

January 22, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

As I listened to the words shared at the inauguration of President Obama this past Tuesday, I paid special attention to the references to God that were shared during the ceremony. The Rev. Joseph Lowery declared, "And now, Lord, in the complex arena of human relations, help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate; on the side of inclusion, not exclusion; tolerance, not intolerance." Pastor Rick Warren sounded a similar sentiment when he said, "Help us, O God, to remember that we are Americans, united not by race, or religion, or blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all. When we focus on ourselves, when we fight each other, when we forget you, forgive us. When we presume that our greatness and our prosperity is ours alone, forgive us. When we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the earth with the respect that they deserve, forgive us. And as we face these difficult days ahead, may we have a new birth of clarity in our aims, responsibility in our actions, humility in our approaches, and civility in our attitudes, even when we differ." Poet Elizabeth Alexander's "Praise Song" cited "Love thy neighbor as thyself" as a guiding principle that some Americans follow. President Obama, in his inaugural address, besides affirming that our nation includes religious people and non-believers, proclaimed, "The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." I was impressed that God's name was invoked, over and over again, as a way of reminding us to look towards higher purposes and goals in our society, to seek unity, equality, acceptance and mutual respect, even when, as Pastor Warren noted, we may hold different opinions.

In the Torah portion for this week, VAERA, God told Moses that he would be in a role of God to Pharaoh, and that Aaron would be his prophet/spokesperson. Commentaries note that Pharaoh saw himself as divine, and telling Moses that he was to be a "God" to Pharaoh may have made him feel that he would be on par with the Egyptian ruler. Yet, Pharaoh's sense of himself as a god was focused on the power he wielded over Egypt. While he may have thought himself to be the protector of his people, the fact that he did not hear the cries of the Israelites demonstrated that, as a ruler, he was thinking more of preserving his position than of the possibility of being merciful or benevolent as a wise ruler might choose to be. Moses' audiences before Pharaoh reminded the Egyptian ruler of that one could seek true godliness only through a commitment to inclusion, freedom, respect and equality. This was what it meant to be in a role of God to Pharaoh: to serve as his conscience, offering a constant call to reach for higher purposes.

As we move forward as citizens of our country in the months to come, let us remember the messages of unity, equality and respect that we heard this past Tuesday and do all that we can to assure that those lofty goals are realized in policy and action throughout our nation.

-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.

January 15, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

These next few days will be transformative, as we consider the past and look towards the future. There will be celebrations in many communities to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King's hoped to give all people a new perspective on how we view one another and a vision that included greater unity in our nation than we had ever known before. The inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States signals change on many levels, bringing to realization one aspect of Dr. King's dream but also taking our nation in a different direction with a renewed promise to find solutions to pressing issues with the cooperation of leaders from both major political parties. Perhaps there is chance that when we hear the word "bipartisan" over the next few years, the next word will not be "bickering," but "partnership." That would, in and of itself, represent change!

Transformation and change happen when we admit that both are possible. The Torah reading for this week, from the beginning of the book of Exodus, recounts the Israelites' plight as slaves in Egypt and the designation of Moses as the person who would, with assistance from his brother Aaron and divine guidance, work hard to give his people a new vision and reason to see a hopeful future. Moses' arrival in Egypt as a voice calling for freedom was the first step in the reeducation of the Israelites. We see a people living only to serve eventually become a community that would choose, based in their own experience, to value justice, liberty and hope.

The Israelite's example moving from servitude to freedom reminds us that we, too, can move in new directions: from conflict to cooperation, from dysfunctional disagreement to respectful dialogue, even from war to peace. Let us hope that such change awaits us in the months ahead.

-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.

January 6, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

Much of productive community life is based on an ability to let go and move forward. As we look at the new administration establish its foundations for governing over the next four years, we are seeing not only the return of past leaders to new positions, but also new faces and fresh efforts to band together "across the aisle" on decisions that need to be made about the economy and other issues facing our country. Holding grudges and being mired in the past would only frustrate and even sabotage any progress we need to

make as a nation to maintain, and, in some cases, recapture, a sense of trust and stability in our lives.

In the Torah reading for this week, which concludes the story of Joseph, Joseph's brothers approached him after they buried their father Jacob/Israel. Even after the touching reconciliation scene that brought Joseph to tears and saw firm and sincere embraces within the family, Joseph's brothers feared that their sibling who had made his mark in Egypt would still bear a grudge and take vengeance on them for selling him into slavery. So they told him, "Your father left this charge before his death, saying, 'Thus shall you say to Joseph: Please, I beg of you, forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, though they inflicted harm upon you.'" Joseph cried as they spoke and as they bowed low, once again, before their brother, saying, "Here we are, your slaves!" Joseph reassured them that he still believed that what they intended for harm, God intended for good, in order to, ultimately, keep them alive, and he promised to take care of them and their families. This passage concludes with the statement, "Thus did he comfort them and speak straight to their hearts."

This is one of the best examples of human connection in the Torah, represented by Joseph's ability to see a higher purpose in all that had happened to him so that he was able to move forward with no desire to bear a grudge or hold any ill will towards his family. Speaking "straight to their hearts" reflected his desire to set everything aside and recognize what they held in common, rather than any events that could have driven them apart.

I believe this episode offers us a way to relate to members of our family and community, letting go of the burdens and conflicts of the past and recognizing what has positive value in the present in order to create a promising future. This was the final lesson of the story of Joseph, and may it be one that can guide us to form productive relationships that can enable us to realize our dreams and hopes.

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

January 1, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

As we watch events in Israel and Gaza from the Seacoast, let us hope for a cessation of the violence that will include an end to Hamas rocket attacks on Israel, aid for the Palestinians in Gaza living under Hamas, and talks that could produce agreements that will benefit all of those who live on either side of Israel/Gaza border.

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