

Recurring brotherly conflicts...

Toldot 5782/2021

What is with brothers fighting one another? The Book of Bereshit is full of internal familial conflict. This week's Parasha opens with God giving prophecy to Rebecca¹ and from the very beginning of Jacob and Esau's lives, they are thrown into a place of tumult. Their story reads very similarly to that of humanity's first brotherly pair, Cain and Abel². One is a hunter, one is a man of the field, an agrarian. They both engage with one another in competition like behaviour, and they both come out the other side in a state of conflict and loss. In the story of the emerging children of Israel, we also see the brothers disliking Joseph, again choosing conflict and loss over unity and connection³. There is a lot of cross over of genesis stories (global, national, familial) stemming out of recurring brotherly conflicts.

Angel Barahona explains that the reason why the image of brotherly conflict occurs in both Jewish classical sources, as well as ancient Greek, Persian, Roman and Eastern cultures, is that conflict occurs when both desire the same object, even if they want to go about different ways of making their goals a reality⁴. This sets up the picture of two warring brothers in a genesis story, that tells us that ultimately the idea – the world, the nation, the city, the tribe etc – was a good idea, the conflict was on how best to make it a reality, and as such, you don't need to worry about the outcome, because the battle was hard fought and the ultimate victor remains.

Francis Nataf in Redeeming Relevance goes a step further. In explaining the conflict between Esau and Jacob, he writes that Sages explained that while Esau wanted control of the physical world, but also like Jacob, the spiritual world as well. Jacob and Esau wanted the same thing. The difference with Jacob's victory, is that would one day open the door for the decedents of both Jacob and Esau to one day be friends – to not be brothers at war, but brothers in arms⁵.

I think this is the ideal goal of the Jewish people – to realise that we do not have to be brothers at war but would actually be better served by being brothers in arms. Famous Israeli filmmaker, Etgar Keret explains that despite that original best intention, the way of modern-day discourse has ripped us back into the brothers at war stage⁶.

I have long wondered how we can get back to the idyllic goal of unity without it being a virtue signalling or fluff filled enterprise.

I wonder if we focus on the opening words introducing us to our warring twins we might be able to find something deeper. The Torah tells us that Jacob emerged holding his brother's heel (ekev), and so he was called Yaakov. Usually this is explained as the first moment of conflict. However, the Daat Zekenim tells us that Yaakov also represents four ways in which Jacob's decedents would crown God. The yud (10) represents the ten commandments, ayin (70) represents the seventy elders that would form the Sanhedrin, the kuf (100) represents the one hundred cubit Temple that Solomon built, and the bet (2) represents the two tablets which held the Ten Commandments. Perhaps he wasn't creating conflict, but rather grasping onto something that was also toiling in both the physical and spiritual world, and could inspire his own goals.

If we realise that we have common goals, we don't need to create conflict to make them realised – we can work together arms in arms.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud – Chayei Sarah 5782**