

Nature vs. Nurture  
Toldot 2015

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Today's Torah portion offers a fascinating insight into the age old question: nature vs. nurture. One of the oldest ongoing arguments in the history of psychology, each side in the debate raises equally valid points about which is more significant in explaining and determining a person's personality and actions. Despite numerous studies it is difficult to conclude if a person's development is predetermined by one's DNA, or if it is influenced by life experiences and environment.

We read in the Torah today about the birth of twins, Jacob and Esau. Although they have the same parents, grew up in the same home, and have similar genetic makeup they are as different as can be. They do not physically resemble each other. One is red-haired and hairy, while the other is – well, whatever word is the opposite of being hairy. Their differences are more than physical, as their nature and interests also seriously diverge. One likes to hunt, the other likes to stay home in the tent. One could conclude that their differences were innate and apparent from birth, but they also had different upbringings and influences. One of them is the favorite of the father, and the other is the favorite of the mother. Although they were raised in the same home (actually, it was the same tent), they had very different experiences. So maybe our story does not shed too much light on the question of what determines a person's personality.

An article I saw this week that relates to this subject caught my eye. The headline said, "Jack Yufe, a Jew whose twin was a Nazi dies at 82." Two brothers, Jack and Oskar were separated when they were six months old. Their father left Romania in 1929 and fell in love on the ship to Trinidad with a German woman named Elizabeth Stohr who he married. After a few years together, fed up with his womanizing, Elizabeth left her husband and took one of the boys, Oskar along with an older sister back to Germany where she had him baptized and raised as a Catholic.

The other brother, Jack, who was raised by his father, eventually spent time on a kibbutz in Israel and served in the Israeli navy. After marrying an American woman, who he later divorced, he made his way to California, where he owned a small store. His twin brother Oskar meanwhile went to school in Germany and grew up saying "Seig heil" every day. Toward the end of the war he joined the Hitler Youth movement.

The two knew of each other, and first met in 1954. The first encounter was awkward, especially since Jack came to Germany from Israel. His brother told him to hide the luggage tags indicating where he had come from and not to let other relatives know that he was a Jew. They were surprised to find that at that first meeting, they were wearing the exact same clothes.

They kept in touch, minimally, but in 1979, at the prodding of Jack's former wife, they met again to participate in the Minnesota Twin Family Study. The subject of a number of books and articles, although they did not hit it off at first, eventually they developed a relationship. Since they were raised so

differently researchers naturally were fascinated by the two. They observed that they had similar tics, mannerisms, and other characteristics. They even walked the same way, and although they spoke different languages, they displayed similar speech patterns when they spoke. They both loved butter and spicy food, liked reading the endings of books first, wrapped tape around pens and pencils to get a better grip, and they both even wore the same kinds of wire framed glasses.

Mr. Yufe outlived his twin brother by 18 years, Oskar having died in Germany of lung cancer in 1997. Both men reflected on the fate that took one to Hitler's Germany and left the other behind in Trinidad. According to Nancy Segal, who wrote, "Born Together — Reared Apart," and "Indivisible by Two," Oskar once told his brother, "If we had been switched, I would have been the Jew and you would have been the Nazi." Although he was glad not to have been "on the other side," he knew that, had circumstances been different, "I would have taken Oskar's place for sure." Perhaps the most important comment he made was when he remarked to the researcher, "Children have no say in what they are taught."

And that is why Judaism insists that we have an obligation to teach our children. Our tradition also asserts that even though our innate tendencies and the environment in which we grow up all influence us, regardless of which is the dominant force in our lives, we have the ability to overcome these factors. Studying Torah helps guide us to make the proper choices.

Ultimately we are responsible for our actions. We cannot place the blame on environment or genetics.

The Midrash says that when the prophet Samuel was told by God to anoint David to be the king of Israel, he was concerned that David would be a killer like Esau since he had a similar complexion and other traits in common with Esau. God told Samuel not to worry though. While it was true, that David may kill others, as did Esau, he would only do it when the Sanhedrin had decided that such action was warranted. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin concludes, "When someone has a basic personality tendency it is a reality of his nature that he will be what he truly is. But a person has free will to choose how this tendency will be manifested." He cites the Vilna Gaon who said that while a person cannot go against his very essence, nevertheless, he can and should train himself to follow the straight path in accordance with his nature.

So while we may never definitively know which factor is most significant – nature or nurture, we do know that we are endowed with free will and self-determination. May we use that gift to make good choices.

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