



Rivalry or Relationship?:

Rereading Ya'akov and Esav

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat Toldot 5786

Our *parashah* offers an opportunity to encounter a typical human phenomenon—plurality—and contemplate its implications. Specifically it brings us to ask: how do Ya'akov, Esav, and their offspring live with each other, as “two” from the womb?

בראשית כה:כב-כג

²²וַיִּתְרָצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־ה': ²³וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי [גוֹיִם]
בְּבֶטֶןךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעִי יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹאִם מִלֹּאִם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

Genesis 25:22-23

²²And the children struggled in her womb, and she said, “If so, why do I exist?” She went to inquire of God, ²³and God answered her, “**Two (*shnei*)** nations are in your womb, and **two (*shnei*)** separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.”



A. “*Shnei*” (שני) as hatred (שנאה)

Rivkah is pregnant, and the pregnancy is difficult. According to Bereishit Rabbah, the suffering stems from the difference between the two fetuses—they move in opposite directions:

בראשית רבה סג:ו

בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהִיְתָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל בִּתְּיָי כְּנִסְיוֹת וּבִתְּיָי מְדַרְשׁוֹת יַעֲקֹב מְפָרְכִס לְצֵאתָ ... וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁהִיְתָה עוֹבֶרֶת עַל בִּתְּיָי עֹבְדֹת כּוֹכָבִים עָשׂוּ רֶךְ וּמְפָרְכִס לְצֵאתָ.

Bereishit Rabbah 63:6

When she would pass by the synagogues or houses of study, Ya'akov would struggle to come out.... And when she would pass by houses of idol worship, Esav would run and struggle to come out.

Not only are they going in opposite directions, according to the *midrash*, but they are also at war with each other, a war taking place within her: “רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר זֶה רֶךְ לְהָרֵג אֶת זֶה וְזֶה רֶךְ לְהָרֵג” - R. Yohanan said: This one ran to kill that one, and that one ran to kill this one.”

These explanations of the struggle between the two fetuses are extreme. What might be driving them? The verse reads: “and God answered her, ‘Two (*shnei*) nations are in your womb, and two (*shnei*) separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.’”

The two instances of “two” (*shnei*) are unnecessary. One way the *midrash* could be operating, then, is to take one of these instances as superfluous, and instead of taking it as the root of *shnei*, meaning two, relating it to the almost identical word *sin’ah* (שנאה), meaning hatred.

A talmudic *midrash* develops this idea of rivalry between one of the most Romanized cities in Eretz Yisrael, Caesarea—which represents Edom (= Rome), the descendants of Esav—and Jerusalem—representing Ya’akov and Israel:

תלמוד בבלי מגילה ו.

אם מליאָה זו – חרבה זו, אם מליאָה זו – חרבה זו. רב נחמן בר יצחק אָמר מִהָכָּא: “וְלֹאִים מְלֹאִים יֵאָמְרוּ.”

Babylonian Talmud Megillah 6a

If this one is full, that one is desolate; if this one is full, that one is desolate. Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: “From here, as it is written, ‘One people shall be mightier than the other.’”

The verse is read as describing a world in which the descendants of these two unborn brothers—Ya’akov and Esav—are locked in perpetual rivalry, governed by the logic of a zero-sum game: when one rises, the other must fall. They will separate, struggle, and contend—their conflict, born in the womb, will endure through generations.

B. “*Shnei*” (שני) as equality and resemblance (שווה)

Plurality allows us to tell a different tale.

Rivkah is pregnant, and the pregnancy is difficult. The presence of two children is the source of her pain. Yet Rivkah, seeks understanding through the experience of others:

בראשית רבה סג:

רבי יצחק אָמר מִלִּמַּד שְׁהִיְתָה אִמְנוּ רַבָּקָה מְחַזְרֶת עַל פְּתִיחֵיהֶן שֶׁל נָשִׁים וְאוֹמֶרֶת לָהֶן הִגִּיעַ לָכֶם הַצָּעִר הַזֶּה בִּימֵיכֶם, אִם כֵּן הוּא צָעֵר וְשֶׁל בָּנִים וְהִלּוּאִי לֹא עֲבָרְתִּי.



Bereishit Rabbah 63:6

R. Yitzhak said: This teaches that our mother Rivkah would go around to the homes of women and ask them, “Did this pain ever come to you in your days?”

Rivkah does not try to escape her suffering but to understand it. She seeks comforting connection, a sympathetic ear, and meaning born of shared experience and open conversation: “and God answered her, ‘Two (*shnei*) nations are in your womb.’”

This time, the word “*shnei* - two” is understood not as a sign of hostility but of resemblance and equality. In another context, the Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 62b) says, “What does the verse mean when it says ‘two (*shnei*)’? That they should both be equal).”¹ And even in the context of Rivkah, the Talmud reads this verse as hinting at a story of friendship, one that is described as happening centuries later between a famous rabbi and a Roman emperor:

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה יא.

”וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ, שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ. אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: אֵל תִּקְרִי “גוֹיִם” אֶלָּא “גֵּיִים”, זֶה אֲנִטּוֹכִינוּס וְרַבִּי.

Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 11a

God answered her, “Two (*shnei*) nations are in your womb.” Rav Yehudah said Rav said: Do not read it *goyyim* (nations), but *gei'im* (proud ones)—this refers to Antoninus² and Rabbi.”

As Rashi explains: “Antoninus and Rabbi—one descended from Esav and the other from Ya'akov.” The depth of their connection is revealed in their final words about one another.

¹ See Torah Temimah on Genesis 25:23, n. 17. The context of the *midrash* is that the two goats of Yom Kippur should ideally be identical.

² Scholars debate who exactly is meant. A number of 2nd and 3rd century CE Roman emperors had the royal name “Antoninus.”



When Antoninus died, Rabbi said: “The bundle has been untied.” Rashi explains this expression: “Our love was such that our souls were bound together.”

Here the verse is understood to describe a world in which the descendants of those fetuses, Ya’akov and Esav, live in a relationship of closeness and depth—a reality of mutual counsel, help, and care. The two are devoted to one another, bound by a connection that endures even beyond the grave.³

Throughout history, interpretations of the word “*shnei* - two” as implying hatred have often served as a religious justification for animosity and as fertile ground for self-fulfilling prophecies of war. Conversely, interpretations of “*shnei*” as implying equality have provided the basis for dialogue and mutual recognition.

As we encounter the divergent narratives of Ya’akov Esav and their offspring we may ask: does the existence of two serve as a source of hatred or of richness? as a foundation for endless rivalry or for creativity and fruitfulness? as a cause of existential struggle or as the starting point for deep friendship? The existence of plurality compels us to ask if difference is a threat, or an opportunity.

Does “two” (*shnei*) mean hatred or similarity?

³ See Mekhilta (Shirah 2 and 6), Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 91a-b, and Avodah Zarah 10a-11a for more on their relationship.

