

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 1/30/22**

We have been talking about the stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis and how they are connected with the later history of Israel both in the Scriptures and in the rabbinic writings. We saw that in the rabbinic literature, Esau and his descendents the Edomites became prototypes of all the peoples who opposed the descendents of Jacob his brother, the Jews. Both Christians and Jews have seen themselves as Jacob's heirs, as the true Israel, and seen the other group as represented by the rejected Esau. What particularly interests me in all of this discussion of genealogical details is that in both the Jewish and the Christian interpretation of the stories, the family relationship persists, even if it is strained and conflicted. Jews and Christians have continued to view themselves as estranged siblings, even if they argue about who is the beloved son. One way or another, we are Jacob and Esau, twins who have been wrestling with each other from the beginning.

But whichever interpretation of the story of Jacob and Esau that you choose, Torah has a word of warning: "You shall not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deut. 23:7). The Edomites, you remember, are the descendents of Esau. Despite their conflicts, the family connection remains, which is why the prophets can condemn the Edomites for not coming to the aid of "your brother."

The way I read it, the story of Jacob and Esau itself does not seem to favor one brother over the other. Both are children of Abraham, both are loved by Isaac and both receive a blessing. The ambiguous prophecy in Genesis 25:23 ("the elder the younger shall serve") suggests mutual servanthood as the real goal. The brothers should be serving each other. Jacob realizes that he will never be free from his fears, from his wrestling with God and with humans, until he adopts this attitude towards Esau. He comes finally to Esau as a servant, as someone who bestows blessing rather than taking it for himself. In so doing, I would argue, he finally acquires the blessing God had for him, the blessing he has been struggling all along to obtain through his own efforts, and is able to step into his role as covenant bearer. It is only by being a blessing that Jacob is finally blessed.

So also, in the parable of the prodigal son, when the younger son comes to his senses, he determines like Jacob to return as a servant rather than someone who had demanded his inheritance, his father's blessing. Christians historically have tried to steal Israel's blessing for themselves and arrogantly appropriated God's promises for themselves. It is time for Christians to reverse how we have interpreted the ancient prophecy and the biblical story and begin to see our role as being servants to our Jewish brothers and sisters with whom our destiny and our salvation is inextricably bound.

Servanthood is an important theme in Christianity. Jesus modeled servanthood for his disciples and he has been seen by Christians to embody the role of the suffering servant as outlined in various passages in Isaiah. The difficult interpretive question about those passages was raised by the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts: "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" (Acts 8:34). Historically Jewish interpreters have read Isaiah as speaking about them, about Israel as a people, and some of the passages in

Isaiah clearly indicate that Israel is the servant (Is. 41:8-9; 44:1, 21; 49:3). But at other times, the servant seems more like an individual, someone who does things for Israel and the world (49:6). This is especially true in chapter 53, which has been central for the Christian understanding of Jesus. Rabbi Heschel has a very profound reflection on these passages. While insisting that Israel is the Lord's suffering servant, he adds, "but Israel may be all or a few or one of its members" (*The Prophets*, Vol. 1, p. 149). That, I think, brilliantly captures the complexity of Isaiah's prophecy. Israel can refer to a people, but it can also refer to an individual.

Christians often talk about Jesus' call to servanthood in general terms, but I would like to suggest that if we really see Jesus as one of Israel's members who in some way or another embodies and fulfills Isaiah's prophecy, then we need to see that servanthood as directed above all towards Israel. Isaiah's servant cannot fulfill his responsibility to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6, 49:6) apart from his responsibility to Israel. Jesus understood that, and insisted that he came first and foremost as a servant of the people of Israel (Matt. 15:24), and he called his disciples to take up that role as well (Matt. 10:6). We can only obtain God's blessing, the blessing God promised to the household of Abraham, if we adopt this attitude of servanthood to the family of Abraham.

Otherwise, the Church's historical arrogance and superiority attitude towards Jews puts us in grave danger. When God calls Abraham and promises to bless him and his family and make them a blessing to the whole world, God also says, "I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). Paul certainly has this verse in mind when warns his Gentile audience that their arrogance and pride with respect to Israel will lead to God cutting them off from the Jewish tree of life they have been grafted into (Rom. 11:17-22). That warning in both Genesis and Romans has simply not been heeded by Christians.

Let me do a little midrash here of my own. The Genesis stories of sibling rivalry offer us a variety of choices, a variety of possible futures. The first is that of Cain and Abel: envy that leads to violence and murder. ("God chose you over me. God likes you best.") The second is that of Leah and Rachel, living together uneasily in an ongoing relationship of jealousy, competition, and heartbreak. (Their story to me is almost unbearably sad.) The third is that of Jacob and Esau, coming together after an extended period of estrangement for a temporary reconciliation and cessation of hostilities, but then going their separate ways, still wary of one another. Historically, all three of these have characterized the relationship between Christians and Jews in various times and places. The wrestling match between Esau and Jacob that began in the womb has not yet come to an end.

But there is a fourth option, the one with which Genesis ends and to which it devotes a large part of its narrative: the story of Joseph and his brothers, whose broken relationship begins with pride, jealousy, and attempted murder. It looks hopeless for a long time but finally ends in mutual forgiveness and mutual blessing, not only for their family but also for the pagan country in which they are living.

God promises Abraham a family that will grow to become many nations, and which will bring blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). The book of Genesis, with its succession of stories of sibling rivalry that build up to the lengthy story of Joseph,

suggests that until the family conflicts are resolved and overcome, Israel will never be in the position to become a great nation, the people that God wants them to be, a people through whom God will bless the whole world.

So we should be asking the same question Esau posed to Isaac after Jacob deceived his father into giving him Esau's blessing: "Do you have only one blessing, my father?" (Gen. 27:38). For two thousand years Christians have assumed that God was only blessing them as favored children, that God had only one blessing. We have seen that historically, Christians have tended to adopt the promised blessings in the Old Testament for the Church while applying the curses to Israel. But Isaac responds to Esau's tearful plea by giving him a blessing as well. And when we encounter Esau again, we find that indeed he has prospered and done well, and most importantly, he has abandoned his enmity towards his brother. Both brothers are blessed.

In this story of separated brothers and a jealous mother and a father struggling to love both sons, I hear echoes of an earlier story in Torah, that of Abraham. Twice God makes it clear to Abraham that the younger son Isaac will be the one through whom the covenant promises and blessings will be carried. Both times Abraham is upset by this and asks God to pronounce a blessing on Ishmael as well (Gen 17:18-20; 21:10-13). Both times God does so. God does not have only one blessing.

But the brothers are still separated. God allows Sarah to send Hagar and Ishmael away, out into the desert, and the narrative continues with Isaac alone. Or so I always imagined until I read Rabbi Sacks. He points out a small but significant passage that we tend to overlook. When Abraham dies, we are told that "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah" (Gen. 25:9). Abraham had bought this cave near Hebron from some Hittites as a tomb for Sarah (Genesis 23). Ishmael's presence here is surprising, says Rabbi Sacks, because we have just assumed that the brothers lived in complete isolation from one another. Yet here they are together again without any explanation.

There is in the text, however, just the shadow of a clue that points to a hidden story. We are told that after Abraham's death Isaac lived in Beer-lahai-roi (Gen. 25:11), where it seems that he had been living for some time (Gen. 24:62). That was south in the Negev desert, far from Beersheva where Abraham had been living. Why did Isaac settle there so far from home? The text does not tell us, but it is where he goes after his father almost kills him and his mother dies. The attentive reader of Genesis will remember that Beer-lahai-roi is mentioned earlier, where it is associated with Hagar and God's promise to her of the birth of a son, Ishmael (Genesis 16:7-14). One might imagine Isaac, after the trauma he has experienced, not wanting to go back to his father's house and instead seeking out his long lost brother. Somehow they reconnected, and the most likely place is in Beer-lahai-roi. This is only an educated guess, based on the faintest of hints in the text, but it does make sense of what we are told.

As a side note, in Genesis 16 for the first time we have a human giving a name to God. Hagar characterizes the deity as "the God who sees me: *'el ro'i* (v. 13), because God has paid attention to her plight. There are echoes of this passage in chapter 22, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which the verb "to see" also plays a crucial role. It is from that chapter that we get our mangled Hebrew phrase "Jehovah Jireh" that has become a

monotonous mantra in the church. But literally that phrase means “the Lord will see,” (“Jehovah” is not a real word but rather a linguistic Frankenstein’s monster stitched together from bits and pieces of various words. It is one of the unfortunate legacies that we have inherited from the King James Bible. It is not a word we should be using in the church.) Abraham does not give that as a name to God but rather to the place, Mount Moriah (v. 14). Even in the KJV, “Jehovah Jireh” is not a name for God. It is Hagar, not Abraham, who names God “the one who sees.”

However it happened, Isaac and Ishmael come together at some point and cooperate in their father’s burial. Rabbi Sacks goes on to find in this overlooked story in Torah a hopeful message for our time. “Jews and Muslims both trace their descent from Abraham —Jews through Isaac, Muslims through Ishmael. The fact that both sons stood together at their father’s funeral tells us that they too were reunited.” Yes, says Rabbi Sacks, their story is one of family conflict and separation but that is not the end of the story. “Abraham loved both his sons, and was laid to rest by both. There is hope for the future in this story of the past” (*Genesis*, pp. 143-144).

That story is actually even more complex than Rabbi Sacks indicates. There are also Christian Arabs, some still living in the Holy Land, who trace their connection to Abraham through their ancestor Ishmael. The family of Abraham is no less complicated now than it was in Genesis. But the God who blesses Isaac also blesses Ishmael. And the God who blesses Jacob also blesses Esau. God does not have only one blessing.

More importantly, God’s whole purpose in choosing Abraham was that through him and his descendents, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). We saw that in seeking to grab his father’s blessing for himself, Jacob actually short-circuits what God has planned for him and has to spend years of his life in exile, on the run, guilt-ridden and afraid. In the famous story (Genesis 32) where the night before he is to meet Esau, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man who seems to be God’s angel or representative, Jacob is still trying to get God’s blessing after all those years. That story does not specifically say that God blesses him, only that Jacob is given a new name, Israel, suggesting that he has won the wrestling match. You cannot force God to bless you or try to steal God’s blessing from someone else. Jacob has to come to the understanding that the only way he can be blessed is by being a blessing, and that is the attitude he adopts the next day when he goes out to meet his estranged brother. His greatness as a bearer of the covenant only begins when he learns to be a servant, when he learns to be an agent of blessing.