

## **Equanimity and Election Year**

*Shabbat Tazria (Shabbat HaChodesh) 5776*

April 8, 2016

Rabbi Barry Block

Roughly half our nation's population seems to despise our nation's chief executive at any given time. Historians say it was even worse in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly in the lead-up to the Civil War.

Most recently, half of the country accused the second President Bush of stealing an election, getting us into a war with a pack of lies, and appointing Supreme Court justices who would roll back the clock on civil rights for women and minorities. President Obama is alleged to have dishonored the very office he holds, unconstitutionally exceeded Executive Branch authority, and appointed Supreme Court justices with contempt for cherished religious values. Being an American citizen myself, I'm on one side of the divide I describe. I urge us all to look at the situation objectively, and to acknowledge that the rancor goes both ways.

Animosity between and within our political parties becomes particularly acute during election year. Each side is determined to greet next January 20 with a president who shares its values. Sometimes, we may eagerly anticipate the blessings and innovation that a new president may bring. More often, particularly of late, we are anxiety-ridden about the possibility that a candidate we abhor will be our next president.

Still, we could not have expected the level of fear that Americans experience as we face the 2016 presidential election.

Yes, we knew that nearly half of America would fear the dreaded consequences of a Hillary Clinton presidency. Our country could well elect a president whom most Americans flatly do not trust, as demonstrated even in polls exclusively of Democratic voters in states whose primaries she has won. Americans who despise President Obama correctly see Secretary Clinton as likely to continue Obama policies that they detest. Many of our fellow citizens believe that President Obama is literally ruining our country with a radical domestic agenda and feckless foreign policy; we knew they would greet the prospect of a President Hillary Clinton with fear that she would only make matters worse.

Less predictable was that Americans who basically share Secretary Clinton's values might also dread her nomination. Who knows, they ask, when the other shoe will drop with the email scandal, or with Benghazi? Even if neither of those bears fruit, they remind us that Clintons are always good for more scandals. Moreover, they point to Clinton's ties to a Wall Street that only eight years ago led our country to financial ruin, and which has yet to be adequately reformed or regulated.

No, this sermon is not a Bernie Sanders stump speech.

Indeed, millions of Americans are terrified by the increasing possibility that a heretofore little-known democratic socialist could be the next President of the United States. For those who dislike the current president's policies, Sanders could seem like Obama on steroids. He is promising revolution, after all, one that would render America unrecognizable to roughly half of our nation's populace.

Millions of Americans who broadly agree with Senator Sanders are also afraid, if merely of his nomination. Would America really elect a president who is an avowed socialist? They understandably ask, "Wouldn't his nomination hand the presidency over to" the other party they despise? They point to a decades-long record in Congress, but little to show in terms of successfully adopted legislation or leadership. Could he accomplish his ambitious agenda, or would he scream powerlessly into the wind?

If roughly forty per cent of Americans are committed conservatives, and approximately half of the Democrats are frightened of one of their own candidates or the other, a majority of Americans are scared. And I haven't gotten to the Republicans.

Governor Kasich's candidacy causes less anxiety than do any others. Still, millions of Americans violently disagree with him on core issues. If Governor Kasich were his party's nominee, roughly half of our populace would be afraid, confident that he would appoint Supreme Court justices who would negatively impact voting rights, reproductive freedom, and civil rights, while cementing corporate dominance in our political life.

The leading Republican candidates spark terror in much of our nation.

In some ways, the Republican senator in the race is the mirror image of the Democratic one. Ted Cruz hasn't been in the Senate nearly as long, but his record

of legislative achievement is even more limited than Sanders', and he has no history of leadership. To the contrary, Senate colleagues of his own party cannot stand Ted Cruz. Arkansas' Senator John Boozman, famously mild mannered, loudly rebuked Senator Cruz in the Senate Cloak Room, when the latter tried to shut down the government

Americans who oppose Senator Cruz's values are terrified that our country could elect an extremist president who would lead the country toward a return to widespread discrimination, a bellicose foreign policy, and a heartless approach to poverty unknown in this country since the 1920s.

As 2016 approached, we might have expected at least most of the fears I have described. And then came Donald Trump.

Several of my colleagues have given entire sermons about Donald Trump, with or without mentioning him by name. Around Purim time, more than a few compared him to Haman, while I was more persuaded by columnists who likened him to the blustery, power-intoxicated King Achashveirosh. I am not giving that sermon. Just as the pulpit is no place for the endorsement of any candidate, it is not the place to oppose one. No, this sermon is about the equanimity we lack, and so sorely need, at this election season, and we would be foolhardy to pretend that the prospect of a President Trump doesn't terrorize the days and nights of countless Americans. He has given ample cause for citizens to be afraid.

If Donald Trump had only generalized immigrants from Mexico as rapists and murderers, *dayyeinu*, that would be enough to frighten millions of Americans. If he had only spoken contemptuously of American prisoners of war, *dayyeinu*. If he had only insisted that our country's immigration policy discriminate against all Muslims on the sole basis of their religion, *dayyeinu*. If he had only treated women with a level of disrespect that would best be described a misogyny, *dayyeinu*. If he had only incited violence at his campaign rallies and warned of riots if his party refuses him its nomination, *dayyeinu*. If he had only threatened trade wars on every international front, with friends and adversaries alike, *dayyeinu*. If he had only suggested that Israel should have to repay the aid it has received from the United States, and then sang a completely different tune at AIPAC, *dayyeinu*. But of course, he has said and he has done all those things and more that legitimately frightens millions of Americans. Perhaps scariest of all, as he has demonstrated at rally after rally, and even before an educated group of our own people at AIPAC, Donald Trump knows how to whip an audience into a

mob. Many Americans fear that even his legal, democratic election as president would portend an end to American democracy.

If roughly forty per cent of Americans are committed liberals, and at least half of Republicans are frightened of one of their own party's candidates or another, then I conclude as I did after discussing the Democratic candidates: A majority of Americans are scared. And all have good reason. All. Including those who most fear the candidate for whom I voted on March 1.

What shall we do?

First, let's take a page from this week's Torah portion, as strained as the connection may seem at first. We read about people with skin diseases, and about priests who are empowered to examine and diagnose the problem. If a person has the dread ailment – *tza'ra'at*, often translated as "leprosy," but actually we have no idea what the skin problem was – the priest would pronounce that individual "unclean." "Unclean! Unclean!" the priest would declare, and then the afflicted one would be expelled from the camp, excommunicated until healed. Note that our sages understood that ailment to be the physical manifestation of a moral problem. Today, we are all Priests of Israel, with an obligation to examine the purported impurities that come before us. Some may be so noxious as to require us to declare forthrightly, "Unclean! Unclean!" We must do everything in our power to keep that malignancy from infecting the rest of the camp.

Let us acknowledge our anxieties about many, if not all, of the candidates; but let not our fears about several blind us to the reality that one of their number must not be permitted to infect our entire body politic.

*Mussar*, or Jewish spiritual discipline, calls on us to live with equanimity, in Hebrew *menuchat ha-nefesh*, calmness of the soul. Election year disrupts many people's equanimity. The *Mussar* tool to achieve equanimity is *bitachon*, trust, trust that everything will be O.K., thanks to God, however conceived. No, we cannot trust that the outcome of this year's presidential election will be entirely to our liking. It's not possible for each of us in this room, let alone every citizen of our nation, to get our way. *Bitachon* doesn't call for passive trust, either. We are each called upon to do our part to achieve the desired outcome. Whether that means making sure we get to the polls or that we travel the country, as some of

our congregants do, to campaign for a particular candidate; we must each do our part.

Finally, I'm reminded of a liberal slogan from early in President Obama's tenure: "We survived Bush; you'll survive Obama." Yes, those words were intended to be flip, but I would suggest that they were also true in a deep and meaningful and bi-partisan way. We may like or dislike what each president says or does, but our own personal well-being is much less affected than our equanimity. The state of the union that is the United States of America is stronger than any president, and certainly more enduring than any menacing candidate. America, and each of us, will be well at high noon next January 20, come what may.

Amen.