



Enlarge Your Tent

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This week, we've been nervously watching the television. Worried. Losing sleep. Some of us have even had indigestion. It feels absolutely interminable, like this will never end. We are not sure we can make it. And then, thank God, the Cubs finally won.

On Thursday morning I saw a new political sign popping up. It says: VOTE for Theo Epstein.

On Wednesday night, of course, Theo Epstein, Cubs President of Baseball Operations, made sports history – again. After 108 years, 7 games, 10 innings, and a rain delay, another famous baseball curse was broken. A team whose failures are so legendary that there are pages and pages of jokes like: “Why are the Chicago Cubs pitchers like orphans? Because they don't know where home is,” finally brought the win home.

Epstein told ESPN back in 2011 about his plans to turn the team around: “When I got to Boston, they hadn't won in 86 years,” he said. “We didn't run from that challenge. We embraced it. We decided to build the best baseball operation that we could.”

Most of what he says about what that looks like is what you'd expect, but one thing stood out. He said they were going “to bring in players who care more about each other.”

That insight, that caring about each other is ultimately what yields success, is one our nation could definitely use today. Our election certainly feels like a curse that needs to be broken.

On Tuesday our country will choose between the most controversial candidates, the least liked and most polarizing, in modern history. Forget caring for each other, supporters of different candidates can't even understand one another.

One side asks: “How can you even consider giving someone who can be baited into losing it on Twitter access to the nuclear codes?” The other replies: “How can you vote for someone who thinks they are above the law?”

Last week I had a long talk with my cousin in Michigan. Armed with a long list of morally abhorrent behavior, outrageous offenses, and just plain offensive actions committed by his candidate, I pleaded with my cousin for over an hour to change his mind. And he pleaded with me for over an hour to change my mind. It was HARD to listen to each other.

At one point my cousin said something that has stuck with me ever since: “What you are afraid our country might become, is what I see it already is. With all my candidate’s significant flaws, I am terrified that a vote for yours is a vote for more of the same.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about that conversation. My cousin is a smart, caring human being. Yet through his lens, my candidate will bring down his world, just as certainly as I believe in my core that his candidate will uproot the very foundations of our nation’s highest ideals.

This isn’t just garden-variety divided. Whoever you are voting for, you likely don’t just hate the other one, you fear the world that will be ushered in if they are the one standing under the confetti on Tuesday night. As the polls show the candidates too close for comfort, all around America today there is tremendous anxiety. Even here, now, many of us feel a sense of foreboding.

The anxiety this election has provoked – on both sides – has become an actual psychological phenomenon with psychologists diagnosing “pre-election anxiety disorder,” even issuing “trigger warnings” for the daily news.

The Atlantic reports about a woman who literally broke out in hives due to election stress. It argues that while “hope” was the watchword of the past two elections, this year’s dominant descriptor is “fear.” At the root of that fear is that we seem to be operating from different sets of facts, seeing each other increasingly not as people with different opinions we can

dialogue with, but dangerous, incomprehensible ideologues in our own echo-chambers where truth seems to be a relative term.

Journalist Deena Winter wrote of her own family's Facebook feud, "I don't want to go home for Thanksgiving this year – for the first time in my life. We are not a family that dreads Thanksgiving. We are not a family who fights. We're a family who loves each other truly, madly, deeply." But, she says, "This election has exposed a huge divide between us: They don't trust journalists like me anymore. And I don't think we can turn back the clock to a time when they did. Not in my family, and not in America."

Is Deena Winter right? It feels like she might be. There's an interesting Pew report that lays out in visual maps the overlap between Democrats and Republicans over time. The data is stark: what was once a large middle ground has been nearly entirely lost.

We are more polarized today than at any time in modern memory, and that means that this anxiety we feel for the future of our nation, whichever side we are on, doesn't go away on November 9th, no matter which candidate wins. Which leads to a crucial question: how do we understand each other in a time when we cannot understand each other?

Rabbi Danny Nevins, Dean of the JTS rabbinical school, wrote this week about our parasha, calling it "the original dystopian tale." Parashat Noah, he points out, contains not one but two dystopias. One is "the consequence of human irresponsibility." The other, a desperate attempt to stem what is perceived as a failing streak by building a "huge skyscraper to make ourselves a name."

The Torah is amazing for its capacity to speak to us in every generation, but seen in these terms, it feels downright prophetic.

Rabbi Nevins speaks of Noah as "far from a perfect hero. He seems distant from others...and does not even attempt to argue with God... He gets right to work on his ark project, immersing himself in the myriad details required to make it float, but fails to convince skeptics

about the dangers or the decisions demanded to avert disaster. In the face of tremendous threats, Noah focuses on technical details, failing to reach the hearts of his potential audience.”

The Tower builders on the other hand, generate tremendous enthusiasm, even working together to accomplish their goal of building ever higher. But, Rabbi Nevins quotes the 17th century biblical commentary, *Keli Yakar*, to say that their focus on “Let us make a name for ourselves,” dips dangerously into a pursuit of power, “not peace and prosperity for all.”

“This yearning for greatness,” Rabbi Nevins writes, “was also their undoing, leading them to precisely the catastrophe they most feared: dispersion, confusion, and lost hegemony.”

The message of the parasha is clear. Seeking the greatness of the tower for its own sake is not enough. Towers, and even arks, only matter because of the values of the people inside and how they are able to translate those values into caring for each other today and in the future.

Theo Epstein’s curse-breaking team is built on a foundational principle of caring for each other. What foundational principle can we employ now to shape not only what happens on November 8th, but what happens November 9th and onward?

Our haftarah this morning says: “Enlarge your tent.” Reach out. Between now and the election, call as many people as you can to talk to them about what they see as their interests in the great American project and share with them your own understanding of what is best for our nation. Resist the urge to talk over each other, lobbing incompatible facts. Listen for common concern, search together for not just opinion but objective facts, reach together for something better for our nation.

If we can do that, perhaps we can begin to revive the promise of our haftarah, “*Ki yamin u’smol tifrotzi*” Right AND Left, you shall go forth.

It might seem now like a miracle beyond achieving, but we Jews have always believed in the power of engaging each other from opposing sides to find a way to move forward together.

After 86 years, the Red Sox curse was broken. After 108 years, the Cubs won the World-Series. Red Sox Nation and Cubbies never gave up hope.

If you're anxious today about the future of our fractured America, you'll never find clearer proof that with tenacity, sustained engagement, and caring for each other, miracles can indeed happen.