

Lessons for Our New President
Parashat Lech Lecha
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We have just concluded an exhausting political campaign in our country and have elected a new president from a different political party, representing a different political philosophy, to lead us.

Notice that I say, "We." Even though the victor in this election received the vote of only a minority (perhaps 41%) of those who went to the polls this past Tuesday, and an even smaller percentage of eligible voters (perhaps as small as 25%), we in this country recognize an electoral system that awards even a plurality with victory. And it is incumbent on all of us to give support to our new president, whether or not we voted for him.

This is one of the differences wrought by November 3rd. The campaign for the presidency is over. Whatever party we do or don't belong to, and however we may have voted, we must now relate to our President-elect as just that: no longer a candidate, but an incipient public servant.

And, of course, the President-elect also has to adopt a different stance. No longer is he the representative of a particular party vying for power, trying to convince us that he is better than the other candidates. Now that he has been elected to public office, he represents and is accountable to all of us.

This takes leadership. I would like to spend just a few minutes this morning exploring some of the lessons we can learn about leadership from our Torah portion.

As we can recall, we read about Abraham this morning. Abraham was the first Jewish leader. He is known in our tradition as Abraham Avinu, Abraham our father. Had he not acted as he did, we wouldn't be Jews today. What do we learn about him from our Torah reading today?

Well, first of all, **he is a listener**. He listens to God. God tells him Lech Lecha, go



forth, and he goes forth. Let me just remind you that when the Bible talks about "listening to God" it doesn't mean what it would mean to use that language today. If we were to hear someone say today that he is doing something because God told him to do it, that would sound like magical thinking to us; it would remind us of the rumors of Ronald Reagan and his wife consulting astrologers before scheduling presidential events.

No, when the Bible says that someone listens to God, it means that someone speaks and acts according to his principles and his convictions. That he isn't afraid to do what he thinks is right, even if it is unpopular. A leader has to have a vision. A leader has to have convictions and has to act according to those convictions. A successful leader can bring people along with him, as Abraham did when he brought with him from Haran his wife and his family and his entire clan. But this is possible only when the leader knows which way he wants to go, and communicates it to his people. (We know that Abraham had conviction; he proved it to his people, as we read in the Maftir portion this morning, when he underwent circumcision at the age of 99. That's commitment.)

The significance of Abraham following God's directive rather than making his journey on his own initiative, is that Abraham is not doing what he is doing for his own sake; he is doing it for God — that is, he is doing it **because it is right**. Yes, Abraham has a vision, but it is based on principles that go far beyond him. A leader should be able to justify what he is doing not on the basis of self-interest but on the basis of the common interest of the people he or she leads.

There is something else we learn about leadership from the strange incident in Egypt. This is an obscure tale, but one thing comes through: Abraham and Sarah **work as a team**. Later in Genesis, in the portion which we will read next week (which we also happen to read on the first day of Rosh HaShanah) we learn that Abraham listens to his wife Sarah; indeed we learn that this is commanded to him by God: **kol asher tomar eleicha Sarah Smah b'kolah** (Genesis 21:12).

A leader shouldn't be afraid to seek advice from, to follow the advice of, to work together with, others. This lesson leads us to the next great quality of leadership which we can learn from our parashah: the art of involving others in leadership, the art of compromise.

At the end of our reading this morning, we read how, when Abraham, Sarah and Lot returned from Egypt, Lot was concerned about the ability of the land to support both of their flocks. Now if you look carefully at that passage, you can see that the

problem is not that the land is not big enough for the two of them; the problem is simply that they are getting in each other's way.

Abraham solves the problem in the classic, fair and magnanimous way to divide something in half. Are you familiar with this? The way to divide anything in half is for one person to divide it up and the other to pick whichever half he wants. That's what Abraham did with himself and Lot. He didn't have to do that. He could simply have told Lot, who was many years younger than he, to settle in a certain area and be done with it. But that would have left hard feelings perhaps. Instead, by involving Lot in the decision, he conveyed the clear impression of fairness and equity.

Finally, there is one final lesson to be learned today about leadership from our readings, one which I think comes straight out of our Haftorah today: a leader must have endurance.

There is a puzzling verse in our haftorah that begs to be interpreted: **V'Kovei Adonai yahleefu koah ... Yarutzu v'lo Yiga'u, yelchu v'lo yiafu** — Those who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength; ... they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not grow faint-hearted." (Isaiah 40:31). The progression in the verse is odd. Why do we first read "they shall run and not be weary" and only then "they shall walk and not grow faint-hearted"? Shouldn't walking come before running?

Well, not always. In pursuing a goal such as the presidency, we say that someone is **running for office**. The goal is clear, easy to grasp, and one devotes all of one's energy to achieving it.

Once one has won, it is the time for serving in office. Walking is a good metaphor for this. It is the time when a leader must have the strength to endure day after day of taxing, wearying circumstances. It involves much less running or flying around, as both of the major candidates did in the last few days before the election, and much more pain-staking work on the ground building coalitions and working together with others to achieve common goals. If the motto of the campaign was "the courage to change," the motto now must be "the strength to endure."

In the morning blessing with which we began our service, we offered praise to God whom we call **Ha-Noten La-Yaef Koach** — the one who gives strength to the weary. That phrase, of course, is taken from our Haftorah today. It recognizes that we cannot be the source of our own strength. And the same is true of a leader. A

leader cannot be the source of his own strength; he can only gain strength by maintaining faith in the basic values and goals by which he lives his life, and by exercising leadership accordingly. Only if a leader remains true to his or her principles will he or she be able to endure the wearying struggles which accompany the work of governance. We hope and pray that this will be true of our new leader and that God will grant him the strength to achieve his goals on behalf of all of us. Amen.