



Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

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Like good Jews throughout our land last week, I observed the *halacha* of Christmas. But, of course, because we are Jews, this was no simple matter.

There is much debate in the Jewish world about the proper *halacha* of Christmas. Does Chinese food and a movie on *Erev* Christmas suffice, or does it only count during Christmas Day itself? Can any Asian restaurant fulfill the mitzvah, or must it be *glatt* Chinese? What about take-out? Must it be an actual theatre, or is there a *kula* (leniency) for streaming videos?

These questions and more have been ruled on by the greatest sages of our generation. The answer? *Teku* – we do not yet know which observance is more meritorious than another, just that making special traditions binds us together as a community, brings us joy and gives levity to an otherwise dark season.

This year, between the heartache of the past few weeks and the fiscal and political chaos that looms in the coming New Year, there was suddenly a little oasis.

A warm and lovely mood broke out on the quiet streets of Newton: couples holding hands, smiling strangers, families laughing in the relaxed calm. It was so peaceful, I kept wanting to wish everyone I saw a “*Chag Sameach!*” It turns out I was not alone. As Mike and I were exiting the theatre on Christmas Day, we were greeted by a member of our shul with a warm, hearty, and slightly mischievous, “Merry Christmas!”

Merry Christmas, indeed. The way in which Christmas has been endowed with unique Jewish flavor speaks to the comfort and blessings we have as Jews here in America. Fittingly, it was Steven Spielberg who reminded me of how remarkable that really is in my own choice of Christmas Day movie: Lincoln.

Now I am no Roger Ebert, so I will spare you the movie review. But I did marvel at Spielberg's mastery – to immerse the audience in another time, a time so familiar and yet so completely alien. To experience a world where even Northern abolitionists had a hard time saying out loud that African Americans were human beings too, that the idea of giving them or, God forbid, women, the vote was incendiary – well, although I knew intellectually that just 150 years ago ideas that are anathema now were the prevailing norm, it was completely eye-opening to experience it in film.

That immersive experience of facing a world where an underlying idea, held firm and dear, creates a massive chasm between who Americans were then and who we are today gave me an answer to a problem that has been bothering me for quite some time.

You see, here we are, standing at the threshold of a New Year, and I've been troubled by a sense of intractability. Next week will be 2013, and, on the horizon, the forecast is looking pretty dim. The fiscal cliff, recession, gun violence perpetrating unimaginable horrors, job loss, catastrophic weather in greater frequency and magnitude than ever seen in modern history, the boomerang generation looking toward a bleak future here at home...

Add to that all the troubles overseas, and, if you were a weatherman projecting for 2013, the forecast would be "dark and stormy."

And in the face of such looming challenges, we are gridlocked. Stuck. A cover story for the New York Times online yesterday vividly captured this with its opening words: "Senators bid hasty goodbyes to families...and one by one returned to the Capitol on Thursday to begin the business of doing nothing in particular."

The article went on to explain that, although there is great will, there is also great division, and so achieving traction is nearly impossible. It's not just senators who are

rolling up their sleeves to find that deeply held competing narratives frustrate forward movement.

If all politics is personal, it's true for the intractable issues in our personal lives too. The relationship we just can't seem to change no matter how many times or from how many angles we approach it. The habit we just can't break. The chains that bind us to life as it is rather than life as we wish it could be.

All that was on my mind as I entered the movie theatre on Christmas day. But as I watched the stark racism playing out on the scene and President Lincoln's will to triumph over it using any means necessary, I was reminded of another forecast. It is the one made in our Torah portion this morning.

We are at the end of a book, the end of a story. How does the book of Genesis, which started in such optimism and hope, end? The final words are "Joseph died...and was placed in a coffin in Egypt."

By anyone's measure a bleak conclusion, but it is made even more poignant by the previous verse, where Joseph has made his brothers swear to "carry my bones from here."

Of course, the brothers do not have the power Joseph had, and so they are stuck. They know the vision, they know the promise, but they cannot see themselves solving the intractable problem of oppression in Egypt. And so they accept their lot as bit players in a cosmic drama and we close the book of Genesis perched precariously between promise and peril – Joseph's body, and with it, metaphorically, the entire Jewish people, in a coffin in *Mitzrayim*.

Mitzrayim literally translated means Egypt, and we know what happens there. As this book closes, we know the forecast for the next one: slavery, oppression, bloodshed, hardship, heartache. Metaphorically, *Mitzrayim* also means "narrow place," and what

more narrow place could there be than looking ahead on the cusp of the future to hundreds of years of slavery?

But before we know it, we will be surprised by the unexpected. Turn the page and we will find the birth of a child who will change the unchangeable. Moses.

What is fascinating to me about Moses is that his story is not possible in a world of peacefulness and harmony. Without the injustice of slavery, without a world divided, he would not have needed to push himself to try and fail, to doubt and learn to believe in himself, to, despite his innate shyness and stutter, find words of poetry and inspiration that echo through eternity.

In a world of peace and tranquility, there is no need for a hero. It is only in a world of pain and moral challenge, of gridlock and division, that Moses becomes MOSES, that Lincoln becomes LINCOLN.

A broken world means there is room for a hero – for many heroes – to rise. And so the most important question to be asking ourselves right now, on the cusp of 2013, is this: Can we break free from the passivity of Joseph's brothers and achieve the traction of Moses? Can we see ourselves – small, limited, stuck though we might be – as called to follow in Moses' footsteps as change agents for our world?

Will we dare tackle the great moral challenges in our time that we, like Moses before us, like Lincoln, must rise to fight? Amidst a dim and depressing world, will we stay in *Mitzrayim*, stuck in the narrow straits, or will we lead ourselves and others out?

Malala Yousefazi, shot by Taliban zealots for the crime of going to school, was supposed to be intimidated, supposed to believe that she was too small to change against the vast forces of tradition.

Instead, from her hospital bed in London, she called a classmate, Ayesha Mir, whose family had been threatened for speaking out. “You need to stay strong,” Malala told Ayesha. “You cannot give up.” The next day, an inspired Ayesha returned to school. Time magazine named Malala a person of the year for 2012, lauding her for “passing her courage on to others.”

Moses and Lincoln changed the world for the better. Malala reminds us today of a teaching Joseph’s brothers never knew: It takes not position, or power, but only courage to change our world.

As the conclusion of the book of Genesis teaches us this morning, it is precisely when we are stuck in *Mitzrayim*, when we feel we cannot move, that we begin to find the seeds of redemption. Sometimes the battles are long and drawn out, but sometimes, if we have the will, we blink and we’re standing in a whole new world.

Who would have dared hope that not only would American slavery be ended but that the very idea of imagining another human being as mere property would be unthinkable? Who would have imagined that we would have an African American President sitting in Lincoln’s chair? Who would have ever dreamed, through the blood-drenched Inquisition and pogroms, that one day there would be *hilchot* Christmas?

Today, who could imagine a world of economic stability? Of safety in schools, global equality, and peace in war-torn nations? Who? Perhaps it will be you.