

Torah Thoughts Toldot

5779:

Parshat Toldot is the story of twin brothers, Esau and Jacob, who are rivals from the time they are in the womb. But on another level, their story is also meant to stand for the close yet tense relationship between one people and another: Jacob represents the Israelites and Esau represents the Edomites. The Torah itself points up this understanding, repeatedly identifying Esau as being ruddy-colored ('Adom') and being called Edom or Seir (the area where the Edomites lived). Later, rabbinic literature took up the pattern and saw Jacob as representing the Jews, as they were now called, and Esau representing Rome or the early Christians.

In each of these cases of national relationships, there is simultaneously a feeling of connection and intimacy and of tension and rivalry. Under Roman rule, Jews saw many benefits of the Roman Empire in terms of the national infrastructure, cultural achievements and scientific inquiry. At the same time, the rabbis identified Rome as a culture of moral rot, one to be avoided whenever possible. And the early Christians saw themselves, and were seen by others, as Jews. Their relationship to mainstream Judaism was certainly one of brothers, marked by feelings of close affinity but also, as time went on, a rivalry that become dangerous for Jews after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The Torah is never merely an account of our past, but a template for our own lives. We identify with it, in part, because we understand that it continues to tell the story of our people, even today. Toldot asks us who our 'brothers' are in the 21st century - other Americans? other religious people? Israelis? - and to what degree are they our allies or our rivals. Siblings often contend with one another, but we pray for sibling relationships with other people that end as Jacob and Esau's relationship did, with forgiveness and an embrace.