

“Two nations struggling in the womb”

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It was very gratifying to hear both Zachary and Evie—celebrating their bar and bat mitzvah today, respectively—talk about how much they like their twin sibling. It doesn't surprise me. I have twin sisters, and they too like each other a lot. I know other twins who are very close. In fact, I don't know of any twin siblings who don't get along – except perhaps for Phoebe and her twin sister Ursula in “Friends!”

Unfortunately, we can't say the same thing about **descendants** of twin siblings.

What do I mean by that?

Well, it's very clear from reading the story of Jacob and Esau in today's *parashah* carefully, that it's designed to foreshadow the enmity not just between two people, but between two **peoples**, that is, the two **nations** that are understood to be descended from Jacob and Esau.

To the Biblical readers or listeners to these stories, it was obvious: Jacob was the progenitor of the **Israelites**, our ancestors, and Esau was the progenitor of the **Edomites**, a nation that lived just across the valley from the Israelites, and with whom they were constantly warring.

The **Israelites** and the **Edomites** probably used the same script and probably basically spoke the same language. They probably looked similar. And they understood that they were descended from the same ancestors!

But that was a world in which your **tribal identification** determined your **identity**. And they were from different tribes.

In that world, though you might share a common ancestor, that didn't matter. What mattered was **who you were today**.



Frankly, it's increasingly apparent that that's the kind of world we're living in today.

Just the other day, there was an election in our country. I know that some people were aware of that. And, as a column by Karl Rove in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* put it, "Very little changed. Red went redder and blue went bluer. And purple? Well, it generally became more blue."

We can see that, can't we? The divides in our country are only getting steeper. The angrier and the more indignant that some feel at our President's character and behavior and policies, the more defensive and resistant to criticism his supporters seem to be.

So instead of the election portending a time of amity in our nation, it portends greater **anger**, greater **resistance**, and greater **divisiveness**.

That is unfortunate, because the governmental model that we have in our country depends upon **cooperation** and **coalition-building**. It may sound odd to say that, since we have a divided form of government, with separate executive, legislative and judicial branches, and even the legislative branch is divided into a bi-cameral legislature. We have a system of checks and balances, that implies a certain distrust within the government for what one of the other branches might be up to. But that system of checks and balances is there precisely to remind us that no one person governs alone, and no one party governs alone. There is almost always a sharing of responsibility and of power. In such a system, unless there is mutual respect—and, even more than that, a sense of duty to the country as a whole, and a willingness to work together, even with those with whom we may disagree strongly—gridlock may very well ensue.

We've seen that over the past few years. It's been getting worse and worse.

One question I have is whether there is anything we can do about that. Can we possibly influence our political leaders to work together across the proverbial aisle to achieve common objectives? Or are we so far apart on so many issues that we must view our political opponents as beneath contempt, or as our mortal enemies? Must this always be a zero sum game, with the exact same number of winners and losers? Must the only options be that either I win and you lose, or you win and I lose?

In our *parashah*, that certainly seems the model. Even before Rebecca gives birth, the children are “struggling in her womb.” And even though both children will be her babies, we’re told that they will be very different from one another and that one will have the “upper hand,” literally, over the other.

As the brothers grow up, their differences continue and their conflict continues. Esau becomes a “skillful hunter,” and Jacob becomes a mild person who stays in his tent. (25:27).

Unfortunately, the text makes it clear that only one can have the birthright. By right it belongs to Esau, but in his own impulsiveness, he sells it – if you can call it a bona fide sale – to Jacob. Then, in the part of the *parashah* that we read today, there’s a parallel story: when it’s time for the blessing to be bestowed, Rebecca enlists Jacob’s aid in deceiving Isaac and obtaining the blessing intended for Esau. It’s a terrible scene: to conspire against the blind, aged Isaac to defeat his intent. And note that the blessing parallels the birthright: the one who gets that blessing is to become the master over his brother. Who doesn’t sympathize with Esau when he returns to learn that he has been tricked?

And this deceit doesn’t go unpunished: We are told that Esau will come to break Jacob’s yoke from his neck (27:40), and in fact, Jacob must leave home to protect himself. He goes into exile for twenty years. And as he tricked his brother, he too is tricked in turn by his father-in-law, Lavan.

So it’s pretty depressing.

We have to wait two more weeks before reading from the Torah what happens after that: Jacob approaches Esau with contrition, and they reconcile.

In the meantime, twenty years go by; twenty years during which we have the sense that if Esau were to have encountered Jacob, he would have killed him.

Are we in that 20-year period in our country? How much longer can we endure this enmity that is tearing our country apart? I don’t know that we can survive twenty more years of this kind of disrespect and disregard.

I think we have to try to create and to support and to fund initiatives that bring us together. Not to disregard our differences. On the contrary, to help us talk about them and to wrestle with them—as Jacob wrestled with Esau, or whoever it was that he wrestled with.

We cannot allow the model of enmity that we learn about in our *parashah* to determine our identity as Americans. We must seek to overcome the divides.

Maybe we can gather hope from the experience of one particular incarnation of the struggle between Jacob and Esau. In the early Middle Ages, both Jews and Christians saw Jacob as a symbol of the Jewish people and Esau or Edom as a symbol of Christianity.

Much of Judaism and Christianity's shared history has been defined, in the words of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Bill Hamilton, by "brutality and bloodshed." And yet, in our lifetime, a so-called Copernican shift has taken place. Roman Catholic leaders have expressed great esteem and affection for Israel; they have repented of past sins against the Jewish people; and the kind of supersessionism that characterized previous encounters—the notion that Christianity has replaced Judaism; that Judaism is now inferior to Christianity—has been pushed to the margins of inter-faith dialogue.

And certainly we have made great progress in building our relationships with various Protestant denominations as well.

In a sense, we are building on the story of reconciliation that occurs twenty years after the events depicted in this week's *parashah*. We are participating in "writing a new chapter in the historic rapport between the descendants of Jacob and Esau."

Let's derive hope from that story, and let's not give up on building coalitions and cooperating even with our political opponents.

I just learned the other day that for the third time, Massachusetts will have a Day of Civility. Governor Baker has declared that next Shabbat, November 17th, is "Massachusetts Day of Civility." The purpose, according to Judith Bowman, Executive Director of the National Civility Foundation, is "to have every person in every family ... consciously perform a random act of kindness."

Now, it's easy to dismiss an idea like this. It's easy to mock it. My response is, it's a step in the right direction. My response to those who would dismiss it is: If you have criticisms, then think of something better, more practical, more likely to succeed and then let's go for it.

Of course, there is a *sine qua non*, an absolute requirement for rapprochement with

political opponents to take place, and that is that all parties to this kind of effort must pledge allegiance to the truth. They must eschew slander and libel. They must say to themselves before they speak: unless I want something like this said about me, I shouldn't say it about my political opponents. They must seek, before saying anything about their opponents, to say something positive, rather than negative.

This may sound naïve, but I don't think it is. It's the way we must behave if we are to restore the luster to the sadly tarnished reputation of our national government.

Let's devote these next two years to reversing the predictions of the prognosticators. Let's not see these two years as opportunities for one side to crush the other. Instead, let's see them as opportunities for building the coalitions that can truly create a responsive, widely respected American government.

Shabbat shalom.