

Sibling Rivalry

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah this week is all about the rivalry and tension between Yaakov and Esav. They were twins but completely different in appearance, temperament and mentality. The competition between them fills these chapters. As the tension gets worse Rivkah decides she must part the brothers and wants to send Yaakov off to her family to build his life in another country.

Yitzhak clearly is reluctant. She does not tell him that she fears Esav might kill Yaakov. Instead she persuades him that Yaakov needs to get away from the Canaanite environment and avoid marrying the local girls. She might think he is a bad influence but she does not criticize or demean Esav or let it come between her and her husband.

The Torah says that Yitzhak then sent Yaakov to his brother-in-law Lavan the son of Betuel the brother of Rivkah the mother of Yaakov and Esav. Why did the Torah need to mention she was the mother and why put Esav after Yaakov? Why did the Torah mention that Rivkah was the mother of both of them, specifically here after everything she did to supplant Esav? The answer is that despite it all she did love them both. So too did Yitschak.

In many families there is sibling rivalry. Sometimes it's worse than others. A wise parent knows that each child must be given the space and the circumstances to thrive as an individual. Even if children come from the same parents, they are different in capacity and personality. Parents may be inclined to feel closer to or more proud of one or another but they have to be very careful to avoid showing it. Sometimes one or another may need to move away. Sometimes they have to pursue different careers or create their own personal businesses. Despite the differences, despite the different cities they may inhabit, they remain the children of their parents, for better or for worse.

Humans are not angels and even within one family there may be conflicts between children who choose to behave ethically and others who do not and misunderstandings arise. Parents have to do their best to love and teach their children even if and when they go "off the tracks." But loving and caring does not mean sacrificing one's own moral and ethical standards. Even so when one is not honest, communication becomes difficult.

The Torah consistently emphasizes respect for parents and for family even when they no longer behave in such a way as to merit it. That's why when the children of Israel invaded Canaan they were forbidden to attack any of the peoples of the 'other side' of the family. But at the same time clearly the Torah teaches us which are the superior values and which of two rival brothers is regarded as a better role model for us. Yitzchak went on loving Esav hoping to win him back. But in the end even he conceded that Yaakov was the chosen leader of the Israelites