

D'var Torah on Parsha Lekh Lecha

Nov 12, 2016

Debbie Goldman

When I started to think about the drash earlier this week, I reached out to John Spiegel and Fran Goldman. Do you think I should provide a space to talk about the Trump election? And if so, how do I do this in a way that helps us turn our shock and fear into hope and insight, into feelings that will help move us forward rather than sink us into further despair? What is the appropriate way to talk about Trump's electoral college victory at Fabrangen, among our community, in our Jewish space, on Shabbat?

For it's clear we do want to talk about it. From Lucy Steinitz' beautiful e-mail that many of us woke up to Wed. morning, reminding us that that "stick by stick" we can make a positive difference in the world, that even in the darkest of days, her father, a Holocaust survivor refused to let purveyors of evil define his world view and turn love into hate. And then there was Amy Brookman's sharing of a piece from David Evan Markus, and Melissa Kahn's note from her sister's friend – reminding us that we need each other at this time, that our strength and hope comes from community. And the many, many conversations and correspondence we've shared over the past few days helping us make sense of this moment in our nation's history and giving us the strength to move forward.

John and Fran urged me to create space for discussion. John pointed out that the first sentence of the parsha provides a perfect opening. The Torah portion begins: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your land where you were born and from the home of your father to the land that I will show you.'" We are entering a new and foreign land, the unknown, and like Avram and Sarai we must chart a new path.

Yesterday I got an e-mail from Truah, a domestic Jewish human rights organization. The e-mail began its drash with the same phrase: "Go, from your country...to the place that I will show you." For Truah, the phrase resonates because we fear that our home is no longer hospitable, and like Avram and Sarai, we feel that we are entering a wilderness. I reject that notion: I will not concede my home to the hate mongering that Trump promoted during the campaign. But the next part of the Truah drash rings very true. The text tells us that Avram went and traveled, haloch v'nasoa, into the Negev. The language, Truah wrote, is doubled, indicating that Avram persevered, continued, shouldered on. That must be us. We too will travel on. Truah continued with a Midrash, explaining that haloch v'nasoa refers to the fact that Avram and Sarai didn't travel all at once. They stopped along the way, taking time to regroup, to reflect, to connect with others. We must do that also.

The Etz Haim commentary is also helpful in connecting Lekh Lekha to our current moment. Avram's radical break with the past, his acceptance of one G-d over all humanity, and the Covenant that G-d makes with the Jewish people begins our Jewish journey of building a righteous community. It reflects an understanding that one can't live the righteous life alone, but rather, one needs a righteous community, one rooted in a shared belief in the humanity of every person.

That is the radical potential in Abram's rejection of idolatry and his faith in one G-d: that every human being is the creature of G-d, that we are all connected one to the other, and that my well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of other people. Life is not a zero-sum game. One does not have to believe in G-d to accept this radical, universal vision of a shared humanity, lived and realized in particular communities. It is this creative tension between universalism and particularism that permeates the Torah and indeed all of Jewish history – indeed poses the central challenge to all societies -- and that faces such serious challenge by Trump's xenophobic populism.

We need our particular communities to get the love and support that we need to be able to look beyond our own needs, to develop empathy with others. It's that empathy that lies at the heart of a public sphere based on universal values, a political economy rooted in rules and institutions designed to ensure an equitable allocation of resources and access to power so that every person can grow and flourish.

“Go forth from your land where you were born and from the home of your father to the land that I will show you.”

The opening verse of Lech Lecha certainly resonates with what so many of us have been feeling this past week. We are indeed leaving the familiar place of 8 years under the leadership of our nation’s first Black president, one who along with First Lady Michelle Obama, has led this nation with unparalleled dignity and wisdom, one who at critical moments has called on all of us to recognize the humanity in each other, and has pursued public policies aimed to realize that vision. Even if you don’t agree with everything Obama has done or tried to achieve, I think we can all agree that his words and deeds have inspired us. As I was preparing this drash, I listened again to his speech last year after the murder of 9 African-Americans in a Bible study group in Charleston SC: “out of this terrible tragedy,” he said, “G-d has visited grace upon us, for He has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind...He’s given us the chance where we’ve been lost to find our best selves.”

But now we enter the uncharted territory of a Trump presidency. In the wee hours of Wed. morning, we experienced the shock of a Trump victory, something almost no one was prepared for. Many of us are still adjusting to that shock. And many of us are also filled with fear. Donald Trump waged a campaign filled with hatred and denigration of Muslims, African-Americans, Hispanics, women, LGBT people, people with disabilities, immigrants, and refugees. He urged his supporters to use violence against opponents. This is not the America we believe in, nor is it the kind of leadership that inspires us to “find our best selves.” We’re not sure what policies Trump actually stands for, because he has been so full of contradictions. But we know he calls climate change a hoax, he favors tax cuts for the wealthy, he opposes women’s right to choose, he favors deporting undocumented immigrants, closing our shores to Syrian and Muslim refugees, and wants to ease restrictions on gun ownership.

Over the past few days, I’ve read everything I can get my hands on to understand what this election tells us. But I don’t want this drash and our discussion afterwards to focus on political analysis. Rather, I want us to talk about where we draw hope and strength to move forward, to act on our values in the public sphere, to get ourselves to place where we can act on the powerful words of Mother Jones: “don’t mourn, organize.”

Let me share three thoughts that help me.

1. First, this is not the first time that we’ve seen a politics based on fear, hate, and division. While it is true, as Martin Luther King said, the arc of history bends toward justice, there are many bumps along the way. I remember how I felt during the Reagan/Bush years, when Reagan Democrats struggled to find a politics that would not leave them on the ash heap of a new economic order. And those of us who rejected the racist, trickle down policies of those years came together to craft a different path.

2. Second, there were many reasons people voted for Trump, who let us remember, did lose the popular vote, if only by 0.5%. I think E.J. Dionne put it well: “The combined effects of a long-term rise in inequality and the brutal damage done to so many by the crash of 2008 certainly seeded the ground for Trumps’ victories in Ohio, PA, and WI. Many on the Left had warned for years about the impact of technology and trade on those who made their livings in the old economy. Why did these complaints become politically explosive only when they were harnessed to resentments over race and immigration?” Trump’s racist populism is based on a zero-sum view of the world, and absent any alternative, it had political appeal to so many who have not benefited from our political economy.

3. And third, we are not alone. We have a different vision, and yes, a different politics. That’s what Lekh Lekha tells us. We embrace the radical vision of a common humanity and seek a politics and leaders who embrace policies rooted in that universal view. As E.J. Dionne concluded in his article: “If ever our nation needed a determined, thoughtful and creative opposition, it is now.” As Mother Jones put it, “don’t mourn, organize.”

Let me read from a statement from Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights:

“The nation we know honors equal protection for all people, views its diversity as its strength, and strives to be a place where all people can live, work, and study as free and equal Americans. We view this election as a modern nadir for these ideals and want nothing more than to move past the demagoguery and fear-mongering of this campaign. Over the 240 years of American history, our communities have seen a lot worse. But we’ve also seen a lot better, and we know that **it takes the hottest fire to make the strongest steel** (emphasis added by me)... We will not be victims of a Trump Administration or Congress that seeks to turn back the clock on our progress. We will continue to protect our most vulnerable and to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table.

And from Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism:

“In the face of polarization, we build bridges. We will be a religious movement of resistance; we will resist the hatred against women, minorities, and even Jews that this election has exposed. And we will resist the politics of division, bigotry and hate.”

Let me now open this up to discussion with this question: what gives you the strength to move to move forward, to continue to pursue your values in the public sphere, with hope rather than cynicism and despair?