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D'var Torah – Parshat Vayeitzei
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Yesterday most of us experienced yet another holiday separated from family because of the pandemic. Perhaps the one cold comfort of not being able to gather with our far-flung families, is not having to figure out how to get through a meal with people whose political views we find abhorrent. It seems especially uncomfortable to have these kinds of conflicts with members of our own family. Even a cursory familiarity with the Torah tells us that intrafamilial conflict is both as old as humanity itself, and that it is not something to be trifled with. The results of conflict among family members (most often siblings but not exclusively) range from exile, to curses, to enslavement to death. No wonder we look forward to sitting down with our cousins from the opposite political party with dread.

In Parshas Vayeitzei, we read about the births of 12 of Yaakov's 13 children. Yaakov's children are the first generation in the history of our people in which all of the children remain within the family, within the single covenant, and are able to inherit together. Among Avraham's multiple children, only Yitzhak inherited the covenant of his father. Among Yitzhak and Rivkah's children, we read last week how Yaakov arranged to receive both hist father's blessing and the inheritance of the firstborn. Among the children of Yaakov, however, there are no banished children, there are no un-blessed children, there are no disinherited children. Everyone is chosen, everyone is blessed, everyone inherits. This shift in practice represented a fundamental tikkun, a corrective to the history of irreconcilable conflict among siblings that goes all the way back to the first siblings in the Torah, Kain and Hevel.

What was the merit that allowed to children of Yaakov to remain together where previous generations had failed to do so? Perhaps they were able to do this because they learned from the example of their mothers. Rachel and Leah were often put in a position of rivalry—rivalry to marry the same man, then rivalry for his affection, competing for who would have the most sons. However, unlike Yaakov and Eisav, whose conflict was absolute, and escalated to the point that they could not even live in the same place, Rachel and Leah managed to live together, not only in the same place, but in the same household. Moreover, although their conflict was real, it seems the Leah and Rachel maintained a deep love and care for one another. First of all, Leah and Lavan could not have deceived Yaakov into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, without Rachel's cooperation. It would have been a simple thing for her to show up at the wedding and let Yaakov know that she was not the one underneath the bridal veil. Instead, according to the midrash, Rachel actively helped Leah to deceive Yaakov, giving her secret signals that she and Yaakov had between them. Rachel in this was a model not only of self-sacrifice, but of showing care for the well-being even of one's rival.

That care went both ways. When Leah became pregnant for the seventh time with a boy, Yaakov already had 11 other sons: six from Leah, two from Bilha, two from Zilpa and one from Rachel. According to the midrash, Leah reasoned that if her child were born a boy, he would make the last of the 12 tribes that were prophesied to come from Yaakov, leaving Rachel with only one son. Leah, then prayed to G-d to turn the fetus into her womb into a girl. Thus Leah gave birth to Yaakov's only daughter, Dinah, and Rachel was able to have a second son Binyamin.

Having grown up with the example of their mothers, who struggled and competed fiercely with one another, but who also looked out for each other's well-being when it mattered most, Yaakov's children understood that rivalry and conflict are not incompatible with love and caring. Though their conflicts would turn quite serious, and lead to prolonged estrangement, in the end they were able to find a way to remain together as a single family.

We often think of pluralism as a new phenomenon in the Jewish world, the product of our encounter with the challenges of modernity. However, pluralism has been been part of our people ever since the generation of the children of Yaakov. We are the heirs of twelve distinct tribes, whose founders had distinct personalities, distinct values, distinct virtues and distinct flaws, who for all their differences, were able to form a single nation together.
We are referred to as B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, reflecting the fact that nation's identity was by those children of Yaakov/Israel who figured out eventually, after much struggle, how to live together. “Jewish values” are the sum total of often seemingly conflicting sets of values. This is one reason I wince whenever someones says “what's the Jewish view on...” The Jewish view is that there is almost never one single Jewish view on anything.

People like to joke that you if you have two Jews, between them they'll have three opinions. This is true, not because Jews just like to argue, but because the capacity to hold and allow for conflicting views is at the heart of what it means to be Jewish, to be “Children of Israel.”

That doesn't mean that anything goes, or that we always have to tolerate views we disagree with. Pluralism asserts that no one faction or ideology has a monopoly on truth or morality. It does not claim that there is no such thing as falsehood or evil. There are conflicts which are absolute, black and white, that do not allow for the two sides to live side by side in peace. We must not make peace with antisemitism, racism, or other ideologies of hatred.

At the same time, we must be careful not to be too quick to brand anyone we disagree with as an enemy. Ironically, those who are most quick to demonize their opponents and claim they are too dangerous to be tolerated, are themselves the dangerous ones. An ideology that refuses to accommodate opposition is one that cannot be accommodated.
We must to learn to distinguish between opponents and enemies, between those who present an existential threat, and those who might challenge us, who we might think are wrong, but with whom we can fruitfully engage around common goals and common values. Let us learn from the example of our ancestresses, Leah and Rachel, and their children, that opposition need not lead to enmity, that we can stand up for ourselves, fight for what we believe in, and still manage to live with, look out for, and even love our opponents. If we can do that, then we may even find ourselves looking forward to sitting down at the Thanksgiving table next year when, please G-d the pandemic is over, with relatives whose views we oppose, and getting into that argument, secure in the knowledge that, in spite of our differences, we can remain united in love.

Shabbat Shalom!