

## Going Home

### *Shabbat Vayishlach 5779*

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Our sages assigned special Torah and prophetic readings for Jewish holidays. They did not, of course, designate a passage to be read on the Shabbat after Thanksgiving. Had they done so, they might have selected *Parashat Vayishlach*.

In our American culture, Thanksgiving often means coming together with family. For many, those reunions make the holiday particularly joyous and fun. For others, the occasion is less festive. On a holiday, even people with legions of friends may grieve the absence of family, temporary or permanent. Others, who are celebrating with relatives, nevertheless anticipate the gathering with trepidation. Changes in family structures, divorces and remarriages, interpersonal disputes, and even estrangements may complicate the festival. And now politics often drives a wedge.

Our patriarch Jacob could relate. Having endured an awful lot of family dinners at the table of his uncle and father-in-law, Laban, who mistreated him terribly, Jacob, his wives, and children set out for his home and family of origin. A substantial obstacle stands in their way: Esau, Jacob's brother, the reason that Jacob left home in the first place. After Jacob stole the blessing that his father Isaac had intended for the older brother, Esau threatened Jacob's life. Their mother, Rebekah, insisted that Jacob flee. Coming home means seeing Esau again and facing the possibility that his elder twin is still eager for revenge.

Jacob is afraid. Hearing that his brother is coming to meet him with an entourage of hundreds, Jacob divides the camp, in the hope that at least some of the Children of Israel may survive. To Jacob's surprise, though, Esau does not seek to kill him. The brothers meet, and then go their separate ways in peace.

How do they do it? Perhaps we may learn from their example.

First, Esau asks about Jacob's family.<sup>i</sup>

Dr. Karin Tamerius, "the founder of 'Smart Politics,' a nonprofit organization that teaches [people] how to communicate more effectively across partisan lines,"<sup>ii</sup> published a piece in the *New York Times* earlier this week, "How to Have a Conversation With Your Angry Uncle Over Thanksgiving." Tamerius's

number one piece of advice is, “Ask open-ended, genuinely curious, nonjudgmental questions.”<sup>iii</sup>

Dr. Temerius’s prescription is that we behave as Esau does in our Torah portion. It works. Jacob, who understandably expects confrontation, is disarmed. He replies by introducing his wives and children, setting the stage for an unexpectedly pleasant exchange among the brothers.

This advice is well taken, and not only when political acrimony is the issue. Some family gatherings are uncomfortable because a person doesn’t like his father’s new wife, or her brother’s new husband, and the feeling is mutual. Perhaps the problem is that one person has said something terribly hurtful to another in the past, or one family member feels slighted after not having been invited to a family wedding. Ultimately, if family ties are going to be fully repaired, the difficult issues will need to be addressed. However, the Thanksgiving table or Passover Seder is not the place to sort out the depths of a fraught relationship. That limitation, though, need not consign us to discussing the weather. Genuine interest in the other person, expressed by asking questions and listening to responses, about things that matter to them, may take us in the right direction, as it does for Esau and Jacob.

New York *Times* Columnist Maureen Dowd published an exquisite piece yesterday. Dowd begins by discussing her relationship with her older brother Michael: “We were always very close. But when George W. Bush was president, a chill entered the relationship. At holiday dinners, Michael, a conservative like most of my family, would mock me about my critical columns on the Iraq invasion. ‘If there was a hurricane, you’d blame it on W,’ he’d say. And then there was, and I did. When Michael died after a bout with pneumonia in 2007, I sat on my couch for days and grappled with how my job had hurt our relationship. I never wanted to go through that again.”<sup>iv</sup>

Dowd got another chance this past summer, and it wasn’t easy. Another brother, Kevin, “had been [Brett Kavanaugh’s] basketball coach at Georgetown Prep...They stayed friends for the next 35 years, and he sometimes referred to Kavanaugh as ‘half a rung below my own sons.’”<sup>v</sup> Dowd then “wrote two columns about the Blasey-Kavanaugh hearing that upset [her] family.”<sup>vi</sup>

Before all that happened, Dowd had planned a family trip to Monument Valley to celebrate Kevin’s birthday. Dowd worried that Kevin might cancel after his sister’s columns criticized his beloved friend. But he didn’t. Moreover, when

the two of them found themselves alone, Dowd “pressed [Kevin] about [President] Trump’s pattern of egregious, lawless and value-free behavior.”<sup>vii</sup> They did not agree.

Ultimately, though, Kevin told his columnist sister: “If you did an unfair hatchet job on [Kavanaugh], I’d be very upset....But politics should not be the determining factor in your life, high up on your emotional scale. You should realize that family always is more important.”<sup>viii</sup> I wonder if Kevin’s statement could be broadened beyond politics. While some family estrangements are the result of abuse or long-term mistreatment, other disunions within families may be traced to petty slights, real and perceived. Many people have no choice but to mourn the families they have lost, as they seek to replace blood relationships with other bonds. Some, like Maureen and Kevin Dowd, admirably work across divides to hold their families together.

Jacob and Esau do both. After coming together and exchanging pleasantries, Esau proposes that they journey onwards together. Jacob, though, concocts an excuse, suggesting that they part amicably, going separate ways, and they do;<sup>ix</sup> but not permanently. They come together at least once again, to honor their father, seeing to Isaac’s proper burial together.<sup>x</sup>

Rebuilding family across a deep divide is a significant theme of *Boy Erased*, a powerful film currently in theaters. The main character is a young Arkansas man subjected to cruel so-called “conversion therapy” by his parents in a crude attempt to “cure” him of being gay. The real person whose story the movie tells is Garrard Conley, whose father is a Missionary Baptist preacher. Not long ago, he told *People* magazine that “his relationship with his father ‘is always going to be little bit complicated,...[but] we’ve found a way around it through the years.’”<sup>xi</sup>

Jacob leaves Esau with gifts and with blessings. Maureen and Kevin Dowd certainly see one another, sister and brother, as a gift and a blessing, across the political divide. The Conley family gives us reason to hope that one can go home again, even after the most painful wrongdoing and estrangement. Let each of us find ways home to our families, or to new families, with gifts and blessings.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 33:5.

<sup>ii</sup> New York *Times* byline, November 18, 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Karen Tamerius, “How to Have a Conversation With Your Angry Uncle Over Thanksgiving,” New York *Times*, November 18, 2018.

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<sup>iv</sup> Maureen Dowd, "Of Monuments, Arguments, Vampires, and Thanksgiving," *New York Times*, November 22, 2018.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> Genesis 33:12-16.

<sup>x</sup> Genesis 35:29.

<sup>xi</sup> Mary Green, "Gay Conversion Therapy Made Me Suicidal: The Powerful True Story Behind the Film *Boy Erased*," *People*, November 7, 2018.