

*Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue*  
Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

Last summer, I was one of sixteen participants in an engagement retreat for Jewish and Muslim leaders. Eight Jews and eight Muslims, along with facilitators and educators, participated in a four-day retreat in Cornwall, Connecticut. From the outset, safe space was established. We spent initial days getting to know each other through activities and through deep engagement of our respective sacred texts, the Torah and the Quran. Some of us joked together about the “elephant” in the room. When was this group of Jewish and Muslim leaders going to speak about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? At one point, several of us got together and drew an elephant on a large piece of paper and hung it in our meeting space. The group had a good laugh and this served as a way to publicly acknowledge our collective eagerness and trepidation in approaching this tense and inevitable part of the retreat.

On the third day, we participated in an activity known as the “fish bowl.” Four chairs were placed in the middle of the room in a small circle— two chairs for Jewish participants and two for Muslim participants. The rest of the group sits in one large outer circle, surrounding the four chairs. Throughout the activity, there must be two Muslims and two Jews in the inner circle and the only people who can speak are those seated in the chairs in the inner circle. A conversation begins at the start of the activity, and is carried on by those in the inner circle. If a person seated in the outer circle wishes to contribute to the conversation, they must tag out one of the participants from their own faith— and take their seat in the inner circle. It was during my time in the fish bowl where I realized how truly essential interfaith dialogue is. Once I dove in, my perspective changed forever.

The four leaders of the activity, seated in the inner circle, started us off by doing the impossible: they placed the elephant inside the fish bowl -- they began a conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the activity went on, the speakers in the center changed over

*Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue*

Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

several times. At one point, one of the Muslim participants spoke about his experience visiting a concentration camp.

He shared a comparison between the Nazis and the Holocaust to the situation of the Israeli government and the Palestinians. Upon hearing this, my heart began to race and my palms felt clammy. I took a deep breath and reminded myself of the instructions given to us by the facilitators at the start of the activity: be aware of your reactions to what others say and when it is your turn to speak, use "I" statements. I waited for one of the participants in the inner circle to respond to the comparison. Nothing. So I got up and tagged out one of the Jewish participants. This was the first time I was speaking about the conflict in front of the entire group. I sat down and collected my thoughts. Then I said, "Interfaith dialogue is an important part of my life and future rabbinate. I am the daughter of two Israelis and have frequently visited Israel, and lived there for two years - in college and rabbinical school. I love Israel and I am open to engage in discussions about the Israeli government, the army, and the Palestinians, however, hearing someone compare the Holocaust and the Nazis to the Israeli government in the conflict is a conversation stopper for me, it stops my ability to dialogue."

The conversation went on briefly, it was time for dinner and the fish bowl activity came to an end. For the first time that week I felt vulnerable, alone and in a daze. Just as I was about to exit the room, one of the other Muslim participants walked up to me, with tears in her eyes and said, "Thank you. I had never heard anyone say that before. I didn't know that drawing such a parallel could be a conversation stopper, it was really important that you said that." And we embraced.

Whether learning with my Christian colleagues across the street at Union Theological Seminary or exploring the challenging questions of theology and suffering with interfaith

*Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue*

Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

seminarians during my hospital chaplaincy training at Bellevue Hospital or breaking bread with my Muslim colleagues at the retreat last summer, I have been incredibly fortunate not just to meet and come to know all of these individuals, but to learn their wisdom – to learn their Torah. We have not only become each other's study partners, we have become each other's teachers. In Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, Shimon Ben Zoma teaches, "*Eizeh hu chacham? Halomed mikol adam,*" "Who is wise? The one who learns from every person." – from every person.

In today's world, there is not only added value from engaging in interfaith dialogue, there is an imperative to do so. Creating space to dialogue with those who carry different views than we do, especially within the three Abrahamic faiths -- this *is* our Torah.

In this week's Torah Portion, Parashat Toledot, we read about Isaac, and Rebekkah, and their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. In Genesis 25:28, we learn of the preferential treatment exhibited by the parents toward their respective sons, "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebekkah favored Jacob." This favoritism further exacerbates the family dysfunction, namely, a lack of open dialogue. In Genesis 27:10, Rebekkah, convinces Jacob to deceive his father, Isaac, so he and not his older brother, Esau may receive the blessing of the first-born. After Jacob deceives his father into thinking he is Esau and succeeds in obtaining the blessing, Esau approaches his father, and is brokenhearted to learn his blessing has been usurped.

Taking a step back from the text for a moment to map out the points of dialogue, we see an illustration of two problems in the communication style of this family, specifically around the stressful and controversial event of the blessing: at each point, a family member communicates only with one other member in the family: Rebekkah speaks with Jacob, Jacob speaks with Isaac, and Esau speaks with Isaac; second, the communication is rarely open and honest.

***Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue***

Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

In Genesis 27:12, Jacob replies to Rebekkah's plan saying, "Perhaps my father will feel me, and I will seem to him as a mocker?" At first look, this verse describes Jacob's concern with being caught. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentary, Haketav Ve'hakabbalah, by Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, uncovers traces of Jacob's inner reluctance to deceive his father in the Torah's choice of words in his reply to his mother.

This is an example of another lost opportunity for honest communication. Jacob could have openly shared his feelings with his mother, and given a voice to the pain and struggle that lay beneath the surface. Imagine instead if Isaac, Rebekkah and their sons sat down for a family meeting and talked together about the blessing and the preferential treatment? I am not attempting to rewrite the Torah, rather I am raising up the lesson that exists within the Torah. In Parashat Toledot, the failure of communication and honest dialogue leads to a great deal of anger and potential violence. The Torah reveals Esau's anger as resulting from the pain of being tricked out of his blessing - in Genesis 27:41 it reads, "*Vayomer Esav be'libo*", "and Esau said in his heart, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob." Here, we witness the fissure that tears through a family as a result of their inability to communicate openly with each other.

Further, *Maseh avot siman la'banim*— *the actions of the forefathers are a sign for the children*. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish commentator, Nachmanides, explains that what occurred to the early generations of the Patriarchs happened as well to the children and grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As we examine our parasha within the greater narrative of Genesis, we note the lack of communication that began with Abraham's relationship with Isaac. Much ink has been spilled over the void of communication between Abraham and Isaac after the traumatic event of Akedat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac. The cycle of poor communication

*Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue*

Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

continues on into the next generation, between Isaac and Rebekkah and their children. And as we will read in Parashat Vayeishev, Genesis 37, Jacob will replicate with his own son the unhealthy preferential treatment he experienced as a youth. This family baggage continues to be passed on from one generation to the next generation and on throughout the broader Abrahamic family of Jews, Christians and Muslims, causing suffering, alienation and tragedy. We must end this poor communication so that we can engage in true dialogue with one another. Only when we engage in interfaith dialogue does understanding and healing become possible.

Tractate Sanhedrin Chapter 4, Mishnah 5 teaches: *Lefichach nivrah Adam yechidi: mipnei shalom habriyot, sh'lo yomar adam lechavero: aba gadol me'avichah.* Humanity was created from a single unit for the sake of peace among humans, so that one should not say to his fellow, "My ancestor is greater than yours." The mishnah in Sanhedrin highlights the necessity for interfaith dialogue. We must remember that all of humanity originates from the same place.

How are we to establish relationships with members of interfaith communities in light of our complex history? As future rabbis and educators: How do we create a constructive and safe space for our students and congregants to understand those complexities and that history and engage with each other and with members of other faiths in a productive and respectful way?

When we engage in interfaith dialogue, we do not forget our history, or the narratives within our sacred texts, or recent events. We hold them - and we understand that the point is not whether we agree or disagree with the person before us, but rather that we *listen* to their story. Only then are we able to truly learn from each other in a meaningful way.

Had I not engaged in interfaith dialogue at the retreat, I may not have had the opportunity to address the comparison between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My Muslim colleagues would not have been able to hear my personal experience and learn that

***Let's Break the Cycle and Sit Down to A Meal: The necessity for interfaith dialogue***

Parashat Toledot ~ Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

drawing such a parallel for me was a conversation stopper. Without dialogue, the crucial details and feelings remain hidden, and then we are left with assumptions, misunderstanding and pain, which often lead to anger and too often then to violence.

Through interfaith dialogue we become more sensitive listening to the news, reading our sacred texts and communicating with our friends, family and colleagues about other members of the Abrahamic faith. Through interfaith dialogue we gain the critical sensitivity needed to address situations in Israel, here in America or throughout the rest of the world.

There are multiple places and opportunities for interfaith dialogue. In order to receive our common ancestor's blessing, we must be prepared to take a seat in the fish bowl and listen.