

Torah Wisdom for After the Election
 By Rabbi Susan Grossman
 Beth Shalom Congregation
 Columbia MD
 www.beth-shalom.net

Shabbat Shalom

It has been a difficult week for America, culminating a difficult year.

Our young people have been reaching out to me, fearful. They don't come to me worried about climate change, taxes or trade agreements. They are concerned about their personal safety. They draw analogies to the rise of Nazism in Germany. I don't want to over blow or whitewash this situation. Anti-Semitic bullying is up in our schools. It isn't just anti-Semitism, of course. On Wednesday, one of our interfaith partners, a Somalian Muslim, received a serious death threat and the Muslim journalist for the Columbia Flier who wears a hijab was viciously cursed by a man attending a meeting she was covering. This is all took place in blue Howard County. Imagine what is going on in some of the more red states.

Whatever your political persuasion, I think you can agree that this election cycle exposed some of the ugliest things about America that we thought we had overcome: blatant racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny (a sad SAT word which means the mistreatment and debasing of women), homophobia, and xenophobia (fear of others, immigrants). For many of us, our faith in our neighbors, in America, is shaken. If some of us are left hopeful based on the election results, so many of us are left fearful for we do not know what the future will bring.

My friends, this morning on this holy Sabbath, this simcha, this joyous event of a Bar Mitzvah, I do not want to analyze the election results. Nor I do not want to talk about policies or strategies.

What I want to talk about this morning is how we go on in the midst of the unknown. How we cope with fear and uncertainty. And what God expects of us in tough times, regardless of whether we were happy or upset with the election results this week.

To find the answers to these questions, we turn, as Jews throughout the ages have turned, to our holy Torah.

So let's turn to the first few words of *Parshat Lech Lecha* (the Torah reading following Election Day) from Exodus 12:1. (It appears in *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary* on page 69.) The last words the first line of parsha as it is laid out in *Etz Hayim*, are *lech lecha*, after which the parsha is named. *Lech lecha* is often translated as "Go forth." Where is Abraham being commanded to go forth to? Turn the page, and continue in verse 12:1: Abraham is called to set forth to a land *el haaretz asher airechka*, "to the land I (God) will show you." In other words, Abraham had no idea where he was going. He knew not what the future would bring. He is scared. But one of the points of the story is that he goes on this journey even though he is scared and uncertain of how it will all turn out.ⁱ

We Jews have known enough journeys throughout our history of exile and expulsions. As we read in our Passover Hagadahs, our father was a wandering Aramean. But we also learned something along the way of those journeys: That we not only can survive, we can thrive because of a journey.

Now I am not advocating that we all leave this country, for Israel, or Canada. Just the opposite. The journey we may need to take over the next few years may be more like the one I took as a college student to Washington DC to non-violently protest the war against Vietnam or the cutbacks to public funding of college educations. Or the march Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel took with Rev Martin Luther King between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. These marchers modeled the commitment to interfaith cooperation and non-violent protest that continues to inspire us.

Along our many journeys we Jews learned how not to give in to despair or fear, but to conquer it, step by step together. Our journeys helped us clarify our vision and strengthen our character so we could sustain a march toward a future we can believe in and work for.

There is another thing about our words *Lech lecha*: the word *lech* means walk. *Lech lecha* can be the imperative intensive: "you must walk." But *lecha* can also mean "to you," as "in walk to you," "walk to yourself." Our ancient rabbis of the midrash explained it this way: go forth to find your best self.

Our Parsha is calling upon all of us to look deep in our hearts to see who we are and who we can be.

Can we sustain the commitment and passion to make a difference? To stand up rather than stand by, as so many did during the War in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. It took tens of thousands of thousands of individuals in historic alliances on a shared journey for justice, equality, accountability, to make a difference. They did make a huge difference, helping the rest of us, and our entire nation to find our better selves.

We have done it before and we can do it again. All it takes is a willingness to stay the course along the journey.

There is another thing about *lech lecha*. I think our parsha is also asking something perhaps even more difficult of us. To open a door for those with whom we may disagree to join this journey, whatever your political perspective.

Can our compassion extend to the steelworker in the rustbelt fearful for his or her future as well as for our immigrant neighbors? For those who were happy with the election results this week, can your compassion extend to those who are terrified of the rise of hate speech and hate crimes during and following the election?

Throughout history, times of economic stress and social change correlate to a rise in popularism, hatred and mistrust. What can we do to build bridges of understanding and compassion? What can we do to help others take that inner journey of *lech lecha*, of maturity and change? It might just be inviting them along on the journey.

My colleague, Rabbi Jessie Olitsky shared a beautiful example of this on Facebook: he wrote: "I came home this evening and my daughter handed me a piece of paper, asking if I would mail this to the White House:

"Dear Mr. Trump, My name is Cayla and I am 6 years old. You should be a better person now. You should be nice to women because I am a girl and I am a kid."

I think what is most beautiful about this letter is not just her desire to get involved in the political process. It's her belief that people can do teshuvah, and change for the better. May it be so."

That is also what *lech lecha* is about: holding on to the hope that everyone has the potential to become better people if we open for them the door to do so.

My final comment this morning about how our parsha can help us cope in the coming days and months and years comes from two other words, a little later on in our parsha, in Exodus 15:1 (which appear in *Etz Hayim* on page 82). God says to Abraham *al tirah*: fear not.

God tells us “fear not” at least 85 times in the Bible. The term appears at least three times in the prophetic reading, the haftorah, from Isaiah we also read today. We are reminded that to fulfill our role as a light unto the nations, we have to shine a light on our fears and conquer them. We can do so, perhaps better than most, because we Jews believe that somehow across the long view of history, things will somehow work out. We affirm this belief every time we sing *Lecha Dodi* in Friday night services and so many of the psalms, affirming our faith that justice and goodness, compassion and harmony will ultimately triumph. Or as Martin Luther King (who drew on the same psalms we do) wrote: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Because of that faith, we do not let fear immobilize us or turn us away from our values that serve as a light unto the nations.

So here are three things we can learn from our Torah reading about how to cope in the coming days and months and years.

Like Father Abraham, we are all on a journey. Sometimes the road is smoother than others, sometimes more bumpy. Sometimes absolutely frightening. But if we continue to put one foot in front of the other and walk this journey with enough others, we can make a difference, and even make the journey easier for those who come after us.

Like Father Abraham, we all also have an inner journey to undergo: to discover the depths of inner strength and conviction so that we rise to the occasion and be our best selves even under difficult conditions, to stand up – as Abraham did in arguing with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah -- and not stand by. Even Father Abraham was not perfect. But he grew and changed and rose to the challenges God set for him. It behooves us to give those we disagree with the chance to do the same.

Finally, like Father Abraham, we are afraid. Fear saps us of mental and emotional clarity, of compassion. As God told Abraham fear not, God is telling fear not. Don't fear. Do. Don't sit home wringing your hands or drowning your sorry in Facebook posts. Get informed. Get involved. Get engaged. As a people we have been through much worse than this before and we have survived and thrived. As a nation, the US has been through much worse than this before and we have survived and thrived. It may not be easy. We may all have to do our parts but I believe, as did the prophet Amos (5:24) that the day will come when we will celebrate righteousness flowing like a mighty stream.

These are the three things that I believe our Torah reading this week is teaching us about how to cope in difficult and frightening times. May we find comfort and guidance in its wisdom. And let us say, Amen.

ⁱ Appreciation to Rabbi David Ackerman for suggesting the idea of Abraham's journey as a leit motif for coping with the fear of what lies ahead of us as a nation.