

“Hardwiring Gone Haywire: The Tribalist Impulse from Genesis to Great Neck”

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“Homo sapiens evolved to think of people as divided into ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

—Yuval Noah Harari

We’ve been having some very interesting conversations in our Shabbat morning Torah study lately about Jacob and Esau, the twin brothers whose relationship is characterized by rivalry, deception, treachery, anxiety, death threats, and estrangement.

It’s a constant source of wonderment to our group as to why Jacob always seems to get away with his less than exemplary behavior, while Esau seems to be unfairly labeled as the bad guy.

Consider what we know about the two brothers:

Esau, we are told, is a hairy man with a ruddy complexion. He’s an outdoorsy kind of guy; he likes to hunt, and he’s good at it.

And he would come back famished from hunting because hunting is hard work (I assume)—and he was known to make dumb decisions when he was hungry.

Isaac, the boys’ father, favors Esau, and Esau is obedient and respectful toward him.

One day, when Isaac asks Esau to go out hunting and then bring him a tasty meal, Esau dutifully obeys, to his great personal detriment—because it’s then that his rightful blessing as the firstborn is stolen from him by his brother.

After vowing to kill Jacob for this, Esau goes off and marries a woman from outside the community. And this makes his mother so upset she says, “I am disgusted with my life.” (How’s that for some ancient Jewish-mother guilt?)

Meanwhile, here’s what we know about Jacob:

Unlike his brother, Jacob has a mild temperament and prefers the indoors.

But he’s perhaps smarter—or, at least, more cunning—than his brother, and he exploits that to his advantage.

When Esau comes in famished from the hunt and asks Jacob for some of the stew he’s cooking, Jacob says, “Sure...if you give me your birthright.” And Esau agrees to the deal.

Then, at the urging of his mother, Jacob dresses up like his brother and deceives his blind father into giving *him* the blessing instead of Esau.

And, amazingly, when God gives Jacob a special blessing after his famous dream, Jacob says he’ll accept it *only* on the condition that God will continue to do things for him.

Bottom line: Jacob is kind of an ungrateful jerk who takes advantage of people in vulnerable situations. By contrast, Esau comes off as, well, an honest and simple guy who is wronged by his family on multiple occasions.

And thus, the question: Why, exactly, do we think of Jacob as the good guy and Esau as the villain?

Well, I think it comes down, ultimately, to one thing: evolution. Let me explain.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his outstanding book *The Righteous Mind*, takes us on a journey back to the beginnings of the human species.

“For millions of years,” Haidt explains, “our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions that could fend off challenges and attacks from rival groups. We are the descendants of successful tribalists,”¹ he says.

Over time, we humans have evolved to be tribal beings. And this tribalism is encoded in our DNA as an instinctual means of survival.

In fact, as Haidt puts it, “we love tribalism so much [that] we seek out ways to form groups and teams that can compete” in different areas of life.

Sports, politics, and religion are some of the ways we give expression to our tribalistic urges. We love competing to vanquish the other side and take home the trophy in whatever form it comes: a Super Bowl ring, The White House, or eternal salvation.

And how do we form our tribes and strengthen them against other ones?

The Israeli historian Yuval Harari explains that it comes down to one thing that homo sapiens, uniquely among all the species of the world, can do—and that is: by *telling stories*.

The ability to make up stories and convince other humans to believe in them, says Harari, is what has made our species the dominant one in all of existence. Why? It’s all about cooperation.

No other animal species demonstrates the ability to cooperate at the mass level that human beings can.

While all other species only cooperate, to the extent that they do, with those they know—like family or pack members—Harari explains that for humans, storytelling enables large numbers of strangers to work together toward common goals.

As he puts it: “Any large-scale human cooperation—whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city, or an archaic tribe—is rooted in common myths. ...”²

So, what does this all have to do with why we see Jacob as the good guy and Esau as the villain?

The answer is because we Jews, like all other human beings, are tribalist by nature.

And to strengthen our tribe against others and give it the best chance of survival, we, like any other tribe, have concocted stories that we all buy into—even subconsciously.

In that common Jewish myth, Jacob is the good guy and Esau is the bad guy—not because that’s the picture *Genesis* paints of the two men, but for one simple reason:

Because—in this week’s portion, in fact—Jacob gets a second name: *Yisrael*. And we, the Jewish people, are *b’nai Yisrael*, the children of Israel.

Meaning: Jacob is *our* guy. He’s the patriarch of *our* tribe. He’s on *our* team.

And we *always* see *our* team as the good guys—whether it’s the Mets or the Yankees, the Democrats or the Republicans, or the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.

And we see it this way not because our teammates are *inherently* the good guys, but mainly just because they’re *our* guys.

Jonathan Haidt’s theory of moral psychology is that we come up with our opinions *first* and *then* we come up with rationales to justify them, rather than the other way around.

Similarly, we identify our tribe first—and then once we’ve picked it, we go about strengthening it by telling stories that justify our own tribe and condemn our rivals.

That’s exactly what Jewish tradition does with Jacob and Esau.

The starting place is that Jacob is Israel, and we’re the children of Israel—so we’re kind of stuck with him.

So, we have to find ways to prove that he’s actually the good guy and his rival Esau is the bad guy.

The rabbis of the Midrash do this by making up stories.

In their version, Esau is actually not just a hunter; he’s a murderer.

While it may *appear* to us that Jacob deceives their father to steal the birthright, the real story is that Isaac—and God—are actually in on the whole thing because they know that Esau is a brutish criminal who doesn’t *deserve* the blessing.

After all, they say, Esau goes on to spend his time raping and pillaging the countryside while Jacob spends 14 years in the yeshivah studying the Torah.

That’s why Jacob becomes the father of the Jewish people, while Esau becomes the father of the Roman Empire—which, of course, was the chief persecutor of the Jewish people in antiquity.

Even when the two brothers reunite after many years and the Torah says Esau greets Jacob by hugging and kissing him, the Midrash says Esau doesn’t really kiss Jacob but, rather, tries to bite him in the neck like a vampire.

With these stories—which, over time, have become our common narrative—the rabbis transform both Jacob and Esau into caricatures: Jacob the Jerk becomes Jacob the Saint, and Esau the Simpleton is recast as the Embodiment of Evil.

It’s amazing what we human beings can do when we deploy our cognitive capacity for myth making in service of our instinctive need for tribalism.

All this feels very relevant to me at this particular moment in time.

Tribalism, as we know, is turned all the way up to 11 right now—maybe the most potent force in American culture today.

And, as always for the last 30,000 years, our tribalism is being aided and abetted by very powerful storytelling.

Think about the stories we tell these days about the other side. The names we call them. The motives we attribute to them.

Think of the draconian things we do to marginalize them, ostracize them, and shut them down.

Consider the lengths we'll go to in order to defend people who behave badly *just* because they're on *our* team, and how easily we condemn people we've never even met *just* because they happen to be on the *other* team.

Last weekend, I had the privilege of participating in a discussion with some religious and community leaders in Great Neck. The purpose of the conversation was to talk openly about the fractures in this community and explore what we can do to heal them.

The facilitator asked each participant to share something that has been a source of pain for them recently as a resident of Great Neck.

I was blown away by what I heard:

Stories about terrible bullying and trolling on social media over politics and religion.

Moms and dads calling each other pedophiles and other horrific names in WhatsApp parent groups that were supposed to be for talking about kids and school.

Community members turning on each other, shaming each other publicly, denouncing each other as “not real Jews.” Fellow citizens trying to destroy each other so *their* tribe can emerge victorious.

This is deeply troubling behavior. Actually, it's disgusting and completely unacceptable.

Tribalism may be part of human nature that's helped us survive, but it's also clear that tribalism can be taken too far.

And I believe we're at a moment in our history when it's gone way too far. And it's not helping us survive; it's causing our *destruction*.

Since I'm new to Great Neck, one of the participants asked me what I, as a rabbi, would have done had I been here in the last few years.

I said that I would have spoken about it from the bimah and called it out.

So, that's what I'm going to do now.

I admit that I'm not part of these social media groups, so I don't know who the people are who are doing the bullying.

But if any member of Temple Beth-El is one of those who's doing it, I am calling on you now to knock it off. Stop it. Immediately.

Behavior of this nature goes against the Torah. It goes against everything Judaism stands for.

No person should treat another human being with such contempt.

We can do better as a community. We *have* to do better as a community.

The urge to tell stories that depict our rival tribes as the bad guys is hardwired in our brains.

But the incredible cognitive abilities that we human beings have evolved are also powerful enough to enable us to see when our natural impulses are leading us down a dangerous path.

People who belong to tribes other than ours may think differently than we do, they may believe and practice differently than we do, they may hold different values than we do—but they are human beings no less than we are, and they are entitled to dignity and respect, and, dare I say, even the benefit of the doubt.

So, rather than using our fantastic storytelling ability to turn them into murderers, criminals, vampires, and caricatures of evil incarnate, can we instead use our words to affirm the humanity in our rivals?

I believe that, perhaps above all else, this is what the Torah calls on us to do.

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 163

² Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, 30