

Parashat Toledot 5765
Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
More post-election reflection 11/12/04
Beth Chayim Chadashim

“Tell the truth,” someone said to me the other day, “aren’t you really more comfortable knowing the battle is far from over? You like being an outsider, don’t you? It’s what you know, it’s what you’re used to, it’s such a big part of your identity. If this election had gone our way - if gay marriage was accepted and legal, what would you do with yourself? How would you spend your time?”

[shoulder shrug]
I’d find a way, I said.

But the truth is, I think, my friend is right - there is a way I’m more comfortable being an outsider. I think that’s true for a lot of us - isn’t it? Although it makes us very sad sometimes - like this past week; there is also something comfortable about it - it is what we’re used to, it’s what we know.

And one of the ways I’m used to being an outsider is that my candidates and my issues often lose elections. I just voted in my 9th presidential election, and I’ve only twice voted for the winner. And I can remember many more than 9 elections where I’ve been disappointed or downright disillusioned even when my candidate won.

And this certainly isn’t the first time that I’ve been in the group that the other side called godless or immoral or in some other way impugned my integrity, my ethics, my religion, my faith. Yes, it’s insulting, yes, it’s exhausting, yes, it’s infuriating, but it hasn’t yet done what perhaps they mean to do - the insults haven’t convinced me that they’re right and I’m wrong. The insults haven’t lessened my sense of who I am: a person of faith, with good ethics and morals firmly, unwaveringly in place.

And here’s another thing that I don’t need red and blue maps, or purple maps, to tell us about our world, our country, our city, our community, our congregation, myself - I am not alone. In case I forget that, 70 BCCers and friends here on this past Tuesday night for a town hall meeting on what to do next - on how to help repair the world -- showed me I am far from alone.

Far from alone in disappointment, far from alone in sorrow, far from alone in worry, but also far from alone in taking hope, in believing change can happen, in knowing that each one of us is also part of God’s creation, also entitled to the civil and human rights that every person is entitled to, and also capable of bringing about change for the better. Take some time later in the evening to look at our notes from Tuesday night, and sign your name next to something you’re willing to take part in - we’ll contact you later to keep us all moving along together on these paths toward action and tikkun olam.

Contrary to some of the spin we’ve been hearing, this election was not a referendum on the right to marry, although it may have been in part a referendum on people’s understanding of such rights. Our friend, the Reverend Troy Perry, founder of MCC, and

some say also the founder of BCC, said in the days following the election:

These votes are powerful reminders that it is always wrong to put human rights and equality to a public vote. Equality under the law, by its very essence, must be afforded to all people, including LGBT people, and must never be based on public popularity.

In this week's Torah portion, Toledot, we've been reading again a story that in the context of these elections and the votes against the right to marry is even more painful this year. It is that story of huge family conflicts: of parents who love one child more than their other child: "Isaac loved Esau ... but Rebekah loved Jacob." [Gen. 25:28]; of Jacob, who refuses to feed his famished brother until he sells him his birthright; of a mother who enables and encourages her best loved son Jacob to trick her aged husband, his ailing father, and steal the blessing meant for her other son, his brother Esau. It is the story of a father - Isaac - who doesn't offer another blessing to Esau until Esau pleads for one: "Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!" [27:38] It is the story of brother Esau so angry at his brother Jacob that he plans to kill him [27:41], and a mother who sends her beloved son away from home - possibly forever - to prevent the fratricide. And if that wasn't enough, it is a story of parents who so disapproved of their son Esau's choice of whom to marry, that they encourage him to be polygamous even though they themselves practice monogamy [27:46f].

Living as we do right now in a nation in which families are being torn apart by life choices, and the varied opinions surrounding them, this Torah portion is an even tougher go than usual. Especially so close to Thanksgiving, a holiday famous for bringing out family conflicts and dysfunctionality. Oy! What's a by-nature-cheerful person to do?

It turns out, if you remember the story, that Isaac isn't out of blessings, and Esau isn't out of luck. Isaac not only has a blessing left for Esau, but he has yet another one for Jacob, which leads our teacher Rabbi Aaron Katz to speculate that perhaps that first blessing wasn't intended for either Esau or Jacob alone, but was a blessing for the two of them - given to Jacob while he was disguised as Esau because Isaac knew that both his sons deserved his blessing, because Isaac knew that both sons - no matter who they were or what they did in the world, and no matter which one he favored - that Isaac knew both of his sons were gifts from God [see Gen. 25:23].

And it turns out, if you keep reading into the next couple of portions, that though Esau and Jacob were on the outs for many years, they do eventually each become successful and wealthy on their own, and the two of them do eventually reconcile, falling into each other's arms [Gen. 33:4] in a scene as touching as this week's falling out is harrowing.

Our friend, Reverend Perry, a little earlier in that statement I quoted a few minutes ago, also wrote:

"We salute the many LGBT people in those 11 states who, along with our family and friends, turned out to vote no on these laws and who boldly supported equality under the law. Thanks to so many in our community for being willing, yet again, to talk about our families and our lives. This public conversation changes public attitudes and will change laws."

Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Rebekah didn't have easy lives. None of our ancestors did

really. It's one of the reasons we can keep using their lives as instructive models for our own.

When Isaac does give the weeping Esau his blessing, it includes this line:

You shall serve your brother;

but when you grow restive,

You shall break his yoke from your neck." [27:40]

This year in my reading of this story, I identify with Esau, and I'm growing a bit restive - how about you?

The struggles are long and hard, but in between the struggles is the reason for them: the lives we are living, the people we love, the communities we are creating, our willingness not only to live our lives but to live them openly, to talk about them and show them to the people who otherwise wouldn't know what there is to know about us: that we too bring blessings to this world.

We were 70 strong here on Tuesday night - 70 strong and willing to go forth from just within the BCC community, and the BCC community is just a small one within the larger GLBTIQ community, which is itself just a very small percentage of the really very many people who would like all people to receive the rights due to every citizen of this nation.

Rev. Perry reminds us too that "The hard work of human rights has always been that of many steps forward, and some steps backward."

Always...even in the time of Jacob and Esau...even before then.

We did slide back a little last week, but let's think of it as giving us more room to take a running start as we move on, move forward, continue the work that will enable not only us to take our rightful place in this society, but will continue to bring rights and peace and security to all people who are oppressed - in all the many ways people oppress one another.

On Tuesday night one of you handed me that marvelous text from Martin Luther King to read - and I do so again tonight, offering it not only in the hopes it will inspire us, but because it is the truth:

"Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Shabbat shalom