

How can we communicate about difficult topics without jeopardizing our relationships?

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Two weeks ago in parsha Toldot, we learned the story of Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac favored Esau because he was a hunter and he provided Isaac with delicious meats, so Isaac planned on giving his birthright to Esau when he died. Twice in Toldot we see Jacob trick his brother out of his birthright, and in the end of the Parsha, Jacob literally steals the blessing from his brother by tricking their father Isaac. I should also mention, that Jacob does not do this all on his own; his mother Rebekah helps him trick his father, because she favors Jacob and wants him to be the leader of the Israelite people. In the end, Esau is so angry with Jacob, he threatens to kill him, so Isaac and Rebekah sent Jacob to live with his Uncle Laban in Padam-Aran.

Fast forward twenty years: God commands Jacob to return to the land of his ancestors in Canaan. In order to follow God's commandment, Jacob was forced to pass through Edom, the land which his brother Esau ruled over. Jacob was extremely anxious about seeing his brother, as the last time they were together, Esau threatened to kill him for stealing the birthright.

In this week's parsha, Vayishlach, Jacob is preparing to make his journey to Canaan. Jacob is so afraid of what Esau might do to him, he sends many messengers ahead of him to greet Esau with gifts of cattle and sheep and servants in hopes that Esau will show him favor. When Jacob finally reaches Edom and sees his brother Esau with his army of 400 men, he goes toward his brother and bows down to him seven times. Esau runs to greet his brother Jacob, embraces and kisses him, and they both break out in tears.

Esau is so thankful to see his brother Jacob after twenty years of separation that he makes no mention of Jacob's wrongdoings, instead he chooses to forgive him. Esau puts his family before his grudges, which as many of us know can be extremely difficult. He recognizes that it does not matter how different he and his brother are, they are brothers, and that relationship is greater than any feud.

Each year at Thanksgiving, we prepare to spend time with our family and friends. We spend several hours cooking extravagant meals and cleaning our homes for guests. Then after all of the hard work is completed, we sit down together to share this beautiful meal. But for many families, the discussion over the meal can be the most complicated part of the holiday. It is rare for everyone around the table to agree on controversial topics. To avoid disagreements, many families choose to deem these topics as "off limits" for holiday meals, in fear that the wrong discussion could break up the family. But is that really an appropriate response? Is it productive for people to ignore the issues and just share platitudes and stories of our day to day lives? How can we expect our government officials to talk with each other and find compromise if we can't even do it around our family dinner tables.

Each one of us holds our own convictions in such high regard that sometimes we forget how to be civil and listen to differing opinions. Pew research studies show that approximately 47% of people get their news either sometimes or often, through social media. That is nearly half the population. Social media is designed to pump ideas that we already like into our news feeds, which means we are

unlikely to gain new perspectives there. And, it is human nature to build relationships with people who are like minded, so when we talk with friends, we often to have little to debate, and therefore little to learn.

A few weeks ago, Rabbi Peter Berg of The Temple in Atlanta, Georgia wrote:

Despite the tone we see all around us, narrow-mindedness is not very Jewish. To be Jewish is to struggle with contradiction. If the Talmud teaches us anything, it is that there is more than one way to solve a dispute or dilemma. Yet, many in our troubled world hang on to the belief that there is a singular way. If we believe in the rightness of our own convictions, then it follows that those who uphold opposing views are denying the truth and luring others into falsehoods. From there, it is a short step to thinking of ourselves as morally entitled or even obligated to silence those with differing ideas.

History has taught us that, if we believe that there is only one valid truth or faith, then violence and death are sure to follow. Idolatry still exists today – not in the form of stones, but in the realm of ideas. Our world is threatened by people who refuse to recognize the beauty of pluralism, by those who think it is “my way or the highway!”

The Talmud is a record of rabbinic conversations from the first century. Often, an argument takes place without resolution. We are enriched not by the final answer, but by the discussion. Even when a legal ruling is issued, the rabbis often record the entire conversation. Multiple opinions convey the idea that other points of view expand our vision and deepen our understanding of the truth.

So, what if, instead of making these difficult topics “off limits,” we made a point to discuss them civilly? What if we could discuss the things that we are most passionate about with the people we care the most about?

While Thanksgiving may be over, it is just the beginning of our holiday season. May we each work to let go of the fear of confronting difficult topics, and be a little more like Esau in this week’s Torah portion by embracing our family and friends regardless of our differences. And may we be like the ancient Rabbis of the Talmud and share our many points of view while also searching for a deeper understanding of the issues that face our world.

Shabbat Shalom