

Don't Look Back?

An Election Week Sermon for *Shabbat Vayera* 5781

Friday, November 6, 2020

Rabbi Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple

Don't look back.

If we learn anything from the sad tale of Lot's wife—recounted in this week's Torah portion, *Vayera*—it is this: *Don't look back*.

Perhaps a little recap is in order:

Our story concerns the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, two of the five “Cities of the Plain” that, the Bible tells us, were located in the Jordan Valley, near the Dead Sea. If you've ever visited the region, you will recall a landscape as barren as any on Earth: fierce desert heat; a body of water so glutted with salt that nothing can survive; jagged outcroppings at every turn; and the all-pervasive stink of sulfur. The last time I led a temple trip to Israel, we had to re-route our visit to the Dead Sea on account of a mysterious sinkhole that appeared out of nowhere and threatened to swallow up any hapless passersby, tour bus and all. It is a

wasteland of wreckage and ruin; a desolate wilderness that fueled the Biblical imagination.

Sodom and Gomorrah were bad places. How bad? When I think of Sodom and Gomorrah, I call to mind Obi Wan Kenobi's grim appraisal of Mos Eisley Spaceport on the desert planet of Tattooine: "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy."

How bad were Sodom and Gomorrah? Think 2020, but worse. Cruelty, arrogance, and mendacity ruled the land. Rabbinic legend is replete with references to the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah as greedy, self-absorbed, and particularly suspicious of, and inhospitable to, immigrants and foreigners. In this week's *parasha*, an angry mob assembles at the doorstep of Lot, Abraham's nephew, threatening to assault those inside, all because Lot had the audacity to harbor two visitors. Lot begs the mob to leave the men alone; appallingly, he even offers up his two daughters instead. Such was the effect that Sodom and Gomorrah seemed to have on its residents.

God prepares to do away with these cities of sin, but first discloses the apocalyptic plan to Abraham, who pushes back:

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent along with the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” A famous round of bargaining ensues. Abraham persuades God to spare the cities for the sake of just fifty innocent people, should they find them, then forty, thirty, twenty, even ten.

How bad were Sodom and Gomorrah? So bad that not even ten righteous souls can be counted. God’s plan proceeds. The wayfarers whom Lot had sheltered overnight turn out to be divine messengers. After repelling the fevered mob, they all hunker down for the night. The next morning they bring Lot outside. “... And one said, ‘Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away!’” Lot and his family make their escape while God rains down sulfuric fire on the cities and all the surrounding farmland. The Torah describes the scene as one of utter devastation, with “the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.”

Lot’s wife turns around and immediately turns into a pillar of salt.

I think many of us can relate to poor Mrs. Lot. For the last few days we've turned into zombies, our gaze constantly on the election returns, paralyzed, hardly able to do much else. I've been teaching classes online for teens and adults since Wednesday and my cheerful greeting, "How's everyone doing?" has been met with vacant stares and gape-mouthed mumbles of exhaustion.

The story of Lot's wife is a cautionary tale. The moral? "Don't look back." *Midrash* elaborates. The Rabbis teach that Lot's wife was punished because in gazing back at the burning cities, she indulged her nostalgia, her longing for the life she was leaving behind—specifically, a life of luxury and ease, but also a life of greed, self-absorption, and inhospitality, as elaborated elsewhere in the legends about Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife failed because of her attachment to the status quo, because she fully embraced and did not repudiate the ruinous society she was ordered to leave behind.

Other *midrashim* view her more sympathetically. One fable explains that Lot's wife looked back anxiously to make sure that her grown daughters had made it out. And while the Torah never says so, we learn in *midrash* that Lot's wife went by the name Edith, or *Idit* in Hebrew, which comes from a root word meaning

“witness.” Indeed, much interesting folklore has accrued around one particularly evocative geological formation at Mount Sodom near the Dead Sea that everyone, to this day, calls “Lot’s Wife.”

This formation is one of many rock pillars across the world also nicknamed “Lot’s Wife,” including one in Dover, England and another in Singapore. The difference is that the one in Israel is made of halite, or rock salt. There she stands, a forlorn testament to the obliteration of her home. Like salt itself, a preservative that allows food to be eaten long after it should have expired, Lot’s wife remains frozen in time, fixed, unmoving and unmoved. A witness.

Whether we sympathize with Lot’s wife or disapprove of her, the Torah clearly wishes for us to learn from her example. Consider that, in the Torah, every time the Israelites fail to move forward, they suffer. Time and again they complain to their leaders that they’d rather go back to Egypt than to the great land and destiny that God has in store for them. Time and again, God punishes them for their backward gaze.

Don’t look back. Don’t dwell on what has passed. We have endured an excruciating election season and a period of partisan

rancor unseen in generations. Let's move forward. This is no time to wallow in endless recrimination and reprisals. If you are hurting from this election, it's time to stop longing for the past and move forward. If you are pleased with the results, now is no time to gloat or relitigate old grievances.

Or so goes the conventional wisdom.

The Gap—the casual clothing chain—capitalized on this theme the day after the election with the following tweet:



Gap 
@Gap



The one thing we know, is that together,
we can move forward.  



834K views

10:32 AM · 11/4/20 · [Twitter Web App](#)

80 Retweets 4,217 Quote Tweets 508 Likes

The image depicts a Gap hoodie, one side blue, the other side red, joined at the zipper, with the caption, “The one thing we know is that together, we can move forward.”

The backlash was swift and merciless. Twitter users went ballistic, blasting the brand, according to *Time Magazine*, “for appearing to gloss over polarizing political divides—divides that were dramatically clear in the lead-up to the 2020 election—in service of marketing. It was also confirmed that the sweatshirt was not an item actually for sale.”

“The message might have seemed noncontroversial,” the report continued, “but in many ways the reaction to the tweet illustrated just how deep American wounds run. Feel-good messages of unity, once considered bland and unremarkable, have become themselves the subject of division.”

Less than two hours—and close to a million views—later, The Gap pulled the offending tweet and published the following message:

“From the start we have been a brand that bridges the gap between individuals, cultures and generations. The intention of our social media post, that featured a red and blue hoodie, was to

show the power of unity. It was just too soon for this message. We remain optimistic that our country will come together to drive positive change for all.”

I’m not sure I’m ready to hire The Gap’s marketing director, but I think it was a pretty good save—and one that comments better than just about any cable news pundit on the meaning of this moment.

And what *is* the meaning of this moment? We learn from the tragedy of Lot’s wife that danger lurks in looking back; but we also know from our own experience—from our heads as well as our guts—that it’s premature to move forward. Where does that leave us?

The answer, of course, is, *here*: in the uncomfortable—dare I say painful—present. In an America that is, for all intents and purposes, as bitterly divided today as it was last Monday, and will so remain tomorrow and, conceivably, for much time to come.

To think otherwise would be naïve. Twenty-five years ago this past Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in cold blood at a peace rally organized to bolster his efforts to pursue a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Rabin

had hoped to show his country that millions of Israelis still supported the peace process, which had in the months prior to the assassination been assailed by protests and sporadic violence perpetrated by both Palestinians and Israelis.

Any such hopes were dashed by the two bullets fired into the 73-year old Prime Minister's arm and back by a 27-year old Jewish law student and religious extremist named Yigal Amir who was immediately arrested by Israeli police. At his arraignment, Amir explained that he murdered Rabin because he planned "to give our country to the Arabs."

Only after the assassination did it begin to dawn on most Israelis that their country had become so irreconcilably divided. Only after the assassination did most Israelis undertake a kind of collective soul-searching which continues to this day, a quarter-century later, in a country still scarred by Rabin's murder, still divided along ideological lines, but perhaps more wary of the danger of political and religious fanaticism.

At the time, in November of 1995, I was a first-year rabbinical student renting a small apartment in Jerusalem just three blocks from the Prime Minister's residence. I have seen with my own

eyes what can happen when a nation fails to acknowledge its own brokenness. I am a witness.

So let us take the time and make the effort to recognize and reckon with the import of *this* moment. We may have a new President come January, but we should not conclude that all that much has changed. Let's sit, for a moment or longer, in the stuckness of the now, in the *right where we are*: perhaps not pining for the past, but hardly ready to march arm-in-arm into the future. Let's each be a witness to the tattered state of our Union: a union divided, a union still without a clear direction.

The outcome of the battle for this presidency may appear, at least for the moment, close to decided, but the outcome of the battle for the soul of our country remains very much an open question. By "battle for the soul of our country," I refer to the unresolved questions about the character and direction of our nation, issues of dramatic significance not just for us as Americans but for us as Jews, because they touch on so many issues about which Judaism offers its wisdom and raises its voice. Questions such as these:

- At a time of a devastating global pandemic, what will be our approach to public health and safety?

- As we grapple with a concomitant economic crisis, what will we do to ensure the financial viability and dignity of workers and all who depend on our economy for their livelihoods?
- At a time where the effects of climate change become more undeniable with each passing week, each new devastating fire or hurricane, what will we do to address the devastating human impact on our fragile planet?
- At a time when we are having a hard time telling facts from fiction, truth from conspiracy theories, what will be the role of science and rigorous investigation in shaping policy?
- How can we create a society founded on mutual interest when we remain so divided over the role of racism in providing opportunity to some while denying it to others?
- How will we regard the immigrant, the refugee, the foreigner who comes to our country seeking safety, opportunity, or both?
- How will we safeguard the liberties of all people, especially at time when communities of color fear rising hostility, Jews fear rising anti-Semitism, Muslims fear rising Islamophobia, and the LGBTQ+ community fears rising homophobia and transphobia?
- At a time when we are more divided than ever about the role of guns in our society, how will we deal with the fact that,

every day, more than 100 Americans are killed with guns and 200 more are shot and wounded?

- What will be our orientation to the rest of the world, toward countries both friendly and hostile to our interests? How will we even define these interests, going forward?
- What kind of relationship will we pursue with Israel and its role—and *our* role—in the Middle East?

I share these vexing questions with you in the context of a Shabbat sermon because I believe that Judaism offers us the opportunity to join an age-old conversation filled with relevant wisdom that does not follow this or that political party, but which also does not allow us the luxury of disinterest on urgent public matters. As the Rabbis wrote in *Pirkei Avot*, “*al tifrosh min ha-tzibur*”: “Do not withdraw from the public.” Or, as I remind my students: Judaism isn’t only that thing you do when you’re in synagogue, or only when you’re around a holiday table at home. Judaism is a comprehensive way of looking at, and responding to, the world. Inasmuch as “politics” refers to our public lives, “the total complex of relations between people living in society,” then Judaism most certainly has a voice to bear on these important matters, one that we can, and should, bring to our civic engagement.

And as we remain stuck in this tense and tumultuous moment in the life of our nation, let us also affirm that, at WRT, our values remain steadfast—no matter who’s in the White House or Congress. Presidents, Representatives, Senators—they come and go. But our Jewish values abide:

In the name of *pikuach nefesh*, the *mitzvah* of saving life and preserving life, WRT will continue to do all that we can to protect and promote the health, safety, and security of our congregation, community, nation, and world—especially in the face of this pandemic, and in a climate of rising hostility against Jewish communities.

In the spirit of *tzedakah*—righteous action on behalf of the disadvantaged—and with a particular eye toward the challenges of today’s economy—WRT will not discriminate against anyone who wishes to participate in the life of our congregation on account of financial need.

In the spirit of Reform Judaism, which grew out of the Enlightenment, and in accordance with the teachings of Maimonides, we will strive to “accept truth from whatever source

it comes,” and to pay particular heed to how science and fact must inform all our pursuits, including spiritual pursuits. Ours is not a blind faith but rather what the great Jewish theologian Hermann Cohen proudly called “a religion of reason.”

In accordance with the Torah’s oft-repeated mandate to acknowledge and address the plight of the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the immigrant, and the refugee, WRT will continue to respond to the needs of some of the world’s most vulnerable people and groups.

In keeping with Reform Judaism’s unwavering commitment to equality, WRT will insist on justice and inclusion for all of God’s children, regardless of ability, age, gender, sexual orientation, background, faith, or skin color.

In the interest of *Klal Yisrael*, the unity of the Jewish people, WRT will always remind us that we are part of a global community, with special ties to Israel—and therefore special responsibilities to safeguard, support, and invest in the physical, spiritual, and moral vitality of the world’s only Jewish State.

In the name of *Tikkun Olam*—repairing the world—we will strive to transform the world as it is into the world as it ought to be.

It is my hope and prayer that, with these principles to guide us, WRT will provide us with sufficient strength, inspiration, and shared commitments to move us forward, out of the stuckness of the present, our gaze, with God's help, ever on the horizon.

Amen.