

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Toldot  
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## Team Kol Rinah

Who's on Team Jacob? Who's on Team Edward? Obviously, I'm talking about the *Twilight* books (and movies), about teen vampires in the Pacific Northwest by Stephenie Meyer, that was popular in the mid 2000's. Jacob and Edward were rivals for the affection of the main character.

Next round. Who's on Team Conrad? Anyone for Team Jeremiah? If you're a 14-year-old girl in America (or me), you know I'm talking about the Amazon Prime show, *The Summer I Turned Pretty*.

Final round. This time Jacob and Esau. Who's on Team Jacob? And who's on Team Esav?

I'll assume you've read or remember the story of Jacob and Esau, of Jacob buying the birthright from Esau for a bowl of lentils, of Jacob impersonating Esav and receiving their father Isaac's blessing.

Jacob's behavior, as recorded in the Torah, is pretty bad. We can excuse him by saying his mother Rebecca really was the instigator, but it was still Jacob who did these things. And Rebecca had nothing to do with Jacob getting the birthright for the lentils anyway.

But if you read the rabbinic tradition, Esav is a murderer, a thief, an idol worshipper. He becomes the progenitor for the evil Roman empire. He didn't care about his birthright, and Rebecca and Jacob were justified in conspiring to keep the blessing from him, because he was truly awful.

To be on Team Jacob, you have to know and read the midrashim, Jewish tradition. To be on Team Esav, you have to have a moral compass that does not depend on the "facts" of midrash.

Moreover, there's a kind of theologically pious approach that says that if this is what happens, this must be what God wants. And God certainly continues the covenant with Jacob. So it must be ok by God.

I've never seen anyone quit a synagogue over competing interpretations of Jacob and Esau in Parashat Toldot.

But tensions around theology, around religious practice, around authority, around the balance of tradition versus change, about evolving senses of morality—these are some of the tensions that challenge religious communities.

Needless to say, Israel is another topic where people have differing and strong feelings.

One way of thinking about what a synagogue is as a container. Kol Rinah is a container for holding us, with all our different politics, and theologies, and traditions, and backgrounds and priorities and needs. The goal of the container is hold us all, so that there is space for us all, with all of our strengths and joys, and with our brokenness and hurts too.

A container has boundaries—walls, a bottom, maybe a top. And we decide what's in-bounds, and what's out of bounds. Lots of different approaches to Jacob and Esau are in. Shouting, cursing, and physical violence or intimidation are out. Lots of different approaches to Israel are in. Applauding Hamas's orgy of violence or celebrating Palestinian children's deaths—neither of these are within our boundaries.

On the Torah's statement that Isaac's eyes dimmed, allowing Jacob to impersonate Esau and get their father Isaac's blessing, [Ilana Kurshan writes](#), "These midrashim suggest that sometimes we lose the ability to see our close relatives clearly because if we were to do so—if we were to see them for who they truly are—we would no longer be able to maintain the relationship. Spouses who become blind to each other's faults can remain in love for decades, and parents who can turn a blind eye to their children's misdemeanors can continue to welcome those children home. Isaac needed to become blind so that he could bestow any sort of blessing upon Esau; his blindness enabled him to maintain the family tie in spite of fierce disagreements and antithetical worldviews. So long as Isaac did not witness Esau sleeping with betrothed maidens, he could continue to allow Esau to sleep under his roof."

There might indeed be times where intentionally or accidentally but without concern we don't see each other clearly, for shalom bayit, for the sake of peace in our house.

But no one would describe Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau's family as harmonious, as a Tolstoyan "happy family." It rather seems a house divided, with so many jealousies and so much unspoken resentment.

I really want to take these characters and make them talk to each other, to have them argue out loud, cry, listen, and hear each other's hopes and fears and hurts and dreams.

And rather than averting our gaze, ignoring things that make us uncomfortable or that we disagree with, imagine a shul where we could share deeply across different perspectives, with respect and curiosity and patience. Imagine a shul where people felt they could ask questions, where they could grow and be seen for who they are, not need to hide themselves. That's the shul I want for us.

What's the holiday most widely observed by American Jews? Thanksgiving.

There are so many things to argue about over the turkey this year. Should we be eating turkey, or meat at all? Ceasefire now, or never? Bring home the hostages or don't negotiate with terrorists? Biden or Trump or RFK Jr.? Is anti-zionism really anti-semitism?

Don't go to Thanksgiving to argue or fight or convince. Go to reunite, to express gratitude, to listen with patience and curiosity, to share not talking points but your heart.

Do you know the protest chant that starts "What do we want?" [Fill in—freedom, justice, gun control...] "When do we want it? Now!"

A meme on Facebook said recently:

"What do we want?! NUANCE!

When do we want it?! OVER AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF IN-DEPTH CONVERSATION!"

What unites Team Jacob and Team Edward is a love of the world of Twilight.

Team Jeremiah and Team Conrad are united by fans caring about *The Summer I Turned Pretty's* main character, Belly (short for Isabel).

Whether we're Team Jacob or Team Esau, we're Team Torah.

This New Member Shabbat, may we be blessed with this container of Jewish life, Kol Rinah.

May we together build the important boundaries we need while creating the qualities of relationship that we cherish and need.

And may seek nuance and conversation with love, respect and curiosity, over Kiddush, over turkey, and for many years to come, as part of Team Kol Rinah.