

Standing in the Face of Trump: A D'var Torah (Nov. 19, 2016)

Since a week ago Tuesday, the election date in the United States, I would say that I have received at least 10 emails daily on the same topic – about 100 or more in the past 12 days: excerpts and copies of articles from CNN and the *New York Times*, CBC and the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic* and *Huffington Post* – articles sent to me and written by those such as Canadian-born David Frum to London England's Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – a plethora of pundits, of opinions and offerings on the sorry state of the world, and the even sorrier state of the United States, since the election of Donald Trump. And each day I watch as the twitters and tweets and the transition team transform the landscape of the U.S.

What can I possibly add to apocalyptic rumblings of the end of times on the one hand and, on the other, the reassuring Chamberlain–“ish” whisperings to stay calm, the system will work,

all is not lost, the centre will indeed hold -- he's good for Israel and the Jews.

And should I bother saying anything at all? Take a stance, present a perspective. Indeed at the beginning of this past week, I bought a package of large safety pins. The concept of safety pins originated in Britain after the rash of anti-immigrant abuse that followed the Brexit vote. Simply put, wearing a safety pin is symbolic of safety to those who feel frightened by the rhetoric of their leaders. I told a friend who was over that I was putting one on my coat in solidarity with those who oppose the racist, sexist and xenophobic statements of President-Elect Donald Trump. But when my friend saw the container full of safety pins, she asked: "Why did you buy so many, are you going to wear all of them?" And I answered her that maybe I would bring them to shul this Shabbat and just leave them on the table in the Kiddush room for people to pick up if they wished. And she stood back, shook her head and suggested that I rethink this proposition. She said that I

should remember that we are a synagogue, not a political rally, and that this was not my job and that perhaps, rather than alienating anyone from our diverse congregation, and rather than being political, I should leave the safety pins at home.

So I thought about it that perspective and as I often find myself doing, I considered what is my responsibility standing here and speaking from this pulpit -- and I recalled the story I had read of a rabbi by the name of Joachim Prinz who in his youth was a rabbi in Berlin in the early 1930s. In reading about Rabbi Prinz, I was able to find the answer as to my responsibility, as a spiritual leader, as a Jew, as a woman, as a lesbian, as a human being. Let me explain by sharing with you a bit about Rabbi Prinz by quoting the memories of Dr. Werner Cohn, Professor Emeritus in Sociology at the University of British Columbia. Cohn writes, "When I was a boy in Berlin in the early years of the Nazi regime, some five or ten years before the Holocaust, a young rabbi broke the conventions of rabbinical discourse and managed to bring

solace and spiritual strength to the Jews of the city. This rabbi's name was Joachim Prinz (in due course he became a leader of American Jewry). In the early 1930s, he held the rapt attention of his people in Berlin, speaking words such as these from the pulpit of several Berlin synagogues: Everywhere you read and hear that you are ugly and hateful. Right now, look at the person next to you: is he hateful? Is she ugly?

And suddenly Rabbi Prinz's listeners, cowed as they had been by the incessant propaganda of the haters, could see the truth: no, the Nazis were not right. They could see the irrationality of all that hatred. They could see, and they knew what they should have seen all the time, that it was not they who were the ugly and the hateful.”

In my research on Rabbi Prinz, I read that many years later when he came to the United States he worked actively in the Civil Rights Movement. He spoke at the March on Washington in the

1960s where he said these words: “When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. A great people, which had created a great civilization, had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent.”

Yes, over 40 years later, we still cannot remain silent. We cannot stand by when the chief strategist for Trump is Steve Bannon, the chairman of *Brietbart News* a man who has been described as an unabashed white supremacist, misogynist, who has pushed *Breitbart News* to present a white ethno-nationalist platform to become the alt-right go-to website. And for those of you who say this is not so, just fact check my remarks and note what he

himself said at the Republican National Convention in the summer when he stated to a reporter, “Yes, *Breitbart News* represents the alt-right.”

We cannot remain silent when a man like Lt. Gen. Mike Flynn is selected to be the new national security advisor; a man who many describe as being unhinged in the past couple of years, and who wrote in his book that ISIS is set on taking us over and “drinking our blood.” I could go on, but I think I have made myself clear.

I suggested that you take the time this morning to read Professor Ellen Umansky commentary on today’s parsha. The reason I did so was so that we could once again see that our tradition, our religion exists within the tension of dual demands. On the one hand, we see Abraham and Sara opening their doors to the stranger – feeding and housing those who are homeless. And yet

on the other hand, we see Abraham and Sarah exiling Hagar and Yishmael from their midst – two opposing behaviours.

More vividly this parsha, this Torah portion describes and demonstrates what Umansky calls a “Theology of Protest.” Unlike Noah, whom we read at the beginning of November, we see Abraham - whom we honour as our ancestor (and note we do not honour Noah in this way) - stand up to the Divine and say “no, you cannot destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.” Yet, we also watch in horror as he proceeds to follow what, as Dr. Umansky wrote, he “thought” he heard the Divine suggest, beginning the process of sacrificing his son Yitzhak.

Again this chapter represents the tensions and the choices that we as Jews, as human beings, must make.

In many ways to me the final lines of Ellen Umansky’s commentary say it all. To add to and paraphrase what she wrote: If we think that we have heard God correctly, if we think we have

heard the message of our politicians and our neighbours and our friends, correctly, and if what they have said, what they have done, what they have demanded of us is morally wrong we must protest -- that is our responsibility.

And so I am going to wear my safety pin and I have put the rest in the Kiddush room -- where if you want you too can pick one up.

And to paraphrase the words of the late Leonard Cohen: Yes there is a crack in everything and that's how the lights gets in but it is up to us to make sure that light does not go out or dim.

-Rabbi Aviva Goldberg

To access all of Ellen Umansky's commentary please follow this link: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayeira/covenantal-models-protest-and-submission>