

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(34)

**The Myrtle and the Wild Rose**

Genesis Rabbah 63:10



**Background to the Fable "The Myrtle and the Wild Rose"**

**Myrtle**

The **myrtle** has shiny leaves and fragrant white flowers. The leaves, bark, and blue black berries are also fragrant

**Jacob and Esau's Birth**



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, were born to Isaac and Rebecca after 20 years of marriage, when Isaac was 60 (Genesis 25:20, 25:26). The boys displayed very different natures as they matured. "Esau became a hunter; a man of the field, but Jacob was a simple man, a dweller in tents" (Genesis 25:27). Moreover, the attitudes of their parents toward them also differ: "Isaac loved Esau because game was in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob" (ibid., 25:28).

**Nature versus Nurture**



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

The **nature versus nurture** debates concern the relative importance of an individual's innate qualities ("nature", i.e. nativism, or innatism) versus personal experiences ("nurture", i.e. empiricism or behaviorism) in determining or causing individual differences in physical and behavioral traits.

The view that humans acquire all or almost all their behavioral traits from "nurture" is known as tabula rasa ("blank slate"). This question was once considered to be an appropriate division of developmental influences, but since both types of factors are

known to play such interacting roles in development, many modern psychologists consider the question naive - representing an outdated state of knowledge. Psychologist Donald Hebb is said to have once answered a journalist's question of "which, nature or nurture, contributes more to personality?" by asking in response, "which contributes more to the area of a rectangle, its length or its width?"

Traditionally, human nature has been thought of as not only inherited but divinely ordained. Whole ethnic groups were considered to be, by nature, superior or inferior. In the 19th and 20th centuries, however, intellectuals increasingly attributed differences among races, classes, and genders to socialization (nurture), rather than to innate qualities (nature). In the 20th century, the Nazis pursued an agenda based on the concept of human nature as defined by one's race. The Communists, on the other hand, largely followed Marx's lead in defining the human identity as subject to social structures, not nature. In scientific circles, this conflict led to ongoing controversy of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.

**?** What is your opinion about the "nature versus nurture" debate?

### The Myrtle and the Wild Rose

Genesis Rabbah 63:10

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה סג סימן י

י ויגדלו הנערים, רבי לוי אמר משל להדס ועצבונית שהיו גדילים זה על גבי זה וכיון שהגדילו והפריחו זה נותן ריחו וזה תוחו כך כל י"ג שנה שניהם הולכים לבית הספר ושניהם באים מבית הספר, לאחר י"ג שנה זה היה הולך לבתי מדרשות וזה היה הולך לבתי עבודת כוכבים, א"ר אלעזר צריך אדם להטפל בבנו עד י"ג שנה מיכן ואילך צריך שיאמר ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה

A myrtle tree and a wild rose bush were planted side by side. When they were full-grown and in bloom, one gave off a beautiful aroma and the other produced thorns.

Genesis Rabbah 63:10

#### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** What is the opinion of our fable about the "nature versus nurture" debate? Which one (nature or nurture) has the "upper hand," according to our fable, in the formation of the personality?

#### Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

**?** Where do we see "nature" in Marcelo Ferder's drawing? Where do we see "nurture"?

#### Note on "The Myrtle and the Wild Rose"

The context of this fable is the life of Jacob and Esau. Rabbi Levi, in Genesis Rabbah, tries to explain how it is possible that, having grown up together, the twins Jacob

and Esau developed such different personalities. In our fable, the myrtle and the wild rose grow under the same climatic conditions and emerge from the same earth, but their different tendencies already existed in the seed from which they sprouted. Thus, Jacob and Esau had the same upbringing, but on reaching adulthood, each one followed a different path: Jacob frequented houses of study while Esau was drawn to temples of idolatry. Rabbi Eleazar then comments that each man is responsible for the education of his son until the son reaches the age of 13 (the age when a boy becomes an adult), and after that the father ceases to be responsible for his son's actions.

**?** What is the problem in the understanding of the midrash of the “nature versus nurture” debate? How does the midrash solve the problem? What do you think about the solution? What is the moral challenge of our fable and its interpretation?

### **! Wrapping Up**

Are we morally responsible if we are destined by our nature to behave in a certain way?

### **Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut**

#### **K-3rd GRADES:**

- 1)  
What did the rosebush and the myrtle tree share in common as they were growing up?
- 2)  
How did they differ when they were grown up?
- 3)  
Do you think they remained friends when they were grown up? Why or why not?
- 4)  
How are you and your brothers/sisters different from each other even if you live in the same house with the same parents?

#### **4th- 6TH GRADES:**

- 1)  
What does this story tell us about what makes us different? Do you think there are things that the rosebush and the myrtle tree shared that gave them some things in common? What might those be?
- 2)  
If you think of you and your classmates who have been studying with the same teachers all year long and may even have been your classmates for several years, what are some of the reasons that some people really do well in school while others do not?
- 3)  
At what age do you think your parents can no longer be responsible for you under the secular law? Why shouldn't they be responsible for you for the rest of your life?

#### **7th-12th GRADES:**

- 1)

In this story we have the issue of nature vs. nurture, whether genetics or environment plays a more important part in determining who we grow up to be. What is the viewpoint in this fable? Give your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing.

2)

The story is intended to shed light on why Jacob and Esau were so different, even though they lived in the same household with the same two righteous parents. What lessons are the Rabbis trying to teach us about parents' responsibility here? Reread the sections in Gen.25:19-34 and 27:1-28:9, and see what you think about the reasons for the differences between Jacob and Esau .

3)

Why do you think there is a Jewish custom and prayer for parents to say that they are no longer responsible for their sons/daughters' actions after Bar/Bat Mitzvah? Do you think we should preserve this tradition or not?

## **Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh**

### **Pre-Reading Strategy: Book Link.**

Read an excerpt from Antoine d'Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince*. Chapter VIII is about the blooming of a beautiful but vain rose. The Little Prince soon becomes disturbed by the rose, and, as he later confides, he shouldn't have judged her so harshly; he should have judged her actions rather than her words.

Read the fable. Discuss the differences and similarities.