

Now What?

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In 1858 the Illinois legislature sent Stephen Douglas to the US Senate rather than Abraham Lincoln, although Lincoln had won the popular vote. When a friend asked Lincoln how he felt, he said:

“Like the boy who stubbed his toe: I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh.”

I feel the same. I am too big to cry and too stunned to laugh.

I will depart from my usual content and tone tonight because I have not witnessed this widespread and communal sense of loss, anxiety, fear and profound sadness since 9/11. It is the feeling I often observe when people are in mourning. There seems to be a collective emptiness, vulnerability and uncertainty, as if a beloved family member died. Since Wednesday, in various random get-togethers people speak in hushed tones almost as if they are at *shiva*.

I have observed congregants who seem shaken to their core, depleted, exhausted, shocked, dazed and in disbelief. Some were openly weeping. Others weep at the slightest comment, without advance notice. Any unrelated remark might set them off. These are classic signs of trauma and shock.

People are fitful and afraid, stunned and saddened, experiencing a level of anxiety for themselves and our country that they have not felt before. They have unprecedented doubts about their fellow-citizens. They don't even know how to speak with their children because they do not own, control or understand their emotions.

I feel that it is my rabbinic obligation to address this dynamic with you tonight: Not as a political pundit – you can read all the jaw-dropping, monumentally erroneous, disconnected and ignorant punditry online if you want. And not as a political partisan, although I, like you, have political views. But rather, I would like to speak with you this Shabbat as your spiritual guide, offering you words of comfort and instruction from the deepest and most profound teachings of our tradition.

Dear congregants, you should know that the fog of confusion dissipates. The clouds of heaviness lift. Trauma's tyranny relaxes its grip. Give yourselves time. The intensity of your

feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity will not last. You will soon feel yourself coming back to yourself. It is one of the central axiomatic principles of Judaism: trust your innate strength; get back on your feet.

Even the Jewish rituals of mourning encourage an initial period of emotional recovery from trauma, shock and loss, and then the immediate return to society. We take time to restore ourselves and we get straight back into the arena, bloodied, roughed up, but ready to resume the battle to do what is right for the sake of right.

You are feeling badly now. “This too shall pass away, never fear,” Lincoln wrote to a friend after the ’58 senate defeat. Two years later he was elected to the highest office in the land.

Unexpected defeat always produces a sense of loss, alienation and loneliness. But you are not alone. Tens of millions of fellow Americans supported Secretary Clinton; she actually won the popular vote. The majority of our city and state voted like you. And 71% of Jews voted for Secretary Clinton. Among non-Orthodox Jews the percentages are even higher, and among non-Orthodox Jews on the Upper West Side the percentages are higher still.

Do not lose faith in American democracy. To live in a democracy is to be defeated often. Our system is based on the will of the people. The majority decides. President-Elect Trump will be our president for the next four years. There is something awesome about the power of the vote, the selection of the people. There is something miraculous about the peaceful transfer of power. It is so rare and so precious.

The pendulum swings from victory to loss to victory again. Social gains are rarely easy and never permanent. Progress, like gay rights, minority rights, the right of women to make decisions for themselves on matters affecting their own bodies – these advances must be fought for indefinitely. There is no relaxing, only perpetual vigilance.

It takes decades, often centuries, for bedrock principles to settle into the soil of the American landscape. There is nothing automatic about liberty, freedom and constitutional protection. Martin Luther King clarified that “human progress...never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle.”

It took a near century from the proclamation of emancipation to the Emancipation Proclamation. And it took another full century from the Emancipation Proclamation to the enshrinement of the Voting Rights Act. Political gains must be consolidated politically. The struggle never ends.

The American Founding Fathers identified the pursuit of happiness, not the arrival. They realized that if we ever actually arrived at happiness we would be miserable. No one can endure total contentment. Even Adam and Eve were restless in Paradise. The Jewish Founding Fathers also stressed the pursuit: the pursuit of justice, not the arrival; repair, not completion. They, too, realized that arrival and completion are unachievable on earth; and yet our task is to persist.

Fortified with these truths, filled with a deeper understanding of the diversity of America, and with an extra dose of humility: Now what?

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After you have taken time to dust yourself off and recover your emotional equilibrium – and it will happen quickly – we must devote ourselves with extra fervor to the great principles and

ideals that define who we are as Americans and as Jews. We should acquire an increased devotion to these principles, and we should highly resolve that this nation live up to the content of its creed.

Our tradition insists that we get back into the arena. Judaism is a religion of potency and protest, demanding of us: What have you done today to promote human dignity; to alleviate humiliation; to ensure fairness; to diminish, if only a little, the human tendency towards arrogance? We are obligated – we do not have a choice – to speak about, and act upon, the moral challenges of our times. We are summoned to fairness and human dignity. This is our calling.

We should not assume that all or most of our fellow citizens who voted for Donald Trump are bigots, racists, misogynists, homophobes, xenophobes or anti-Semites. Many Trump supporters voted for Barack Obama twice. Broadly speaking, Mr. Trump won because there are vast swaths of our country that are experiencing unprecedented economic pain and social dislocation – a kind of bereftness that we generally do not feel here.

There are real and ignored problems in America: poverty, income inequality, crime, abysmal education in parts of the country; people who feel dispossessed culturally by globalization and technology, and people who feel deprived of stability and are disoriented. Millions of people, often outside the urban centers, feel dislocated from their own community and consider the establishments and power centers to be out of touch, blissfully ignorant of their cries. The very bewilderment that many of us are experiencing – fear of losing the country - is the same bewilderment that many of those who voted for Trump experienced. We are a polarized country.

At the same time, there is no doubt that Mr. Trump energized and brought out some of the worst elements of American society. He did rouse rabble in the campaign. He did incite division, suspicion and fear. He did provoke racists and anti-Semites. He did disrespect women. When David Duke celebrates and claims a part in the victory you can feel the ghosts of past American transgressions lurking in the dark and scary corners of our national home.

At this early stage we should assume that the President-Elect is sincere in his desire to be the president for all Americans. We should give him that chance. At the same time, the record of this campaign and the hints that we received of the President-Elect's personality and proclivities, provide enough evidence to fear setbacks in social progress and an erosion of our central values.

Everything we receive from Jewish tradition pleads with us: Do not turn your back on the political process. Get more involved. Be more active. It is the antidote to emotional distress and political loss.

We despise racism, misogyny, xenophobia, intolerance and hatred of the other. We are for justice and righteousness. "I have selected Abraham to do what is just and right," the Bible tells us. This is the reason for Jewish existence: to pursue justice and to promote righteousness.

We are for peace. We are for tolerance, love and acceptance. "Love your neighbor as yourself," the Bible insists. The entire body of prophetic values may be reduced to the one insistence that the weak and dispossessed be treated with respect and dignity.

We are for racial and economic justice. We are for equality. We are for freedom, the expansion of human liberties:

“If there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart and shut your hand against them,” we read in Deuteronomy. “Rather, you must open your hand and give him whatever he needs.”

“Whoever is not merciful to others is not a descendant of our father, Abraham,” our sages teach.

Ezekiel proclaims:

“Say to the House of Israel: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh...”

The prophet Isaiah demands:

“Unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage; let the oppressed go free; break off every yoke; share your bread with the hungry, clothe the naked and take the poor into your home.”

Political disagreements on how to advance these principles – how to promote greater security and prosperity – are not only legitimate, but desirable. Pluralism encourages diversity and dissent. Being on one side or the other of our many disagreements on economic and social policy is not ipso facto evidence of moral inferiority. We are too quick to assign moral labels to our opponents.

But we can never compromise on the principles themselves.

We must defend these values and be prepared to fight politically, harder than ever before, to protect them. Because while individuals come and go; while political leaders rise and fall, these truths are timeless and impervious to politics. They exist independent of those who happen to hold power at any given time. And even if temporarily eclipsed, these eternal truths are stronger than any opposing force. “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Micah spoke the truth: Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

Jeremiah spoke the truth: Let not the mighty man glory in his might. Glory only in mercy, justice and righteousness.

Amos spoke the truth: Let justice well up like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Hosea spoke the truth: I desire kindness.

Akiva spoke the truth: Love your neighbor as yourself; this is the central value.

It is more important now than ever before to live our lives in accordance with these values and to teach our children to be loving, compassionate, caring, gentle and kind, even if these traits are not always exhibited by our political leaders.

Furthermore, the historical experiences of our people instruct us that it is critical for Jewish life: We have always had an interest in social stability. When freedom erodes and intolerance increases it is always bad for Jews. We are the first to feel the effects. “Pray for the welfare of the government, for without it, people would swallow each other alive,” teach our Sages.

Ten weeks after winning the War Winston Churchill interrupted his participation in the Potsdam Conference to return to London for the announcement of the election results. Everyone was

convinced that Churchill would prevail. He had stood practically alone against Hitler. He won the War, the lion of Britain.

Churchill wrote: “Just before dawn I woke suddenly with a sharp stab of almost physical pain...by noon it was clear that [we had lost the elections]. Churchill’s wife, Clementine, said to him: “It may well be a blessing in disguise.’ Winston replied: “At this moment it seems quite effectively disguised.”

Do not lose hope. Keep the faith. Our country is strong. With all its challenges and problems this is still the most exceptional country on earth. Its best days are still ahead. Americans are generally good and decent. We are still the last best hope on earth.

The American Dream is alive. It is still alive. The sun shines on this country and dawn will come tomorrow as well.

We are blessed. You may feel that some blessings are disguised now but our Jewish ancestors could not even dream of such a place. We are blessed to fight for principles and values.

Gird your loins and fight. When right, support the President-Elect. When wrong, protest, advocate, lobby, and defend with passion the ideals that define us. There is something ennobling, inspiring and immensely patriotic in opposing majority will if the majority is wrong. It bespeaks a deep seated belief in democracy. Democracy upholds the will of the majority but it is a majority restrained by constitutional limitations, and by the moral principles permanently and perpetually enshrined in the human heart.

Do not begrudge these years. They can make you better. There is nothing that inspires us more than to fight for principle. Moral sentiment and grim resolve lift the heart and feed the pure running waters of the wellsprings of life itself. These years may concentrate our minds and force us to think through what we really believe. What are the principles that guide our actions? These years may deepen our resolve to never take anything for granted. Everything can change in human affairs.

We get better through struggle. We do not seek, nor do we expect a challenge free world. We do not seek to empty challenge from our lives but to challenge the emptiness of life. Not to escape struggle but to struggle with escapism.

We should want our fight to count. To mean something. Amidst the challenges of the years ahead lay opportunities for sacrifice and service and ennobling struggle.

In the immortal words of the greatest of American presidents who guided us through far more difficult times:

“We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”