

HE AIN'T HEAVY HE'S MY BROTHER

-1970, Lyrics by Bob Russell, Music by Bobby Scott, and performed by the Hollies, Neil Diamond, Olivia Newton-John, the Osmonds, and Cher, among others.

The road is long with many a winding turn
that lead us to who knows where,
But I'm strong, strong enough to carry him.
He ain't heavy, he's my brother.

So on we go.
His welfare is of my concern.
No burden is he to bear,
we'll get there.
For I know he would not encumber me.
He ain't heavy, he's my brother.

If I'm laden at all,
I'm laden with sadness
that everyone's heart isn't filled with the gladness
of love for one another.

It's a long, long road from which there is no return.
While we're on the way to there,
why not share?
And the load doesn't weigh me down at all.
He ain't heavy, he's my brother.

...

This song is based on a drawing of a boy carrying a younger boy on his back, with the caption, "He ain't heavy Mr., he's my brother." A Catholic priest named Father Edward Flanagan thought the image and phrase captured the spirit of Boys Town a community where troubled or homeless boys could come for help, so he commissioned a statue of the drawing with the inscription, "He ain't heavy Father, he's my brother." The statue and phrase became the logo for Boys Town, and a symbol for the sibling relationship.

Deamonte Love is a 6-year-old boy who led a troupe of tiny refugees to safety after Hurricane Katrina, when rescuers separated them from their parents. Deamonte was the oldest of the group, which included his 5-month-old brother, three toddlers in the 2-year-old range, a 3-year-old and her 14-month-old brother. All held hands as Deamonte led the group along Causeway Boulevard in New Orleans, where he identified himself and his associates to authorities. In a sea of helpless victims, Deamonte found the guts and fortitude to take care of himself, his family and friends [Kathleen Parker, 9/14/05].

The story behind the Boy's Town motto is inspiring. Deamonte's story is moving. When we turn to our own tradition what does it have to say about sibling relationships and responsibilities?

We can start with the story of Cain and Abel at the beginning of the Torah - not an auspicious beginning!

Next is Isaac and Ishmael, whom Biblical and Rabbinic tradition read as rivals for God's promise to their father Abraham, causing Abraham to kick Ishmael out of his house.

A generation later is Jacob and Esau. Poor Esau - Jacob was just too smart for him, and tricked him out of his inheritance.

The sister relationship doesn't fare any better. Rachel and Leah are portrayed as engaging in competition for Jacob's attention.

In the next generation, Joseph's relationship with his brothers has given us material for a terrific musical, but not much practical wisdom about how we should treat our own siblings.

In one of the only personal stories about the sibling relationship between Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, the latter two are gossiping against Moses behind his back, angering God. One might imagine that Aaron, who served as the voice of his younger brother Moses who had the more direct line to God; and later served as the Kohen Gadol, High Priest, still subservient to Moses, might carry around some jealousy, especially since he was the one who had to take the blame for building the Golden Calf, even though it was Moses who stayed away so long.

By the time we get to the second book of Samuel (2 Samuel 20:9), we are not surprised that when Joab said to Amasa, "How are you, brother?" and embraces him as if to kiss him, that Joab stabbed him instead! And it is not surprising that when Solomon's brother Adonijah suggested that as the older, perhaps the kingship should go to him on the death of their father David, Solomon had him immediately put to death (1 Kings 2:15-24).

I think most of us as on gut level know that we do have obligations towards our siblings. We understand on a deep level that the sibling relationship carries an obligation higher than that towards a non-family member or a stranger. I'm sure that many people spent part of their Rosh Hashanah celebration with family because we know, even if it not written anywhere, that that's what we should do if we can. I have seen people take care of their siblings in ways that go far beyond what they would do for a mere friend.

If we are to intuit any Jewish principles about how we ought to treat our brothers and sisters, we need to go deeper than the narrative stories I mentioned.

Where do we look in Jewish tradition for guidance on sibling matters? For every person I see who would do anything for a brother or sister, I see another who has a

more difficult relationship. The stories of Genesis are real -- I see siblings who don't speak to each other, I see siblings who compete for their parents affection, I see people who have struggled for years to build a relationship with a sibling who seems not to care, and I see people who struggle to maintain a relationship with a sibling whose behavior is so destructive that were this only a friend, the friendship would have fizzled out years ago.

The Oxford Jewish Study Bible (page 324) points out that the brother relationship in the ancient Near East signified someone who was of equal status. In Deuteronomy, the word brother is used as a synonym for "fellow citizen" (JSB, 412). Deuteronomy seems to suggest that one should treat every fellow Jew as if he/she were a sibling; in other words, there is effectively no special privilege or obligation incumbent upon a sibling.

Is there Biblical and Rabbinic wisdom regarding the sibling relationship? From a Jewish point of view, do we have obligations to honor or respect or take care of our siblings?

First of all, lest we think that the entire book of Genesis is dysfunctional, we do see the brothers Isaac and Ishmael come together and set aside their differences to bury their father (Genesis 25:9). In addition, Jacob and Esau do partially reconcile after being apart for 20 years, although they then separate again.

Rabbinic midrash teaches that Rachel and Leah cooperated to trick Jacob into marrying the older sister before the younger. The midrash suggests that Rachel and Jacob had a secret sign to confirm Rachel's identity under the chupah, and Rachel gave the sign to Leah so that she would not be humiliated by having her younger sister marry first.

In the poetry of Song of Songs, sister or brother are terms of endearment, signifying an affectionate relationship. When David learned of the death of his good friend Jonathan, he eulogized him with the words, "I grieve for you, My brother Jonathan, You were most dear to me." (2 Sam. 1:26, JPS). Clearly, the love of a sibling is among the highest forms of love.

In terms of obligation, Deuteronomy speaks of levirate marriage -- when a man dies childless his brother is obligated to marry the widow and have a child to continue the family line of the deceased brother. Though this mitzvah is not followed today, it points to a deep Biblically-based responsibility of siblings towards one another. This theme is echoed in Leviticus (21), which talks of the requirement of a Kohen to bury his brother or sister, despite the general prohibition against a Kohen coming near a dead body. The broader implications of this passage is that siblings are obligated to mourn for one another by sitting shiva and saying kaddish. If siblings are obligated towards each other in death, how much more so must they be obligated in their lifetimes!

The basic sibling obligation also flows from the 5th commandment, to honor one's parents. Our parents had an obligation to raise us -- if we have siblings, our parents

also raised our brothers and/or sisters. Parents want siblings to get along and help one another. Together, the siblings have a obligation to honor their parents for what they have done for them. By having a caring relationship with your siblings, you are honoring the wishes of your parents. Even after one's parents are no longer alive, one still has the obligation to honor their memory through Shiva, Yizkor, and Yahrtzeit, and through one's relationship with one's siblings.

The Halakhic obligation towards family before others was codified by 16th century Rabbi Moshe Isserles in a gloss to the comprehensive law code Shulhan Arukh (Yoreh Deah 251:3). He writes:

... [the support of] one's one's siblings takes precedence over other relatives or friends.

יקדים פרנסת אביו ואמו אם הם עניים והם קודמים לפרנסת בניו ואח"כ בנין והם קודמים לאחיו והם קודמין לשאר קרובים והקרובים קודמים לשכיניו לאנשי עירו ואנשי עירו לעיר אחרת והוא הדין אם היו שבוים וצריך לפדותן.

The early 14th century commentator Ralbag, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, wrote on Proverbs 17:17, "A friend is devoted at all times; A brother is born to share adversity," that it is the nature of a relationship of deep friendship to stick together through good times and bad. Siblings, however, tend to drift apart during good times --- but when the bad times hit, the nature of a sibling bond ought to bring them close together.

For most people, the experience of being a sibling is challenging. There is competition, there are slights and disappointments, and different life choices can lead to physical and emotional distance between siblings. The Ralbag understands that it is possible to live very well without significant interaction with a sibling until a crisis happens. Often, that crisis is the aging or illness of a parent. Then the siblings are forced back into a significant relationship. At moments like these, it is worthwhile being reminded us Psalm 133, הֲיֵה מְהֵרָה -טוֹב וּמְהֵרָה -נְעִים שְׁבֹת אֲחִים גַּם-יְהִד, "How good it is, and how pleasant when brothers, sisters, dwell in harmony." The Psalmist continues, "It is like precious oil upon the head, flowing down the beard, Aaron's beard, to the very edges of his robe." I am grateful for the insight of my colleague Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein, who notes that the context of the Psalm is the ordination ceremony for Aaron - and it is Moses, who despite any lingering feelings against Aaron in their relationship, poured the anointing oil on Aaron's head. It is precisely at this point, when siblings set aside past feelings of jealousy or resentment, that we say, הֲיֵה מְהֵרָה -טוֹב וּמְהֵרָה -נְעִים שְׁבֹת אֲחִים גַּם-יְהִד, How good it is, and how pleasant when brothers, sisters, dwell in harmony.

There is a Jewish legend about two brothers who farmed together on a hill in Jerusalem. One was married with children, and the other was a bachelor living alone. They were close, and whatever they harvested they shared equally. At one point, however, the unmarried brother thought to himself, "It's not fair. My brother has so many more mouths to feed than I do. I'm going to give him a little extra." Without

telling his brother, in the middle of the night he brought several wheelbarrows full of food to his brother's storehouse. That same night, the married brother thought, "It's not fair. When I get old, I have children to support me. My brother has nobody. I'm going to give him a little extra that he can sell and save for when he can no longer work." In the middle of the night, he brought several wheelbarrows full of food to his brother's storehouse. This went on for several weeks, and neither brother could figure out why their own store of food seemed not to be diminishing. Finally, one night the two brothers ran in to each other pushing their wheelbarrows of food towards the other's storehouse. Realizing what had been happening, they embraced. According to the legend, God built the Temple on that very spot, to honor two brothers who truly loved each other.

May this Rosh Hashanah lead us towards healing and strengthening our families, leading us towards the healing and strengthening of our Jewish community, our secular community and country, and ultimately, increasing the level of Shalom and Ahavah, love and peace, in the world.