Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold

Candle Lighting Time
Fri. Evening 5:14 pm

Services
Saturday Nov. 14 9:30 am
Thursday Morning minyan followed by Bagels and Bible will begin Dec. 3 at 8:30 am.

PARSHAT TOLDOT
WHAT SIBLINGS OWE EACH OTHER

"The children struggled in her womb, and she [Rebecca] said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of God." (Genesis 25:22)

This is a portion about sibling rivalry. Even in their mother's womb, Jacob and Esau struggle with one another. By the end of the portion, Esau threatens to murder Jacob who is forced to flee. (The brothers will find some reconciliation, but we need to wait two weeks to read about it.) From Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers, sibling rivalry is a major theme of the entire book of Genesis.

Can the words of the Psalmist ever be true? "Here is what is good and what is pleasant, for brothers to dwell together" (Psalms 133:1). What do brothers and sisters owe one another? To answer that question, let me share an old personal story.

I grew up the oldest of three brothers. My youngest brother is a very successful lawyer in Los Angeles. Sadly, our middle brother, active in the gay community, died of AIDS in 1991. It was a painful tragedy for my parents and our entire family. I have vivid memories of our father showing us a picture from Boy's Town in Omaha, NE of a boy carrying a younger boy on his back. The picture had the words, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." My father told us that this is what he expected of his sons, to take care of one another.

When my brother died, we had become very close. I conducted his funeral. But a few years before, I am embarrassed to say, we had a falling out. He was becoming more active in the gay community, and I was becoming more religiously observant. We clashed and did not speak for about a year. I am proud that my ideas about being gay and Jewish have evolved since then, a point I made in my newest book on sexual ethics, *The Rabbi's Sex Class*.

During that period when we were not speaking, my parents called me with a problem. My brother had fallen behind in his mortgage and was in

danger of losing his condo. My wife and I spoke and immediately sent him a check to help cover his mortgage. Why? I suppose the words of my father came back to me, “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.” Or perhaps I thought about the famous rhetorical question Cain asks after killing his brother Abel: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer is yes, we are our brother’s [and sister’s] keeper.

Allow me to teach one passage from Jewish tradition that I love to use in counseling situations about sibling rivalry. The book of Proverbs has a strange and disturbing verse. “A friend is devoted at all times; A brother is born for trouble” (Proverbs 17:17). The commentator Gersonides (the Ralbag, 1288-1344) makes a beautiful comment on this verse. “But at the time of troubles he rises up to help him, because his nature forces him since he is his bone and his flesh.” We pick friends whose company we enjoy, with whom to go out socially. But when we are in trouble, we can turn to our siblings for help. Siblings take care of siblings. That is what our father was trying to teach us. And that is what I tried to teach my own three children.

My brother and my parents are long gone now. But this story of helping my brother is not simply about my family. It is the meta-story of the entire book of Genesis. At the beginning of Genesis, Cain kills his brother Abel. At the end of Genesis, Joseph embraces and forgives his brothers. Siblings do not need to be best friends with their siblings. But in times of trouble, siblings take care of one another.