

The Twerp Wins
Drash by Joe Hample, Rabbinic Intern
Beth Chayim Chadashim
Parashat Toledot, 11/9/07

My grandfather wasn't a bit religious, but he had a good liberal arts education and he knew his Bible. He once told me it was an embarrassment that our ancestor Jacob was such a bad egg. That's right: the patriarch Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes and the progenitor of our whole people, was a bit of a rascal.

I think Grandpa may have had this week's Torah portion in mind, the one where Jacob steals the prerogatives of the firstborn from his elder twin Esau. Esau is the strong, hairy one, the he-man; Jacob is the quiet, smooth one, the mama's boy; but Jacob outsmarts his brother and obtains the special birthright and blessing.

For some of us this story may feel a little uncomfortable. It seems to play into anti-Semitic stereotypes. Don't our enemies say we're sly, crafty, devious? Jews are often viewed as physical weaklings, pale and nearsighted scholars, who somehow manage to outmaneuver the big strapping gentiles.

From another point of view, the cunning Jacob is a universal figure, a Jungian archetype, a stock character you'd find in any folklore tradition: the wildcard, the dark horse, the free spirit. Like Hermes in Greek mythology, or Krishna in Hindu mythology, Jacob is the trickster in Hebrew mythology, the one who wins the game by changing the rules.

Beyond the specifics of Jacob's career, the victory of the younger sibling is a recurring trope in the Hebrew Bible. The other pair of twins in Genesis – Tamar's kids – works out the same way; it's the younger one who gets to be the ancestor of the royal line. The legal part of the Bible privileges the firstborn (Deut. 21), but the narrative part of the Bible continually subverts this paradigm. Isaac is preferred to his elder brother Ishmael; Joseph is preferred to his elder brothers; and of Joseph's two sons, the younger is the favorite. King David is a youngest son; King Solomon is his youngest son. Likewise with the women: Rachel is younger than her sister Leah, but Rachel is the favorite. This plot twist is so ubiquitous in Scripture, the Bible might as well be renamed The Twerp Wins.

Why is the victory of the younger sibling such a major theme in our text? Probably because Israel saw itself as the younger sibling of older, bigger, stronger nations like Egypt and Babylon. In spite of our youth and puniness, we were somehow sure God loved us best. If Egypt or Babylon was aware of that belief, I'll bet they didn't like it.

Now I happen to be a firstborn, so I'm a little sensitive about those uppity rugrats stealing the birthright. It hits a little too close to home. I'm the eldest of four, and I was the well-behaved one as a child, the best little boy in the world. But things change in adulthood, don't they. My brother Zack has written a couple of successful books on baseball, not my area of expertise. My sister Martha is in the junk-mail business: she develops those glossy impersonal letters you throw away by the hundreds; she owns a big house with a swimming pool. My brother Henry has a

master's degree in Ethnomusicology. I was pretty thrilled to get my own master's degree last spring and catch up with him. Of course, mine isn't in Ethnomusicology.

Esau is a figure of some pathos. He makes every effort to please his folks, even taking another wife when his mother isn't crazy about his marital choices, even making his father's dinner to prove he has a sensitive side. He gets all farklemt when it turns out the pipsqueak snagged the paternal blessing: Esau groans, Dad, don't you have a blessing for me too? Caught off guard, Papa can only blurt out that Esau will probably get even someday. That's not what they tell you to say in parenting classes.

If you're a firstborn, you know how the firstborn is caught between generations, with one foot in the parents' world and one foot in the kids' reality. Much the way I feel in rabbinical school, where the other students are half my age, hipper, more energetic, more adaptable. I'm a sort of uncle to them. Who knows, maybe I'm teaching them some bits of tribal lore they haven't heard from their own folks. Who knows, maybe Esau's self-confidence rubbed off on Jacob. And maybe Esau was able to shep some naches from Jacob's later success.

Esau does eventually forgive Jacob: we'll read about their reconciliation a couple of weeks from now, on Shabbat Thanksgiving. I'm still working on forgiving my siblings, for being richer or taller than I; for having more athletic or musical talent; for being younger. But we learn from the Talmud (BT Rosh ha-Shanah 17a) that those who forgive are themselves forgiven. And it's not all bad having a sports author and a fiddle player for brothers: someday I'll make them entertain at my temple's new member party. It's not all bad having an advertising executive for a sister: someday I'll make her plan my capital campaign. It's great they're such distinctive individuals. Perhaps in some small way my early academic excellence was an inspiration to them.

At least I was my grandfather's favorite, the grandfather who disapproved of Jacob. My younger siblings – louder, messier, pushier – were, in Grandpa's lingo, bad eggs. But I've reached the place where I can embrace being Esau and respect Jacob too. Of course, there's always one benefit to having siblings. You're all making fun of the same parents.