

**Lech Lecha**  
**November 12, 2016**  
***Open Tent Judaism- Open Tent America- Open Tent World***  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

So, last Shabbat, I stood on this bema and gave a sermon on *Parshat Noah* where I insisted that whichever candidate got elected the other side needed to remember that the world would not come to an end; that regardless of which side won, we were not on the eve of destruction. Of course that's when I thought *my* side would win. Now, I sure hope I was right.

After receiving the email on Thursday about my intention to speak about the election today, a number of you reached out to me and said that you hoped I could find something from the events of the past week that *everyone* could agree was good news.... So I want to begin by telling you that due to the anxiety of the events leading up to and following the election – I lost 5 lbs.! I think we can all agree *that* is good news – beyond that I am not sure what to tell you.

About half the country is elated by the results of the presidential election and about half of the country is depressed by those results and therein lies the problem I wish to focus on this morning. If half of us were *mildly* pleased and half of us were *mildly* disappointed – I don't think this would be such a challenging time. But that is not the case. We are a nation extremely divided and that is not good for anyone. A different outcome in the election would not have changed the problem that confronts us – it would merely have altered the dynamic of who was elated and who was depressed.

So here is what I want to do this morning. I would like to take a few moments and address my friends here today who are elated and I then want to take a few moments and address my friends here today who are depressed. Then I want to see if we can use today's Torah portion to focus on the real challenge that now confronts us.

First to my friends who are celebrating: congratulations. I wish Donald Trump well and I wish him great success. We all want this country to succeed, we all want this world to be a safer place, we all want there to be greater fairness and justice, happiness, compassion, love and peace in the world. I hope those of you who supported him are correct that Donald Trump is the path to those things. But please be patient if it takes longer for those who did not vote for him to get there. I hope Trump can produce a better America, a better world and a better future for our children. I hope you understand the skepticism of those who are not as sure as you are.

As I walked the streets of New York the past few days, it is undeniable that there are groups of our fellow Americans that are encouraged and empowered by Trump's success on Tuesday – they have a spring in their step and a gleam in their eye. But equally undeniable is that there are groups of our fellow citizens who feel alienated, betrayed and abandoned: many blacks, many Hispanics, many Muslims, many gays, many women and yes, many Jews. The rhetoric of this campaign was unsettling, to say the least, to many Americans. We must find ways to reach out and encourage and empower all those who are feeling unsettled today. I hope President-elect Trump meant what he said in his acceptance speech that he wants to be the president of *all* Americans. Those were the right words and that was the correct tone – I hope it continues.

I have heard from both of these groups over the last few days. Some of you reaching out to me to share your joy; some of you reaching out to me expressing concern and fear. What I told those who were afraid and concerned was that the challenge of this moment – is not to over-react... but also not to under-react.

I have had members of our community tell me that they were seriously considering leaving the country. I understand your fears and your concerns, but I really do think that is an over-reaction. This is not the time to abandon ship but it is a time to be watchful. “Yeah, that was what a lot of rabbis were telling their congregants in Germany a generation ago,” one member sarcastically said to me as I attempted to calm his fears.

As a Jew who has studied his history I know the price of underestimating the seriousness of a moment. But today is not 1933 and Trump is not Hitler. I have had holocaust survivors tell me they resent the comparison of Trump to Hitler – as they feel it demeans the experience they suffered at the hands of real evil. In 1933 a prescient person could flee Germany to another country. Some Jews fled to America and were safe; some fled to France and were not. Where does one flee to in 2016, when we live in a global village? This is America we are speaking about – and as goes America so goes the world. No, the battle for our welfare, the welfare of our children and the welfare of the world will be fought here. Trump may be the answer to what ails us and if so I will be the first to sing his praises. But if he is not, the battle will be fought here and it is ours to fight.

Some of you have asked me, “what do we say to our children when they ask – ‘how could we elect a man who talks the way he does and acts the way he does to be president of the United States?’”

That is not an easy question. I think we have to acknowledge that there are some people in this country who like the way he talks and like the way he acts – and while that is sad – it is a fact. But I also think that we need to emphasize that there are a lot of people who voted for him *despite* the way he talks and *despite* the way he acts. That is to say – that they do not approve of his behavior or of his language – but that there are other things he stands for that they do approve of and that is why they voted for him. Not every Trump supporter wears a vulgar T-shirt, and while some of them do, most of them are good and decent people who just disagree with you – and they deserve your respect.

I think now more than ever we all need to be models of appropriate behavior since we cannot depend on our political leaders to set such an example. I read where a teacher was correcting a student for interrupting the class by saying, “...Johnny that is not how we behave in this class!” To which the student responded, “Why not? Donald Trump kept interrupting Hillary Clinton and he became president of the United States!”

To all those who reached out to me expressing fear and concern, my response is quite simple. It is ok to be concerned, it is not ok to be afraid. We need to assure each other that all will be well. And just as I am assuring you of that fact – you need to assure your children of that fact if they express any fear. And should they model behavior that devalues women, disrespects minorities, is insensitive to the handicapped or use vulgar speech – now more than ever we must be prepared to say – “But that is not how we behave!”

We should do everything we can to support the newly elected president of the United States. I will be the first to applaud everything he does to make this a better country and I hope you will as well. But I will not be hesitant in speaking truth to power as I did time and again during the last eight years and neither should you.

But even more important than learning how to deal with a newly elected president that you either love or hate is how do we all deal with the fact that half of our country feels so radically different than we do? 59,937,338 Americans voted for Trump. 60,274,974 voted for Clinton. We are a nation divided. And if the outcome of Tuesday's election had been different it would not have changed that fact it merely would have altered the equation of which half was happy and which half was sad.

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly tribal. Muslims are killing Muslims across the Middle East and Central Asia today: Sunnis versus Shiites, Pashtuns versus Pashtuns and Kurds versus Turks. Christians are not faring well there, either. The story line in Judaism is also not a good one – as even the kotel has become a place of disunity and contention as Jews battle Jews for mutual respect and recognition. It is almost impossible for a rabbi to speak about Israel these days without half of his congregation calling him or her a traitor – regardless of what position he may take. The absence of pluralism and tolerance is the dominant political trend in the world today. And now I worry that this spirit has come to these shores as well. We are no longer, “one nation, indivisible...” but a collection of Red States and Blue States. Distrust of the other is rapidly becoming the way we do business.

Today's torah reading – *parshat lech lecha*, introduces us to the founder of Judaism – *Avraham Avinu*. A unique destiny was conferred upon *Avraham* as he was to become the founder of Judaism. Unlike the founders of other faiths, he left behind no written work, nor was he influential by position of power – he was only a wandering stranger in Canaan. So what made *Avraham* unique? What gave him the special qualities that were to transform the lives of generations of Jews and non-Jews down to modern times?

According to our rabbis, who studied the Torah carefully to make sure that it was mined for every precious truth and no nuance went undetected; according to the rabbis, *Avraham* had certain qualities of character, values by which he ordered his life – and these made him worthy of being the first Jew. Abraham became known as the foremost exponent of *hesed* – of kindness. He exemplified the virtue of hospitality which is a manifestation of *gemilut hesed* – deeds of loving-kindness and he dramatized in and through his own personal life this value which was to occupy one of the highest places on the ladder of Israel's values: *Gedolah hachnasat orchim m'kabalat p'nei shechina* – “The act of hospitality, welcoming strangers, is greater say the rabbis, than even welcoming the presence of God.” And the image that came to represent Abraham the man of *hesed* – the man of hospitality – was the image of *Avraham* sitting in his tent – which we are told was open on all four sides so that he could see strangers approaching – no matter the direction from whence they came.

That's it? The founder of Judaism – a religion and way of life that has endured for 4000 years – that has survived defeat and exile - -that has endured hardship and history – and the secret to *our* survival is a guy whose tent had doors on all four sides? You were hoping for something more profound? But, maybe it is profound enough. Abraham sat in a tent that was open on all four sides – open to people who approached him from every direction – this is less an act than it is an attitude.

The problem of our time – even more than the closed home and the locked door, is the closed mind and the locked heart. The attitude of isolation, the world of I, ME and MINE – is a world that closes in on itself – it is a very different world from Abraham's tent that was open on all four sides. Abraham lived in a world of an open heart and an open mind – and as a result he became a model for countless generations. We live in a world of closed minds and closed hearts. And all you have to do is read the headlines of our daily newspapers to see what it is doing to our world.

Arabs are known for their hospitality. You may be their enemy outside their home but once they invite you inside their home – they will treat you with respect and deference. There was a time when I thought this was an expression of hypocrisy but now I see it as something very different. When I walk in the world, I have enemies and I have friends – and woe to the person who does not know the difference. But in my home, everyone is a friend. This is the essence of Arab hospitality that is a manifestation of Middle-Eastern hospitality that dates all the way back to the open tent of Avraham Avinu.

I think we saw a remarkable demonstration of this on Thursday. Can you imagine two people who disrespect each other more than Donald Trump and Barak Obama do? And yet, on Thursday, President Obama welcomed President-elect Trump into his home, the White House which is soon to become Trump's home – and he did it graciously and warmly.

Here is the crux of the challenge that now faces us: we learn from Abraham Avinu the truth that in our home everyone is friend. But how far do we extend the borders of our home? That is now the critical question. There was a time when it went from sea to shining sea. Is that no longer the case? Have we become two distinct nations? Two separate homes? Red homes and Blue homes?

For a long time in Israel the challenge was to find a way for Jews and Palestinians to learn to live together in one place. But, most Israelis and most Palestinians have given up on that dream and now the question is how to live apart in one place – how to construct two separate lives, two separate countries – in one place. Is that what is happening here as well? The American dream used to be one of a diverse population living together, respecting each other – dare I say loving each other? But at the very least extending kindness to each other. I worry about the future of that vision in a country made up of red states and blue states. Half of the country voted differently than you did! How do we learn to live and respect and love each other?

Never has the world changed as rapidly as it has in our time. This places upon each of us the challenge to open his or her mind to new facts and to new alternatives and to new evidence, just as Abraham opened his tent to those who came seeking help and in need.

Climate change is a fact. Large numbers of people who look different than us who inhabit our country – are a fact. To shut the windows of the mind is to court mental and spiritual suffocation.

But there are other facts we need to be mindful of as well. This new world has not presented equal opportunity for all. There are many who have been left behind and we dare not close our hearts to these fellow citizens. The inability to reach out beyond ourselves and to feel the pain

of others, to exult in the happiness of others, to truly share life with others – this is also the challenge of our times. Abraham's tent was open on all four sides – *gemilut hesed* means to reach out, to enlarge your spiritual home as well as your physical one. We are a generation that has so much to give – and yet too many of us close our doors and hoard our blessings for ourselves. In a hungry world – we have food. In a lonely world we have friendship – we have love, we have understanding, we have caring in abundance, we have encouragement, we have compliments galore that we have stored up for the using- like Abraham we need to develop a generosity of spirit and to learn how to share them.

*Avraham Avinu* was the first Jew and he became the first Jew because of one worthy trait: he exemplified kindness – he was a man of *hesed*. Because his tent was open on all sides – he met many people, he welcomed them, laughed with them, cried with them and learned from all of them – because his heart and mind was open to all – he grew in spirit, he grew in character, he grew in moral excellence to become the founder of a people that would change the destiny of the world.

I hope this shul will be a model for *hesed*, for a community based on kindness, a place you can feel comfortable expressing your concerns and focusing our actions. I hope this shul will be a place where we do what we Jews have always done in times of uncertainty-- to be together and draw strength from each other. On this Shabbat and on every Shabbat, let us be a living proof that after a divisive election we can, like *Avraham Avinu*, be a model of kindness and generosity of spirit in a world that needs us now more than ever.