

Lincoln's Lessons as the High Holy Days Approach

Shabbat Ki Teitzei 5779

September 13, 2019

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts the chaos of the 1940 Democratic Convention. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had declined to declare whether or not he would accept nomination to a third term, bucking a precedent established by George Washington and held sacred for a century and a half. The Convention nominated him anyway, but not without resentment: Why wouldn't the President clarify his intentions? Why wouldn't Roosevelt come to Chicago to speak to them?

Infuriated, but unwilling or unable to vent their anger at the Roosevelt, and without a viable alternative for President, the Convention turned against his vice-presidential nominee, Henry Wallace. Roosevelt privately resolved to reject the nomination if Wallace was not his running-mate. At the same time, Roosevelt devised a plan: He would dispatch his wife to the Convention. That, too, was unprecedented: No First Lady, and no wife of any presidential candidate, had previously addressed a nominating convention.

Speaking directly before the vice-presidential nomination vote, Eleanor Roosevelt's words were masterful. In an ordinary time, she said, a president would not accept nomination to a third term. In an ordinary time, a candidate would address the Convention. But 1940 was, in her words, "no ordinary time." With the nation not yet out of the Depression, and Hitler's armies advancing across Western Europe, she argued, a third-term for the president, along with his chosen vice-president, was required. Quoting Eleanor Roosevelt, Goodwin entitles her book, *No Ordinary Time*.¹

We, too, live in no ordinary time.

No, we are not threatened by armies like Hitler's. And yet:

America is divided, with hateful venom most of us have not experienced in our lifetimes.

Across the world, cherished, long-standing alliances are frayed.

Politicians who promulgate racial and ethnic hatred—some of the ideals of Hitler, if not yet his murderous methodology—gain favor and even election in some European countries. Here in the United States, white supremacists’ dark web sites proclaim their belief that they have a supporter in the White House, perhaps the only conviction they share with progressives.

We Jews live in no ordinary time.

Yes, we have experienced antisemitism repeatedly throughout our history, often infinitely worse than what’s happening in America today. And we live at a time and in a nation of unprecedented prosperity and acceptance for Jews, not to mention in an era of a powerful Jewish State of Israel. However, for this country, antisemitism in 5779, the year now ending, has been fatally unprecedented. While the murderers have been white supremacists, we face antisemitism from extremists both left and right.

For Jews, though, this time of year is never an ordinary time.

As we approach the High Holy Days, for an entire month of preparation, we are commanded to examine our souls and to look around at our society. Where have we missed the mark? How can we, individually and collectively, prepare for a better year ahead? How can this year’s promise of repentance be different from all those years when we’ve vowed to be better, only to fall back into familiar, unhealthy patterns?

For inspiration, I would ask that we look to our Torah portion, and also to the words of another American president, speaking at no ordinary time.

Our portion in Torah tonight commands us to go out of our way to return a person’s lost animal.ⁱⁱ Earlier, in Exodus, we are required to help even an “enemy” in that situation.ⁱⁱⁱ The principle is summed up tonight: “You must not remain indifferent.”^{iv}

When our fellow Americans, working full time, cannot afford decent housing or access adequate health care, we must not remain indifferent.

When our fellow Americans face fully legal discrimination—in employment, in housing, in education—because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, we must not remain indifferent.

When our fellow Americans fear that a broken tail light may get them shot by the police, we must not remain indifferent.

When our fellow Americans suffer with mental illness, including substance abuse disorder, and can only avail themselves of “treatment” by being arrested, we must not remain indifferent.

When we are able to avert our eyes from any of these injustices and many more like them, as if we were ancient Israelites declining to return a lost ox or donkey to a neighbor, we must confront this out-of-the-ordinary time, and find a way to repentance.

When Abraham Lincoln rose to offer his second inaugural address—the Civil War in its death throes in March of 1865, which would prove to be scarcely a month before he was assassinated—he was certainly not speaking in an ordinary time.

Still, he affirmed his unshakable resolve:

“[I]f God wills that [the Civil War] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

Like President Lincoln before us, let us, at this season and always, combat injustice wherever we find it. Let us raise our voices and our votes, and let us raise our hands as volunteers.

But President Lincoln did not appeal for justice only. He also preached a message of unity and mercy:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Like President Lincoln before us, at our own time that is out of the ordinary, let us stand for justice and right, and also seek unity and mercy. Let us perfect our

own souls, freeing them of malice. Let us strive to perfect our nation, for even the work that President Lincoln sought to complete remains tragically unfinished. Then, may we be among those who heal this broken and divided nation, a painfully imperfect world. Let us be said to have observed the commandment: “You must not be indifferent.” Then, for the remainder of this preparatory month and throughout our High Holy Days, let us engage in that penitential work with both justice and love, in partnership with *Avinu Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful.

Amen.

ⁱ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 22:1-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 23:4.

^{iv} Deuteronomy 22:3.