

The following d'var Torah was given by Rabbi Steven Conn for Shabbat Lech L'cha (Nov. 8, 2008).

No matter whom we voted for, I think we can all agree that something extraordinary happened on Tuesday night when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States.

Crowds poured into the streets in cities all over the country; not just African Americans, but people of all races and ethnicities.

Many of you remember Rabbi Phil Pohl, who grew up in our congregation. His parents moved to Florida just last year. Rabbi Pohl's daughter Jennifer goes to List College at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He sent me an email describing Jennifer's experience on election night. As many of you know, the Seminary is located at 122nd Street and Broadway, only a few blocks from Harlem. When I was a student at the Seminary, we were told never to go to Harlem after dark. But on election night, after Barack Obama was declared the winner, Jennifer and her friends decided to walk down the hill toward 125th Street. When they reached the Apollo Theater, Jennifer wrote, they joined throngs of people, celebrating in front of a giant screen TV mounted outside. They hugged and high-fived people of all ages, colors, and ethnicities. It was a scene that would have been unimaginable in the New York City I lived in twenty years ago.

Even those of us who didn't take to the streets are still talking about what happened. Everywhere I've been in the last few days, I have heard people talking to each other about Obama, the election, and what a unique moment this is in our country's history.

For the moment, Barack Obama has captured our national imagination. But why? It's not just that Obama will soon become our first African American president. There are other, even more important reasons.

First of all, Barack Obama embodies the principle of equal opportunity for all. His rise to the presidency proves once and for all that anyone who is willing to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices can become president.

Barack Obama also provides us with a new role model. Kids all over the country and the world--especially African-American kids--are telling their parents this week, "I want to be like Barack Obama".

For many of us, Barack Obama has also been a breath of fresh air. Whether we agree with his ideas, the very fact that he is inexperienced, that he seems to speak to us from the heart, and that he appears to be motivated by a strong sense of idealism makes Obama seem different from other politicians.

Finally, people all over the world cheered Barack Obama's election as a blessing to the nations. There is widespread hope that Obama, who has roots in Asia, Africa and the United States, can reach out to the nations of the world in friendship and restore America's image as a world leader and a country to emulate.

Personally, I have never seen anyone who has captured the imagination of this country and of much of the world the way Barack Obama has. Not Bill Clinton, not Ronald Reagan. I am too young to remember John Kennedy, or FDR. But those who do tell me the reaction was not as intense or as widespread. Is there an example that might help us better understand this phenomenon?

I think that there is indeed an example—right here in our Torah portion this morning: Abraham. The call of Abraham, which we read at the very beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha, has certainly captured the imagination of Jews, Christians, and Muslims the world over. And in God's charge to Abraham, we see some of the very same elements that have sparked our popular imagination this week.

Like Barack Obama, Abraham is the embodiment of the principle of equal opportunity. If you think Obama is inexperienced as a leader, take a look at Abraham. The Torah doesn't tell us why God chose Abraham. He does not appear to have any special qualifications. Some commentators suggest God did this on purpose; so that the reasons for the choice would remain a mystery. By doing so, God wants us to understand that any one of us could be Abraham.

God also wants Abraham to be a role model. God tells Abraham "all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." Rashi explains that this phrase means that people will say to their children "may you be like Abraham"—in the much same way that parents are saying to their children today, "may you be like Barack Obama."

Abraham too, is referred to as a breath of fresh air. In Midrash Rabbah we read "Said R. Berekiah: What did Abraham resemble? A vial of myrrh closed with a tight-fitting lid and lying in a corner, so that its fragrance was not disseminated; as soon as it was taken up, however, its fragrance was disseminated."

And finally, Abraham, like Barack Obama, is expected to be a blessing to the nations. God tells Abraham, "I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great nineteenth century German teacher, explains the words "you shall be a blessing" to mean "you must so live as to be a blessing to the world."

In all these ways, there is a striking parallel between our image of Obama and the Abraham we read about today. Does this mean that Barack Obama is destined for greatness? We can't know, any more than we can know the end of Abraham's story from reading just the beginning. Abraham faced ten trials before he could be called a truly great leader. Barack Obama will face at least ten trials, probably many more. Abraham stumbled and fell along the way several times. No doubt, Obama will stumble and fall as well. Barack Obama may have the potential be a great leader like Abraham, but that's as far as we can go for now.

In the meantime, Barack Obama has one more thing in common with Abraham. Both men are not afraid to ask something from us. Both challenge us to stand up and be partners in bringing about change.

Abraham is challenged by God to go through the painful ritual of circumcision, and to pass this tradition down to his sons--and ultimately to us. Circumcising our sons is what we are asked to do to affirm our commitment to the covenant of Abraham. Circumcision is an act of faith, a sacrifice made so that future generations will remember that we are all part of something bigger: a history, a community, a people.

In his acceptance speech on Tuesday, Obama also challenged us to do our part to make this a better country and a better world. These are his words:

What began twenty-one months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night. This victory alone is not the change we seek – it is only the chance

for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you.

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other. Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers – in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people.

From the very beginning of our history, we have sustained ourselves as a community and as a people through commitment, hard work and sacrifice; by caring about each other and not just ourselves. This is the legacy of Abraham.

For too long in our country, our government—whether led by Democrats or Republicans-- has demanded little of us. And we have become divided and self-involved as a result. May we rise to meet this new challenge to give of ourselves to our country, and to unite together to pull our country out of the crisis we're in right now. And may we truly find in Barack Obama, a leader who not only makes a good first impression, but who, like Abraham can be a blessing to our nation and to all the peoples of the world.