

POST-ELECTION DISCUSSION
What words of wisdom do I have?

Remarks delivered by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer
Sunday, November 13, 2016

When we gathered two weeks ago for our pre-election discussion we were feeling guardedly optimistic. We also were experiencing terrific anxiety and fear. We hoped that when we met again we would be celebrating. My own fantasy was that I'd get some red-white-and-blue helium balloons to decorate the room.

In the interim, many of us went out to work on Hillary's campaign. Some had worked for months already. We went canvassing and we worked the phones.

Oren and I were in the Glenside suburb of Philadelphia the Sunday before the election. There was lots of good energy among the volunteers. A number of them were discussing their plans to go to the Javits Center for election eve and what time they would have to get there to get in.

We heard that Chelsea Clinton was going to show up soon at a campaign office in nearby Elkins Park. So we went over with a few other volunteers. It was very exciting. After she spoke, Oren managed to push to the front of the crowd and I have a terrific photo of Oren with Chelsea.

The polls and paths to victory were expansive. And then it all crashed down. A big part of the disaster was that we were not prepared for it. We had been so optimistic. Predictions were so encouraging, and then the floor fell out.

It reminds me of a friend of ours who thought he was in the peak of health and when he went for a routine medical review the discovered that he was gravely ill, with no external signs to show for it, and he died within months. The difference is that we had signs, but couldn't see them, or refused to see them, or were told that we'd still squeak by.

We had anxiety no matter the outcome. Obviously we were anxious about losing, and having our hopes and dreams get dashed. Of not seeing the first woman make it finally to the White House. Of not knowing what to tell our children.

We also were worried if we won. What would the outcome be then?
What would the gun-carrying, alt-right do if they had lost. Would there be peaceful marches on the streets, or destructive riots, and burning, and marching on the White House?

And now we need to get together, to comfort each other.

So how do we make sense of our feelings?

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who conceived of the Five Stages of Grief, provides us with a useful model, with some modification, that can normalize our reactions. I've had plenty of experience working with families in mourning to understand the helpful application of this schema.

Her stages were: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance

Before we get into the stages, it is important to remember that these stages are not necessarily sequential. It is quite common to move forward and backwards and revisit one stage or another.

Some people will skip a stage altogether. Others can't get past a certain stage. And it is also possible that the so-called final stage, acceptance, may never be achieved.

I also want to add another stage to Kubler-Ross' list that I feel is missing. It is the immediate first stage that comes before denial, that kicks in on getting the terrible news of a terminal illness or a death. That first stage, to my mind, is **Terror**.

Terror takes the form of cold panic, apocalyptic fear, uncalmable fright.

Terror is the feeling that the world is coming to an end.

In real terms: it is the fear of deportation, of the loss of healthcare, of being persecuted for your identity (GLBTQ, Jewish, bi-racial, women, secular humanistic).

Terror is the fear of looming climate disasters and environmental carnage, of the world going up in flames. Maybe not today, maybe we'll be spared, but the clock is ticking, and we fear for our children's and grandchildren's future.

Terror also takes place physically. We feel the terror in our bodes.

We are prone to sudden tears or sobbing, shaking and trembling. I woke up around 4am on Tuesday morning shivering violently. The window was not open. Then I realized how afraid I was and that knowledge helped me calm myself down.

And here is an example of how my mind has gone to the darkest place that I associate with fear, stoked by the memories of Germany in the 1930s, which my father escaped in order to come to this country. The other night, I came home and heard a siren from a police car or fire truck coming up West End. For a moment I fantasized the car driving up. Parking. Yanking someone out of his house. Shooting him dead in cold blood on the street.

How many of us reacted similarly after 9/11 when we saw an airplane fly over the city? Or when we drove by the George Washington Bridge or passed through the Times Square subway station and worried if these were the next targets?

Terror is having these notions spring up on us out of the blue.

Terror is feeling paralyzed – helpless – wanting to run away. Or wanting to stay in bed and never come out.

But we can't stay there, hiding. At the very least, we have to get up and feed our pets, if we have them. And if we are parents, we have to take care of our kids. Then the challenge is to take care of ourselves first so that we can take care of them. Get your own breathing mask first securely in place. And try to act like the face of calm for your kids.

Denial comes next and takes two shapes.

The first is disbelief. Did this really happen? I can't believe it. It's a nightmare and when I wake up it will be all okay.

Disbelief is being dumb-founded. Is he really going to be our president? Is she really going to be our first-lady? Did half the country really pick him over her? What kind of place do we live in?

The second kind of denial takes the form of **resistance**: I won't give into it. I'll fight back. I won't let the cancer beat me. We won't let him take office. We'll get a recount. The Electoral College will **deny** him the job.

Then we come to **Anger** and **Blame**.

Like children who have a tantrum, we think we'll get our parents to rescind their decision that we don't like. If we scream about it enough, we'll beat them down, and we'll be able to stay up later, eat more ice cream, watch more television.

Now, as adults, we channel that inner child and unconsciously think that our fury will undo what is happening. If we protest loud enough, things will change. We won't remain passive.

We also need to lash out at the unfairness, the injustice, the chaos of the situation. We need reasons. We need to make sense of what happened.

We especially need to point the blame somewhere, anywhere but in our own direction!

It is too painful and too damning to think that we brought this disaster on ourselves. Or that we contributed to it in anyway. Or that if we had only done something differently we could have averted it. Like not smoking, or driving drunk, or drinking too much that evening. Like not donating more for the campaign, or volunteering more hours.

Of course, this is simplistic thinking. We may not be culpable at all, but we need someone to take the fall. We want to distance ourselves from our own responsibility. We need to hold someone else responsible.

And so we start our autopsy report. But, of course, there is no simple answer, and there are probably many interacting variables at play. And what happens next is that as we start to

enumerate our targets we start to argue with each other about which were the main causes. Of course, then we, essentially, take our anger on our own friends and loved ones! As others have said, anger is often a displacement of fear and anxiety, or sadness and depression, and impotence, and we need a safe place to express these feelings.

Inspired by the Jewish confessional prayer for Yom Kippur – Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi (we have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have robbed, we have spoken slander), I devised an **Alphabet of Post-Election Blames**. (It is posted separately.) Needless to say, I have had to constantly revise this list as I realized or someone pointed out that I had left out a particular Blame.

Before we move on, there is one other strong emotion that Kubler-Ross leaves out of her list. It is the feeling of **horrible shame**. How many times have we said ourselves or heard someone say or write that they are ashamed to be an American?! We feel deep embarrassment for the country and, by extension, for ourselves.

(This reminds me, too, of when my mother was battling ovarian cancer. It made her furious that people talked in whispers about cancer but talked in full voice about someone who had a heart disease. People with cancer were thought to have brought it on themselves as some kind of weakness or offshoot of depression. It was an embarrassment. The disease was bad enough, but now it was stigmatized.)

A variation of the **Blame Game** is the **What If Game**.

What if I had made more donations, volunteered more hours? What if more time was spent campaigning in the rust belt? What if Bernie Sanders had run? Or Joe Biden, or Elizabeth Warren?

But Bernie Sanders shoots this down himself: “What good does it do now? The election is over,” Sanders said. “Donald Trump won. I would have loved to have had the opportunity to run against him, but that did not end up being the case. Right now, where we are is where we are. We’ve got to look to the future.”

Hillary had a similar comment at the Benghazi hearing when she yelled out in frustration, “What difference does it make?!”

The next stage is **Bargaining**. Another name for it is Negotiation.

What can I do to turn back the situation?

If I give away all my wealth to the church, will God send a miracle drug to cure my cancer?

If I am on an airplane in turbulent weather, will God land it safely if I promise to keep kosher the rest of my life, put on tefillin, observe Shabbat? Even if I don’t believe, now’s the time to start! Of course, we believe that there are plenty of atheists in foxholes.

Of course, this is all superstitious thinking. But many otherwise rational thinking people are prone to it in moments of duress.

Or, in terms of the election, how can I come up with a plausible line of thought that will mitigate the disaster I feel is looming.

For example, Trump won’t be that bad. He was a democrat until recently. He has gay friends. His daughter is Jewish and he turns to his Jewish son-in-law for counsel. Would they possibly support an anti-semitic as an adviser to the president?

But pushing back on me are other truths: How can I deny that he has alt-right at his side, and the climate-deniers? And my panic kicks back in again.

Or maybe I carve out a niche of safety for my group, my zip code, my class of people, but I keep remembering all the other vulnerable groups who don’t have our privileges.

Finally, maybe finally, comes **Acceptance**, which, for many, is elusive.

In the work with dying people, some don’t ever get to that stage, or their illness speeds up and they never reach this moment, and the on-going work now becomes the challenge of the survivors.

It is important to say that that **Acceptance** does not mean endorsement or approval. It doesn't mean I like the situation. What it does mean is a coming to terms with the reality of the situation.

But that isn't possible yet. Here we are, only days after the election, and it is too early to run the gamut of these emotions and reach acceptance already. No wonder protesters took to the street to reject the outcome. They were saying: We will not accept this.

Trevor Noah on the Daily Show put it this way: It is like your dad dies, and your mom starts dating at the funeral. (Even a year or two later is still early for some people to watch this happen.)

Of course, Hillary gave her concession speech and "accepted" the outcome with words, but not in her heart or ours. Likewise, Obama gave a speech in the Rose Garden when he announced that there would be a smooth transfer of power. Biden was behind him to give him moral support. Off on the side, the advisers and office staff were standing under the portico of the building, all grim-faced. They were not pleased by the talk.

Obama's words were uttered with as a pro-forma requirement. But you could tell by what he didn't say, or how he didn't act, how he was feeling. Had Hillary been elected we could have expected him to be more effusive. Not gloating, but upbeat and certainly optimistic. And the audience would have been glowing with smiles!

We also heard some qualified acceptance talk from the likes of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. They said, essentially: We'll work with you. We'll support you. If you do right us, we'll do right by you. And we'll accept you. But if you don't, we will fight you every inch of the way with every ounce of strength we have.

As Sanders put it, then "I will vigorously oppose him if he appeals to racism or sexism or some of the other discriminatory measures that he brought up during his campaign. If he is going to resort to bigotry, trying to divide us up, we will oppose him tooth and nail."

So the acceptance is very, very tentative. Conditional and qualified, and can be thrown off in a second.

Finally, a step that is not part of the Kubler-Ross schema: **Taking Positive Action.**

This is also how we can cope. This is how parents cope whose children are murdered in school shootings. They regain meaning in their lives by championing the cause of common sense gun control. They honor their child by trying to save another child's life.

When we are ready – and some ready right now! – we can take steps to protect civil rights, for immigrants, people of color, women, the elderly, the young, LGBTQ, the disenfranchised – for all Americans.

We too can take up a cause. There are no end to them. From protecting the environment to fighting racism and the incarceration system, to working towards favorable results in the mid-

year elections. And we can continue to give strength to each other. By listening, by comforting, by taking someone else's hand and helping them walk forward with new purpose and new hope. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but we'll keep on walking. And holding our heads high.