

*Parashat Va'era*  
January 24, 2009—28 Tevet 5769  
A Mighty Wind

A few years ago, I heard a perfect d'var Torah. It was short, just one word. It was sweet. Everyone around the table loved it. It was the day that Deval Patrick won the election to become our Governor. He ran on a theme of can do optimism. The motto of his campaign was Yes We Can. There were Yes We Can signs all over the neighborhood. He was our first African American governor. He was young and charismatic. When he won, there was a tremendous enthusiasm in our community and in our Commonwealth, a swell of good feeling. The night of the election, we had a shul meeting. It was the tradition of that group that a lay leader give the d'var. The woman giving the d'var says: Tonight I have just one word for my d'var. Deval! D'var, Deval. The ten people seated around the table in the Slater Conference Room broke into applause, responding: Deval!

This is the first Shabbat after the inauguration of our new president, a huge national moment. But there is no one word to take it in. Just saying Barack! will not do because there is far more texture to our time now, things are far more complicated now than they were even a few years ago when Governor Patrick won his election.

In the wake of this huge national moment, when virtually our entire nation was glued to its television at noon on Tuesday, I have two simple questions.

First, what shall be our response, individually and collectively, to this national moment? After all, something is happening in our land right now. When was the last time almost 2 million people descended on Washington? When was the last time you saw so many grown people, men and women, cry tears of catharsis, tears of joy? When was the last time you felt like you were living in history? Generations from now will

remember this moment. They will read about it in the history books. And we were there. But what do we do now?

Second, was President Obama's speech too grim? That was a question I heard from the commentariat. After all, there were almost 2 million people there, it was possibly the biggest inauguration crowd in the history of our country, there was a nation watching on television, there was a world celebrating this moment, there was this sense of hope and expectancy. And here the President talks about our many challenges, how they will not be met easily or in a short span of time. Did his sober realism cross the line, as one commentator put it, to Jimmy Carter's malaise pessimism?

As so often happens, our weekly Torah portion speaks exactly to the issue of our day. Moses was at the beginning of his mission to help a beleaguered but hopeful people. And yet things were not going well. His initial foray met with failure. When he demanded of Pharaoh let my people go, Pharaoh not only said no. Pharaoh said: your people are shirkers, and now I am going to punish them. They have to make the same tally of bricks each day, but we will not supply them with the straw. They have to get the straw, and make the same number of bricks, every day, and my taskmasters with their whips will be waiting. Have a good day.

When the people find out, they are in despair.

What is a helpful response to this dark news? God himself responds with pure hope and optimism. Moses, God says, tell the people everything is going to work out just fine. I am totally here for you. I am going to save the day. And here God, in an abundance of good cheer, uses no fewer than four words of hope, four synonyms of salvation, that is the basis for the four cups of wine we drink at the Passover seder. God

says *vehotzeiti vehitzalti vegaalti valakachti*, do not worry because I am going to free you, I will deliver you, I will redeem you, I will take you to be My people. These words are so hopeful and so optimistic that we drink to them, four times, every Passover seder.

And yet, when Moses relays these divine words to the people, they cannot hear it. They cannot take it in. The Torah says *veloh shamu el moshe mkotzer ruach*. They would not listen to Moses because of *kotzer ruach*, literally from shortness of spirit. Rashi says that when we are in distress, when we are worried, we cannot draw a deep and resonant breath. Their breathing was constricted, and their hope was constricted. The Israelites did not have enough *ruach*, enough spirit, for them to take in God's message of hope.

All of which suggests, actually, that the President's speech was spot on. A distressed people cannot take in a message of pure hope. Such reassurance rings false. It is tinny. A textured time demands a textured message of sober realism and measured hope.

And that leaves us with our second question: what now? The inauguration is over, the big national moment is over, what shall we do to be helpful? All week long I have been dwelling with this question through the prism of our tradition, the *kotzer ruach* in our portion, and the *kotzer ruach* in our nation, this shortness of spirit. All week long I was focused on that word *ruach*. *Ruach. Ruach*. Our response, Jewishly, must somehow partake of this word. And then it hit me. We have heard that word before in the Torah. In a famous verse. In the second verse in the Torah.

In the beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth, *va'haaretz hayta tohu vavoh vehoshech al pnei tehom*, there was a void, there was confusion and darkness,

*veruach elohim merachephet al pnei hamayim*, and the spirit of God hovered, caressed, the water. In a world of darkness, *ruach elohim*, the spirit of God reassures.

There, in the second verse in the Torah, is a healthy response to this national moment: to be part of *ruach elohim*, the spirit of God, a caressing spirit, a hovering spirit, a loving spirit, that can be the answer to *kotzer ruach*, a shortness of spirit.

In practical terms, what does this mean? It means that each of us can be helpful by saying: I can help. I can help be part of a *ruach elohim*, a spirit of God that caresses. Somebody is new to our community. I can help. I can welcome them. I'll invite them for a Shabbat dinner. An elderly person in our community would love to go to shul but no longer drives. I can help. I'll drive her. Another person is sick. I can help. I'll cook a meal, or I'll stop by for a visit. Somebody has lost a loved one and is sitting shiva. I can help. I will pay a shiva visit.

This week you all received the letter about Emanu: With You Now, the Temple's response to the recession. If you have financial talent, say I can help. If you have networking and job getting talent, say I can help. If you have emotional or spiritual gifts to give, if you are a healer, say I can help.

Renewing our nation begins right here, by renewing this sacred place.

I believe in us. I believe in communities of faith. I believe in the power of people of faith to begin again. I believe in the power of people of faith to make hope happen.

A couple months ago NPR ran this segment about a 26-year old Chabad rabbi named Zalman Mendelsohn who goes to Jackson, Wyoming with his 21-year old wife Raizy, and their infant daughter, to set up a Chabad community. Jackson, Wyoming

would not seem to be fertile soil for a Hasidic community. There are few Jews in Jackson, and those that exist are overwhelmingly Reform. But this couple kept at it.

The cornerstone of their outreach work was Shabbat dinner. Raizy would personally cook a five course meal: homemade challah, salad and dips, gefilte fish, chicken soup, pot roast, homemade cakes and tea. They drove around Jackson advertising their first Shabbat dinner, putting up fliers in local establishments. They had no idea how many people would come.

Raizy prepares dinner for twelve. She sets the table for twelve. And hopes.

When time for services come, on their very first Shabbat in Jackson, exactly one woman wanders in off the street. This one guest sits through Kabbalat Shabbat services. She sits through the five course meal, from challah and dips through cake and tea. Just the rabbi, the rebbitzen, and this one guest. For more than three hours. When the guest finally leaves, Raizy turns to her husband and says: In a few years, when our Shabbat table is teeming with guests, our visitor tonight will say: I remember the time, back when the rabbi first started out, that I was his first and only guest. And now, look at how many people are here!

Raizy and her husband were part of *ruach elohim*, a caressing divine spirit, that created warmth and hope and home and hearth in Jackson, Wyoming. Now is our time to bring it here.

Yes we can.

Shabbat Shalom.