

“Country First”
17 Heshvan 5769 / November 15, 2008
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Last week I mentioned our President-elect’s name in almost every paragraph of my comments. This week I want to talk about his rival candidate, John McCain. If Barack Obama’s campaign slogan was “Hope” then most certainly the most identifiable slogan associated with John McCain was, “Country first.” John McCain was and is a great hero for our country. There are very few that can say “Country first” with the conviction, resumé and actions to support such a bold statement. For McCain, “Country first” is not a punch line offered at a party. They are words that he lives by, words that carried him through his torturous captivity, and they are words that propelled a productive and principled career in the Senate. Faith, honor and courage are the words that come alive in this great servant, this great soldier, this great veteran. This week, as we spend time recalling the contributions made by those who have served in our military, we devote a day in our lives to these veterans, many of whom gave their lives for us. This week we celebrate Veterans’ Day. We pause to take notice and to thank those who are with us, those who have served us and those whose names are recalled on memorials and in cemeteries. Tuesday was Veterans’ Day and John McCain is the paradigmatic veteran, his life is the greatest teacher.

On November 4th when John McCain conceded the election, he offered the following, “I would not be an American worthy of the name should I regret a fate that has allowed me the extraordinary privilege of serving this country for a half a century.”

Today, I was a candidate for the highest office in the country I love so much. Tonight, I remain her servant. That is blessing enough for anyone, and I thank the people of Arizona for it.”

He continued “Americans never quit. We never surrender. We never hide from history. We make history.”

However, this year a much greater testimony was shown in the video that served as an introduction of John McCain at the Republican National Convention. The narrator, doing a voice over of John McCain lying in a hospital bed, remarked that “he’d survive being held captive for five years because of the faith he had learned from his father and grandfather, the faith that there is more to life than self.” Then, Orson Swindle, a fellow Prisoner of War, read from McCain’s book, *Faith of My Fathers*, “In prison I fell in love with my country. I loved her before, but like most young people, my affection was little more than an appreciation for the comfort and privileges most Americans enjoy and take for granted. It wasn’t until I had lost these comforts and privileges that I realized how much I loved her.”

We live in the land of the free, home of the brave, because there are brave people who insure our freedom.

There are four quick stories together in this week’s reading. The first story is a story of achievement; the next two stories are stories of failure and the fourth is just for emphasis. The stories explain that we are required by our sages, (who demand of us) and, by our Torah, which inspires us, to find ways to care for those who cannot care for themselves. As the story goes,

Sarah has given birth to Isaac, the pride and joy of her life, possibly her greatest joy. When she sees that Abraham's attention is split between Isaac and his son through Hagar, Ishmael, she orders that he banish Hagar and Ishmael. The second story is the story of the binding of Isaac, when Abraham is to take his son and sacrifice him just as God asks. Abraham agrees. In both situations we want Abraham to stand up for the weak, for those who cannot protect themselves and for those who are most vulnerable. Our conscience calls out to Abraham to care for the innocent. We know he can because the first story in the portion makes that perfectly clear. When we meet Abraham in this week's portion, he's embroiled in an argument about God's imminent destruction of Sodom.

Abraham is willing to fight for humanity. He is willing to confront God and take on the mighty force of the divine to save a few guiltless lives. Abraham doesn't suggest to God that he not drive away the wicked from the earth. Abraham agrees that evil must be eradicated. Abraham, I dare say, would fight that battle as well. However, in this story Abraham is concerned about protecting the blameless. Abraham is the one who defended those who needed defense.

When Hagar and Ishmael are left to fend for themselves, Hagar puts her son down and walks away because she cannot bear to see her child die of starvation. The text says, "God heard the cry of the child and sent a messenger. *Vayishma et kol hanaar*. God heard the cry of the child." When Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, Isaac, God sends a messenger to save him. *Vayishma et kol Hanaar*, God heard the cry of the child – and in the Haftorah, when the women are afraid for their children's lives, *Vayishma et kol Hanaar*. God heard the cry of the mother and sent Elisha to save the children.

We are taught that Abraham brilliantly sets the stories in motion. We are compelled to come to the assistance of those who are less fortunate. We are inspired to defend those who need our help. We are motivated to fight the good fight. Where this is oppression, our Torah says, "Rise up and protect. Where there is an attack, rise up and guard. Where there are those who need our support, rise up and preserve."

Ha'af tispah tzaddik im rasha – "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23)

Abraham gives language to the courage we all wish we had but few are able to deliver. When Abraham says, *Ha'af tispah tzaddik im rasha* – "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23) So, we cheer him for his bravery. We are thankful for the Abrahams of the world.

The stories together bring us a clear message. There will be times when we have the strength and conviction to aid those who desperately need us. There will be times when others will have to pick up that mantle. There will be times when we must do it ourselves and times when others will step in. There will be times when we volunteer and times when we must be drafted. However, no matter, when there are those who step into the line of fire, and stand on the wall to defend us, we owe them our gratitude, our admiration and our pledge to care for them when they return. I cannot tell you how embarrassed and disheartened I am by the way we have treated our veterans. They ought to be greeted with the highest level of care but we have done so little, and

what we have done, we have done poorly. That is why I am so proud of the way Har Zion's Shul Stitchers have donated a dozen afghans to Walter Reed Veterans Hospital. We heard the cry of our soldiers who have returned home. Wouldn't it be inspirational if every American could do just one thing for just one veteran?

This week we observed Veterans Day, but we have not seen our veterans. John McCain, speaking at a rally for Senator Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, looked over his shoulder and thanked Zell Miller for being there. He thanked him for supporting him throughout his Presidential campaign. McCain then made an off-the-cuff remark that hit home. He said "I want to thank Zell Miller, a Marine. I call him a Marine although he no longer serves in the military. Once you're a Marine you're always a Marine." Once our soldiers have served, we are always in debt to them. Once they have put on our country's uniform, we must hold them in the highest regard and treat them with the respect and honor they deserve.

There is a picture of my father that I love. I once found it tucked away in the back of our attic. This is a picture of my father in his army uniform. He was a Chaplain in the Army, a Captain in fact, when I was born. I was born in Ft. Huachuca Arizona, the great state from which John McCain hails. Although he only served for several months, I take great pride in my father's service. In preparation for this sermon, I called him and he told me the following story. It is a story I hadn't heard. He said he didn't really do anything and although he was in the Army, he never served in a forward location. He was never asked to put a fellow soldier's life in his hands or ask a fellow soldier to hold his life in his. However, his older brother Eliot was a true war hero. My uncle Eliot, he told me, was in World War II and awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for his heroic actions. You see, my uncle was seriously injured while fighting in the Battle of the Bulge.

This German offensive was officially named "The Battle of the Ardennes" by the U.S. Army, but it is known to the general public simply as the *Battle of the Bulge*. The "bulge" was the initial incursion the Germans put into the Allies' line of advance, (16 December 1944 – 25 January 1945)

The Germans planned the offensive with utmost secrecy. During heavy overcast weather, there would be almost a complete surprise attack against a weak section of the Allies' line, a time when the Allies' strong air forces would be grounded. Ultimately, the German objectives were not realized. In the wake of this defeat, many experienced German units were left severely depleted of men and equipment. Survivors retreated to the defenses of the Siegfried Line. The Battle of the Bulge was the single, bloodiest battle that U.S. forces experienced during World War II. The 19,000 American dead were unsurpassed by those of any other engagement.

My uncle Eliot would later be commissioned by the United States Army to write a book, "We Were the Line." It described his unit, Charlie Company of the 48th Infantry. They were called the "rail splitter." I could not have been more proud. This week we thank our veterans, our soldiers and our heroes, for providing a blanket of freedom, a blanket which allows us to sleep comfortably each and every night.