

Shabbat Parashat Toldot  
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29 Cheshvan 5775  
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Sha'ar Communities

Can you tell the difference between a jackal and a fox from 200 feet away? Neither can I. It would have been helpful two weeks ago when my wife Andi, son Aaron, and I were hiking Nachal Amud in the lower Galil. We were visiting Aaron who is on Hevruta, a gap year program at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and went up north for two days in part because we love to hike amidst its rugged beauty and in part to escape a bit from the growing chaos in Jerusalem where simply waiting for a train could be fraught with mortal danger. These days, in cities throughout Israel, being able to tell the difference between a pedestrian and a terrorist, between a car and a weapon, though nearly impossible, has become a matter of life and death.

Twelve miles east of Nahariya and nine south of Lebanon, we settled into our favorite tzimmer in Kfar Vradim, a stunning bed and breakfast perched on a mountain overlooking rolling hills dotted with Arab and Jewish villages known for their millennia-long ability to live together in relative peace and quiet. (How tragic that on the day we left the north for Tel Aviv that quiet was also shattered by clashes between Israeli police and Arab residents. Violent demonstrations are ongoing as of this writing.)

The next morning we awoke to a breathtaking sunrise and a sumptuous outdoor breakfast that also filled us until we could hardly breathe. While davening on the terrace surrounded by the Galil's verdant sights and smells, I held my tzitzit in my hand as we do at the end of the Shema when gazing at them reminds us of the Torah's myriad commandments that give form and purpose to our lives. Except rather than stare at the strands of wool in my hands, my eyes were drawn to the homes and towns on the hills around me, sensing in their varying colors, shapes, and sounds, the demand of our tradition that we and our enemies find a way to live, and not die, together.

Off we went to hike Nachal Amud, a beautiful trail that passes an inviting water hole before circling back to the head. The tzimmer's owner said the start was a mere thirty-minute drive away, but fifty minutes later, as our GPS was taking us down towards the Kinneret, we realized we were off-course. Finally, we pulled onto the shoulder of a road with a small sign pointing to Nachal Amud. We started hiking a gorgeous arid riverbed nestled between two ridges, passed the imposing stela for which Nachal Amud is named, and figured we'd continue for a while on what was simply a different, less traveled section of the trail we had planned to hike.

We were chatting a lot as we walked, maybe in part to suppress a little anxiousness not knowing exactly where we were heading, when I stopped suddenly. About 200 feet ahead of us on the path was an animal I didn't recognize. None of us did. It had the strong, curved body of a dog, but the face and eyes of something potentially more vicious. It was sand-colored and quite handsome. Could it be a fox? A hyena? Was it dangerous? Friendly? When it started trotting down the path towards us, we decided not to wait to find out. We turned around and quickly started to retreat. Annoyed that I hadn't hired a guide for the day like we usually do, I called one I knew in the area for a reality check. When I described the animal to him he instantly recognized it as a jackal and reassured me that they're harmless to humans, unless of course they feel threatened and bite you and happen to be rabid... We turned around again and continued, undisturbed, on our hike.

How does one discriminate between safety and danger, between friend and foe, between good and evil? There are circumstances and people who create no confusion. Indeed, plenty of evil abounds in Israel, the Middle East and throughout the world today. But what we find so vexing and so terrifying are the circumstances and people who defy simple classification, who both beckon and repel us, make us feel optimistic and despondent, confident and utterly vulnerable.

While it's tempting and infinitely easier to see the world in zero-sum terms, being able to tolerate the risks of standing in a place and in the presence of people that cannot be so simply reduced is key not only to our personal and national aspirations with respect to our adversaries, it is also key to our self-understanding. We learn this from none other than our foremother Rivkah in the opening of this week's parasha.

Finding themselves childless, "Isaac pleaded with God *lenochach ishto*". This is usually translated as "on behalf of his wife" but Rashi explains it as "opposite his wife", meaning they were each praying for a child. The verse then reads "*Vaye-ater lo Hashem*", God responded to "*his*" pleading, meaning Isaac's and not Rivka's, and Rivka becomes pregnant. Rashi brings the Talmud's conclusion, "*eyn domeh tefilat tzaddik ben tzaddik l'tefilat tzaddik ben rasha*" (there is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person who descends from a righteous person to one of a righteous person who descends from an evil person) to explain why it was Isaac, son of the righteous Abraham, whose prayer was answered and not Rivka, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean.

The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) asked: how can the Torah say it was Isaac's prayers that were answered when they were both praying for a child and she became pregnant? Clearly both their prayers were answered! He explained: Both Isaac and Rivkah knew they were going to have two sons, one righteous and one evil. Isaac prayed that the righteous one would be completely righteous, even though this meant that all the evil qualities would be concentrated in his other son who would then be completely evil. Rivkah, on the other hand, prayed that her evil son would

not be completely evil, even though this meant that her righteous son wouldn't be completely righteous because some of those qualities would be given to the evil son, and some of his to the righteous one. The Kotzker then restated the Talmud's conclusion to explain why Isaac's prayers were chosen: there is no comparison between the prayers of a righteous person for a righteous child and the prayers of a righteous person for an evil child.

While the Kotzker Rebbe preserves the tradition's preference for pure righteousness (which is also reflected in commentaries about Esav's wickedness that often feel forced or lacking in textual support), there's something compelling, even haunting, about Rivkah's prayer that her wicked son not be completely wicked, knowing that she would then have to contend with her other son's imperfect righteousness.

In fact, it would seem that in spite of the parasha's prizing Isaac's prayer, Jewish tradition actually chose Rivka's. Many are the sources that remind us that no human being is wholly evil any more than one can claim to be wholly righteous. We are taught that we are each composed of both good and evil inclinations, our yetzer tov and yetzer ra, and that it is the mission of each human to tip the scales toward goodness by putting our selfish impulses and ego-based energies towards positive uses, like building businesses and families. And homelands. And making peace.

After all, while Rabbi Simhah Bunim of Przysucha (1765-1827) wrote: "A person should have two pieces of paper, one in each pocket, to be used as necessary. On one of them is written, 'The world was created for me', and on the other, 'I am dust and ashes' ", it was the Kotzker Rebbe who added that the trick is to know which piece of paper to take out and when.

To accept that we are a combination of virtues and vices is one thing. To acknowledge that duality in our personal -- and our political -- adversaries, is another. And yet, Parashat Toldot suggests that our ancient mother's plea that her unborn son destined for great wickedness be blessed with even a small measure of the goodness of her other, righteous son, might be the very source of our own limitations. If we are capable of misdeeds, then our enemy is capable of decency.

Rather than see Rivkah's prayers as flawed for having been willing to sacrifice Yaakov's righteousness for a measure of decency in Esav, let's see them as heroic for being willing to see something redemptive in someone whom we could so easily dismiss or reject. And as further proof of the ultimate acceptance of her prayers over Isaac's, the Sages boldly recalled Esav's merit for his unwavering dedication to his father, and even for his settling of the land of Israel while Yaakov lived in Padan-Aram. They were no less courageous than Rivkah, for they acknowledged his merit even as they resolutely condemned his vicious and murderous actions.

Minutes after we had settled back into our pace in Nachal Amud, free of fear of the jackal and warmed by the midday sun and our restored confidence, we heard the noise. It was faint at first but then it sounded clear and close though we couldn't locate it. It was a series of notes flowing from a chalil, a flute. Someone somewhere up on the ridge was playing this nondescript, unhurried, middle-eastern melody. Was it a shepherd? A hiker? A child? An adult? A Jew? An Arab? We had no idea. Alone on a trail we hadn't prepared for, deep in the grooves of earth, we were grateful for the musical company, listening carefully for the sweetness and the hope in each anonymous note.