

## **Abraham and Obama: Reflections on Senator Obama's Victory and the Passage of Proposition 8**

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At the end of last week's Torah portion, Terach had started the journey with his family from Ur to Canaan, sensing new possibilities and new hope for his family. They did not get to Canaan; they instead settled for a life in Haran, thinking the journey too tough—and Haran seemed, perhaps, not the worst place in the world. It is only this week when one of Terach's children, Abraham, senses deeply within a deep call. His call, crafted in the cultural vocabulary of his day was yet a return to vision, a call to return to the Promise of the Promised Land wherein the work of effectuating a dream could start. Hope, so vital to all, was rekindled, and started to shine more brightly.

Abraham and his life partner Sarah did a lot of community organizing, and in the process they accomplished two things: *r'chusham asher rachashu*, they were funded with funds to help spread their message more widely in their ever-changing world, and *ha-nefesh asher asu*, they moved hearts and minds with their call and challenge. Their message resonated; people came aboard.

Everything can change in a week, especially in an election week. We can find ourselves getting stuck in Haran, depressed by the difficulties life presents or we can be on the move to Canaan, toward working with others toward achieving the dreams begun by our forebears and reshaped in each and every generation.

I have a feeling that most of us this week felt both a pull toward being ensconced in Haran and a parallel pull toward sensing we could yet get to Canaan. In Arkansas, voters approved a backward measure destined to hurt children by barring unmarried couples from becoming adoptive or foster parents. Leaders of this measure touted that they were targeting the GLBT community. In Arizona, voters approved a state constitutional amendment to forbid same-sex couples from marrying. Florida voters approved an even more sweeping amendment intended to bar marriage, civil unions and other protections. Yet the defeat of Proposition 8 here feels perhaps even more discouraging, disheartening and dispiriting, for sensing a chance to effectuate a victory for fairness, many of us put out considerable effort and good will. Now we find that the result is an overturning of our State's Supreme Court decision of last May which stated that everyone has a basic right "to establish a legally recognized family with the person of one's choice," and which found our state's quite strong domestic partnership statute to be inadequate in that regard.

These results gain added urgency this first post-election Shabbat, as many throughout the world recall Kristallnacht, a time when a minority, after being

stripped of many, even most of its rights, found out that its future was certain—in that case certainly doomed. Kristallnacht came only about two years after the Nuremberg Laws, among which were provisions telling people who they could and could not marry, and which marriages would be annulled. Yes, we know all too well what can be the result when religious communities and politically motivated leaders work in tandem and when many common people buy into fear-mongering tactics built on myths that marginalize. So many of us may rightfully be not only hurt or angry this Shabbat, but fearful.

Nonetheless, we need not interpret these results in the light of despair. Struggles over civil rights never follow a certain trajectory. They zag just when you think they should zig. The sad, even ugly outcome of ballot fights should not obscure the building momentum for full equality for women, GLBTQ people and persons of color. Rather, the elections' downside merely reminds us of how much remains to be done before bigotry is behind us, fully erased.

And they remind us of just how much has changed. Tuesday's margin of 52 percent to 48 per cent for Prop 8 demonstrates change since the year 2000, when California voters approved the law that our Supreme Court's May decision overturned by a margin of 61 to 43 per cent. It is evident that voters are growing more comfortable with marriage equality. Progress is evident as well in the fact that since 2000, the California State Legislature has twice passed a measure to let gay couples marry, even if subsequently vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger.

And in Connecticut, voters rejected a proposed constitutional convention through which opponents of same-sex marriage wanted to overturn the recent decision of the Connecticut Supreme Court allowing same-sex couples to marry.

Far from showing that our Supreme Court was wrong to extend the right of marriage to gay people, the passage of Proposition 8 reminds us of the crucial role that the courts play in protecting vulnerable groups from unfair and unequal treatment.

And we need to remember that fuller freedom for the community of GLBTQ people and their loved ones is intimately bound up with the journey toward fuller freedom for all communities. And in this, we find much reason to hope.

We certainly can draw encouragement from the fact that every initiative to further erode a women's right to choose in this country went down to defeat, including Proposition 4 here.

And it is hard to fully appreciate what Senator Obama's victory means for African Americans. With the election of Barack Obama a new chapter has opened. You can hear it in the streets and see it in our schools. People are caught up in this sudden new historical period. And it is a chapter that is being taken note of and

resonating throughout the world; a world in which for every 1000 people, 700 of them do not have white skin.

It was just 50 years ago where there were places in America where a black man risked being hung merely for looking at a white woman. People sitting here tonight grew up at a time when drinking fountains and public restrooms were labeled “white” and “colored”, when education was separate and decidedly not equal, when opportunity was limited and hope seemed absent.

I recall in seventh grade dating Shirley Freelon, an African-American young woman. Many let us know quite definitively that they thought that we were wrong to do this. Speaking for myself as a gay man in hindsight, I can state that they were right—though not for the racial reasons they proffered. Nonetheless, it was unbelievably difficult for Shirley and me, junior high school students, to live with not only the constant derision but with death threats for liking each other and wanting to spend time together.

Less than 50 years ago three civil rights activists were murdered and thrown into a swamp for helping blacks register to vote. Two of those workers were Jewish. Indeed, we Jews sensed that our own sense of fuller freedom was bound up with the strides toward freedom that people of color were beginning to take. Thus about half of all whites participating in the events of Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 were Jewish.

To this day I recall where I was not only when President Kennedy was shot, but I recall where I was when Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., *zecher tzaddik liv-racha*, was murdered for the crime of stating that blacks deserved equal rights. Many people—from Lyndon Baines Johnson to Rosa Parks to countless blacks who faced the police dogs of Bull Connors helped bring about this change. Yes, we are not yet in the Promised Land, but perhaps we are no longer in Haran. At least the landscape is changing.

We are moving toward readiness to finally live up more fully to our own creed that all men and women are created equal. Brian Thompson of Signal Hill, California, summed it up: *I am a 38-year old black male. For all my life, I have considered myself an American. On Tuesday, November 4, 2008, for the first time, I am finally convinced that America agrees with me.*

Our No on 8 votes Tuesday demonstrated our realization that allowing fear and cynicism to grip us only encourages those who pursue ends contrary to our collective long-term interest, to our American *n'shama*, to our moral vision and to our sense of hope.

We can now make it a long spring if we join with other communities and become more proactive and do not allow ourselves to forget that we are part of a community. That is why synagogue life matters; that is why community

organizing matters. And hopefully our grandchildren, maybe even our children, will not know a world in which a person of color, or a woman, or a TBLG person could not hope to obtain the highest office in the land. Maybe they won't realize how momentous this week was. Perhaps it will be normal to them.

In the wake of the passage of Prop 8, we know all too well that Senator Obama's victory does not end racism or the many kinds of discrimination experienced in this country. But it is proof that even despite that, the ideals our forebears set forth in our Constitution ring truer and louder than ever before. I heard freedom's song this week even before Cantor Bernstein's teaching us her rousing rendition, sung as beautifully as Miriam sang freedom's song after crossing the Red Sea. And it is now easier to believe in the possibility of the realization of our ideals.

As an organized movement, we are still quite young. Let us note, then, that Senator Obama's victory does not just belong to his family or to just his supporters, or just to those people of all colors who took up the banner for people of color. It belongs to everyone. So let us take in, really take in, this transformative time, this *dayyeinu* moment in the history of the struggle for civil rights and for human dignity.

Doing so, we have reasons to take heart. First, the youth of this country are energized in ways we have not experienced in years. The moment Senator Obama's victory was projected, hundreds of students at historically black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University knew instinctively where to celebrate. They gathered Tuesday night at a campus statue honoring the "A&T Four," freshman who in 1960 famously challenged Jim Crow laws with a sit-in at a whites-only Woolworth's lunch counter, launching a nation-wide sit-in movement.

These young people, like so many of us, sensed another tremendous stride forward in a civil rights struggle spanning generations. Darius Dawson, aged 20, commented that "It wasn't just Barack Obama who won, Martin Luther King, Jr. won. Thurgood Marshall won. All the civil rights activists from years ago won."

But the youth not only honored the past, they took justifiable pride in their own role in Senator Obama's victory. Junior Shelbi Miller noted that "Previous elections, a lot of kids didn't vote. This time, kids my age are saying: "We made a difference."

And this spirit has spread to even younger Americans, the not-yet-able-to-vote Americans. In Los Angeles, among students gathering in the library at Crenshaw High School, Pierre Dupree, 18, received rock star treatment. He was the only student old enough to have cast a ballot for Senator Obama. "Oh my G!d, you got to vote?" several of his 17-year old classmates shrieked jealously. Instinctively, they reached out to touch him and hug him, as though they could experience the act of voting through him. "What was it like?" one student asked.

Dupree smiled at the memory of the voting booth. “I felt proud. I thought, ‘I’m voting for the first black president the very first time I vote,’” he responded. “I can’t really describe it.”

The other young people nodded. They look at Obama and see themselves, their hopes for getting into college next year. They see a future that many of their parents never had. “My mother was crying yesterday, and I’ve only seen my mother cry over my grandmother’s death and my brother’s death,” Brandi Thibodeaux offered. “We get to vote in four years to keep him in office.”

Finally, we have in Barack and Michelle worthy heirs of Abraham and Sarah. These are people who know how to listen, how to invite conversation, how to gather people. They don’t pontificate; they challenge. They don’t just offer sound bites; they put out ideas. They do not demand; they invite. They don’t just talk; they walk. And so, like Sarah and Abraham they gathered enough funds to enable more people to engage their ideas and to connect with their passion. Like in ancient times, hope has been reborn, and we look forward to moving further from Haran and closer to the Promised Land. I cannot tell you, but it was of immeasurable meaning to me to hear our community named Tuesday night in President-elect Obama’s speech.

In this week’s portion, G!d demands of Sarah and Abraham: *Kum, hit-alech ba-aretz, l’or-kah u-l’roch-bah, ki l’cha et-nena*. Arise, walk through the land in its length and in its breadth; for I will give it to you.” Did you hear? The promise is not just for the generations—it is ours, yours and mine. Spiritual inheritance *is* eternal. The love of country, the pull toward justice, the yearning for freedom and the call for fairness are here, more urgent but closer than ever, at our very grasp. But you and I, too, need to hear the call, even while emotions are raw: *L’chi lach—lech l’cha*. Go! Get up! For yourself—and everyone else! Walk through the land, hear and see the change that is in the air, put down better roots, till it and safeguard it, reconnect with what matters, reach out to others, form coalitions.

Join Abraham and Sarah, Barack and Michele—and let us leave behind Haran once and for all and join together toward the Promised Land. President-elect Obama stated in his speech Tuesday night that this is “the genius of America, that America can change. Our union can be perfected.” This is our challenge. This is our hope. This is our dignity. Shine your light—our light—and let freedom ring. *Shabbat shalom*.