

Let Us Not Separate – Parashat Lech Lecha 5777

Rabbi Michael Safra

I once heard of a man who was lying in bed on a Saturday morning. His wife nudged him: “Get out of bed already and go to “shul”. “But I don’t want to go to shul”, he said, “and I have my reasons. First, I am tired. Second, I don’t like the service and I really dislike the sermons. Third, the congregation doesn’t like me.” But his wife responded, “Those excuses are no good. I have my own reasons why you need to get out of bed and go to shul. First, a decent Jewish family goes to services together. Second, God will never forgive you, if you don’t go to shul. And third, you are the rabbi.”

I want to acknowledge the anxieties of this moment. There is anxiety in our country, not just over the highly charged question of whether or not Donald Trump will become a good president, but also born of the surprise, even shock – by detractors and supporters alike – over the results; and that doesn’t just go away. I think also that, for some, there is a certain anxiety over this sermon. This is one of those mornings where much of the congregation comes in knowing the broad topic, and undoubtedly some are a little anxious about what I might say. “Is he going to bash Trump? Is he going to complain about wild protestors?” Or perhaps the more standard, “Is he going to blabber on and on and on?”

And so I can begin by assuring you that even though Parashat Lech Lecha describes how Abram and Sarai left their birthplace in Mesopotamia to create their new life in Canaan, I am not going to talk about the value of *Aliyah* or even immigration to Canada. I want to talk about healing and coming together and the unity of the American people.

The first lecture I attended as a freshman in college was History 165, American History from 1865 to the present. The professor described the broad theme for his course. American history, he said, is characterized by a series of polarizations of “we” vs. “they.” The particulars have changed – free men vs. slaves, native born vs. immigrant, men vs. women, black vs. white, rich vs. poor – but there have always been insiders, who felt they represented the real America, and outsiders who felt that the project remained unfinished because they were left out. That truth holds through Reconstruction, rapid immigration, women’s suffrage, civil rights, and various iterations of tax policy.

And leaving the actual candidates aside, Tuesday’s election map highlighted quite clearly the polarizations of today: rural vs. urban, red vs. blue, common vs. elite. My fear is that instead of coming together, these fissures will continue to widen: either that the winners might overreach and push aside the other half of the country with whom they disagree, or that the losers will obstruct – that instead of using the opposition to shape the policies as broadly defined by the ruling party, they will work to score points already for the next election. I hope we can agree that the election season model of two Americas competing with each other for dominance is far inferior to the American dream of unity with a common purpose.

And the Torah actually speaks to the issue as well.

Among this morning's stories of Abram's travels, we read of friction between the herdsmen of Abram and those of his nephew Lot. There simply wasn't enough grazing land for both groups, and so they quarreled until Abram had had enough. He said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. **הפרד נא מעלי**, Let us separate. **אם השמאל**, ואימינה, If you choose the left, I will go right; **ואם הימין ואשמאילה**, and if you choose right, I will go left." It sounds like the agricultural version of today's friction between red and blue, and the solution is to separate, to break up the union.

Lot picked the beautiful land of Sodom and Gomorrah (before they were destroyed, of course), and Abram took what was left. And in context, the Torah seems satisfied with the decision.

But if we read the Torah a bit subversively, it suggests that Abram may actually have made a bad choice. Because we know what happens next. In the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot has two children, Moab and Amon, whose descendants become Israel's mortal enemies. About them, the book of Deuteronomy states, "**לא יבוא עמוני ומואבי בקהל ה'**" No Ammonite or Moabite shall be permitted to join the congregation of the Lord; even one who is removed for ten generations is not permitted to join the congregation of the Lord!" What began as a small family squabble became so deep, so final, so absolute that the Torah says it could never be mended.

Except that there are cracks in the metaphorical separation wall. Midian is related to Moab and as such they are slated by the Torah for destruction. But who is the most famous Midianite in the Torah? Tzipporah, daughter of Jethro the Midianite priest, and she married Moses. The book of Kings tells us that Solomon married Naamah, the daughter of an Ammonite king. Their son, Rehoboam, succeeded Solomon as king.

And of course there is Rut HaMoaviyah, Ruth the Moabite, who lovingly told her Jewish mother-in-law, "Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God." Ruth is the ancestress of King David, which means she is the ancestress of the Messiah. You see what is happening: The messianic ideal is reunification; the messianic age is characterized by an undoing of Abram's mistaken decision to separate from his nephew at the very beginning. The one once labeled as the Enemy will become a partner, an assistant, a companion in love.

Now I'm not too worried about the Messiah, but I still pray for the end of the zero-sum game of division that defines our politics of this moment. The truth is that

- We need to be fiscally responsible *and* to provide for the needs of society's most vulnerable members.
- We need to welcome the stranger, the tired, the poor; *and* to validate and address the very real anxieties of those who are most adversely affected or feel left behind by change.
- We need to be open and inclusive and accepting of the lifestyle choices of every human being *and* respectful of conservative readings of religious traditions that suggest that some things are right and others are wrong.
- We need to remember that Black Lives *and* Blue Lives matter.

- We need to be Israel's strongest ally that supports her in her quest for peace and security in the world's most unstable region *and* to be vigilant in our pursuit of a peaceful and just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, for the benefit of the occupiers and those living under military occupation.

In Pirkei Avot, the Teachings of our Rabbis, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century sage Rabbi Ishmael teaches: “אל תאמר קבלו דעתי, Don't say to someone else, 'You must come around to my opinion!' That's up to them, not to you.” Unity does not mean asking the other side to abandon its principles to join our team. Unity requires a genuine striving to listen and understand and respond to the other side, and then to work together for common cause. For the sake of unity, we must resist Abram's urge to separate and retreat to our comfort zones on either the left or the right.

In a beautiful blog post this week, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnold Eisen, suggested three simple actions steps to guide our path towards healing and national unity:

1. In speech – to remember that all people – those with whom I agree and those with whom I disagree and those about whom I talk behind their backs – all people are created in the image of God and must be treated with dignity and respect, whether or not the microphone is hot. Our words matter.
2. Truth – I think it was Daniel Patrick Moynihan who said that everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not his own facts. Both sides must recognize that the discourse of this campaign was characterized by flat out lying and misuse of facts. And that has to stop.
3. Helping one another – to remember that at its core, citizenship is about responsibility. And our number one responsibility, as Jews and as Americans, is to help other people in need, especially the ones who cannot help themselves.

That is the essence of my prayer on this Shabbat. May our new leaders be blessed. May our nation be blessed. May we come together in an effort to heal our wounds, repair the cracks, bridge the divides, so that Abram's mistake of separating from a loved one in the face of friction might never be repeated. In the words of our liturgy:

May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony, to banish hatred and bigotry, and to safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country. And let us say: Amen.