

Questions vs. Answers

Parshat Chaye Sarah

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“Questions vs. Answers”

So what does it feel like to live in a blue state in a red country? I am of course referring to the

results of the presidential election this past week - which after all the build up and hype - certainly did not disappoint when it came to drama and intrigue. And there is a very clear divide in this country which means that some of you here this morning are very happy with the

way things turned out - and some of you here this morning are very unhappy with the way

things turned out.

If the statistics are correct it would appear that there are more people here on Long Island and

certainly more people here in New York and our surrounding states who are unhappy than are

happy - which led to my opening question - what does it feel like to live in a blue state in a red

country? But I think all of us who are old enough and mature enough to have weathered our

share of presidential elections - know that the first thing - is not to get too excited. Whether you

are happy or sad - don't get too happy and don't get too sad - because presidents don't tend

to have the dramatic impacts on things that they, or we, like to think they do. Some on the left

went into a state of mourning when Ronald Reagan was elected as those on the right felt

similarly when Bill Clinton was elected - and somehow the ship of state managed to remain

upright and not flounder in the turbulent seas that are our contemporary world.

But there is no doubt that this election revealed some trends about where this country is and

where it seems to be headed that all of us need to consider and incorporate into our understanding as we prepare for the days and months to come.

There is a large part of "Red America" that we don't understand and we persist in our ignorance about them and about what motivates them at our peril.

There were a lot of reasonable arguments to vote for John Kerry and there were a lot of reasonable arguments to vote for George Bush. Regardless of whether you personally agree

with these arguments or not - I think it is fair to say that someone who voted for Kerry because

they did not like the direction that President Bush was taking our country in Iraq, or the concerns they had about Bush appointing the next few Supreme Court Justices - these are reasonable concerns - whether you share them or not.

Similarly - someone who voted for George W. Bush - because they felt that in the battle against terror he represented a clearer and more forceful voice, or that you felt he would be a better protector of Israel - again whether or not you share these opinions - I think we can all agree that they are reasonable, we understand why someone might believe them.

What is harder for many of us - sitting in our blue state of New York, to understand is the large number of people who voted for George W. Bush because of what they called: his clear, strong and forceful commitment to religious values.

Gary Wills, a professor of history at Northwestern University in an essay titled: "The Day the Enlightenment Went Out" that appeared on the New York Times op-ed page after the election argued that "America, the first real democracy in history, was a product of Enlightenment values - critical intelligence, tolerance, respect for evidence, a regard for the regular sciences.

Though the founders differed on many things, they shared these values of what was then

modernity...” He goes on to argue that respect for evidence seems not to pertain any more. A

poll taken just before the elections showed that 75 % of Mr. Bush’s supporters believe Iraq

either worked closely with Al Qaeda or was directly involved in the attacks of 9/11. “

Now, I have little doubt that if you are sitting here in this sanctuary today and you are a Bush

supporter that you were probably one of the 25% that supported him for other reasons, better

reasons - but that other 75% concerns me and worries me. Belief for them is more important

than facts.

Bush’s team clearly better understood the zeitgeist of the American electorate, harnessed that

vast mass of red America in ways that left the Democratic leadership scratching their heads. I

am not convinced that Bush and his people represent the feelings and beliefs of many of his

supporters - but they accurately understood what candidate Bush needed to say and do - to

win them over and he performed beautifully. But, I fear they have a tiger by the tail.

We who live here in a blue state do not understand the fundamentalism of what is a not insignificant portion of the contemporary American electorate. I think President Bush was

sincere when he promised in his acceptance speech to “reach out to the whole nation,” even

those who voted for John Kerry but even if he wants to be more conciliatory now - it will not be

easy for as Gary Will puts it, “the constituency to which he owes his victory is not a yielding

one...his helpers are also his keepers.” It is going to be difficult for Bush to become a nuanced leader now - because it was precisely this lack of nuance that attracted a good portion of these supporters.

George W. Bush’s certainty about matters of faith was seen by large numbers of Americans

as an enormous positive especially in contrast to John Kerry who was painted as “wishy washy” - an intellectual who changed his opinion depending on the facts of a particular matter.

Some of us were puzzled. We saw Kerry’s intellect as a good thing. We admire people who

are open to new ideas and seek them out - who deliberate, debate and wrestle with ideas before they determine their course on any given subject - and once that course is determined -

are not afraid to reflect, reconsider and readjust as the facts may determine as time goes on.

We, many of us, some of us - thought this was a good way to behave in the world.

But there are, apparently, large numbers of people who do not agree.

And my concern this morning is not so much with the re-election of George W. Bush as our

president - I think we will all be just fine and America will be just fine under his leadership - but

I am worried a bit about a large segment of America who voted for him for reasons I am having trouble trying to fathom.

There is a battle going on for the soul of America, and it is a battle that is similar to the one

that is going on in all the major religious traditions of the world - it is the battle of fundamentalism or at the very least a tendency toward fundamental kind of thinking vs. rationalism.

Christian are wrestling with it. Jews are wrestling with it - we wish that Muslims were wrestling

with it a little more - and it is a battle that has now been transformed to the landscape of American politics.

Fundamentalists or those who have fundamentalist tendencies do not like uncertainty and do

not know how to live with uncertainty.

The constant haggling and debating, the arguments over fine and at times what seem like minutia. These "fundamentalists" - whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jewish like their

religion neat. When there is a problem they want a solution. Where there is a question, they

want an answer. So their basic attitude is one of impatience.

Those of us who are not fundamentalists or do not have this tendency towards fundamentalist

thinking - have a very different approach to the world.

We love the wrangling and the argumentation. We love the questions and the debate.

Fundamentalists love answers and rationalists love questions.

That is why fundamentalism was for so long not a very Jewish way of looking at the world.

From the very first Jew, Avraham Avinu - who challenged God Himself by asking "Will the

Judge of all the earth not do justly?" through Moshe Rabeinu and Rabbi Akiba and Moses

Maimonides right down to our day - we Jews were always exquisite rationalists. In Judaism,

we lived for the challenges - for the questions and answers were merely the occasion for more

questions. The Torah is Gods law, the answer to all our questions - No? Not on your life. The

Torah is God's law, but it is merely the occasion for a host of new questions that necessitated

the Mishna and the Mishna necessitated the Gemorrah, which gave rise to the Codes, which

gave rise to the Responsa process that continues to our very day!

We need look no further than this weeks Torah reading, Parshat Haye Sarah for a case study.

Avraham is beset by many questions and he has few answers. The Midrash states that

Avraham Avinu was tested by God ten times and he proved himself up to all the challenges.

In Parshat Lech Lecha Avraham is told by God to leave his land, leave his home, leave the

land of his birth and to journey to an unknown destination that God would reveal to him when

he arrives. Why? Good question - no answer.

When he arrives in the land he is confronted with a famine. Why did God have him leave a

land of plenty to come to a land of famine? Good question - no answer.

God promises Abraham that he will be the father to a great nation, that his offspring will be

more numerous than the sands on the seashore or the stars in the heaven - meanwhile he is

100 years old and Sarah is 90 and they do not have one child!! How is this possible? Good

question - no answer.

Finally, miracle of miracles they are blessed with a son at their advanced age only to be

confronted by the Akeda - God's incredible demand that Avraham take that one son, his only

son his beloved Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice! Why? Very good question - no answer.

In this weeks reading, Sarah dies and Avraham has the responsibility to bury his wife, his lifelong companion. And imagine Avraham's frustration when he was promised by God that

this entire land would be his and meanwhile he is nearing the end of his life and comes to bury

his wife at the end of her life and he does not own “four-square” - he does not own enough

land to bury his wife. Avraham is embarrassed and belittled as he has to seek permission from a neighbor to bury his wife. Why? Good question - no answer.

Most moderns would have given up long before today’s test. At some point along this long

road we would have turned to God and said: “Enough is enough God! All I get from you are

promises! Why should I persist? God, give me one good reason to continue believing in You! “

Yes we are an answer inclined, solution oriented people. We read the story of Abraham and

we do not understand how he could persevere with all these questions - yet he did persevere.

And as a result of his perseverance, he changed the course of human history. Every Jew, every Christian, every Moslem, every human being who has benefitted from the morality of

Western Democracy right down to the Presidential election of 2004 is indebted to his persistence.

What was the secret to his persistence? His faith? I think not - remember Avraham is the first

Jew - God has no track record with us prior to him - there is no faith - because there is no

history of a relationship upon which to base that faith. No, I think there is something else -

something even more profound going on here. I think it all goes back to one very simple fact -

Abraham valued the questions and the challenges that God presented him more than he needed the answers that God for God's own reasons withheld from him. Unlike today's fundamentalists, Abraham understood that questions are more important than answers. That

we are defined more by our questions than by our answers. Our questions spurs us on, they

ignite our imagination they fire our indignation. We are defined not by our common answers

but by our common concerns and our common questions.

This approach is not in fashion in contemporary America. Not only do we want answers in our

Presidential elections - we want them everywhere and the sooner the better. Look around the

corporate table of any major company and you tell me who will be more successful: the person

who asks the difficult questions or the answer man or woman - the one who is quick to solve

the simple challenges of corporate life?

Follow your children in school. Which child will be more successful as a student in today's

educational environment: the one who poses the challenging questions or the one who "tests"

well, the one who can master the material in short order, answering questions quickly.

Even in the realm of religion - look at the types of religion that are popular in our contemporary

environment. They are the ones that offer the quick fix and the simple answers.

Fundamentalism is in because it promises clear, precise and simple answers to life's

complicated questions. One of the most popular sections of today's book stores is the 'Self-help' department. Many Americans have one two and three titles on their night tables

instructing them on everything from: "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" to "Self-Deafeating Behaviors That Hold You Back." But how many of you have ever read "Who is

Man?" by Abraham Joshua Heschel or his collection of essays entitled: "The Insecurity of

Freedom"? - some of the greatest religious works ever written. Why have so few read

Heschel's books? Because they ask questions rather than offer easy answers. They challenge

us to wrestle with issues and confront profound questions and we who live in Red America

have little patience for the hard work that such a process entails.

Nowadays we don't know how to live with unanswered questions. Why did God remain silent

during the Holocaust? Why were women treated unequally in Judaism and why aren't we

moving even faster towards rectifying that inequality? Why doesn't Judaism embrace

homosexuality as an alternate life style? Why can't I eat whatever I want to eat as a modern

Jew? And God forbid the rabbi doesn't give an answer right away - 20 seconds or less - rabbi,

I'm waiting....! And if we don't get our answer right away - we leave our faith behind and move

on - maybe some other enterprise will give us the answers we demand. And that is why

fundamentalism is on the rise - even within Judaism - it gives us the quick, simple answers we

desire - no matter that they may be the wrong answers - yes, no, no, no, yes- there, are you

happy? I fear that for too many of you - that is precisely what you are looking for.

But today's Torah reading teaches us that we are the poorer for that simplicity. Abraham, like

many modern Jews could easily have decided that, "the game was not worth the candle". On

the one hand God had given him no end of promises, but his reality was one of constant uncertainty. Yet he persisted and the world is a better place because of his persistence.

We too are constantly facing challenges to remain firmly committed to our religious tradition.

We live in a world where answers are hard to come by - in areas even more difficult than selecting the next president. We today, like Abraham of old have two choices: We can pursue

the quick fix, the simple answer - or embrace the difficult questions and learn to live wrestling

with the challenges of our lives.

I am proud to live in a blue state in the midst of this red country. Because regardless of

whether you voted for Bush or Kerry this past Tuesday - I trust that you are as concerned with

the rise of fundamentalism in America as you are with its rise in Judaism and its overwhelming

dominance in Islam - this is truly the major threat to our well being in the years to come.

And in keeping with my theme this morning, I will end with a question for which I have no

simple answer: What do you intend to do about it?

TBS Clergy

Contact Rabbi Lucas

Other Sermons from Rabbi Lucas

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