INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Forgiveness in response to family conflict

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, discusses family conflict in his book "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence." From the book of Genesis, he relates four stories of brother conflicts, leading up to the lesson of forgiveness found in the story of Joseph and his brothers. He begins with the story from the early chapters of Genesis where we read of the first recorded act of worship of different offerings by the two brothers Cain and Abel, which led to the first recorded murder in Scripture. Conflict led to death.

Last week, we looked at Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, whose birth from different mothers created conflict. While the brothers separated, both branches of the expanded family tree are acknowledged in Genesis and, in the end, the brothers came together to bury their father. This expanded family is also part of the Muslim story as recorded in the Qur'an, where the Jewish patriarchs are recognized as prophets and a part of their story. The early conflict led to separation, but both brothers survived and the expanded family lines were acknowledged in both the Hebrew and Muslim scriptures.

JACOB AND ESAU

Sibling conflict continues into the next generation as we read 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. And then Jacob received the blessing as the eldest as well as the birthright by tricking his blind father. When Esau realizes what has happened he wants to kill Jacob.

Understandably, Jacob flees the scene and goes far away to his mother's brother Laban, where he works for Laban and falls in love with his younger daughter, Rachel. He agrees to work for Laban seven years in exchange for marrying Rachel. As often happens to deceivers like Jacob, he is deceived by his uncle, who now says he must first marry the older daughter, Leah. Jacob must now work an additional seven years to finally marry his first love, Rachel.

In time, Jacob grows in wealth and desires to return home but is still fearful about his brother's likely response. As they come together, Jacob is frightened, offers gifts to his brother and pleads for Esau's kindness. Surprisingly, Esau runs to meet his brother, embraces him and weeps. The conflict that began years earlier with a pledge to kill his brother is resolved with a restored relationship. Furthermore, Esau's descendants, the Edomites, are considered part of the expanded family. Conflict is resolved through reconciliation.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

The stories of family conflict and resolution continue to the next generation as Genesis recounts the story of Jacob's sons and their conflict with Joseph, one of Rachel's sons and Jacob's favorite. While not the first-born, Joseph becomes the main actor in this story, reflecting the tensions among the various tribes of Israel. Most are familiar with the story, at least the Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice version in the musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

The story, in brief, tells of the jealousy of the brothers leading them to sell Joseph to a caravan of traders, who in turn sell him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph, through his efforts as well as his ability to interpret dreams, is promoted to a position of trust and power in this new land. Years later, when famine threatens the survival of Jacob and his family, the brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain, where they encounter Joseph, who has been put in charge of the program for saving up supplies for the coming crisis and has plenty of grain. The brothers do not recognize Joseph as their brother but see him as the stranger who holds their future in his hands. As the story unfolds, older brother Judah plays the decisive role in recognizing the injustice that had occurred earlier when they had tried to dispose of Joseph.

Esau and Jacob made peace and were reconciled in the end. With Joseph and his brothers, Sacks points to the resolution of Joseph forgiving his brothers for what they had done when they sold him into slavery. He notes that this is the first place in the Bible where forgiveness is described in the act of conflict resolution. The brothers were fearful that Joseph would take revenge, but he assured them, saying: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." (Genesis 45:3-8)

Following the death of Jacob, their father, the brothers are again fearful that Joseph will now take his revenge. The book of Genesis concludes with Joseph's reaffirmation: "'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." (Genesis 50:19-20)

Sacks reflects, "This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have done." Conflict is resolved through forgiveness.

Forgiveness as a way to respond to family conflict is the theme of the Joseph story. Can this be a lesson for the extended human family? Let us refrain from revenge but instead follow Joseph as he "reassured them, speaking kindly to them." Can we apply these concepts and principles in our own day as we address conflicts in our families, communities and our nation?

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