

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Parashat Vayera
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Let me start with some good news about the election. Approximately 160 million Americans will have voted, by the time the ballots are all counted, more than two-thirds of eligible voters, the highest voter turnout by percentage in one hundred and twenty years.¹

Americans have come together to participate in our democracy peacefully, to share their voices and their hopes for our country. The Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58a, records the blessing to recite when seeing a multitude of people (in the original context, a huge gathering of Jews). In looking at this incredible level of voting participation, I would like to recite that blessing now, because the immense participation in this election is indeed a blessing.

*Baruch ata A-do-nai, Elo-heinu Melech HaOlam, Chacham HaRazim.
Blessed are you, Lord our God, Master of the Universe, knower of secrets.*

After stating the blessing, the Talmud explains it: “For their minds differ one from the other, and their faces differ one from the other.”²

America has never been more diverse—our faces have never differed more from one another.

“And our minds differ from one another?” That, I think, was the hard news for everyone—that our nation is still deeply divided.

In biblical times, things were so much simpler. The whole world was guilty, so God destroys the world and everyone in it except for Noah and his family.

In this week’s parashah, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are wicked. Abraham doesn’t comprehend that it could be *all* bad, and challenges God, until God agrees that if there are ten good people, God will not destroy.

We eventually learn that the people of Sodom are indeed wicked, beyond comprehension, beyond redemption.

Unlike God, Abraham cannot see into the hearts of the inhabitants of Sodom. But he hopes, that maybe good will overcome wickedness, that God’s mercy will conquer God’s judgement. The Torah tells us, “Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord, and looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln” (Genesis 19:27-28).

This is to say, Abraham woke up in the morning and discovered that the righteous people in whom he had hoped did not exist.

I imagine this is how some of us are feeling still. We too were hoping to find more people who agreed with us than we did.

We can give up, stop trusting, stop hoping, and stop working.

¹ <https://time.com/5907062/record-turnout-history/>

² Thanks to Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, the CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and USCJ, for this reference.

Or we can take a page from Abraham's original playbook, of "making souls." Our tradition teaches that Abraham and Sarah brought hundreds of people under the wings of the Shekhina, to be part of the covenant.³ We too can spend time listening to those whose minds differ from ours, sharing our hearts, and making our minds a little less different from each other.

This is hard, vulnerable work. Abraham is not always up to it, and neither are we. After the episode with Sodom, Abraham and Sarah live in Gerar, with Sarah posing as Abraham's sister, because he does not trust the people there to keep him safe if it's known that Sarah is his wife.

Later, when pushed by Sarah to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham doesn't protest, but complies, albeit with God's assurances.

When faced with people whose thoughts are not like yours, what will you do?

May we each build the strength, the resilience, and the faith, we need to not withdraw, or fight, but to listen and slowly to let words that come from the heart enter the heart.

Shabbat shalom.

³ See Rashi on Genesis 12:5.