

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 2 DECEMBER 2016

Why Are We We? A Story of Two Brothers

I grew up in the shadow of the University of Chicago. Literally. Our apartment was on 54th and University, and U of C started around 58th, four blocks away.

I do not know how it is now, but in those days they said that U of C was seeking for its student body people who, sometime in their life, would accomplish one thing that would make a major contribution to civilization. In other words, they were looking for – and this word was bandied about in the neighborhood altogether too often – so-called geniuses.

The notion and prizing of geniuses even found their way down to the grammar school I attended. Imagine the pressure that put on everyone!

Of course, people conveniently forgot about the fact that two neighborhood kids, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, who, setting out to commit the perfect crime back in the 1920's and murdering Bobby Franks, had also been U of C students. And they too, people said, were geniuses.

The theory behind most of this genius talk was the belief that we are what we are – and become what we become – because of our nature. But is that so? And if it is, then what?

There is a curious midrash that comes out of this week's *parashah*. In the *parashah*, Rebecca is having a particularly difficult pregnancy. Pregnant with twins, the text tells us, וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ (*Vayitrotzatzu habanim b'kirbah*), "the children were struggling/kicking around inside of her." Not very pleasant. And the full meaning of the text is something like, "If this is what pregnancy is all about, forget it!"

Now the word, וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ (*Vayitrotzatzu*), is an interesting one. It comes from the root, רָצַצ (resh-tzadi-tzadi), meaning, "to struggle." But the Rabbis in this midrash didn't read it that way. They read the word, וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ, as coming from the root, רוץ (resh vav tzadi), meaning, "to run." And instead of translating the text as "the children were struggling/kicking around inside of her," they read it as "And the children seemed to be ever on the run¹ within her." (Gen. 25:22).

And from that understanding came this midrash: "When Rebekkah passed synagogues or houses of study, [the unborn] Jacob was scurrying within her in his eagerness

¹ Play on the word, *vayitrotz'tzu*, understanding the word as deriving from the root, *rutz*, instead of *ratzatz*.

to get out; and when she passed houses of idolatry, [the unborn] Esau was scurrying in his eagerness to get out.² In other words, who Jacob and Esau became was already set while they were in the womb. In other words, for this midrash, who we are is pure nature, from the very moment of conception.

On the other hand, this midrash conveniently disregards something that we also read in the biblical text. After birth, "As the boys grew up, Esau became a man skilled at hunting, an outdoorsman, while Jacob was a mild man, one who stayed in the tents." And then, "Isaac (their father), who had a liking for game-meat, loved Esau, while Rebecca (their mother) loved Jacob." (Genesis 25:27f) What do you think that house looked like? Were the two brothers socialized the same way? Were they raised the same way? In other words, in the biblical text we find the opposite. There it seems to be all about nurture.

Leave for a moment the *parashat hashavua*, the week's Torah portion, Toldot, and move a little closer to home. This time, instead of being somewhere off in the Middle East 3,500 years ago plus or minus, let's move right here to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And the years are a few years ago, within the lifetimes of many of us, and the brothers are not Jacob and Esau but James "Whitey" Bulger and William "Billy" Bulger. Whitey Bulger, to refresh your memory, was born in 1929 and became one of the most horrendous criminals imaginable. His brother, William Bulger, was born in 1934 and became the President of the Massachusetts Senate, a position he held from 1978 to 1996, and then President of the University of Massachusetts, a position he held from 1996 to 2003, but only until then because he was forced to resign under pressure from all quarters including Mitt Romney, our then governor, owing to his unwillingness to reveal details of his brother's whereabouts.

Two brothers, both children of the same parents (There were more children in the home), both raised in the same South Boston home, but one going off in one direction, the other going off in quite another. Nurture? Nature?

I've always believed, by the way, that both Bulger brothers possess a certain kind of genius, the difference being that Billy's carried him to make a positive impact upon society, and Whitey's - and Whitey is an obvious sociopath - carried him to make his life a life of heinous crime. But that was the life of Leopold and Loeb as well. And was not Josef Mengele, who with a flick of his wrist sent countless people to their deaths upon their arrival at Auschwitz concentration camp, also a physician (He also had a doctorate in anthropology) who, along with many other physicians performed deadly human ex-

² Genesis R. 63:6; Yalkut, *Toledot*, section 110.

periments on prisoners? Geniuses? By IQ measurements, I'm guessing many might have been.

So why do some, and not only so-called geniuses, go one way while others go the other? And is it our nurture that drives us?

Our nature...this is a curiosity: Genesis purports that our heart's nature is *evil*³ [literally] from our youth (Genesis 8:21). RaSHI takes "youth" to mean from the instant right before we are born.

But if that's the case, consider Moses for a moment. Moses is raised in Pharaoh's court (nurture) and, before being forced to flee, murders an Egyptian. Nonetheless, he is picked to be, and, in our tradition is, the greatest leader we've ever had. More, as the Torah ends we read, "There never again arose a leader as Moses, who knew God face-to-face," meaning, he totally [and uniquely] comprehended the fullness of God's being. That's why the tradition sees him not just as an ordinary genius but as the genius of geniuses (nature)!

So is it nature or nurture? When I was serving as a chaplain in Germany back in the late sixties and early seventies, I came in contact with a significant number of Germans then in their 40's and early 50's who - and this was *so* obvious - had in some way either participated in the Holocaust or, at least, were aware of what was going on. How did I know? From the code words: most claimed that they had spent their World War II service years with Rommel in the Afrika Corps. What I learned early on: that was the standard lie for those who spent their years in Eastern Europe or Germany.

Talking to many of those Germans, I discovered that they, in so many ways, were similar to me. They had the same love of art and music and literature, same pursuit of higher education, same economic drive, same materialistic desires, and even same sense of obligation to insure their kids would get orthodontia if they needed it, as I did. And that got me thinking: could I have done what they did? I wrestled with that for a long time. The fact is that I didn't know that I couldn't do what they did. And that to me was frightening. Finally, one realization saved me: I *didn't* do what they did. They did what they did. They were guilty. I wasn't.

None of us knows, in situations we haven't ever encountered and hopefully never will, how we will act. So how do we escape this dilemma? For Judaism, it is found in the great paradox taught by our sage Akiba (another genius, by the way): "Everything

³ Italics mine.

is foreordained, though free-will is given; the world is judged by the good, everything following the bulk of the action.”⁴

What we *are* capable of (what our nature is) is not the thing. It’s what we, by how we within our homes and our society are nurtured, that, in the end, is what counts. We *do* have the capability of making the world a better place. What it takes is our *will* to make it so. May that be our path. And may we, no matter what we are capable of, strive always to make the bulk of our actions good, so that, following what Akiba taught, the world will, in the end, be a better place.

⁴ Avot 3:15