

Complexity Not Caricature —A Message of Empathy for Election Day

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My daughter is going to be reading Torah at our Shabbat service tomorrow morning. I've been listening to her while she's learning her verses.

Now, this is one of the most famous portions in the Torah: Parashat Lekh L'kha. When we think about it, we usually think about God calling out to Avram and telling him to "Go forth to a land that I will show you."

But Cantor, you gave Lindsay a different section of the parashah to read—one that we usually skip over.

It talks about all these kings with long, weird biblical names who go to war with each other in the land of Canaan—which, of course, would later be called the Land of Israel.

The scene is ironic: Just two chapters earlier, Avram had left his whole life behind for the promise of a new land and numerous descendants.

And then, as soon as he gets there, the country breaks out into war between factions who wanted to gain power by destroying their rivals.

Some Promised Land, right? Does it remind you of anything?

I think Cantor may just have given Lindsay the most relevant and timely part of the Torah, given that Election Day is next week.

I have worked on campaigns. I used to love Election Day.

The air was charged with possibility, and there was this sense that whatever was going to happen that night would change the world.

And, at the same time, the world just went on as usual. Because, when it came down to it, everyone kind of took for granted that whatever happened that night, the postelection hangover would go away in a day or two and the country would be fine.

But, now, it feels so different.

It feels like our Promised Land is on the brink of civil war.

A survey in today's *Washington Post* found that "88 percent of Americans are concerned that political divisions have intensified to the point that there's an increased risk of politically motivated violence in the United States."¹

And with good reason: because we're seeing it. The incidents are too numerous and so well-known by now that there's no point in trying to list them all.

But it's unmistakable. And it's terrifying.

America didn't used to be like this.

What in God's name has happened to us?

There are good reasons to sound the alarms—and there's no shortage of people doing it.

But you are all well-informed people who read the news and know what's going on. You don't need me to tell you.

You know how important it is to get out and vote; that participating in democracy is not only a civic duty but also a religious one in our Reform tradition.

And you're well aware that the rise in antisemitism—and the threats just yesterday against Jewish institutions in New Jersey, which thank God have now been resolved—are part and parcel of the broader trend of political violence.

Next Thursday, a group of congregants and I are going to an ADL seminar in Manhattan to learn more about it, and you should join us.

But tonight, what I think our community needs from me, the rabbi, is not political commentary. You don't need me to scare you about what might happen if one side or the other wins on Tuesday night.

I think what I can best add to our discourse right now is a *religious* message from the Jewish tradition about how we, as a society, might turn back from the brink.

It seems to me that we have arrived at a place in our culture where we can no longer distinguish between *disagreeing* with someone and *hating* them.

We all know that, today, everything is politics and everything is personal.

But that didn't just *happen*.

There has been a very intentional effort by the institutions that shape our culture to cultivate this hatred toward those with whom we disagree.

Politics-based hate is a *business model*,² a strategy to capture our attention by stoking our fires of anger and outrage, because it's known that these are extremely powerful emotions.

And one way to do that—to make us hate people who see the world differently than we do—is to dehumanize them by reducing them to caricatures, to one-dimensional "*theys*."

They think this, *they* want to do that.

It's one of the lessons that we learned from the Nazi period, actually: that it's easier to convince people to hate caricatures, because they aren't really human anyway.

Radical dehumanization of our political opponents has become an American obsession, and I believe it's the reason we are where we are today in our political culture—with violence on the rise and the powder keg about to explode.

But Judaism pushes forcefully against this radical dehumanization—so forcefully it's like it *knew* already in ancient times that this would be a perennial human sin.

Apropos of where we are in our Torah-reading cycle, Judaism grounds its radical *humanization* philosophy in the *Book of Genesis* and the creation of Adam, the first human being.

Now, Adam was no ordinary man.

According to the Kabbalah, Adam—which means "earth" in Hebrew—was the spiritual soil of humanity. Every human soul that would ever come into being was originally rooted in him.³

In other words, every soul that would ever exist was created *along with*, and *as part of*, this mystical first human.

The midrash even talks about the individual souls hanging off every part of Adam: his arms, his legs, his neck, his eyes, even his nose hairs!⁴

So, not only do all of us share a common spiritual ancestor, every one of us also has a soul that has been around since the very beginning.

And where have our souls been all this time until we got them?

Yep, you guessed it: cycling through the world in other bodies and other lives. Reincarnation.

This is creative and fanciful imagery, to be sure. But the Kabbalah uses it to teach a very important idea about humanity:

The people we are today were not formed in a vacuum. We weren't even formed in one *lifetime*.

We all come from a common ancestor, and yet each one of us is an endlessly complex product of different physical, spiritual, and emotional experiences we cannot possibly begin to comprehend.

And even as we have free will, the way we live in this life is heavily influenced by our soul's long history of past experiences and the work it needs to do this time around to move up the spiritual ladder.

Now, what does this all have to do with politics and Election Day?

Well, interestingly, this medieval kabbalistic idea is kind of similar to a theory put forth by a team of political scientists less than a decade ago.

Based on extensive research, these political scientists—John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford—argue that each person is biologically predisposed to hold the political opinions they do.

If you're skeptical of it, you should read their book. It's called **Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences**.

They show that people who identify as liberals and people who identify as conservatives actually exhibit different biological responses in certain instances:

- Like the way their eyes move in response to spots of light flashing on a computer screen;
- And how their bodies respond differently to certain chemicals, which obviously has nothing to do with politics;
- And how they react differently to other biological stimuli that are beyond anyone's control.

In other words, they argue, we are—at least in part—hard-wired to see the world the way we do.

Not that we can't overcome our predispositions. They believe we can. But changing a predisposition, they say, is like turning around a supertanker: It can be done, but it's not easy.

Now, add to this our idea from the Kabbalah: that because of our soul's countless and unknowable past experiences, we enter this life with a certain amount of spiritual baggage and predispositions.

And we see that *every* human being is truly a *whole world*: vast, deep, brilliantly intricate in design, incomprehensibly complicated, shaped by forces we can never fully understand about ourselves let alone about others, possessing free will and yet predisposed by our biological and spiritual hard wiring.

Where the modern secular culture of radical dehumanization of the *other* unfairly reduces the *other* to a one-dimensional caricature, Judaism's culture of radical humanization teaches us to see every human being as an absolute singularity—someone who has never existed before and will never exist again; someone who God put here for a unique purpose.

So, instead of seeing our opponents as evil, we might choose to see them as complex human beings who are formed by an intricate and infinite field of biological, psychological, environmental, and spiritual factors, no less than we are.

And just maybe, this will cause us to respond to them with empathy and dignity rather than hatred and contempt.

In my opinion, this is the only way we will be able to turn back from the precipice and go forth to the Promised Land.

1 Emily Guskin, [“A wide majority of Americans are concerned about politically motivated violence.”](#) *Washington Post*, 11/4/22

2 See Matt Taibbi, [Hate, Inc.: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another](#)

3 See [Sha'ar HaGilgulim 6:3](#)

4 See [Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 12:1](#)