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BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community

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Safaris, Scuba-Diving, Mother-in-Laws, and Building Bonds

Lauren Roth ('87) | BronfmanTorah | Acharey Mot-Kedoshim

Lauren Roth ('87) is a Marriage and Parenting Therapist, and a columnist for Aish.com. She is the mother of Yaacov, Yoni, Nava, Yael, Eliana, and Shimon Roth, and the wife of Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth, who is Associate Professor of Medicine at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and a retinal surgeon.

I've been thinking about the fact that people today are lonely. Lonelier than they've ever been, I believe.

I consistently hear from relationship experts this observation, too: that Americans are lonely, and in desperate need of community.

I've also been thinking a lot about marriage.

Partly because I'm a marriage therapist, trying to help couples create closeness, love, and intimacy between two disparate people. And partly because two of my children, ages 24 and 21, are, as we call it in the Orthodox world, "dating:" going out with different candidates, one at time, searching for their soulmate to marry.

So I've been thinking a lot about marriage, and what makes a good marriage. And the model for what makes a peaceful, fulfilling marriage is the same model as what makes a peaceful, fulfilling community.

The twin elements are: (1) kindness towards others; and (2) respect for others and for their viewpoints—including their viewpoints which may be different from your own.

My daughter, at present, is dating a brilliant Talmudic scholar. My first questions to her, when she meets a new young man, are: “Is he kind? Is he a good person? Is he respectful? Is he respectful towards you, is he respectful towards others, and is he respectful of opinions he doesn’t personally hold?” Only someone who has those qualities is marriage material. In this case, his excellent Talmudic skills enable him to see, inhabit, and articulate all the viewpoints on any given topic. And he does it respectfully, with kindness. That’s how you build a peaceful, fulfilling marriage, and that’s how you build a peaceful community.

The most insidiously destructive people, I’ve learned from my practice, are those who really do believe they’re being open-minded to their partner’s opinions and preferences, but cannot see that they actually aren’t. The best example I ever experienced of this blindness to one’s own close-mindedness actually came not from my practice, but from my social work schooling. I had a professor who professed to be progressive, liberal, and open-minded. “Great!” I thought. “I can speak openly about being an Orthodox Jew, and she’ll be liberal, open-minded, and accepting!” Unfortunately, she believed she was more open-minded than she actually was. Turns out, she was only open-minded about the ideas and opinions she believed were correct. That’s inevitably destructive.

For a relationship to blossom and bloom and be fulfilling for each partner, the partners don’t need to agree on everything. In fact, I happen to think it’s healthier for children to grow up in a home where parents (a) don’t have the same opinions, but (b) show deep respect for each other. The children learn intellectual curiosity from seeing different opinions and different ways of being in the world, and they learn how to have respect and love for people who think differently than they do. The same principle applies in a community. For a community to flourish and for the members to bond well, each person has to have kindness for the others, and respect towards those who think differently than they do.

In my own marriage, this gets played out in many arenas. One of them is our attitude towards...my husband would call it “adventure.” I would call it “mortal danger and extreme discomfort.” Ha!

Let me explain.

My husband really wants to go on an African safari. Even though I’m a feminist, I’m a post-modern feminist. (For those of you not as familiar with women’s studies, that means I believe women have the right to choose their lifestyle.) He craves adventure in the extreme wild; I much prefer staying home, in my house, with my children, with my friends, eating organic gourmet salads, drinking coffee in my clean kitchen, biking the trails in the park, reading books in my cozy living room at night...instead of facing wild beasts in the jungle and living in a tent that may or may not have snakes and scorpions and may or may not have running water.

My mother, on the other hand, is a feminist, too. But she’s the card-carrying kind from the ‘60’s. The kind that craves adventure and seeing the world and daring and danger—so she and my husband are planning on going on an African safari together! (No mother-in-law jokes, please! They actually really do get along! I actually believe he does not secretly wish to feed her to the lions!)

It’s the same thing with scuba diving; my husband loves going once a year to Cozumel, after which he gleefully shows me underwater videos of, “See? This is the shark I was chasing! And this is the eel I was trying to get closer to—oh! And here is the sting ray, and there—you see that? That’s a piranha!” Since I do not relish the thought of being some sea-creature’s lunch, and since, like Jerry Seinfeld, I think scuba diving’s main goal is to NOT DIE, I prefer to stay firmly on land. Once again, cozily ensconced at home. So—my husband takes his annual scuba diving trips with: my father!

This Torah portion, like so much of the Torah, discusses building bonds with others and building bonds of community. This is the Torah portion with the reverberating dicta: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” and “Do not hate your brother in your heart.”

We can enter into wonderful community bonds or intimate bonds with people who

think differently than we do. We just have to have kindness, compassion, honest and real open-mindedness, and respect. We would probably be less lonely, both in our intimate relationships, and by building stronger communities around ourselves, if we were each kind and respectful to everyone and approached everyone with an open, compassionate, curious mind.

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