



Parshat Toldot
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What Kind of Community Do We Want to Be?
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I have a confession to make. Growing up in Pontiac, Michigan I was a nerd. Actually, I was an uber nerd. I was a ham radio operator. I used to get my kicks building radios out of Heathkits – some of you are old enough to remember them. I entered science fairs. I spent countless hours in our basement playing with my chemistry set (and more than once scaring the daylights out of my mother.) And my reading outside of school was confined to Popular Science, Popular Mechanics, Scientific American and some obscure magazines known only to fellow ham radio operators called QST and 73. If you don't know what they are, don't ask.

Now I was very fortunate because I was rescued from a life of eternal nerdism by Pearl Jacobstein, my high school librarian. Being the good nerd that I was, I spent a lot of time in the library. After faithfully doing my homework, I would check out books on science, math and ham radio. One day Mrs. Jacobstein gently suggested that I might try reading something else. She was a very smart woman. She did not start with literature or poetry. Instead, she encouraged me to read a biography of Isaac Newton. From Isaac Newton I gravitated (sorry about the pun) to biographies of other great historical figures, and not just scientists. Then she encouraged me to start reading history and from history I made my way to literature.

I owe a lot to Mrs. Jacobstein. She encouraged me to broaden my horizons, intellectually and otherwise. She became a good friend and would write one of my three letters of recommendation to college – to MIT of course. I never completely got over my fascination with science and math.

Sadly, people today are far less likely to encounter a Mrs. Jacobstein. Why do I say that? After all, we still have high school librarians. But instead of turning to other people to suggest what we might read, all too often we now rely on technology. Buy a book from Amazon, here are five more just like it. You liked that song on Pandora or Spotify? Here are dozens more from the same genre. Did you watch a movie on Netflix? They keep suggesting over and over more of the same even if you thought the last movie was a dud. Buy a particular product or worse yet, make a donation to support a good cause and you will be overwhelmed by suggestions that you might want to buy similar products or support similar causes.

We have become the extrapolated sum total of our clicks, each one reinforcing our existing preferences, beliefs and tendencies. And for those who are single, this technology even extends

to your love life. Whether you rely upon J-Date, Match.com, or other websites, algorithms match you with others with common backgrounds, interests and preferences.

An aside. Adele and I were fixed up on a blind date by our roommates. When we met, there was instant attraction (at least on my part. It took Adele a bit longer.) But the reason I tell this story is that on paper we had very little in common. I liked to watch sports on TV. She did not. She had a great interest in art and classical music. At the time, I did not. I liked to play hockey. She liked to folk dance. I could go on. We have often commented that if we had only looked at each other's J-Date profile we never would have met. Luckily for us, our roommates (who got married a week before we did) could see past our superficial differences. And every year for the past 42 years we have toasted them on our anniversary.

Unfortunately, given our dependence on technology, many of us lack the equivalent of a Mrs. Jacobstein or perceptive roommates to push us out of our comfort zone and to encourage us to try new things, and in the process, to become better, more interesting people. Instead we are reduced to swiping right or left, both literally and figuratively. Rather than expanding our world, it often just gets narrower.

I fear that this technology enabled world has other consequences. The same digital technology that caters to our preferences in books, movies, and music, also permits us to self-select how we get our news and information. Moreover, it allows us to get in a form that just reinforces our existing beliefs.

In simpler times, we had just three networks to sample from. Whether you got your news from Huntley Brinkley, Walter Cronkite or Howard K. Smith, it was more similar than different and it was delivered at precisely the same time – 6:30-7PM in Pontiac, Michigan. Back in those days, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (a Tufts alumnus) could authoritatively say, “People are entitled to their own opinions but not their own facts” in part because we got our facts from the same sources – NBC, CBS, ABC, and a handful of universally respected newspapers. There was a reason it was called broadcasting.

Not so now. Today, we narrow cast. If you lean right you watch Fox. If you lean left you watch MSNBC and you can watch all day if you so desire. Furthermore, if you dive just a bit deeper into the internet or your cable guide you can find precisely the flavor of both facts and political commentary that match your preferences. No need to listen to anyone that disagrees with you. All day and all night you can feel smug knowing that you are right because people who think exactly like you are providing you with a version of reality that conforms almost perfectly with your view of the world. In effect, we have all become nerds with our beliefs and preferences constantly reinforced. In this process, we are losing the capacity to engage with those who think differently from us.

Our Torah portion today, Toldot, tells us how risky it is if we cannot learn how to disagree agreeably. Jacob and Esau can never reconcile their differences. We know how their story ends.

I fear that we too are having a hard time reconciling our differences and it is not only tearing at the fabric of our society, it also has consequences for this wonderful community that is Temple Emanuel.

How many of us avoid certain people because we know they hold political views that we cannot accept? How many of us self-edit, consciously avoiding certain topics because we seek to avoid getting into a political argument? How many of us are quick to judge others who hold contrary views, convinced that we hold the moral high ground?

These deep divisions in our society make life difficult for anyone who has responsibility for leading an institution. I am particularly sympathetic to the plight of college and university presidents. Trust me. Being a university president is not easy and certainly not for the faint of heart. I have always said that one of the many things that makes running a university challenging is that everyone who went to college thinks they can run one. And they don't hesitate to tell you when they think you are screwing up.

Today when people hear stories about what is happening on campus (often either over the web or through highly slanted stories from polarized media) they jump to conclusions. Let me tell you one such story that happened to me.

I am an early riser. I am often up at 4:30 or 5. The first thing I do when I get up is to check my email. One morning during my time at Tufts I woke up and looked at my phone and discovered over 500 messages all alleging that I, Tufts and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy were anti-Semites. Now say what you want about me, but I hope that you, my fellow congregants, would attest that I am not an anti-semite.

One of these messages contained a link to an obscure English language newspaper published in Indonesia. When I clicked on it I discovered an anti-Semitic diatribe right out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The by-line indicated that the author "was a lecturer at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy." It was not a name I recognized. I went on the Fletcher web site and could not find such a person. I waited a reasonable time until I could place a call to the Dean and asked him who this person was. He did not know. After some sleuthing we discovered that he had been a visiting lecturer for one semester years ago and had been fired because of his crazy ideas. But the byline was technically correct: he "was" as in "had been" a lecturer at Fletcher.

I tell you this story because people hear what they want to hear and believe what they want to believe in part because they have been conditioned to do so. Too often we jump to conclusions and our first response is to express moral outrage, regardless of the truth.

If being a college president is a tough job, being a rabbi is not far behind. I am struck by how often we all listen to precisely the same sermon but hear very different things. Some are certain that every sermon from this pulpit contains a political message. People listen to exactly the same words and some conclude that our rabbis are too far to the left, while others hear the same

message and conclude they are too far to the right. Where you stand depends upon where you sit.

Rather than express outrage when we hear messages that we think run counter to our view of the world, I think instead we need to be much slower to judge. My colleague, Jim Ryan, the current Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard and the newly designated President of the University of Virginia says that we all need to become more generous listeners. I love that phrase – more generous listeners. I also think we can learn from the great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr who said, “We must always seek the truth in our opponents’ errors, and the errors in our own truth.” To put it another way, none of us is infallible.

One of the reasons I love being Jewish is that ours is a questioning religion. We don’t demand conformity to an orthodoxy. To the contrary, it is the essence of Judaism to embrace different opinions, different views, different interpretations. In fact this nuanced view of the world is always right in front of us. Just pick up the prayer book. You don’t like the Amidah with Immahot? No problem. We have a version without it. Look at the Tanakh. Lots of different interpretations of the same passages. And the Talmud is filled with conflicting commentary. After all these years, Hillel and Shammai are still going at it, and more importantly, we can still learn from their dialogue.

Imagine how boring the world would be if we all thought the same way. We embrace diversity in part because we learn from our differences. It is why those who study Torah and Talmud typically do it in groups – because learning occurs when we share different interpretations. If you don’t believe me, just think how boring any gathering of friends would be if everyone present held precisely the same view of everything. There would literally be nothing to discuss.

These are difficult and trying times in our nation. As a people, we find ourselves bitterly divided. But I would hope that at Temple Emanuel we could model the behavior we would like to see in the rest of the country. Because if we cannot figure out how to engage with each other given that we share so much in common, there is not much hope for the rest of the nation.

Temple Emanuel is a community. We were a community before our national politics became so toxic and we will be a community once this current climate of divisiveness recedes into the rear view mirror. But what kind of community we are will be determined by how we treat each other as we work through these difficult issues.

- Will we be a community where people avoid certain conversations and retreat into the comfort and certainty of their own beliefs, or will we be a community in which people engage and learn from others who think differently?
- Will we be a community defined by our differences or will we be a community known for our mutual respect?
- Will we be a community that judges each other harshly or will we be a community of generous listeners?

- Do we want to be a community where our rabbis, like Mrs. Jacobstein, prod us to grow and to learn, or will we sit smugly in our seats convinced that we have life and the world all figured out?

The choice is ours. What kind of community do we want to be?

Shabbat shalom.