

A New Leader
Lech Lecha 2008

Rabbi Weinblatt
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Regardless of how you voted on Tuesday you can't help but acknowledge, feel and recognize that it was a good week for America. A chapter, the chapter of racism and of denying people their rights because of the color of their skin has been closed, and a new chapter has been opened.

Inspired by the prospect of electing our first African American president, many, including elderly blacks participated in the democratic process for the first time in their lives. Spurred on by the chance to change the country's direction by electing a different leader, many young people proudly cast their first vote.

It was a good week for America as the extraordinarily gracious and sincere concession speech of John McCain on Tuesday evening was followed by the eloquent, inspiring and uplifting words of President-Elect Barak Obama. You can't help but love a country in which a contest can be fought so fiercely and yet the adversaries then reach out a hand to each other, express mutual respect for their opponent, respect the outcome and pledge to work together.

All American children can now dream that one day they can reach the highest office in the land. Once again people around the globe look to America and are reminded of all the reasons that it is the leader of the Free World and its democracy the envy and model for so many.

For Jews, regardless of how you voted, you cannot help but share in the sense of pride felt by blacks, for their struggle has been our struggle, for so long. The history of their long march toward equality, despite difficulties, and the challenges presented by divisive leaders, such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, is one that we have helped to lead and be a part of. A record number of Jews were elected to Congress. Yes, it was a good week for America – maybe not for the stock market, but still overall, it was a good week.

No one knows what the future will bring, but for now we can bask in the sense of hope brought on by the prospect of a new beginning and enjoy the imaginings of a better future.

I want to comment on one of the comments I heard that was disturbing to me. In one of the post-mortem assessments and discussions the host of a popular NPR Friday morning weekly round up of the news mentioned the letter of congratulations sent by the leader of Iran, Mahmud Ahmadinejad to Barak Obama. She naively gushed over it and said that this may represent a new beginning or new opportunity to resolve our differences with Iran.

The remark from an intelligent, well-read, well-informed, knowledgeable woman reflects a shallow understanding of the threat posed by Iran and a lack of understanding of history. It shows how easy it is to be deceived by our hopes. To his credit, and to the consternation of Iran's leaders, at his first press conference as President elect, Mr. Obama reiterated his position that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable.

Many have said this election was about our future and not our past. But it is imprudent and impossible to act without being cognizant of the past. This is one of the reasons why we Jews are so committed to learning and then sharing the lessons of history with the world.

Tomorrow, November 9 will mark the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. On November 9 and 10 in 1938 the full force of Nazi Germany's vehement hatred of Jews was unleashed against its Jewish citizens. Long planned, and made to appear as if it was a spontaneous outburst, a well coordinated and highly organized attack on Jews and Jewish property left 200 synagogues, many of them buildings hundreds of years old destroyed and in ruins. The pogrom against German Jews and the destruction of their communal property as well as the ransacking of their homes and businesses marked a turning point in how Germany acted against its Jews. 92 Jews were murdered, 30,000 were rounded up and sent to concentration camps, 800 shops were looted and razed. as police either stood by and watched, or actively participated, there was nowhere to turn. The Jewish community was then assessed a fine of a billion marks for the damages, as their insurance was cancelled and the process of Aryanization was escalated. The Holocaust had begun.

But the point we must always remember is that this violence did not come out of nowhere. There were plenty of warning signs.

Although there were only 500,000 Jews in Germany, constituting only .76% of the overall population, less than one percent of the population, they were blamed for all of Germany's economic ills and as being the cause of Germany's defeat in World War I. In the five years leading up to Kristallnacht, about 90 laws, known as the Nuremberg Laws had been enacted severely restricting the rights of Jews, regulating and limiting what they could do, who they could marry, all to protect German blood and honor.

Hitler had written and told the world exactly what he intended to do, and then proceeded to do so.

So I hope that this talk show hosts forgives us if we spoil the party and point out that the words of a person who uses the exact same words of Adolph Hitler and of a regime that embraces the ideology and goals of Nazi Germany, and wants to continue their work should be taken seriously.

The Talmud warns against extending compassion to the cruel, and says that in the end, one who extends compassion to the cruel winds up being consumed and destroyed.

In this week's Torah portion, we see that when necessary, Abraham, known for his compassion understood that when his nephew had been kidnapped, and when a military threat presented itself, he acted forcefully to rescue the hostage. And the result – after the incident with the five kings is that the king of Sodom blesses Abraham.

In commenting on the unusual juxtaposition of God's names Adonai/Elohim by Abraham the Art Scroll shares the insight of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh. Abraham refers to God in this way because God "in His wisdom knows when harsh judgment is necessary to lay the foundation of a brighter future."

This past week's election was all about a brighter future for our nation and the world, yet that does not mean it will not require vigilance.

We read in this week's torah portion that through Abraham the nations of the world shall be blessed. It is no wonder that the founding leaders of America wanted to emulate the Jews of the Biblical period and found the story of the struggle against the tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh to resemble their struggle. This is also one of the reasons why Jews have felt so welcome in this country.

We must look in both directions, simultaneously, backward and forward. Let us rejoice in the strides our nation has taken this week, and let us be sure that we keep a watchful eye out so we learn from our past as well. Only then can we truly appreciate how far we have come as a nation and a people, and how long and arduous the journey to the Promised Land.

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