

“Today I am a man”, was how a generation of Bar Mitzvah speeches began, back in the day of many of the fathers and even grandfathers of those in our sanctuary this morning. Those speeches were often dictated to the young men by the rabbi—see all the work you might have been spared, Andrew and Alexander, and tended to focus on the ritual obligations of men in the Jewish community. But today, in the midst of recent revelations of what at least some men think of as manly behavior, I thought it would be worth probing what Judaism has to say about masculinity.

Jacob and Esau, the main characters in your Torah portion, are the focus of much discussion about what it means to be a man in our commentaries. On the surface it might seem like Esau is the more manly. Physically stronger, a powerful hunter, one might conjecture that these were the traits that made him so attractive to his father Isaac, traumatized as Isaac may have been from being bound on the altar by his father, and vulnerable throughout his life, as a nomadic outsider.

Esau is portrayed in the Biblical text as a powerful man who lived by his appetites, who existed only in the present, and was not able to appreciate the meaning of a birthright that would only come to him later in life. In later rabbinic commentary

he is the one who, in pursuit of immediate gratification, defies the prohibitions on idolatry, murder and rape.

Jacob, who spent his youth trying to catch up with his more physically developed brother, continuously grabbing him by the heel as it were, is a tent dweller, ish tam, translated alternatively as a mild man, or a man of perfection, though that perfection won't be obvious in his acts of trickery and deceit. Jacob is the one who would be able to pass the contemporary psychologists cookie test- that is to delay gratification and not eat the cookie in front of him in order to receive a greater reward a few minutes later.

In this week's portion the two reconcile, at least temporarily, but it's interesting that this follows Jacob assuming at least some aspects of his brother's personality, in that he wrestles with the angel, an act of physical prowess, preventing the angel from being able to get away.

Also in this portion we have the story of Dinah, which includes men acting badly, both Shechem Ben Chamor, son of a donkey, who first takes Dinah and only afterwards asks to marry her, and Simon and Levi, who lead a bloodthirsty attack, denounced by their father. The brothers seek vengeance on a man, whose attack on their sister seems to have been seen as a threat to their manhood.

The rabbis debate, what is more important for a man, bravery in combat or the ability to withstand temptation. They come down on the second, believing that conquering one's impulses requires more skill and judgement, and contributes to the first. A king, they write, in order to rule over his country well, needs to be able to rule over himself. He needs to subdue the impulses that lead to anger, excesses and evil.

In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, a foundational text of Jewish teachings, the rabbis ask: Eizehu Gibor? Who is a true hero? Or alternatively translated, Who is truly strong? And they answer, the one who subdues his impulses, ha kovesh et yitzro. It is not physical strength that makes one a man, but rather the ability to overcome one's impulses, including specifically one's sexual appetites. And further, Avot de Rabbi Natan, a commentary on Pirke Avot adds, "Who is strong? The one who makes a friend of his enemy." It might appear in this week's Torah portion that Jacob is weak, after all he sends generous gifts to his brother, and speaks to him with great politeness. But in the end, he achieves his goal, of transforming someone who might have been a threat to himself and his family, into someone with whom he can coexist in this world.

Sarah Imhoff has recently written a book that has received a lot of attention, Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism. In her introduction she explains that as Jews immigrated to America in large numbers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century issues of masculinity were an important part of their acculturation. Yet the Jewish community did not adopt the Teddy Roosevelt definition of manliness as being a strong outdoorsman and hunter. Instead they “championed a masculinity of self-sufficiency, courage and physical health, but one that played down physical strength, aggression and domination.” They wanted to move away from the image of the shtetl Jew, weak and sickly, and yet hold on to the values of traditional Jewish masculinity including avoidance of violence, being family oriented and gentle, and valuing study above all else.

Alexander and Andrew, as you navigate through the confusing years of Junior High School and High School, may the sense of yourselves as Jewish men be a guide to your actions and goals, and so may you live lives not of domination and abuse, but rather of meaning and purpose.