

## The Pope and the Rabbi

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
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Today's Torah portion with its numerous subplots can be read on many levels. Consequently, it lends itself to broad interpretation and many themes, and therefore is in many respects a goldmine for darshanim, for rabbis and those giving sermons.

We can read the narrative as the disturbing story of what happens when there is a breakdown in communication between husband and wife, mother and father. The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, the dean in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the yeshivah in Volozhin commented, Rebecca's "relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca" (*Commentary to Gen. 24: 65*).

He traces the distance between the two of them to the time when Rebecca saw Isaac meditating in the field at which point she covered herself with a veil. The Netziv explains, "She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind." The Bible never tells us that Rebecca informed Isaac of the oracle she had received before giving birth, which is why she preferred Jacob and resorted to deception to ensure that the correct child would receive the blessing.

On another level, it is the story of poor parenting, and the disastrous consequences of what happens when favoritism is shown by parents towards a child, as in the case of Jacob and Rebecca, when each parent has his or her own favorite.

Another theme is demonstrated by the impulsive choice made by Esau to satiate his hunger and choose a bowl of lentils over his birthright. His forfeiting of his claim can be seen as the difference between an individual who seeks immediate gratification and one who is willing to wait for a later reward. It reminds me of the experiment where children are asked if they would prefer to receive one treat, such as a candy bar that they can eat now, or to wait and get three later. Invariably the children who are willing to get the larger reward later score higher when they are older on most tests of achievement.

There is plenty in Jacob's character which can be called to question as well. And of course, the Torah portion reflects a theme rampant throughout the Book of Genesis, of sibling rivalry and enmity between brothers.

These are just a few of the topics evoked by this morning's reading. So how does a *darshan* choose which theme to discuss? The answer is that one brings to the task wherever one is at that point in life. It just so happens this was the Torah portion assigned to me for my senior sermon in rabbinical school. I still recall the challenge of reading and re-reading the portion and commentaries closely to see what theme I wanted to explore. I chose to speak at the time about the dangers of making impulsive decisions and the consequences of not considering the long term impact of our actions.

In addition to all these possibilities there is one other aspect to today's Torah reading you might have missed. We also read about the birth of Christianity. You heard me correctly. For if Isaac's half brother, Ishmael, about whom we read in previous weeks is seen as the progenitor of the Arab people, Esau, who

is called Edom, is always interpreted by our rabbis in the midrash and Talmud as representing Rome and the Christian world.

Viewed through this filter, the enmity and the distrust between Jacob and Esau is looked upon not as a personal struggle between two brothers, and not in terms of the dysfunctional family that it is, but in terms of the ongoing, eternal, inevitable conflict between Jews and Christians.

Our rabbis saw Esau as seeking to murder Jacob, and saw the parallel of the efforts of Rome to eradicate Judaism in the first part of the millennia. More often than not, believe it or not, they overlooked the human tragedy of a family torn apart, and saw instead their own ongoing battle for survival in the face of pogroms, forced conversions, the false charges of desecrating the host, poisoning wells, and the blood libel accusations.

Perhaps I am thinking about this context because I recently met and heard Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Argentina, known as “the Pope’s rabbi.” The rabbi, who is the president of the Buenos Aires Rabbinical Seminary, and the Pope coauthored a book about Catholic – Jewish issues.

Before becoming Pope, Jorge Bergoglio was archbishop in Buenos Aires where he regularly visited synagogues and Jewish communal events. After the 1994 terrorist bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center, in which 85 people were killed, he was the first public personality to express solidarity with the victims and to sign a petition for justice. Earlier this year he invited families of the victims to meet with him in Rome.

Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee’s Director of Interreligious Affairs has written, “The transformation in Catholic attitudes and teaching towards the Jewish People is without parallel in human history. A people once presented as cursed and rejected by God – even in league with the Devil – is now described (in the words of Pope John Paul II ) as the “dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the Covenant never broken and never to be broken.”

Rabbi Skorka spoke to a group of rabbis in New York upon his return from having spent several days with the Pope in Rome. He told us that shortly after becoming Pope he received a call on his cell phone, and on the other line, using the informal grammatical structure of Spanish, the voice said, “This is Bergoglio”. Not Pope Francis. Not a call placed by a secretary, but the Pope just calling to speak to an old friend. The Pope announced during his friend’s visit that he will visit Israel in the spring saying that he dreams of embracing Rabbi Skorka in front of the Western Wall, in order to send out a message against anti-Semitism.

Concerned about the alarming increase in discrimination and violence against Christians in Arab countries, the Pope said in a meeting with leaders from the Simon Wiesenthal center last month, “When any minority is persecuted and marginalized on account of its religious beliefs or ethnic origin, the good of society as a whole is placed in danger, and we must all consider ourselves affected.”

“Let us unite our strengths to promote a culture of encounter, of mutual respect, understanding and forgiveness...We must be able to transmit to them not only knowledge about Jewish-Catholic dialogue, about the difficulties overcome and the progress made in recent decades... We must, above all, be able to transmit to them our passion for encounter and knowledge of the other, promoting the active and responsible involvement of young people.”

As a result of the work started by Pope John XXIII and continued by Pope John Paul II and building upon the foundation they established of reconciliation, Pope Francis gives us cause for new hope. Perhaps

the story of Jacob and Esau, which our rabbis read for so long as indicative of the enmity between the descendants of Jacob and Esau and the centuries of persecution can be reinterpreted and read in a different light, in the light of brotherly love.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, MD*

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[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)