

Four Points of Light

In Tribute to George Herbert Walker Bush

Chanukah 5779

As we spent each night this week kindling the exquisite Chanukah candles, it seemed fitting that the nation was remembering George Herbert Walker Bush, who spoke of one thousand points of light.

I must admit something of a personal connection to our nation's forty first president, as, just three days following my fourth birthday, President Bush was the very first public official for whom I cast a vote. Before panicking that those persistent rumors of massive voter fraud are correct, allow me to explain. My parents were on opposite sides of that particular election- I shall not divulge who voted for whom- but I accompanied one of my parents to the voting booth on that Tuesday morning at the Whittier school.

I had been given a choice as to which parent I would join, and so, I, knowing my parents divergence on this issue, was left to choose between the Vice President and Governor Dukakis. I chose the right parent, and felt extremely vindicated on Wednesday morning, when my parents told me that the Vice President would become President in just over two months. Not fully understanding the electoral college and its nuances at that stage of my life, and not realizing that Bush carried the state of New Jersey by over 420,000 votes, I was more or less convinced that my choice had been decisive.

Shabbat, Chanukah, and Rosh Chodesh, independently, are all days on which we do not eulogize. But, that does not absolve of us of a dual obligation, both to show respect to national leadership, **חלקו כבוד למלכות**,

and, to learn the lessons of, whether or not one agreed with his policies, or supported his platform, the life of a remarkable person, not perfect, as no man is, but someone who embodied a time not of politics, but of public service.

I would like to focus on just four points of light from the life of our forty first President, which, it seems to me, offer much illumination for our own lives.

Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming, a lifelong friend of the President, in his eulogy at Wednesday's state funeral, quipped, in describing the President, "those who travel the high road of humility in Washington, D.C., are not bothered by heavy traffic".

In our age of personal branding, someone with President Bush's record of military service, the youngest aviator in the entire United States navy, fifty eight combat missions, shot down over the Pacific, would not miss a moment to tout his personal heroism and sacrifice, toughness and courage, resilience and fortitude. Yet, as is well known, President Bush lived by the maxim of the Proverbist "Let the stranger praise you and not your own mouth", יהללוך זר ולא פיך.

It may have seemed like some kind of an extreme, but that was precisely what Rambam taught in conjunction with the virtue of modesty. While the Golden Mean may be desirable in other areas, absolute humility is the chosen path. In the words of our Sages, מאד מאד הוי שפל רוח.

Humility is not mutually exclusive with personal ambition and striving, with all of one's being, to maximize one's own potential, and they certainly

co-existed in President Bush. The point of synthesis between the two is striving to achieve one's personal maximum so that one can best serve those around him. It was precisely the lesson of the life of Yosef, which we read of this morning, who started as an immature seventeen year old dreaming of his own power, yet grew into actual leadership by recognizing that if God had chosen him for leadership, it was only so that he might sustain others, כִּי לִמְחִיָּה שֶׁלֹּחֲנֵי אֱלֹקִים לְפָנֵיכֶם לְהַחֲיוֹת לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גְדוּלָה.

It has been widely noted that this first point of light, humility, was instilled in the future president by his own mother, who forbade him to speak of himself. Chanukah is a time of profound emphasis on the significance of family life, נֵר אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ, with the higher levels of the mitzvah actually reflecting each and every person in the household. President Bush was sustained by a marriage of seventy three years, by his children, and grandchildren, and surely saw his most significant achievement to be his role as a family man.

While it may perhaps be said that our culture no longer places the same emphasis on family as it once did, with its near glorification of personal autonomy and self-discovery, our own Jewish value system accords with the one which was at the core of the life of our forty first president. Long term relationships, the duties and obligations that come with family life, and those, to be sure, are as constant as they are real, but these are the price one pays, and happily pays, for those joys that are beyond description, that ensconce us in a framework of unconditional love.

And if family was the President's second point of light, this in turn, brings us to the third, and perhaps most poignant, point of light, the lessons of terrible, unspeakable suffering.

While it was not often discussed during their years in the public arena, but is now well known, George and Barbara Bush lost a beautiful child, Robin, to leukemia, just short of her fourth birthday. Every day he drew breath, George Bush prayed for the soul of his child, and for the opportunity, that when, the good Lord called, he would be able to hug her again. There is no suffering that can equate with the loss of a child, and for some, it would result in, and we would not judge it, a hardening, a narrowing, a closing of the heart.

In the case of the future President, the result was precisely the opposite. It softened his heart, and his capacity to truly feel the pain of others, a point famously ridiculed during the 1992 Presidential campaign, was deepened.

As was recounted by many this week, on foreign trips, he would go to children's hospitals, and visit children who suffered from the same disease which took his daughter's life. As so many of you remember, if leukemia was the stigma of the 1950's, AIDS was the stigma of the 1980's, and who could forget Barbara Bush holding an AIDS baby, as only a mother who understood could have. And, for those who knew him well, George Bush's championing, and signing of the American with Disabilities Act was a direct result of the compassion which stirred for those whose life was marked by forms of pain and suffering.

This has always been the halakhic response to suffering as well. As we are taught time and again in the Torah, whilst the ways of the Almighty are, and will always be, fully mysterious to us here on Earth, **כי לא מחשבותי**, **מחשבותיכם ולא דרכיכם דרכי**, his thoughts are not ours, and his ways are not ours, we are called to transform our suffering into compassion. 'Do not

oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” **ואתם ידעתם את נפש הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים**. Herein lies life’s most basic lesson. We do not wish to suffer, but if we must, than let it soften our hearts towards the pain of others. And this was George Bush’s third point of light.

Finally, there is one last point of light, one which speaks to us as we celebrate the truly participation in the Chanukah communal kiddush.

As the 43rd president eulogized his father on Wednesday, he cited from his father’s inaugural address, words which seemed to come from the very depth of his father’s soul, recently departed:

“My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions. They are not the measure of our lives. In our hearts we know what matters. We cannot hope only to leave our children a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must hope to give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend; a loving parent; a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood, and town better than he found it. And what do we want the men and women who work with us to say when we’re no longer there? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us? Or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment there to trade a word of friendship?”

We are all gathered here in this room, as we often do, as a manifestation of this very sentiment, which again, lies at the very core of our worldview. We pray as a community, we learn together as a community, we read books together as a community, we socialize as a community, we celebrate as a community, as we do today, and we support one another as part of a

community. It's why we stand at the door guarding each other. It's why we cook meals for each other. It's why we we mourn with each other, and it's why we visit each other in the hospital. We are secured in the knowledge that if we should stumble, and if our immediate family might experience hard times, that we are tethered to a broad, caring, and growing community which will be there for us

For these four points of light, humility, family, compassion borne of suffering, and reminding us of how important it is that we should be part of a community, we are grateful for the forty first President of this nation.

After ninety four full and well lived years, he must have been secure in the knowledge that, before his remarkable flame was extinguished, he had kindled so many others, perhaps, even, one thousand points of light.