

**A Jewish Response to the Election of Barack Obama**  
**Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Beth Torah**  
**Shabbat Lech Lecha; November 8, 2008; 10 Cheshvan 5769**

*Dear Mr. Marcelino:*

*You were my fifth grade teacher some 25 years ago at Brady Middle School. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you didn't remember me—I'm pretty sure I didn't stand out academically in those years. I did want you to know that I thought of you recently. As I was watching the returns come in from this historic presidential election, I had a flashback of sitting in your classroom listening to phonograph records of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech. I remembered what a profound impression it made upon me, as well as your gifted teaching about Black history in America. This all came flooding into my consciousness as I watched Barack Obama become the first black president of the United States. As I looked on the Orange City School District's website, I was so happy to see that you are still teaching. I hope you are still playing those recordings to your students—though nowadays I imagine they are amplified from your i-pod rather than a phonograph. I hope your students are still listening that speech, and that you are still inspiring successive generations of students as much as you inspired me. Today I am nearly 35 years old, married, the father of 3 children and living in Dallas, TX where I work and serve as a Rabbi. I hope you are well and as impassioned a teacher and human being as I remember you over two decades ago.*

*Warmest regards from your former student, Adam Raskin*

My thumbs typed this message on my Blackberry just a few days ago to my beloved fifth grade teacher. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was truly unusual to have an African American male teacher in a predominantly Jewish elementary school. But the Lord truly works in mysterious ways—as a young boy being raised by a single mother, I was provided a daily male role model in this enthusiastic teacher, Mr. John Marcelino. Moreover, Mr. Marcelino, who taught every subject with skill and stamina, truly shined in the month of February. February, for several decades has been designated as Black History month in our country, and my African American teacher taught this group of upper middle class Jewish kids about black history from the Civil War to Reconstruction, from segregation to the Civil Rights movement. We learned about and read the works of Fredrick Douglas, George Washington Carver; Visages of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Henry Louis Gates, Thurgood Marshall decorated the classroom. I only now realize that the average fifth grader may not have gotten this kind of an education! But I am so grateful that I did, and I wanted my former teacher to know it. From those mind-expanding lectures in my fifth grade class, to when you could hear a pin drop as the phonograph needle crackled along the surface of the record, and we tried to picture ourselves standing on the National Mall on that March day in 1963, those memories fed my amazement as I watched the unfolding of history before my very eyes this past Tuesday night.

When God spoke to Avram, the transcripts of that conversation are recorded in our parasha this morning, God invited Avram to leave behind not only the physical

domain of his life, but also the intellectual and spiritual confines of his father's house. We don't know much about Avram's father Terach, but the Midrash is quick to point out his idolatrous practices. We don't know much about Ur Kasdim, Avram's home town, but the Midrash instructs us that Avram's awakening to monotheism and the ethical demands of his new faith was so threatening to the local king that he sought to kill Avram in order to silence him. So God says to Avram: *lech lecha, mei-artzecha, umi-moladetcha, u'mibeit avicha, el ha'aretz asher ar'eka*: Go forth from your native land, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you...And so begins the journey of the first Jewish family.

Ramban, Nachmanides, reminds us in his 12<sup>th</sup> Century commentary that at the end of last week's parasha we already learned that Avram had left his father's house. You may recall that the end of parashat Noah says that Terach, Avram, Lot, Sarai all set out together from Ur and traveled toward Canaan, settling temporarily in Haran. Since the Torah does not use language repetitively, Ramban asks, what is there to learn from the instruction to leave his father's house that appears again at the beginning of our parasha? Ramban says God's message to Avram here is "*hitracheik od mibeit avicha*," which means, distance yourself from your father's house. I take this in the ideological rather than the spatial sense. All the assumptions and limitations on the way people thought back in Ur need to be left behind. Part of Avram's call to greatness is to learn to think and imagine the world differently from his ancestors. And here's the kicker, it is by virtue of his willingness to go beyond the boundaries of his ancestral realities, that Avram will become Avraham—that is the father of a great nation...A nation that will bring blessing to kol mishpachot ha'adamah to all the families of the earth. I love how Genesis speaks of humanity as family. Rather than the balkanization of how we view each other today, Genesis imagines a human family with common ancestry and mutual concern. In fact, I believe this is part of the narrative between Jews and blacks as well. Julius Lester, the African American writer and poet who converted to Judaism once said in an interview: "Blacks assume that Jews are white people. And blacks don't understand that most Jews don't think of themselves as white." In an essay by New York University Professor Hasia Diner, she writes that Jews saw themselves as "cultural bridges between the white and black worlds because they understood them both."<sup>1</sup> As people who internalized the narrative of our own slavery, and people who perpetually knew the plight of victimhood, there has been a historic alliance, a historic sense of responsibility that Jews have felt for the plight of blacks. And when a black president coming to power with 78% of the Jewish vote it says to me that beyond the Jeremiah Wrights and the Louis Farrakhans of the world that this visceral connection still exists--And I believe that Barack Obama feels the connection as well. I know many of you have had concerns about Jewish interests and Israel's security in this election. I have felt those concerns as well. We will remain vigilant in our advocacy for these causes, and I believe we will have a president and an administration sophisticated and thoughtful enough to hear us and to be our allies.

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<sup>1</sup> Lester, Julius. Blacks, Jews, and Farrakhan, in *The Jewish Condition, Essays on Contemporary Judaism Honoring Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler*. UAH Press, New York, 1995. Page 55.

I found it fascinating to observe how much my daughters were caught up with this election. On the first day of early voting I took Mia with me to the polls. Although the computerized touch screen was ultra modern and easy as can be, I kind of wished there had been a paper ballot and that long lever that you used to have to pull from one side to another to register your vote. There is something very satisfying and reassuring about pulling the lever and hearing your ballot get punched. Nevertheless, we stepped up to the screen together, and Mia actually touched the screen for me...hopefully I didn't get disqualified for that. I wanted to nurture her interest in voting and democracy, and she was so excited to have "voted" on that day. On Wednesday morning Mia was eager to tell me that she had figured out that she and Sasha Obama are the same age. What I was struck by in the words of my 21<sup>st</sup> century child was her interest in what she, a religious Jew, a rabbi's daughter, in Dallas, Texas had in common with an African American, Christian kid from Chicago, not what she observed to be different...though the differences between them are obvious and numerous. This is the dawning of a new age indeed. In Thursday's edition of the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof ended his column<sup>2</sup> by reflecting on Martin Luther King's speech to the Hawaii State Legislature in 1959, "two years before Mr. Obama was born in Honolulu," where King "declared that the civil rights movement aimed not just to free blacks but 'to free the soul of America.' Mr. King ended his Hawaii speech by quoting a prayer from a preacher who had once been a slave, and it's an apt description of the idea of America today: 'Lord we ain't what we want to be; we ain't what we ought to be; we ain't what we gonna be, but, thank God, we ain't what we was.'"

In recognition of the fact that today, in November of 2008, 'we ain't what we was,' I conclude this *drasha* with the following benediction...Regardless of what we think about Barack Obama's specific policies or positions. Regardless of whether we are Republicans or Democrats...in simple recognition that in America today, 'we ain't what we was,' I offer this prayer. And as I do I ask you to remember those who were once slaves, brutally and forcibly kept as property rather than persons against their will; those who were lynched and hosed right here in America's cities and towns; those who were prevented—by law— from voting and participating in the political process; those who were looked at suspiciously as they shopped in stores or walked along sidewalks in certain neighborhoods; those who had to sit in the back of the bus, drink from different water fountains and use separate bathroom facilities...all right here, in the United States of America. And I ask you to recall the many brave people of all races and creeds—many of them Jews—who worked and struggled and even died to make right these fundamental wrongs so that today in American we can say, 'we ain't what we was:' *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam she'hechyanu, ve'kiyemanu, ve'higiyanu laz'man hazeh*...Praised are You O Lord Our God, who has kept us alive, and given us strength, and enabled us to contemplate our past and look toward our future and say with conviction at this historic moment in our nation, "we ain't what we was," and thank God for that! And let us all say...Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kristof, Nicholas. "The Obama Dividend." *The New York Times*, Thursday, November 6, 2008