

Rabbi Steve Cohen
Friday night, November 11, 2016
Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara. CA

When I first began working out at my gym a number of years ago, I was in the locker room one day and had not yet started changing, and a burley guy standing across the room, whom I had never met, called out “what I want to know is, how does it stay on?” I looked up and realized he was talking to me, and I said “excuse me?” He said “how does it stay on, that thing on your head?” He was talking about my kippah! I appreciated that so much! That he was willing to express his curiosity and to reach out and to try to learn about someone very different from himself.

Thus began a locker room friendship that has continued for at least five or six years. He is a local farmer, and learned long ago that I am a rabbi. Often when he sees me he calls out “Steve, are you keeping that flock in order?” To which I always reply “they’re all over the place.” We have talked religion, and about our families, and farming and the drought, but we have never talked politics. Probably because we both knew that we had different politics opinions, and neither of us saw much point. As a result, I now realize, it was a limited friendship, and of little real importance to either of us.

Over the past few months, I have often wondered if he was supporting Trump or Clinton, and thought about asking him....but never did. Then yesterday, I came in and overheard him in conversation with another guy in the locker room, and could tell immediately that he was happy about the outcome of the presidential election.

We both realized that we had to say something to each other. And he blurted out “I am a white man. Does that make me a terrible person? Because it feels like that’s what some people think.” And so we were able to begin. And he gets the credit, because he was willing to speak from a deep place of pain and anger.

My friendship with that guy is going to continue and at last to become important, because we have realized that we do not need or want to change each other’s minds....but we do want and need to understand each other. I am convinced that this is one of the great lessons to emerge from this election. We all, on both sides of the great political divide in our country, need to come to understand that there are good people on the other side. And that no one ideology or point of view has a monopoly on the truth. I have hoped for years that this congregation could be a place where we could learn to listen and speak respectfully across our political differences. To be honest, I don’t think we are there yet.

But I am not willing to give up. It feels too important. We have to learn the power of what our ancient sages called “machloket l’shem shamayim”—argument for the sake of heaven.

This could eventually be our most important Jewish contribution to this American nation. We Jews have known throughout our long history, that listening and speaking respectfully....really listening, and communicating with unconditional respect for the human dignity of the other person does not mean holding any less passionately to our own opinions. Maybe we will change someone’s mind, maybe we won’t. Maybe they will move us from our position; maybe they won’t. But even if no one budes an inch, something profoundly important will happen. Out of the respectful dialogue we will come to understand each other.

Call me naïve. People have told me that it is not possible. But if we cannot have a respectful conversation between liberals and conservatives here at CBB, where will it happen? This election has shown just how necessary the dialogue is. There is hatred now in this country, good people hating other good people, because we have forgotten how to speak and listen to people across our differences.

That I think is something for us to work on....over the coming months and years.

But what about this moment? What do we need right now, and now I'm speaking specifically to those who are worried about our President-elect. What do we need in this moment of turmoil, confusion, sadness and fear?? Should we be working for unity or preparing for a great battle? Does this moment call for healing of wounds or for anger?

Many intelligent and reasonable members of our community fear that we are witnessing the rise of fascism, and that president-elect Trump is preparing to lead this nation into a reign of ruthless brutality. He has spoken openly of massive deportations. And of repealing the Affordable Care Act. But at what cost of human suffering? He has promised to quickly undo our country's commitments to the Paris Climate Agreement, signed by 191 nations. On the other hand, he has announced plans for a massive investment in rebuilding infrastructure which may well create millions of jobs.

Is he Hitler and is this 1933, or is he Franklin Delano Roosevelt about to launch the New Deal? And if we are not completely sure, can we afford to wait and see?

As someone who loves history, and studied it in college, and always looks for historical analogies....I think that in this moment history should awaken us. But not for fear, which does not carry us forward. And not for hatred, which poisons our hearts. Not even for anger, which kept Moses out of the Promised Land. At this moment, let us get ready for courage. That is why we are here tonight—for courage, which comes from music, and from community, and from our ancient sacred traditions.

It may be the courage to fight. It may be the courage to work together with our political adversaries.

It is surely the courage to walk out into the unknown, as our first father Abraham did four thousand years ago. That is the story the Torah holds out to us this week.

Lech lecha. Go forth, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house. In the opening words of the portion, God sends Abraham out into the unknown. *El haaretz asher arecha*, to the land....which I will show you. Not a word about how far it would be. How long it would take. What he would find there. Or what dangers or enemies or challenges he would encounter along the way. Just "go."

This is how our Jewish story begins, on a journey without a map, without a guide, with no knowledge. Years later, Abraham says "God made me wander like a lost lamb."

Apparently, it was precisely Abraham's willingness to wander...to tolerate uncertainty, to walk forward without knowing that sets him apart from the rest of the world.

This week, stepping out into a completely new political landscape, we know a little better how Abraham felt. May our coming together tonight, in song, and prayer and reflection fill our hearts with a bit of our first father's courage, and may we be a blessing for this entire magnificent, miraculous, broken American nation. Ken yehi ratzon. May this be Your will. Shabbat Shalom.