



THE CITY CONGREGATION for HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Rosh Hashanah 2016

**“MAKE US A KING”
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

The Jewish pessimist is the one who says, “Oy, things couldn’t get any worse,” The Jewish optimist is the one who replies brightly, “Sure they can!”

When God called to Moses out of the Burning Bush God said to him, “I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt. I have heard them cry out to be rescued.” Then he added an action statement.

Was it:

- (a) Go build a wall to keep out all the illegal immigrants?
- (b) End all trade deals and stop exporting jobs to Assyria?
- (c) Demand to see Pharaoh’s birth certificate.
- Or (d) None of the above

In fact, the correct answer is (e) “I am sending you to the king of Egypt, so that you can lead my people out of his country. Canada is a bit far off, so you’ll have to settle on Canaan.”

But Moses said to God, “Hold on. I am a nobody. How can I go to the king and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Pharaoh won’t listen to me. The Hebrews won’t listen to me. My wife and kids don’t listen to me. Please, I’m not the one for the job. I have no experience. I’ve never even been elected town alderman. I have a weak heart. My feelings get hurt easily. I am not a confident public speaker. Can’t you find someone else? What about my brother, Aaron? Will he do? Or my sister, Miriam? You know she’s dependable and what stamina!”

Now in contrast to this self-doubt, self-effacement, and hypersensitivity, there seems to be no end to the self-appointed, self-important and self-promoting individuals who eagerly enter the arena of politics. Many of them pose as reluctant leaders and messianic saviors, but their outsized egos betray their true ambitions to gain power, unbridled adulation and all sorts of free gifts. They also are most uniquely endowed – on both sides of the aisle -- with strong personalities and an abundance of narcissism to withstand ridicule and scorn, mocking but ineffectual schoolyard nicknames, and all manner of slings and arrows, which, with the skills of a martial artist, they easily deflect and turn back on their attacker.

And here’s the dilemma. What if you are one of those decent politicians? Yes, there are many of them too. Do you respond in kind to the invective thrown your way? Do you cling to the high road and focus on the issues, not the innuendos? After all, when truth becomes irrelevant, conspiracy theories and exaggerated claims and outright falsehoods persist despite

rational evidence and fact-checking to the contrary. Indeed, for many people, apocalyptic rhetoric – despite the terror it induces – is much more exciting and appealing than steady words of comfort and hope, not to mention honesty.

In the end, how many voters, even the wise and intelligent ones among us, make choices exclusively based on reasoning and devoid of emotions? We may be drawn to certain policies and positions, but also factor in posture and personality, temperament and demeanor, steadiness and unflappability. We may like a bit of wonkiness but we don't discount virility and saber-rattling either, be it masculine or feminine. Although we all know that manliness in a woman is a catch-22. Men get praised for being tough, defiant and fired up. Women are condemned for being cold, shrill and hysterical. Of course, they better not cry either or they'll be accused of being too emotional and unbalanced. Women are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

Though it was a delight, the other evening, to see how a woman could masterfully stand her ground against a macho bully.

It made you want to kvell the way she showed her toughness by being disciplined, humorous, totally prepared and in control, while he had one tantrum after another.

The glass ceiling is definitely more than halfway broken, and with enough hammering away, let's hope it finally crumbles.

Teddy Roosevelt's foreign policy was to "speak softly and carry a big stick." These days, at least in some circles, it is more like "roar and growl and pound on your chest." And threaten to sue and insult anyone who crosses you up. No wonder Monday Night Wrestling is so popular. Along with even bloodier chicken fights and dog fights. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. If you're not tough enough to take on your domestic opponent, how will you face the Russians, the Chinese, the North Koreans, not to forget the Mexicans.

The sad truth is that old-fashioned superheroes who champion civility and fair play are boring, though some claim that as a badge of honor. On the other hand, bullies and anti-heroes appeal to many people's basest traits and darkest fantasies of being vicariously empowered and triumphant. They are masters at stirring up a crowd with their extremist rhetoric, outlandish assertions and promises, and also their seductive charm. The audience eats it up but has no clue that the leader no loyalty to them, but only has his own gain in mind.

Even those who go as spectators can't help but be swept up in the contagious enthusiasm. Psychologists have long observed that normally self-regulating, reticent individuals surrender their inhibitions to the frenzy of the mob. What makes it so dangerous is that when provoked, the leaders swat away challenges and protestors like they were irritating flies. The crowd, in turn, cheers them on, and the feedback loop invigorates the leader even more. Like some kind of alien zombie force you shouldn't mess with, the crowd just gets stronger and more dangerous, and the leader goads them on and routinely incites violence. It is no wonder that for many people – especially Jews with memories of 1930s Germany – that our anxiety levels are on red alert.

Now some of us think, perhaps nostalgically, that our politicians should be scored on maturity not bellicosity, and on consistency, accountability and predictability. Have they championed a particular view for years and years or did they just opportunistically get on the bandwagon last week? Do hard-and-fast stands curiously morph into malleable suggestions? Do they even have a position or are they really shapeshifters adjusting to their audience? Do they flipflop and pivot with the wind, or is flexibility and the open-mindedness to evolve and change one's mind actually a virtue?

When our bar and bat mitzvah students are asked to pick a role model or hero they often discover that the person they look up to is flawed, sometimes in more ways than one. It poses a good challenge: How much slack can we give someone? How much is too much? In the spirit of the High Holidays, we can also ask: how long does the statute of limitations keep ticking on past mistakes, lapses in judgment, bad behaviors and/or flagrant misdeeds?

In a kind of Bizarro world that we are living in, where up is down and down is up, this election's candidates are competing with each other for who is the least disliked and least unpopular! To be sure, there are enthusiasts for each candidate, but more people, including USA Today's editorial board, seem driven to vote "anybody but" rather than definitively and exuberantly for.

And so, in times like these, we often turn to our ancient texts for advice. Perhaps we can derive some guidance from a cautionary tale from the Bible that is recorded in the eighth chapter of the book of Samuel. There we learn that the Hebrews had been organized into a loose confederation of tribes, but with the rise and threat of the Philistines, nationalism was invented and the tribal leaders clamored for a unifying strong-man leader.

At the time, the prophet Samuel, who also acted as a priest and judge, consolidated political power and led the resistance against the Philistines. As a member of the establishment class, he also subscribed to the idea of dynastic rule. He wanted to appoint his sons as his successors but the people wisely rejected this idea. Samuel's sons, as the Bible tells us, had "turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice." Apparently on behalf of the crony capitalists of the day.

Instead, the people clamored for a king, a human king, to be more exact. This was a serious indictment and critique of God as Divine King and Supreme Ruler. Needless to say, God was peeved and took this personally. "They have rejected me as their king just as they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods."

But God was not easily defeated. He doubled down and called the people weak-minded and losers. And he resorted to his usual response: threats. God told Samuel to warn the people about what would happen if they had a king. What a disaster it would be! The king would take their sons and make them plow his ground, reap his harvest, and draft them into servitude in his army. He would make their daughters cooks and bakers, though he'd allow the pretty ones, as long as they didn't put on weight, to be beauty pageant winners and trophy wives. He would appropriate by eminent domain the best of their olive groves and vineyards for his hotels and

golf courses. He would take their male and female servants and the best of their cattle and donkeys for his own use, and he would ultimately make all the people become his slaves.

“When that day comes,” warned Samuel, “you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want an egotistical and tyrannical king over us, who will go out before us and fight our battles.”

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, undoubtedly with a sneer, and said, “Fine. Hell hath no fury like a God scorned. Make them a king in my image: at times compassionate, at other times vindictive, at times abounding in love, at other times unforgiving, at many times threatening all sorts of plagues and terrible punishments, and at all times, boasting and self-absorbed. Give them what they ask for and deserve.

Unless, said God on second-thought, they will stand fast against demagoguery by working their hearts out, by donating all that they can, in small bills and large, and by going to vote in resounding numbers so that this madness does not come to pass.

They may think I intervene in the affairs of the world, but the fact is I am aloof and all bluff, a fiction of their imagination. It is up to them to dig themselves out of their own problems. Even if they don’t believe in me, I believe in them!

Hazak v’ah-matz! Let them be strong and of good courage!

And finally, on a lighter note: A rabbi was once hired for a new position and advised that he could talk about any subject he wanted as long as it wasn’t about politics. I guess I wasn’t there the day they sent out that memo.

May the days and weeks and year to come be ones of hope, sanity and relief.

Shana Tovah.