

December 14, 2024. Vayishlach

[Genesis 32:4-36:43](#)

English Reading (Triennial Year 3):

Genesis 35:16-36:43

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In this Torah portion, God tells Jacob to return home. Worried that his brother Esau will kill him, Jacob divides his clan into two camps, so at least some will survive in case of a fight. Jacob sleeps alone in the desert and is awoken by an angel who wrestles him through the night. Jacob survives and is blessed by the angel and renamed Israel. Then Jacob meets his brother and, surprisingly, they embrace.

Jacob is surprised to learn that even with estranged family members, reconciliation is possible¹. Jacob didn't prepare for reconciliation and didn't expect that Esau would be willing to set aside or even forget the past and embrace his brother and their future.

There is a lot of learning we can draw from this part of the parasha, from this story.

I say this because, sadly, internal family tensions are not just a Biblical experience; they are common throughout history. Esau feels like an exception here: More often, those who have had such encounters with members of their family are afraid to even attempt reconciliation. Perhaps they are afraid of opening a Pandora's box, that will just make tensions worse. They may also be afraid being rebuffed, even when they know they were in the wrong. In modern life, differences in values and political beliefs related to current events add to these tensions, as many of us may have experienced. Tiptoeing around these conflicts is terribly stressful and can make us feel alienated from the people we love.

¹ [Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky](#)

How many of us can relate? (raise hands.). We can also think of this issue in a more macro context—not just as divisions between individuals, but between groups – within and outside the Jewish community. The themes of betrayal and loss are real to us, just as they were to Jacob and Esau. Our whole country seems fractured, like a shattered windshield. But I remember when we lived in Namibia, where small stones from the gravel roads often cracked our windshields, there was a special process that the shops had to remelt the glass together again. We need the equivalent to repair our fractured relationships.

How do we do that? Based on today's parsha, I decided to focus on this issue: What can we do restore civility and respect in our families and in our community?

One good example of civility comes from Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. They disagreed on many critical issues ...(but) nevertheless... they behaved with love and friendship toward one another, as it says in Zecharia, "TRUTH and PEACE they loved." [Yevamot 14b:4-10](#)

[Pirkei Avot 5:7](#) tells us that, seven things [apply] to a fool, and seven to a wise person. A wise person does not speak in front of someone who is greater than him in wisdom, and he does not interrupt his fellow, and he is not afraid to answer; he asks on topic, and he answers according to the law. He talks about the first thing first, and the last thing last. About that which he has never heard he says, "I never heard," and he admits to the truth. And the opposite of these [is true] for the fool.

I looked on the internet for other insights. On the Chabad organization's website dedicated to the Jewish Woman (don't know why), I found 13 ways to avoid arguments, keep the peace, and reconcile family disputes:

Chabad starts off by reminding us that Shalom (“peace”) is one of G-d’s names.³ In Hebrew, the word for both hello and goodbye is *shalom*. And then they continue.

1. G-d wants peace so much that we are permitted to “alter” a narrative in order to keep peace.⁴ A lot of people end up sacrificed on the altar of truth when it’s not necessary. They are not saying that you should lie outright—just not reveal the whole truth if it isn’t critical and it will lead to strife.
2. People are fond of having the last word in an argument. By doing so, they feel as if they’ve won (even if they haven’t). Yet the opposite is true; the person who has the last word is left with a lack of closure if the other person doesn’t respond. If you stop arguing, it doesn’t mean that you agree with the other person; it just means that you don’t feel that arguing is worthwhile.
3. Stay clear of incendiary topics of conversation, especially on social media, where it’s so easy to get into conflict. And when someone offers it, don’t take the bait.
4. Be respectful and polite. *Derech erez kadma l’Torah*—“Good manners are prerequisites for a [Torah](#) life.”⁵ Even if you disagree, be gracious about it. Conflicts arise more because of *how* something is said than *what* is said. Speak clearly, calmly, gently and succinctly. And, of course, don’t insult anyone.
5. We often act as if the person who disagrees with us can change reality simply by virtue of their differing opinion. They

can't. Understand that this is simply their opinion. You can try and change it, but you probably won't succeed.

6. If you want to influence someone to do something you feel is beneficial, do it in a loving, positive way. The words of the wise are heeded when spoken pleasantly.⁶ The more positive a person you are, the more people will want to agree with you. The Chabad site adds, Abraham managed to get so many followers to Monotheism because he looked and acted like a prince of G-d, and so others flocked to him to listen to his views.
7. Work towards a common goal. Focus on what you do agree with rather than what you disagree with. When you shift the focus, the conflict dissipates.
8. There are people who feast on conflict. They fight for the sake of it, not for truth. Stay away from these people. Far, far away.
9. When you are at fault, mistaken or wrong, admit it, and if necessary, apologize.. King David is praised for admitting his error when the prophet Samuel chastised him.⁷ His predecessor, King Saul, lost his kingdom because not only did he disobey G-d, but he tried to justify it.⁸
10. There are some things worth fighting for. Money and honor are not two of them. Anything involving defending your honor or fighting over money will end badly even if you win..
11. Make sure that you have your facts straight before you enter into an argument. So many arguments could be avoided if people actually knew what they were talking about.

12. Give to others and desire their good. If they feel that you truly care about them—that even in disagreement you are emanating love, acceptance and concern—they’re less likely to see you as an opponent and will be willing to consider your views. At the very least, they won’t argue with you.

13. Look at other people not only as physical beings, but as having an inner Divine soul. If you see beyond their superficial faults to the core of their beautiful soul, it will be easier to accept and love them, and avoid conflict with them.¹¹

Most of my examples relate to individuals, but I think we can broaden the context. So here is your two questions:

(1)

What guidance would you add about avoiding conflict or reconciling if a conflict has already occurred? How can we be like Esau and Jacob and reconcile after years of anger and alienation?

(2) How can we apply these aphorisms – these words of advice and wisdom – to our broader environment: to our lives under the new national administration, to differing viewpoints around the Middle East, and within the Jewish community generally?