esau? We sympathize with Esau. After all, it was he who was cheated out of what was rightfully his.

Rachel and Leah? We sympathize with Leah. After all, she's the bride who, though not left at the altar, is left at the conjugal tent!

And Joseph and his brothers? We sympathize with Joseph, the youngster, who was almost killed, and whose father was bereaved when his sons told him that Joseph had been torn apart by a wild beast.

And so in all four or five of these stories, we sympathize with the underdog. We sympathize with the brother (or, in the case of Rachel and Leah, the sister) who is the victim. We sympathize with the "other one."

Consider further how all of these stories end. Think about how the last scenes in these stories form a pattern:

Cain and Abel? Abel lies dead and buried, with his blood calling out to God for vengeance out of the earth.

That's stage one.

What about Isaac and Ishmael? The last scene is of the two of them coming together to bury their father. They live in separate communities, they don't have much to do with each other, but they come together to bury their father.

What about Jacob and Esau? After the climactic moment when Jacob approaches Esau, who is surrounded by 400 armed men, and they embrace, the two of them part, each going their separate way, but each forbearing from pursuing the other. And yet they do reunite, in order to bury their father Isaac (Genesis 35:29).

And what about Joseph and his brothers? They do more than grudgingly walk alongside one another. They forgive each other and they reconcile. They overcome the unbelievable fratricidal threats and violence to live together. And then, of course, at the end of Jacob's life, they do what their father and his brother,

and their grandfather and his brother had done, namely, they go together to bury their father (Genesis 50:13).

What can we learn from this? A simple message: fratricidal violence is a natural tendency, *but it can (and should) be overcome*. We can move beyond our natures. We can move from the murderous result of the Cain and Abel story to the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers.

Indeed, we can move further than that, for the Bible continues in the next book, the Book of Exodus, with another story of siblings, namely, the story of Moses and Aaron and Miriam. And what do we see there? We see Miriam protecting her brother, saving her brother; we see Aaron, the older brother, working together with Moses, the younger brother, serving as his mouthpiece. Do they ever not get along? Well, we have the story in the Book of Numbers of Miriam and Aaron gossiping about Moses, but that's about it. For the most part, their relationships are civil and respectful.

The Bible, according to Rabbi Sacks, is making a sophisticated moral argument. None of its characters is all-good; none is all-bad. Unlike some of the sectarian writings of the Qumran community, the Bible is not an epic about the Sons of Light versus the Sons of Darkness.⁵ It is an epic about real people,⁶ people who have virtues and vices. Such characters are “studies in moral complexity.” Why would this be? Because “dividing the world into sinners and saints, the saved and the damned, the Children of God and the Children of the devil, is the first step down the road to violence in the name of God.” (p. 169)

The Bible, in Rabbi Sacks' view, is a “subtle, multilayered philosophical treatise” that makes its points through narrative. The Bible represents truth as story rather than truth as system. Biblical consciousness is chronological, not logical. “Its connections are not abstract and conceptual; [they are] real encounters of challenge and response, during which wisdom matures and relationships are honed and refined.” (p. 171-172)

The Bible's intention is to get us to sympathize with the victim, which it does through the technique of role reversal, in order to realize that we must not fall into the trap of demonizing the other.

Hence, as much as I find the story we read today profoundly disturbing—particularly in light of the horrific carnage that took place in Paris yesterday—I am

intrigued, encouraged, and consoled by Rabbi Sacks' reading of it. Some might find his reading apologetic, but I think it is a fair one.

The Bible may seem to condone the demonization of the other in certain passages; it may even seem to reinforce it. But the Bible can also be read differently, such as the way Rabbi Sacks has suggested we might read the stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis and Exodus. Reading the text in this way can encourage us to move beyond the primitive, childish exclusivity of the dualist, to a more expansive vision, equally grounded in our sacred texts, that sees all of us as precious in the sight of God, all of us as equally worthy of God's blessings. (See pp. 265-267).⁷

Shabbat shalom!

¹ This sermon is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris on Friday, November 13, 2015. Several of the assailants were heard to cry "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great") as they carried out their murderous assaults.

² See Joshua 11:17. For a discussion exploring the historical background to the tale of the conflict between Jacob and Esau, see: Martin A. Sweeney, "Israel's History as a Family Narrative, <http://thetorah.com/israels-history-as-a-family-narrative/> .

³ I quoted extensively from *Not in God's Name* in my 2015 Rosh Hashanah Day 2 sermon: https://www.templealiyah.com/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/rh_day_two_2015_sermon_not_in_gods_name_1.pdf .

⁴ Rabbi Sacks' analysis of the stories of sibling rivalry in the Torah closely tracks that of Diane Sharon, "Rivalry in Genesis: A New Reading," *Conservative Judaism* 53:4, Summer 2001. I first presented this analysis in a sermon entitled, "The Evolution of Sibling Relationships in the Torah," December 3, 2005: https://www.templealiyah.com/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/toldot_12.3.2005.pdf.

⁵ This is a motif in the Dead Sea Scrolls. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_of_the_Sons_of_Light_Against_the_Sons_of_Darkness .

⁶ Like Rabbi Sacks, by "real" I mean complex and human, rather than uni-dimensional. I do not mean to suggest that these or other Biblical characters are historical figures.

⁷ This takes work. In Rabbi Sacks' inspiring words, "We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the moral responsibility of the rich for the poor, the commands to love the neighbor and stranger, the insistence on peaceful modes of conflict resolution and respectful listening to the other side of a case, forgiving the injuries of the past and focusing instead on building a future in which the children of the world, of all colors, faith and races, can live together in grace and peace." (p. 263)