

Toldot 5767
Brothers
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

Relationships among siblings are some of the most supportive and strong emotional bonds that one will form in a lifetime. Watching my two young children play together is deeply moving ... when it's not incredibly aggravating!

While there are times when Ari will pull out Talya's hair and others when Talya will hide her crayons on a high shelf beyond his reach, there are far more frequent moments where their deep bond is evident. They hug, kiss and dance with each other and each needs to know where the other one is.

Waking up from his nap, Ari will ask "Talya?" - wanting to know where she is. Sometimes he will not get up until he has clarified where Talya is; it's as if he needs to know where she is to feel safe. And often when she is sad or angry, Ari runs after her, wanting to console her. Similarly, Talya looks after her little brother - grabbing him when he starts to run into the street. They share a *kesher*, a deep attachment to each other, that I pray sustains them throughout their lives.

All of us who were or are blessed to have siblings or to grow up with them realize what an intense relationship it is. Our sisters and brothers can be the source of great pain (I am still doing *teshuvah* for the way I teased my sister) or the source of the greatest support we ever receive.

As Alex told us in her *d'var* Torah, this week's Torah reading is *Parashat Toldot*, where we read of the conflict of two brothers, twins - an intense rivalry that begins before birth - and the narrative of Jacob and Esav continues for three Torah readings.

But this parashah, halfway into the book of *Bereisheet*/Genesis, is not the only narrative about sibling difficulties. In fact, much of the book of Genesis can be seen through this prism. It opens with two brothers, Cain and Abel, whose competitive relationship culminates in murder. And it closes with eleven brothers who have problems with their favored brother, Joseph. Along the way, we find other narratives that relate the complex feelings that exist between siblings; for example, the powerful episode where Rachel allows her sister to deceive her beloved Jacob.

There are some clear patterns that emerge from the book of *Bereisheet*.

First, in the ancient world, there was a clear bias in favor of the first-born child. This is enshrined in laws that grant the first born a double portion of the family's estate. But the Torah is clearly uncomfortable with this and, while it does not change the inheritance laws, it has its readers rethink the validity of this practice. Time and time again, the younger child is chosen over the first born; they are promised to continue the

generations and they are clearly favored. This occurs with Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esav, and Joseph over his brothers. In fact, this continues throughout the Tanakh – see the example of David, the youngest of seven, who becomes Israel’s second king. The Torah’s message is clear: leadership is not based on birth, but on merit. As a parent, I see the logic in this – we make mistakes with our first born, but with subsequent children maybe we learn from experience how to parent better – or at least differently.

Second, there are clear lessons in parenting. Over and over, we see the dangers of favoring one child over another. Esav and Jacob’s rivalry is fueled by their parents: Isaac bonds more closely with Esav and Rebecca loves and protects Jacob to the detriment of her other son. This is then replicated in Jacob’s destructive act of loving Joseph more than his other sons.

Third, this week’s parashah discusses siblings who are twins: this was a particularly challenging blessing, especially in the ancient world. Often, one or both identical twins were killed because of the lack of clarity about who would be in charge, the threat to social order. Humans have a need for categorization, for labeling and understanding all things, and twins can make this far more difficult.

But again, the Torah twists the stereotype – there is great conflict and competition between these two brothers, but there is more to the story than this week’s episode. When Alex and I were discussing the *parashah*, we realized that this sibling narrative cannot be read without its subsequent chapters. Next week, Jacob runs away from his brother and starts his own family (getting deceived a number of times along the way – what goes around comes around!).

And finally, two weeks from now, this narrative reaches its apex: Jacob and Esav’s reunion. They come together and there is no fighting. In his book *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred*, James Williams points out that while this rivalry has potential for great violence - Esav after all decides to kill his brother in this morning’s reading - there is none. In fact, while Jacob fears and prepares for a violent confrontation when he returns twenty years later, something extraordinarily different occurs.

The Torah states that Jacob “went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esav ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept – *Veyehabkeihu Va’yipol al-tzavarav va’yishakeihu v’yivku.*” (Gen. 33:3-4) Hollywood could not write it any more powerfully. Feeling the compelling emotionality of this scene, our ancient scribes placed dots over the word: *va’yishakeihu* – he kissed him to teach us how critical and how intense reconciliation is. This sincere kiss of Esav comes to heal the rift between the two brothers.

There is also a kiss in this morning’s reading: Isaac says to Jacob (who he thinks is Esav): “‘*G’sha na u’shka-li b’ni* – come close and kiss me, my son;’ and he (Jacob) went up and kissed him. And Isaac smelled his clothes (fake clothes) and he blessed him, saying: ‘Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that Adonai has blessed.’”

(Gen. 27:26-27). This is a kiss of deceit that is the final lie that brings Jacob his father's blessing. But when Jacob and Esav reunite, the kiss has been transformed to that of deep love, creating healing between these formerly estranged brothers.

Jacob also blessed his brother Esav, stating that seeing "your face is like seeing the face of God." (Gen 33:10) Presenting Esav with gifts, Jacob returns the blessing he had stolen twenty years earlier. The Hebrew text is brilliant: Jacobs says, "*Kah-na et-birkhati* – please accept my present," but *birkhati* also means, my blessing. With these gifts, Jacob is making restitution and returning his ill-gotten blessing to his brother.

Here we find two brothers, twins, seemingly destined to harm each other from their days of fighting in the womb. The likelihood of violence rises up as Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright and his father's blessing, but instead the Torah presents us with reconciliation.

Widening our perspective from these brothers to all the siblings in the book of Genesis, we find a clear trend. While the book opens with murder and closes with potential murder (see Joseph's brothers almost killing him before they sell him into slavery), the dominant theme is reconciliation. Ishmael and Isaac come together and bury their father. Esav forgives Jacob as Joseph forgives his brothers.

There are two clear lessons for us: one is personal and the other on a larger scale. First, while we all face challenges in our relationships with others including our siblings, we can heal and transform these relationships. The Torah's message is clear: we can change the negative dynamics that seem to lock us in bad patterns with others.

Second, all humanity are our brothers and sisters, and we must reach out to them. Genesis opens with brothers: Cain and Abel. After Cain kills Abel, God asks him where his brother is. And Cain responds: "*Hashomeir ahi anokhi* – Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9) That is one of the central questions of the book of *Bereisheet*: are we our brothers' keepers?

The Torah's answer is an emphatic yes. We are. We can and we must heal our broken relationships. But this extends beyond our actual siblings. In the Torah, "brother" can mean more distant relatives, fellow tribesman and others. As the prophet Malakhi asks a couple of verses after the conclusion of this morning's *haftarah*: "Have we all not one father? Has not one God created us?" (Mal. 2:10)

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we should remind ourselves of our obligation to take care of our brothers and sisters around the globe and specifically those in Darfur. At our Lexington Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, Gabriel Mabil, a refugee from Sudan who escaped the violence, spoke about his experiences in Darfur: close to half a million killed and 2.5 million displaced, with terrible atrocities occurring on a regular basis.

We are our siblings' keepers – whether they are family members, other Jews or people half way around the globe who have no oil, natural resources or allies to help

them. The Torah tells us to help them. So, I ask that you take one of these blue sheets home with you; they list ten simple steps to help alleviate the situation in Darfur. Pick one or two, call the White House for five minutes on Monday or take another action step. Contact our social action committee or our Darfur chair, Barbara Palant, to let her know what you are doing. Just as estranged brothers can reconcile, we can help brothers in need.

It was told of the great Russian novelist, Turgenev, that once he was walking in the streets and was stopped by a beggar. Turgenev dug his hands into his pockets and found that he had brought no money with him. He turned to the beggar and said, "I'm sorry, brother, but I have no money to give you."

The beggar smiled and said, "You don't have to give me any money. You have already given me a precious gift. You've called me *brother*."

May the Torah inspire us to renew our relationships and reach out to our brothers in need. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.