

Parashat Toldot

Can Sibling Rivalry be Repaired?

Our Siblings are the Branches in our Tree

Sibling rivalry is deeply rooted in the very first brothers of the world. As soon as a baby is able to scream and grab, he will attempt to seize a teddy bear from his brother or protest loudly when his brother takes away his soft ball. Last Shabbat one of my granddaughters pushed her sister off her chair. Though she fell, hurt herself, and cried profusely, with the help of their mother, the sisters quickly became friends again. Both learned to apologize, one for pushing her sister off her chair and the other for taking her seat. Even as we grow up and learn to share, the underlying need to protect our own rights does not always abate, and in the process, great rifts between siblings may arise. Unlike children, who quickly forget, adults are not always able to get over the hurt they experience through their brother or sister. They could use a 'mother' to help them reconcile. I believe that it is one of the saddest things in the world when siblings don't get along and some even refuse to put effort or take a risk for the sake of saving their relationship. A human being is compared to a tree, the roots are our parents, the branches our siblings, and the fruits our offspring. Our tree can only flourish when all our family relationships are healthy. More than once, women have come to me for help because they do not get along with their sisters. Others came for different issues and during the sessions, it turned out that they had accepted not being on speaking terms with their sister for many years. Some felt unable to work on these relationships as so many issues had piled up over the years that they had given up untangling the emotional mess.

Could it be Damaging to have an Open and Honest Talk with Your Sister?

I recall one woman in particular, let's call her Aliza who refused to go to a mediator with her elder sister, Tanya, as she felt it may be damaging for her personal development to find her own voice. Since childhood, Aliza had looked up to her big sister and during adulthood, she had often gone along with Tanya and learned much from following her advice. One day when a dispute arose between them, Aliza decided it was time to free herself from allowing her sister to dictate her opinions. When Tanya became extremely hurt, Aliza interpreted it to be the result of Tanya's unwillingness to accept her right to assert her own views in life. I explained to her that it was possible that Tanya's hurt feelings were unrelated to Aliza having her own opinion but a cause of Aliza's avoidance of an open and honest discussion between them. "Perhaps your unwillingness to be open about your feelings toward your sister may cause the negative feelings to be expressed indirectly in even more hurtful ways." Sometimes we may evade speaking our heart in order to avoid hurting people without realizing that these unspoken negative feelings leak out in other ways, especially to our loved ones, and cause more damage and hurt than mustering up the courage to be direct in our speech. Furthermore, perhaps the process of asserting her personal independence caused Aliza to close her heart to having compassion for her sister in fear that empathy for her sister's feelings would cause her to be swayed into having to agree with her. It is not always easy to know how to show compassion by acknowledging verbally where the other person is coming from and empathizing with her pain without having to agree with her or

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be persuaded to apologize for things we didn't do. Could it be that Aliza's possible lack of empathy and compassion was hurtful to her sister? Perhaps this could be repaired through a reconciliation with a third person who could act as a buffer and create a safe space for Aliza to express herself by ensuring that Tanya would not bully her younger sister. Working things out with Tanya could possibly be an opportunity for Aliza to find her own voice and practice expressing her own emotions in a clear and direct way.

Ya'acov is Held Accountable for Lack of Brotherliness toward Esav

What can we learn from *Parashat Toldot* about repairing Tanya and Aliza's relationship?

After 20 years of infertility, Rivka finally gives birth to twins. The boys were very different, "Esav became a cunning hunter, a man of the field, while Ya'acov became a sincere person dwelling in the Tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27). Rashi explains that אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד – "a cunning hunter" implies that Esav would entrap and deceive his father, whereas אִישׁ תָּם – "a sincere, wholehearted or simple person" implies that Ya'acov would express what was in his heart with his mouth. Although Esav is evil and Ya'acov righteous, Ya'acov's actions toward his brother don't seem very brotherly. When "Esav comes home from the field faint [with hunger]" (*Bereishit* 25:29), Ya'acov takes advantage of his brother being so famished that he is unable to think about the future. As a condition for giving him a bowl of lentil soup Ya'acov demands that Esav sell his birthright without explaining what this birthright consist of. Unaware of the connection between the birthright and his father's blessing, Esav is overcome with pain when he finds out that Ya'acov has taken the blessing through deception.

ספר בראשית פרק כז

(לד) כְּשָׁמַע עֵשָׂו אֶת דְּבַר יְאֻבִי וַיִּצְעַק צָעֶקָה גְּדֹלָה וַיִּמְרָה עַד מְאֹד, וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָבִיו בְּרַכְנִי גַם אָנִי אָבִי: "When Esav heard the words of his father he cried out with a great (מְאֹד/meod) and exceedingly bitter cry and he said to his father, 'Bless me also, O my father'" (*Bereishit* 27:34).

The *Zohar* explains that Esav's scream, voice and cry reaches until a place called "very much" that is spelled with the letters מ-א-ד *mem, aleph, dalet*, which also spell Adam – א-ד-א *aleph, dalet, mem*. It echoes the primal suffering of all humanity stuck into a seemingly vain and hopeless existence. Esav's voice rises to one of the highest places where Adam, the progenitor of humanity, is created as a being separate from godliness and pure paradise, which in itself is terrible suffering. It includes the suffering of all humanity throughout the ages. Therefore, the heavens and earth and everything that is within them shake (*Zohar, Parashat Mishpatim 111a*). This pain that Ya'acov inflicted on his brother, although he was wicked cannot be swept under the carpet and forgotten, as the prophet writes, "Hashem has a quarrel with Yehuda, and He will remember about Ya'acov. He will repay him according to his deeds" (*Hoshea* 12:3). Although the birthright with its blessings surely did belong to Ya'acov, he is still liable for not treating Esav with brotherly love and compassion. Hashem does not forget how Ya'acov disregarded the prophetic principle, וּמִבְּשִׁרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם "...Do not hide from your kin" (*Yeshayahu* 58:7), by refusing to feed his famished brother unless he sold to him his birthright. Ya'acov had to pay for this lack of brotherliness, through the strife between his sons, which lead Yehuda and his brothers to sell Yosef as a slave in Egypt (Shabtai Teicher z"l, *Sabba D'Mishpatim, The Old Man in the Sea*).

Did Ya'acov Need to Apologize to Esav for the Pain he Caused Him?

Is it possible to repair the relationship, if you feel your sibling has wronged you and hours, days, weeks, and years go by with no communication between you, without the opportunity to tell him how hurt you were, and why you were hurt. Is it possible to make believe that everything is fine, and maintain a superficial relationship without working things out? Even if on the surface, everyone is friendly again, how is it possible to avoid a loss of a certain trust without a heartfelt open communication and a sincere request for forgiveness? Yet, how could Ya'acov risk his life to offer the murderer Esav such opportunity for reconciliation? "Esav hated Ya'acov, because of the blessings which his father had given him..." and plotted to kill Ya'acov (*Bereishit* 27:41). In order to save his life Ya'acov had to flee and the brothers were separated for 36 years (Rashi, *Bereishit* 28:9). Ya'acov was naturally afraid to face his brother and it is understandable that he would evade such a meeting of reconciliation with or without a mediator. Moreover, Ya'acov's personality, which is more fearful than any other Biblical hero, made it even harder for him to face his murderous brother. (Note that the word ירא – fear is mentioned in the Torah in connection with Ya'acov about 14 times). Considering all these extenuating circumstances, it would seem that Ya'acov surely is exonerated from seeking reconciliation with the evil Esav who has plotted to kill him for years. Then how would Esav ever be appeased?

Ya'acov Risks His Life to Seek Reconciliation with his Brother

Four wives and eleven sons later, on his way home from the house of Lavan, Ya'acov is gripped by fear and anxiety when Esav, accompanied by four hundred men, marches toward him (*Bereishit* 32:7-8). Nevertheless, despite his fear, he apparently remains steadfast in his intention to meet with Esav. Prepared to face his brother, Ya'acov sends an offering (*mincha*) to Esav (*Bereishit* 32:14-22). Ya'acov instructs his emissaries to explain the purpose of the gifts as follows:

ספר בראשית פרק לב (כא) ואמרתם גם הנה עבדך יעקב אחרינו כי אמר אכפרה פניו במנחה ההלכת לפני ואחרי כן אראה פניו אולי ישא פני:

"Behold, your servant Ya'acov is behind us, for he said: I will cleanse his anger/face (אכפרה) with the offering (*mincha*) that goes before me, and afterwards I will see his face (פניו/*panav*); perhaps he will accept me (ישא פני/*yisa panai*)" (*Bereishit* 32:21).

The combination of a *mincha* (offering) and the verb root כ-פ-ר – *kaf-peh-reish*, clearly refers to atonement. Rashi thus explains that Ya'acov comes to "remove [Esav's] agitation." Thus, it appears that Ya'acov seeks forgiveness. How else would Esav's anger be purged? The continuation of Ya'acov's statement further strengthens this point. Ya'acov states his desire that perhaps פני ישא/*yisa panai* literally, that Esav will lift his face. The verb for lifting or raising נ-ש-א – *nun-sin-aleph* is often associated with forgiveness and relationship. For example, after Kayin's *mincha* is rejected and his "face falls," G-d informs him that if he is good, he will be "lifted up," an apparent reference to his "fallen face", and the possibility of divine forgiveness, acceptance and relationship (*Bereishit* 4:5-7). In sending his *mincha*, Ya'acov wishes for exactly what Kayin failed to achieve with his *mincha*, namely, an elevation of his face by his master, a renewed relationship and reconciliation (Rav Chanoch Waxman, *Parashat Vayislach, Yeshivat Har Etzion*).

"Do not Hide from your Kin"

What can we learn from Ya'acov about appeasing the pain of our sibling? The fact that Ya'acov was willing to risk his life to face his brother Esav and go into effort in becoming reconciled with him through humble words of endearment and excessive atonement offerings teaches us the importance of being willing to go into risks for the sake of reaching reconciliation with our siblings. Although the birthright was rightfully Ya'acov's, and as such he had done nothing objectively wrong in obtaining it from Esav, he still needed to make amends through a face-to-face appeasement for having caused much pain to his brother. Note that the word "face" is mentioned three times in our Torah verse. Today we often cause so much damage to our dear ones through easy telephone and email access. So many miscommunications occur via these indirect ways of communication, all of which can be saved through the effort of a face-to-face communication. According to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, in spite of the well-known spiritual law that Esav hates Ya'acov, at the moment of their face-to-face meeting his compassion was aroused and he kissed Ya'acov with his full heart (Rashi, *Bereishit* 33:40). No matter how patronizing, intimidating and manipulative your sister may be; could she be even half as wicked as Esav?" I asked Aliza, "Would any conceivable damage that could possibly issue from a face-to-face reconciliation between you and your sister in any way amount to a fraction of the damage caused by evading such opportunity for appeasement?" I inquired. "How can you withhold from your sister the opportunity to speak her heart and hear you express yours?" Perhaps the answer to this question echoes the admonishment of the prophet, "...From your kin do not hide" (*Yeshayahu* 58:7).