

D'var Torah for Shabbat Lech L'cha, November 12, 2016 (in the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential Election) – based on a talk for NYBR rabbis 11/11/2016

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“Go High”

I.

Mikol m'lamdai hiskalti – From all my teachers have I gained wisdom. My gratitude goes to all my colleagues who offered their deep wisdom on conference calls, in-person meetings, and on the internet throughout the past week. Each and every one struck a tone of sensitivity, healing, inclusiveness, and hope. Do yourself the favor of going on line and finding some of these precious pearls from rabbis around the United States.

Chevra, my bar mitzvah happened fifty-one years ago on this very Torah portion. I assure you that the d'var torah I delivered that day contained very little of what I need to say to you now. But that's what Lech L'cha is all about: Going into the unknown, full of faith and unafraid, but still very cautious about what's ahead. So permit me to look back at that naïve thirteen year-old and say to him, “The future is complicated, but in the main it's good. Now go out there and give it a shot.”

Now to the sobering present:

First of all, seven out of ten Jews in America voted Democratic. In our non-Orthodox congregations, the ratio is probably nine to one. (And in our own congregation, the imbalance is much higher.) That means that our loyal shul-goers who voted for the Republican ticket need to be made to feel welcome in their own Jewish communities where they are a noticeable and uncomfortable minority. Because they are not only members of shuls but actual shul-goers, they shape their life decisions on the basis of our precious Jewish values, just as much as do Jews who vote Democratic.

We rabbis need to look out for their well-being in these next weeks. That's what I said to my colleagues in a New York Board of Rabbis conference call on Friday morning. I said that our Trump voters, as well as our "none of the above" voters, deserve to have the comfort of their Jewish home as much as anyone else. That task of "looking out for the other" goes for our congregants, too. We must approach one another with "*kaf z'chut*," the "benefit of the doubt," no matter how strong our feelings of disagreement, hurt, fear, mourning, and even outrage.

Outrage, by the way, which will not easily dissipate, and which must therefore be translated into something constructive.

Therefore, I offer a bold text from our parashah about “comportment.” (And this is for sure not something I knew how to say in my bar mitzvah speech!) God says to Abraham, and by extension to Sarah, “*v’heyey b’rachah.*” “Be a blessing.” Not “give a blessing,” and not “be blessed.” Rather, show by example in this very new and uncharted territory into which I, your God, am sending you, that *the way you comport yourselves in that new place exemplifies and radiates “blessing.”*

As President-elect Trump showed in his victory speech, and Secretary Clinton in her concession speech, and President Obama in his remarks, and as First Lady Obama has adjured us throughout the campaign, “When others go low, we go high.” God’s commandment to Abraham and Sarah, and thus to all of us who carry on the proud tradition of the Jewish people, is to “go high.” To “be a blessing,” and as Abraham and Sarah did, to “make converts to blessedness.” “*V’et hanefesh asher asu.*” Literally, they “made souls” of everyone they met and influenced for the good. They made converts to blessedness.

That’s not what the text means, but that’s what it has COME to mean because of the strong mis-reading the Rabbis have brought to it. That continues to be the

Jewish mission TO ourselves and BEYOND ourselves: Make converts to blessedness.

Yes, the text tells us that God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is that "*v'niv'r'chu v'cha kol mish'p'chot ha'adamah*" – "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." But that universal influence only comes as a consequence of Abraham and Sarah's lifelong commitment to "be a blessing" by exemplifying an uncanny level of *menschlichkeit* in the face of challenges which they could in no way prepare themselves for. As I said to that bar mitzvah boy of long ago, the future is complicated. Staying the course will require more resoluteness than you believe you contain within yourself. Nonetheless, go out and give it a shot.

II.

Next, a teaching from the Shabbat itself: "*Zakhor v'shamor.*" "Remember and guard." When we approach this Shabbat and every Shabbat, we perform all sorts of positive acts, celebratory acts, things that bring holiness and specialness to the day. But we also "guard" the Shabbat vigilantly, lest it be harmed by errant actions or uncaring behaviors.

Likewise, we Jews need to go into this new political era by continuing to do all of the positive things we do – and have ALWAYS done - to bring justice, fairness, equality, respect to society – a true sense of the “tzelem Elohim” in all our fellow citizens. But we need to practice “sh’mirah” as well. When hateful people feel themselves empowered or permitted by political rhetoric to commit violent acts, whether verbal or physical, we need to stand guard. When people’s civil rights and human rights are threatened, we need to be willing to be “shomrim.” We need to put ourselves on the line of defense for our vulnerable fellow citizens.

That’s what we Jews wish would have happened in Germany and Poland and Austria, and even here in America, in the 1930’s. On this week of commemorating Kristallnacht, we need to commit ourselves to both “zakhor” and “shamor.” To being positive about the future, but also to being vigilant about the safety of our fellow Americans, indeed all our fellow carriers of the “tzelem Elohim,” the sacred image of the divine.

III.

In that spirit, we remind ourselves of a verse we recited dozens of times in the final two months of the campaign. It’s the closing verse of Psalm 27. “*Luley*

he'emanti lir'ot b'tuv ado'nai b'ereetz chayim." "Were it not for my faith that I will behold God's goodness in the land of the living..." The ellipsis is telling. Were it not for my faith that this land, this world, this time in history, would indeed radiate God's goodness and blessing, I would give up. But I won't give up, because I do believe.

And the closing: Have hope, but don't JUST hope. "*Kavey el ado'nai* – hope in God, for sure – but ALSO "*chazak v'amez libecha*" – strengthen yourselves for what could be a difficult struggle against evil and hateful forces – but ultimately (and this is why the psalm repeats itself here) *v'kavey el ado'nai*- approach life not expecting the worst, but hoping and striving for the best.

And of course, above all, *v'heyey b'rachah*. Be a blessing. Go high. Be a blessing.

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