

WEEKLY TORAH READING

Vayechi

Genesis 47:28-50:26

What's with all the Jewish Nobel Prize winners? Every Nobel season it seems we find Jewish (often Israeli) names, in science, economics, literature. Of course we take great pride in our prize-winners, often emailing each other the names after scouring the list, pointing out, with all due modesty, that our scientific/literary/business/economic achievements far exceed our miniscule numbers.

But, still, why? The great (non-Jewish) biologist Richard Dawkins asked the question in a recent interview. "In Jews, [the number of Nobel Prize winners] is exceedingly high. That is a point that needs to be discussed. . . Race does not come into it. It is pure religion and culture. Something about the cultural tradition of Jews. . . I don't have the answer to it. I am intrigued by it."

Actually, for me it's not a mystery at all. I can account for the phenomena with one word: *hevruta*. It's an Aramaic word which describes an ancient Jewish method of study: teaming up with a partner, an intellectual equal, whose task is to challenge, argue, disagree. The most illuminating *hevruta* story concerns one of the greatest Talmudic pairs: Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. The two studied together for thirty years, always disagreeing, but maintaining a close friendship. They became brothers-in-law when Resh Lakish married Rabbi Yochanan's sister. After Resh Lakish passed away, his rabbinic colleagues tried to comfort Rabbi Yochanan's enormous grief by finding him a new study partner. But the new partner simply agreed with everything the old rabbi said. "That's not what you're supposed to do!" Rabbi Yochanan burst out. "I don't need you tell me I'm right. I need you to point out to me how I'm wrong."

The rabbinic work *Pirket Avot* ("Sayings of the Fathers") adds a theological dimension to the *hevruta* method of study. The book begins by recounting the chain of tradition: God gives the Torah to Moses, who transmits it to Joshua who transmits it to the Men of the Great Assembly, and so on. But suddenly it goes, as a whole, to Hillel and Shammai, the Talmud's most famous *hevruta* antagonists, who disagree about virtually everything, and even set up opposing schools. It's as if God's word suddenly bifurcates into opposing ideologies, and the only way we get at the deep truth is for the two schools of thought to battle it out. It's a method that produced a great literature (The Talmud) and, perhaps, a few Nobel prizes.

The tradition of great clashing pairs begins in the book of Genesis. Our first stories concern feuding opposites: Cain and Abel; Abraham and Lot; Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau. These aren't simply brothers, they symbolize ideological or lifestyle opposites: nomads vs. farmers; city dwellers vs. shepherds; hunter/athletes vs. quiet intellectuals. The most important pair is Joseph and Judah, who engage in their final conflict in this week's reading. After burying their father Jacob, Judah (and his brothers - but Judah is the leader) suspect that Joseph will now seek his vengeance and kill them. As readers, we suspect this also; after all we don't know Joseph all that well. But Joseph surprises us and Judah by embracing his brothers once again, in love. The gesture echoes an earlier scene where Judah confronts Joseph, right before Joseph finally reveals himself. The Hebrew word the Torah uses there for confront is *vayigash* which the rabbis read aggressively. Judah confronts Joseph as an

enemy, an antagonist, an opposite, like a warrior with only two possible outcomes: victory or defeat.

And remember that, again, it's not just two brothers. Judah and Joseph symbolize dueling approaches which still resonate in today's Jewish world. Judah is the proud Israeli, Joseph the successful Diaspora Jew. Judah's the "pure" Jew; Joseph, with his Egyptian name, wife, job, and children, assimilates. Judah works with his hands; Joseph uses his mind. Judah's a nomad, Joseph's a city boy. How can these opposites unite? As readers we expect a fateful clash, with a winner and a loser.

But they don't destroy each other. They embrace and forgive - which is to say they don't strive for victory, but instead for synthesis and mutual understanding. It's important to understand why. In Judah's climactic speech he emphasizes two themes: a mutual narrative, and a mutual family. In other words, Judah and Joseph may disagree on the basic elements of living a Jewish life. But they still share a story, and a family.

The challenge of hevruta is to disagree strongly, but love each other fully. It's the only way, ultimately, we can learn from each other. In many fields, I'm convinced this model - loving disagreement - produces great work. Sadly, this spirit's been missing in the world of Torah study for many years. For the most part, scholars from the Orthodox and non-Orthodox worlds don't even talk to each other, much less study together. But if we could regain the spirit of Hillel and Shammai; Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish; Judah and Joseph, we could again produce something great.

Shabbat Shalom,
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