

From Generation to Generation

Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard

November 8, 2015

Parshat Toldot

The reading from the Hebrew Bible this week is *Toldot*, which means both “generations” and “stories.” It opens with Isaac asking G!d to make his wife Rebecca pregnant. His mother, Sarah, also had been unable to conceive until she was a very old woman. Rebecca does conceive, and she carries twins who struggle in her womb so much that she asks G!d “if this is how it is going to be, then why am I?” or what is the reason for my existence? G!d actually answers this existential question by telling her “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples will come from your body. One people will be mightier than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”

While Isaac asks G!d to do something tangible – make his wife pregnant – Rebecca asks the reason for her existence. Isaac gets a tangible response, and Rebecca gets a philosophical answer, suggesting to some commentators that she is the deeper thinker and the one more spiritually attuned. G!d's answer to her tells us that G!d has a plan for Rebecca that is bigger than the pain she is suffering during the pregnancy.

The plan unfolds as we read on in the portion: Esau is the first born twin. He is all red and hairy, which is what his name “Esau” means. He grows up to be a hunter and Isaac’s favorite, because Isaac likes to eat meat and Esau provides it for him. Jacob, the second to be born, is named Jacob meaning the one who grabbed onto his brother’s heel while he was being born. He is a homebody who likes to cook, and he is Rebecca’s favorite.

Rebecca conspires with Jacob to steal the first born’s blessing and birthright from his brother Esau. Our Rabbinic sages teach that she does this because she is in tune with G!d’s plan. Jacob will become a great nation – he will actually become “Israel” - after he wrestles with an angel, gets his hip ligament pulled and emerges forever changed from the struggle as indicated by the change of his name. Esau, too will become a great nation; the Edomites are his tribe. But this is the Hebrew Bible, so it’s Jacob’s tribe that is the center of the story.

The story of these twins and their parents echoes the story of Abraham’s sons Ishmael and Isaac and their parents. The elder, Ishmael, gets pushed out because Isaac’s mother Sarah, like Rebecca, knows that it is Isaac’s story that matters for the development of the nation of Israel. Ishmael too founds a great nation, the nation that would become Islam, but again, this isn’t the Koran, it’s the Hebrew Scriptures, so his story is secondary. And there are many, many more commonalities between the two stories.

What interests me about the similarities between the two stories is what the sons learn about life from their parents, and how the parents seem completely unaware of what they are teaching their children. In both cases, the children learn brutality and betrayal in the setting of the nuclear family. In both cases this learning will be projected onto the next generation with huge consequences that are both awful and wonderful. In both cases, the younger generation will have to go through its own struggles to develop into emotionally whole and spiritually developed individuals.

The sons' journeys lead them to becoming fully actualized, emotionally developed and spiritually sophisticated human beings capable of doing great things because they reconcile with one another. Ishmael and Isaac come together to bury their father Abraham just as Jacob and Esau will reunite to bury their father Isaac. When Esau and Jacob meet up again as old men, Esau gives great quantities of gifts to Jacob, and Jacob tells Esau that to see his brother is like seeing the face of G!d. They've done the inner work that would lead to a transformation in their relationship and that would allow them to lead their respective people. Jacob's words to his brother about seeing G!d in his face and Esau's emotional response of clinging to Jacob and kissing him, lets us readers know that they have each internalized the other's struggle and are genuinely changed by that. They have become spiritually renewed. This spiritual renewal doesn't just affect

their immediate families, it affects their children and their children's children. "L'dor v'dor" or "from one generation to the next. It affects the nations they each lead. Jacob's and Esau's reconciliation sets in motion peace and cooperation between their peoples for all time.

In October, I heard an interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates just after he'd become a MacArthur Genius Award recipient. He's a writer for *The Atlantic*, which last year published his article, "The Case for Reparations." Coates is making the case for the payment of reparations to African Americans to begin to right the wrong of 200+ years of slavery, and its lasting effects. He cites studies done that show that millions or millions of dollars were stolen from African Americans by not paying them for their labor, by stealing the lands they came to own after slavery was over, and by denying African Americans mortgages and forcing them not just to pay for the homes they believed they were buying at rates double or more the homes' values, but also to pay for repairs on those homes and the taxes on them, as well. Moreover, he cites evidence that in the year 1860, slaves as assets were worth more than the sum, *the sum*, worth of manufacturing, the railroads and all of the productive capacity of the United States.

In the interview, Coates spoke about growing up as a black child in Baltimore, where every decision he made, such as choosing which baseball cap to wear and how to wear it or what path to take to school, could mean the difference between coming home again safely or winding up dead.

And he was clear that the potential for violence done to him that he had to consider every day was the result of the color of his skin and the result of the legacy of slavery.

Perhaps you are saying to yourself, “yeah, I also grew up in a tough neighborhood,” or “yeah, I also experienced discrimination growing up an immigrant or gay or Jewish” or whatever other reason you might have experienced it. At least that’s kind of where I was heading in my own mind as I listened to Coates talk, because, you know, I’m Jewish, and you know, there were, and still are those moments when someone’s anti-Semitic beliefs about Jews leaks out in my hearing. But he stopped me in my tracks with his next comments. He said that what really bothered him was that the majority of America, that is white America, went around living our lives having no idea that black, Native American, Latino, and Asian American kids lived their lives the way he grew up. No idea. He’s bothered that while neither he nor his parents were slaves, he and his kids live every day of their lives with the legacy of slavery affecting every aspect of their lives, and that white Americans don’t seem to appreciate that we, too, live every day of our lives with the legacy of slave holding affecting every aspect of our lives. That’s because we got the legacy of that luxury thanks to the color of our skin. But it’s also because we refuse to look that legacy in the eye and see ourselves as the descendants of a life

that devastated an entire population and continues to adversely affect millions of African Americans.

I know what Coates means. One of my teachers, Rabbi Marcia Prager, and others have suggested that Jews live with a collective experience of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I wasn't personally a victim of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Polish pogroms or the Holocaust, yet I inherited that legacy and it's affected who I am in ways that still surprise me. And it can make me angry to think that most Europeans, most Poles and most Germans don't daily suffer the shame and outrage of their ancestors' beliefs and actions when I live daily with the repercussions of those ancestors' anti-Jewish-ism.

Coates went on to say that if we want to celebrate the great American experiment in democracy on July 4th, if we want to be patriotic about what's great about America, we needed also to deal with the fact that our great democracy, the creation of the American nation, was made possible by the enslavement of the black population. Even after 1865, the American nation, to quote one of Coates's interviewees, was a "regime that elevated armed robbery to a governing principle" by such methods as Jim Crow and into the latter half of the 20th century by denying African Americans home mortgages, the rewards of the GI Bill, and a host of other government-sponsored or sanctioned discriminatory practices. Celebrating America is

celebrating a lie if we don't reconcile these truths. For Coates the way to do so is through reparations.

Coates is talking about something much deeper and more sustaining than the payment to African Americans of back pay and tax rebates. Coates writes that "Reparations - by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences - is the price we pay to see ourselves squarely." He goes on to write that what he is "talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal." This is why I was so profoundly affected by his argument. It's not just about the money; we've paid out reparations to slaves on occasions in our history, and if we wanted to do it, we'd find the money to do it now. But after twenty-five years of Representative John Conyers introducing a bill in the House at every opening session of Congress to study the effects of slavery, it's still not been passed. Because we don't want to go there. None of us as individuals wants to acknowledge that just because we ourselves weren't slave owners doesn't mean we don't have a responsibility to right this wrong that is still being perpetrated.

Coates reminds me of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's suggestion that to acknowledge, to really see the person before me means I must take responsibility for that person, for not to take responsibility is to do violence to that person. I realize now that what Levinas meant was that while my family might have been too busy running from our own oppressors back in

Russia and Poland during the period of slavery in America, I as a white American, who enjoys all that status has to offer, have a responsibility to my African American contemporary who is carrying the slavery legacy within her to be with her in her suffering, to fight with her for all African Americans to share in the American dream, and to stand beside her as witness to the suffering of her people. To see her face is to see the face of G!d, but it's also to do my own internal, spiritual work. That means countering the lie of American democracy with the truth of the legacy of American slavery. That means encouraging my white friends to engage with our inchoate racism by forcing ourselves to look at our white privilege in order to eliminate it. For me, it also means making the argument for reparations not just for the economic justice it would bring about, which could, indeed, go miles to reverse a host of ills plaguing the African American community, but also for the national spiritual renewal it could catalyze.

A national spiritual renewal! Imagine us making new traditions on July 4th by telling our stories to one another and listening compassionately.

Imagine us sitting beside one another and seeing G!d in each other's faces as we acknowledge our collective culpability and take responsibility for an other's suffering. Imagine saying "yes," I owe it to you and choose to sacrifice some of what I have because you have sacrificed for me and this is what neighbors and fellow citizens do for each other in the oldest

continuous democracy in the world. Imagine choosing to renew our national spirituality, so that all people are recognized, seen, heard and responded to with compassion and love.