



Letter From Our Rabbi

Osama and Obama, Renaissance And Renewal

June 2011

Dear Haverim,

Last month, I wrote about the Renaissance Weekend, the five day “Think Tank” retreat that our family has attended each year for almost two decades. There was too much to share in one letter, so, as I previously announced, I’ll continue this month.

But before I do, let me also share some reflections on President Obama’s daring decision to send in the Navy Seals against Osama bin Laden.

I say “daring” because, had the mission failed, it could have resulted in a tremendous loss of American lives and Presidential prestige. Most of us had relegated the capture or killing of bin Laden to the back of our minds, but, once he was dead, we breathed a sigh of relief, celebrated that a measure of justice had been done and then began to worry about what’s next. After all, bin Laden’s death doesn’t end the terrorist threat, but hopefully it’s the beginning of an end that might be a long way off.

The Jewish question raised is: “Should we celebrate the death of an enemy?” Purim says “yes,” as we rejoice with abandon in Haman’s downfall. He wanted to kill all of the Jews in the massive Persian empire, as the story goes, solely based on a perceived insult to his pride by a Jew.

Pesach says “no,” as we spill ten drops of wine from our cups for the ten plagues, lessening our joy because our enemies perished in the sea. Radical empathy for an enemy, in the midst of jubilant celebration, is rare in any society or religious tradition and should make us proud.

Judaism created this tradition so that we could distinguish between justice and revenge. Justice is appropriate and necessary in any civilized society, but vengeance just keeps the fire of hate burning and sets the stage for a continuing reciprocity of mutual violence.

Judaism teaches us to pursue justice and rein in anger, even if anger sometimes helps us to seek justice. One of the great strengths of our tradition is that it pushes us to act morally in the world, while also bringing to consciousness how to deal with our conflicted feelings. Truly, Judaism addresses both the outer and inner worlds in which we live.

Now, back to Renaissance. While it's impossible to "summarize" Renaissance, let me offer a few interesting ideas that were expressed:

- 1) "Never overestimate the intelligence of the American people." (Quoting Mark Twain)
- 2) Too many people think that the Constitution opens with "Me, the people." Americans – liberal and conservative – need to be less self-centered and more devoted to the needs of our whole society.
- 3) Keep young voters involved and teach them to have patience. People – young and old – want certainty in politics and life, but no one knows what's going to happen next.
- 4) Blacks and Latinos are more optimistic about the future than whites, because minorities will be a majority by 2042.
- 5) If the Republican House overreaches, President Obama will win in 2012, just as Newt Gingrich's arrogance helped President Clinton.
- 6) On a funny note, it was suggested that the government could encourage weight loss by tying it to an IRS deduction. Or individuals could use the "anti-charity" method. If you're a Democrat, declare that you'll give \$500 to the Bush Library if you don't lose 20 lbs. in 10 weeks. (Also usable for the Clinton Library by Republicans.)
- 7) There were fun sessions on such things as the history of fortune cookies ("Why do Americans put paper in cookies?") and on why we act irrationally and buy things at sale prices that we don't want or need. There was advice from Sufi poets ("Woe to those who are wise in only their own eyes") and from psychiatrists – live your life by the same credo with which we respond to patients in a session: "Be brief, nice, empathic, authentic and interesting. It's hard to do all of that together, but try."

Sessions in which I spoke included such topics as religion and globalization, dealing with challenges to our personal beliefs, the well-furnished mind, America's civil and religious consensus and the future of religion. Some points that I made were:

- 1) Don't be triumphalist, mixing military intervention with religious rhetoric ("converting the heathen," as in the early days of the Iraq war or printing Bible verses on American weapons, as was recently discovered).

- 2) Promote inclusive, peace loving religion, not “clash of civilizations” exclusivist faith.
- 3) Globalization may lower costs, but it destabilizes workers and regions. Be sensitive and compensate with funds and programs.
- 4) How can we say that we care about religious progress, e.g. equality for women, but then tolerate feudal policies towards them by some religions (Islam, Haredi Orthodox Judaism), because we are trying to practice religious tolerance and respect for diversity. When should we criticize religious beliefs and practices and not just be politically correct?
- 5) Religious institutions should assume a greater role in improving society both as institutions and in inspiring individuals to do so.
- 6) Religious humanism/naturalism has an important role in welcoming secularists, agnostics and atheists to the table and helping traditionalists see that one can be religious and rational.
- 7) America isn't secular enough, despite the hysterical rhetoric of fundamentalists.
- 8) We can make synagogues and churches more attractive – intellectually, spiritually and socially – if we become more open to reality.

As you can see, Renaissance always provides an exceptional opportunity for learning and teaching in one's own field and, even more, in studying fields in which you are just curious.

Whether learning Greek and Roman history, the psychology of motivation, economic theory or what's next in culture, Renaissance is an invitation to life-long learning, inquiry, self-search and new knowledge.

Not only has University Synagogue been enriched by those whom I have met and been able to bring to speak, but also by how Ruti and I have grown as a result of our experiences at Renaissance. All of us can benefit from such “out of the box” experiences in “breaking set,” so, during this year and beyond, spend some time going to lectures, reading books and watching documentaries that are not in your field and that are beyond your comfort zone. Practice what our tradition calls “Torah lishma” – learning for its own sake, so that all of us can forever be perpetual, wide-eyed, ever-curious students of learning and life.

B'shalom,



Rabbi Arnold Rachlis

