

Toldot 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/18/2017

This morning I want to talk about Confirmation Bias; our unique ability to seek out proof of truths we already hold, while at the same time dismissing evidence that runs contrary to what we already believe. Confirmation Bias, I believe, has a great deal to do with the way that we read one of the most poignant moments in this week's Torah portion.

Parshat Toldot contains one of the most emotional moments in all of the Torah. And please understand that the Torah does not usually show emotion in this way. Remember when Isaac was about to be slaughtered by his dad? No emotion. Abraham? We don't know what he was thinking either...But listen to what this portion says: "After Isaac finished blessing him, and Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, "My father, please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing." His father Isaac asked him, "Who are you?" "I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn, Esau." Isaac trembled very violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me?! I ate it just before you came and I blessed him-and indeed he will be blessed!" When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me-me too, my father!" But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me!! He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?" Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?" Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" Then Esau wept aloud." It is a painful scene to watch between a father and son who really do love one another.

So Isaac does give him a blessing, of sorts: You'll live by the sword and you'll serve your brother. Great. Esau's reaction after that powerfully emotional and disappointing moment in his life is as expected: "Esau hated Jacob, because his father had given Jacob the blessing. He thought, "The time to mourn my father's death is near; then I will kill Jacob. But when Rebecca heard about Esau's plan, she sent for Jacob and said, "Listen, your brother Esau is planning to get even with you and kill you. Now, son, do what I say, and flee." And that's exactly what he does. They don't meet up again for 20 years, two weeks from now in Parshat Vayishlach. By that point both of them have done rather well for themselves, but now Jacob hears that Esau has 400 men with him and is asking for a meeting. Jacob panics. He thinks his brother is coming to kill him.

But that's not at all what happens. No, what happens is something extraordinary. When the two brothers meet after 20 years, Esau runs to Jacob, hugs him, kisses him, and Esau, the man of emotion, breaks out in tears. It is an extraordinary moment of forgiveness and reconciliation. A wonderful example for all of us who feel wronged but hope to make things right. We need to forgive and forget as Esau did; to hug, kiss and make up. What a beautiful and powerful lesson that is! It could have been a life changing teaching that was handed down from one generation to the next. Beautiful...

But that's not how the Rabbis of our tradition read it. Not at all! Playing on the word to kiss, they say that Esau really wanted not to kiss, but to bite Jacob on the neck (Dracula style) and so Gd sent a miracle to protect Jacob, and Jacob's neck turned to stone. So instead of a tearful reunion, we have Jacob with a stiff neck and Esau crying with a mouth full of broken teeth!

But that's consistent with pretty much everything rabbinic literature says about Esau. They teach that Esau was a hunter in that he trapped people with words, manipulating them for his own gain. They tell us that he enticed women from their husbands. He was a hater of peace, a man consumed with violence. He was, according to the Rabbinic Tradition, the epitome of evil.

Really? The epitome of evil? Was he rash? Sure? Intellectual? No. Impulsive and emotional? Obviously. But pure evil? We don't see THAT in the text! Moreover, Jacob, the one who actually does the deception, is depicted in Rabbinic Literature as studious and wholesome; dedicated to goodness! And so it makes you wonder why the Rabbis were so predisposed against Esau? Think of how different things would be if they weren't!

Well, it turns out that the vilification of Esau can be traced back to the Roman period. The depiction of Esau as evil was most clearly a response on the part of the Rabbis to Roman persecution. The Rabbis saw themselves as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so of course the forefathers had to look good. And those who stood against the forefathers became the archetypical "other." It was helpful for them to assert boundaries between "us and them," "good and evil;"... It was helpful for them to paint a character portrait in black and white and so Esau became the "black sheep" of the family.

But it is what happened next that is truly most interesting to me. Once this image was crystallized in Rabbinic Literature, Confirmation Bias is, as I said, our human proclivity for seeking out and finding evidence that supports our own assumptions. Esau is evil, so every enemy of the Jewish People becomes an "Esau." We find things that support the narrative we already hold. And Evil Esau became so engrained in our tradition that you really have to work hard to find something nice to say about him. And if you do, even that may seem suspect. And so, the image of reconciliation that actually IS in the Torah is overlooked. Jacob becomes the hero and Esau the enemy.

But think of how really different things could have been if the model of reconciliation had been the one handed down. It wasn't; and that's because the Rabbis of the second century had an agenda. But does that really mean we need to inherit their agenda?... I think a lot about this Confirmation Bias these days. How much of our understanding of the world is shaped by an agenda that is no longer our own. How much more helpful would it be if we could get at the root of the biases that sometime influence our political life here in America? Think of the potential for healing that could come if we acknowledged this Confirmation Bias as a natural tendency in all of us.

Closer to home, think of how much of our lives are shaped by things that happened within our own families long ago that evoked a reaction that is no longer the one we want to perpetuate? How many family members don't speak to this day because of some slight that might have

happened generations ago? And finally, how much of our own inner narrative is shaped by an understanding of ourselves that we perpetuate through Confirmation Bias?

The process of human emotional and intellectual growth is fueled by curiosity, a willingness to research, to think, to listen and to learn. Even when it comes to our sacred literature, it's not only permitted to ask questions, it's expected: of our tradition, of our community, and of ourselves. Let's not be afraid to grow - let's not be afraid to ask the good questions about how we came to think what we now think, so that we can begin to plan for a better, brighter future.