



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## A GREAT NATION – A SOURCE OF BLESSINGS

It is 1 a.m. on Wednesday morning, just after midnight, November 5. As I sit and craft these words, the citizens of the United States have just completed a great miracle. Today, as they do every four years, they re-established a new nation, one in which the People – not government, not military, not wealth, but the people — are sovereign. This day, as is true every four years, the American people reconsidered their collective vision of who we are as a nation, what our agenda is to be into the future. Because of the miracle of free elections, the world witnessed a nation that is not trapped by previous policies or institutions, not hobbled by previous biases or prejudice, one which took upon itself the creative capacity to reinvent itself and its future. Surely such a moment, rare around the globe and in human history, summons our reverent attention.

Look how far we have come! As I drove my daughter's carpool to school yesterday morning, she read to me from her American history textbook about the ideology of manifest destiny – the then popular doctrine that Anglo-Saxons were called by God to civilize the rest of humanity, thereby justifying policies of imperial expansion and domination. Yet this year's presidential election is historical in that a son of Kenya and of Europe, two great streams of humanity united in Senator Barack Obama, has been elected the next President of the United States. My daughter read of an ideology which justified the rule of men by men, viewing women as naturally light-headed and flighty, therefore needing the guiding governance of the male. Yet yesterday a woman concluded a campaign to be elected Vice President. And the electorate itself is proudly, resiliently diverse – every race and ethnicity, every faith known to humanity, gay and straight, male and female, special needs and not yet special needs – all together selected the next leader of the most influential nation on the planet. Such raucous freedom, such symphonic diversity inspires our contemplation.

No surprise, then, that the Torah weighs in on the notion of national greatness. Our father Avram is summoned by a divine lure to leave the conventionality, habit, and limits of his childhood. He is invited to risk all and to gain all by venturing toward the unknown: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." Even in the wording of the invitation, God lets Avram realize that it doesn't have to be the way it always was, that convention does not mandate destiny, that we are all invited to an open-ended journey in which our future is not determined for us. It is chosen by us. God invites Avram to journey without an assigned destination.

Traditionally the text has been read to mean that God (and the reader) can identify the destination in advance, while Avram is asked to venture forth without knowing where he is headed. But I think the Torah is also indicating the God hasn't yet settled on the destination either: to the land that I will show you, later, as we locate it mutually. God and Avram will create the future together, as co-creators of an open-ended tomorrow. As inducement to Avram to embrace his radical freedom, God entices him with a vision of what such liberty makes possible:

I will make of you a great nation  
And I will bless you.  
I will make your name great  
And you shall be a blessing (12:2).

With this offering, God asks Avram (and us) to leave behind our own idolatrous assumptions – the way it has always been, the resignation that it must always be that way. The world has often equated greatness with coercion – the ability to impose one's will on another, the power to force others to accede to our desire. Even some of Avram's children have distorted this blessing into an endorsement of supremacy, coercion, and oppression.

But such a reading is wrong.

The God of Abraham is not about the imposition of force, about stripping creation of agency, novelty, and choice. Instead, we understand the Holy One as the constant, relentless striving toward innovation, freedom, partnership (the Bible calls it "covenant,") and love. One verse later, God weighs in to clarify our understanding of what it means to be a great nation:

All the families of the earth  
Shall bless themselves by you (12:3)

A nation is great not by its ability to manipulate and to control, but to the degree that its actions elicit the grateful appreciation of the family of nations. We are Avram's children to the degree that we are a "light to the nations," as the Prophet Isaiah reminds us – advocates for resolute shalom in a world of brutality and greed, champions for education and dignity in a world of oppression and utility, advocates for freedom and diversity against the smothering blanket of uniformity. Only if the families of the earth see us as a source of blessing are we truly a great nation.

This reality governs human society in the long run, for the God of Israel is the bubbling enzyme of history, the catalyst of freedom, diversity, and mutual care. We need not remain trapped by a mindless, endless, competition for resources in which there must be losers in order for there to be winners. Instead, Avram (and his children) is invited to leave those old ways, those toxic habits, and to journey into the bracing sunlight of freedom, the oxygenating breathe of possibilities as yet unattempted.

Rashi sums up this blessing quite simply: he hears God tell Avram "I will make known your character in the world."

My blessing for our new president and for our nation made new – thanks to the wisdom of our founders, our democratic institutions, and our citizenry – is that we, too, will

stretch to be a great nation as the Torah understands national greatness: great not in ability to impose but to inspire. Not in our capacity to hoard and consume but in our desire to share and to elevate. Not in our selfishness and our narcissism, but in our sense of our expanded belonging and the responsibilities which go with that relating. God bless us, everyone.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson (<http://www.bradartson.com>) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University where he is Vice President. A doctoral candidate in Contemporary Jewish Theology, his newest book is *The Everyday Torah: Weekly Reflections and Inspirations* (McGraw Hill).