

As Hanukkah approaches and Thanksgiving passes us by, our minds are turned to the people we love. Family, friends, and neighbors. This is the time of year that we reflect on what it means to be part of a community. We come to simple conclusions-- It is important and rewarding to be an active member of a community we love. And we struggle with complicated questions-- How can we know what is best for everyone when we are only one person?

In this week's reading, Jacob reunites with his brother after years apart. He is nervous and takes many precautions. He hides away his daughter for fear of losing her, and splits his camp in half in preparation for a worst-case scenario. He gathers a large gift of livestock to appease his brother. Esau forgives him, without the need for gifts or violence. Jacob did everything he could think of to protect his family, and none of it was necessary. It is his acts of spontaneity that affect Jacob the most. He could not have predicted his match with G-d, his injured thigh, or being given a new name.

Jacob did not always make the best decisions. Many scholars believe that Jacob should not have hid his daughter Dina from Esau, and that action was to blame for Dina's kidnapping and abuse. But Jacob did not earn the name Israel because of his mistakes or precautions. He earned his name because of how he lead his community in times of struggle and need, even without preparation or warning.

We read the torah for guidance and answers to questions big and small. Sometimes the answer is simple; When Jacob asked for forgiveness, he was given it. Sometimes there is no answer, and as community we must continue on until we can find an answer on our own. But there is no way to know until we face the problems head on, willing to be humble like Jacob and kind like Esau.