

Two Nations in Your Belly

Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Nathan and Janet Appelman Professor Emeritus of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, JTS



One of the most poignant and profound verses of the Bible appears early in this week's Torah reading, Toledot. Our matriarch Rebecca, beset with a difficult pregnancy, asks God, "Why me?" ([Gen. 25:22](#)). And God replies to her with one of the most fateful verses of the Bible: "There are two nations in your belly" ([Gen. 25:23](#)). From that moment on, the die is cast: we are locked in a struggle with Esau / Edom. This week's haftarah from the prophet Malachi teaches us the stakes: "Is not Esau Jacob's brother? asks the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" ([Malachi 1:2-3](#)).

"I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated." This is, to say the least, not only an extreme formulation of the enmity that characterizes the relationship of Jacob and Esau, but also a distortion of subsequent history. For if the Lord has loved Jacob and hated Esau, God sure has a funny way of showing it. One does not have to subscribe to the lachrymose theory of Jewish history to believe that since the moment of the prophecy to Rebecca, in fact it is Esau who has been ascendant, while Jacob has been downtrodden.

In the world of the ancient Rabbis who gave us Judaism—the world of the Talmud and the Midrash, from the first century through the seventh century CE—our Rabbis identified Esau / Edom with the Roman Empire. In doing so, they took on both aspects of that Empire—the earlier pagan Roman Empire and the later Christian Roman Empire, and conflated them into one image of Esau, forever at odds with Jacob / Israel. For the Rabbis, Esau most often was depicted as the enemy, our oppressor, "The Man" who kept us beneath his boot.

But the Rabbis never forgot the first part of Malachi's prophecy, which confirms the earlier biblical oracle given to Rebecca. For all that there has been enmity and opposition, Esau is also our brother, indeed our twin brother. He may be

red-hued, hirsute, and macho, while we tend to be pale and scholarly, but brothers are we. The tension between being brothers on one hand and enemies on the other is well represented in the Talmud:

Rabbi Judah son of Converts said, "How admirable are the deeds of this nation, [Rome]. They have built markets, bridges, and bath-houses."

His colleague Rabbi Yosi was silent.

But Rabbi Shimon ben Yokhai retorted, "Anything they have built has been for their own needs. They build markets so their whores have a place to ply their trade. Bathhouses to pamper themselves, and bridges to collect tolls and taxes." ([BT Shabbat 33b](#))

Well, that pretty much says it. On one side is the curiously named Rabbi Judah, who tends to see our brotherhood, while the zealous Rabbi Shimon can only see our enmity. The truth about this age-old sibling rivalry is, of course, somewhat more complicated.

Our rabbinic Jewish heritage has been deeply influenced by Esau / Rome. There are thousands of loan words from Greek and, to a lesser extent, Latin found in the Talmud and the Midrash. Some are familiar, but it helps to remember they are Greek in origin: for example, "synagogue" or "Sanhedrin." The former speaks for itself. The latter name, used in Hebrew for the Jewish courts, is not only Greek, but had been the name for the Roman senate. Another word commonly used in synagogues is "*bimah*," the raised platform from where the Torah is read. Yet it, too, is Greek, originally meaning the dais where a tribunal sat.

The Rabbis repeatedly number the books of the Hebrew Bible as 24, even though others count as many as 39. Why

so few? It's not coincidental that there are 24 books in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. In fact, the Rabbis in the Mishnah (Yada'im 4:6) refer to the writings of Homer by name.

The same Rabbis present themselves as philosophers, and in their thinking they largely align themselves with Roman Stoics. Their art and architecture is largely Roman—synagogues in the Galilee are built as Roman basilicas. In fact, those same synagogues are replete with Roman mosaics, including, mysteriously, images of the Greco-Roman god Zeus-Helios, who is found in the center panel of a number of synagogue floors!

When explaining how the rabbis came to be comfortable with Roman art, the leader of the Jewish community in the late first century, Rabbi Gamaliel, is quoted in the Mishnah ([Avodah Zarah 3:4](#)) commenting on the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse he attends. It's art, he explains, and is not used for pagan worship. As art, it is permissible. From then until today there has been pictorial art in synagogues.

The influence of Roman culture on rabbinic Judaism is pervasive. In my recent book on this topic ([Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism as We Know It](#)), I remind my readers that well before we Jews lived in Christian America, our forbears struggled to find their Jewish identity in first pagan and then Christian Rome. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, they adopted the best of Roman culture to create a Judaism that would survive and ultimately flourish. This remains our challenge as Jews today. How can we adapt the best of American culture while making Judaism a vibrant religion that will flourish for the next two millennia?

This commentary originally appeared in 2016.