

Integrity, Literacy and Hope in the Age of Trump

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The Jewish Center

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On Thursday, I discovered in my inbox an email from a reporter at the New York Post.

Dear Rabbi Levine,

I'm reading reports that a rabbinic waiver has been granted to Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump to ride in the presidential motorcade on Shabbos. My question is, is it halachically permissible to do this? What's your professional opinion?

First of all, how impressive is it that a reporter from the New York Post knows the word *halachically*?

On the substance of the matter, these are difficult questions to answer. But I can assure you that my response was unassailable. My response was to forward the email to Rabbi Zirkind....

With yesterday's presidential inauguration, everyone has an opinion and everyone is looking for an angle. As observant Jews who are committed citizens, what's our angle?

What I'd like to do this morning is shift the conversation away from what we may like or dislike about our new president and turn instead to a conversation about values. So allow me to share with you three observations that speak to this unprecedented moment in our nation's history.

My first observation emerges from a well-known anomaly in the narrative of Moshe at the burning bush.

ויקרא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה--וַיֹּאמֶר ה'נִי

Why the doubling of Moshe's name? Is it the language of love or might it mean something more?

The Midrash offers a fascinating explanation:

הוא מִן הַעַד □ לא נדבר עמו, הוא מִן הַמֶּה □ מִן דְּבַר עִמּוֹ

Moshe was the same Moshe throughout his life. The fact that he interacted with the Almighty Himself, the Midrash says, never had an effect on his core identity. Even after he became the world's greatest prophet, he remained the world's humblest man.

But it's not just that Moshe never changed. It's that his inner self and his national identity were one and the same: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה--וַיֹּאמֶר ה'נִי.

The Torah tells us that there was no prophet like Moshe. He was *sui generis*. Try as they may, no other political leader can achieve this kind of harmony.

And so it's worth remembering that in the person of President Trump, we have in fact two characters: Donald Trump the man; and Donald Trump the president.

To honor the station is not to honor the man; to root for the political success of our president is not to endorse his character.

Bernard Henri Levy recently cited a passage from the Talmud Yerushalmi that tells the story of Rabbi Yehudah Nessia, one of the foremost figures of Jewish thought of the third century.

Rabbi Yehudah was the head of his yeshiva. And there was a young Roman swineherd who would pass by the yeshiva grounds on a regular basis. When he did so, they shouldn't have done it, but the yeshiva students would seize the opportunity to poke fun at the farmer.

Years later, Rabbi Yehudah was summoned to the distant city of Caesarea, to appear before the Roman Emperor Diocletian on a Saturday eve. The emperor made the summons on Friday afternoon so that Rabbi Yehudah would be forced either to travel on Shabbat or appear late. And the emperor heated the local baths to such a degree that would the rabbi have entered, he would have been boiled to death. A miracle occurred and the rabbi was saved on both counts.

When he appeared before Diocletian, Rabbi Yehudah recognized him as the former swineherd. Diocletian said to him with derision, "Just because your God performs miracles for you, does that give you the right to mock me?"

"We had contempt for Diocletian the swineherd," the rabbi said, "but we are ready to honor Diocletian the emperor." As Levy puts it so nicely, it was the rabbi's hope that the emperor would be like Shaul ha-melekh. He, too, before becoming king had tended donkeys, but went on to "heed the prophecy, rise to his office, and become a new man."

It seems this sentiment has been entirely absent from the discourse. But it's not an either/or proposition that says we have to be for our new president or against him. There is a nuanced middle position.

As Jews committed to the embrace of the stranger, we can never turn a blind eye to statements or policies that bespeak racism, xenophobia or misogyny. We have to remain vigilant and we have to object vigorously when our values come under assault.

But at the same time, we have to honor the office of the president of the United States of America; pray that he and his counselors are guided by divine wisdom; and remain committed to the ideals that have allowed this nation to prosper. I can't say for sure that our new president will be a Shakespearean Prince Hal and that he'll become a new man; but I can say that – whatever his failings – we should be rooting for his success.

If my first observation is about the substance of this new administration, my second is about its form.

In a book called *ממנו*, it's quite conspicuous that we find among the central figures in the opening chapters virtually no names.

א וַיִּלְדָּה אִישׁ, מִבְּנֵי לֵוִי; וַיִּקְרָא, אֶל-בְּנֵי-לֵוִי

There's a baby and his sister and her mother, but we don't know any of their names.

Two Jews are fighting. But their identities are obscure.

And the reason for this is very simple. By and large, after the death of Yosef's generation, the Israelites had begun to Egyptify. They had assimilated to such a degree that it would have been difficult to assign them individual identities. Yes, we have Midrashim about how the Israelites kept their clothes and their language. But virtually everything else was gone – including ברית מילה – the very sign of the covenant that differentiated them.

This is the meaning of the word ויִרְצוּ – As the Seforno puts it, the Israelites had adopted the ways of רצוּם – swarming aimlessly without purpose and without identity. The Jews had devolved into products of their moment and their environment.

And so the only characters with names are those who rise up against their culture: Shifra, Puah and Moshe. Because they're unwilling to simply conform to the social mores of the moment, they acquire names.

My point isn't about assimilation; it's about consciousness. Presidential administrations play a not insignificant role in shaping the culture of our times. And not just by playing politics or producing policies, but in the manner in which its members comport themselves. It's not just about the message; the medium matters, too.

And so we have to stop and notice when notions like integrity and character begin to erode. When so little value is attached to reading and learning, to deliberation and collaboration, we have to be moved.

To have acquired a name in Sefer Shemot is to have embraced a counter-culture – to have stood in the breach and declared an objection to the new normal.

For thousands of years, we have privileged books and study; wisdom and scholarship; history and memory. The idea of the Beit Midrash was and remains the center around which our community revolves.

If this is going to be the age of tweets and bombast; vapidity and illiteracy, then we need to redouble our commitment to literacy and learning. These are the values that we've preserved for thousands of years. And for thousands of years, they've preserved us.

As Abraham Lincoln put it in his first inaugural address: “While the people retain their virtue and vigilance, no administration, by any extreme of wickedness or folly,” can cause irreparable damage to the fabric of our nation.

Finally, I want to say something about the feeling of despair that seems to loom so large for so many: Otherwise sane and rational people are convinced that this is the beginning of the end:

- The end of America's exceptionalism
- The end of America's bipartisan support for Israel
- The end of America as a refuge from anti-Semitism

So let me conclude by sounding a note of optimism. Not because we live in hopeful times; but because we are a hopeful people.

What could it possibly mean that the new king of Egypt didn't know Yosef?

ויקם מלך חדש אשר לא ידע את יוסף

What would it mean for a new monarch to know nothing about one of his predecessors who also happened to be a national hero and the mastermind of Egypt's regional supremacy?

The Kli Yakar writes something beautiful. What the Torah means to tell us is that the new king didn't know the story of Yosef. The new king didn't know that it was precisely when others conspired to quash Yosef's dreams that he rose to greatness. The new king didn't know that such is the perpetual fate of the Jewish people. And so it's little wonder that four verses later the Torah tells us about the new king's stunning failure: וְכַאֲרֵי יַעֲנֹהוּ אֱלֹהֵי כֵן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרוּץ – the greater the oppression of the Jewish people, the greater their capacity for triumph.

We don't seek out adversity, but it's the natural condition in which we thrive. We may not be prophets, but we're the sons and daughters of prophets. And even if we cannot know the future, we can believe in the future.

This great nation of ours has never been dedicated to the proposition of perfection. We elect imperfect leaders who govern an imperfect electorate. We've made some terrible mistakes in our past – both political and moral. And yet here we are – blessed to be pursuing life, liberty and happiness in a country that has made freedom nothing less than sacrosanct. In the end, leaders are only as great as the people they lead. Whether or not we choose greatness, is up to us.