

SHABBAT SERMON
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Bowing, Biting, Embracing, Crying – Biblical Body Language

Body language is something that we frequently are not conscious of but certainly says a lot about us, sometimes more than words. Research claims that only 19% of our communication is carried out with words, while close to 50% is conveyed by our body language. The science of the study of body language is known as “Kinesics” ... the science is relatively new but this morning’s Torah portion contains an incident with various forms of body language that contain a contemporary lesson for us.

Our Torah portion describes the long awaited meeting between Jacob and Esau. They have been separated for 20 years. Jacob left after having secured the birthright from his father, Isaac ... while Esau, his brother, swore revenge. What is going to happen after 20 years? Jacob does not know, and the Torah tells us that he prepares for this day by praying, bringing gifts and preparing for war. And then the moment arrives. The two brothers come face to face. Esau comes with an army of 400 men. Jacob immediately divides up his family to protect them. And the Torah tells us: *Vayishtachu artzah sheva p’amim ad gishto ad achav* – and Jacob bowed himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother.” “*Vayartz Esav likraso vayichabkeihu vayipol al tzavarov vayishakeyhu vayivku* – and Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.” In case you haven’t noticed, there is a lot of body language going on here. Jacob bows to Esau. Esau embraces him and kisses him and both of them cry. Not a word is spoken, but their actions leave us much to talk about. And our sages, in fact, do talk about all these actions, and all of them relate to contemporary events.

“They cried.” Since when do men cry? Aren’t tears a sign of one being a “crybaby?” Isn’t crying reserved for women and children? That question was asked all over the sports pages of New York’s newspapers two weeks ago after the NY Jets lost a football game that basically put them out of the playoffs this year. It was later revealed that in his talk with his players after the game, the Jets new coach, Rex Ryan, broke down and cried. And sports talk shows and columnists had a field day, claiming this was a sign of weakness on the coach’s part, poor leadership and “if you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen!” You might remember in 1972 Edmund Muskie became the favorite to win the Democratic Presidential nomination, but at one point during the New Hampshire primary, Muskie choked with anger and seemed to cry because of a few nasty articles in the Manchester Union Leader newspaper. Those tears became a symbol of weakness from which it was difficult for him to recover.

But aren't we living in a new day? Aren't we constantly being told that men are becoming more emotionally open, and that it is now perfectly normal for a man to be seen crying? Haven't we seen many word leader, sports heroes and others being filmed crying? Haven't men crying become more acceptable? Well, in a recent survey the answer is "yes" ... and "no!" The survey revealed that 77% of men think that it has become more socially acceptable for men to be seen crying. But a closer look at the survey reveals that while most people think male tears are more acceptable, 52% of men think it has become a *bit more* acceptable. And that "bit" may not be enough for them to feel entirely comfortable about crying. That survey was paid for by a company that makes a living off of tears ... a company called "Kleenex." Well, Kleenex should know that Judaism is on its side! Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great modern biblical commentator points out that, with the Torah telling us that Jacob and Esau cried, we are being told something very important. We are being told that their reconciliation was heartfelt, that their reconciliation was sincere. These two men would not be faking tears ... if they were crying, it shows that they were truly overwhelmed by this experience, by the loss of each other for 20 years and for the reconciliation that was now taking place. Yes, men do cry! And from the Torah's perspective it is a sign of strength, not weakness.

"And Jacob bowed himself to the ground seven times." Jacob, in meeting his brother, bows to him ... just as President Obama, in meeting the Prime Minister of Japan, bowed to him. And conservative columnists were in an uproar. Even liberal John Stewart labeled this, "submission accomplished," seeing the bowing as a sign of weakness, as something the President of the mightiest country on earth should never do. And had not President Obama done the same thing with the King of Saudi Arabia? Shouldn't our President be showing some backbone instead?

What would Jacob have done? Well, it seems he would have done just what the President did! But was that the right thing to do? Well, it depends ... it depends on whether you are a Kabbalist or a realist. You see, the Kabbalists felt that Jacob made a fatal mistake in bowing to Esau, and they felt that it was a mistake that had to be rectified. So according to Kabbalistic tradition, Jacob was given another opportunity where he might bow, and be given a chance not to make the same mistake. The opportunity was given in another life, because the Kabbalists claim that Jacob was reincarnated as Mordechai – the hero of the Purim megillah. And you all remember the incident ... Mordechai comes face to face with the wicked Haman, and he refused to bow down to him as everyone else has done. So, obviously, from the Kabbalistic perspective, bowing is a sign of weakness and submission that must be rectified.

But that's not the only tradition we have, for in the Medrash we are presented with a completely different perspective. The Medrash raises the question regarding Mordechai: "*V'chi kintran haya v'ovar al gezeires hamelech* – was Mordechai a provocateur – that he flouted the king's decree?" The Medrash is questioning: why didn't Mordechai bow? After all, it was the ruling of the king! And we have a tradition that the law of the land is the law! Why should Mordechai make trouble by not bowing? And the Medrash explains that the problem was not in bowing down to Haman ... that would have been perfectly okay, if not for the fact that Haman had engraved an idolatrous

image on his heart. The problem here was bowing down to idolatry. But bowing down to another human being, our sages didn't see anything wrong with that! I'm not a kabbalist, so I would say that there was nothing wrong with what our President did. Indeed, in the Talmud our sages put much emphasis on the obligation to conform to local customs. In the Talmud we are told: "A person should never differ from the local custom, for did not Moses refrain from eating when he ascended to heaven (whose inhabitants, the angels, do not eat)? And did not the angels eat when they descended to earth (to visit Abraham)?" Yes, in each instance the custom of the community took preference; teaching us that yes: when in Rome, do as the Romans do! When our Beth Tfiloh contingent went to visit the Islamic Center, we took off our shoes. That was not a sign of submission ... that was a sign of respect. And so I would have to say: when in Japan, do as the Japanese do! In return, I'm sure when the Prime Minister of Japan comes to visit the White House he will greet our President with the traditional American "high-five!"

And then we get to the central body language act where we are told: "And Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him." In the bible the Hebrew word for "kiss" is "*vayishakehu*." And in the Torah that word has a series of dots put over it. According to one Talmudic sage, the dots tell us that he came not to kiss him (*nashko*) but to bite him (*noshkho*). Now you tell me: who goes around biting people's necks? Vampires! Vampires are big these days ... there are many TV programs and now the most popular movie, "New Moon," tell the story of vampires. Vampires, of course, should not have been a Jewish issue. After all, they are born out of Christian mythology and the antidote to the vampire is the sign of the cross. But just our mazel, the woman who wrote the screenplay for these vampire movies is named Melissa Rosenberg, who is quoted as saying that the vampires in her movies are "kosher vampires." Kosher, because they are all vegetarians which in this context means they don't drink human blood. Now you wouldn't believe how many people have asked me about the Jewish perspective on vampires! And I must tell you ...the whole thing makes me a bit uncomfortable because the rare references to vampire-like figures in Jewish folklore usually come from the Middle Ages, and just from those areas where Jews were accused of the blood libel. We live in a day and age where there are still some who accuse Jews of the blood libel ... when there are people who accuse us of killing Palestinians to sell their organs. Under such circumstances, I think it's best for Jews to stay away from vampire talk! Perhaps the best perspective for us as Jews on vampires is found in a 1967 movie called, "The Fearless Vampire Killers." In one scene a woman tries to ward off a Jewish vampire with a crucifix, to which the vampire responds, "Oy vey, have you got the wrong vampire!"

Which leaves us with one more body language question from today's Torah portion: Jacob and Esau embrace. And our sages are torn on whether this embrace was sincere or not. This has ramifications way beyond the Biblical story. Traditionally, Jacob came to represent the Jewish people and Esau became the representative of Rome, the Christian people. And in contemporary times we have seen the Catholic Church reach out to the Jewish people. And there have been divisions within the Jewish community of whether that embrace is sincere or not. But for me, the question is simple:

would we have been better off without the embrace? What if Jacob and Esau had not embraced? And what if the Catholic Church and the Jewish people had not embraced? But let me move this to a different area ... an area that affects all of us for this question of the embrace has taken on contemporary meaning in the age of the Swine Flu. I recently had an appointment with a cardiologist and I extended my hand ... he extended his elbow! "We have to be careful these days," he said. My colleague, Rabbi Jack Riemer, has pointed out that he knows some synagogues where people will no longer kiss the Torah scroll with their Tallisim and then bring the Tallis to their lips. The Archbishop of Philadelphia has asked parishioners not to drink from the chalice during the flu season. Eastern Orthodox Christians used to take Communion by dipping the same spoon in the chalice every time. They don't do that any more. They understand that, if they did, no one would let their child take Communion. After reciting the Lord's Prayer, the Rev. Ralph Chieffo now tells his people to bow to one another as a sign of peace, instead of hugging or kissing. One man said that he could get used to having his wife bow to him, but he does not think that this new custom will last, once the swine flu epidemic dies down. So you tell me ... is this good or is this bad? Do we have to take precautions at this time, or are we over-reacting? Is this limiting of social contact going to be a threat to our humanity?

So what should I tell you to do? Should I tell you to continue kissing each other, and kissing the Sefer Torah and the mezuzah, and shaking hands and embracing each other? Or should I tell you to avoid touching each other, and touching doorknobs, and touching holy objects? Truth? I don't know. I don't know what to tell you to do.

As Rabbi Riemer points out: protecting your health is very important. The Torah says: "*Ushmartem et nafshoteychem*", which means: you should protect your health. And so I do not want to tell you to ignore any danger to your bodies. Really I don't. But I also know that relating to other people, treating other people in a human and humane way, is also important. We should not get so involved in protecting ourselves that we end up living in a vacuum or a self-made isolation ward. There is something spiritually wrong with a society in which people are afraid to hug, afraid to kiss, and even afraid to shake hands with each other. How different history would have been if Jacob and Esau would not have embraced for fear of Swine flu! And what if, when Moses had handed Aaron his rod and asked him to stretch it out over the land of Egypt and bring down the plagues ... Aaron would have said, "I am sorry, my brother, but you know mom has told us that we should never handle anything that someone else has handled before, so I'm going to have to get my own rod!"

Sure, we have to be cautious but let me caution you against going too far in your desire to protect your self. I know one person who carries a large bottle of Purell with him wherever he goes. Are we on the verge of becoming like the television detective Monk – who never goes anywhere without his attendant, Natalie, whose job it is to carry wipes that she gives him the moment he shakes hands or touches anything that someone else has touched before him? Yes, it is true that germs are contagious, but you know

what? The fear of germs is also contagious. We have inoculations against germs. We don't have inoculations against fear.

And so, each of you is feel free to make your own decisions. You can decide whether to elbow tap or fist bump or whether to shake hands and hug. Which ever you prefer is alright with me. Out of respect to the current crisis, the synagogue has installed Purell dispensers in the building so that you can use them if you wish.

But as for me, I have thought about it, and I think that I am going to live dangerously. If you feel the need, you can hug and kiss me all you want! I have made this decision because I think that I would rather risk catching the flu, which they can cure, rather than risk living a life of isolation, which is much harder to cure. If you disagree, then feel free to avoid me. But if you can't control your urge, "come and get me!"

This is one way, as indeed *all* of our body language provides us with, an opportunity to live up to the mandate of the Psalmist: "*Kol atzmotai tomarna Hashem mi comocha* – all my bones shall say: Lord who is like Thee." Amen.

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