

SERMON: Toledot

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Nov 9, 2018

THE TWINS THAT WRESTLE WITHIN US

This week's Torah portion, *Toledot*, tells us about the conception and early lives of Jacob and Esau. It also tells us a great deal about Isaac and Rebecca's relationship with each other and with their sons. It begins like this:

וַאֲלֵהּ תוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם אֲבִרְהֵם הוֹלִיד אֶת-יִצְחָק:
וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקַחְתּוֹ אֶת-רִבְקָה בִּת-בְּתוּאֵל הַעָרָמִי
מִפְּדָן אַרְם אֵחֹת לָבָן הָעָרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

וַיַּעֲמֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִיא וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְהוָה
וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: יִתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה
זֶה אֲנִי וַתִּלְוֶה לְדָרֹשׁ אֶת-יְהוָה:

Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the twins struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the LORD,

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גַיִם [גוֹיִם] בְּבֶטְנֶךָ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ
 יִפְרְדוּ וּלְאֵם מִלְאָם יִאָּמֵץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

and the LORD answered her, “Two nations are in your womb, Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.”

Tonight, I want to concentrate on this line:

יִתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי
But the twins struggled in her womb, and she said, “If so, why do I exist?”

Another translation would be: *“Why is this happening to me?”*

As I watched the election returns on Tuesday night, I also thought, “why is this happening to me?”

And because I was also studying up on the weekly parasha, I couldn’t help but think that this nation, like Rebecca, has twins struggling within it, each fighting for dominance, each convinced of that it is right in its claim for dominance. And while I am concerned about some of the results, and very relieved about others, it seems to me that it is still not clear what will be born from this struggle of twin visions of our future.

After they are born, Jacob and Esau continue to fight for dominance, and Jacob and Rebecca plot and cheat Esau from winning the election, and in what is an early example of Fox News spin, the great early rabbis claim that Esau was the cheat all along, and Rebecca and Jacob were simply saving Isaac from a wild man. The rabbis seem very invested in making Jacob right, and blaming Esau, despite the obvious meaning of the text. Confirmation Bias is very old. So is sibling rivalry.

So I was not very satisfied with the rabbinic commentary, but there was one commentary on this verse that I found very interested. It is in the Tanya, written in 1797; the Tanya is the great work of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Chabad rebbe.

In his commentary on this verse, the Alter Rebber makes a provocative argument that in each of us, there wrestle two souls, each struggling for dominance. Drawing on a wide range of source, the Alter Rebbe says that we are each born with no one soul, but two.

- Nefesh HaElohit Our God-Seeking Divine Soul
- Nefesh hachiyonit habehemit / nefesh beinoni

The Vitalizing Animal Soul

The Nefesh HaChiyonit HaBehemit is the animating force of our bodies and our lives. It is the force for survival, the part that knows how to make things, to get things done – it is the part of us that is Esau, the person in the world, “ish sadeh” the person of the field, as the Torah describes him. It is not evil; it is quite necessary. It is how we survive in this world.

The Nefesh Elohit, is the Joseph within us, the “ish tam,” the part of us that seeks beyond ourselves, looks for meaning, is drawn to the tabernacle, drawn past our limited egos and seeks serenity, and connection with the infinite.

Take a moment and reflect on how this idea might manifest in you.

- Do you have an Esau that kicks in to make things happen and get things done?
- Do you have a Joseph that is more seeking of meaning, of God, of serenity?
- How do they get along?
- When does each kick in?

Neither of these twins, according to the Tanya, is “the real us.”

Neither, according to Yiscah Smith, at Pardes Institute, “embodies or defines Good and Evil. They are each God created, God bestowed and God-appointed centers of consciousness.”

Each wants to control the body and its organs, including the heart and the mind, the seats of emotion, devotion and reason. Each is constantly encroaching on the other’s turf.

A person attains a certain level of groundedness, a sense of a spiritual life, is doing the right thing when suddenly a not-so-holy thought invades her mind or heart. And likewise, sometimes when we are indulging our physical desires and animal needs, a very lofty thought might pop into our heads and change our lives. Often at moments of holiness, our other soul will insert itself, in sudden bursts of energy, like twins wrestling in the womb of who we are becoming.

Does that mean we are doomed to eternal inner turmoil? Yes, to some degree. It is an integral and valuable part of the human condition. Remember, we are Yisra’el, those who wrestle with God. There is meaning in that wrestling.

But as the Mussar ethical tradition of Judaism teachers, the key is not in having one win over the other, but in finding ways to balance them. Or as Yiscah Smith calls it, “we must learn the skill of spiritual conflict resolution.”

Inner peace, wholeness, *shalom*, doesn’t come from the victory of one over the other, but from the awareness of each, paying attention to when each is activated, and learning to hold them both in balance.

To be both spiritual people with a connection to what is larger, and to be people in the world, we must learn the spiritual practice of honoring both, and having them learn to communicate instead of fight. It is a

form of Jewish mindfulness. We do not need to conquer; we need to coexist.

I believe that if we were better at this “spiritual conflict resolution,” individually, we might be less in conflict as a nation. It seems to me that people feel threatened, their Nefesh HaChiyuvit haBehemit kicks in, and if we are not careful, the fight response, the survival instinct overpowers our larger sense of good and right, takes it over, if you will, so we get a religious zealotry about attacking what we feel is threatening us. When this happens, religion and politics becomes the slave to wars, big and small. We go to our corners.

But when we live too much, individually or nationally, in our Nefesh Elohit, we also can lose sight of practicality, of how humans actually work, and come up with plans that don't work. We can forget, so to speak, to eat lunch. We can forget that others want to harm us, and that's not paranoia or neurosis. It's lived experience. It's knowledge of history.

And so as we move forward from the election, from Pittsburgh, as we move forward with all the problems that face us, let's not forget to take some time and try to balance our twin souls, try to get them to have a conversation, take time to reflect, to think for ourselves about the balance of these in our lives. Let's work on the skill of spiritual conflict resolution, both within ourselves, and within our nation and world.

And let us always remember, it is both a very troubling time to live through, and it is still a Wonderful World.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon

