

## **A Message about Wednesday's Events**

Dear Friends,

In the wake of Wednesday's assault on our democracy, like many of you, I am feeling a mixture of outrage, fear and sadness. If you are feeling frightened, angry or overwhelmed, please know that you are not alone.

As has been said in many ways by many people already, it is legitimate to be disappointed by the results of this election, but it is intolerable in a democracy to seek to violently overturn the results of a democratic election.

In the course of my brief career in the rabbinate, I have often spoken about the Jewish value of engaging in makhlokes l'sheim shamayim, conflict for the sake of heaven. Our tradition not only tolerates differences of opinion, but celebrates them, affirming that two seemingly conflicting positions can both be expressions of divine Truth. The Talmud itself is a repository of arguments and debates, in which minority opinions are not only recorded, but taken seriously, studied and debated centuries—and in some cases millennia—after being rejected.

That spirit of celebrating differences of opinion is a central value of our community. And as part of that ethos, I, like many pulpit rabbis, generally take great care to steer clear of controversial, potentially partisan political issues, lest those who don't share our political positions feel unwelcome in our communities. However, I think that, like many pulpit rabbis, I have let my fear of being overly political keep me from speaking out when the Torah and my own moral compass demanded I do so.

Just as embracing differences of opinion is a Jewish value, it is also a mitzvah to speak up and rebuke people when they engage in wrongdoing. The pluralism of makhlokes l'sheim shamayim means that no one person or school of thought has a monopoly on truth. It does not mean that there is no such thing as truth, or that all views are equally tolerable. I think part of why we have arrived at this day is that too often we have allowed our laudable desire to be respectful of differences to prevent us from speaking out and naming dangerous, false and immoral statements and actions for what they are.

Not all conflict is for the sake of heaven. The same mishnah that describes conflict for the sake of heaven contrasts it with conflict that is not for the sake of heaven, because conflict for the sake of heaven is only possible when we allow ourselves to reject and rule out positions which are utterly illegitimate and unacceptable. Elsewhere, the Talmud teaches that one who is kind where cruelty is called for, ends by being cruel where kindness is called for. When in our zeal to be tolerant, we show tolerance towards voices that advocate violence, bigotry and hatred, we help to strengthen the forces of intolerance.

How then can we tell the difference between conflict for the sake of heaven, and conflict that is not for the sake of heaven? How can we distinguish between someone with whom we can productively disagree, and someone whose views are too dangerous to be tolerated?

Perhaps we can learn from the examples that the Mishnah brings of each type of conflict. The Mishnah says that conflict between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai is an example of conflict that is for the sake of heaven, while Korach and his followers represent conflict that is not for the sake of heaven. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai were in agreement about the big stuff: they both accepted the Torah, the mitzvot and shared ethical principles. Where they differed was in details about the correct way to fulfill the mitzvot. Korach and his followers, by contrast, rejected the entire Torah, claiming that Moshe and Aaron had made the whole thing up to benefit themselves. In making this claim, they were rejecting the evidence of their own eyes—after all, they themselves had been present for the revelation at Sinai and saw the clouds and the fire on the mountain as Hashem revealed the Torah through Moshe. When someone is willing to reject established facts that are inconvenient for their personal interests or political positions, and make up (or choose to believe) convenient lies, they have taken themselves out of the bounds of legitimate debate.

In response to Korach's rebellion, the earth itself opened its mouth to swallow up Korach and his followers. Even the mute earth could not be allowed to keep its mouth shut in response to the outrage of Korach's lies and slander.

If we want to live in a community and a world where conflicting opinions can coexist and be debated productively, we cannot continue to silently tolerate voices of hatred and intolerance, and we cannot continue to humor those who reject facts in favor of lies and fantasy. We cannot allow our desire to be tolerant to dissuade us from speaking out against outrageous wrongdoing.

While all people of conscience, wherever we fall on the political spectrum must denounce Wednesday's disgraceful display, denunciations after the fact are not enough. As a nation, we need to ask ourselves what we can do in the days and months and years ahead to ensure that the scenes of Wednesday do not repeat themselves.

One thing I know we can do, the very least we can do, is open up our mouths and speak up when we encounter people spreading false and dangerous ideas. As the Talmud says, silence is like agreement. When we are silent we are complicit. The forces of hatred and violence succeed when good people remain silent. As long as the earth kept its mouth shut, Korach and his wicked band could keep up their attack on the Torah. The earth had to open its mouth to defeat them. We cannot count on the earth opening its mouth to swallow up those who would undermine our democracy, so it is up to us to open our mouths. If enough of us open up our mouths to speak words of truth, justice, and compassion, then perhaps we can make lies, bigotry and demagoguery disappear from the face of the earth.

Please join me in praying for the safety of everyone in our country, the health of our democratic institutions, and for a spirit of truth, justice and peace to prevail in this land.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Garth Silberstein