

51 years ago today, President John F Kennedy was assassinated. His words are still being spoken to this day. A famous line JFK is known for is “forgive your enemies”. It seems fitting to speak his words today before I read my torah reading, parashat Toldot in which we are inspired to forgive our enemies. Everyone has a story about forgiveness. I’d like to share a story of forgiveness that has greatly impacted me. One of my dear friends is a Holocaust survivor. I’ve heard him speak to groups of students. A common question he is asked is, “do you hate Germany?” His response is always the same. “I don’t hate them. They have apologized and tried to make up for their actions. I forgive them.” In fact, the Torah teaches us about the importance of forgiving someone regardless if you like them or not.

In Parashat Tol’dot, we read about Jacob and Esau who are twin brothers. They were fighting even before they were born. That fight continued on over the first few decades of their lives. According to the rabbis and the torah, Jacob is the father of the Jewish people and Esau is the father of the Amalikites and Edom, our sworn enemies. Therefore when we talk about Jacob and Esau fighting with each other, we are not only talking about those two characters from the Bible, but their descendents as well.

I came across this midrash, a Jewish folk tale. One day, Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua was walking by the seashore when he noticed a boat sinking. Moments later, a man drifted to shore who was wearing nothing at all. The man, trying hard to cover himself, pleaded with the Jewish people walking by, “I am a son of Esau, your brother, I have lost everything. Please give me a garment to cover myself.” The Jews refused, saying, “Your people have treated our people with cruelty. Therefore, may all your people be stripped as bare as you are today.” The man then turned to Rabbi Elazar

and said, "You are an honourable man; please help me." Rabbi Elazar took off a garment and gave it to him. He went further than that and took him home, fed him and gave him money so he could begin his life again.

The rescued man eventually became the King. He ordered that all the Jewish people be killed. The Jews went to Rabbi Elazar and asked him to help them. When the King saw Rabbi Elazar standing before him, he said, "Does your torah not teach kindness? I told your people I was the son of Esau and they treated me with hatred, not kindness."

Rabbi Elazar replied, "though they are guilty of breaking the law of the torah, forgive them." The king replied, "Because of what you did for me, I will forgive them."

According to Jewish history, we think the worst of our enemies and always expect them to do the wrong thing. And yet, the king does the right thing. He forgives the Jews because of what Rabbi Elazar did for him.

As people, we also tend to think the worst of others. We learn from this parasha to give people a chance even if we don't like them. At times, we take on other people's fights when we were not the original participants; often not even knowing the cause. We shouldn't fight with people based on what our friends think. We need to be strong enough to do the right thing like Rabbi Elazar. If the king, who was treated badly, was willing to forgive the Jews and bring the communities together, then we can learn the same thing for us today.

We are often faced with the choice to forgive people in our lives; probably on a weekly basis. Whether we have disagreements with friends, parents,

teachers or siblings, conflict is a part of life. Once words are spoken or actions done, we can never take them back. They can only be forgiven. We all know it feels much better to forgive than to walk around carrying anger. Conflict not only makes us uncomfortable, but as well the people around us.

Sometimes, the most important reason to forgive someone is because it's the right thing to do. Not for any other reason.

Jacob and Esau forgave each other despite the fact that they have such a bad history together. Forgiving others brings peace and wholeness into this world and it benefits not only us, but others as well.

As Nelson Mandella said, "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

There's no better source of love than forgiveness.