

A Thanksgiving of Brotherly Love

It was not a building I ever went in.

It was dark and seemed kind of scary.

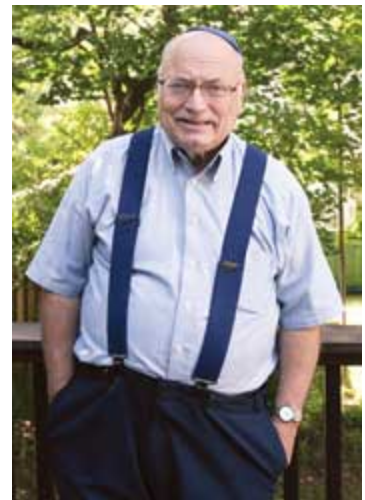


When I was ten years old and my father was the rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Ridgefield Park, NJ, I longed for him to take me to his “grown-up” activities.

When he offered to take me to the annual interfaith Thanksgiving service, I was, at first, excited. I would have more time with my dad and get to see him “in action.”

But the truth was, I was a bit anxious. Only around the corner from my dad’s small *shul*, the Catholic church seemed larger than life and quite foreign.

I had never been inside.

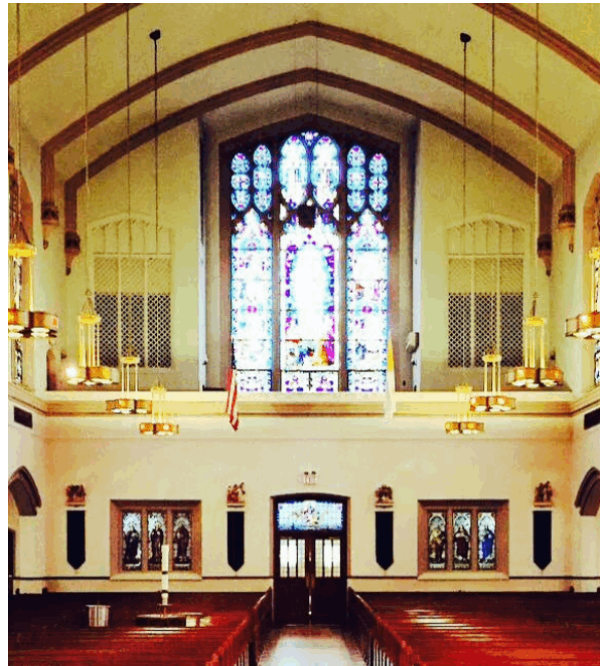


Walking into their sanctuary I was struck by the grandeur, the almost impossibly high ceiling and the formality of the priests' vestments.

And for what were these kneelers attached to each pew? Not to mention the cross that loomed over the entire church – that really struck me.

This was like visiting a long, lost brother that I had heard about, but never met. I was almost frightened of what could happen in this experience.

* * *



This week we also learn of the birth of brothers, twins: *Eisav* or Esau who was born first, and *Ya'akov* or Jacob, who was born holding his brother's heel.

Even from before birth, we learn, they are fighting. Who will be born first, receiving additional blessings and monetary benefits?

While Esau wins that race, Jacob is grabbing his heel in an effort to overtake him, earning the name *Ya'akov*, from the word "*Ekev*," meaning heel, not the most desirable designation.

Their rivalry continues with Jacob swindling his brother out of his birthright and then, with his mother Rebecca's guidance, deceiving his father Isaac so he received the coveted first born blessing. *Ya'akov*, the one named "heel," or "crooked one" does not act in an straightforward manner.

While we know that Jacob, the deceiver, will be himself deceived in next week's *parashah*, and the trilogy of three Torah readings will reach their climax in a couple of weeks where his name is changed from Jacob to Israel, the father of the twelve tribes and, thus, the Jewish people, the overwhelming feeling this week is one of sibling rivalry and hate.



So much so, that, at the end of the *parashah*, Jacob, fearing for his life, runs away from his brother for twenty years!

Our tradition expands this sibling schism into the conflict between Romans and Jews and later, between Christianity and Judaism. That enmity expanded over the millennia with plenty of anti-Semitism, culminating in Christian Europe's nadir: the Holocaust.

* * *

But there are other models, one of which is presented in this morning's *haftarah*.

Haftarat Maḥar Hodesh, the special *haftarah* or prophetic reading that we read on the Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh *Hodesh*, before the festival inaugurating the new moon, contains a most powerful narrative.

Here we learn of a friendship so deep it supplants the natural hatred that should have or could have existed. Just over 3,000 years ago, the first king of Israel, King Saul was due to pass the mantle of leadership to his son Jonathan, as is the pattern in a monarchy.

But, we know that the next king is not to be Jonathan, but King David.

You might think that Jonathan should hate David, since he is taking what would be by right his.

But Jonathan does not hate David; in fact, he goes out of his way to help him.

The backdrop to this *haftarah* is important: David's stature as a beloved soldier and leader is rising, while Saul's renown is on the decline. In fact, David's successes on the battlefield drive Saul to rageful jealousy. King Saul tries to kill David twice even before the narrative in our *haftarah* opens.

David tells his best friend, Jonathan, who is King Saul's son about his father's malice, but Jonathan does not believe that his father would try to kill David. He does agree to a test to see how his father, King Saul, will act. Sure enough, Saul erupts in anger when David is absent from the New Moon celebration.

King Saul issues an edict to have David executed. While Jonathan tries to argue with his father, it is futile. He escapes his father's wrath to tell

David that his father does want to kill him. David was right. Very Games of Thrones.

But, the *haftarah* ends with a reminder that we are not doomed to



hate. The two

friends might

have been

destined to become mortal enemies, à la

Shakespeare's Capulets and Montagues, but they do not.

Instead, they are dedicated friends. The *haftarah* closes with Jonathan telling David "*Lekh l'shalom* - go in peace. For we have sworn to each other in

the name of *Adonai*: 'May *Adonai* be [witness] between you and me, and between your offspring and mine, forever!'"

That is true friendship. That is true love. In fact, when our rabbis in the *Mishnah* a thousand years later want to describe the paradigm of true, unconditional love - they cite David and Jonathan as "*Ahavah she'einah tlu'yah v'davar* - love that is not dependent on any specific thing; unconditional love." (Mishnah Avot 5:18) They love and care for each other, even though it is NOT in their best interest. It is based on true friendship, true love.

*

*

*

So, two or three times a year, when Shabbat falls before the New Moon, we are reminded that relationships do not have to be stuck in



negative patterns, in places of hate, that we do not need to remain locked in ancient hatreds and rivalries that may have originated years earlier.

Instead, we are offered a vision of friendship and kindness:

David and Jonathan.

* * *

As we look around the world today, we see that ancient hatreds are still present. There is hate between races, religions, nations; in fact, almost every place where there is difference, there can be, and, often is hate.



But, it does not have to be that way. We can build a new tomorrow. A new moon can come tomorrow and bring with it renewal and a different paradigm: one of love and friendship.

* * *

Let me take you back to the Interfaith Thanksgiving service when I was 10. While I started in a place of fear like Jacob and Esau, things changed quickly. I was moved by the beauty of the Christian prayers and felt comfortable with inclusive God-language where God could be referred to in ways that made no religious group uncomfortable.

Sitting in a church and appreciating the aesthetic beauty of their space and setting were critical for me. Most importantly, at the social hour that followed, it became clear to me that Jews and Christians have much in common. While they might have moved Shabbat from Saturday to Sunday, we both have Shabbat; both traditions care deeply about those in need; much of our liturgy comes from the same book of Psalms... and the cookies were all kosher!

I remember leaving that service with a newfound appreciation for Christianity.

While we have had some difficult times historically, there is much we can learn from each other.

Interfaith experiences have been some of the most profound of my life. Serving as president of interfaith clergy associations in Chicago and here in Lexington and taking a group of Christian ministers and priests to Israel have been some of the most deeply connecting moments in my rabbinate.

* * *

While most of us innately feel the need to attend services on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, we do not always feel the pull to the Interfaith Thanksgiving service.

I want to try to convince you that you should add this Tuesday night to your list of mandatory moments.

Each year, on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists, people of faith and people of no faith, people of many races, people who have lived

here for generations, along with immigrants, all come together in the rich tapestry that truly is the United States.

This does not occur in most places on this planet, nor does it occur in most places in our own divided country, but it should. When we come



together on Tuesday night, it sends a message not only to ourselves and our families and friends, but to the world. We share a model that is in short supply in our world that appreciating our own differences can be done in a manner that is both

respectful and positive.

Imagine if this was practiced throughout the world! This year we will be hosted by Grace Chapel on Tuesday night at 7:30; Grace is the largest evangelical church in New England and if you have never been, you are in for a treat!

Join us and help us model the friendship of David and Jonathan, the model of unity and sibling love that the world so desperately needs.

