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torah
QUEERIES

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

Nature vs. Nurture: A Story of Generation(s)

by **David Levy**

Parashat Toldot — Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

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Toldot, the name given to this week’s parasha, has many layers to its definition. Coming from the Hebrew root meaning “birth,” it literally means “generations.” Its use in the Torah introduces genealogical lists, and also marks the beginning of important stories related to the members of Abraham’s particular genealogical line – some translations even give the word as it appears at the beginning of this week’s parasha as “story.” Toldot is a particularly fitting name for this section of the Torah, because the story begins with the birth of Jacob and Esau, and hinges on both the relationship between the older and younger generations and the question of who shall lead the generations to follow.

To me, Parashat Toldot reads like a divine statement on the “nature versus nurture” debate: Are our identities and destinies somehow inherent in us, or are we shaped by the environment in which we are brought up, formed by the generation before us? In queer culture, this debate at times looms large. Are we “born that way” or are there external factors that “make us gay”? And if we adopt children, will our nurturing homes be enough to bring up a next generation in our image, or will adopted children turn out like their birth parents . . . whoever they might be?

While these questions may at times feel like irrelevant cocktail conversation, they also have a sinister side. If it turns out that queerness can be genetically predicted, will narrow-minded potential parents terminate pregnancies rather than bear queer children? If research points toward environmental factors, will it only fuel “ex-gay ministries” that attempt to “rehabilitate” queer people from their lifestyle?

In attempting to study the question of “nature versus nurture,” researchers have often looked to families with twins, particularly identical twins. After all, if twins share DNA and are brought up together, that’s as reliable a control group as one might hope to find. Whereas if twins are brought up separately, the influence of “nurture” might become more evident.

Now the twins in this week’s parasha – Esau and Jacob – are not identical, in either looks or temperament. Esau is a ruddy, hairy hunter; his younger brother a mild-mannered, smooth bodied man. Their differences manifest themselves almost at the moment of conception, struggling in their mother’s womb. They are born fighting – Esau coming first with Jacob clutching his heel – and their relationship remains stormy well into adulthood. Even God affirms their nature, telling their mother Rebecca during her pregnancy “the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23).

The first story the Torah offers us of the boys’ later life involves Jacob bartering Esau’s birthright in exchange for stew. Jacob is cunning, seizing the opportunity with no sign of premeditation. Sounds like a case for nature, no?

When we meet up with the brothers again, a similar story of Jacob stealing the blessing of his father from Esau unfolds. Only in this story, Jacob doesn’t act with the same initiative and cunning. This time, Jacob’s mother Rebecca orchestrates the entire affair, telling Jacob exactly what to do in order to trick her husband into blessing her favorite son instead of his. Rebecca’s plan involves not only cooking, but also grooming and clothing, along with a solid command of the cultural issues at play ... in short, she’s practically a one-woman ancient Near Eastern “queer eye.” When Jacob protests that Isaac might not be so susceptible to Rebecca’s plan, she shuts her son up with a quick “Just do as I say” (Genesis 27:13).

The whole birthright-stew exchange suddenly comes into a sharper focus after witnessing the skill in Rebecca’s plan and the way she dominates her son. Perhaps Jacob was able to seize that opportunity so quickly because Rebecca raised him. Exposure to his mother’s example would surely have sharpened Jacob’s acuity in such situations. Perhaps he was nurtured to be as he is.

But when two stories that are so similar exist side by side in the Torah, we can’t help but ask why. Why tell what is essentially the same story twice, if there’s not something to be learned from the contrast? In this case, I think a core lesson speaks to the futility of the nature versus nurture debate. This parasha presents two alternate versions of Jacob and Esau’s relationship, one colored by birth and the other by environment. Both turn out the same. Whether Jacob had it in for Esau from the womb, or whether he learned his behavior from his mother, shouldn’t affect what lessons we take from their interactions.

This lesson itself could bear repeating once in a while these days. When I think about the amount of money, energy, and talent being devoted to research into “gay genes” (and not, say, to curing AIDS), I have to wonder why. Whether we are born queer, become queer, or choose to be queer shouldn’t affect how we’re judged, our rights under the law, our access to appropriate health care, or our positive self-images.

About the Author:



David Levy is the chairman of the board of Keshet, a Boston-based Jewish GLBT non-profit committed to building community and creating change. In his professional life, he’s the Middle School Director at Prozdor at Hebrew College in Newton, MA, and a resident tutor in religion and BGLTS advising at Harvard.