

Lech Lecha 2024: Shattering Idols

This Shabbat we mark the 86th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. On November 9th and 10th, 1938, nazis unleashed a violent, vengeful pogrom against Jews in Germany in retaliation for the assassination of a nazi official in Paris by Hershel Greenspan, a 17 year old Jewish man who learned that his parents had been deported from Germany to Poland. Throughout Germany, Jewish businesses were vandalized, synagogues were destroyed and burned to the ground, Jews were rounded up, arrested, tortured, and sent to concentration camps, and hundreds were murdered that night or succumbed to their horrific injuries in the days and weeks to come. On Kristallnacht, our community was assaulted, denigrated, and horrifically and deliberately smashed.

For many of us, the results of Tuesday's election have left us feeling assaulted, denigrated, and smashed. Not only did Donald Trump win the electoral college as he barely did in 2016, but he also won the popular vote. It is shocking for many of us that a man so full of hate and vitriol, who already held a term in office that was incredibly difficult for so many of us, a man who tried to uproot the foundations of our democracy, not only was given another chance, but won an election that was not particularly close in the end.

I feel so full of sadness and concern and anger, not just that Trump won, but that so many Americans voted for him. As awful of a human being as Donald Trump is, I cannot imagine that everyone of the 73 million and counting who voted for him, including some members of my extended family and I'm sure some members of our congregation, are equally awful human beings. Let's be honest with each other- the last four years have been difficult in our country. There have been protests and violence, fear and hate, a setback in rights for many, horrific wars in Ukraine and Israel/ Palestine. And it is undeniable that our pocketbooks have been squeezed in uncomfortable ways. Even though the out-of-control inflation of the past few years has cooled, prices for everything from milk to diapers remain much higher than they were at the beginning of Biden's term. So, while I cannot understand how people were willing to overlook Trump's many, many defects and flaws, they did. And we cannot simply write them off.

So where do we go from here? As usual, we turn to our texts to guide us. This Shabbat's parasha, Lech Lecha, seems exceedingly relevant and filled to the brim with wisdom. It begins with a command to Abram to lech, to go, to get out, to go away from everything he knows. Lech Lecha may artzecha u'mimoledeticha u'mi'beit avicha. Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house.¹ The triplet here is telling. Abram is being told to go from the land- the country which provided structure and governance, the society of which he was a part. From his birthplace, from his local community, his neighborhood, his village. From his father's house, from his family, from those closes to him. Out of nowhere, he was told to leave it all behind. And to go where, exactly? El Haaretz asher areKa. To the land that I will show you. Not very specific, try putting that into GPS and see where it leads. But he went. He listened to God's command and got out. He got out because he knew he was on a mission, to be in relationship with the one God who called him and set him on his journey.

¹ Genesis 12:1

Perhaps even more relevant for tonight is the midrash² which explains how Abraham became a monotheist and brought others along with him. The story goes that he was working in his father Terach's idol shop. And he realized that the idols, as beautiful and appealing as they were, had no power, could not do anything. So, one day when his father was out to lunch, Abraham took a club and smashed the idols in the store. He left the biggest idol intact and placed the club in its arm. When his father returned from his break, he asked Abraham, "My son, what have you done?" And Abraham explained, "Father, the biggest idol got angry with all the other idols and smashed them." His father replied, "Abraham, do not be ridiculous, you know that these idols cannot do such a thing for they are simply statues." And Abraham said to Terach, "Then why do you pray to them?" Terach got the message, and thus Abraham's dream, the journey of the Jewish people to bring God's oneness into the world and to smash *avodah zara*, idolatry, began its millennia long path.

Thousands of years after Abraham, our world, and our country specifically, is awash with idolatry. We see it in the worship of money, greed, and fame. We experience it in the obsession over our jobs over the welfare of our families and our loved ones. We perceive it in the quest for power and dominion over our earth and over other human beings. Even as these idols remain false, they are dangerous, and they threaten our values and our lives.

So, there are two things we must do in the days and years to come, and they are intricately related. The first is to continue to work to smash the idols around us knowing that more false idols will pop up come January 20th and beyond. The second is to prevent ourselves, our loved ones, and those in our country who are particularly vulnerable from experiencing a Kristellnacht-like smashing or worse. How do we do both of those things? We smash idolatry by doubling down on our values, by loving the stranger, by protecting the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. We smash idolatry by caring for the earth and by giving to the poor. We smash idolatry by speaking truth to power, by holding folks accountable for their actions, by never giving up. We smash idolatry by reaching out to those with whom we disagree, by not letting our anger or our fear get the best of us, by giving folks of different political views the benefit of the doubt, by finding common ground where we can. And we protect ourselves by coming together in our communities, in our families, our social groups, our workplaces, this Temple, our cities. We do not allow ourselves to be divided. We call out anger and hate wherever we see them. We do not allow our rights to be eroded or rolled back. We persist. We resist. We seek justice and equity and peace. We hold onto whatever shard of hope that remains and we never, ever, let it go.

After God commands Abraham to go forth, God shares these words: I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse the one who curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you. These are beautiful words, but they are also aspirational. God promises a blessing, but at what price? Abraham goes through so much in his life, so much that our rabbis give us a multiplicity of interpretations but tend to agree on the 10 trials. And they are awful. He tries to negotiate with God over the innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah. He goes through terrible familial strife with Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael. He nearly sacrifices his own beloved son, Isaac. Chaos and death and destruction follow Abraham wherever he journeys in life. And yet, he is promised a blessing.

² Genesis Rabbah 38

I would argue the blessing comes true for Abraham. When he dies, his two sons, known as the progenitors of Judaism and Islam, come together peacefully to bury him. We invoke Abraham in every prayer service at the beginning of the *avot v'imahot*. Even his name, *Avraham*, means the father of many. We often describe him as the first Jew, and here we are, thousands of years later, numbering in the millions. The Jewish people, in spite of the hate, the tortures, the pogroms, have undoubtedly been blessed, because we are still here.

This land we are travelling to in the next years is unknown. The days will likely be filled with treachery, false idols, and scary and unexpected surprises. We are entering what will likely be a period of darkness for our country. But if we can cling to one another, if we can uphold our values, if we can muster up the strength, the courage, and the fortitude to move forward on this journey that like Abraham we did not ask for nor necessarily expect, then I believe that we, like Abraham, can persevere and become a blessing. God bless us all, and please, God, continue to bless the United States of America.