

7 Steps to Meeting Each Other (Rosh Hashanah 5774)

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For Jacob, it is his homecoming, his first time returning to the land of Canaan, the land where he was born and raised, the land from which he fled for his life. And this moment, his homecoming, is, I imagine, the scariest moment of his life. He is preparing to encounter his brother Esau, for the first time since he stole Esau's birthright and their father's innermost blessing.

So Jacob prepares. He sends messengers ahead. They tell Esau that Jacob had been staying with Laban for 20 years, that he accrued some wealth, and that he wants - *limtzo chein b'einecha* - to seek favor or forgiveness from his brother.

Limtzo chein - to receive *chein*. The word "*chein*" in the Torah is a word that translates literally to mean *grace*, and it connotes getting something when you don't deserve it. Jacob didn't deserve it. He wronged his brother Esau. And if it weren't for the dominant bias within Rabbinic Judaism against the character Esau we might see that more clearly. The Rabbis who read this had an agenda: vilify Esau. Exculpate our patriarch Jacob, who becomes Israel. And it was an easy enough endeavor: Esau is the extreme Other in the text itself. Genesis tells us they were opposites from the time of the womb where they first quarreled. When they were born, Esau who came out first was hairier and reddish. Esau was a hunter, Jacob a "homespun man--*yeishev olahim*, hanging out in the tents." (Couldn't make this stuff up!) And it's not like the parents didn't take sides: Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca Jacob. God's behind the scenes setting it all up. And to the writers of the Hebrew Bible, Esau is the progenitor of the Edomites, enemies of Israel.

So the Rabbis' othering of Esau wasn't unfounded. But the Rabbis, they just piled it on. No doubt for important reasons in their own day, their own historical need to differentiate themselves, to empower themselves in an era of powerlessness. Since Esau is the extreme Other to our father Jacob, they thought, let's read our lives into this text and render him the perennial Other. Let's distance ourselves from him. From them. And surround ourselves, in midrash as in life, with likeminded people, our kind of people.

The Othering of Esau, like it or not, is a part of the tradition that we have inherited. We still, in countless ways, sort ourselves, drawing near to those who are likeminded, moving away from those who are different.

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Journalist Bill Bishop makes the case that when it comes to meeting people who are different, today our culture in the United States makes that extraordinary difficult, in new and alarming ways. In his book *The Big Sort*, Bishop and sociologist Robert Cushing present a thorough study of self-segregation among Americans in recent years. They look at a variety of data, from voting trends to IRS income reports, to advertising research, in order to understand how Americans have moved around over the last few decades. And they notice something unusual. Looking across time they discovered that fewer and fewer of us today live near people who vote differently from us; more and more of us live near people who vote exactly the way that we do. "In 1976, less than a quarter of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. By 2004, nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties." They call this trend "the Big Sort," after the way we're sorting ourselves. And it's not just about political affiliations but also about our values, how we worship, and what we want out of life. We are further away from those who value differently, no longer interacting, no longer engaging with the other the way we once did.

So Bishop and Cushing conclude with a scathing reading of this state of affairs: They write, "as people seek out the social settings they prefer—as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable—the nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous groups. [We live in] balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible."

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Jacob sends his message to his incomprehensible other, and he waits in fear. Esau receives Jacob's message, and replies with a message of his own. The messengers return to Jacob and say: "*banu el achicha el Esav*-- we went to your brother Esau, and he too is marching to meet you—along with four

hundred men." 400 is a loaded number. We find it repeatedly in the Book of Samuel, always connoting a militant group—400 means war. Jacob's reaction is clear: *vayira Yaakov m'od*, Jacob is terrified. So he divides his people up, preparing for the worst.

Anytime the Other becomes "incomprehensible," we have a problem. A climate of fear consumes us, we imagine the other in the worst light, as the enemy. A steady flow of messengers goes back and forth between oneself and the other saying, "the other is incomprehensible," too far away to understand, let alone to embrace. *Vayir'a Yaakov m'od*—be fearful, be distant, be incomprehensible to the other.

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In my early childhood I could count on one hand the number of non-Jews who were my friends. On that same hand, I could add to it the number of non-whites who were in my social group. I'd need the other hand but not much more to add those who were not middle or upper-middle class, and it wouldn't take another finger to add those who were openly gay. Over time, I wrestled to put myself in a position to encounter others.

I recall when I was 15, and my brother was home from college. He told me he needed to talk to me about something. "What did I do this time," I wondered (Usually when Geoff would say, "we need to talk," it meant he knew about some kind of trouble I was stirring up and wasn't gonna tell mom and dad. I guess that's an older brother thing.). He knocked on my door that night, and with more courage than I'd ever mustered for a conversation, he told me he was gay. I remember my reaction. I was recently introduced to civil rights politics, so before even telling him "I love you, I accept you," I jumped right to solution: "Geoff you should lobby for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act! Let's fight against this other crazy bill that's gaining traction—it's called the Defense of Marriage Act! Did you know that these bills are trying to make your life better or worse!" "Yeah, Matt, I know—this is my life, this is who I am." Oh. This is you. You are ... different from me... and in a way that I never really knew. The world in that moment changed. The other in that moment changed. Because the other was really my brother.

I remember the experience of going back to school, back to the dominant culture of ostensible sameness, but now knowing that we are not the same.

None of us. Maybe it shouldn't have taken a family member coming out for me to see that no matter how much we sort ourselves, we are always a community of others, always in need of re-sorting.

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Perhaps you saw the movie Avatar. (I did...5 times.) In Avatar, the way that the people in the distant world of Pandora greet each other is not by saying "hi," or the polite "how are ya"—they say "I see you." Don't we all have our moments when we cross or are thrown beyond our comfort zone and say to each other, "I see you"?

To be a community means to say "I see you," to meet each other, each and *every* other—because the Other is ubiquitous: the religious other, the ethnic or racial other, the gender or sexual orientation other, the elder or younger other; the Jewish other. We meet each other:

- When we recover from tragedy by seeking our brothers and sisters who are different but share in our pain.
- When a group of our lifelong learners invites equality activists to teach them about transgenderism, or when on National Coming Out Day someone feels safe enough to tell another about that part of who he or she is: we meet each other.
- We meet each other within this extraordinary, sacred tool that is the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, which tries to help us meet the religious other—and pool our power to make things better. For each other.
- We meet each other when we begin with the assumption that we don't know each other, whether it's the Muslim or Christian sitting next you at the MLK Shabbat Gathering in January, or your colleague who lives, socializes, and maybe votes differently than you do.
- And we meet each other through our everyday actions, what we call *mitzvot*:
 - When we invite an unlikely guest to our dinner tables.
 - When we realize we don't need all the clothes in our closet, or food in our pantry, and that others do.
 - When we are asked to help out and regardless of how tired or busy we are we open our hearts and hands and answer: YES, I will give, I will make time... to meet each other.
- When we "mix things up" with mitzvot like this, we RE-SORT

ourselves and RE-ORIENT ourselves. When we practice this kind of relational engagement work: We transcend our fear.

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Vayira Yaakov M'od. Jacob is so afraid. He prepares for the worst, assuming that the story that sorted his life, that defined the last two decades of his being would explode in a clash of fatal consequence. That night, Jacob finds himself all alone. And he encounters someone, *a so-called "ISH,"* this mysterious divine other being who find elsewhere in Genesis. Jacob and the *ish* wrestle all night, the other demands to be let go, and Jacob says, "not until you bless me." The *ish* says, "what's your name?" "It's Jacob." The *ish* replies, "no longer is Jacob, but now it's Israel. Your name is Israel," he says, "*ki sarita im Elohim - because you wrestled with God - V'IM ANASHIM - and with other people.*"

Jacob receives a name that sanctifies encountering the other. And what happens in the very next moment? *Vayisa Yaakov einav vayar v'hinei Eisav,* Jacob lifts up his eyes and – behold - he SEES Esau. Jacob approaches him by bowing down to the ground 7 times. 7 times! Imagine that, amid all the fear that overwhelms him from a distance: 7 times he stops on his way to the Other. 7, the holiest number, the number that recalls the story of the Creation of the Universe itself, with the 7th day being where mankind and God meet.

Rosh Hashanah in our tradition is referred to as HaYom Harat Olam, the Day of the Creation of the World. Each year, on Rosh Hashanah, we, who now identify as Israel the people, we task ourselves on this day to re-enter creation, to re-create, to re-sort the universe with God. That's what this Holy Day is all about. Jacob in our story teaches us that to become Israel, to partner with God, means to see, to approach, to meet the Other. On Rosh Hashanah we imagine ourselves approaching each other with the courage of Israel in this moment.

Humble enough to bow down 7 times to his lifelong Other, Israel arrives and stands before his brother. "*Vayaratz Eisav likrato,* and Esau runs to greet him. They embrace. They kiss." And Jacob says to his brother, "*Ra'iti fanecha kir'ot p'nei Elohim:* Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."