

Encountering Others Through Relationship

Parashat Vayishlah 5783

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I had coffee the other day with a congregant. (I hope you all heard about Coffee Buzz; we want you to have coffee with other members of the community, and we're willing to pay for it. Check out the flyer on the Shabbat table!) That led to a longer conversation, but I offer the short answer again now. The hardest thing about being a rabbi is giving – and receiving – negative feedback.

For a long time, when people would ask about my transition to the role of Senior Rabbi here, I would point to staff meetings. For 15 years as a Junior Rabbi, I could make jokes during staff meetings. Now, I'm the one who has to tell colleagues I want them to do their jobs differently. My role also places me on the receiving end of people's complaints, which are not always delivered in the most compassionate or understanding of ways.

This isn't new, and it isn't unique to B'nai Israel. You may know of the proverbial waiter in the kosher restaurant. When he approaches tables, he asks customers: "Is *anything* okay?" Or the synagogue voice mail: "Welcome to Temple Beth Judah. To complain about the rabbi, please press 1. To complain about the cantor, please press 2. To complain about kiddush, please press 3. ..." And it isn't just in the Jewish community. The other day, I saw a cartoon of two people sitting on opposite sides of a service desk. The clerk says to the customer: "When you download our customer service app, you can throw darts at me just by pressing on the screen."

It's an old problem, which the pandemic may have made worse. Social distancing was isolating. Many of us got used to interacting with people as their "two-dimensional selves" – what I see is what I get; it's easier to talk behind people's backs in the virtual space; we lost something in not being together.

The trend towards anonymous interactions began before the pandemic. Social media is surely part of the story as well, as is corporate bureaucracy. How long does it take to get a real person on the phone when you have a problem with, say, your cable? By the time we do get a person, how much patience do we have left? Do we treat the person on the other end of the line as a human being created in the image of God, or as a faceless, unlucky receptacle for all our feelings about the value – or lack of value – of cable? More troubling, might our demeanor with the faceless customer service representative affect the way we speak with the synagogue receptionist? We have to be careful, because we may see the receptionist – or her boss – in the supermarket, or at the gym, or in services.

To paraphrase Washington Post Guest Columnist Mat Bai: There was a time not so long ago when if you wanted to hear or express the world's dumbest sentiment on [fill in the blank], you had to at least put on a coat and go down to the neighborhood bar. Now you can just press send, and some poor soul on the other end of the email will have to read it. And with only a little more savvy, we can post our diatribes on Twitter or TikTok for the rest of the world to see as well. It's all a little too easy.

The hardest moments are when we become the objects of criticism. Because the nuance is lost and we are forced to interact in two dimensions – is it good, or is it bad? I contrast that with the best part of being a rabbi. The best moments are in **relationship** – when I get to know people and guide people and be part of their most intimate experiences of celebration and grief. The question is how we can incorporate the best aspects of relationship into the moments of criticism.

When Parashat Vayishlach began, we found our patriarch Jacob in the same predicament as last week. He was scared. Last week he was running away; this week he is returning to greet Esau; and in both places, he is scared. The predicaments are the same, but Jacob is very different. He has matured. To extend my metaphor, we might say that Jacob has jumped the counter. Last week, he was a customer with a demand; this week, Jacob encounters God and Esau in relationship.

Recall Jacob's words at the beginning of his journey last week. "If God remains with me," he said. "If God protects me on this journey ... and if I return safely ... then Adonai shall be my God." That's the demand of a customer. It's a conditional statement. *If you want me to pay the bill, you better give me everything I demand; and if you don't give it to me, I'm going to walk away.*

Now hear Jacob's words as he returns. He's still scared; he still wants something; but he approaches God in a different way. "*Katonti*," he says. "I am unworthy, I am humbled, I am made small by all the kindnesses You have shown me; with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have expanded to two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother. Fulfill Your promise to deal bountifully with me." Jacob still wants something, but he approaches God in *relationship*. It isn't conditional. *God, he says, I know you can deliver me because you've delivered me before; and whatever happens, know I won't forget the miracles of the past. I won't forget Your promise.*

We see Jacob's maturity again when he wrestles with the mysterious assailant. It could be God; it could be an angel; it may even be Esau. It is a hands-on experience. And at the end of the night, the assailant asks for leave. Jacob says: "I will not let you go until you bless me, לא אשלחך כי אם ברכתני." Compare this to the first time Jacob sought a blessing. He disguised himself. He pretended to be his brother. He tricked his father. He played the role of anonymous customer who must have what he wants regardless of what others may say or feel.

This time, though, Jacob is up-front. The assailant asks is "What is your name?", and Jacob tells the truth. The assailant changes Jacob's name to Israel, which is significant. Jacob is the one who grabbed his brother's heel; Jacob is the one who solves problems by conniving, tricking, and sometimes running away. Israel, on the other hand, means struggle. Israel wrestles with God; Israel faces his problems; Israel works in partnership; he gets his hands dirty. Israel encounters the world *in relationship*.

Last week, I stepped out of the sanctuary to lead a Learner Service with 6th-graders and their families. I began by asking what made prayer difficult and, predictably, the first answer was that it's all

conducted in Hebrew. I responded that language is indeed a challenge, but it may be misdiagnosed. It isn't just the Hebrew language; the challenge is the language of *prayer*. We think of prayer in that customer model. Prayer means asking for things. And that is difficult because we don't always need more things; and when we do, experience tells us that prayers aren't always answered. Asking doesn't always lead to receiving.

We have to think of prayer in another way. It isn't always about *asking* for things. Prayer is about entering into **relationship**, and there are better models for relationship than provider/customer. The best prayers begin with gratitude. Relationship can be grounded in memory, or tradition, or awe. Relationship is multi-directional. We yearn for God to move closer to us; but we can also *move ourselves* towards divinity. We can utter words of praise; we can observe *mitzvot*; we can appreciate the feeling of experiencing prayer in community. Relationships with one another become a model for the Relationship with God.

I think about the relationship with Israel as well. We know how difficult it is to criticize Israel. We must be careful because our detractors are listening. We ask whether it is okay to criticize Israel, but that may be the wrong question. The question is not whether or not to criticize, but rather: how can we criticize *in relationship*?

No country is perfect. No government is beyond reproach. But we aren't **customers**. Customers are outsiders; customers can always walk away. In **relationship**, our starting point is love. I love Israel. I believe in the Zionist dream. I affirm the right of our people be a free nation in its own land. In relationship, I have a stake. So, I have to express concern when my brand of Judaism is pushed aside. I can't ignore illiberal politicians who want to weaken the courts or other democratic institutions. We have to be careful, but in relationship, even disappointment can be expressed.

In his book *I and Thou*, the 20th-century philosopher Martin Buber described relationship as the key to understanding God. When I appreciate the beauty of a tree – not for its fruit or wood, but as something beautiful. ... When I approach another person not as an object to service my needs but as a fellow being with the capacity to love and think and feel, God is in that relationship. That's what our patriarch Jacob learned as he matured; and that's what we must learn as we experience people, and get frustrated with people and interact with people in ways that weren't possible not-so-long ago: We are blessed by God, experience divine love, we encounter God when we value and encounter other beings in relationship. Shabbat Shalom.