

Speaking with Esav

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If you think your Thanksgiving might be awkward, imagine what a weeknight dinner was like for Yacov and Esav growing up.

From before they were born, these brothers are in conflict and they only grow apart from there. Yakov is described as *yoshev ohalim*, one who dwells in tents and Esav is physically dominant, *tzayid b'feev*, a hunger for hunting in his mouth. Nothing like this detailed description appears when we read of Yishmael and Yizchak, or even Joseph and his brothers. It seems that the Torah is going out of its way to highlight how different these two children were, and inevitably, from their distinct interests and inclinations, they grew into two very different people.

In many ways, our parsha is a cautionary tale. Reading this story, we might conclude that personal differences result in conflict, accompanied by pain and one side ultimately losing. That is exactly where our parsha lands us at the end of our *sedra*. Yakov has gained his father's *bracha* but has fled his home. Esav is on a murderous rampage. Though one brother has "lost" and one has "won," an entire family has been destroyed.

From this vantage point, this story offers us a lens to consider how we relate to people who are very, very different from us. Must we be locked in an adversarial stance with them? How can we relate to those with whom we disagree? To put it differently, if you were to speak with "an Esav" in your life, what would you say?

This question came up for me Tuesday night, on my way back from Washington DC. I was reflecting on the day and the rally with a number of fellow travelers, and then also sharing that there are a range of opinions and positions regarding Israel in my extended family. Did I plan, someone asked, to talk to these family members about Israel next week when I was visiting family for Thanksgiving. I admitted that I wasn't sure. Such a conversation depended on a variety of factors, including my relationship with the person, how open they are to having a conversation and their own relationship to the topic at hand.

This morning, I want to share three ideas to bear on this question of if and how we speak about things that are very important to us with other people who may disagree. The first comes from a midrash, the second from a modern scholar and the third, from a children's book.

Idea #1: Seek Common Ground

According to the Sages, there was at least one thing that Yacov and Esav had in common: the mitzvah of *kibud av*. They both deeply loved and respected their father Yitzchak, taking extra care to honor him. In Breishit Rabba (65:5), the midrash notes that Esav had special clothes that he put on, to serve his father. The text continues:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: I attended my father all my days, and I did not attend him one one-hundredth of what Esau attended his father. When I would attend my father, I attended him with dirty garments, but when I would go out on the road, I would go out with clean garments. But Esau, when he would attend his father, he would attend him only with royal garments. He said: 'It is not in keeping with Father's honor to attend him in anything other than royal garments.' That is what is written: "[the garments] that were with her in the house."

Yacov and Esav likely did not agree on anything, and actually their fidelity to their father only fueled their competition for Yitzchak's blessing. But they did both endeavor to honor their father. It is important to note that at the end of Yitzchak's life, we see the twin brothers reunited for moment of genuine harmony:

וַיָּגַע יִצְחָק וַיָּמָת וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּיָו זָקֵן וּשְׁבַע יָמִים

Isaac breathed his last breath and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age;

וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ עֵשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּנָיו:

and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob.

Yacov and Esav bury their father together! This is not a small detail but an important coda to this story. After years of competition and hatred, there was some measure of reconciliation. They found, or maintained an area of common ground, something that both brothers felt was important.

When facing someone like Esav, we must remember that there could actually be a value that we share in common, even if we express it very differently. We must push ourselves to be curious about where that person is coming from and see if there could be some small patch of common ground. While this doesn't erase the deep differences, it is an important step toward conversation and understanding, and keeps open the door to future partnership.

Idea #2: You probably won't change someone else's opinion, but maybe you can understand it

Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist at NYU has written a number of books about morality and politics, including one of my favorite books, *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. In it, Haidt introduces a metaphor for thinking about the human mind and moral reasoning known as “the elephant and the rider.”

The metaphor goes something like this: Our minds contain a center of reasoning and logic, the rider, and a more emotional center, the elephant. The rider can do their best to attempt to direct the elephant. But the elephant is far more powerful and has its own will. Haidt summarizes this principle as follows (p. 61): *“Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second...”*

...within the first second of seeing, hearing, or meeting another person, the elephant has already begun to lean toward or away, and that lean influences what you think and do next. Intuitions comes first.” (p. 69)

We would like to believe that the rational part of ourselves can advise and guide our emotional core; but according to Haidt, in a pure contest of wills, emotion will nearly always defeat reason.

The corollary to this concept is that if it is hard to direct our own internal elephants, it is nearly impossible to redirect someone else’s elephant through logic and facts alone. We have to take seriously the possibility that even when we think someone else is wrong, they might not actually change their perspective even though we lay out a pristint logical argument. We spend a lot of time talking to the riders of those with whom we disagree.

Perhaps, though, we can still try speaking to the inner elephants. We can find out what values are important to other people, and which values they prioritize most. To extend the metaphor - what is the name of their elephant and how did it grow up? What personal experiences informed their values and brought them to this place.

This kind of conversation is going further than Yacov and Esav do in our parsha, who exist in the same physical space but are never in true dialogue with each other.

Idea #3: Think back to the Garden

I will share two brief versions of this idea. Yara has a children’s book called, “a very big problem.” It is an illustration of a midrash about *Gan Eden*, in which each creature comes before God and pleads their case for why God should love them the most.

“The land quaked and said, ‘I was created first and without me, there would be no place for a Garden. I am God’s favorite and God loves me the most’...The earthworms wriggled and said, ‘without us, the birds would not have food and the plants would not have soil.’ We are the most important, we are God’s favorites, God should love us the most!”

All of God’s creations argue and claim that they are the favorite creation and God loves them the most, at which point God responds as you might have predicted, “some of you are large and some of you are small, some of you were created first and some last, but all of you are important, and all are loved. God’s love is big enough for all of you.” While it may sound like a Christian idea, it is right there Midrash !

Rabbi Sacks offers a similar insight on our parsha, in his book “Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence.” The key, says Sacks, is a small detail that we often miss when we read the dramatic tale of Yakov and Esau:

“*There was a second blessing,*” writes Sacks. Yacov is on his way out the door, fleeing Esau and Yitzchak blesses him again with another blessing:

וְאֵל-שֵׁדִי יְבָרֶךְ אֶתְּךָ וְיִפְרֶךְ וְיִרְבֶּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְקָהָל עַמִּים. וְיָתֵן לְךָ אֶת בְּרַכַּת אַבְרָהָם לְךָ
וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְּךָ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֶל-הָיִים לְאַבְרָהָם.

May God Almighty bless you, make you fruitful and increase your numbers so that you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing of Avraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as a foreigner, the land God gave to Avraham.

The blessing that Yakov took from Esau “spoke of *wealth and power - the dew of the heavens and the richness of the earth, to rule over your brothers.*”

Rabbi Sacks suggests that this blessing of wealth and power was never meant for Yakov. He was intended to have the second blessing all along, the covenantal blessing of a relationship with God and yes, a connection to the land.

Our tradition teaches that there is enough blessing to go around in this world, and that every person, and family, and people are deserving of God’s blessings.

Whether or not it is during Thanksgiving dinner, we are sitting right now at a dinner table of sorts, with Yacovs and Esavs.

It might be that for some of us, it is not the time for one of these heart-to-hearts. So many of us feel vulnerable and there is such a wide range of opinions and perspectives on Israel, in our families and our community as well.

For those of us that do open up this space, let us remember such conversations are incredibly intimate. It has to be a safe space, which is very challenging to find right now. I can't imagine that Yacov always felt safe around his Esav.

Still, there are ways to do this: When we express our values with others and whether they come from and identify our shared convictions as well. It is a delicate dance that calls us to also remember that each person in this world is created in the image of God and deserving of God's blessings.

Author Bayo Akomolafe writes that "We need a politics of tenderness more than ever. Not tenderness as capitulation to particular conclusions that have already been made. Not tenderness that if you don't see the world as I do, there's something wrong with you." But tenderness as the nurturing of grace that allows something different, something even beautiful, to be born in the midst of the fires."