

Beth Chayim Chadashim
Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Shabbat Vayera

Nov. 17, 2000

A full week of worries and of losses. The presidential campaigns seem to continue despite the fact that the election was over a week ago. No matter who ends up in the White House (and I think many of us wish it was Martin Sheen's character, President Bartlett, from "The West Wing"), what seems clear is that the majority of citizens in this country don't care that much who is president - not between these two candidates anyway. Which says, what? We don't care? We don't like either of them? We're losing faith in our political system - did we have any?

In truth, the election, or lack thereof, has taken a back seat for me lately. How quickly did you lose interest in the reports? I was glued to the news for the first 48 hours. I am impressed, feel grateful, to be reminded or assured that something like this, as surprising as it is, proves a couple of important things beside the general apathy of our citizenship. One, it reminds or assures us that this country is a stable one - no threats of revolution or coup here, no threat to our constitution or to the orderly running of the country. Second, our votes do count! Who knew? A couple of us were saying last night that if only we could hold a new election right now with the same candidates, a whole lot more people would probably vote! I would be interested to know what the "American people" really do think - who they would vote for now that we know our votes count.

But as I said, for now, without any conclusions forthcoming on who will be our next president, I'm losing interest up against the sad news of the week: the death last weekend of Leah Rabin, widow of Yitzhak Rabin, the assassinated, peace-making prime minister of Israel, and closer to home, the death Tuesday night of Rabbi Alexander Schindler, dear friend to BCC. I've been crying all week. I loved him very much. Lots of us remember Rabbi Schindler fondly from his visit with us in March of 1998, in the midst of our year-long celebration of our 25th anniversary. As President of the UAHC — the Reform Movement's organization of congregations — for over 20 years, Rabbi Schindler was an important figure in the history of gay and lesbian inclusion in Reform Judaism in general, and specifically of getting this congregation accepted as the first g/l congregation of any religion to be accepted into a mainstream religious organization. BCC was able to be pathbreaking because Rabbi Schindler and others too - Rabbi Erv Herman to name the primary one — because they helped clear the path.

I was studying the week's Torah portion this past Wednesday when I heard the news of the death of Rabbi Alexander Schindler. I was reading the passage in which God decides to tell Abraham of the plans for Sodom and Gomorah, and where Abraham argues with God about those plans: "G-d says, 'Shall I cover up from Abraham what I am about to do? . . . Indeed, I have known him, in order that he may charge his children and household after him: that they shall keep the way of G-d, to do what is just and right . . .'" So God revealed the plans to Abraham and Abraham, still standing there before God, as the text says, came close (va-yigash) and said, 'Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? . . . Far be it from you to do a thing like this . . . will not the judge of all the earth judge justly?' [Genesis 18:22-25] There is a tradition in Judaism known as ethical wills. These are documents Jews leave for their children that list not the distribution of their material wealth after they've died, but rather that articulate their values and morals - the ethics they would pass on to their children. [By the way, if you're interested in these documents or in writing one, Devorah Servi will be

teaching about them here at BCC in January.] Some say the idea of an ethical will comes from this passage in Genesis when G-d says, "In order that Abraham may charge his children and household after him: so that they shall keep the way of G-d, to do what is right and just . . ." Whatever it is that we charge our children with, however we teach them what is right and just, that is our ethical will.

In fact, some say that the ethical wills of both God and Abraham are in this passage: God's ethical will to Abraham and his descendants is: teach one another "to do what is right and just. . ." And Abraham's ethical will is his chutzpah - his willingness to argue with God, to stand in God's presence, even boldly to step forward, for what he believes is right and just: "Far be it from You to do a thing like this . . ." Don't forget he's speaking to God here! "Will not the judge of all the earth judge justly?" [Genesis 18:22-25] If it's true that this passage gives us the ethical will of both God and Abraham, I think it's also true that Rabbi Alexander Schindler was a direct inheritor of their charges to us, their ethical wills.

He is a contemporary example of the power of standing up for what one believes, even in the face of adversity. Of standing up not only for yourself, as a Reform Jew in a Jewish world not always so appreciative of Reform Judaism - but also of standing up for others who are not you, as Rabbi Schindler and so many others did over 25 years ago with BCC and many times since then, taking on causes not because they have an intimate investment in them, but because it is right, and because they care about the hearts and the lives of people. Abraham first, and Rabbi Schindler later, understood - and teach us — that Judaism, at its core, sometimes calls upon us to change rather than cling to what once was, to draw nearer to one another rather than push each other away, and, always to seek ways to draw nearer to God. And isn't it amazing how they drew nearer to God and to other Jews? So boldly - Abraham steps forward to argue with God when he felt injustice was hovering nearby. And Alex Schindler - only a year into his tenure as UAHC President - long before he was acknowledged as the leader he later became - stood up for us, boldly took a step forward toward more influential Reform rabbis and said, "shall not the inheritors of Reform Judaism act justly?"

I was remembering earlier today what Rabbi Schindler said to us when he first came to the bima that night of our 25th anniversary celebration. We'd been introducing and introducing him - speaker after speaker singing his praises - and he got up and said "thank you for your warm words of praises, after an introduction like that, I can't wait to hear what I have to say!" That comment, by the way, didn't make it into the printed text of the speech (which is available here in case some of you lost your original copies). But here is a short excerpt of what he had to say that night, well worth waiting for, well worth hearing. A powerful reprimand to the Jews who don't accept us, and a warm embrace from him of us. He said: "It is the rest of the Jewish community which loses out when it withholds its full solidarity, by failing to make your simcha our simcha, by failing to recognize the triangle that lies within the Star of David, by failing to cross the boundaries of Otherness, the fringed boundaries [LISA: HOLD UP YOUR TZITZIT] the fringed boundaries at which compassion gives way to identification."

We have lost a dear friend, but we'll never lose his legacy, his ethical will, which charges us to be what he was, what Abraham was, which charges us to stand up for justice and for Judaism, for ourselves and for each other, whenever injustice or misunderstanding, prejudice or hatred, try to wend their way into our lives or the lives of the ones we love. God said, "shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" and the implication is that God answers the question, no, Abraham must be told and he must respond, for I have chosen Abraham to teach his children and those who follow after him how to keep the way of G-d, how "to do what is just and right. . ." [Gen. 18:19].

May the memory Rabbi Alexander Schindler, his legacy of doing what is just and right, always be for

a blessing in our lives.
Shabbat Shalom

This week, as we recite kaddish and remember Leah Rabin and Rabbi Alexander Schindler. I recall the words of a song Fran sometimes sings to us: Before Kaddish:

They are falling all around me
The strongest leaves of my tree.

Every paper brings the news that
The teachers of my song, are movin' on.

Death comes and rests so heavy.....
Your face I'll never see, I'll never see you anymore.

But you're not really going to leave me.
It is your path I walk,
It is your load I take on,
It's the record you set that makes me go on,
It is your air I breathe,
It's your strength that helps me to stand,

You're not really, you're not really going to leave me.