

Toledot November 6, 2010—29 Cheshvan 5771

True story: On April 12th, 1945, Harry Truman was summoned to the White House. Ushered into Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting room, the vice president was gently informed by Mrs. Roosevelt that President Roosevelt had died. "Is there anything I can do for you?" Truman asked after a moment's reflection. "Is there anything we can do for YOU?" Eleanor replied. "You're the one in trouble now!"

It's a funny story, and true on many levels. Leadership, particularly political leadership, is fraught with danger, so much so that you have to wonder who would want to take on such responsibility. The method, the pattern, for getting elected today is one that we are all too familiar with. First a candidate gets his or her picture taken with the family in the front yard, or going off to church or shul. And then within a very short time, you have to-- you simply must-- go negative and start with attack ads. Everyone hates them and everyone tells you that they work. And so you and I, and most importantly, our children, are inundated with them. In fact they become so familiar, so routine that we take them for granted and they slip into our subconscious unnoticed. But today I want to talk about the heavy price we pay for allowing that to happen.

Towards the beginning of Parashat Toldot, we learn of Esav's surrendering of the birthright to his younger brother, Yaakov. Rashi (25:32) explains that Esav relinquished the birthright out of fear of the immense responsibility involved. Upon hearing of the many strictures, the high expectations and responsibilities that a first-born had to assume, he decided to give it up. Rashi says that he saw leadership as a burden and not a privilege. Esav didn't want to become a lightning rod for criticism as a public figure and so he eagerly passed it on to Jacob. Jacob himself had a hard time taking on leadership, but he stuck with it, and eventually became a mature and respected leader-- so much so that Gd changed his name to Israel, and we have been carrying Jacob's name ever since. But anyone who watched TV this month can understand why Esav acted as he did.

This political season was, in many ways, overflowing with anger, and fear and contempt. And if I had to boil the spirit of the season down to one word, that word would be "cynicism". And in this cynical climate even the most altruistic, self-effacing politician is seen as suspect. One's only hope in getting elected seems to hinge on making everyone fear your opponent more than they fear you. Who in their right mind would want to step into leadership today?

I used to have in my old office a lovely framed cross-stitch sign, lovingly made for me by a member of my first congregation. It was a quote from the Jerusalem Talmud (Berachot 1:6) that says, "Even though Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah assumed a position of distinguished leadership in the community - NEVERTHELESS, he lived a long life." Leadership, and the responsibilities it entails - is tough. Leadership involves taking risks. It means having to make decisions that some people will find unpopular. It means having clearly defined principles and, at the same time, the humility to deeply consider the opinions of others. Leadership entails a willingness to be taken to task for the mistakes you make. It's tough. And yet, each of us, every parent here, we want our kids to be leaders. We may not want them to go into politics, but we want them to be the kind of people who stand up for what is right, to be willing to help others - to be leaders in their own way. Some religions advocate withdrawing from the world in quiet meditation - but not ours.

Opportunities for making the world a better place present themselves all the time. Our tradition, Jewish tradition teaches that we must always weigh the difficulty involved against the potential benefit to others. This assessment tool is used all the time, and thankfully it is one that so many of us take seriously. Our Jewish community is amazingly well organized because people - some of whom are here today- are willing to step up and lead, to take on the responsibilities, and suffer the slings and arrows of others, because they know that this is what we are commanded to do. We can't be inhibited by the immense responsibility that leadership positions entail. We cannot be hobbled by cynicism - there is too much important work to be done.

And this lesson should be applied to each individual regardless of professional aspirations or inclination. One can only achieve greatness by accepting upon himself or herself the difficult challenges and high goals that come from a commitment to leadership.

And all of us - leaders in our own realm- must emerge from this election season with the understanding that there is only one cure for cynicism, and it is not idealism. Idealism is too abstract. No, the only response to cynicism and suspicion is empathy and understanding. True leadership, the highest form of leadership, comes from empathy - looking beneath the surface, past the easy depictions born of fear, to the inner workings of the human heart. That's the only way to really help- that's what true leadership is all about. And that takes work, hard work. But that is our responsibility as Jews. We who know all

too well what it means to be stereo-typed and labeled must not fall prey to media manipulation, to the inbred cynicism of the election year. It's too easy to slip, unconsciously, subconsciously, into that way of thinking. And that's one of the reasons we pray to Gd: to help us rise above the petty, the fearful, the hardened cynicism of the world, to find the softness, the optimism and the hope inside of us- and then to bring that emotion, that empathy, that heightened sensitivity into the world through our own actions. True empathy starts with self-understanding. That's why we come to shul; that's why we pray. That's why we take the responsibilities of personal leadership seriously, that's why we are proud to call ourselves Jews...