

After the Election: Our Reason for Being Here

Shabbat Lech L'cha 5777

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Rabbi Barry Block

On Wednesday, after our presidential election's results had become clear, Reform Movement leadership issued a statement referencing the beginning of this week's Torah portion, in which God commands Abraham and Sarah, *Lech L'cha, L'chi Lach*, "Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your ancestral house, to the land that I will show you." The sages emphasize the redundant description of the place that Abraham and Sarah must leave, not only "your land," but also "your birthplace;" and with further repetition, "your ancestral house." Leaving a place of certainty for an unknown destination is so unsettling that the facts must be repeated if they are to sink in.

Our Reform leaders' statement suggested that the election of Donald Trump thrusts us into uncharted territory, like Abraham and Sarah before us.

But I wonder.

We have been here before. Whether we supported the President-Elect or Secretary Clinton, I venture to guess that every adult here has lived through presidential elections that our preferred candidate has won and others when the person elected was abhorrent to us.

We have been here before. Ever since Thomas Jefferson defeated John Adams for reelection, one president has given way to another, in America's peaceful transition of power, from one leader to another of vastly different philosophy and temperament, often after an acrimonious campaign. And, for those who point to ample evidence that this particular President-Elect is dangerous to the republic and the liberty of many within our borders, rest assured that I have heard from congregants who feared with equal passion that Secretary Clinton presented greater if different threats.

But maybe our Reform leadership was correct. This President-Elect's campaign and revelations about him in recent months have led to significant, substantiated charges of misogyny, of racism, even of tolerance for the purveyors of anti-Semitism. While we cannot yet know if Donald Trump will govern as he campaigned, we do know that America has been governed by bigots in the White House before him. The patina of time may obscure their deepest flaws, but many

of our presidents did not believe that all humans are created equal, and they governed accordingly. So yes, we have been here before, even if not in our lifetimes.

Yesterday, our Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism held a post-election conference call. The first to speak was our friend and partner, Cornell William Brooks, President of the NAACP. Brooks cited a verse from the Book of Esther, from a moment when the queen is reluctant to go before the king to save her people's life. Mordechai speaks up, saying, "Perhaps it is exactly for this reason that we have come to our current position." Mordechai suggests that Esther has come into royalty to be there for just such a moment as Haman's threat.

Brooks was speaking of the Black-Jewish alliance, renewed in recent years by the Reform Movement and the NAACP. Neither of us is the explicit target of the President-Elect's sharpest threats, which are to immigrants and Muslims. African Americans and Reform Jews who know the heart of the stranger are now united in a way that enables us to stand up to any oppression together.

I might apply that verse from Esther to the role of Jewish Americans specifically. Like Esther to royalty, we have achieved liberty, prosperity, and admiration of our neighbors unprecedented in the 2000 years of our diaspora. Perhaps we have come to that position for a moment such as this one.

Perhaps we have come to this position so that we can model to our nation how one accepts victory and defeat with grace. Both the President-Elect and Secretary Clinton have done just that, as has President Obama. Let those who are victorious exemplify triumph tempered by humility. Let those who grieve lead in affirming that Donald Trump be the president of all Americans come January 20. Let us teach that an opposition can be as loyal as it is vigorous.

And what of that vigorous part? If our next President oppresses American Muslims, or seeks to discriminate against Muslims on the basis of their religion, we must stand up and say, "We are Muslims," like Danish Christians wearing yellow Star of David armbands during the Holocaust. If our next President seeks to deport immigrants who lack legal documentation of their right to be in this country but have demonstrated love and loyalty to the one home they have ever known, we may have come to our position in this society for the moment when we can place our very selves in the way of their deportation, in unprecedented acts of civil disobedience. Yes, we must be vigilant and prepared.

At the same time, tonight, in the wake of the election, and in this moment of our President-Elect's grace, let us be patient and even optimistic. Haman has not come to power. No evil edict has been issued. Let us pray that it won't be, even as we ready ourselves for the worst. For now, let us accept the majesty of American democracy with the humility demonstrated by the President-Elect on Tuesday night and by Secretary Clinton on Wednesday.

With grace and compassion, vigilance and patriotism, let us go forth into this new era of American life, however uncharted. Like Abraham and Sarah before us, let us go forth to blessing.

Amen.