



## The Observant Life Book Club

# SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

(Source: “Between Siblings”, David M. Greenstein, *The Observant Life*, Martin S. Cohen, Senior Editor, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012, pp. 693-708)

### TEXT

In preparation for this book club session members should choose which sibling relationship to study and then report on the dynamics of the relationship they chose to study for the first part of the meeting. (Some of these relationships have a great deal of text so perhaps they can be split between two members.) There is material on this subject for more than one session!

- *Cain & Abel* – Genesis 4
- *Isaac & Ishmael* – Genesis 17:21:1-21; 25
- *Jacob & Esau* – Genesis 25:19-34; 26:34-35; 27-28:9; 32:4-33:20; 36:1-8
- *Rachel & Leah* – Genesis 29-30:24; 31
- *Dina & her brothers* – Genesis 34
- *Jacob's sons* – Genesis 37; 42-48
- *Moses & his siblings* – Exodus 1-2; 3:16-4:31

### DISCUSSION

1. No happy parents in Genesis?
  - a. Based upon what each member has reported would you agree with Rabbi Greenstein's observation, “There are no happy families in Genesis.”? (p. 697)
  - b. Why are there so many troubled sibling relationships in the Torah? Does the Torah portray relationships realistically?
  - c. Do group members have experiences they can share about their own siblings or know of situations with siblings that resemble the ones in the Bible?
  - d. What does it say about our sacred text that it includes such portrayals of families?
2. The role of the parents
  - a. Rabbi Greenstein notes about Cain & Abel “Though these brothers are the first humans to have human parents, those parents are not the source of their tragic conflict....”
  - b. It is as if the Torah were saying that the bitterest forms of sibling rivalry do not require parental malfeasance, real or perceived.” (p. 694)
  - c. Do you agree that such rivalry can occur without parental “malfeasance”? To what extent is parental “malfeasance” responsible for the hostility between Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers?

### 3. Brothers

- a. Rabbi Greenstein notes that “When it comes to stories of brothers the salient thread running through the Genesis narratives is their inability to dwell together” (p.695) and
- b. “Only by acknowledging the reality of sibling rivalry and learning to master it can siblings hope to find an emotionally healthy and ethical way to live in harmony with each other.” (p. 694). In spite of the hostility between brothers in Genesis is there also evidence that in most cases they learn to live in harmony with each other? For which of the relationships discussed is there reconciliation? What do you think the Torah wants us to take away from these stories?

### **RABBINIC TEXTS ON SIBLINGS**

In spite of the difficult relationship among siblings in Genesis, Rabbi Greenstein reminds us that the Torah assumes “a deep and powerful bond between siblings” and uses the terms “brother”, “friend” and “neighbor” interchangeably when demanding “Do not hate your brother in your heart, but admonish your friend so that you will not place a sin upon him... Rather you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus19:17-18). And in fact, we do see reconciliation as the final outcome for most of the relationships discussed earlier and the rabbis adopt this approach to sibling relationships as opposed to the conflicted relationships in the Bible. Thus, the rabbis see all siblings as equally responsible for the care of their parents as they age and become infirm even if they have painful memories of their childhood or even if one sibling was preferred over the others. And in rabbinic tradition the prohibition against favoritism (unlike the stories of the Torah) extends to issues of inheritance and brothers “are obliged to see to the needs of their sisters until those sisters are married” according to the laws of the Mishnah (p. 698) which is an example of progressive “family law” in ancient Israel.

### **QUESTIONS**

1. Do you find that these values work in practice? Has it been your experience that siblings maintain a sense of connection and a common commitment to caring for parents and each other? Does the Isaac/Ishmael or Jacob/Esau model work in time for a real reconciliation? Can siblings recover from events like those in Jacob’s family?
2. What are the kinds of issues that tend to work against sibling cooperation as we age and often move far away from the family home? Have you experienced tensions arising over:
  - a. Finances?
  - b. Life styles differences?
  - c. Sibling partners?
  - d. Inter marriage?
3. Have you found ways to restore family relationships when they have been seriously damaged? Can you share some insights?