

Shabbat Shalom.

As we head into next Tuesday's election, I want to start with some good news. Which is that in just a few days, the election will be over. Baruch Hashem.

At least, the guessing, and canvassing, and polling will be over. And that will be good. But as we know, after Tuesday, the real work will just be beginning: the work of healing, of thinking clearly, of holding our leaders accountable, and remembering who we are as a community. All that will take some time. And we're going to have to find some way of walking this path together, as New York Jews, choosing to bridge the divides between us, which are so painfully deep today.

Over the course of these many months of campaigning, and, really, for the past two years, much has been said and written about the fissures in American Jewish life. Given the last near century in which Jews generally took for granted a shared set of political views, it actually does feel newsworthy that we've woken up to a disunity among our people, with all its attendant pains and possibilities. The war in Gaza amplified debates that had been slowly creeping in on us for at least a decade, problematizing our perceived consensus, and driving a wedge through our communities between generations, social scenes, synagogues and so on.

As New Yorkers, we feel this acutely. And it's all so horribly painful. To consider the ways in which we've devolved into two camps, seemingly at odds with one another.

But almost as an antidote to that feeling this week, in our Torah cycle, as we read the literal first chapter of our people's history, we read a very different story. A tale of ultimate unity. When it was so much easier for our people to be unified. Since, of course, the global Jewish population was only two people: Avram and Sarai. Nevermind the various marital disputes between them that would come later...for a moment – honestly just for one single chapter in this parsha – they were unified. By a singular, famous call:

Vayomer Adonai El Avram. And God said to Avram: Lech Lecha, me'artz'cha, umi-molad't'cha, umibeit avicha. Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house...el haaretz asher areka. To the land that I will show you.

You could read this, against the backdrop of today, and say: look! Right there at the very beginning! We read of the centrality of the land in Jewish history.

And it's true, if we're looking for a biblical proof-text for that, this the first one of many. But I'm more interested in the first clauses of that verse. That seemingly out of nowhere, Avram heard a call. From the Unity of all Unities, which is to say, God. And then, with Sarai, in a unified act of defiance against all they'd been previously taught to believe, they went forth in pursuit of something better.

In this famous first episode, Avram demonstrated his ability to hear a singular truth with a capital T, of the sort that binds us all together. The first cause of all things: a single God. Maimonides argued that Avram was just so brilliant that he could tap into that kind of truth when no one else could. He could see the bigger picture, thanks to his intellectual faculties and intuition.

But this ur-text, if you will, this locus classicus for Jewish Unity and the unity of God belies a different lesson about our pursuit of truth. One which, I think, is actually at the core of everything that Avram bestowed upon the countless generations which came after, unto the present moment. And that is, simply, that in parashat Lech Lecha, Avram was able to draw a radical, new conclusion. And in so doing he was able to change the course of our history for good.

In a Hasidic understanding, lech lecha doesn't just mean, "go forth," or "get going," but emphasizing the prepositional pronoun of "lecha," the phrase really means something like, "Go *to* yourself." "Understand yourself." Or "Find yourself." The 18th century Rabbi David of Lelov taught that all of Judaism is a path toward the truth of one's soul. And with that in mind, we might be so bold as to translate "lech lecha," as: "*think* for yourself."

Lest we view this as merely a semiotic stretch...consider for a moment all the many texts that portray Abraham as a man who DID think for himself.

You likely know the famous midrash. That Abraham saw through the lies of his father Terach, who made a living selling idols. And one day smashed them all, forcing his father to acknowledge the deceptions he had been peddling. Abraham, per the midrash, was not willing to go along with the falsehoods all around him, choosing instead to think for himself.

Another text from the same collection of midrashim puts it more plainly. That Midrash teaches: "the whole world was on one side, and Abraham was willing to be on the other side." And for that reason, he was called an Ivri, a Hebrew, a boundary crosser. A literal iconoclast.

Again and again, our rabbinic texts take pains to describe Abraham, the first Hebrew, as a man who thought for himself, who had a Yiddishe Kop, that Jewish sensibility, born of alienation to resist mainstream assumptions and choose a different path.

For that matter, the Torah itself describes Abraham as a man who literally argued with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah willing to take God to task directly for the sake of humanity. Jewish texts seem to beat us over the head with the idea that Abraham was a nonconformist.

And in this sense, he was the first of many Jews throughout our history, who exemplified the concept of chiddush. Meaning offering something new that has never been said or thought before. In Avram's time, generating an original thought did not require dissenting from other Hebrews, because there weren't any. But in every successive generation of Jews, thinking independently naturally yielded generative debate.

And throughout the millennia, our people has survived because of our ability to have new ideas, chiddushim – and to countenance so many different potential new truths. Dare I say, *competing* truths, in the ever unfolding Talmud of history. We all know that disagreement is the hallmark of Jewish life. It's a downright cliché.

But I mention all this tonight because as we pursue communal healing in this next chapter of our story, we need to find our way back to that ancient Jewish instinct to accept diverging views from one another. Because it's in that *shakla v'tarya*, that back and forth, that we are able to find new insights about who we are.

Accepting disagreement is especially hard for us right now because we feel pretty bruised by the past two years. And because, I think, for many of us, the disagreements in public Jewish life feel like they run right through our very sense of self.

The path that once felt singular now forks in two – on side, activists. On the other, the Establishment. Both claim to be THE correct Jewish path. And I think it's fair to say that both are trying to proceed honorably.

But as we try to find our way, amidst very loud voices, the most Jewish response might be the quietest: to clear out the noise and to think for ourselves.

I guess that's a useful reminder before heading into any election. But it's also a reminder for us, in the post-election moment we're *also* approaching. A plea for us all to find some Jewish way through the morass of our time. Though we may find ourselves on one side or another of a continuum, not one of us is in precisely the same spot as

any other. And the important point is to find *ourselves*, wherever we are...accepting that others are trying to do the same.

That general goodwill toward others has sustained our multivocal tradition for thousands of years. It was the necessary communal imperative for a group of individuals, who heard the call of lech lecha, and charted their own paths albeit with a tether to one another. All of those separate views butting heads with one another and still finding a way to observe Shabbat together and live together and love each other. *That* has been the hallmark of Jewish unity far more than any modern political consensus.

Our resilience, as a people, has come from our ability to walk a path together, even as we argue along the way, deriving different truths from the core of our being in conversation with each other.

And tonight, as we settle into this Shabbat, before what will likely be a challenging next week in the New York Jewish conversation may we hear our own call to get really clear about who we are and what we believe. May we find a truth that is personal, but also, interconnected. As this election gives way to something else, may all of us work toward a shared sense of communal purpose rooted in the integrity of each of us individuals. And in so doing, may we, together, become a blessing.

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