



Parsha Va-yetzei
Hosea 12:13-14:10
November 8, 2013 / 5 Kislev 5774

We are in the midst of a three-week narrative of Jacob in his early years. During last week's reading, in Parashat Toldot, we read of the trickery and manipulation which resulted in conflict between brothers but which the main characters of the story felt was necessary in order for the birthright to be passed to the correct son. Next week, in Parashat Vayishlach, we will read of the moment of reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. It is in this week's reading, however, that we encounter Jacob at a moment of transition, the time during which he is transformed from a boy to an adult as he marries and has children. It is in this parasha that a sense of poetic justice is served as he is tricked into marrying the wrong sister and begins to emerge a changed man.

It is in this context that we encounter our Haftarah, which comes from Hosea. First, on a surface level it is clear why this selection was chosen. The Haftarah opens, "Then Jacob had to flee to the land of Aram; There Israel served for a wife." This reference to the patriarch Jacob's journey is fitting after having just read the original narrative. However, the Hosea text then continues and begins to recall the sense of divine favor despite the national sin that has ensued. In fact, the Haftarah ends not with a tale of desperation but with a sense of hope for the future. We read in chapter 14:2-3, "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, For you have fallen because of your sin. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: 'Forgive all guilt, and accept what is good.'"

One might ask, what is the message here? What does this have to do with the Parasha itself?

I would suggest that the message here is that despite what we have done in the past we have the ability to repent for our sins. You see, this Haftarah gives us the message that while we cannot forget what has happened in the past (the prophet Hosea reminds us), we cannot be stuck in the past either (and therefore we can repent). We must find ways to reconcile, and this should happen between individuals, families, and even nations.

How often do we have conflicts with people where we know that if we could just talk about what happened things would be better and yet, we often remain silent? This is true with our families, our friends, and our communities.

This past week, I hosted a close friend of Pope Francis, Rabbi Avraham Skorka, a Masorti rabbi from Buenos Aires, to my congregation, Sutton Place Synagogue in NYC. Rabbi Skorka's message to my congregation was clear. We can either sit in silence in the face of conflict and

not move forward (like the silences in the biblical text between Cain and Abel) or we can look toward the future and speak to one another (like Jacob and Esau). It was, for millennia, an assumption that the Catholic and Jewish communities wouldn't be able to live side by side. However, what is clear from our parasha is that each of us, even enemies amongst us, can engage in acts of repentance with the hope for a better future.

This parasha is the bridge between Toldot and Vayishlach for Jacob and therefore a moment of ambivalence. Jacob could have gone either way when he met his brother, and the Israelites, in our haftarah could have chosen to remain indifferent (or engaged in sinful acts) or they could have chosen to engage in acts of repentance. The parashiyot are a model for what can happen if we look forward, not backward, in order to reconcile with those we love, and live the life we want to live rather than the life that we have been living.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Rachel Ain of the Sutton Place Synagogue. Rabbi Ain became the Rabbi of Sutton Place Synagogue in the Summer of 2012. Before joining SPS, Rabbi Ain was the Senior Director for National Young Leadership of the Jewish Federations of North America, where she worked closely with lay leaders and professionals to engage the next generation of leaders for the Jewish community, Prior to that, she was the Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, a Conservative Synagogue in Syracuse, NY, from her ordination in 2004 until 2011.