

Shabbat Toldot 5784
Better to Be the Younger Sibling
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Shabbat Shalom.

I'm friends with a pair of twins, born 5 minutes apart. When we were kids, they would get into a recurring sibling rivalry argument. "Why do *you* get to go first? You're only five minutes older than me?"

"Just five minutes? I'll be older than you every day of my life!" He was right. If you're even a little older, you're older forever.

I am the older brother in my own family. There were times when I was happy to be *older*, and there were also times when I wished I were the *younger* child. I am sure that many younger siblings at times desire to be the older one, at least for the fun stuff. But is being the older sibling actually better?

In biblical times it certainly was. Not only were they first in line for inheritance, but the firstborn inherited *double* the amount of other siblings! That's a much better deal than what most older siblings get today. But of course there's more to it than that.

Today's Parsha, Toldot, contains a prophecy that G-d shares with Rebecca when she has twins struggling in her womb. The in utero wrestling match between Jacob and Esau portends the ongoing rivalry the two brothers will live out as children and adults.

G-d shares the prophecy with Rebecca alone: "Two nations are in your womb... one people shall be mightier than the other, *Vrav Yaavod Tzair*" (Gn. 25:23). Usually that last phrase is understood as "the older shall serve the younger," as we readers know that the younger son Jacob in the end will triumph over his older brother Esau. But the phrase is oddly worded. The commentator Ibn Kaspi said, "Had the text used the Hebrew word "*Et*" and said "The *Rav* [older] will serve *Et Hatzair* [the younger], the verse's intention would be more clear. However, the construction as it stands leaves the meaning ambiguous. And this reflects the fact that at times Esau dominated the relationship, while at other times, Jacob was stronger." For Ibn Kaspi, the phrase can be interpreted in two ways, opposites, in fact. "The older shall serve the younger," as our Humash translates, or "the greater shall the *younger* serve," as Rabbi Sacks translates it. It's amazing how the subtleties of Hebrew allow for multiple interpretations, each one compelling. In the end, Jacob emerges as the next link in the chain of the Jewish family, not Esau. So for that family, better to be the younger child.

Interestingly, this is how nearly every sibling relationship in Genesis also plays out. In other words, you do not want to be the oldest sibling. Also note that each generation has more family drama than a reality TV show.

Let's go back to the beginning of the Jewish family to see. That family tree begins when Abraham has two sons, first Ishmael and then Isaac. Ishmael becomes his own nation, but the Jewish spiritual inheritance bypasses him in favor of the younger Isaac. Lots of drama ensues along the way, like Ishmael and his mother Hagar being kicked out of the house.

Next, Isaac and Rebecca have two sons, Esau and Jacob, and it's the younger Jacob who continues the Jewish family legacy. Much drama results, with Esau ready to kill Jacob for stealing the blessings.

A generation later, Jacob expands the family tree by having 12 sons and one daughter with Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. Leah herself is the older sister who gets switched in the dark for her younger sister Rachel on her wedding night.

Jacob's oldest sons, like Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, never capture their father's heart like their younger sibling Joseph. That favoritism leads to the brothers wanting to kill Joseph and selling him off as a slave.

A generation later, Joseph's two sons, Menasseh and Ephraim, are given a blessing by their grandfather Jacob, who famously crosses his arms to give his fuller blessing to the *younger* child with the right hand, seen as dominant. No reason is given as to why he does this, other than that Jacob foresees that the younger one would be greater one day. No drama follows here, to Menasseh's great credit.

Time passes, we move onto the book of Exodus, and G-d chooses Moses to confront Pharaoh instead of his older siblings Aaron and Miriam. Fast forward a generation, and we don't know much about Moses's sons, but we do hear that Aaron's older sons Nadav and Avihu die by bringing an alien sacrifice to G-d, leaving Aaron with his younger sons only.

To sum up, the Torah presents a very clear pattern that the younger child succeeds more than the older child. Why might this be?

I think that it has to do with the status quo. In ancient days, older sons were entitled to much more than their younger brothers, to say nothing of sisters. This was the way of

the world. It seemed to be destiny for the older ones to accomplish more because they had such a head start, and doubling their inheritance, as the Torah instructs, reinforces this hierarchy. But the Torah narrative empowers the younger sibling again and again, upsetting the status quo. And the Torah in many ways rebels against the status quo. For example, G-d is one, not many. G-d is immanent and transcendent, not physical. G-d stands with the powerless, like the Israelite slaves, not the powerful, like Pharaoh. G-d acts through history, not just nature. Remember that in Genesis, the Jewish family's mission is to live a life according to the values of the one G-d in a world awash with idolatry. By definition, the Jewish family upsets the status quo simply by existing! A key lesson from the Torah is that just because the world is as it is, it does not mean it will remain that way forever. And the shift from one epoch to another often brings pain, as we see the family dramas emerge each generation in Genesis.

Each of us undergoes a periodic evolution from one way of living to another. As individuals, we may live lives with a similar routine for years - same job, same house, same hometown - but at some point one of those pieces may shift. We may take a new job, move to a new neighborhood, or even move to another city. Those changes aren't always smooth or easy, but they are often permanent.

As families, we get used to specific family roles and dynamics, but sometimes there are major changes. There may be a new family member, someone might go away to college, or there could be an ongoing medical challenge. These changes aren't always smooth or easy, and they are often lasting.

Recognizing that the status quo periodically shifts brings me to Israel. Daniel Gordis is a well-known commentator, who wrote a post last week with the title: "5 weeks in, Israel and Israelis have undergone a profound change. Where we are headed is not clear. But what is certain is that we're not going back." There's a lot of wisdom here. The status quo before October 7th was fundamentally different from the one that will emerge after the war against Hamas ends. The war will end at some point, and Israelis *will then afterward* have much to figure out about what the new normal looks like. It will take much time to settle into the new normal, and growing pains and discomfort along the way are inevitable. Israel needs our support for a military victory now, but also our support in the form of patience and understanding in the years ahead as Israel evolves and figures out who it will be in its next chapter of history.

When we zoom in on one family in Genesis - like Jacob and Esau - we see something very clearly. But when we zoom out and look at all the family dynamics in Genesis, only then can we see a pattern. We ultimately see growth, but along the way, pain. Shabbat Shalom.