

Iconoclasts and Rejecting Conventional Beliefs
Election 2008
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How many people heard the album of the 1950's comic hit, *The 2000 Year Old Man*, which was updated and re-released in the year 2000? In the show, Carl Reiner interviews a 2000-year-old man played by Mel Brooks—yes, I know, you're already laughing even if you haven't heard the shtick yet. ☺ Anyway, during one part of the interview, Carl Reiner asks the 2000-year-old man, "How did you discover God?"

The 2000-year-old man responds: "*Well, we all used to worship Murray, big, tall, strong Murray. We used to say, 'O Murray, please don't beat us up. Please don't harm us. We worship you, O Murray.'* Then one day Murray was struck by lightning. We yelled out, '*Quick, get the marshmallows!*' But then we knew there was something bigger than Murray and that's how man discovered God." ☺

Well, that's not exactly how traditional midrash, rabbinic legend, pictured humanity coming to realize that the world is ruled by one God, but it's not all that far off, either. The midrash offers several classic answers as to how we got on the path towards monotheism, of which I'll share two. Arguably the most famous midrash in our tradition, one with which many of us are familiar, is the legend of

Abraham, our patriarch and the hero of this week's parasha, smashing the idols in his father's idol shop, later explaining to his father—"well, this small idol stole the food from that one, and the larger idol attacked him, and eventually we had an 'idol rumble' and they all destroyed each other". To this, his father says, "impossible! They're all made of stone!!!", and Abraham responds—"EXACTLY—so why do you worship them again?" The 2,000 year old man realizes that anything that can be destroyed couldn't possibly be God, and so, too, does Abraham get the fact that things that can be destroyed can't possibly be God, let alone if they are objects of stone that have no living force in them at all!

The second midrash about our journey towards monotheism brings a parable of a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a building in flames. The man wondered—"is it possible the building has no caretaker"?, at which point, the owner of the building appears and says—"I am the owner". This parable is then applied to Abraham, who is portrayed as seeing the world being destroyed by the flames of wrongdoing and reacting by wondering aloud, "could it really be that the world has no master?" Then God, recognizing that Abraham has uniquely noticed and objected to the world's troubles, reveals God's self to Abraham and says—"I am the Master, the Sovereign of the Universe"—and then proceeds to charge Abraham with the task of leading the way to a new, more righteous world that centers on the belief in one God—*LEKH LEKHA Mi-Artzekha*,

U'mimoladetkha, U'Mi-beit Avikha el ha-aretz asher areka. Go now from your homeland and your origins to the place that I will show you.

When our sages of old tried to answer the obvious and vital question, “Why, from amongst all people, was this guy Abraham selected to pave the way to a new age in world history?”, the answers they came up with, as evidenced by the two midrashic examples I just shared, all came back to one key concept. Abraham must have been a man who was willing to, as our Etz Hayim Chumash says, “stand apart from conventional thinking”. Conventional thinking in the Ancient Near East said—maybe the idols are gods? Maybe there is no god at all and that explains why there is wrongdoing in the world? Or maybe God just doesn’t care what we do? And to all this, by his acceptance of God’s order to march forth, Abraham says, “Everyone’s got it all wrong. Idols are made of stone. There is a God who is the “master of the house” who cares what we do and tells us so, even if God allows us to choose how we will ultimately act. When Abraham identifies that the world’s sense of values are out of whack, he does not stand by and “watch the building burn”—instead, he takes steps towards progress and heightened morality, even if it means, as it did in his case, standing virtually alone. Abraham, you see, was the classic iconoclast, one who emphatically rejects and overturns traditional views.

And this is why it is fitting that we read *Lekh Lekha*, the story of Abraham's selection, in the aftermath of this extraordinary week in our country's history, when we witnessed the election of Barack Obama as President and, with it, the overturning of long-held traditional views in our country. **No matter who you voted for in the national election, it's hard not to acknowledge the historic nature of what has taken place.** As Jon Meacham comments in an article in this week's Newsweek:

“A nation whose Constitution enshrined slavery has elected an African-American president within living memory of days when blacks were denied fundamental human rights—including the right to vote. Hyperbole around elections comes easy and cheap, but this is a moment—a year—when even superlatives cannot capture the magnitude of the change that the country voted for last Tuesday. “If there is anyone out there who 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 democracy, tonight is your answer,” Obama told an adoring yet serious throng in Chicago’s Grant Park. He alluded to the historic nature of the victory only indirectly. “This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations,” he said. He did not need, really, to add anything to that: that he was saying the words was testament enough.”

This 2008 election was remarkable in so many ways. No doubt many of us in the room can remember a time during our lives when a woman would not have been considered a candidate for the top ticket in the nation, whether it be a major contender for one party's presidential nomination or a nominated vice-presidential candidate. Likewise we may remember a time when someone the age of John McCain would not have been considered a viable candidate for the presidency. And how many of us would have thought a generation, or perhaps even a decade, ago, that Barack Obama - a man of mixed race, of black skin, the son of an African, the son of a single mother, a man with a foreign, unassimilated name—could be elected president of our country? At such a low point in our country's morale, at a time of crisis and uncertainty, we are reminded of how far we have come and how much we have of which we can be proud.

Years down the road, we will likely remember this election as pioneering, and all of its previously unlikely candidates, as pioneers. The “glass ceiling” against gender has been broken, the barrier against people of color has been smashed and we have effectively said that age is not an impediment to leadership or human capacity. These metaphorical idols have been destroyed in front of our eyes. Does this mean that America has finally put all of these issues behind? As, Jon Meacham says, **“No, but we are much further ahead than we were a week**

ago”. Of course, there is much to be done, and many serious obstacles along the way. Our country has many significant problems to deal with; our president elect has an overwhelming job and he must still prove himself to the American people. But no longer will color or gender or age make a person an unlikely hero. We’ve shown the world by example what we stand for and who we are. We have shown that we should never accept the status quo if it is unacceptable to us. We have shown that we should never accept inequality or settle for what is wrong. We have shown that, as Barack Obama said on Tuesday night, “all things are possible”.

May God give President-Elect Obama and all of our newly elected or re-elected leaders the strength to lead with courage and conviction even when faced with the most difficult of challenges. May his, and their, leadership enlighten us, and may our country and its inhabitants be blessed with good fortune, happiness, justice, and peace. PLEASE JOIN WITH ME ON p.148 in our siddurim AS WE RISE AND RECITE TOGETHER THE LAST TWO PARAGRAPHS OF A PRAYER FOR OUR COUNTRY:....

