

December 3, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

In families, in congregations, and in communities, there are people who become sources of positive challenge for us. Sometimes it can be a friend or a family member. It might be an ideological ally or a person in the “loyal opposition,” where disagreement does not result in disengagement. We grow from such challenges, whether they are the result of a clash of opinions or a partnership that teaches us a new approach or perspective. In order to grow, it is best that there be an atmosphere of respect that fosters trust and acceptance even when common views are not shared.

In the Torah reading for this week, Jacob discovered that his long-lost brother Esau, his lifelong adversary, was coming to meet him with several hundred men. Of course, Jacob, at first, thought that his brother’s objective was murder or capture of his family. He sent gifts to placate Esau, sent his family across the nearby stream, and engaged in a wrestling match with a being – perhaps a man, or an angel, or Esau’s angel, or Esau himself, or an external representation of Jacob’s inner struggle to overcome his past. He won “the match,” which left him with a strained hip, and Jacob emerged with a new name, Israel, for, as the “being” told him, “for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” Jacob/Israel then went to greet Esau, hoping for and receiving the best, as they reunited with an embrace. Esau suggested that Jacob follow him on his journey and remain together. Jacob indicated that he might consider join his brother, but he chose to go his own way instead (without letting Esau know). Jacob/Israel grew from this experience, having successfully triumphed in meeting an internal challenge that was signified on the outside by his brother Esau. Where there had been only suspicion, at least on Jacob’s part, there was now a cautious but very real respect between brothers, enough that they could leave the past behind and start anew.

In our world, there are all too many examples of growth out of a challenging time that must take place in the midst of bitter contention. We have the ability within us to keep our comments and actions construction and positive, even when agreement may not be possible, as we realize that there are many ways of reaching our common goals and as we teach each other through sharing our respective ideas and the varying paths we have chosen. May we serve as partners for one another so that our challenges can lead to peace within ourselves and with each other.

-- L’shalom, Rabbi Larry