

Importance of Forgiveness

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November 17, 2023

I don't know about you, but I have not always gotten along with my siblings. Even though we love each other, we have had disagreements and fights throughout our lives. Some were more physical, and some more mental and emotional, but we always know how to push each other's buttons.

In this week's Torah portion, *Toldot*, we get our next set of brothers, Jacob and Esau. Like many siblings, they are completely opposite people. Esau grew up to be an outdoorsman, a skillful hunter; and Jacob became a simple man, raising livestock.

Even before they were born, they were battling with each other in Rebecca's womb. When she cried out to God asking why, God said: "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body."^[1]

According to many commentaries, from the beginning Jacob and Esau were not just two different people with completely different interests, they were two different nations. Their descendants were to be enemies. Israel vs. Edom; Israel vs. Rome; and more and more.

This seems all too relevant right now. I could go on and on about the connection, but I think we all see it. Israel is our homeland and we think of all Israelis as our family, our siblings. But what about our Palestinian neighbors? Yes, Hamas did unspeakable things and they need to be stopped, however the innocent noncombatant Palestinians are our neighbors, siblings and maybe one day our friends.

The question is, will there ever be a time when we will forgive and trust one another? Will Jews and those of Esau's descendants ever stop being enemies? What is our role in making that happen?

These are big questions, and I can tell you right now that I don't have the exact answers. We are in a time of heightened intensity, and the answer might be that it can't happen now. However, personally, I hope that peace and comradery between Israel and our Palestinian neighbors will happen one day in the future.

In my study of the Torah portion this week, I came upon an interesting story related to these questions.

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua was once walking by the seashore when he noticed a boat sinking at sea. A moment later, he watched as a man holding onto a plank of wood floated onto the shore. Other Jews were walking by. Because the man was naked, he covered himself and pleaded, "I am a son of Esau, your brother. I have lost everything. Please give me a garment to cover myself." The Jews refused and said, "Your people have treated our people with cruelty. Therefore, may all your people be stripped bare as you are today." The man then turned to Rabbi Elazar and said, "You are an honorable man; please help me." Rabbi Elazar took off a garment and gave it to him. Then he brought him to his home, fed him and gave him money with which to begin his life again.

When the emperor died, the rescued man succeeded him. He ordered that all Jews in his state be killed. The Jews turned to Rabbi Elazar and asked him to plead for them. When the man, who was now the ruler, saw Rabbi Elazar standing before him, he said, "Does not your Torah teach 'You shall not hate an Edomite, for

he is your brother’?[2] I told your people that I was the son of Esau, and they treated me with hatred, not with kindness.”

Rabbi Elazar replied, “Though they are guilty of breaking the law of the Torah, forgive them.” The king, recalling what Rabbi Elazar had done for him, answered, “Because of what you did for me, I will forgive them.”[3]

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua teaches that forgiveness is important. Even though the Jews broke the law of the Torah, they still should be forgiven. Jacob and Esau’s story is a powerful reminder of the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite their differences, Jacob and Esau were able to reconcile and forgive each other.

In *Genesis* 33:4, Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him, and they wept together. This act of forgiveness and reconciliation is a testament to the power of love and the importance of being able to respect and understand the differences in each other. We can learn to resolve these conflicts in a healthy and respectful way.

I know that this is something Rabbi Meir thought a lot about. He created an Interfaith Forgiveness Conference where he raised similar questions. He asked what each of our faith and spiritual communities say about granting forgiveness when the offender has not sought forgiveness. He also asks what they say about carrying hate and bitterness throughout one’s life.

In my opinion, forgiveness, understanding and open dialogue are the best ways toward cooperation and peace. These are not easy things to do. In fact, I would say that these are the hardest things to do in a rivalry situation. However, even taking one small step toward these things could initiate a large step toward peace.

I know that as my sisters and I have grown older, we have made intentional strides to be more open toward each other, to have open conversations with each other, to more fully understand each other’s lives and to see each other as loving sisters and not as rivals.

[1] *Genesis* 25:23

[2] *Deuteronomy* 23:8

[3] *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 11:1