

Vayishlach Sermon – Rabbi Jennifer Singer 11/19/21

Like many homes in Florida, mine sits alongside a pond. It's a little pond, but it's filled with life.

I've lived in Florida for well over 20 years, but this is the first time I've lived on the water. Every morning I gaze out. Yesterday I didn't have to look to know that I would see sand hill cranes, because they are so incredibly noisy. The days before there were ducks.

This morning there was an alligator. It's probably five or six feet long, and has a beautiful striped tail. It spent hours sitting still as stone beside the water. I couldn't get close enough to look; couldn't even take a photo because if I opened my screen door, however quietly, the sound would disturb him and he would slip into the water.

But my next-door neighbor did open her door, quietly quietly, and took a picture. She sent it to me, knowing that we share a healthy respect for the creature, combined with fascination at sharing our world with it so intimately. You can see it on my Facebook page if you'd like.

My neighbor and I live in paired villas. We share one wall, a front garden, and a roof. We are friendly neighbors; we like each other and respect each other's privacy. It's comfortable.

That's not always the case with neighbors, or with families. It seems we all have stories of family members attacking each other, sometimes almost literally at each other's throats.

Instead of our tradition offering us positive role models on how to get along, we see the same behaviors echo down through the millennia. In this week's Torah portion, twins Esau and Jacob reunite 20 years after Jacob ran away from home, fleeing his brother's threat to kill him in retaliation for stealing his birthright.

When they meet they embrace, both in tears. The verse in the Torah reads, “Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.” (Genesis 33:4)

It sounds nice, doesn't it? But the Torah has a series of special marks above the word “kissed” to indicate that Esau actually bit his brother.

Things get worse in the second half of the Torah portion, when Jacob's daughter Dinah is kidnapped, raped, and then sought in marriage by her captor. Her brothers trick the would-be suitor and all the men of the city into getting circumcised. They in turn have tricked themselves into believing that they will share in the wealth of Jacob's family, and willingly comply. On the third day the brothers swoop in, kill all the men, plunder the city, and rescue Dinah.

It's clear in the story that Dinah is a pawn in the men's power struggle. Her voice is never heard and she is given no say in the matter.

Throughout the stories in Genesis, people deceive and take advantage of each other, even their closest families. What kind of examples are these?

How can a relatively young congregation establish itself as a loving, mutually supportive, and caring religious community? After all, Kol HaNeshama is just over 14 years old. Like all teens, we have our struggles, disputes, minor disagreements.

Here's how: We learn from their mistakes and our own. We talk to each other. We commiserate during the tough times and we support each other, regardless of whether we always agree.

The past 19 months have been dreadful. We are living in a world that has changed drastically and dramatically. Although our lives have begun to feel nearly normal, we fear eating together in closed spaces. We wear masks to protect each other and ourselves. We read of American states and countries around the world where the pandemic is worsening. The result is estrangement and fear. No wonder people feel isolated and are lashing out at each other.

Do me a favor. For 20 seconds, remove or lower your mask, smile, and look around the room.

Drink in the faces around you. Look at the people who you've known for years, the ones you've never met, the ones you sort of know. Smile back at them. Turn all the way around so you can see everyone here, and peek at the computers to see the people on zoom.

Now face forward once again with your mask in place. How do you feel? I hope you feel warmer than before, seen, perhaps even cherished.

When you leave tonight, take those 20 seconds with you and remember that while the struggles are real, the challenges enormous, and the gators in the yard only seem docile, we have something bigger, brighter, better. We have a community.

Shabbat Shalom.