



Reconciliation in the Time of Corona

This week's torah portion completes a powerful three-part story arc in the life of our patriarch Jacob and his brother Esau. Their story is exceptionally powerful because it is a reflection of so many things that can go wrong within a family, but ultimately the power of forgiveness wins out.

Jacob and Esau were twins. Esau was the firstborn, and therefore entitled to the special blessing of his father Isaac and all that this implied. As the story unfolds, we learn that Esau at first cares little about his birthright. Moreover, we learn that their mother Rebecca wants Jacob to receive it. When the time comes, Rebecca helps Jacob perpetrate a deception upon her husband Isaac. While Esau is away, Jacob is blessed by a blind father who is confused as to which son is present. Upon his return, Esau seeks to receive a blessing and is denied. In his fury and anger Esau vows to kill Jacob after their father dies. And Jacob is forced to flee for his very life.

And so begins Jacob's journey into adulthood. He leaves as a frightened irresponsible youth and twenty years later he seeks to return home. But first he must reconcile with his brother. In the time that has passed Jacob has undergone tremendous change; he has found his sense of spirituality, learned how to make an honest living, and is married with a family. He is ready to return home. The question remains however, whether Esau is ready to forgive.

At first glance we are unsure. Esau is told that Jacob wants an audience. He agrees but brings 300 men to join him--a small army! Jacob upon hearing that news, cannot sleep and asks everyone around him to leave and find safety. Alone he wrestles with a Divine being and before dawn he asks for a blessing. In that moment, Jacob completes his journey. He understands what he has done. He has changed as a person. He accepts responsibility. He realizes at last that a true blessing cannot be merited by deception, but only because of the person he has become. His name is no longer Jacob "the heel" but "Israel" the one who struggles with God.

This story always touches me because every one of us is on our own journey. Along the way there are bumps and short comings. People we have hurt. People who have hurt us. And while some people cannot change, and remain toxic, the notion that people can change is at the core of this story.

Those who have had long standing estrangements with loved ones should reread this story and reflect. How have we changed? Is it possible that the thing that drove us apart can be forgiven? Are my wounds stronger than my ability to forgive? Are my disappointments more important than the potential for family harmony? In cutting off family what impact am I having upon future generations within the family? Is it right that cousins cannot know each other?

If this Time of Corona has taught us anything, it is that family is important. Has the virus of anger or fear or lack of faith insinuated itself into your life? Perhaps, now is the time to pivot and take a gentle step towards forgiveness. It's not easy. It is a struggle. A wrestling with oneself. Yet, as Jacob showed, though we emerge from this struggle wounded, we can nonetheless find our way home. And that in itself is a blessing.

Rabbi Sanford Akselrad

The texts for this week's essay can be found in the Torah, Genesis 27:1-29:29 and Genesis 32:4-33:3.