

Bo 5781

Rabbi Heath Watenmaker

January 22, 2021

Our nation's first transfer of presidential power came on March 4, 1797, as a calm, "radiant" George Washington bid farewell to the nation and introduced his successor, President John Adams, who had served faithfully as his Vice President. Back in September of 1796, when President Washington announced he would be stepping down, he warned his young country of the dangers of forming political parties, and urged them to "always exalt the just pride of patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations."¹ With pomp and circumstance, and the support of his predecessor, Adams was sworn in as the second president of the United States. As President Adams later reflected, he thought Washington looked "as serene and unclouded as the day," which worried him. "He seemed to me to enjoy a triumph over me. Methought I heard him say, 'Ay! I am fairly out and you fairly in! See which one of us will be happiest!'"²

The first real test of this peaceful transfer of power came only four years later. The election of 1800 had been a bitter, brutal, and drawn out saga. There were power plays and endless maneuvering among the political parties that had emerged during Adams' tumultuous presidency. It seemed the very fate of the nation hung in the balance. Even the process of voting took nearly nine months. The vote in the electoral college - which held much more than just a symbolic role in 1800 - ended in a tie - incumbent John Adams could only muster 65 votes, and Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr tied with 73 votes apiece. It was a battle between the Federalists, represented by Adams, and the Democratic-Republicans, Jefferson and Burr. As one historian remarked, "A general mood of crisis and fear of disunion plagued the press, as the House of Representatives took six days and 36 ballots before breaking Jefferson's deadlock with Aaron Burr."³ Finally, the outcome was decided, but the tumult and the animosity between political parties had everyone on edge leading up to Inauguration Day on March 4, 1801. In fact, the animosity ran so deep that, it is said, President John Adams quietly departed the half-built Washington DC shortly after 4:00 in the morning on Inauguration Day and was well outside the city before Jefferson took the oath of office.

But for many Americans, including Margaret Bayard Smith, the 18th-century author and political commentator, the day of Jefferson's inauguration underscored the durability of American democracy. Raised in a Federalist household and married to a Democratic-Republican newspaper editor, Smith savored the shift. She wrote, "I have this morning witnessed one of the most interesting scenes a free people can ever witness...The changes of administration, which

¹ Full transcript of this Farewell Address is available at <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=15&page=transcript>

² Gillian Brockell, *Washington Post* - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/01/19/george-washington-john-adams-transfer-power-inauguration/>

³ Sara Georgini, in *Smithsonian Magazine* - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-john-adams-managed-peaceful-transition-presidential-power-180976451/>

in every government and in every age have most generally been epochs of confusion, villainy and bloodshed, in this our happy country take place without any species of distraction, or disorder.”⁴ For Adams and Jefferson alike, the driving need to sustain the fledgling democracy and preserve the union overrode party demands.

From that moment on, the peaceful transfer of power became a bedrock of American democracy. Despite embroiled political in-fighting, and even in the midst of a Civil War, the Inauguration Days came and went, with fanfare and celebration, a moment of pride in American democracy and civility.

Until two weeks ago, we Americans took this peaceful transition for granted; it seemed inevitable, just the way we did things here. But that moment of insurrection, the storming of the Capitol, whose hallowed halls I’ve had the privilege of walking each year with our Confirmation students, sowed seeds of doubt and despair for what laid ahead for our democracy. As Rabbi Weissman so beautifully consoled us two weeks ago, in that moment, America didn’t feel like our America.

I know for many, the last two weeks brought much anxiety and trepidation. Many of us watched with concern as fences and the National Guard were deployed throughout the Capitol and the National Mall was cleared. I will admit that I wasn’t sure I could write this sermon until a day or two passed after the Inauguration - the aftermath would determine what was needed in this moment.

But in the end, peace and calm prevailed. Just like four years ago, and four years before that, and four years before that, a Vice President and President stood at the Capitol and took their oaths of office. (And I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the historic nature of Vice President Kamala Harris as the first female, first African-American, and first Asian-American Vice President.) As President Biden said in his Inaugural Address, “democracy has prevailed.” Though James Corden, host of the Late Late Show, noted, “yes, democracy prevailed, but the game definitely went into overtime, didn’t it.”

As Margaret Smith wrote 120 years ago, there is a long history of bloodshed and violence surrounding changes in administration. In Jewish tradition, our texts certainly set an aspirational tone for how transitions of power ought to proceed. In Deuteronomy (at the far end of the story of the Exodus that is being set in motion in our Torah portion this week), we find a powerful example of how to effectively transfer power, as Moses appoints Joshua as his successor, who will lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. We read:

⁴ Sara Georgini, in *Smithsonian Magazine* - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-john-adams-managed-peaceful-transition-presidential-power-180976451/>

Deut. 31:1 Moses went and spoke^a these things to all Israel.

Deut. 31:2 He said to them:

I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active. Moreover, Adonai has said to me, "You shall not go across yonder Jordan."

Deut. 31:3 Adonai your God will cross over before you; and God will wipe out those nations from your path and you shall dispossess them.—Joshua is the one who shall cross before you, as Adonai has spoken.—

Deut. 31:5 ...Adonai will deliver them up to you, and you shall deal with them in full accordance with the Instruction that I have enjoined upon you.

Deut. 31:6 Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them; for Adonai your God marches with you: God will not fail you or forsake you.

Deut. 31:7 Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that Adonai swore to their fathers to give them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them.

Much like an Inauguration, and indeed, a model for today's rabbinic ordination, Moses, In front of the entire Israelite community, publicly states his faith (and, according to the text, God's faith as well) in Joshua, with the charge *chazak v'amatz* - be strong and courageous. Our tradition understands that this public display allayed any fears that Joshua's leadership might be doubted, directly linking Joshua's leadership to Moses and his legacy. Indeed, the rabbis of the Mishnah recognize this crucial moment of this transition of leadership, and it becomes a cornerstone of their own self-definition of their power and authority. In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Ancestors, the rabbis link themselves to Moses, as the inheritors of a *shalshet hakabalah*, a long chain of transmission of traditions: *Mosheh kibel Torah MiSinai, u'm'sarah liYehoshuah* - Moses received Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to prophets, and prophets transmitted it on to the men of the great assembly. Though Moses receives the Torah at Sinai, in Hebrew *kibel*, he then transmits it, the Hebrew word is *m'sarah* - which is a transmission or handing down of both content *and* authority. Implicit in this transmission is a sense of bestowing trust and faith in the next generation. At our b'nai mitzvah, we often speak of the bar or bat mitzvah as taking their place as the newest link in this *shalshet hakabalah*, our chain of Jewish tradition that stretches back into our past and ahead into our future, which requires their active participation and ownership of their Jewish identity.

For me, one of the most powerful and inspiring moments of the Inauguration this week was National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman's powerful performance of her poem "The Hill We Climb." In her conclusion, she offers us all a charge and a challenge:

So let us leave behind a country
better than the one we were left with.

Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west.
We will rise from the windswept northeast,
where our forefathers first realized revolution.
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states.
We will rise from the sunbaked south.
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.
And every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.⁵

Fortunately, this week brought another peaceful transfer of power and a new President and Vice President took the oath of office on Wednesday. Now the work of healing the soul of our nation begins. As Gorman reminds us, "For there is always light, / if only we're brave enough to see it. / If only we're brave enough to be it."

⁵For full transcript of the poem, visit

https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a35268319/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-transcript/?fbclid=IwAR1Gw800cKQIDWI4ws1NEvSKsWYdVu-cpLPIB07OX_HBMt9haj7blRNMc