

Seven Steps to Meeting Each Other
Kol Nidre 5780
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For Jacob, it is his homecoming, his first time returning to the land of Canaan, the land where he was born and raised, the land from which he fled for his life. And this moment, his homecoming is the scariest moment of his life. He is preparing to encounter his brother Esau, for the first time since he stole Esau's birthright and their father's innermost blessing.

So Jacob prepares. He sends messengers ahead. They tell Esau that Jacob had been staying with Laban for 20 years, that he accrued some wealth, and that he wants - *limtzo chein b'inecha* - to seek favor or forgiveness from his brother.

Limtzo chein - to receive *chein*. The word "*chein*" in the Torah is a word that translates literally to mean "Grace," and it connotes getting something when you don't deserve it.

Jacob, he doesn't deserve it. He wronged his brother Esau. And if it weren't for the dominant bias within Rabbinic Judaism against the character Esau, we might see that more clearly. The Rabbis who read this story had an agenda: to vilify Esau. Exculpate our patriarch Jacob, who becomes Israel.

And it was an easy enough endeavor: Esau is the extreme Other in the text itself. Genesis tells us they were opposites from the time of the womb where they first quarreled. When they were born, Esau who came out first was hairier and reddish. Esau was a hunter, Jacob a "homespun man," *yeishev olahim*, "hanging out in the tents." (Couldn't make this stuff up!) And it's not like the parents didn't take sides: Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca Jacob. God's behind the scenes setting it all up. And to the writers of the Hebrew Bible, Esau is the progenitor of the Edomites, enemies of Israel.

So the Rabbis' othering of Esau wasn't unfounded. But the Rabbis, they just piled it on. No doubt for important reasons in their own day, their own historical need to differentiate themselves, to empower themselves in periods of powerlessness. Since Esau is the extreme Other to our father

Jacob, they thought, let's read our lives into this text and render him the perennial Other. Let's distance ourselves from him. From them. And surround ourselves, in midrash as in life, with likeminded people, our kind of people.

The Othering of Esau, like it or not, is a part of the tradition that we have inherited. We still, in countless ways, sort ourselves, drawing near to those who are likeminded, moving away from those who are different.

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Journalist Bill Bishop makes the case that when it comes to meeting people who are different, today our culture in the United States makes that extraordinary difficult, in new and alarming ways. In his book *The Big Sort*, Bishop and sociologist Robert Cushing present a thorough study of self-segregation among Americans in recent years. They look at a variety of data, from voting trends to IRS income reports, to advertising research, in order to understand how Americans have moved around over the last few decades. And they notice something unusual. Looking across time they discovered that fewer and fewer of us today live near people who vote differently from us; more and more of us live near people who vote exactly the way that we do. "In 1976," they write, "less than a quarter of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. By 2004, nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties." They call this trend "the Big Sort," after the way we're sorting ourselves. And it's not just about political affiliations but also about our values, how we worship, and what we want out of life. We are further away from those who value differently, no longer interacting, no longer engaging with the Other the way we once did.

Bishop and Cushing's book is about a decade old, but recent studies only affirm the severity of their findings, especially in the online echo chambers we construct. Bishop and Cushing conclude with a scathing reading of this state of affairs: They write, "as people seek out the social settings they prefer—as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable—the nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous groups. [We live in] balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible."

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Jacob sends his message to his incomprehensible Other, and he waits in fear. Esau receives Jacob's message, and replies with a message of his own. The messengers return to Jacob and say: "*banu el achicha el Esav*-- we went to your brother Esau, and he too is marching to meet you—along with four hundred men." 400 is a loaded number. We find it repeatedly in the Book of Samuel, always connoting a militant group—400 means war. Jacob's reaction is clear: *vayir'a Yaakov m'od*, Jacob is terrified. So he divides his people up, preparing for the worst.

Anytime the Other becomes "incomprehensible," we have a problem. A climate of fear consumes us, we imagine the Other in the worst light, as the enemy. A steady flow of messengers goes back and forth between oneself and the Other saying, "the Other is incomprehensible," too far away to understand, let alone to embrace. *Vayir'a Yaakov m'od*, be afraid of the Other, and gather your 400, your armies of sameness, get prepared—because the Other is a threat.

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The Jewish People are, in the words of Rabbi David Saperstein, "quintessential victims of religious persecution for millennia," and we know all too well the feeling of being Othered. And on this day of ultimate honesty, we cannot fail to name the reality of rising antisemitism in our own nation. This virus of antisemitism requires not only that we be guardians of Jewish memory, but also that we understand what makes this strain of the virus distinct. We cannot fully grasp antisemitism in our nation today without the lens of intersectionality—that is the ways in which our various identities overlap and intersect in the context of discrimination and oppression. Any attempt to sort ourselves, to treat antisemitism in isolation, without sensitivity to bigotry based on skin color, nationality, or ethnicity is ignorant to the ideological workings of White Nationalism.

Eric Ward, Executive Director of the Western States Center, and author of the seminal article, "Skin in the Game," explains this ideology.

"White nationalism is rooted in the anti-Semitic belief that Jews are responsible for the defeat of white supremacy and seek to destroy the 'white race' through mass immigration, gay marriage, and a host of inclusionary policies."

Ward differentiates white nationalism from white supremacy in the following way:

“If white supremacy is a system of disparities and bias used to exploit and maintain control, white nationalism seeks the complete removal of Jews and people of color from the United States of America.”¹

We Jews won't sort ourselves away from this crisis. Even *thinking* so ignores who we are. We call ourselves, *Beit Yaakov*, the House of Jacob. And the House of Jacob includes the 12-15% of American Jews who are nonwhite or 20% of Jewish households with people of color. Facing antisemitism means facing ourselves, individually and together. And yes, that means facing and naming our fears.

Vayir'a Yaakov m'od, Jacob is afraid.

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Vayira Yaakov M'od, Jacob is afraid of the Other. Jacob prepares for the worst, assuming that the story that sorted his life, that defined the last two decades of his being would explode in a clash of fatal consequence.

That night, Jacob finds himself all alone.

And yet, the Torah says he encounters someone, *a so-called "ISH,"* this mysterious divine Other whom we find elsewhere in Genesis.

Some say the *ish* is the angel of Esau, his lifelong Other.

Some say the *ish* is God, the Divine Other.

Some say the *ish* is his own self, the Other within.

Do you want to know who it really is? Yeah, me too.

With thousands of years of quarreling among Torah commentators, why ruin such a good thing?

In fact, doesn't the age-old argument, in and of itself, tell us something.

The Other remains elusive, everywhere and nowhere, within and beyond.

That is uncomfortable, unsettling, and yes, fearful.

We are far more comfortable when surrounded by sameness.

¹ <https://popcollab.org/white-supremacy-falls-white-nationalism-stands/>

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In my early childhood I could count on one hand the number of non-Jews who were my friends. On that same hand, I could add to it the number of non-whites who were in my social group. I'd need the other hand but not much more to add those who were not middle, upper-middle class, Muslim, or immigrants.... and it would not take another finger to add those who were openly gay or gender non-conforming.

I recall when I was 15, and my brother was home from college. He told me he needed to talk to me about something. "What did I do this time," I wondered. He knocked on my door that night, and with more courage than I'd ever mustered for a conversation, he told me he was gay.

I remember my reaction. I was recently introduced to civil rights politics, so before even telling him "I love you, I accept you," I jumped right to solution: "Geoff you should lobby for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act! Let's fight against this other crazy bill that's gaining traction—it's called the Defense of Marriage Act! Did you know about these bills!?" "Yeah, Matt, I know—this is my life, this is who I am."

Oh. This is you. You are... different from me. And in a way that I never really knew.

My world, in that moment, changed. The Other in that moment changed. Because the Other was really my brother.

I remember going back to school, back to the dominant culture of ostensible sameness, but now knowing that we are not the same. None of us. Maybe it shouldn't have taken a family member coming out for me to see that no matter how much we sort ourselves we are always a community of Others.

I also recall losing many a night sleep that year. And not because of the way that I was Othered for having a gay brother—and I was. Nor was it from discovering the othering he faced throughout his life, for that reality that took me much longer to fully appreciate. No, what kept me up was the honest reckoning with all the biases, stereotypes, and bigotry that I had harbored within—and that I unknowingly perpetuated.

Facing my brother, I could not avoid facing myself and facing this truth: *It is not only the Other who others the Other.*

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Inside each and every one of us are assumptions or expectations regarding different groups of people. We only see the tip of the iceberg, if that—but they exist, beneath the surface, or hiding in plain sight in the systems that sort of lives. All kinds of biases and prejudices: racism, ageism, genderism, ableism, weightism...the list goes on.

This is not exactly “news”—it’s been researched extensively. What is news, what we did learned in 5779, is that we face powerful, organized, and nefarious campaigns seeking to divide us along lines of group identity. Focusing on implicit bias does not mean ignoring those who seek to cause us harm. To the contrary, it precisely *because* this crusade aims to germinate implicit bias and propagate it as bigotry, that we need to equip ourselves, train ourselves, and defend each other.

This community has educators and resources to learn about implicit bias. Our own Federation’s JCRC throughout this Fall is running trainings on implicit bias-- so that we face ourselves, and face each Other.

We have in this community so many opportunities, large and small, to get closer to the distant Other, to counter the culture of othering the Other.

- We can gather with our interfaith partners;
- We can lead with curiosity in the face of conflict and ask honest questions;
- We can change our spending habits to include more minority-owned businesses and restaurants, maybe in less familiar parts of town;
- We can listen to life stories of those whose worlds are so different from ours, whether it’s a Christian who never met a Jew, or an Israeli or a Palestinian who just moved here for a job, or your colleague who lives, socializes, and maybe votes differently from you.

It takes Jacob a lifetime to face his Other.
We can’t afford to wait that long.

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Jacob and the *ish* wrestle all night, the Other demands to be let go, and Jacob says, "not until you bless me." The *ish* says, "what's your name?" "It's Jacob." The *ish* replies, "no longer is it Jacob. Now it is Israel." Israel, he says, "*ki sarita im Elohim - because you wrestled with God - V'IM ANASHIM - and with Others.*"

From this meeting, Jacob receives a name that sanctifies encountering the Other. And the very next moment: *Vayisa Yaakov einav vayar v'hinei Eisav*, Jacob lifts up his eyes and – behold - he *sees* Esau.

Jacob approaches him by bowing down to the ground seven times. Seven times! Imagine that, despite all the fear that overwhelms him from a distance:

Seven times, seven steps he takes on his way to the Other.

Seven: the holiest number.

Seven: the number God assigns to the Creation of the world.

Seven: the month in the Hebrew Calendar in which we find ourselves now, in the *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe.

And this Day, Yom Kippur, is the 7 of all 7's, "the Sabbath of Sabbaths", the Holiest Day of the Year, when we gather as *B'nai Yisrael*, children of Israel, when like our ancestor Jacob, we return home, we wrestle all night and day, and we do not let go until we are blessed:

May we be blessed in the year 5780,

blessed with the honesty to see our-selves;

blessed with the humility to approach the Other;

blessed with the strength to *become Israel*,

who takes seven steps to meet his lifelong Other,

blessed *to become Israel*, who arrives and stands before his brother:

"Vayaratz Eisav likrato,

and Esau runs to greet him.

They embrace. They kiss."

May we be blessed to become Israel, who says to his brother:

Ra'iti fanecha kir'ot p'nei Elohim,

"Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."

Amen.