



My Brother's/Sister's Keeper: Wrestling with Sibling Relations

Parashat Tol'dot, Genesis 25:19-28:6 | By Mark Greenspan

“Between Siblings” by David Greenstein (pp. 693) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

The Psalmist proclaims, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers/sisters dwell together” (Psalm 133:1). Yet these words ring hollow as we read Genesis. Beginning with Cain and Abel, Genesis records a series of painful and tragic incidents involving sibling rivalry. David Greenstein points out that there is something paradoxical in the way the Bible addresses sibling relationships. On the one hand, the Bible devotes a great deal of attention to sibling relationships gone badly. At the same time, it understands the term ‘brother’ as the paradigm for ethical responsibility between all people. The terms, ‘brother,’ ‘friend,’ and ‘neighbor’ are used interchangeably as expressions of the innate connection that we have to others – even strangers. The Torah challenges us to see all people as our brothers/sisters. We are commanded to treat the needy with compassion and caring because they are our “kin” (see Isaiah 58:7).

The sages were unkind to Esau. He came to embody the nation of Edom and the Roman Empire. As a result, Esau is often depicted as a wicked idolater and aggressor. When we read the Torah on its own terms, without a rabbinic bias, we find a more nuanced image of who he was and his relationship with Jacob. Feuding siblings often demonize each other and fail to see their own faults or the good in their sibling. The Bible can teach us something about the ethics of sibling relations by looking at the pitfalls and failures of our ancestors as well as the insights of *halakhab*.

What responsibilities do we have to our brothers and sisters? How should we treat them and what can we expect of them? And given that this relationship will never be completely ideal, how can we balance the complexities of sibling relationships with the ideals of the psalmist?

The children struggled in her womb and she said, “if so, why do I exist?” She went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one shall be mightier than the other; the older, the younger, shall serve.” When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob...when the boys grew up Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; But Jacob was a mild man who stayed in the camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebecca favored Jacob.

- Genesis 25:21-29

Sources and Resources

- a. *Esau: numerous attempts have been made to denigrate Esau in Midrash and even in current biblical interpretation. It is not justified according to the text. The motive is understandable: Jacob's behavior in the matters of the birthright and the blessing is an embarrassment. Even small children express surprise at what this patriarch does to his brother - and his father. The Torah neither denigrates Esau nor justifies Jacob. On the contrary, one of the great qualities of the Tanakh is precisely that none of its heroes are perfect. Moreover, Jacob suffers some corresponding recompense for every deception he commits, as do Laban, Rachel, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Joseph's other brothers. The lesson, therefore, is not only that people are not perfect but also that acts of deception can fester in a family and that they have consequences. Those who try to excuse Jacob and turn Esau into a villain are unfortunately hiding these essential lessons of the Torah.*
- Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (Genesis 25:27)
- b. *The Sale of the Birthright: The provisions of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 establish that at some point it had been legally and socially acceptable in Israel for the father to ignore seniority of birth. We know also that Jacob deprived Reuben of his birthright... Further, Genesis 48:13 tells us that Jacob passed over Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim. Added to these examples is the documentation from Nuzi, Alalakh, and Ugarit all confirming the same socio-legal situation.*
- Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*
- c. *If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and unloved have borne him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the unloved one, when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as the firstborn, the son of the unloved one in disregard of the son the unloved who is older. Instead he must accept the firstborn, the son of the unloved one, and allot him a double portion, of all he possesses; since he is the first fruit of his vigor, the birth right is his due.*
- Deuteronomy 21:15-15
- d. *But if any man hate his brother, and lie in ambush for him: (Deuteronomy 19:11). From this verse the sages inferred: When a man violates an easy precept, he will in the end violate a grave precept. If a man violates the precept "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), he will in the end violate successively "You shall not hate your brother" (Leviticus 19:17), "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge" (Leviticus 19:18), and "That your brother may live with you" (Leviticus 36:22), until finally he comes to shed blood, as is said, "If any man hate his neighbor, he will come to lie in ambush for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally" (Deuteronomy 19:11).*
- *Sifrei Devarim* 186-187
- e. *Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Judah Ha-nasi was about to pass away he said, 'I require the presence of my sons.' When his sons entered into his presence he instructed them: 'Take care that you show due respect to your mother... 'Take care that you show due respect to your mother.' Is not this instruction a Torah law, since it is written, "Honor your father and your mother?" She was their stepmother. Is not the commandment to honor a stepmother also Torah law, for it was taught: "Honor you father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12) 'you father' includes 'your stepmother', 'and your mother' includes 'your stepfather,' and the superfluous *vav* includes 'your elder brother?' This exposition was meant to apply during one's own parents' lifetime but not after their death.*
- BT *Ketubot* 103a
- f. *Oh that you were as my brother: (Song of Songs 8:1). Like what kind of brother? From the beginning until the present, you find brothers who hated each other: Cain hated Abel and slew him, Ishmael hated Isaac and sought to slay him, Esau hated Jacob, and the tribal fathers hated Joseph. Like what kind of brother, then? Like Moses and Aaron;*

of them it is said, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psalms 133:1). Each loved the other, each cherished the other. When Moses was given the kingship and Aaron the high priesthood, not only was neither brother envious of the other, but each rejoiced in the distinction accorded to the other. You can see for yourself that it was so. For you find that when the Holy One told Moses, "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh" (Exodus 3:10), Moses replied, "O Lord, make someone else Thy messenger" (Exodus 4:13). Do you suppose Moses held back because he did not wish to go? Not at all. He spoke as he did out of respect for Aaron. For Moses said to himself: Before I appeared, my brother Aaron prophesied to Israel in Egypt for eighty years. So Moses said to God: Aaron has been prophesying to Israel during all those years--am I now to enter my brother's domain, and cause him to grieve? That is the real reason why Moses did not wish to go. So the Holy One said to him: Aaron will not be disturbed because of what I ask you to do. Not only will he not grieve, he will even rejoice, as you will find out when he goes forth to meet you, as is said, "Even now he is setting out to meet you and he will be happy in his heart to see you!" (Exodus 4:14) He will express his happiness not merely in words, but also with his heart; indeed, even more in his heart than in his mouth. When God told him this, Moses consented to go.

-Tanhumah, Shemot 27-28

Reflections

In just a few verses, the Torah tells us everything we need to know about the complex relationship between Esau and Jacob. Neither is depicted as a villain nor as an angel. Their conflict begins before they are born. In some ways God is responsible for the rivalry when He tells their mother, "Two nations are in your womb" (Genesis 25:21). What was Rebecca supposed to think? It was inevitable that she would take sides and try to actualize the oracle, at least as she understood it. Yet the meaning of the oracle is not at all clear. Friedman, elsewhere in his commentary, suggests that the final line of the oracle is not clear. Does it mean that the older shall serve the younger or that the younger will serve the older? Rebecca understands it to mean that Jacob is to be the dominant son who will receive God's blessing and dominate his older brother. They two boys are also separated by character and interests. They are even physically different from one another; Esau is red and ruddy while Jacob is soft and smooth skinned. Finally, with parental favoritism it was inevitable that this family would be wracked by controversy and discord. In a sense, the conflict between Esau and Jacob was a perfect storm caused by personal, parental, and even theological factors. There is no attempt to judge here – simply a statement that sometimes children are so different they simply don't get along.

The Bible sees no need to create special rules for the relationship between brothers and sisters. This is something that ought to come about naturally. And yet it also understands that the relationship between siblings is fraught with complexities. Children will always wonder if they are the favored child, and parents unfortunately all too often show favoritism that is destructive to the relationship between their children. Even when they don't, children will sometimes see it. Interestingly, in the story of Cain and Abel, the rivalry is not over parental love but acceptance by God. In a sense we might speak of the conflicts between religions as a form of sibling rivalry. Greenstein is correct then in arguing that our responsibilities as children and as siblings should be more significant than the petty differences that divide us. He argues that our relationship to brothers and sisters is precious and needs to be nurtured even when the circumstances under which it developed were not optimal.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *The Torah lacks any explicit statement regarding sibling relationships that parallels the mitzvah to honor one's parents, given such pride of place in the Ten Commandments, or the fundamental parental mandate to raise children to love and service of God. Nevertheless, the Torah assumes a deep and powerful bond between siblings, a bond that can be appealed to effectively as the basis of proper ethical conduct toward perfect strangers.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- b. *The Torah uses the terms, “brother, “friend” and “neighbor interchangeably”...By viewing the entire population, citizens and strangers alike, as our brothers and sisters, we are concomitantly moved to treat everyone fairly.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- c. *Adult siblings must equally attend to their aging father or mother, even though he or she may have overtly preferred one of them as a child. No sibling may try to place the burden of looking after their parent solely on another...*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- d. *The tradition sought to expand the commandment to honor one’s parents to include other family members whenever appropriate and possible. The Talmud, for example, reads the fifth commandment to include the obligation to honor one’s older brother or sister.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- e. *It is unrealistic and unethical to ask people simply to throw away their memories of the past... The biblical emphasis on narrative in its teachings about sibling relationships may be interpreted as a tacit recognition that these relationships are subject to the divergent and shared narratives that connect siblings to one another.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- f. *Whatever the relationship might have been when all siblings were alive, the Torah teaches that it is important for a person to be present at the burial of his or her siblings and also formally to mourn their passing.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

- g. *Siblings are commanded by the Torah to help each other when they are in dire straits...In these cases the Torah explicitly charges the family of such individuals to come to their aid...the helpful sibling is called a “redeemer.”*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 693

Questions to Ponder

1. Why does the book of Genesis devote so much effort to describing the relationships between siblings? Why does this become less relative from Exodus on?
2. Was the relationship between Moses and Aaron (and Miriam) ideal? Why or why not? What can we take from their relationship that might help us in our daily lives?
3. Greenstein points out that inevitably one child or another tends to take greater responsibility in caring for aging parents? How can the other siblings help when they are not available or incapable of caring for their parents? How can the family avoid resentment?
4. What can parents do to avoid causing sibling rivalry? Is rivalry avoidable?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan