

## Vayera 5769 Avraham and Rahm

Shabbat Shalom.

I usually stay away from politics – I prefer to teach Torah and stay closer to the traditional rabbinic role of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable,” as the expression goes.

But sometimes, you have to share a bit – even if it is politics.

Last week, I attended the STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) conference held in Phoenix, Arizona. It was scheduled two years ago so they did not know they would be a mile away from where John McCain would speak on election night.

Since we happened to be so close to a major political moment, a few of us figured we should go. Of course, we did not know how to get in, but we thought it would work out.

After ducking through some crowds and accidentally walking through a restricted area with a security detail, we found ourselves on a long line. The mood was subdued as everyone knew he had lost.

One rabbi decided since we were all wearing kippot and needed a cover story to get, we would be “Rabbis for McCain,” although in truth most of us were not his supporters. One colleague of mine was interviewed for a Spanish newspaper and another for Japanese TV.

One person asked us who we were and we replied: “Rabbis for McCain.” He wasn’t buying it as he responded, “There are no rabbis for McCain!”

Finally, we made it to the metal detector just as McCain was beginning his speech. But without a ticket and since the Rabbis for McCain ploy was not working, they did not let us in.

We had to think fast – since it was not a victory party, people were leaving and I asked a few of them for their tickets. Some wanted to keep them as souvenirs, but finally I got a folded ticket and went in.

There was a jumbo American flag on a field with a few thousand people and a huge grandstand for hundreds of cameras from all over the world.

We made our way through the crowd and he was only a couple of hundred feet away from me as he spoke. While I did not agree with everything he said in the campaign, that night John McCain demonstrated real leadership. He spoke generously about new president-elect – he silenced the few fundamentalists in the crowd and spoke

with heart and purpose. It was like the old John McCain returned instead of the one who seemed to have been co-opted by some of the more extreme elements in his party.

I would say it was probably the best speech of his entire campaign and even this crowd of stalwarts began to understand the significance of Obama's election.

But the most emotional moment happened afterward; we wanted to get back to our hotel and watch Barack Obama's speech at an election gathering there – thanks to some quick thinking, commandeering a shuttle, and some fast running, we made it back.

Whether you agree or disagree with his politics, Obama's election is a historic moment for our country and I have to confess that I was in tears watching the moment. Sharon called me on the phone and we woke Talya up for this special moment.

For all its flaws – and there are many – this country is the only majority white nation that could elect a black person to its highest office and we should all feel proud about the progress this country has made over the last generations.

I remember meeting Barack Obama in 2004 when we was running for senate in Illinois. He came to meet with some of the rabbis and I was immediately impressed with his demeanor and his ability with words. He was impressive and many of us thought he was going places; well, maybe not this fast....

Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, not a supporter of Obama still wrote the following:

“The morning after the epiphany in America, I remarked a little sheepishly to a friend that from the way I had surrendered to my emotions, you would think that my own ancestors were slaves. And then I saw it: I had surrendered to my emotions because my own ancestors were slaves. How can a Jew, I mean a Jewish Jew, not rejoice at the election of Barack Obama? [...] historically, spiritually. We, too, remember the pharaohs; and we, too, choose never to hate the world; and we, too, have a hope of being saved by America.”

While there is great excitement about the future, there is also great anxiety as we cope with difficult challenges. This week's parashah present us with a model of a leader and leadership.

Avraham is a leader who is not afraid to take risks. Last week, in *Parashat Lekh Lekhah* how he followed God's command to leave his home and travel to an unknown destination and he takes the chance. After that he demonstrates his leadership protecting his nephew Lot and he fights when he has to and makes peace deals when he can, making a covenant with God. Finally, he circumcises himself at an advanced age.

Leaders are those who can handle tough decisions.

In this week's reading, Avraham starts strong with *hakhnasat orhim*, welcoming visitors, and attempting to save the cities of *Sdom* and *Amorah* by arguing with God about justice, but then he starts making poor decisions: risking Sarah's life by passing her off as his sister not his wife, kicking out Yishmael (his first son) and Hagar after Isaac is born, and finally, the binding of Isaac. In these, he seems to be a poor leader – why does he argue for the innocent in *Sdom*, but not for his own son? It seems like Avraham is burnt out as a leader and not able to keep himself rejuvenated.

We can also hear echoes of Avraham's agonizing choice to take his son Isaac to the altar in the decision we face in America and Israel when we send the younger generation to war.

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This morning I want to focus on a new leader on the national scene, one who shares Avraham's name. "When the new president takes office in January, the man at his side will be the son of an Israeli, Rahm Emanuel, or "Rahmbo" as he is known in Washington for his take-no-prisoners style. The Illinois congressman, who will be Barack Obama's White House chief of staff, is described as one of the most talented political hands in Washington. After earlier stints as an adviser in Bill Clinton's White House and as chair of the Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives, Emanuel, 48, is expected to help the new president achieve ambitious goals." (The Forward)

Emanuel, who according to reports I read, grew up going to Jewish day school and visiting Israel every summer, volunteered at an Israeli military base during the 1991 Gulf War. He rust-proofed brakes on an army base in northern Israel, but I think it was his presence as an American coming to Israel as Iraq fired Scud missiles upon the country that must have been most encouraging to the Israelis.

Emanuel's father, Benjamin, was a pediatrician and a member of the Irgun, a right-wing underground during the British mandate that became part of the Israel Defense Forces in the 1940's (and his father's recent offensive comments about Arabs have unfortunately already caused some small problems), but Rahm is known as a centrist who supports the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. "Insiders credit Emanuel with orchestrating the 1993 historic handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat by advising Clinton to grab the two leaders by the arms and make the moment happen." Perhaps, more magical moments are in store with a Rahm-Barack administration.

The name "Emanuel" is not the family's original name. Rahm's father replaced the family name "Auerbach" with the name of his brother Emanuel after Emanuel was killed in an Arab uprising in Palestine in 1936 as a means of keeping his memory alive.

Rahm himself is the inspiration for the character Josh Lyman on *The West Wing*. He has two older brothers, one bio-medical researcher and the other one, Ari, inspired a character of the same name in the HBO series *Entourage*. He also has a younger sister named Shoshanna.

Rahm's wife, Amy Rule, is involved in their children's school, the Conservative-affiliated Bernard Zell Day School where their three children, Zacharias, Ilana and Leah, study.

Perhaps what excited me most about Rahm is his desire to infuse his leadership and his life with Judaism and Jewish learning. He is a committed Jew. Emanuel has said of his Judaism: "I am proud of my heritage and treasure the values it has taught me."

"As far as his presence in the White House goes, if his past tenure there is any example, he will be clear-cut in his advocacy for Israel, human rights, quality of life for all Americans and responsible government. It's interesting to note that Obama could have picked anyone for this job, but he chose the most identifiable Jew in the business."

In his personal life Emanuel is said to be deeply compassionate, a voracious consumer of Jewish learning, principled, and committed beyond all else to his family.

Jack Moline, a Conservative rabbi in Alexandria, VA used to have a *hevruta*, a study partnership with Rahm who was his congregant when he lived in DC and worked for the Clinton administration. When Rahm left the Clinton White House, he was honored with a large reception. Since Rabbi Moline studied with him in his office, he was among the invited guests. To his shock (and everyone's notice), when he got up to speak, he acknowledged Rabbi Moline first and the President and First Lady next. The consent of his rabbi was more important to him than of anyone outside his family.

In making this particular decision to become Chief of Staff, Rahm consulted a lot of people including Rabbi Moline. Rahm had set his eye on being the first Jewish Speaker of the House, and accepting this position means his personal ambitions must be redefined. (He said to Rabbi Moline, "Being a part of history is an obligation greater than my personal goals.") Rahm was most concerned about his children's Jewish education and the challenges of preparing for his son's bar mitzvah. While those details are private, it seems like he has found a good solution that keeps the family's Jewish priorities paramount.

He relies on the counsel of a number of rabbis in Chicago: Debra Newman Kamin and Michael Siegel and my old friend, Rabbi Asher Lopatin who spoke at my installation here in 2004.

After moving back to Chicago and working successfully in banking, Rahm decided in 2002 to make a run for an open congressional seat on Chicago's North Side.

He earned support among adults who had been his father's patients as children and from the legions of police officers and firefighters who took the endorsement of Emanuel's uncle, a police sergeant. However, he faced a bruising battle in the Democratic primary that included anti-Semitic broadsides raised by Polish supporters of one of his opponents.

In response, he gathered religious leaders to condemn the smears, which included allegations that his loyalty was to Israel, rather than to America. Emanuel brought together a coalition of Chicago clergy to denounce the incident. He recalled, “One of the proudest moments of my life was seeing people of my district from all backgrounds demonstrate our common values by coming together in response to this obvious attempt to divide them.”

This year, just before Rosh Hashana, Rahm called my friend, Asher, with a question: Could he violate the holiday to sit in on a conference call about the \$700 billion bank bailout package that congressional Democrats were fiercely trying to revive?

It didn't take long for Asher, who heads a modern Orthodox congregation in Chicago, to give him an answer.

He told him that it was his *halakhic* opinion that the financial system was on the point of failing and it could be a disaster, and this was a matter of life and death, to get this passed, as long as the violation was kept to a minimum. (J Post)

Asher also shared with me how Rahm models his yiddishkeit. He was given the honor of opening the ark for the *Unetane Tokef* on Rosh Hashanah. As the prayer states: “*mi Yiyashir u mi yayani* – who will become rich and who will become poor?” Rahm was caught up in the power of the moment - we certainly do not know the answers to that and even though he was helping make decision that could in fact determine that, he was struck by the enormity of his responsibility.

While leadership has challenges and we can see even strong leaders like Avraham get burnt out and start making poor choices, let us hope that Rahm Emanuel, a leader who has studied and internalized the wisdom of our tradition, will be able to help the new government start to fix our myriad problems.

*Kein Yehi Ratzon* – may it be willed into being: Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.