

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 11 NOVEMBER 2016

Lessons Learned from an Election

Outside of running for and being elected Temple Youth Group president when I was in high school and also PTO co-president when I lived in Columbia, South Carolina, I have never been a candidate for election. Well, that's not completely true. When Dick Riley, Governor of South Carolina, was nearing the end of his second and statutory final term as governor -- after his term ended, he went on to become President Clinton's Secretary of Education -- I was attending a party at the governor's mansion. Everyone was wondering who would run for governor in the next election. Someone at the party asked a congregant of mine, a friend who was the political kingmaker in South Carolina, who the next governor was going to be. "God," he said.

"And who might God be?" someone else asked him.

"Him," he replied pointing at me standing about ten feet away (He often, in the typical fashion of Southern humor, called me "God" when we were alone).

"Here it comes," I thought to myself. Suddenly I was surrounded by at least twenty people, half a dozen of whom were reporters.

That's when the questioning started. While I knew that this was a joke, they were serious. And for a moment I thought to myself, "Mmm...why not?"

Then I remembered something another congregant of mine, one who himself had run for political office, had once told me. "If you win, all of the costs of running a campaign will be paid for. But if you don't, well, make sure you can afford to pay all the costs yourself."

With that I let the joke (which had almost become a non-joke) run for a few more moments. Then I announced that I had changed my mind. And as quickly as the crowd around me had gathered, so quickly after I, God or not, had now become a non-candidate, did it vanish.

I learned a lot about political office when I lived in South Carolina. I don't know how it is now, but in those days it was easy to gain access to and personally get to know political office-holders. Well, at least that's the way it was for me as a rabbi living in the state capital. I had a personal relationship with the governor, and I also knew our long-serving US Senator, Strom Thurmond. It was from him -- who on at least one occasion following a Bat Mitzvah celebration at my synagogue pounded on the door of my study two minutes after the service ended to say, "Good Shabbos, Rabbi!" -- that I learned that getting elected was about being perceived as taking the right stand at the right time. He

was a prime example. He went from being the most rabid segregationist around when he ran as and carried a couple of states as the Dixiecrat candidate in the 1948 presidential election, to being, when he died, as fierce a champion of the cause of his African-American constituency who kept him in office as you can imagine.

Which brings up some lessons which flow from the election that ended this week with Donald Trump being elected as the person who in two months will be inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States.

First, this: I'm not a prognosticator by any means. But when, after Donald Trump emerged as the Republican candidate following his crushing the candidacies of a vast number of candidates in the Republican primaries and caucuses, most everyone I met made the same pronouncement: "There is no way he is going to win presidential election." As the months went on, and more and more things emerged about who Donald Trump really was, the litany grew more frequent. There was, everyone here was saying, no way he could win the election.

But I, despite my own personal support for a Hillary Clinton presidency, responded, each time I heard someone pronounce the impossibility of a Trump victory in the election, with just the opposite position. And I also gave the reason for my response. "While I fervently hope you are right, it *is* possible for him to win. *We* don't elect presidents. People in Middle America and now the South do. We here in Massachusetts often *do* see things differently from the rest of the country. Remember, we were the only state that voted for McGovern in the 1972 election (Cantor Levson correctly reminded me the other day that the District of Columbia supported him in that election too)!"

The reality was – and this continued until the very hour the polls started closing and the election results began pouring in – that the view of the impossibility of a Trump win was shared by virtually everyone: Clinton supporters, the press, the pollsters, a whole host of people all the way up to President Obama himself.

But I have always believed in the possibility of a different reality, the one of so many in Middle America and the South. I have because I know that we don't gain an understanding of the rest of the world simply by looking at ourselves and our own needs. Who and what we are is not necessarily a mirror of what exists in the minds of others. That's why, even in the unfolding of the Jewish tradition over the course of the centuries, there is such a multitude of opinions vis-à-vis most anything you can think of.

And that is an important lesson to remember from the election.

A second is a lesson gleaned from the way Donald Trump ran his campaign himself. It's what I saw as Strom Thurmond continued winning election after election. Donald Trump had an uncanny ability to read the masses. He became *their* voice. What those

masses were thinking and wouldn't in this era of political correctness ever dare to say, he said...out loud. And the more the rest of us talked progressive 21st century language and articulated the positions that that language reflects, the more the people on the other side dug their heels in to say that we were wrong and they – and now Donald Trump whose voice was their voice – were right.

It is interesting as to why the liberal wings of Judaism supported Hillary Clinton. Hers were essentially the same left-of-center positions that our Reform movement has been espousing for years. It's what always coursed through the veins of our brand of Judaism in what we believed was our cause, and that was the tradition of the prophets. And it's why virtually every Reform rabbi I know supported Hillary Clinton. Her stands on women, on LGBTQ, on immigration, on Muslims, and on a host of other issues relating to human rights and dignity...those were the same positions that all of us have been preaching from our pulpits for decades.

And when the election ended in a Trump victory, and that pained most of us here so deeply, what personally pained me more was not that *he* won but, rather, that what and who he represented was and still remains so widespread. Bigotry and hate and misogyny and everything else he was giving voice to in his campaign still exists and hasn't gone away, not by a long shot.

And so *our* work still very much has to continue. The battle for what we have fought and which we thought we at last had won is not even close to being over. But about that I do proclaim this: we will continue the battle. For the causes we know are right, we will continue to fight on. For as long as it takes to win.

In the past few days since the election, what I have read and continue to read in the social media and other places, along with what I have heard spoken by so many people, is a manifestation of intense grief. For so many of us, we have suffered a profound loss. But to this Judaism has much to say: don't suppress grief. Mourn. Let it out. Deal with it openly so that in the end we can, as our *shiva* draws to a close, put our shoes back on, go out into the world, walk around the block, and breathe fresh air and then continue the tasks that our lives yet have to be about.

I still very much believe in what the Founders of our country stood for. And I still believe that what my grandparents who came here from lands of oppression believed about our country will in the end prevail. But I also know that what it took to get this far toward achieving the human rights and dignity we have achieved will remain what my life has to and will be about as long as the breath of life is within me. For in the end, that exactly *is* what our lives must remain about, must, no matter who our president will be, be our lot and the length of our days, now and always.