

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can religions overcome their sibling rivalries?



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An important inspiration for my interfaith work has been the writings and presentations of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He has written more than 30 books and hundreds of articles, essays and blogs. The videos of his lectures are readily available on the internet, including at his website, rabbisacks.org. He served as the chief rabbi for Great Britain for 22 years, and it was my great pleasure to meet and hear him lecture at Cambridge University. He was awarded the Templeton Prize in 2016.

His book "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence" describes the Abrahamic religions as engaged in a classic sibling rivalry that often is based on the idea that only one can be the privileged, favorite child. That such religious jealousy can and does lead to violence is reflected in Genesis, when the first recorded act of worship is followed by the first recorded murder, when Cain kills Abel.

"Such has been the history of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam," Sacks wrote. "The younger believes it has prevailed over the elder. Christianity did so to Judaism, Islam did so to both. ... Each regards itself as the heir to the covenant with Abraham. Strife is written into the script. It may lie dormant for centuries, but its seeds lie intact, ready to spring to life once circumstances favor religious revival. Each defines and defends itself by negating the other."

He then devotes four chapters to further stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, concluding with a chapter on siblings working together: Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

In each of these stories, Sacks points out aspects that are usually ignored in the telling, at least in the Christian tradi-

tion in which I was raised.

Isaac was chosen in the Hebrew Scripture telling of the story, but Sacks points to the extraordinary length to which the text goes to insist that Ishmael will be blessed by God. The Lord tells Ishmael's mother, Hagar, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." (Gen. 16:10) God then tells Abraham, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you. I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly." (Gen 17:20) God again tells Abraham that he will make Ishmael into a nation, "because he is your offspring."

When Hagar is in the desert and fearing for Ishmael's life, God calls again to her, saying, "What troubles you Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is. Help the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 21:17-18)

The Hebrew text is clear that Isaac is chosen but Ishmael is not rejected. Sacks calls it "the most radical of monotheism's truths: that God may choose, but God does not reject. The logic of scarcity – of alpha males and chosen sons – has no place in a world made by a God whose 'tender mercies are on all his works.' ... Brothers can live together in peace."

Perhaps the brothers did find peace. The Bible says, "Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah." (Gen. 25:8-9) The

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passage then follows with the genealogy of both Isaac and Ishmael.

The sibling narrative continues in that same chapter with the story of Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Most of us remember how Esau sold his birthright to his younger brother in a most impetuous act for a mere bowl of homemade soup. Then Jacob received the blessing as the eldest as well as the birthright by tricking his blind father.

The devious act of Jacob, along with Esau's indignation, led to many years of separation between the two brothers. Jacob married, had children and accumulated considerable wealth, not always honorably, but it was time for him to return to his own land. This was a frightening prospect, given Esau's vow to kill him. Finally, on his return, Jacob has an encounter with the angel (or as the text suggests, was it with God?). That encounter changed Jacob, and his approach to Esau led to their embrace. Brothers can live together in peace!

Before Jacob could be at peace with Esau and with himself, he had to wrestle with God regarding who he really was: one with a stolen identity, or one who can be true to himself and even love his former enemy.

Are the children of Abraham today condemned to carry out a sibling rivalry, pitting religion against religion? Or can we embrace each other and live together in peace?

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