

Fear and Hope in a Time of Uncertainty

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5777

Lech Lecha, m'artzecha, mim'olad'techa, mibeit avicha... “Go! Go forth,” God commands Abraham, “from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house.”

These opening words of this week’s Torah portion resonated with me this year not solely as millennia-old narrative seeking to establish the origins of our patriarch’s covenantal bond with the Holy One. This Shabbat, at the close of this week in our nation’s history, have we not all been called upon to engage in a significant departure? I am not referencing the flood of traffic to the Canadian immigration website which caused it to crash repeatedly throughout these past days. Rather, in the election of Donald Trump as our next president, a loud message is reverberating through our nation...one calling for a significant departure from the business of politics-as-usual.

For many citizens in this great land – indeed for many in our community – this landmark event is celebrated as a welcome exodus away from Washington’s norms, away from undesirable policies, the first step towards a brighter future for many who have felt left behind and abandoned by our political institutions. For roughly the other half of our nation, Trump’s election is being experienced as a step backwards, a potential rewinding of decades worth of progress, a disheartening embrace of – or at least capitulation to - inflammatory rhetoric that puts people’s wellbeing at risk.

For all of us, the future remains more uncertain than usual. Our President-elect has never held political office. We have no formal record to go on to help us predict what comes next. Some of his own political views have been all over the map, shifting 180 degrees from year to year or even week to week. Both for those who embraced his candidacy wholeheartedly and for those who preached “Never Trump!” alike, we do not know what comes next, and the uncertainty may be exhilarating or disquieting, or both.

As it was for Abraham, who followed God into the wilderness in search of a Promised Land, stepping away from what is stable and known brings with it both hope and fear. Hope that we are journeying towards a place of greater wholeness, prosperity, tranquility, justice, and peace. Fear that we are stepping away from that which is known, stable, consistent, and comforting. With the election now behind us, we are left to hold onto both.

Baruch Spinoza – one of Judaism’s great agitators – taught that these emotions are not only not mutually exclusive, they are inextricably linked. “Fear,” Spinoza wrote, “cannot be without hope nor hope without fear.”¹ These existential realities go hand in hand. We hold onto both, but at the moment, many in our nation are not feeling them in equal measure.

¹ *Ethics*

Let me speak first to the fear, and please permit me a moment of rabbinic transparency when I say that I count myself among those citizens with significant worries coming out of this extraordinarily divisive and bitter campaign, and not just because I am a Jew and we are – historically – prone to extreme worrying.

As we take our first steps together into this new chapter of American history, I fear for the poor in our nation whose needs - and whose lack of access to a path out of their conditions - were not meaningfully addressed by either party during this election cycle². I worry for those who are seeking citizenship and asylum in our country as they flee inexorable poverty and war-torn nations, as my own grandparents did just decades ago. I fear for our global climate crisis and our need to respond thoughtfully and swiftly to combat its predictably devastating impacts³. I am concerned about our international relations with foes and allies alike, and I fear for those who have benefited from the Affordable Care Act and whose access to healthcare may once again be at risk. I fear for some of the foundational cornerstones of our democracy like the free press which keeps our populace informed and keeps those with power in check⁴. I fear for my friends and neighbors with brown skin – not because I think our President elect is a racist...I do not pretend to know what is in his heart – and certainly not because I believe that bias and prejudice are the hidden threads binding his supporters together...to broadly accuse a group of voters as such is both irresponsibly presumptive and disrespectful.

My concern is born out of language used on the campaign trail...incendiary words that stoked the fires of our lesser selves and lent legitimacy to those who are openly discriminatory – not only against African Americans, Muslims, and Latinos – but also against people in the LGBTQ community, women, and Jews as well. Swastikas and white supremacist epithets aimed at their usual targets and celebrating the election results have appeared in graffiti and on fliers in upstate New York, Vermont, Minnesota, and Texas just over these past three days. And right here in Wellesley, Massachusetts two Babson students drove through the Wellesley College campus on Wednesday morning waving a Trump flag, spitting at female students, and hurling misogynistic slurs at them as they went.

Regardless of whether these are to be seen as outgrowths from a divisive and vitriolic campaign season or as random outbursts of bad behavior, none of us should question our President elect's responsibility to respond forcefully to this wave of incidents committed in his name and to call for them to cease.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/opinion/sunday/3-tvs-and-no-food-growing-up-poor-in-america.html>

³ <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/jun/03/hillary-clinton/yes-donald-trump-did-call-climate-change-chinese-h/>

⁴ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/trump-threatens-to-weaken-first-amendment-protections-for-reporters/>

In our Jewish tradition – and in reality – our words matter. They have a deep and lasting impact. The first verses of Torah depict God speaking the entire world into being. Indeed, our words can be used to create or to tear down.

Because of Donald Trump's lack of historical political record to look to for indications of how he will now act, we can rely only on his words, and our nation has been hearing those words very differently. As Salena Zito noted in a piece in The Atlantic, when it comes to how we understand Trump's campaign trail rhetoric, "The press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally."⁵ We all take him seriously now as he will be our President in just a few weeks' time, and I know that many – those who voted for Clinton and those who voted for Trump – share in my fervent longing that much of what he has said was spoken out of political expediency and is not to be taken as a prelude to policies and actions yet to come.

For many in our nation, these concerns I have enumerated – and others as well - are real, and they are powerful. Yet, they cannot be the end of the story. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, instructed us clearly: "Tear fear out by the root! Let it not become your night and your universe, your silence and your lie – or, what is worse, your truth, your God."⁶

"Fear cannot be without hope." And there are good reasons for hope as well. Our nation is strong and built upon a foundation constructed to grant liberty and justice for all. We have a political system that ensures a peaceful transfer of power, and President-elect Trump, Secretary Clinton, and President Obama have all provided us encouraging evidence that this process is proceeding as it should.

I applaud President elect Trump's victory speech promises to the people of our nation and the people of the world to "seek common ground not hostility, partnership not conflict," to work to bring our divided nation together and to "be President for all Americans." We should all join in celebrating those sentiments and in holding him accountable to those noble commitments. To be sure, he, his cabinet, and our members of Congress have a great deal of work to do in order to bridge the cavernous divide that seems to exist between citizens of our nation. Yet, that work is not theirs alone.

I made the mistake of opening my Facebook page yesterday. It is hard not to get sucked into that vortex, and as I read people's heartfelt comments, I was struck, in particular, by the writing of one of my former campers at Eisner, whose wedding I was blessed to officiate just a couple years ago. His sentiment: "If you're looking at your Facebook feed today and you're seeing almost entirely the same type of post...that's your first clue to what's gone wrong." Indeed, we live in a world in which we can create our own bubbles of the like-minded, selecting only media outlets, entertainment, and even friendships with those who reinforce our existing beliefs. We

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>

⁶ From his play, Zalmen, Or the Madness of God, 1974

blame our election cycles for polarizing our nation – and they share in culpability for that reality, to be sure – but we too hold responsibility.

Blind distaste for those on the “other side” is one thing when it comes to Red Sox versus Yankees. It’s something entirely different when we treat our neighbors who hold differing outlooks and beliefs like pariahs. Cursing or muttering under our breath as we drive past lawn signs for the candidate that isn’t our own, unfriending Facebook connections because of differing political views...these acts will not help us to heal our national divide. It is incumbent upon us to actually speak with one another and to do so with respect. To ask one another about how and why we’ve arrived at the positions we hold, and it’s for us to reflect on our own political stances as well. We should stand by our values and our core principals, but it is possible to do so and to see the humanity, the shared hopes, and the common goals of people whose stances differ from our own.

We will soon share together in the *Kaddish* prayer, which is included – typically more than once – in every Jewish service. It concludes with the words *Oseh Shalom bimromav hu ya’aseh shalom*...Grant us peace from on high, O Maker of peace. Rabbi Mark Dratch notes⁷ that “In the prayer for peace at the end of the *kaddish*, we take three steps back, bow to the left and bow to the right... In explaining this unique practice of stepping backwards during this prayer, Rabbi Menahem Sacks, of blessed memory, suggested that our actions teach us a vital lesson. If we truly want to achieve peace, then we cannot remain fixed to our spots, unyielding in our convictions and inflexible in our understanding. We need to pause, step back and take a new view of our situation. We need to look at it from different perspectives, from the right and from the left, and reevaluate who we are, what we believe and what we are doing. Then, and only then, might we have a chance to achieve peace.”

Earlier this week, a member of our community asked me, “Is there a blessing for our new President?” In fact there is, and I conclude tonight with these words of blessing penned by my colleague, Rabbi Zoe Klein: “When God offered King Solomon anything he wished...King Solomon asked for one thing only: “Give me a listening heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong. For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?”

He didn't ask for might. He didn't ask for wealth. He didn't even ask for wisdom. He asked for a listening heart.

May the new leader of the free world be blessed with a listening heart. A heart that listens to the pain of a divided people. A heart that listens for commonalities. A heart that listens to those whose voices are tiny and soft. A heart that listens for the weeping at the margins. A heart that listens to the dreams of the poor, the hopes of the young, and the faint prayer of the dying. A heart that listens to the call of the earth and the haunting song of the sea. A heart that listens past language, dialects and differences to the very pulse of humanity. A heart that listens to the

⁷ Excerpted from JSafe, December 28, 2015, Shalom Bayit: Family Conflict & Harmony.

resounding message of history. A heart that listens to the spirits of our ancestors and the hum of the future. A heart that listens to you and listens to me and hears the mysterious harmonies that are so often hidden from us.

May we all be blessed with listening hearts, and step into tomorrow together with a commitment to hear one another...with our hearts attuned to one another's precious and unique music, [as we] learn to sing in harmony...Bless us, that we may bless each other. [May God, please, bless America.] Amen."