

December 2016

Dear Congregants and Friends:

A lot has happened in this country since my last Lach L'cha column: the clocks have been turned back an hour signifying that winter is just around the corner; we Jews have survived the month of Mar Heshvan, the Hebrew month with no holidays; Tom Brady has returned from a 4 game suspension, and, oh yes, we Americans have elected a new president. Starting with the day that Donald Trump was elected to be this country's next president, my computer has been overflowing with emails, many of which, while phrased slightly differently, seem to be asking the same question: how can, and should, the Jewish community in this country, over 75% of whom voted for Hillary Clinton, respond over the next 4 years to a government led by the far more Conservative Donald Trump?

My response to family, friends, professional colleagues, etc., comes from the Jewish Tradition, for who knows better than we, the Jewish People, how best to respond to uncertain and turbulent times?!

Succinctly stated, the response that I have gleaned from our Tradition is "to pray like everything depends on God and to act like everything depends on us." A classic proof text for this approach can be found in the Book of Exodus. The Israelites, now standing on the shores of the Sea of Reeds, hear Pharaoh's chariots fast approaching. Fearing that they will either be forced to return to slavery in Egypt or worse, killed, they cry out to Moses, "you are the one responsible for bringing us here; how are you going to save us from what lies ahead?" Moses, remaining calm and collected, does exactly what he has done up to this point, call upon God for guidance and support, only this time, however, God says, in effect, "I have done most all of the work getting you to this place, now it is time for you and the Israelites to step up to the plate and do something on your own."

Midrash then tells us that one of the Israelites, Nachshon, heeding God's words, walks into the Sea up to his knees. Having heeded God's word and shown good faith, he looks up, waiting for God to perform a miracle, but nothing happens. Nachson thus walks out a little further, this time up to his waist, again looks up, but still nothing happens. Nachshon continues to walk out into the water, deeper and deeper, first up to his chest, and then to his neck, but still nothing happens.

When the water is now almost over Nachshon's head, God finally parts the Sea, in effect telling the Israelites, "as my covenantal people, we are now partners in bringing peace, healing, and justice to you and to the world."

Support for my response is further found in a contemporary story told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi Emeritus of England, respected author, and humanitarian. An African American family had just moved into a previously all white area of the District of Columbia. The young children in the family are sitting on the front stoop of the house, saying "hello" to, and smiling at, the passersby, all of whom either ignore the children or respond with a frown or grimace on their faces. The children are just about to go inside and tell their parents that they don't want to live in this neighborhood, when an older white woman returns their smiles and says, "welcome"! This same woman returns within a few minutes with drinks, cookies, and sandwiches for the children.

One of these children is now a prominent lawyer and law professor at Yale University Law School, Stephen Carter, who says that what this woman did changed his life. Mr. Carter even wrote a book, entitled "Civility", about what this woman taught him that day. In the book, he describes the woman, whose name is Sara Kestenbaum, as an observant Jewish woman, who "taught me how a single act of genuine kindness and civility, what she called chesed, can change a life forever."

None of us can know, at this point in time, what the next 4 years may hold for the Jewish community, for racial and ethnic minorities, for the immigrant community, or for the country as a whole. We may all be pleasantly surprised, or we may be greatly disappointed. Only time will tell.

Fortunately, however, our rich and venerable Tradition gives us immediate and time tested guidance as to how

we can, and should, respond to these times of uncertainty, unsettledness, and incivility:

- ◆ We can begin by praying to God, personally and as a community, for guidance, wisdom, strength, civility,

and loving kindness for ourselves, our leaders, and for our country;

- ◆ We can then, at the same time, on a personal level, strengthen our commitment to the giving of tzedakah, or charity, to those organizations serving the disadvantaged and needy; to volunteering

our time to those organizations in whose missions we believe; and to perform, on a daily basis, acts of gemillut hasadim, “acts of loving kindness”.

This is, I believe, how God and our wonderful Tradition want us to respond to whatever challenges may lie ahead.

Wishing your families and you a joyful and meaningful Chanukah!

Hag Samach!

Rabbi Howard Mandell