

Searching For Each Other

In last week's New York Times, one of my favorite editorial writers, Maureen Dowd, shared the tension and tempers that are threatening her close but politically divided family. For years she has generously shared her column space with her brothers who have a markedly more conservative perspective. Equally generous, she has taken readers on a tour of her family dynamics and the intellectual give and take that is a source of pride. No doubt, their heated debates took aim at cherished assumptions and ideological dogmas. They sharpened their minds and thrilled in the battle of thought and wit and remained close. Well, up to a few years ago, they remained close. Family over politics. But in today's world, even close and loving families are set on edge due to the stress and anger brought about by the ugliness of modern politics.

I encourage you to read her thoughtful column, Of Monuments, Arguments, Vampires and Thanksgiving <https://nyti.ms/2znXe0d>

This week's Torah portion, *Vayeishev* (Genesis 37:1-40:23), includes the heartbreaking story of family disfunction that led to disastrous consequences for our ancestor Jacob-Israel and his family. The characteristics of their disfunction are all too familiar: favoritism, sibling rivalry, jealousy, etc. Unfortunately, just as a single family can suffer fractures and divisions, so too, can a nation.

The ideal of *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one," conveys a unity that, frankly, has never existed. Indeed, in a vibrant democracy, different voices, opposing ideologies and political philosophies are pitted against one another. Each strives to be heard, to win the election, to exercise its leadership and vision. And this nation has witnessed, in every generation, those competing parties and interests deteriorate into social unrest. And no, things are not worse now than ever before. Far from it. Still, that is cold comfort.

But all is not hopeless. This Torah portion offers us a time-tested antidote to that which ails our families and this society:

¹² One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, ¹³ Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready." ¹⁴ And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring and bring me back word." So, he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, ¹⁵ a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, **"What are you looking for?"** ¹⁶ **He said, "I am looking for my brothers."**

(Gen 37:12-15)

The commentators point out that Joseph, not finding his brothers, could have given up. He could have felt that he made a good enough effort and could truthfully report to his father that he tried but was not successful. Instead, he went wandering from field to field, well past the city of Shechem. He refused to give up. He went looking for his brothers.

Of course, when he did find them, the brothers were not exactly happy to see him. Rather, they sold Joseph to slave traders and he ended up in an Egyptian dungeon. Even then he never stopped seeking reconciliation. Eventually, the long-lost brothers that Joseph sought joined him in Egypt and the reunited family lived happily ever after. (Well, not quite, but that's another story!)

The point is, like Joseph, we need to keep trying to create a more perfect union. "Out of many, one" does not mean that we will ultimately do away with debate and disagreement. Our nation, our community, and our families are a multi-colored quilt that celebrate our uniqueness. What we seek is to strengthen those threads that bind the varied designs, fabrics, textures and colors into a quilt under which all are warm and welcome.

Shabbat Shalom!

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