



Parshat Lech Lecha
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President-Elect Trump: Now What?

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President-Elect Donald J. Trump. As of Friday, January 20, 2017, President Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States. It has obviously been a deeply emotional week. This morning I would like to surface two questions that we need to engage.

The first is the undeniable fact that we are a divided nation. 47% of Americans cheer this result. They say: We have elected a change agent. A person who is going to shake things up. A successful businessman. A deal maker who gets stuff done. Somebody who sees, gets, and responds to, the real pain of millions of Americans who are without jobs, without dignity, without hope. These Americans did not feel seen or heard the last eight years. Their economic prospects did not improve the last eight years. They took that lack of being heard, they took their economic stagnation, into the voting booth. That is why we have a democracy. The people have spoken. Democracy worked. Let's see if a new leader can bring new and better results.

But 47% of Americans mourn this result. They have many serious problems with our new president. Among them, they say: Our new president is guilty of the sin of racism. He is the father of the birther movement that tried to discredit President Obama because he was other, namely because he is black. Our new president is guilty of the sin of misogyny. Anybody who said what he said on that bus would be fired. Our new president makes fun of people with disabilities. There is a deep dread that this election was not about a different approach to the economy, but about dark forces of nativism, xenophobia, and hatred of the other.

So our first problem to work through is the very fact of our divided nation. Abraham Lincoln warned so many years ago that a house divided against itself cannot stand. We *are* a house divided against itself. How do we deal with this division?

But there is a second problem we have to work through. There are two different reads possible about what this election means.

One read is that this election was about the economy. About seeing, hearing and responding to millions of Americans who did not feel seen, heard or responded to, whose economic prospects were in stagnation. I want a better future for my children. The American dream is now dead for my children. This election is about bringing prosperity and opportunity back to people who did not feel they had it.

But a second read is that this election is about a dark brew of hatred, and that negative energy has been unleashed and cannot be put back in the bottle. The KKK and other alt-right groups were an important part, not the only part, but an important part of the Trump coalition. What if the dark underside of the American story—slavery, Jim Crow laws, persistent racism—is ascendant? How do we deal with these very real fears, shared by about half our nation?

What if this second read is right? What if the election is about hatred, not economic opportunity?

Because I am not only a rabbi, but also a human being and a citizen who loves and believes in our country, I will share with you my own evolution since the election.

As Tuesday night became Wednesday morning, and as it became clear that Donald Trump would win the electoral college—he was winning Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida—I could not sleep. When I went to minyan on Wednesday morning, I wore the *keriah*, the torn shirt that I wore at my mother's funeral. I was sitting shiva for our

nation, mourning the loss of a country I thought I knew. How could we elect a person who stirs up all this hate?

But I am no longer in mourning. From Wednesday to Shabbat morning, I am in a different place. I got there thanks to two core teachings of the Jewish tradition.

The first came from a conversation I had with our friend and teacher in Jerusalem, Micah Goodman. I called him and asked if he had any words of wisdom.

Micah pointed out that so much of the world was very surprised by this result. For months the polls had been predicting a Clinton victory. Before the Comey intervention, the polls were predicting a Clinton landslide. Maybe a Democrat could even win Arizona and Georgia. Even after the Comey intervention, the polls still showed that while the election was tightening up, Hillary's getting to 270 was virtually inevitable, and that Trump had an extremely narrow and improbable path to victory. Not only that, but for 16 months, pundits, commentators, experts, editorialists, wrote that Donald Trump would never become president. His support topped out at 40%. And because of his constant self-sabotage, he could not get above his core 40%, not enough to win this election. That was *the* conventional wisdom. Micah added that he was so convinced by all the experts and all the polls that he bet a friend in Israel an expensive bottle of scotch that Hillary would win.

And of course, as we know now, all the polls, all the analytics, all the big data analysis, all the experts who predicted the virtual inevitability of Hillary's victory were all wrong.

What does this teach us, asked Micah? *That the world is greater than our minds' ability to understand it. We don't know stuff.* And often the stuff we don't know is the stuff we most want to know, and that we think we do know, but we are wrong. Micah pointed to a book of the Bible that gets very little attention, *mishlei*, Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is wisdom

literature. But at the heart of the Book of Proverbs is a paradox. The Book of Wisdom is very doubtful about our ability to be wise. Proverbs chapter 3 teaches us:

Do not rely on your own understanding...
Do not be wise in your own eyes

The Book of Proverbs is not anti-wisdom. Anti-science. Anti-fact based learning. Rather, it wisely counsels us to be humble about what we think we know. We think with all that wisdom, all that science, all that fact-based learning, all those analytics, all that polling, all that big data analysis, all that computer modeling, we've got the world figured out, and we don't.

If we do not and cannot have the world figured out, we need to be humble.

Most of us never thought Donald Trump would become president. We were wrong.

For those of us who worry that the Donald Trump presidency will become a disaster for our nation, maybe we will be wrong there too. A little humility. Maybe we don't know. Maybe we will be surprised again, for the good.

As Micah was sharing this Torah, I thought about a big and beautiful picture I saw in one of our member's homes. When President Obama won his first election, and first spoke as President Elect in Grant Park in Chicago, this member was there. In his home there is a wall-sized photograph of the crowd that night. The photo shows their faces, beatific, in the thrall of a religious moment. A black man was just elected president! These faces shine because our new president is going to heal our divided nation.

Well President Obama did not heal our nation.

And President Elect Trump will not kill our nation.

We are too big and too diverse for any one leader to heal or to kill, and we are too big and too diverse for any of us to be able to predict with any confidence what will be. The net effect of

this humility, the realization that we are so often dead wrong, is to move me from mourning to cautious hopefulness. That is the first source, the Book of Proverbs, as shared by Micah.

The second source is the Abraham story in our *parsha* this morning.

Lech lecha, get beyond yourself, get out of your comfort zone, out of your silo, out of your zip code, out of your echo chamber, to the land that I will show you, namely a different land that is not your zip code. Be open to a new world. Yes, we are a 47-47 nation. But most Americans do not live in 47-47 communities. As the CNN analysts were doing their thing, zooming in on little pockets of Ohio or Florida, it turns out that many of us live in silos. We live in communities that are 80-20 for one candidate, or 80-20 for another. In Cleveland, Hillary wins decisively. In rural Ohio, Trump wins decisively. *Lech lecha* tells us if we want to be one people, get out of our zip code and see the world from somebody else's point of view.

The Washington Post recently ran a piece about a woman named Kathy Cramer, a political science professor who for the last ten years has been traveling through rural Wisconsin trying to understand the minds of rural voters. Now Wisconsin was especially a surprise. It was one of the few states where Donald Trump fared badly in the primary season. How did he win it in the general election? He captured rural Wisconsin, and there is a lot of rural Wisconsin. Why did he win there?

Kathy Cramer recently wrote a book that would answer just this question called The Politics of Resentment which the Washington Post profiled. The Washington Post writer asks Kathy Cramer, when you listened to rural citizens of Wisconsin for ten years, what did you learn? She answers:

I went to these 27 communities several times — before I realized that there was a pattern in all these places. What I was hearing was this general sense of being on the short end of the stick. Rural people felt like they not getting their fair share...

First, people felt that they were not getting their fair share of decision-making power...People would say: *All the decisions are made in Madison and Milwaukee and nobody's listening to us... Nobody's coming out here and asking us what we think.*

Second, people would complain that they weren't getting their fair share of stuff, that they weren't getting their fair share of public resources.

And third, people felt that they weren't getting respect. They would say: *The real kicker is that people in the city don't understand us. They don't understand what rural life is like, what's important to us and what challenges that we're facing. They think we're a bunch of redneck racists.*

Let's hope that that is what this election was about. That they did not feel heard about power, resources, and respect. Because if that is the problem, we can solve it. We can do a better job of seeing, listening and responding. Yesterday the Globe profiled another rural Wisconsin citizen named Dawn Damico, a 52 year old owner of a chocolate shop, and grandmother of six, who had never voted in a presidential election in her life, until she voted for the first time on Tuesday. For Donald Trump. Why? Because she did not feel seen or heard by Hillary Clinton, who did not campaign in Wisconsin during the general election. But she did feel heard by Donald Trump.

But what if what is going on, below the surface, is old-fashioned racism, nativism, and fear of the other? After all, the KKK did endorse President-Elect Trump. If that happens, our mandate as Jews and as descendants of Abraham is crystal-clear. God tells Abraham that his job, and ours as his descendants, is *laasot tzedakah u'mishpat*, to do justice and righteousness. Abraham famously does just that when he fights for the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, telling God: Shall not the judge of the whole world judge justly?

If the administration of President Trump is not about expanding economic opportunity, but instead results in the derogation of the rights of vulnerable minorities, if that happens, God forbid, all of us, whoever we voted for, can and should stand in resistance. We are all

descendants of Abraham, the original resistor. To paraphrase Bernie Sanders, if President Trump is about expanding economic opportunity, I will be with him 100 percent. But if he is about oppressing vulnerable minorities, I will oppose him 100 percent.

But until that happens, my own spectacular lack of prescience with regard to this election reminds me to be humble, and to be open to a pleasant surprise. After all, to use his own idiom, Donald Trump likes to be a winner. He does not like to be a loser. If he wants to be a winner as president, he needs to appeal to all of us, not only the 47% who voted for him.

It was an emotional week. Now that the bitter campaign, and the election itself, are over, may we all come together to support our new president, may we all be open, vigilant, and ready to act to pursue justice and righteousness, and may we all work together to form a more perfect union. Shabbat shalom.