

Working on Living Together- Parashat Vayetzei, 5781

There was once a beautiful rose. Being the most beautiful flower in the garden made her feel wonderful. However, she noticed that people only looked at her from afar.

The rose looked for the cause of her isolation and realized that there was always a toad sitting right next to her, day in and day out. She thought that because of the toad's slimy and warty appearance, others did not come close to see her.

Full of indignation, the rose requested the toad to go away. Obediently, the toad abandoned her.

Not too long afterward, the toad came by to visit the rose. The toad was very surprised when he saw the rose. The rose was dried and withered. She had no leaves or petals.

"You look devastated", said the toad. "What happened to you?", he asked. "The ants have been eating me ever since you left me", answered the rose. "I will never be the same", she added.

"Well," said the toad, "when I was here, I got to enjoy your lovely scent. It made everyday pleasant. But sometimes, the wind would blow you and your thorns would bump me and I would get hurt. By the same token, I kept many away from admiring you up close, but I also ate all the ants that came around to attack you. In that way it was possible for you to become the most beautiful flower in the garden."

We know, and can see, that it is not always easy living with other people. Our needs and priorities differ, and even when we see the same problems, our solutions may not align at all.

We see this so clearly in the section of Torah we just read from Parashat Vayeitzei. Conflict abounds aplenty. Jacob has deep inner struggles with who he is, what he has done, and to where he is headed. His uncle, Lavan,

multiple times deceives, cheats, and changes deals with Jacob for Lavan's own benefit. Rachel and Leah, sisters and Jacob's wives vie for his affections, his time, and their own material possessions. And looming over all of this is Jacob's own fractured relationship with Esau, who has grown wealthy and powerful and, last time they spoke in Parashat Toldot, swore to kill Jacob.

Each of these conflicts has to be navigated throughout this Torah portion and onward. Some of them are simply resolved, and others are not ever satisfactorily brought to a close. But I want to take a look at just one: the relationship between Rachel and Leah. Both of them are married to Jacob, though he makes no secret of his love and preference for Rachel. Leah, however, is able to bear many children, whereas Rachel remains childless for a long time. Their fights crop up in several places in this week's Torah portion.

There is one key place, however, where Rachel and Leah are united. When Jacob has once again been cheated by Lavan, and realizes that he will never get a fair deal, nor ever truly prosper, unless he strikes out completely on his own, he goes to his wives, and explains his plans to leave with what they have, travel through the night without saying goodbye, and so that they cannot be detained, and return to the land of Isaac and Abraham in order to be free of Lavan. And Rachel and Leah respond in one voice saying, "Will we truly have any share of our father's inheritance [if we stay here]?...Now, go and do exactly as God has told you." (Genesis 31:14-16).

In a moment of deep turmoil, when they could have fled with fear of the unknown or anger at being asked to leave their home, Rachel and Leah instead listen and respond with thoughtful compassion. They see how Jacob struggles to both honor their father and to independently provide for his family and make a name for himself. They watch as Lavan time and time again gives Jacob the short end of the stick, even as they hold love and affection for him and for all of their family in Haran with them. It would have been utterly reasonable for them to react harshly against Jacob, to

castigate him, to say, “Absolutely not! We cannot leave our home, no matter what is going wrong. You need to just work harder and be better.”

That spirit of compromise is not lost on the rabbinic commentators. Rashi remarks that it is this encouragement from his wives that ultimately gives Jacob the courage to face up to Esau, to reunite with his brother though it might mean his death, and, in the end, to ask for, and be granted, forgiveness from his twin who he so grievously wronged almost two decades ago.

Supporting one another, even when we differ, in fact, especially then, is the very thing that can allow each of us to be at our best. It is when we are able to hear the heartfelt stories of others, to put aside our differences and our own filters through which we see the world and actually reach out a hand of care to our neighbors and to those who are unlike us that we see how much we truly have in common. Like the toad who keeps the ants away from the flower, and the flower whose beauty and fragrance brings joy to the toad, we are at our best when we go out of our way to support others and when we allow them to do the same for us.

So much has been made these last few years about how different and tribal we have become. We talk to those who think, eat, vote, and read like us, and have become far too comfortable writing off those who differ or disagree. There are plenty of people out there who are espousing awful rhetoric or doing harm with their ideologies, but there are millions more people who are wounded and hurt by the world around them who are looking for a way forward for their families, their communities, and themselves. It is a disservice to our own lives and our world to treat our differences as flaws or excuses to ignore others. The more we can reach out to really hear the stories of others, even if they upset us, even if they don't accord to the ways in which we see the world, the better our communities will be and the more our own stories can be heard and appreciated, warts and all, even if not we are not completely understood.

Psalm 133 opens declaring, “הַיְהִי מֵה־טוֹב וּמִה־נְעִים שָׁבֵת אֶחָיִם גַּם־יִחָד...How good and how pleasant it is for siblings to sit down together!” (Psalms 133:1). Indeed, how wonderful would it be if we could sit down with anyone? What would our world look like if there was more listening and less yelling? More subtlety and fewer slogans? More compassion and less caricature? More reaching out and less isolated group-think?

Someday soon, we will get through this pandemic. We will return to many of the parts of our lives which we have been unable to enjoy throughout the last ten months. I hope and pray that when we re-emerge from out of the funk of this last year, that we do so with a new-found appreciation for the interconnectedness of our lives, that for me to succeed, you must succeed, and for me have space to thrive and grow, you must be afforded the same. May we protect and support each other with compassion and care; may we one day appreciate the simple joys and pleasures of sitting together with all of our siblings around the world together.

Shabbat Shalom.