

WHAT NOW?  
thoughts on the presidential election of 2016

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When I was a boy I sent away to the White House for a signed photo of then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower. It was my most prized possession. Although in all likelihood the "signature" was machine-generated, in my eyes it was a personal letter to me from the President of the United States. This was a man who was a war hero, the general who saved the world from the tyranny of Nazi Germany. I so cherished this picture that I would keep it in my secret cubby that my father built for me, a removable shelf at the bottom of a bedroom storage cabinet. It shared that space with my "Indian Head" pennies.

I'm not really sure what ever became of that photo. Somewhere along the way it disappeared into the abyss of lost toys. And with it, of course, went my fantasy of the presidency. The truth be told, heroes were a dime-a-dozen in those days. We had the Lone Ranger. Sky King. Al Kaline. John Wayne. Father Knows Best. But as I grew older I came to understand, painfully, that none of them were real, at least not in the way I had idealized them.

It all began with the Kennedy assassination. His presidency was the zenith of this romanticization. Camelot. The beautiful wife and adorable kids. The brothers who played football in Hyannisport. You could actually buy trading cards of their family. But on November 22 everything I thought I knew came crashing down to earth. The president was not merely a human, he was mortal. His successor, as war raged in southeast Asia as well as the streets of Newark and Detroit, became the target of criticism, something I had never before considered. And as my youthful naïveté turned to cynicism, so did the image of the presidency descend. Richard Nixon made it easy. From there it went to a former football player, a peanut farmer and a movie star. The presidency went from sacred myth to ordinary man. A politician. Gone were the days of heroes. And any notion I might have had of "statesman" was relegated to the world of history books.

Still each one of these presidents did things that helped America grow. Johnson gave us the vision of the Great Society. Nixon helped us get out of Vietnam and normalize relations with China. Ford and Carter got us past Watergate. No matter where you stood on the partisan divide -- while each may have assumed his place on the pedestal of American leadership, while each may have been the most identifiable and culpable when it came to laying claim or taking responsibility for America's successes and failures -- well we know, as part of the genius of American constitutional democracy, they were just *part* of the equation.

I am here to tell you tonight that it will be no different for the next four years.

I still believe in America. I still believe in the design of a government which was created to ensure that we would not lose our way. I still believe that it works. The giddiness that pushed me into the voting booth remains undiminished. The privilege of empowering citizenship continues to nourish my dreams. For centuries we Jews would offer prayers for the Queen or the nation. But we wrote those prayers because we knew, either from past experience or

current realities, that we truly had no say. We lived at the "pleasure" of the king. But here it is different. And I have great confidence this will not change.

None of this is to say that this election was just another round of The Vote. If Americans can agree on anything, these past days and weeks and months have witnessed the most fractured, hostile, and bizarre display of partisan politics in any of our lifetimes. We have sat in front of our televisions and computer screens and watched with our mouths agape, incredulous that the competition for the most respected position of world politics could resemble the worst possible version of the Jerry Springer Show. Yet well we knew this was not entertainment. This was reality television in the truest sense of that phrase. This was the stuff of which lives are transformed, millions of lives. This was the stuff that could alter the course of human history.

Come Wednesday morning half of our country woke up feeling that their anger and sense of betrayal had been vindicated. They awakened to the elation of victory, to what they truly believe will be a future of promise. The other half never quite made it to sleep. The other half saw a Tuesday that glimmered with sunshine and hope turn into a Wednesday of clouds and rain, to a miasma of sadness and anger and fear. And shock. It feels as if we inhabit parallel universes. But we don't. We live across the street from each other. We sit next to one another on the train. We cheer for the same football teams and will graciously brake our cars to allow each other to cross the street. Yet when it comes to putting a sign on our front lawns or a sticker on our bumper or a pithy comment on FaceBook ("Guilty"), we become enemies. If looks and words could kill, virtually any city in our country could easily end up looking like Aleppo. Indeed, if we learned anything on Wednesday it was that there is no such thing as American exceptionalism. We are no different than the people of any other nation. And if we're not careful, America might just end up like every other nation.

But we're not there yet.

Let me be clear: I have grave concerns about the President-Elect. I fear his narcissism, his absolute compulsion to be at the center. I fear his impulsivity, his lack of intellectual wonder, his preoccupation with always being right. I fear his lack of discernment, his inability or unwillingness to distance himself from his racist and hate mongering fringe. I abhor the way he objectifies women, the way he exploits the weaknesses of others. I don't need the President to share my values, but I expect the President to place my needs above his own.

By the same token, and I know this will be especially hard for some of us, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. We owe him that much. The office of The President of the United States has the power to be transformative. I genuinely pray that his election will be humbling for the President-Elect, that it will challenge and even inspire him to see that his primary mandate is not to make America "great" but to make America "whole". And I want to believe that he will have willing partners.

For all my misgivings, I refuse to give up on America. What I have always loved about Americans is their ability to face and transcend adversity. We have overcome civil war. As a nation of immigrants, we have taken profound diversity and turned it into a strength (whether all of us realize that or not). We confronted economic depression and world war and transformed our nation into an exemplar of affluence and justice.

We are hardly perfect. There are so many who have been left behind. There is still so much to do. The land whereupon we co-exist today is rife with a contempt for the other that seemingly impedes any hope of progress. We have allowed our souls to be fed with fear instead of compassion. We have seen our politics reduced to rallies and chants. We have demonized each other in ways most of us never thought possible. Someone said that the feelings they had on Wednesday morning were just like those of September 12, 2001. But someone else said, on September 12 we were all united.

Therein lies the difference. Therein lies our challenge.

It would be natural for me to encourage commonality. "Let us put aside our differences and come together. Let us heal our wounds." Nothing would bring me more joy. But it's not that simple. We don't have to agree. We don't have to see "eye to eye". But if we are to have any hope as a nation, then it must begin with the way we speak and act toward each other. We must first restore decency to political discourse. Even more, we must desire and aspire to the art of compromise. As citizens, we must demand an end to partisan gridlock. We must begin with a premise that a nation divided is no nation at all.

And to do that we would do well to listen to our children.

This past Wednesday evening I sat with our high school students and watched as they wiped away their tears when they spoke of their fears. I witnessed disillusionment and despair. To be sure, they were disappointed that their candidate had lost the election. But it was more than that. They shared a profound anxiety that their world would be filled with racism and misogyny, a world where xenophobia would masquerade as patriotism.

As I listened to their deeply considered concerns, I thought back to *my* teenage years. Well we know (and many of us remember), my world was filled with rage and revolution. We marched. We burned flags. We sat in and spoke out. But we did all of this because we believed that our future would be better than our past. There was no such optimism on Wednesday night. They see a world in reverse.

But I'll tell you something else. Each and every one of them felt the need to understand the other. Despite their pain, they spoke of wanting to engage with the other half. This isn't a game for them. This isn't a case of winners and losers. They either articulated or nodded in sincere assent to an earnest desire to figure out why kids their age could see the world so differently.

Wouldn't it be great if we could get our leaders to do the same?

My colleague Rabbi Zoe Klein noted that, as we are taught in the book of First Kings (3:9), as Solomon is about to assume the awesome power of kingship, he reaches out to God in profound humility:

"Give me a listening heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong. For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?"

Reflecting on this verse, Rabbi Klein observes: "[Solomon] didn't ask for might. He didn't ask for wealth. He didn't even ask for wisdom. He asked for a listening heart."

Rabbi Klein goes on to offer, based on this remarkably appropriate text, an absolutely beautiful prayer. Here is her hope:

"May the new Leader of the Free World be blessed with a listening heart. A heart that listens to the pain of a divided people. A heart that listens for commonalities. A heart that listens to those whose voices are tiny and soft. A heart that listens for the weeping at the margins. A heart that listens to the dreams of the poor, the hopes of the young, and the faint prayer of the dying. A heart that listens to the call of the earth and the haunting song of the sea. A heart that listens past language, dialects and differences to the very pulse of humanity. A heart that listens to the resounding message of history. A heart that listens to the spirits of our ancestors and the hum of the future. A heart that listens to you and listens to me and hears the mysterious harmonies that are hidden to us."

But, she continues, it's not just on him. The responsibility lies with us as well:

"May we all be blessed with listening hearts, and step into tomorrow together with a commitment to hear one another. To receive each other's presence with hearts that are open and compassionate. With hearts that listen to one another's fears. With hearts that listen to one another's devotion. With hearts that listen to one another's achievements. With hearts that listen to one another's disappointments. With hearts that listen to one another's beauty. With hearts that listen to one another's goodness. With hearts that listen to one another's pride. Let us step into tomorrow with our hearts channeling Solomon's gift. With our hearts attuned to one another's precious and unique music, and learn to sing in harmony."

Regardless of how we voted, we must find ways to listen to each other, to bring our disparate voices together and to collectively affirm what I know we all wish for this land. In the words of Dwight David Eisenhower, the man whose picture and machine-generated signature so inspired me in the days of my youth: "Whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America."

We must learn to cross the aisle and work for the common good. We must come to understand that Democrat and Republican are not supposed to be identities but differing perspectives on how to realize the American dream. There will come a day when a woman will take her seat in the Oval Office. There will come a day when love of country will supersede fear of the other. And I pray we will figure out how to talk to and listen to and respect each other.

This past Wednesday night, as we brought all of our high school students together for a closing assembly here in this sanctuary, Cantor Meredith leaned over to me and mentioned that the Ner Tamid was "out". The symbolism was overwhelming. I could not bring myself to mention it that night. But you know what? We put in a new light bulb.

There is nothing that is broken that cannot be fixed.