

A MIRACULOUS ELECTION
BY RABBI MICHAEL LOTKER

Well it was quite an election night. For one thing it actually ended that night – unlike the last two presidential races that took quite a bit longer to resolve. No, for this race there was no doubt. I think that was part of the magic of the evening. We all knew, at least we were pretty sure, that what was to happen was simultaneously: impossible and virtually assured, a miracle and inevitable, and history making and a little bit frightening

Yes, it was indeed one of those moments where, years from today, we just may remember where we were when it happened – Tuesday night, November 4th, 8PM our time, when the polls closed in California and the networks were free to declare that Barack Hussein Obama, a young man of mixed African-Kenyan-Black and American-Kansas-Caucasian ancestry, a Christian with Muslim roots, became the first black person to be elected leader of any white nation in history.

Of course his supporters cheered and his opponents' champions were disappointed. But there was more. There were tears of joy and beaming smiles of pride from both sides of the political divide. Emotions that we found hard to understand were unleashed. As one of my congregants asked me, "Rabbi, why was I crying with this news?" Why indeed.

As you should know by now, I am not public with my political preferences—at least not from the pulpit. I keep them to myself for many reasons: in order to safeguard the tax exempt status of Temple Ner Ami, because I don't consider myself particularly knowledgeable or insightful when it comes to politics, and most importantly because I know that you have many sources of political advice and expertise (and therefore don't need mine) but few people talking to you about God and Judaism. Therefore it's important for me to stress that the point of this article is not meant to be political at all.

I believe that this election means far more than a simple victory for one side or the other. I believe that this election gives us permission, even evidence that hoping for miracles is not an exercise in futility. The verses of Torah that we read the week of the election, from *Parashat Lech L'cha*, (Genesis 12:1 – 17:26) spelled out God's instruction (the Hebrew word *Torah* means "instruction") and promise to Abraham. "Abram," God says (Abram will be instructed to change his name to Abraham later in the Torah), "you must go forth on a journey—a divine mission—leaving your father's home. You will not see the final success of this journey," he is told. "Indeed your children will be enslaved and oppressed in a land not theirs for four hundred years. But in the end, your seed will see success and the families of the earth will bless themselves by you." Who could have guessed that this outsider, this seemingly ordinary man, would at the age of 99 have a child with his 90-year-old wife and, on behalf of humanity, enter into a divine covenant.

I made a purchase the day after election day in an antique store. It was a cast iron sign which reads "Public Swimming Pool: White Only – Selma Alabama, 14 July 1931." I know that many of our congregants were alive when this humiliating sign was affixed to its gate. I myself remember scenes from my teens – images of black men, women, the elderly and young, beaten, slammed with fire hose spray, attacked by police dogs for daring to suggest that they should be able to vote, able to sit anywhere in a bus, able to use any water fountain and any bathroom they pleased. This only a hundred or so years after black slaves were treated like cordwood as they were packaged and shipped from their homes to their owners. It was less than 50 years ago that it took federal troops to register a few young black men and women as students at Universities in Alabama and Mississippi. And only a few decades ago, marriage

between blacks and whites, indeed the marriage between our President-elect's parents, was illegal in at least 19 states.

Who could have possibly predicted that only a generation or two later Barack Obama would become the freely elected leader of the United States of America by many of those whose grandparents would have questioned his very humanity.

So when people tell me that there will never be peace in the Middle East, that hatred between Jew and Arab, other diseases, that we must learn to live with the shortcomings of the world, I will take out this sign and remember that it only took some 50 or 60 years after segregation and oppression to election night elation and Obama. I will also remember similar, perhaps more private moments like this—being served a kosher meal on Lufthansa Airlines, watching the Presidents of Israel and Germany walk hand in hand under an armed Israeli honor guard onto the floor of the Israeli Knesset.

The message of this election is that we must never confuse great and difficult challenges with impossibilities. The Talmud teaches us that it is not up to us to do everything in completing the tasks that face us—even Abraham—even Moses would not see the final end of the Jewish journey. But, more importantly, that we are not free to do nothing. God works miracles not through perfect leaders working magic but through ordinary people who turn out to be able to accomplish extraordinary things: people named Abraham, people named Sarah, people named Moses and even people name Barack (Arabic for *Baruch* – blessed one).

One of my colleagues heard a young man put it this way: Rosa (Rosa Parks) rode so Martin (Martin Luther King, Jr.) could march, Martin marched so Barack could run, and Barack ran so we could fly. Miracles can and do happen