



Seeing Siblings

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A minister was preaching one Sunday morning about all the things money can't buy. "Money can't buy happiness, it can't buy laughter, and it can't buy love," he told the congregation. Driving his point home, he said, "What would you do if I offered you \$1,000 not to love your mother and father?" A hush fell over the congregation.

Finally a small voice near the front said, "How much would you give me not to love my sister?"

Ahh...siblings. That indescribable bond sealed with knuckle sandwiches, pulled hair, and big swaths of tape drawing uncrossable lines down the center of rooms. The dulcet tones of "Mom, he hit me!" "No I didn't!" "Yes you did!" "Well, only because you hit me first!"

And yet those same squabbles can emerge to adulthoods of shared memory and purpose. Adulthoods of beautiful relationships, like the ones Frank Bruni wrote about in his ode to siblings in last Sunday's New York Times. Click on nytimes.com, and "The Gift of Siblings" is the number one most e-mailed article. Why?

Perhaps because it paints a gorgeous picture of siblings who just "get" each other. Who don't have to speak because the other knows what would be said.

As Bruni reflects: "I began talking later than most children do. But I didn't need words. I had my older brother, Mark. The way my mother always recounted it, I'd squirm, pout... or bawl... and before she could...coax actual language from me, Mark would rush in to solve the riddle. 'His blanket,' he'd say, and he'd be right... He was my shaman and my Sherpa. With Mark around, I was safe."

He goes on to recount how he and his siblings make a point to always get together for major milestones, and reflects on why it is that they have remained so close. “I’m... convinced that having numerous siblings helps,” he says of his clan of four. “If you’re let down by one, you can let off steam with another.”

Not only that, he says, “[S]iblings... help shoulder the burden of your parents’ dreams and expectations... [they] not only pick up the slack but also act as decoys, providing crucial distraction.”

Ultimately, though, he concludes, “My siblings have certainly seen me at my worst, and I’ve seen them at theirs. No one has bolted.”

That one statement contains multitudes. What does it mean to hang on tight to siblings – to not bolt when the going gets tough?

Perhaps that question is why this article is at the top of the most e-mailed list. Because we all hope and pray, for ourselves with our siblings, and for our children and grandchildren with theirs, to have that unbreakable bond, that unconditional commitment.

It is said that one marries “for better or for worse,” but this article reminds us all that it is with our siblings that we first learn that principle.

It is a lovely piece. An inspiring piece. And yet, it is also, as Bruni freely admits, a lucky piece. Because closeness with siblings is actually no easy task and no guarantee.

See, for Exhibit A, nearly every sibling relationship in the Torah. From Cain and Abel down through Miriam, Moses, and Aaron, the Torah is one long litany of sibling troubles. Jacob steals the birthright from Esau, Leah is jealous of Rachel, Joseph’s brothers seriously entertain murdering him but settle for just selling him into slavery, Miriam complains bitterly about Moses’s marriage and what makes him more worthy than she and Aaron anyway?!

In fact, to this rule of unhappy and estranged siblings, so special is the exception that each Friday night to this day, we recall the one set of brothers who are given the opportunity to be jealous and do nothing more remarkable than simply not fight. We bless our sons, “May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.”

Sibling relationships are hard. Although we came from the same genetic stew, what is miraculous is how different we actually are. And as if the hard-wiring we bring with us into the world that inclines us to be individuals is not enough, reams of psychological studies attest to the “Sibling Effect.”

Precisely because our siblings are studious, we carve out for ourselves the jock niche. Or because they were unreliable, we become the steady one. Because they are Republicans, we are Democrats. Because they are Democrats, we are Republicans. We are not the same. We would not necessarily have chosen each other to be our friends.

And so, throughout our lives, these relationships, more than any other, take work. They take patience, forbearance, the willingness to look the other way, to manage disappointment, and to tolerate some of the worst behavior. They take a commitment to repeatedly and consistently reach across the divide of politics, religious expression, basic opinion, interests, fundamental worldview, just because we were born to the same set of parents. And sometimes that is just too hard.

I cannot tell you how many times I have walked into a shiva house only to find that there’s an uncle nobody talks to anymore or siblings that can’t sit in the same room. Something happened long ago, or recently, or happened again and again and again because it’s a pattern that no one can seem to stop. A fight started in childhood won’t seem to let up. A dispute over money left everyone bitter and angry. A new spouse that isn’t liked. Anger about lack of interest shown in each other’s children. Unequal burdens when caring for aging parents. And one day it is too much.

We don't need divorce papers to untangle from our siblings – couldn't get them if we tried – but too often the reality is that. We become divorced. In Bruni's words, "...no longer fellow passengers, just onetime housemates with common heritages."

With Bruni's piece at number one, it has to mean there's something in each of us that wishes for more. And, according to social scientists, if we can navigate successful sibling relationships, we get more. Negotiating peaceful relationships with our siblings is the building block, the training ground, for creating successful relationships with everyone else we encounter in the rest of our lives.

If that is so, then the ultimate lesson Bruni's article leaves is a challenge. He writes: "I'm convinced that family closeness isn't a happy accident... It's a resolve, a priority made and obeyed."

A dear friend of mine who grew up with seven siblings observed that perhaps the reason sibling relationships are so hard is because they know you so well, and you, them. They remember when you were a punk, when you were afraid, when you did the things you were proud of, and the things you weren't.

Whereas, with our friends, throughout our lives at different stages, we can choose which face we want to show, which part of ourselves to express, with our siblings it's all there, exposed in its fullness.

But none of us wants to be stuck with those past labels, weighed down by a history of mistakes. No matter what has transpired before, we, and they, want to be seen for who we are now.

And so, my friend observed, the key to a healthy sibling relationship is to actively let go of all that we think we know about each other, and "see the face that wants to be seen." If we, and they, can let go of our patterns, our assumptions, and try to see, then we have a chance.

Author Margo Rabb writes of her own difficult relationship with her sister. Like the ancient Isaac and Ishmael, it was only when their parents both died that they were jolted into seeing each other again. They developed a relationship that has given them both an anchor, and even, laughter. She reflects, ‘We share genes, a history, and the only bits of our parents we have left.’”

If it weren’t so hard, the Torah wouldn’t be filled with tales of sibling failures. But if it weren’t worthwhile, the Torah wouldn’t have wasted the ink.

It takes work, it takes seeing anew, to forge and maintain close relationships with our brothers and sisters. But the rewards are worth it. Just ask Frank Bruni.