

“Out of Many, One - Out of One, Many”
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A few weeks ago, the front page of the Wall Street Journal showed a poster with a picture of Barack Obama and the title, “*Il Mondo Cambia.*” This means, “The World Changes.” In this one phrase we realize that, regardless of one person’s journey and the charismatic nature of this one person, this is a world event. It doesn’t matter what you think individually about our current President and his successes and failures; his strengths and his weaknesses. The election of Barack Obama, as the 44th president of the United States of America, is a global event. Whether you believe this is a watershed, paradigm, shift-propelled from the moment of the Civil Rights Movement, or simply a result of an unpopular war and economic crisis with international implications, the election of Barack Obama has global reverberations. I find that the journey of Barack Obama from Kenya, Africa to the White House in Washington DC, incredibly inspirational. It is the kind of inspiration that forces me to evaluate my worth, my value, and my contribution. It motivates me to do more.

On Tuesday night at 12:04AM, when Obama said the words “It can’t happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice.” I mumbled to myself under my breath, “I am in.” I am in. I am an American and I am proud and I want to be a part of perfecting our union. So, I kept going back to the personal journey and how the one can change many.

I know President-elect Obama said quite eloquently that this victory is not about him. It is about his family, the volunteers and the brilliant strategists. However, I reject, not that notion, but the degree of personal responsibility. For me, this was and is about the man, Obama. It is about the name Barack. I say quietly, without desire of raising the ire of many, I believe in the man and therefore I believe in myself. I know there is much he wants to achieve as President but he has already achieved so much. He has become President of the United States of America. Isn’t that what we say to our children when we put them to bed at night? Isn’t that what our parents said or should have said to us when they put us to bed? You can be anything you want to be, you could even be President of the United States of America.

President-elect Obama was launched in July of 2004, when he emerged on to the national scene at the Democratic National Convention. There, in Boston Massachusetts, a star was born. Almost from the first words out of his mouth, I was stirred. He began, “Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let’s face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats and went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. However, my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America. America is so often shown as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many.”

Then he said something that struck me at my core. You see, when Missy and I married and had children we gave each a Jewish name, a name that connected them to our ancestors, our people and our legacy. They don’t have two names, they have one. They don’t have a Jewish name and a secular one. They are Adi, Nina, Gavriella, Mia and Yasmin. They are who they are and their

names run deep and wide. Obama remarked, “They would give me an African name, Barack, or ‘blessed,’ believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success.” Then he acknowledged, “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles.”

Then it came into focus for me. We are all part of a greater story because we are a people conjoined by “our faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles.” If you can’t attach yourself to the narrative of Barack Obama, then maybe you can connect with our Biblical narrative.

Today we read of Abraham and his unlikely journey. Today we read of Abraham who birthed a nation. If the story lineup until Abraham is about the stutter step of the birth of human beings, then Abraham is about the beginning of our people. Today, the story both narrows and expands. It narrows the account of humanity to a single people. It expands from a single person to an entire nation. That is exactly the story I tell now of our President-elect. It began with a nation that provided ultimate opportunity and narrowed to one single narrative. We pray that we will once again expand to the benefit of our entire country. “*E pluribus unum*, out of many, one” – but also out of one comes many.

Today, Abraham began our story with one step, with one single command. God speaks to Abraham and says, *Lech Licha Meartzecha Umimoladecha, umi beit avicha el ha’aretz asher ani ar’eka*. “Go forth from your land, from the place you were born, from your father’s house to a land I will show you.” You don’t know where you are going, but you know where you are. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in the call of God to Abraham – “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house.” This was a summons to chart new and different paths, the most fateful and, at the same time the most hopeful, in the history of mankind. The best description of it is the title of Nelson Mandela's autobiography: *The Long Walk to Freedom*.

Abraham began something great. He started something that was bigger than self. The first sentence of that journey is incredibly instructive. To borrow the words of Ollilot Ephraim quoted in the Itture Torah, *Lech lecha...Lecha – l’atzmicha*. “Go, go to yourself. The journey of life is not to an outer location. The journey of life is an inner journey of self discovery. Go to yourself. Find yourself. Discover the you within. Discover that you are the work of art. If you don’t know how to do it then let me tell you how,” says our beloved Torah. Look at who you were when you were born. Look at your parents, look at the place you find yourself. *Meartzecha Umimoladecha, umi beit avicha* – your land, your birthplace and your father's house. Ask yourself, who were you when you were born? Who did your parents want you to be? Who do your people need you to be? Says the Itture Torah, Abraham was an unlikely person to emerge onto the international scene negotiating treatise among nations. He was an unlikely candidate to be a messenger of ethical monotheism, as the son of an idol maker to a world in desperate need of a new metaphor. (Obama at the Alfred E. Smith dinner this year quipped “and I got my middle name from someone who obviously never thought I would run for President.”) Yet he was and he did. Abraham becomes another, alongside Noah, Joseph, Moses and David who inspires us to personal achievement through the example of real living. Abraham, in this week’s reading, makes mistakes. He behaves in ways we wish he hadn’t but that is what makes him authentic. None of our heroes are super heroes with supernatural powers. Each and every

person we meet along the journey of building our nation, one story at a time, is a person we can identify with, someone we can emulate, someone we can access. The message is that you can be an Abraham, all you have to do is look inward. Then do the most magnificent thing, look outward.

Again I turn to President-elect Obama's words in 2004. "If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child." "If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for their prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandparent." When he concluded his moving oration with the words, "The hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too." I asked myself, "What is my place? What is my purpose, what is my dream? Will I make the world a better place?"

I know from this *bimah*, from this place, I often decry the stagnation of the human project. I look around and see the wars and illness, poverty and crime, fill our streets, our neighborhoods, and our homes and I wonder if we are getting any closer to a more perfected world and a Messianic era. At times I am disheartened by the state of human existence. Then Barack Obama stepped into the light and now I am encouraged. This is a step forward. I pray that being elected as President of United States is not his only accomplishment.

Michael Sandel, a Harvard University political philosopher remarked, "Taking office at a time of crisis doesn't guarantee greatness, but it can be an occasion for it." I believe Obama will rise to the occasion. The time is ripe.

At midnight, as the election day turned into the dawning of a new era, Barack Obama stepped out onto the platform to announce his victory. He said the words, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer." Then he continued.

"And to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand."

Our tradition teaches *Lech lecha* – Go to yourself – find yourself – for when you do we can make the world a better place. The long journey begins with a glance inward and if you can't imagine your own greatness, if we can't imagine our own contribution, then we can certainly pray for our President-elect. Abraham changed the world with a single idea. I pray Barack Obama can.

I humbly and reverently offer this prayer:

At this critical time in our history, when sinister forces seek to perpetuate anarchy and disastrous consequences seem imminent, endow our President-elect Barack Obama with insight. As you have blessed him with patience, may he know when to act swiftly. Implant in his heart courage and perseverance, to remain loyal to his charge, and fortify him with resolve to defend the oppressed.

May he be immovable in his conviction that justice and equality are indivisible. May he dedicate his presidency to uphold the dignity of all who were created in the image of God, regardless of race or creed. Through his toil and sacrifice, may a new dawn of freedom be ushered in. May his example inspire us to render perfect devotion to our country, so that this government “of the people, by the people, for the people” shall never perish from this earth. Let us never be found wanting in the fulfillment of our duty to preserve the rights and privileges of all this blessed land. Grant that we may be ever-mindful that righteousness exalted a nation. Remind your children that they are all are brothers and sisters.