

Parashat Toldot
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In our parasha's description of Rebecca's pregnancy, we find a seemingly straightforward verse that upon deeper reflection may have much more profound meaning for us:

"vayitrotzetzu habanim bekirbah" "and the children struggled within her"

What's the background to this verse?

Rebecca is barren, Isaac prays fervently on her behalf, **"vaye'etar Yitzchak"**, "Isaac entreated God" (Rashi: Isaac pleaded) and she conceives. Midway through her pregnancy a battle rages inside her.

Rebecca is overwhelmed by the rumblings within her and cries out **"Lamah ze anochi?"** "why me?" She seeks an explanation from God who clarifies for her: "Two nations are in your womb, and two separate peoples shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other and the older shall serve the younger".

The classical commentators frame the battle inside her womb as a precursor to the battle that will rage between the brothers Jacob and Esav throughout their lives and throughout history between the nations that they each father – Israel and Edom.

Rashi suggests that the language used in our verse comes from the verb **"larutz"** "to run". The Midrash describes the clash inside her as one between Esav who was always running to houses of idol worship and Jacob who would run to houses of Torah study.

I'd like to offer a different reading of the story and suggest that the war raging inside Rebecca was not a war between two brothers or two nations, but was one between two different parts of herself -- the same war that rages inside each of us every day, between the different parts of who we are.

The rabbinic tradition speaks of us having two yetzers or inclinations: yetzer hatov and yetzer hara – good and evil inclinations – both of which are critical to human life. As the Midrash teaches, without a yetzer hara we wouldn't build homes, create families or engage in business.

In a similar vein the Kabbalah teaches us that we have not one but two souls: one that is focused on our physical life, self fulfillment and self-gratification -- as the parashah might suggest, our Esav soul; and one focused on becoming one with the divine source of life, personal growth and spiritual direction -- our Jacob soul.

When these two levels of consciousness inhabit one body, as they do with all of us, it's unreasonable to expect a life characterized by inner quiet. It is more reasonable to expect life to be animated by inner struggle: between selfishness and selflessness, pragmatism and idealism, ugliness and beauty.

And rather than be agitated by the inevitable inner tensions that we feel throughout life as we grow and evolve, and by the daily choices and decisions we make that affect not just ourselves but others, we should instead feel reassured by these conflicts and see them as evidence of our unmistakable, holy humanity.

Rav Soloveitchik taught that Kedushah, holiness, is found in paradox, in contradiction, in questions, not in neat and clean resolutions to life's challenges. Our task as human beings is not to force all the different, disparate pieces of whom we are to fit together neatly and seamlessly, like a perfect puzzle we buy from a toy store. Our task is to hold the often conflicting and contradictory parts of who we are in one singular embrace, in the wholeness of our singular lives. And if you can picture the jagged edges of the pieces of the real, human puzzle that we are precisely **not** fitting together, it's in the spaces left between them where the Shechinah, the divine presence, flows.

There are some specific words used in the parashah that reflect this profound message about the dynamism of human nature:

When describing barrenness elsewhere, the Torah says "**Adonai sagar et rachmah**" "God closed her womb", so why then, when describing the rumblings in Rebecca's womb does it not say "**vayitrotzetzu habanim b'rachmah**" "the children struggled in her womb"? Why does it say "**bekirbah**" "within her" using a word that has a root (k-r-v) that denotes inner privacy, closeness, spiritual intimacy?

"**Bekirbah**" suggests that the conflict was deeper than two bodies entangled within her. The conflict was truly *within* her, her soul, her essence. (What might Rebecca have been in conflict about at that time? She knew one son was to be chosen, one was not. Perhaps she struggled with how to love and honor both.)

And more. The text later describes Jacob as an “**ish tam**”, a mild, simple, or sincere man, homely, in contrast the wild, earthy, hunter Esav. Again, these descriptions are used by the Rabbis to support their reading of the story. But there is another way to read it.

“**Tam**”, as we know from elsewhere, means wholehearted, or complete. “**Noach ish tzadik, tamim hayah bedorotav**” “Noah was a righteous man and wholehearted in his generation”; God approaches Abraham and says to him “**hithalech lefanai veheyeh tamim**” “walk in my ways and be blameless” -- without deficiency, whole.

Where do we see this completeness in Jacob, this wholeness?

He was an “**ish tam**”, dwelling in tents, “**ohalim**”, which is plural: he was one who dwelt in both the tent of righteousness and the tent of impiety, the tent of compassion and the tent of indifference.

Paradoxically, Jacob only displayed the wholeness of whom he was, his authenticity, when he undertook precisely the actions that we condemn him for: stealing his brothers' birthright, masquerading as his brother to steal his blessing. Not that these actions are understandable or commendable. But they are laced with his desire to honor his mother, please his father, and even carry on the covenant. He comes into the fullness of whom he is when he displays the conflicting and contradictory dimensions of his being. His wholeness, his **shleymut**, is realized precisely in his imperfections.

What redeems Jacob, what makes his story sacred for us, is not the outcome of his actions – his carrying on the **brit**, the covenant. It's the process by which he had to come to terms with his conflicts. Jacob is the one biblical character whom we observe wrestling with himself when he later prepares to return to face Esav and struggles with the angel by the side of the Yabok river. He takes a hard look at who he is, what he has done, the raging forces of both good and evil within him. He turns himself inside out – Yabok is an inversion of Yaakov! That is when he lives up to his epitaph of being “**tam**”: whole. Authentic.

He becomes whole not when he learns to subdue one force inside of him or overpower one aspect of himself. If you recall, there's no resolution to his wrestling match with the angel. Rather, Jacob becomes whole when he learns to harness the energy of his physical and earthly impulses to bring creativity and passion to his spiritual yearnings, and when he learns

to suffuse his bodily and material yearnings with spiritual reflection and refinement.

At the end of Jacob's struggle, two important things happen. First, his name, his essence, changes from Yaakov to Yisrael: you who will struggle with God and prevail. Second, he walks away limping, he has a "**mum**", a wound – he's forever marked, scarred, from the whole experience.

Herein lies another sacred paradox: the wrestling with himself that leaves him existentially whole leaves him physically imperfect. His wound, his imperfection, becomes an eternal sign of his completeness.

We all walk around scarred in some way from the conscious or unconscious battles we have raging within us. And we have to ask ourselves: when we see each other's wounds, what do we make of them? How can we learn to see them as signs of each other's wholeness and not each other's deficiencies? How can we honor each other's wounds?

Every day we are charged, as was Abraham, to walk together with the Divine and to be whole. We are asked to accept the complexity of who we are: our tendencies toward evil as well as our inclination towards goodness; our arrogance as well as our humility; our potential to bless as well as our potential to harm.

Too many innocent lives have been lost to battles great and small over how to be all or nothing. Too many are being lost right now in Israel and Gaza. For many of us the current military struggle in Israel epitomizes this lesson of the parashah: We long so deeply for peace, for Medinat Yisrael to exist securely and to be beacon of democracy and freedom. And yet we will not stand silent as our people and our land are threatened. We will defend ourselves against all aggression. How hard and painful it is for us sometimes to hold these undeniable impulses together in one heart.

It is inhuman, inhumane, and inauthentic, teaches our merciful Torah, to be anything but one in our own dividedness, to be whole in our own brokenness, to be perfect in our own imperfections.

May the brokenness of our hearts lead to **shleymut** – to wholeness -- and to Shalom, peace.

Shabbat shalom.

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