

A Time of Change and Challenge

In the yearly journey that we make in synagogues around the world reading through the entire Torah, the Five Books of Moses, today's Torah portion's opening words feel particularly appropriate. The portion begins with Genesis 12:1 with the words: "the Eternal One said to Avram *Lekh Lekha* (Go forth) from your land, from your place of birth, from the house of your father to the land that I will show you." Avram is about to embark on a journey whose destination is completely unknown to him. He will leave that which is familiar, having no idea what will befall him or what he will encounter in the new place to which he is traveling.

A year and a half ago, who could have imagined where we would find ourselves today? Half of the country is probably elated and half the country is probably still in stunned disbelief. The fact of broad division in our country is not a new story, but it probably hasn't existed at this level at least since the Vietnam War divided our nation and often divided generations. Divisions have existed along various lines since the founding of this country, whether it was a division over states' rights versus federal regulation, the North versus the South, rural versus urban America, or the battles over slavery and civil rights. However, our very name itself, the United States of America, expresses the grand desire and goal of transcending the many differences we have historically faced.

The rhetoric of division has been a huge component of campaigning this past fifteen months and it's a relief to be past that, yet I suspect that this rhetoric will not evaporate, but may very well continue to dominate news programs and the airwaves for a long time to come. As much as we may want to work for unity, first we have to be realistic and recognize that genuine disagreements exist. For example, some people, including 99% of environmental scientists, believe that climate change is real and human agency is largely responsible for it and that

irrevocable climate change is probably the most urgent problem and threat to our future that we face. Others believe that it is either a hoax or part of a natural cycle unaffected by human activity. Some people are worried about the future of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid and want the federal government to maintain these programs. Others want to dismantle or privatize these programs. For some people any attempt to impose more stringent background checks that curtail access to guns, or to ban someone who is on a no-fly list because of concerns about potential terrorist activity from being able to purchase a gun (the “no fly, no buy” proposition) are unconstitutional infringements on the Second Amendment. To others these are reasonable restrictions that might help diminish the more than 30,000 fatalities from guns that occur in the United States every year (this figure includes homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths), and might prevent terrorist incidents.

Clearly people on both sides of the divisions feel endangered and unheard. If the gulf across the divides widens, people will probably find it harder and harder to listen to each other, and to hear each other. That will make it even more difficult to bridge the gaps and to find ways to compromise. Without deeply listening to one another, trying to hear the message underneath the message also, finding compromise will likely elude us. With a population so vast and so diverse, respecting differences and finding common ground and being flexible enough to compromise is essential.

What if, when we’re really listening to someone on the other end of the divide, we find we don’t like what we hear? I think that’s the time to truly listen for the message underneath the (surface) message. Maybe this will sound overly naïve, but I tend to believe that the vast majority of people mean well, and underneath even their anger or negativity there are probably old wounds and fears. If we can hear those, we can find ways to compromise.

We're standing at the beginning of a new era in the United States. As they used to say during demonstrations in the 1960's: "The whole world is watching." The whole world is watching - to see what happens here. Just as our fates are intertwined with each other here in the United States, similarly, in this era of globaliztion, most of the world is intertwined too. What happens here will be felt in most of the rest of the world. To take one example, if the United States rolls back restraints on burning fossil fuels and on the consequent release of greenhouse gases, the effects will be global.

Can we come together and find a common set of guiding principles on which to progress towards a better future for all? How can we make sure we don't leave anyone behind? How do we create a more compassionate society and live with what the Torah calls a "circumcised heart," that is, a caring and compassionate heart? Though our challenges are clearly many, I still believe in our being a United States of America. A time of change and challenge can also be a time of great opportunity for growth.

Avram was told "*Lekh Lekha*," which is conventionally translated as to "go forth" into the unknown future to a new land. However, in the Jewish mystical tradition, the very same phrase "*Lekh Lekha*" is understood more literally as to "go into yourself" i.e. to go beneath our surface layers and to find deep within ourselves a new "land." May we see all that we have in common, rather than focusing primarily on our differences. May we honor each other as unique individuals as we try to find common ground upon which to build together. May we trust each other enough to try to listen to what is really going on in our fellow humans on the other side of the divide.