

“Should Any Rabbi Bless this Inauguration?”

Parashat Vayechi, January 14, 2017/16 Tevet 5777

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

President Ronald Reagan’s second inaugural in January of 1985 was actually held inside the Capitol Rotunda, rather than outside on the East Portico, where inaugurations often take place. I don’t know how many of you remember the winter of 1985 here in Washington, but January 21st was a particularly cold and bitter day, with wind chills of 25-below! Nobody wanted to stand outside in those conditions, not the least of which the 74 year old President. Inside, the Capitol the band struck up the stirring melody of Hail to the Chief as the President entered the room. He took his place along with Nancy, next to Vice President and Mrs. Bush. Just over his shoulder, in the row right behind the president is a tall, balding man, clapping and smiling as the President stood before him. This man was Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, then President of Hebrew Union College, established in Cincinnati in 1875. Dr. Gottschalk, who was born in Germany in 1930, credited Ronald Reagan with teaching him English! Gottschalk used to watch the former actor’s movies after his family immigrated to the United States, and he found that listening to Reagan was a great way to learn the language! After Georgetown President Timothy Healy read the Lord’s Prayer and opera singer Jessye Norman sang *Simple Gifts*, Rabbi Gottschalk was called upon to offer a prayer. Though his English was impeccable, an ever so slight German inflection could still be detected. When he was nine years old, Gottschalk went down to the river with his grandfather the morning after Kristallnacht to collect the burnt fragments of Torah scrolls and prayer books that had been savagely burned by the Nazis the night before. Forty six years later he was offering a prayer at the inauguration of the 40th president of the United States.

For some reason, that was the last time a rabbi has offered a prayer at a presidential inauguration. I waited and waited for my invitation, but shockingly the Trump transition team did not ask me to participate in the inaugural ceremonies. But they did tap Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder and dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles; a museum, educational, and outreach organization named for the famous Nazi hunter and devoted to confronting hate and promoting human rights around the world. Now you may recall that another Orthodox rabbi, Haskel Lookstein, who was the rabbi that supervised Ivanka Trump’s conversion to Judaism, was asked this summer to offer an invocation at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. Initially Rabbi Lookstein agreed. He considers himself a close friend of the Kushner family, and Ivanka’s mentor and teacher. But there was a massive uprising among Rabbi Lookstein’s congregants and students. Sustained protest and pressure convinced him to rescind his acceptance, and he did not, in the end, pray at the Convention. Rabbi Hier is also under attack from a much wider circle. Jews of all denominations and backgrounds are calling on Rabbi Hier to boycott Donald Trump’s inauguration. An online petition has gathered thousands of signatures...he has been pilloried in both the Jewish and secular press, with op-eds reproaching Rabbi Hier for agreeing to offer blessings and Jewish imprimatur to this president-elect. Not only that but Elton John, Garth Brooks, Andrea Bocelli, and at least one of the Rockettes have refused to appear or perform next Friday. The question is, should this rabbi or any rabbi participate in the inauguration at all? Has Donald Trump’s well documented record of insulting women, the disabled, religious and ethnic groups, and his tepid response to the enthusiastic support he’s received from the alt-right, white supremacists, anti-Semites, and other haters cause us to boycott the inaugural and the new administration?

As I waited for the call from Trump’s people to speak next Friday, I thought a lot about these questions. What would I do? Would I agree to be on the dais with a man whose presidency gives me deep, profound reservations and who has said some of the most repugnant things that have ever been a part of public discourse? As I was thinking over my hypothetical response to my hypothetical invitation, I

came across a vignette in today's Torah portion that really gave me pause. Every time we read these portions of the Torah we make a big deal over Joseph's ascent to the highest echelons of Egyptian power. And rightfully so! Here is a Hebrew, a foreigner, a prisoner, a criminal, who gets out of jail, learns the language, the culture; who uses his well-endowed gifts to interpret dreams and render critical advice to the ruler, eventually get rewarded by being named second in command of the known world's most powerful kingdom. It is a big deal. Which makes it even more puzzling to read what happens in the immediate aftermath of his father Jacob's death.

Vayidabeir Yosef el beit Paroh: Joseph spoke, not directly to Pharaoh, not face to face with the only other human being who outranks him in the Egyptian bureaucracy, but to his court, to some middleman, some assistant who is supposed to bring the message to Pharaoh's attention...

My father made me promise to bury him not here in Egypt, but back in Canaan, where we come from. *E'elah na, v'ekbera et avi, v'ashuva.* Please allow me to go up to bury my father there, and then I will return.

Don't you find this strange? Why can't he talk to Pharaoh? Why the third party? Why such meek, cowering language from such an esteemed, celebrated official? The commentaries explain this by the fact that Joseph is an *aveil*, he is a mourner, and really in no condition to greet Pharaoh personally. *Ein lavo el sha'ar ha'melech bil'vush sack*, said the 16th century Italian rabbi Ovadia Seforno...One does not go to the king's chambers wearing sackcloth. But I think it's more than that. By acknowledging Jacob's foreignness, his otherness, his refusal to be interred in this land, Joseph also reinforces to Pharaoh his own outsider status. He is ultimately not of this place, doesn't belong in this place, it's that realization that makes him so docile and timid, notwithstanding his official position in the court.

I have to tell you something, as a relatively recent immigrant myself--to Washington, that is--every time I drive downtown past the monuments, the White House, the Capitol, I am struck with pride and patriotism. It really never gets old! As much of a Zionist as I am, I feel so proud of this country. And it is precisely because it is not like Egypt; because the president is not a pharaoh; and because we are all, if you go back far enough, immigrants to this land from some other place. It may shock you to hear this, but I think that Rabbi Hier should speak at the inauguration. I believe he should speak because unlike Joseph in Egypt, we do belong in this place. We do have a stake in this nation. Many of us are not *geirei toshav*, we are not temporary dwellers or guests just passing through. On January 20th, the other five faith leaders who will participate in the inauguration are all Christian in one form or another; the Roman Catholic Cardinal of New York City, evangelical preachers and televangelists who are considered Mr. Tump's faith advisors and confidants. The Jewish people should be represented on that dais, and by whom better than Rabbi Hier whose very presence is a testimony to repudiation of hatred, bigotry, anti-Semitism, and racism?! I'm sure he won't be given very much time to speak, but in whatever time is allotted to him, I hope he says something along the lines of what Rabbi Gottschalk did in the presence of President Reagan in 1985 when he said: "Inspire our leaders to defeat hunger and hurt, to promote compassion and to find successful ways to assure the weak their share of America's promise. In humility, we pray that this opportunity for renewal will advance reconciliation in the family of nations, guaranteeing peace in our world and tranquility in the farthest reaches of our universe." Or when he channeled George Washington, saying "May You, who are the rock of ages, guide them in protecting the Constitution of our beloved Commonwealth, founded in faith, which ensures unity without uniformity. Sustain them. O God, as they advance the American way which "gives to bigotry no sanction" to "malevolence no hope."

The American presidency is greater than any single occupant of the Oval Office. American democracy is more enduring than the elected officials of any specific term or era. It is transcendent. It is sacred. And

both the office, and the peaceful transition of power deserve the blessing of our tradition, and perhaps a bit of its prophetic voice as well. Rabbi Hier has had his own disagreements with some of Donald Trump's assertions and he publicly spoke out about them. I'm sure he will stand there on Friday in much more mild temperatures than back in '85 with mixed emotions and some ambivalence. But in the end we must listen to the voice of Rabbi Chanina who said 2,000 years ago, under Roman rule, *hevei mitpalel bishlomah shel malchut*...Pray for the peace, the welfare of the government. *She'ilmalei mora'a ish et re'eihu chayim baLAu*...For if people do not respect it, they will swallow each other alive. Notice that Rabbi Chanina also encourages us to pray for the government more than any particular occupant or official. It is this system of democracy that we pray for, and that rather than swallowing each other alive, we instead unite to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in God's ways.
Amen.