

AFTER THE ELECTION
November 11, 2016

Shabbat shalom!

And, once again, welcome to our guests from Temple Emanu-el, Community Synagogue and Larchmont Temple, all in Westchester County, NY.

I would like to share with you a story I heard about an American woman who was a soldier stationed in Afghanistan. She was in a marketplace when she saw an Afghan woman, dressed very modestly with a scarf, walking through the market with her husband. The woman made a point of walking five paces behind her husband; and when the couple walked back from the market, again she remained always five paces behind her husband.

The American soldier could not understand and, finally, through a translator, she went to speak with the Afghan woman. The soldier said, “Don’t you know that the Taliban are no longer in power here?” “I know that,” said the woman. “Don’t you know that you are no longer required to walk five paces behind your husband?” “I know that,” said the woman. “Don’t you know that men and women are now treated equally here?” “I know that,” said the woman.

“So why do you insist on walking five paces behind your husband?” The Afghan woman looked at her and said: “Very simple. Land mines.”

That about sums up how I am feeling at the moment. All week long I’ve been asked – here in the community and by friends and relatives around the country and in Israel – how I feel about the election.

I’ve always been an optimist. And what keeps running through my mind is the old stiff-upper-lip advice, “Cheer up, things could be worse,” and the punch line that follows – “So I cheered up, and sure enough, things got worse.”

A number of you have been very candid this week in sharing your own thoughts with me – sometimes tearfully – giving voice to shock and disbelief and fear for our country – economically; in terms of social justice, and in voicing grave concerns in areas ranging from immigration to civil rights, abortion rights, our commitments to the environment, our international relationships and the very soul of a country that most of us thought would rise above bigotry, racism and xenophobia.

Rabbis become very experienced in practicing what we learned in rabbinic school is called the “rabbinic oh.” Someone says, “Rabbi, you won’t believe what my ex-husband, that louse, just did!” and rabbis learn that the safest response is: “Oh?” Because there is always another side and we don’t want to take sides or alienate people.

Yet I have to share with you, the fear is there. The lead story in today’s *USA Today* speaks about the upsurge in racist and anti-Semitic graffiti just since the election, and gives several shocking examples, as in an upstate NY town where a massive swastika is scrawled on a park wall, over-painted with the slogan “Make America White Again.” And the Southern Poverty Law Center, which has been tracking neo-Nazi and racist hate groups in this country for many years, reports a major proliferation of such groups just in the last year, and the apparent legitimacy lent to such groups just from the rhetoric of the man who now merits the title of President Elect.

And I can’t help but wonder, as a student of the rise of Nazism in the 1920’s and early ‘30’s, that by every standard of science and philosophy and music and art Germany was the most civilized nation on earth, until the world saw how thin the veneer of civilization can be when the alignment goes awry.

How might we respond? More specifically, what might be a Jewish response?

I spoke this morning with Daniel Schwartz, the Executive Director of Faith in Action-Alabama. Daniel is a young, very educated Jewish man, based in Birmingham, whose mission is to build an interfaith, inter-racial coalition to work towards social and especially racial justice. His coalition is increasingly effective, building on parallel efforts in other states that have already had some success, notably in Louisiana where the work of Faith in Action led toward changes in the penal codes that had reflected racial bias. Daniel Schwartz led a program at Interfaith Montgomery last week, and will be extending his work into Montgomery in the coming months.

He pointed out the Jewish teaching that God has set before us choices – of life or death; blessings or curses. When we read on Yom Kippur that we must choose life, we take this to mean that burying our heads in the sand is not the best long-term option. Better to redouble our efforts to push back against injustice, indeed push back against the narrative that delegitimizes justice in whatever form that takes.

Equally important is to remember one of the core teachings of Torah: that we are created in the image of God – all humanity, every one. It seems almost like a platitude to say so, but think of the implication in terms, for example, of not denigrating or demonizing the

“other”; of welcoming the stranger into our midst and treating them as citizens, as we are taught in Leviticus 19.

By not “demonizing the other,” moving forward must also mean not demonizing those with different views of what it means to have a just society or a just business model or what is best for America in our relationships with the world. Just as Judaism teaches clearly that we have no monopoly on the truth – as in the Talmudic teaching that “the righteous of all nations have a place in the World to Come” – we liberals and we conservatives hold absolutely legitimate though different visions of what is best for our country, once we get beyond the expressions of bigotry and hate that characterized so much of this election cycle.

David Brooks has a wonderful and cogent analysis in today’s *Times*, in which he points out the many dichotomies in our society in terms of the visions we hold: a foreign policy that is active and engaged, or one that is wary of too much foreign involvement; fostering open trade around the world, or having protectionist trade policies; supporting individual initiative, or using governmental resources to help those in need. We have always had such dichotomies; the debate between whether to support the role of a strong central government, for example, or favor local control or states’ rights, on the other, has been unresolved for centuries. These are principled differences, but those who hold views that sometimes differ radically still profess a love of our country that is legitimate and genuine.

Brooks concludes his piece by stating that we must denounce bigotry and dishonesty, homophobia or xenophobia; racism and anti-Semitism, whether by President-elect Trump or by anyone else who seeks to lead us, even as we must continue to look towards a better future. As the *Times* editorial board states, the person who must do this most forcefully and explicitly is Mr. Trump himself, in affirming his intent to be president of all of our diverse people.

I would like to share with you part of a message issued this week by the leadership of the Reform Movement – signed by the heads of my rabbinic body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, as well as by the heads of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I think it speaks well for my own feelings at this moment in our history:

“President-elect Trump has the opportunity to use his office to bring Americans together, and to move us toward a brighter future. If he does so, we will be ready to work with him for the common good. If he does not, we also stand ready to be fierce advocates for the values that guide us: inclusivity, justice and compassion.

“This week we read [the Torah portion] Lech Lecha with its clarion call to “go forth.” Just as Abraham went out into a place of great uncertainty, we now find ourselves in an unanticipated time and place. But we know, like Abraham, that our faith and enduring values will be a strong foundation as we move forward. We love the stranger, feed the hungry and care for the orphan and the widow.

“Throughout our Reform Movement's history, our congregations, institutions, rabbis, cantors, other professionals and lay leaders have striven to bring all of us together to strengthen and to sustain one another, and to work together in the pursuit of justice for everyone. We welcome all: Jews and non-Jews, people of all races and religions, of all sexual orientations and gender identities and the immigrants among us. That welcome is the essence of who we are as a community, and who we are as a country, and that remains as true today as it has ever been.

“As we pray each week in our synagogues on Shabbat in the Prayer for our Nation, we ask God for guidance for ourselves and for our nation, to grant our leaders the wisdom and forbearance to govern with justice and compassion. We ask God to help us appreciate one another and to respect the many ways that we may be faithful to the ways of righteousness, and to keep our country sound in body and spirit.”

That concludes the statement.

One more thing about Judaism. Many religions ask their followers to make a leap of faith, to believe in what they teach. Judaism is different – we are asked to make not a leap of faith, but a leap of action. Doing everything within our power, starting with our local efforts in our own community, to improve our world and help all who are suffering, is the best way to begin. *Tikkun Olam*, we call that process, repairing the world, and if not now, when?