

Unlikely Heroes

Lech Lecha 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

This has been an extraordinary week in America. No matter who you voted for in the national election, it's hard not to acknowledge the historic nature of what has taken place in our country. America has come a long way in the past two generations. And at a low point in our history, at a time of crisis and uncertainty, we have been reminded how much we have of which we can be proud.

Listening to both John McCain and Barak Obama on Tuesday night, my heart swelled with pride and I found myself reflecting on the trajectory of my own lifetime. I remember seeing separate water fountains for African Americans in the local department store as a seven or eight year old – this was not the Deep South but North Miami Beach, Florida, a community that was heavily Jewish. By the way – it was a large store that was owned by a Jewish family. At that time, I didn't know what the expression, 'civil rights,' meant but I knew that there was something seriously wrong with this. Why did people of color have to drink from a different water fountain than I did?

I remember my parents getting a call from the police station in Gainesville, Florida after the Klan burned a cross in front of my sister's home. It was the nineteen sixties and she and her friends were demonstrating for civil rights and they were protesting what they saw as an unjust war in Vietnam. My parents were mortified – when did my sister turn into such a trouble maker?

I can hear the echo of Martin Luther King's speech, "I have a dream," and I remember the deep sorrow and anxiety so many of us felt when King's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet. I remember the television images of race riots and violence. I can still hear the unkind and demeaning comments my elders would make about the 'schvartzes.'

But I also remember, as we all can, a time when a woman would not have been considered a candidate for national office, let alone for the second highest office in our nation. And I remember a time when someone the age of John McCain would not have been considered a viable candidate for the presidency.

In the years to come, when we look back at this year's election, I believe that we will remember 2008 as the year of unlikely heroes. Barak Obama - the child of an interracial couple, John McCain - the disabled war veteran who spent five years in a prison camp, Sarah Palin - a mother raising a child with Downs Syndrome, and even Joseph Biden who has faced his own self-inflicted wounds as a politician over the course of his career, were unlikely heroes. But Americans saw in all of them great potential and promise. It's time to put the rhetoric and sound bites aside. Now that the rancor and the accusations are behind us let us acknowledge the truth of 2008 election: all the people running for office, every one of them was extraordinary in his or her own way.

And they will be remembered as pioneers. The glass ceiling against gender has been broken, the barrier against people of color has been smashed and we have effectively said that age is not an impediment to leadership or human capacity. As far as I'm concerned, America is a stronger and better nation today

than it was a week ago. Democracy is messy but it's the best form of government we have! We've shown the world by example what we stand for and who we are. Of course, there is much to be done, and many serious obstacle along the way. Our president elect has an overwhelming job and he must still prove himself to the American people. But no longer will color or gender or age make a person an unlikely hero.

This morning we read about another unlikely hero. If you think about it, Abraham is just about as unlikely a hero as one could possibly expect. God calls on Abraham when he's already seventy five years old; He promises him that Abraham will be the father of a great nation even though he and Sarah are childless. God uproots our forefather and sends him off to a distant land where he knows no one and has no political connections or alliances. We know little about Abraham: we're never told why God chose him or what Abraham believed, or what strengths made him worthy of this mission.

So why did God choose Abraham? The sages speculated on God's choice and Abraham's attributes, but in the end what made Abraham a worthy hero was not where he came from but what he did with his life once chosen. In a sense this choice was an act of faith on the part of God. In *Pirke Avot* we are told that our forefather underwent ten tests over the course of his life time. He was not chosen because he succeeded and passed these tests but because he was willing to confront them and respond to these challenges in the first place. What made Abraham a hero was not who he was but who he had the potential to be.

We see Abraham as brave and courageous, as generous and kind, as faithful and just. Nothing could shake his faith in God and yet he was also willing to challenge the God in whom he had faith. And yet all of these qualities were exhibited after God chose our forefather to be the founder of a nation and a new faith, and not before.

We ought to think of our president-elect in this way. America has spoken, but a great leader must be humble enough to recognize that he must lead all the people – even those who disagree with him. No one person or party has all the answers. He cannot ignore the voices from the right or the left. No leader has a mandate: he must listen to the people and respond to the challenges as they arise. Barak Obama was elected because he had a vision that the voters embraced but reality is rarely the same as vision. It's one thing to be a candidate; it's another to be a real leader.

Consider Abraham. God promised Abraham "I will make you a great nation and I will bless you." No sooner does he arrive in the land of Canaan, he faces a serious famine. Abraham dreams of building a family but the route to that dream is not without pain and heartbreak. Vision and reality are never the same. Our forefather makes mistakes along the way and struggles with an uncertain world. And so it is with us. Leaders are not Messiahs - their job is not to save us but to help us become a nation united in building a better world.

If I could offer one small piece of text to President-elect Obama, it would be from *Pirke Avot*. Actually I would encourage him to study this entire work but if he didn't have the time I'd suggest the following statement attributed to Ben Zoma:

Who is wise?	He who learns from all people.
Who is mighty?	He who subdues his passions.
Who is rich?	He who rejoices in his portion.
Who is honored?	He that honors his fellow men.

I can't think of a better set of instructions for a national leader or any leader for that matter. In fact these instructions would serve all America well!

And so the journey begins. But it is not Barak Obama's journey or Joseph Biden's journey – it is our journey as a people and as a nation. If our president and our leaders fail, then we all fail. It is time, then, for Republicans, Democrats and Independents to come together and work for the betterment of our society and our world. It is not time to point fingers in accusation or to stand back in anticipation but, in the words of one of our great leaders, 'to ask what we can do for our country.'

You know, I've spoken more about politics in the last few months than I've spoken about this topic in my entire career. This has been the most compelling election that I can remember in my life time. Politics, however, is not my favorite topic. I figure that if people want to hear about politics they should turn on CNN or FOX News or MSNBC. They can read the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. There are people and authors who are better equipped to deal with these issues than I am.

This year, however, has been different. For the first time that I can remember the issues of politics are also issues of the spirit. There are large moral questions at stake in our society. And I feel that we are struggling for the very soul of America. We have been challenged to ask ourselves to reflect on what we value, who we are and in what we believe. We must consider the very future of our planet and the needs of our fellow neighbors.

Americans are not asking what is politically expedient but what is right and wrong. And while we don't all agree on the answers to these questions, we are engaged in a grand, national, debate about the spiritual and moral future of our society. We are also asking the same questions – and that is no small matter. It seems to me that the big question for us is not the economy or the war or even the environment but what type of people do we want to be? What type of legacy do we want to leave for future generations?

And, of course, for us as Jews there is the question of Israel... a certain, unnamed, member of our congregation asked me if I was pleased with the outcome of our election. I said I was; I had voted for Obama; still, I said, I was still worried about Israel and what the future held for our land. The person to whom I was talking had also voted for Obama – much to my surprise. When I asked her if she was at all worried about Israel, she responded by saying, "Rabbi, in order to have a strong Israel, first we must have a strong America!" I think that is a sentiment that we can all agree about!

With the election behind us, let us pray for the welfare of our nation and our world. The other day we concluded our Minyan by reciting a prayer for our country. We ask God's blessing for our new leaders and for all our unlikely heroes: whether he's a 'Joe the Plumber' or she is Anne Nixon Cooper, the 106 year old Atlanta woman who voted for Obama on Tuesday.

That's what makes America such an amazing place – it's a land that allows for unlikely heroes.

It is a land where each of us has the unique opportunity to share our gifts and blessings with others.

It is a land where anything is possible!