

## Brotherhood

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this special Shabbat for our Men's Club, which is frequently referred to as "The Brotherhood" in other congregations.

Let's talk about brotherhood. In Western culture, brotherhood is considered the epitome of love. The motto of the French Revolution was "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" -- "Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood". People speak of "the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God". We often hear the line, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother!" People sing, "America! America! God... crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!" Universities have "fraternities". We consider universal brotherhood to be our ideal.

But wait a minute: What does our Jewish tradition say about brotherhood? Do we also consider it the epitome of love? Let's consult our traditional Sources, beginning with the Torah:

-The first two people born of a woman were Cain and Abel, two brothers. The first killed the second. When God asked Cain where his brother was, he said:

I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? [Gen. 4:9]

In other words, why should You assume I should keep track of him just because he is my brother? Not a good beginning for "brotherhood"...

-Abraham's children Ishmael and Isaac were estranged for most of their lives. They came together only to bury their father.

-Isaac's children, the twins Jacob and Esau, fought even while inside their mother's womb (and for the rest of their lives)! Jacob is remembered as the righteous patriarch, the one whose name God changed to Israel and who became the progenitor of the Jews; whereas Esau is the epitome of evil; the ancestor of Amalek, of Rome, of Haman, and of all antisemites past, present and future.

-Jacob's sons ganged up on their brother Joseph, and thought of killing him, but then decided to just sell him into slavery in Egypt.  
 -Moses and Aaron got along and worked well together only because Aaron readily acknowledged the supremacy of his older brother Moses. He was a self-effacing man, known as the consummate “*rodef shalom*” -- the “pursuer of peace”. The Mishna says:  
     Be among the disciples of Aaron -- loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them near to the Torah. [Avot 1:12]  
 Is the lesson here that you have to be completely self-effacing to get along with your brother?

And in the rest of the Bible, the picture does not improve much. Fratricide was common in royal houses, so the murderer could avoid having to live with brothers who also claimed the throne:  
 -Abimelech, son of Gideon the Judge, killed his seventy brothers so that he could rule alone in Shechem. [Judges 9:5]  
 -King David's son Avshalom ordered the killing of his brother Amnon. [2 Samuel 13:28]  
 -King David's son Solomon – the great and wise Solomon -- ordered the killing of his brother Adonyahu. [1 Kings 2:23-25]  
 -Yehoram took over the kingdom of Judah from his father, and promptly killed his six brothers. [2 Chronicles 21:4]

But, you will ask, what about the line from Psalms we sing so often:

הִנֵּה מָה טוֹב וְיָמָּה נָעִים שֶׁבֶת אֲחִים גַּם יַחַד:

*Hinne, ma tov u-manaim, shevet achim gam yachad!*

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity! [Ps. 133:1]

Well, the fact that you have to say it that means that it is an unusual sight, not an expectation. When brothers are at peace with each other, it is indeed a pleasant sight, because it is such a rare one. You don't say, for instance, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when mothers cuddle their baby!” It's true, of course, but you don't bother to say it.

In my own family, in Egypt, my father was the eldest of nine children. (In fact, his birthday is today: He would have been 113!) His father made the bad decision of retiring and giving everything he had to his firstborn, my father; asking him to be in charge of the family,

pay him a pension, marry off his sisters (with dowries), and help his brothers complete their education and start businesses. My father was a fair and honest man, but this situation did not endear him to his siblings, who could never get enough from him. They may well have been tempted to sell him into slavery in Egypt, except that he was already into slavery in Egypt! But I don't want to give you a false impression. Family is family. When I was forced out of Egypt in 1967, I went to Belgium for four months and stayed until I got my refugee visa to come to the United States. Three of my father's siblings lived there. They welcomed me and took care of me.

But, you will also ask, what about the story of the two brothers who loved each other so much that the Holy Temple was built on the site of their tearful reunion? Let me remind you of it.

In ancient Israel two brothers shared a field. One was a bachelor, living at one end, and the other a married man with many children living at the other. After the harvest, the bachelor was worried that his brother did not have enough to feed his family, and the married man was worried his brother would not have enough saved for his old age. So at night each carried some of his own produce to the other's storehouse. After many days of unwitting exchanges the two bumped into each other in the dark, understood why their stocks never decreased, and wept in each other's arms. And Tradition tells us that it's on this very spot that the Holy Temple was built.

This is the stuff of thousands of Jewish sermons, stories and children's books. Under the title, you usually see a vague reference, such as "Inspired from the Talmud" or "Based on the Midrash" or some other euphemism for "I have no idea where this is coming from". Indeed, it is nowhere to be found in the massive sources of Jewish Tradition.

This has long bothered me, so I did some research and found that it bothered many others also, including eminent rabbis and scholars. This is what was established. The first known reference to this story is an 1835 book by Alphonse de Lamartine, a top Gentile French writer, and one of my favorites. He says he got the story from Arabs while visiting the Holy Land. The book was a hit, and, after that, the story was picked up by many authors in many languages, including

Jews, and that's how it came to us. But other than Lamartine's say-so, we don't know any Arabs *today* who have this so-called "tradition". So one is entitled to wonder: Did Lamartine make it up? More likely, was made up just *for* him in exchange for a handout? In the real Jewish tradition, the Bible tells us that the site where the Temple was built was Mount Moriah, where God told Abraham to bind his son Isaac. Nothing about loving brothers. [Gen 22:2, 2Chronicles 3:1]

In Israel, they have their own version of this story. The two brothers were stealing from each other, then one night they bumped into each other, and understood why their stocks never *increased*. They slugged it out all night until dawn, and Tradition tells us that it's on this very spot that the Israeli Knesset was built! Now, this version is certainly less inspiring, but perhaps more realistic.

The worst quarrels are fratricidal. Brothers are frequently jealous of each other, try to outdo each other, and feel that their parents favor the other son. You don't choose your brothers, so why should you be automatically expected to get along with them? You do however, choose your friends. So why isn't true friendship, rather than brotherhood, the epitome of love?

In 1965, Tom Lehrer, the American Jewish lyricist, wrote a song called "National Brotherhood Week", in which he makes fun of the hypocritical use of the word "brotherhood":

Oh, the white folks hate the black folks  
And the black folks hate the white folks  
Oh, the poor folks hate the rich folks  
And the rich folks hate the poor folks  
Oh, the Protestants hate the Catholics  
And the Catholics hate the Protestants  
And the Hindus hate the Moslems  
And everybody hates the Jews...  
But during National Brotherhood Week  
Be nice to people who  
Are inferior to you  
It's only for a week, so have no fear  
Be grateful that it doesn't last all year!

Now, let's back up a minute. To be fair, the word "brotherhood" is not totally devoid of positive meaning in Judaism:

-The Torah says:

And if your brother has become poor... then you shall relieve him... that he may live with you. [Lev. 25:35]

-The Book of Proverbs says:

The Lord hates... those who sow discord among brothers. [Proverbs 6:16~19]

-The Talmud says:

[After the Amidah,] Rabbi Eleazar used to say: May it be Your will, O Lord our God, to cause love and brotherhood and peace and friendship to dwell in our lot. [Berachot 16b, 12a]

So he put brotherhood on the same level as love, peace and friendship.

-A standard prayer begins with “*Achenu kol bet Yisrael* -- Our brothers the whole House of Israel”.

-The last of the seven blessings at a wedding begins with:

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who created joy and happiness, groom and bride, gladness, jubilation, cheer and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and fellowship... [Ket. 8a]

Love and brotherhood -- *ahavah ve-achavah* -- אַהֲבָה וְאַחָוָה . Note the similarity in the words: Ahavah, with a heh, is love; achavah, with a chet, is brotherhood. The spelling itself suggests that they are very close. Of course, if you look at the various translations of the word achavah, in Orthodox circles, more than half the time it is not translated as “brotherhood”, but “friendship”, or “fellowship”, or “companionship”, at least in this context. So “brotherhood” in Hebrew is a wide concept that goes beyond its literal meaning and extends to good friends, just as it does in English. But, nevertheless, it does suggest that the feelings between two real brothers are the epitome of love.

A popular name for congregations is Agudat Achim (or Agudas Achim in Ashkenazic), meaning “A congregation of brothers”. We, more cautiously, went with Adat Reyim, meaning “A gathering of neighbors”. We also wisely went with the more neutral “Men's Club”, rather than the customary “Brotherhood”.

Time to conclude. Brotherhood is a bond in blood. As such it cannot be broken, no matter what, and that's what makes it valuable. Friendships can be broken, but not family ties. Fellowship can be ephemeral, but not family ties. Brothers grow up together. They share memories that last their entire lives. Eventually, in most cases, these bonds do prove strongest and deepest. The examples I gave

earlier are the exception rather than the rule. And by glorifying the concept of brotherhood, our culture encourages real brothers to feel more tolerant towards each other than they would otherwise be.

Here's to brotherhood!

Shabbat shalom.