

Inaugural Blessings

Shabbat Va-eira 5781

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My father displays an American flag on his home on every patriotic occasion—including, every four years, Inauguration Day. However, as January 20, 2017 approached, Dad was tempted not to display the flag. He had done so in the past, whoever was being inaugurated. This time, though, felt different. Like many who had opposed Donald Trump’s election, my father feared what our nation might become under his leadership. Then, he reconsidered. He had been dispirited when some neighbors refused to fly the flag on the days of President Obama’s inaugurations. Perhaps he did not think of Hillel’s words, “What is hateful to you, do not do to anybody else,”ⁱ but he acted on them. Ultimately, my father flew the flag on January 20, 2017, celebrating American democracy and hoping for the best.

Hard as it would have been to believe four years ago, our nation is more angrily divided now than it was in the aftermath of President Trump’s election. Though plenty on the losing side complained back then, Secretary Clinton conceded when the results are clear, and President Obama promptly invited the President-Elect to the White House. The Women’s March, held on the day after the inauguration, was as peaceful as it was heated in opposition to the new President. No arrests were made.ⁱⁱ

By contrast, this time, millions of Americans claim that the election results are fraudulent.ⁱⁱⁱ 147 members of Congress challenged those results, and armed domestic terrorists invaded the United States Capitol, causing at least five deaths and threatening the lives of our Vice President, Senators, Representatives, and many others who work in that citadel of democracy.

We have met the enemy, and we are it.^{iv} No, you and I, however we voted, did not march on the Capitol on January 6, and none of us condones that. Still, Americans of all political stripes have judged one another harshly. Many Republican voters believe that Democrats are seeking to destroy America. Many Democrats and others who oppose President Trump imagine that the 75 million Americans who voted to reelect the President must, at the very least, have a high tolerance for bigotry and misogyny.

Our divisions have been deadly. Our response to the pandemic has been politicized, leading nearly half of America to refuse to comply with infection prevention measures recommended by medical science and mandated by our Republican Governor. From a Democrat’s perspective, President Trump cavalier

attitude toward the virus has endangered his supporters' lives—and, by extension, the lives of those who come into contact with them. Others argue that Democratic attacks on the President's Coronavirus policy have led many Trump supporters to believe that the virus is more political than deadly.

Our divisions were deadly this summer, too. The extrajudicial execution of George Floyd shocked the conscience of virtually every American, regardless of party. Soon, though, we permitted the struggle for Black lives to become partisan. One side behaved as though people could not support both President Trump and racial justice. The other acted as if one could not advocate for Black lives with an understanding of the very real challenges and dangers faced by law enforcement. Both sides were mistaken, but each had withdrawn to its corner without hearing the other. And more people—Black people, mostly—died.

I am, of course, on one side of this divide. From my perspective, President Trump is a vile misogynist who has purposefully appealed to white supremacists, treated immigrants inhumanely, and diminished equality for gay, lesbian, and especially transgender Americans. At the same time, I know that at least some of his supporters don't agree with that assessment. I also know that others of his supporters do object to his treatment of women, people of color, and/or LGBT folks, but find the Democratic alternative to be so dangerous that they continue to support him. I know these things, but I do not understand them. And I need to understand, even as I remain unlikely to change my mind. We do not need to agree with one another; but we do need to hear and at least try to understand one another.

I fear, though, that our hearts are hardened. Righteously backed into our partisan corners, we are unwilling to hear one another, or at least to listen. In this week's Torah portion, God tells Moses that God has hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that God may multiply the plagues upon Egypt. The sages are troubled: Is God diminishing Pharaoh's free will, preventing him from letting the Israelites go free, thereby ending the plagues? They answer that Pharaoh has resisted righteousness for so long that he has passed the point at which he can repent and save his nation.^v The Torah thereby suggests that, if we do not open our hearts to one another soon, God may permanently close them, to the detriment and destruction of our nation.

I admire the words of Ken Vance, Editor of *Clark County Today*, a news outlet in the southern Washington State suburbs of Portland, Oregon:

“[O]n January 20, ...Joe Biden will be sworn in as our 46th president. As a self-proclaimed conservative, I want to make it clear, Joe Biden will be my president! That's the way it works. I wish every inauguration featured Ronald Reagan taking the oath of office, but that's just not going to happen. Just as I write

this, a commercial came on my television promoting the station’s coverage of Inauguration Day. It included a clip of Biden that I have heard and read many, many times. ‘I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide but unify, who doesn’t see red states and blue states, only...the United States’...I am putting my hope and faith in our next president to stand up to these words.’^{vi}

We will need more than hope and faith. We must hold our new President to his pledge, and we must do our own part: Seeking to understand one another, even when we do not and will not agree. Our work will not be easy, and neither will that of our new President. Listening will be hard. We will hear words that unsettle us. And we will utter statements that trouble or even anger others. But we must share, and we must listen, honestly and openly, if we are to heal this great nation with hearts that are open only a crack, hearts that threaten to harden forever.

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

ⁱⁱ Phil McCausland, “Peace, Positivity as Massive Women’s March Makes Voices Heard in D.C.,” NBC News, January 21, 2017, updated January 22, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Detrow, Domenico Montanaro, and Susan Davis, “Most Americans Believe The Election Results—Some Don’t,” NPR, December 9, 2020.

^{iv} During the War of 1812, Commandant Oliver Perry wrote, “We have met the enemy, and they are ours,” signaling victory in an important naval battle. *Pogo* creator Walt Kelly created a 20th century parody of Perry’s words, “we have met the enemy and he is us.” (Wikipedia.)

^v See, for example, Rashi to Exodus 7:3, citing Midrash Tanchuma, *Va-eira* 3.

^{vi} Ken Vance, “Opinion: ‘Joe Biden is my president; that’s the way it works,’” *Clark County Today*, January 12, 2021.