

Fall River Herald News Clergy Column November 14, 2020

The Need for a Shared Truth in Our Nation

We are in a period of limbo in our country right now. It was unrealistic to expect the deep divisions in our society to disappear overnight without an election that ended in a landslide victory accepted by both sides. Even a landslide at the polls with no mail-in ballots would still have to be accepted by the side that received less votes. If you watch different news stations that represent different sides of our current divisions, you would have to wonder if they are talking about the same set of events and have access to the same facts and information. The two sides seem so far apart, as though they represent two parallel universes completely at odds with each other. Obviously, there can't be two sets of facts for the same event. In the language of formal logic: "A" and "not A" cannot both be true at the same time.

This reminds me of the story of two people who come to a rabbi to settle a dispute between them with a neutral mutual friend accompanying them. The rabbi listens attentively as the first party tells their version of the story and when done, the rabbi says after careful consideration: "You're right." The second aggrieved party then relates their version, also to the rapt attention of the rabbi, who thinks for a moment and says: "You're right." The neutral friend says: "But rabbi, they completely disagree with each other, how can they both be right?" The rabbi thinks for a longer moment and says: "You know what? You're right too!"

What are we to do? These are unprecedented times – we all know that. The statistics regarding the pandemic are alarming – maybe more so than ever. Just this past Wednesday the country hit a record high of 148,000 new cases in one day. At the same time, as we are now into the ninth month of "the new normal," people are becoming fatigued by the situation and restrictions. Without a nationally coordinated program it's hard to imagine how we may conquer the crisis and the economic fallout that the lack of controlling the pandemic is bound to engender. Sadly, such a nationally coordinated program does not seem to be immediately on the horizon – and who knows how many people will die covid-related deaths by the time such a program may come into place, if it ever does? A country that is not united will have great difficulty implementing a nationally coordinated plan. On the encouraging side, however, an

effective vaccine does seem to be within reach now. However, we need to get through the winter first with the minimum of infections and deaths.

Also very encouraging is the fact that last week's Election Day went smoothly. Despite the divisions in our country and the concern that some self-appointed "poll watchers" bearing arms might show up at the polls, more people exercised their right to vote than ever before in our history – and it was peaceful. Maybe that bodes very well for the future despite the discord in the wake of the election results.

This Saturday's Torah reading, as we are now five weeks into the book of Genesis, begins with the death of the matriarch, Sarah, and concludes with the death of her husband Abraham. In effect it is about the succession of leadership. Now their son Isaac and his wife, Rebecca, will assume the leadership of the extended family. The middle of the Torah portion relates the story of Rebecca and Isaac being brought together.

After the Torah portion is read or chanted, the custom is to read or chant a section from the books of the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible that somehow connects to the Torah portion by echoing its themes or key phrases. The origin of this custom goes back about 2,000 years to when the Romans conquered the land of Israel and forbade the study of the Torah - punishable by death. To get around the prohibition a section from another part of the Bible that reflected the forbidden reading was chanted in its place. This Saturday's *Haftarah* (that additional scriptural reading) opens with King David near the end of his life in a dramatic scene confirming that his son with Bathsheba, Solomon, will replace him as the most worthy successor, though another son, Adoniyah, was trying to take advantage of his father's weakness, replacing him surreptitiously. One of the concerns of the prophet Nathan, who arranged for this scene of King David in the presence of Bathsheba announcing the succession of their son Solomon to the throne, is the acceptance of the successor by the people at large. If the populace does not accept the new leader you will have a badly divided society that becomes vulnerable to the outside world and increasingly fragile on the inside. Nathan recognizes that the people at large need to know that King David sees Solomon as his successor, not Adoniyah. The power of the leader is such that he or she can unite or divide the populace with their words and their actions.

Without norms in a society, whether in the Land of Israel in 973 BCE or in the United States in 2020, that society cannot flourish. Without a common sense of, and commitment to, truth, a society will fracture. I'm sure we all have embedded in our minds the phrase: "the truth,

the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” whether from watching “Perry Mason,” some other court show, or actually being in court. It’s a sacred phrase that is foundational for a free society. We need to know that our elected officials who represent us are committed to this principle of truth, and to be able and willing to trust that this is a key value common to all in our society. May the coming months remain peaceful and may we continue to protect each other by wearing masks.