

Shabbat Vayera 5781- Post-Election Thoughts
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Shabbat Shalom!

You're feeling anxious. In this slow-as-a-snail period of election results coming into focus, everyone - whether you voted Republican or Democrat for President - is feeling anxious. Aside from that shared emotion, people far away and close by are experiencing opposite feelings: Hopeful anticipation or ever-deepening concern; optimism that things may improve for Americans or distress that our situation will sink lower. But everyone is feeling anxious.

Today I'm not going to speak about the victor of the Presidential election. There, I just took away some anxiety! Instead, I will speak about a group of people even more influential than the President: us as a community.

Make no mistake, the President has more impact on our country than any other individual. But don't underestimate the overwhelming influence our community has on our own lives. Whether you voted red or blue for President, everybody here has work to do in building a better society. Each of you plays a role in shaping our Jewish and American communities and cultures. So much of our own lives and our children's lives depends on the values we act on in our schools, our neighborhoods, Beth El, our workplaces, and our communities on the North Shore. If we ourselves sit on the sidelines, then we abdicate our values to others. Checking a box on a ballot? That's easy. It's much harder to live out our values every day.

Whether your side wins or loses this election, you've got work to do. Because you can still impact your local communities in a major way. So we've *all* got work to do. I want to thank a New Jersey congregant, Steven Abramowitz, for sharing this idea with me. See, rabbis do listen to congregants!

Who determines how much food goes to the ARK to help out our local Jewish community? We do. Let's fill up the pod in the parking lot.

Who determines how much food goes to local communities who need it? We do. Let's participate in the Thanksgiving Mitzvah Project - which will be pandemic-safe in two weeks - to benefit families in Waukegan's Glenwood School.

Who determines if our Beth El seniors are checked on during the pandemic? We do. Let's support HAZAK's efforts as we continue to make weekly calls and offers to help.

Who determines if people nearby have access to blood when they need it? We do. Thanks to all those who participated last week in our blood drive, sponsored by Men's Club and Sisterhood. Let's donate blood if we're able.

Who determines if local people who cannot afford still have access to winter jackets and toys? We do. Let's participate in the Annual Chesed Coat and Toy Drive and donate used winter jackets and new toys starting in two weeks.

I share these opportunities not to deliver the shul announcements early. Because every week I look forward to the Ron Goldberg show!

Instead, I mention these because *this* is how we create a community and culture that actualizes our Jewish values. *These* projects translate the timeless words of the Torah into 2020. If we want to live in a community that picks each other up when we need a hand, then we ourselves must extend that hand.

I also share these social action Mitzvah opportunities to show how we can and do work *together* no matter if we vote Republican or Democrat. Our congregation has members who vote differently. We do. But crucially, we still come together here - in-person or virtually - to pray, to learn, to create a world filled with kindness and justice. We all have work to do, but our endeavors will succeed only if we work together.

Sometimes that's challenging; never is it harder than now. But when we focus on our shared values more than where we disagree, we can really heal some of these tears. Perhaps not all, but some are better than none.

For a shining example, let's explore Abraham in today's Torah reading. Parashat Vayera begins when Abraham rushes out of his tent on a dog-days-of-summer hot day to welcome three strangers. Magnanimous in every way, Abraham offers to bring them a snack and then basically proceeds to serve Rosh Hashanah lunch combined with Thanksgiving dinner. Of the very best food he could offer. This demonstrates Abraham's signature value of hospitality, *Hachnasat Orchim*, which has since been part of Jewish spiritual DNA.

There is a small detail I want to look at closely. Before Abraham offers them food, he says "*Yukach Na Me'at Mayim V'Rahatzu Ragleichem V'Hi'sha'anu Tachat Ha'Etz*. Let a little water be brought, wash your feet, and recline under the tree" (Gn. 18:4). Recall that on a hot desert day, water is more precious than money. And here Abraham wants to give invaluable water to the strangers...to wash their feet. Why? The *Pshat*, simple,

interpretation is what the Etz Hayim Humash says: “Water for bathing one’s feet was a much-appreciated comfort to travelers with their sandal-like footwear and the pervasive dust of the roads.” This fits with Abraham’s sincere generosity.

Notice that Abraham doesn’t ask any questions of the travelers, like who they voted for, as it were. If there is one thing that was for certain, these men are not Jews. Impossible, for only Abraham’s family are Jewish. But this religious distinction - which is central to Abraham - falls second to their shared humanity.

Here is what Rashi says about why Abraham washed their feet, a *Drash*, creative interpretation: Abraham believes these are men who worshiped idols on the ground, and he is strict not to allow any idolatry into his house. In other words, he has serious religious differences with them. The water isn’t to make them physically comfortable - like a moist towlette for their feet. The water makes *Abraham* emotionally and spiritually comfortable by washing away all traces of idolatry. But not even polytheism stops Abraham from reaching out to the travelers. If Abraham can be a good neighbor to these travelers with profoundly different worldviews - then we should too.

This verse also inspires a Midrash quoted by the Etz Hayim Humash: “God promises Abraham, ‘As you brought a little water to My emissaries, I will give your descendants water in the desert. As you brought them bread to eat, I will sustain your descendants with manna for 40 years. As you gave them shade under a tree, I will give the Israelites a cover of clouds to protect them from the desert sun.’” In other words, the kindness Abraham offers the strangers boomerangs to directly benefit Abraham’s future offspring. Kindness begets kindness.

In the aftermath of a bruising election, fists are clenched tight. Never is it harder to open our hands to reach out to work with others. But we must accept this challenge, for the consequences of a society further divided are dire.

I now wish to share a short story with you that highlights this theme. Though it may seem a children’s tale, its message is deeply serious: our future depends on our ability to work together. The story is from a book, [Capturing the Moon](#) by Rabbi Ed Feinstein, and it’s called “Heaven and Hell.” ([Read story](#))

Our Beth El community is a generous one - with our hospitality (in ordinary times), our time, and our money. But we all still have work to do. Like the story teaches, our capacity to reach out to others determines our own fate as a society. Will we merely survive or truly live? And as the story models, we must continue to extend our arms to others, to feed others, to welcome others, and to work with others.

We've all got work to do to repair what has been tarnished and broken. But we need to work with each other in order to make it last. Perhaps this African proverb said it best about community: "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

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