

Fear Not, Avram: Reflections on the Shabbat After Election Day

I was invited by the New York Board of Rabbis and UJA-Federation of NY to offer brief remarks this past Friday morning on a call for rabbis on the subject of how to address our congregations on the Shabbat after Election Day. Here were the instructions I got from the NYBR and the UJA-Fed about how to craft my remarks in a brief phone call for rabbis about addressing their congregations on the Post-Election Shabbat.

“...please remember to keep your remarks to 5 minutes and to refrain from expressing any partisan views. This seminar is for the purpose of modeling ways of addressing the widest spectrum of congregants. Please avoid expressing any personal views regarding disappointment or elation over the outcome of the election as this is in strict violation of the NYBOR and UJA-Federation’s 501c3 status.”

So, as I address you this Shabbat morning:

- 1) I will not be keeping my remarks to 5 minutes.
- 2) I will endeavor to refrain from being partisan.
- 3) I believe our Bayit *does have* the widest spectrum of congregants, and I offer the tefillah that these words neither alienate nor divide any of us, but that they galvanize us to give voice to our feelings, and, when we are ready, to try to come together over the values that we share even as we speak our minds over the passionately held differences we have.
- 4) I will not express disappointment or elation over the outcome of the election.

But I will begin – not end, but begin – by expressing fear, a feeling I think must be named.

For fear may be one of the most significant factors driving people to cast votes the way they did in this election, and fear is the longest-lasting and most persistent emotion I have heard articulated since Tuesday night by so many, regardless of which candidate they voted for.

And for those who feel no fear but only success today, as well as for all those who do feel some form of fear, I express it because it – fear – was the very feeling that Avram, *the victor of the war* in this week’s parashah, felt immediately upon emerging victorious.

Remember, Avram inserts himself into the war of the 4 kings and the 5 kings in Bereishit Chapter 14 because he hears that his nephew Lot has been captured by the 4 kings in their defeat of the 5 kings. Avram immediately gathers his men and sets off to battle the 4 kings, and, catching them weary from victory at night, overcomes them, beats them back, restores the looted possession and the captives to

their homes, and of course emerges with Lot. After brief interchanges between Avram and Malkitzedek, and Avram and the King of Sodom, the episode concludes – and it seems, in fact, to be over.

The next verse, Chapter 15 verse 1, begins:

אחר הדברים האלה היתה דבר יקוק אל אברם במחזה לאמר אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד:

After these things, which Rashi says means *immediately* after these things, literally days if not hours after his triumph, the word of God comes to Avram in a vision, saying:

Don't be afraid, Avram. I will protect you. Very great is your reward.

Don't be afraid, Avram.

If someone tells you not to be afraid, in this case God, it is fairly reasonable to assume that you either are, or have reason to be, afraid.

But why should Avraham have been afraid? He just mounted an against-all-odds military campaign and achieved, by all counts, decisive success. What is there to be afraid of?

A striking midrash on this pasuk cites three possibilities.

בראשית רבה מד/ד

אנכי מגן לך, ... , ר' לוי אמר לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם מתפחד ואומר תאמר אותן אוכלסין שהרגתי שהיה בהם צדיק אחד וירא שמים אחד...

רבי לוי אמר אוחרי לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם מתפחד ואומר תאמר אותן המלכים שהרגתי שבניהם מכנסין אוכלסין ובאים ועושים עמי מלחמה...

For R Levi, Avraham has two fears.

First, what if he harmed someone good and righteous in the war? War, conflict, has collateral damage, unintended consequences. People we didn't mean to hurt are hurt. Our methods of fighting inevitably spill over beyond the domain in which we meant to use them.

Second, Avraham worries, what if this war is not over? Sure, the kings fled now, but what if they regroup and come back for me? This is not a worry about the damage the war *already* did, but a worry that damage will actually continue. The battle may be over, but the fight will continue.

These are natural, reasonable fears, and while they are placed in the mouth of Avram, the "victor", they echo what we all may be feeling today, regardless of whose side we were on in the election.

The fear that over the brutal year and a half of this election season, we – our nation – have hurt each other. We have not read each other's intentions charitably, we have stereotyped each other and made assumptions about each other, and we have probably said things we deeply regret. Perhaps we –

Americans, and members of our own Bayit – raised our voices, our tempers, or even our fists over a decision and a decision-making process which is absolutely high-stakes, but whose purpose is not to divide people or breed anger or hatred.

And then, the fear that this is not actually over. That the anxieties and different value systems that we have, and the strong feelings we carry about the outcome of this election, may continue this harmful cycle forward. That we will continue not to understand each other, continue to judge each other, and continue to hurt each other.

I shuddered as I watched the live comments thread on the side of my computer during Hillary's "concession speech" on Wednesday morning, livestreaming through a particular television network. Violent, disgusting words and threats about her flooded the sidebar of my screen. I literally couldn't watch, and I had to find a different feed through which to watch the speech. She lost – why isn't it over?

And the same destructive vitriol towards our President-Elect, and to all who voted for him, painting them with one brush stroke, and blaming them for a whole host of evils challenges we may face at this moment.

We are entrusting our sacred nation to this President's leadership, along with all the other pieces of our government and our union. Take a principled stand on any issue, but don't hurl epithets or slander. Let us have kavvanah and fervor as we pray every Shabbat for his success and leadership, whether you agree with it or not, and whether you challenge it or not.

The midrash adds one more fear:

ורבנן אמרי חדא לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם מתפחד ואומר ירדתי לכבשן האש ונצלתי, ירדתי למלחמת המלכים ונצלתי, תאמר שנתקבלתי שכרי בעולם הזה ואין לי כלום לעתיד לבא...

Avram wonders in this moment – maybe my merit has just run out. I made through a lot of trials and tribulations. I've worked hard to get to this day. And yet, he fears, maybe I'm done. Maybe I'm just exposed now, vulnerable. Maybe my streak of success and safety has expired.

This is, to me, the final component of this post-election fear: a fear that what is left in the wake of this election is a license for racism, for sexism, for religious discrimination and for discrimination based on whom we love. For discrediting and disrespecting facts and truth and our political and democratic process. That as far as we have all come as a nation, that some of that is going to start sliding back.

That we as Americans, especially many women and minorities, after all we have fought for to get here, feel less safe now, and more vulnerable.

That is a real fear. That the election is over, but the path of destructive speech and action it has paved plunges forward.

And it's also the fear, of so many Americans, that the things that drove us to support the winning candidate may still not come to pass. That all the energy we poured into bringing about a better economic vision for our families, a vision of a better America – in its policies towards other nations, in the functioning of its government, in its security and protection at every level – all those things we are dreaming of may still not come to fruition.

So what now?

I want to offer the beginning of a thought, something that has guided me over the last few days.

Remember, the entire midrash unpacking Avram's fears is premised on the fact that God says, don't be afraid. So we want to understand why Avram was afraid.

But it's in response to those fears that the Torah says, אל תירא אברם, אנכי מגן לך – don't be afraid, Avram, I will protect you. I am your shield, the very description of God that seals the first blessing of the Amidah that we recite multiple times daily – מגן אברהם – Shield, Protector of Avraham.

Some have taken that stance. Don't be afraid. Plunge forward. Come together. It's going to have to be okay. God, for some – or the system of checks and balances in our nation, for others, or the collective good will of the American people, for yet others, will slowly wash away the hurt and the pain and the divisions we suffered over these last months. And I am an optimist.

But even Avram is not satisfied with this promise of God's.

For the first time in the entire Torah, chapters into Avram's journey and life story, he chooses this moment to open his mouth and speak to God.

He says, how do I know this is going to pan out? How can I be sure? It *doesn't* look like I am going to have progeny and carry on the monotheistic mission we have begun together. It's not as simple as "don't be afraid", God, he says.

And so we may feel. It's just not so simple.

To this, I want to offer a rereading of God's promise to Avram. אל תירא אברם. Don't be afraid, Avram. אנכי מגן לך. Anokhi will protect you.

What is Anokhi? Why not simply Ani? They both simply mean, "I".

There are two complementary answers to this question.

First, Anokhi appears much less often than Ani in the Tanakh, although it is not extremely rare. But Anokhi fundamentally points us to one place, I believe.

אנכי ה' אלקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים

Anokhi is the Lord our God who took us out of Egypt from the house of bondage.

Anokhi means standing up for the oppressed and the enslaved.

Anokhi means speaking truth to power – let my people go!

Anokhi will protect you, Avram. Don't be afraid, because the way to resolve – the greatest hope for addressing – your fears after this battle is over, is to champion the rights of the most vulnerable and victimized. To let no one, neither civilian nor elected official, diminish the humanity of the other.

Second, the Malbim and others suggest that while Ani is used as the first person singular when it is not specific, and "I" that could just as well be anyone, Anokhi, by contrast, means, "I and no one else". In other words, Anokhi points to the utter uniqueness of the individual. Their distinct tzelem Elohim, their irreplicability and irreplaceability.

Anokhi will protect you, Avram. Walk through the world appreciating and preserving the uniqueness of every individual, and you will not have to fear.

No matter whom you voted for, and no matter how you feel about the outcome, there is fear. Much like the fears the Sages imagined Avram felt.

Whom did I hurt along the way of this election season?

What fallout will remain even though it's over? What tensions and divisions in our precious nation were thrown into broad daylight, and driven further apart, that now need to be addressed?

How do we respond to the particular fears of minorities and those whose identities have been challenged, victimized, or threatened over this election season, including those who voted for either candidate and feel victimized or unsafe if they are minorities in their own families or communities? And how do we know that all the things that drove us to vote for change will really happen, after everything we poured our hearts and souls into?

אנכי מגן לך.

Emulate God, the Anokhi who rises up for the oppressed and victimized. Let us create solidarity and union with all who need to feel more safe in our nation.

See the Anokhi, the preciousness of the other, with whom we agree and with whom we disagree. Ask the other to tell you more of their story, and their hierarchy of values, and stretch yourself to understand it, even if you disagree wholeheartedly with it. We all share this nation and its fate and its future.

May we walk that path of Anokhi, however long it will take, all the way to its ultimate destination: to the **אל תירא** of fearless progress, growth, safety, peace, and partnership across our nation.