

## Maintaining the Covenant with All Americans

### *Shabbat Lech L'cha 5781*

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One of the priorities of my rabbinate has been to meet the needs of the majority of the community without alienating those in the minority.

Worship style provides a case study. In an historic Reform congregation, we treasure members who long for Classical Reform worship, accompanied by organ and professional choir. As one generation has given way to another, though, and our congregation has become more diverse, the prevailing taste has changed. A less formal worship style is preferred by members who resonate to contemporary liturgical music. At Congregation B'nai Israel, we have worked hard to thread that needle, praying from a Classical Reform prayer book monthly, while employing more Hebrew and the poetry of *Mishkan T'filah* most weeks. We vary musical styles accordingly. Importantly, too, we strive to spread the honors and participation around to our deeply-valued longtime members, some of whose families have sustained our congregation for over 150 years, while also honoring and highlighting the diverse array of members who have enriched our community in more recent years and decades.

Do we always get it right? Certainly not. Hopefully, we learn from our mistakes, such as the time we chanted several Hebrew prayers during a service using *Union Prayerbook – Sinai Edition*.”

Worship style isn't the only contentious area. A guest speaker or I may present a message that inspires a significant segment of our congregation, including some whose voices have gone unheard in the past. That same sermon, though, causes some members to wonder if they really belong at Congregation B'nai Israel. I am particularly grateful when a member expresses their discomfort directly, and then comes back the next week, when the nature of the service—and the sermon, if there is one—will likely be quite different.

Some of my colleagues proclaim that their sermons are never “political,” but that they preach Torah instead. For me, that's a false contrast. Admittedly, I define “political” very narrowly in this context. A house of worship's tax-exempt status may be threatened if it endorses or opposes a candidate for office. To do so from the pulpit would be a “political” sermon, one that I would never give or permit as long as I'm rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel. On the other hand, a Torah that reminds us thirty-six times of our paramount duty to the stranger, a Torah that demands economic justice, and a Torah that teaches that every human being is

created equally in the Divine image is a Torah that demands social justice. Never addressing issues of the day would be an abdication of a rabbi's role to teach Torah. And our tax-exempt status permits taking positions on issues.

Still, “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”<sup>i</sup> In June, we held focus groups, as we prepared for streamed High Holy Day services. Among the questions was one about the kinds of messages people wanted to hear on those sacred days. Messages of hope were desired above all. That, I could deliver; but still, I was conflicted: Should I not devote at least one of my High Holy Day sermons to the continuing struggle for racial justice in America? Ultimately, I decided that 2020's High Holy Days would be a time to comfort the afflicted—which, during a pandemic, is everybody. “Afflicting the comfortable” could wait for another day.

Few houses of worship include substantial numbers of both Republicans and Democrats. Congregation B'nai Israel, by contrast, includes people of different political philosophies, even if more of one or the other. Whatever happens on Tuesday, some of our members will be relieved, while others will be cast into despair. Still, I affirm, with a high level of confidence, we will come back together next Friday night to worship our God together, and to seek comfort in our prayers and in our community.

But what of our nation? No, we are not “divided as never before.” America was more divided, to the peril of citizen and enslaved person alike, as the election of 1860 approached. And yet, we must take no solace from being in a better position than a nation that enslaved millions and was on the brink of Civil War. Still, many Americans do fear that violence will follow an unfavorable result for either side, particularly if the election is close or contested. Closer to home, many of us cannot speak civilly across the political divide, even with family members. Last week, a friend told me that he was relieved as he was sad that his mother had cancelled her plans to visit at Thanksgiving. Her excuse was the pandemic, but the real reason was that his mom knew she would be the only Trump supporter at the gathering.

Violence or none, what we can say for sure is that tens of millions of Americans will despair, whatever the result. Only a mighty effort, and maybe not even that, will find our nation more united after the election than today.

We may take comfort in a very odd passage in this week's Torah portion. God repeats the promise that Abram will father children of his own and that his descendants will inherit the Promised Land. That's not strange. Then, though, God tells Abram to take a bunch of live animals and cut them in half. That is unusual.

“Vultures descended on the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.” And then, he falls asleep, which is also bizarre. Perhaps Abram is dreaming when a fiery torch passes between the pieces of slaughtered animals. And it is on that day that God “made a covenant with Abram.”<sup>ii</sup>

For us, the animals, brutally cut in half, represent our divided nation. The fiery torch, we pray, is the light and warmth of God, blessing the nation and promising a covenant that may include all in a brighter future.

No, I do not predict that Divine intervention will mend America. Instead, each of us must take up God’s torch and renew our covenant with all Americans. We will not do that if we vilify those who disagree with us, no matter how strong our convictions. We will not do that if we exploit race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion to appeal to one “base” or another. Instead, we must uphold and protect the democratic process that has sustained the nation for centuries. The torch we raise must not be to set fire to the other side, but rather to shed light on all that truly makes America great. Our motto is *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of many, one,” perhaps better translated, “Unity, grounded in diversity.”

At Congregation B’nai Israel—for all our faults, and we have them—we have made a priority of remaining a united congregation while embracing our diversity. We do that, not by avoiding subjects which may divide us, but by being true to our principles—paramount among them, respect for those who disagree. Let our imperfect example be reflected in the land we love, in the fraught days ahead, and into the future—in a covenant with all America.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 15.