

Toldot

December 3, 2016

שְׁנֵי גֵיִים בְּבֶטֶןךָ, וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים, מִמֵּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ; וְלֹאִם מְלֵאִם יֵאָמֵץ, וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִי

Genesis 25:23 *Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.*



This week's Torah portion introduces Esau and Jacob. Though the two men are twins, they are different in every way—in their physical appearance, strengths, and personalities.

The narrative voice of the biblical text portrays Jacob as the one predetermined by God to inherit his father's blessing and wealth over his older brother, Esau. Yet, many see Jacob, spurred on by his mother Rebecca, to be a schemer and trickster. And for centuries, the evident conflict between the twin brothers has been used to explain the ongoing conflict in Israel and the region.

Biblical history indicates that the father of Arab nations is Ishmael, Abraham's son by his Egyptian concubine Hagar. Biblical historians name Esau (also referred to as father of the Edomites in Genesis 20), as a second progenitor to the Arab nations after Ishmael, who was born before Esau.

Rabbinic texts portray Esau as crass and uncaring, ready to dispense with his inherited rites for a bowl of red soup or lentils (verse 34). The same texts paint Jacob as one who “must” do what he can to obtain what he was predestined to receive, even if it means deceiving his blind father. And so, Jacob benefits from his older twin's ravenous hunger and receives the firstborn blessing intended for Esau. Turmoil ensues, and Esau is enraged. However, he does not immediately leave to chase his younger brother. Rather he pledges to remain housebound as his ailing father nears death. The text states that Esau says in his heart, “afterward I will slay my brother Jacob.”

In addition to biblical commentaries, some history books claim that the Arab states of today are all descendants of either Esau or Ishmael (each of whom hated their favored siblings who became Jewish patriarchs in line for God's blessing and the Land of Israel).

Can we, in the modern day, assume that this is the root of our current Middle Eastern conflict? Was the present-day situation initiated by maternal jealousy, family rivalry, expulsion, trickery, and murderous, angry threats? Or perhaps the biblical stories offer a way to explain an existing conflict in the region?

Accounts of hatred and mistrust in the region do not end with the early stories of Esau and Jacob. The narrative in *Numbers* states that, while in the wilderness, Moses and the people encounter ongoing enmity from the descendants of Esau as they ask permission to travel through their lands (Numbers 20:14-21).

Edom (Esau) says to him: “You may not pass through me, or I shall come out with the sword against you.” The children of Israel try to negotiate, suggesting that if they or their cattle drink any water on

Edomite lands, they will pay for it. Again, they are told, “Do not pass through here!” and are confronted by numerous men barring their way.

We read of the ongoing violent encounters of the Edomites and the Ishmaelites with the Israelites in Judges, Kings, and Psalms. Sadly, there are contemporary Arab leaders who continue to use these ancient texts, reciting with the exact wording, to justify their expressions of hatred and desire for the destruction of Israel.

As God promised in the text, the descendants of Abraham, including Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Esau, did prosper and grow to become numerous. However, due to political and social upheaval, the majority of the Jewish descendants were forced out or left the region for other, more hospitable lands. The entire region was populated by numerous Arab communities and tribes with loosely or non-existent legal borders between them.

Internationally recognized borders remained undefined at the end of Israel’s War of Independence in 1949. Already at the end of the 19th century, during the last several decades of Ottoman rule, there were murmurings of Arab national feeling as Arab leaders began to object to the foreign rule of the Ottoman Turks. Arab nationalism then blossomed after World War I. Tribal communities, already in the region for many centuries, began to establish themselves as independent entities, each with their own local leadership, often supported by the British in their quest for regional supremacy.

Perhaps the most frustrating challenge for Jews is the Arab nations’ wealth of territory and population in contrast to the comparatively tiny landmass of Israel and their small population. With brutally antagonistic political conflicts between and amongst Arab states and ethnic groups within those states, it feels increasingly less probable that the modern day descendants of ancient brothers, fathers to the Jews and Arabs, will reconcile and live side by side peacefully.

Discussion Questions:

Prominent thinkers in the Arab world included Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammed Abduh (1849 - 1905); both activists, scholars, and politicians whose attempts to modernize Islamic pride and Arab nationalism continue to influence the development of Muslim thought today. What challenges might these liberal thinkers have confronted when faced with multiple Arab groups who do not necessarily see themselves as a single unified people?

Additional Resources:

Efraim Karsh, [*Misunderstanding Arab Nationalism*](#), Middle East Quarterly, Spring 2001, Volume 8: Number 2 pp. 59-61.

Martin Kramer, [*Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity*](#), Daedalus, Summer 1993, pp. 171-206.