



Parshat Vayera
20 Cheshvan 5781 — November 7, 2020
For a Nation United in Worry:
We Strongly Disagree, And I Love You Anyway
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Paradoxically, it turns out that we are the United States of America after all.

United in our insomnia. Both Republicans and Democrats report not being able to get a decent night's sleep.

United in our fear. Both parties fear that if the other candidate wins, the very future of our nation is endangered.

United in our alienation from national unity. However you voted, the reality is that about half the country voted for *the other* candidate. United in not getting that fifty percent.

United in living with a pit in our stomach.

United in handling all this stress not well. We eat too much. We drink too much. We persevere too much.

The United States of America. United in our dividedness. United in our 50-50 split.

In the face of this division, I want to raise a single question. For each person listening, here is the question: *what can I do, what can I personally do right now, to make this grim situation a little better?*

We cannot change the fact of our dividedness. It just is. We cannot change the fact of our 50-50 split. It just is. What *can* we change?

The Torah has deep wisdom for us right now. We, the Jewish people, have always gone by two different names.

One name is Israel. You will remember that Jacob gets this name when, after wrestling with the angel who assails him in the middle of the night, Jacob won't let him go unless this assailant offers a blessing. The blessing is you shall be named Israel because you have wrestled with beings human and divine and you have prevailed.

Israel is about wrestling. We wrestle with God. We wrestle with one another.

One authentically Jewish move now is to wrestle. And what I want to offer by way of wrestling is easy to say. It sounds like common sense. But if we are honest with ourselves, it is hard to do. It is this: *not* to think that the person who voted for the other candidate is a bad person. *Not* to think that if the person voted for the other candidate, you obviously have nothing in common.

I recently received an email from a young person whose Bar or Bat Mitzvah I did about 20 years ago. This person moved back to Boston and is still single. And this person said to me: I have tried all kinds of dating apps, and it is absolutely brutal. So I am doing the old-fashioned thing. Do you know anybody's adult child or grandchild that might be a fit for me? This person could be rich or poor; successful or unsuccessful; tall or short; athletic or not athletic, Jewishly engaged or not Jewishly engaged. I can work with anybody. The only thing that this person *cannot* be is a supporter of the other candidate. If they support the other candidate, there is no point in even going out on a date.

That is real. The feelings we have are so deep, and the antagonism to the other side so deep, that the default, in 2020, is that we have nothing in common with the other person. It takes wrestling to resist that and to see that their humanity transcends the candidate they voted for.

Now you might think that the move is to force ourselves to have honest conversations where we try to listen openly and without judgment and to understand the other's point of view.

But, if we are being honest about it, there are two things you can say about these kinds of conversations. They are very unpleasant. They are very unproductive. There are no new insights. No new facts. No new arguments that change anybody's thinking. These conversations don't work, and they usually leave a residue of ill will.

So I think the better move is to acknowledge that we strongly disagree, and I love you anyway.

Can you *say* that we strongly disagree, and I love you anyway?

Can you *feel* that we strongly disagree, and I love you anyway?

Can you *act on that* that we strongly disagree, and I love you anyway?

The morning after the election, a woman named Jeneen Interlandi published an op ed in the Times with the title "I Love My Twin. How Did We End Up So Far Apart?" They are twins. And yet, they are far apart on their candidates, and, like the rest of the country, they stare at each other with mutual incomprehension. And when they have tried to talk about it, it is unpleasant. It is unproductive. It does not work. It leaves a residue. But they are still twins. She concludes her piece with this plea from her heart:

I'm not sure how we get through this moment, but I don't think it will end when the election is called, or when the new year begins, or when the next president is sworn in...

But I've known...for my entire life...that I can never truly win anything if it means losing my twin. I don't know where that leaves us. I only know that he is my brother, and I love him.

How do we successfully wrestle our way to believe that the person who voted for the other candidate is not a bad person, is bigger than their vote, is somebody we can and need to love anyway?

That is where the other name of the Jewish people comes in. Our second name is Judah. That name comes from our matriarch Leah. All she wants is her husband Jacob's love. Her first three sons, Reuben, Simon and Levi, she names in order to try to win his love. All these attempts fail. When her fourth son is born, she names him Judah meaning this time I will praise God for what is. Judah is named for that moment, the Jewish people are also named for that moment, when Leah says there are things that I wish were otherwise, but I cannot change them. OK. I am going to praise God anyway, and I am going to focus intentionally on the good.

Accepting what cannot be changed and focusing on the good enables us agree to disagree about the election and to build loving relationships anyway.

Last week a long-time member called me to tell me that she was voting for the other candidate. She said she wanted to explain her reasoning. I said: no need. Vote your conscience. No need to explain it to anybody else, certainly not to me. No, here is my thinking, I want to lay it out there for you. After sharing her thoughts, she said she hoped it would not cause a breach in our relationship.

We come down so differently on the merits. No matter.

The Judah move invites me to see the abundant good in this person, and the long and rich relationship she has had not only with me, but with our whole shul for many decades. I thanked her for her call, and for caring about what I thought, and I told her that our connection is far more important and far more enduring than this election, however much we agree to disagree.

This is a maximally unsettled and unsettling time. The pandemic still roars in month nine. Cases nationally and locally are going up. Our nation is more divided than ever about what to do about it. Meanwhile, Thanksgiving is coming, and like the Pesach that wasn't Pesach, like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that were not Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this

Thanksgiving will not be Thanksgiving the way we have always experienced it. And on top of all that, bitter and unbridgeable national division stains our nation and our world.

We have all lost so much already. We have all lost too much already. We cannot lose anything more. We cannot lose our relationships too.

I don't know how to ameliorate the national pain. I don't know how to connect with voters in other parts of the country who are so different from me, and who see the world so differently.

But I do know one thing. I do know that the people I loved before the election--family, friends, members of our shul--I am going to love after the election. I do know that I will not let this election destroy love.

We are united in being divided. We are united in our 50-50 split. OK. That just is. Now our sacred work is to love one another anyway. Shabbat shalom.