

October 29, 2020 – *Lekh Lekha*
Weekly Message from Rabbi Peltz

This week I've been participating in a virtual conference from the Hartman Institute on Judaism, Citizenship, and Democracy. Yehuda Kurtzer, the President of the Hartman Institute, gave a thought-provoking keynote address last week about the responsibilities of citizenship, which gave me perspective during this contentious election season. He pointed out how Judaism uses the language of obligation, or mitzvah, when it comes to our responsibilities as members of the Jewish people. In America, however, the language most often used about citizenship is rights. We talk about civil rights, the right to life, the right to health care and so on. While liberals and conservatives may disagree on many things, the language of rights is something that we all use. How we talk about our relationship to our people and our society matters. When citizenship comes with obligations, then we have a responsibility towards something bigger than ourselves. When citizenship is about rights, then we don't need to give up anything, rather we fight for those rights. While rights are important, an overemphasis on them can lead to a sense of entitlement, and a disincentive to compromise.

Think of Abraham in this week's portion, *Lekh Lekha*. Commentaries suggest many reasons why Abraham complies with God's call to leave his land. One reason that is given is that, since the command came from God, Abraham left out of a sense of obligation. As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in our *Etz Hayim Humash* commentary, God's commands give us the opportunity to be moral people. In other words, by being obligated to higher values, we can achieve more, and do better. When we reflect on American history, we see that some of our greatest moments were born out of a sense of obligation. In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the first federal income tax to help pay for the Civil War. Imposing a shared responsibility for the Union's cause. In 1941, after Pearl Harbor, Americans enlisted to fight the Nazis and the Japanese in World War II out of a sense of obligation to the cause of freedom. This language of obligation was most explicit in President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961, where he famously said: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." This inspired countless citizens to see the importance of civic action and public service.

These are three examples of how the language of obligation has helped to unite our country around the idea that citizenship has responsibilities. While rights are an essential piece of citizenship, as enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution, rights without a sense of obligation can lead us down a dangerous path. As we approach Election Day this year and cast our ballots, let us be cognizant of not only the rights, but also the obligations, of citizenship. Then, perhaps, we too can heed God's call like Abraham did, to put our values into action.