

December 5, 2008

Shabbat Shalom!

News reports in this time of transition to a new presidency have included reflections on the legacies of presidents who served at pivotal times, such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt (and, in some cases, Ronald Reagan). As President-Elect Obama assembles his cabinet and the principal leaders of his administration, comparisons are inevitable to the ways in which Lincoln, Roosevelt and other presidents met major challenges of the past. These commentaries, some say, are premature, but a knowledge of history – and great historical figures and decisions – can be a great source of insight on how to approach the future.

These reports on America's leaders – past, present and soon-to-be – reminded me of a rabbinic story that explains why angels were going up, and then down, on the ladder or stairway to heaven in Jacob's dream in this week's Torah reading (since the expectation would be that angels should first come DOWN, and then go UP!). The rabbis envisioned these angels as guardians of great civilizations – Babylonia, Greece, and Rome – upon the ladder, which represents their survival throughout history. When this rabbinic story was written, Rome still ruled over Jews in their empire, and this tale includes a promise that Rome would not endure forever, but that Jacob and his descendants would continue to live on through the centuries. This story makes clear that Jacob was afraid to step onto the ladder in his dream, but the God's reassurance sustained him on his climb.

We call leaders great when we feel that they have taken courageous steps that will have a positive impact on the future of society, a nation or the world. Sometimes, we don't know until much later how one decision or one act can make a difference. The lesson of Jacob's dream, as explained by the rabbis, was that we can and should take steps towards the future that will sustain our spirits and our communal well-being. It is not about one people or one nation being better than another. Our perspective can focus on how we can join together to move forward in positive and productive ways!

So, as members of a community, let us continue to talk with each other, listen to each other, and act in concert in a way that can enrich our own lives and our congregation and extend a confident helping hand to the world.

***-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.***