

Toldot 5781

Rejecting Opposites

This week we meet Esau and Jacob. Like Cain and Abel before them, they appear to have absolutely nothing in common. Esau is outdoorsy, physical, apparently not very bright: Jacob is a homebody. Within the Rabbinic tradition there's a clear preference for Jacob. The Rabbis imagine him studying in a Bet Midrash whilst identifying Esau with Rome and everything they perceive as its shortcomings.

And the way the Torah presents these two brothers really is binary. Even their parents are lined up one on each side, with Isaac loving Esau and Rebecca loving Jacob. Despite the fact that these two are twins, that they shared the same womb for nine months having been beseeched and prayed for by their parents, we could almost divide this parashah into two columns, with a birthright tossed over the empty space in between.

And yet.

David will know that sometimes in acting you need to play 'against the line' - that something you might want to shout at the top of your voice becomes more effective if whispered. The same is true of the way that we read text. Sometimes reading against the plain meaning reveals a wealth of subtle clues and exposes deep questions.

And of course I'm going to suggest that Toldot is one of those texts, and of course I'm going to say that if we read it that way there are profound gifts for us to gather.

In his luminously insightful book *Not In God's Name*, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory - it's still hard to say those words - delves into the subject of religious violence, and particularly violence between the Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity, Islam. He traces that bloody heritage back to the narratives of sibling rivalry in the Tanakh, and particularly to the struggle between Esau and Jacob and the way they are set in opposition to each other. And he devotes a whole chapter to reading their story as both narrative and counter-narrative - one apparent story on the surface of the text, a whole other story going on beneath if we read it 'against the line.'

This morning we will consider just one tiny aspect of his masterful analysis - the idea that beneath all the oppositions there is actually a greater similarity than we think. And to make my case, I want to look at part of just one sentence, which is only five words long.

It comes from the narrative of the birthright at the start of the parashah (see page 148, 25:34). While the English splits the sentence in two, it's only one in Hebrew - the only occurrence of five consecutive verbs in the whole of Tanakh:

vayokhal vayesht vayakom vayelexh vayivez

[Esau] ate and drank and rose and went and spurned [the birthright].

What a superb portrait of the Esau we know from the story. In just five words, everything: his haste, his appetite, his physicality, his speed, his impulsiveness. Even if we did not know him from before, this sentence would tell us everything about him that we need to know.

And yet, if we look at the arc of Jacob's story, we can see exactly the same themes, though they are worked out over chapters rather than in consecutive words.

vayakhol - he ate. Food - or the lack of it - is a critical theme in Jacob's story. After the exchange of a bowl of stew for the firstborn's birthright - in an ingenuously 'fair' bargain - Jacob uses food actively to deceive his father. To this day, there's a piece of an animal that we don't eat in memory of the angelic damage to Jacob's hip. And this theme of food at the beginning of his story is in inverse parallel to the lack of it at the end - the famine in the land of Canaan which drives him to Egypt to be once again reunited with his son.

vayesht - he drank. Jacob first deceives his father with wine. Then, when he comes to the land of 'the easterners' the first thing he sees is a well of water - the well he will uncover for Rachel, his true love, in a feat of Superman-style strength. Jacob becomes wealthy under the nose of his tricky uncle by using a clever piece of natural magic in the water-troughs of his goats.

vayakom - he rose. While we think of Jacob as fleeing immediately after the deception, he is in fact instructed to leave by Isaac using just these words (*kum lekh padena aram* - 28:2). And while *vayakom* is a common word in Biblical Hebrew, it is used to introduce perhaps the most critical episode in Jacob's life, the one in which he wrestles with the angel (32:23).

vayelekh - he went. The best evidence of this is the way that Jacob can't seem to settle anywhere. He leaves Canaan and goes east; he leaves Laban and heads back to Canaan; from Canaan he will eventually end his life in Egypt. The whole of next week's parashah, *vayetze*, is one single continuous paragraph, reflecting the way that he never rests. For a person presented as not very physical, Jacob covers a great deal of ground.

vayivez - he spurned. Esau spurns his family position: Jacob spurns people. In common with his grandfather, his strength is not in his personal relationships, and in common with his father, he has favorites. He loves Rachel to Leah's detriment; he loves Joseph to the detriment of all his other children, and he hardly even seems to have a relationship with his only daughter. He arranges his family to meet Esau with those he considers most dispensable at the front of the line. There's a kind of emotional ruthlessness in him that far outpaces Esau's impetuosity.

So perhaps the 'deception scene' of one brother dressing as the other isn't quite what it seems. Perhaps that scene is there to underline the counter-narrative - that beneath the surface, these two brothers have far more in common than it might first seem. Perhaps their rivalry has its source not in their differences but their similarities. [Perhaps, like Yale and Harvard or Oxford and Cambridge, they compete because they fear that they are too much the same.]

I guess it's becoming clear by now where we might go with these ideas at this particular time. One of the things that has been keeping me up at night is how we hold on to a sense of community - especially at a time when the culture in which we live has become so polarized. I'm not saying we all need to sit in a circle and hold hands - actually, we can't do that anyway - but I wonder whether, when we disagree, we might also try to identify points of similarity. Perhaps our understanding of Judaism can be expanded by not defaulting to the position of argument; perhaps, below the surface, against the line, in the counter-narrative, there are points of agreement too.

Jacob and Esau ultimately come back together. The question is, can we do the same?