

SPIRIT IS THICKER THAN BLOOD

JACOB CHINITZ

The confluence of the brotherhood theme in Genesis Chapter 37 – the antagonism of Jacob's older sons toward their brother Joseph – and the festival of Hannukah that celebrates the victory of the unified Maccabee brothers, has much to teach us about the relative values of merely genetic brotherhood as compared to spiritual bonding, the inner urge to connect, among those not related by blood. There is a common saying "blood is thicker than water." Perhaps we can coin a new saying: "Spirit is thicker than blood."

To begin with, there are ties among human beings that are determined by birth, parentage, marriage, family, tribalism, ethnicity. The Torah lays great stress upon biological consanguinity when it recommends marriage and reproduction. Thus, brotherhood is included in the strong connection based on the family unit. When the Torah says: *Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and attaches himself to his wife, and they become one flesh* (Gen. 2.24), another bond is created, one that is based not only on the personal commitment and the social elements in marriage, but also on the physical union it represents. The Torah demands honoring blood parents, and the sages extend this honor to the older brother.

On the indispensability of the family blood relationship I cite this passage from Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, III 49:

It is known that Man needs lovers all his days. Aristotle has already explained this in the ninth chapter of his Book of Ethics. At the time of his birth, and his good fortune, he enjoys their company, and in his time of trouble he needs them, and in his old age and weakness in body he is helped by them. This love is found in children in greater and greater measure, and so with other relatives. This relationship of love, brotherhood and aid from relatives is complete only with them.

Jacob Chinitz was ordained at Yeshiva University and is a member of The Rabbinical Assembly. He has taught at several colleges, and has written a few hundred articles in twenty journals in the United States, Canada, and Israel. He has served as rabbi in Philadelphia and Halifax, and recently at Congregation Shaare Zedek, Montreal. His three books are: In My Opinion, Divrei Torah for Shabbat and Chagim, and Ten Illusions about Judaism.

The one family, with one father, even grandfathers in many generations, there is among them love and help from one to the other, and compassion from one to the other, which is one of the great purposes of the Torah. Hence, the whore is forbidden for such permission would cause the loss of this relationship, and the one born of her would be a stranger to all Men, not knowing his relatives, and not being known by them, and this would be evil in the relationship between him and his father.

In other words, according to this rationale of family and sexual regulations in the Torah, blood connection among human beings makes for compassion and care. As we are fond of saying in modern society, the family is the basic unit of society.

Yet these connections are often unreliable. Cain and Abel, the first set of brothers born of connubial union, come to fratricide. Abraham and Lot, related by blood, cannot get along and have to separate. It is touching and tragic when Abraham says to Lot: *'Let there be no strife between you and me . . . for we are kinsmen. . . . Let us separate . . . '* (Gen. 13:8-9). Does he mean we have to separate despite the fact that we are kinsmen, or does he mean we have to separate because we are kinsmen? The sons of Jacob start with hatred and end in reconciliation, but the Book of Judges is fraught with enmity and jealousy among the tribes of Israel. A millennium later, the Maccabee brothers start with unity and liberation of their people, but their Hasmonean successors descended into fraternal strife.

Thus, with all the emphasis upon the sanctity of the family and brotherly love, the Torah and post-biblical Jewish history show the dangers of brotherly hatred, and also the great potential for love and compassion among individuals not related by blood but united by spirit and mind. One example is the bond between David and Jonathan: *'It pains me for you, my brother Jonathan, you were very pleasant to me, your love for me was more wonderful than the love of women'* (II Sam. 1:26). David calls Jonathan brother, in the sense that a social brother can be even closer than a blood brother, and he extols the love between him and his spiritual brother above the qualities of love between man and woman based on carnal union.

We see the superiority of social and spiritual brotherhood compared to blood and biological brotherhood when the Torah's command for affection

and consideration broadens from the family to society in general. Acquaintance may lead to a deep regard for persons who are not kindred, and the sages instilled that into halakha. For example, we are enjoined to *Love your fellow being as yourself* (Lev. 19:18), and show regard for all old people, not only old parents: *Rise before the aged and honor the presence of the elderly* (Lev. 19:32). The Talmud extends the passage: *You shall not curse the judge* (Ex. 22:27) to the spiritual bonds, beyond legal requirements, between teacher and disciple, king and subject, friend and friend.

These commands concern communal, social, and spiritual regard that transcend kinship and family and encompass the entire human race. Even if the *halakha* narrows this injunction, technically limiting it to the love for fellow Jews, the relationship is still for a peoplehood and goes beyond blood relations.

Indeed, post-biblical writings promote this concept as not merely equal to a blood-relationship, but actually superior to it. This is strikingly exemplified in the Mishnah (Bava Metzia 33a):

If one has to choose between retrieving his own lost object or his father's or his teacher's loss, his own comes first. If he has to choose between the loss of his father and the loss of his teacher, his teacher comes first. The reason: His father bought him into this world, but his teacher taught him the wisdom that will bring him into the life of the next world. Only if his father is also a sage, does his father come first.

If his father and his teacher were each carrying a load, he should relieve his teacher first, and then his father.

If his father and his teacher were held captive, he redeems his teacher first and then his father. If his father was a sage, he redeems his father and then his teacher.

We see here that while the blood relationship between son and father is still present in terms of a legal obligation, if there is a choice between the father and the teacher, the spiritual father, the latter takes precedence.

In Genesis, we deal mainly with blood and family relationships, between father and son, brother and brother, as later with the Maccabees. But in the rest of the Torah, and in the rest of the Maccabean story, we see the primacy of spiritual brotherhood over blood brotherhood. Joseph and his brothers

were destined to develop into Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, who were united at Sinai in a union based on faith and commitment, rather than one based on tribal identity alone. Before Sinai, they were united only by blood and family; at Sinai they became a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation* – a spiritual destiny and mission that still rest upon their descendants today. Indeed, spirit – though incorporeal, sensed rather than seen or touched – is thicker than blood.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

January	Leviticus Numbers	11 – 27 1 – 8
February	Numbers	9 – 36
March	Deuteronomy	1 – 30
April	Deuteronomy Joshua	31 – 34 1 – 24
May	Judges I Samuel	1 – 21 1 – 8

