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"TOP HAT"

In the third grade I fell in love with Abraham Lincoln. I don't remember why exactly. I read a pamphlet-sized children's biography about him that my third grade teacher, Kathryn Ashley (with whom I also fell in love that year, come to think of it), had in a little book collection for us to browse through on the counter in our classroom. Then I proceeded to read every biography or storybook about Lincoln in our grade school library (there were a lot of them). I dressed like him for Halloween & Purim (I did *enjoy* being in a top hat and tails – and I still do [put on my top hat]). I memorized the Gettysburg address ... "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." I kept a scrapbook about him; at one time I was the youngest member of the Abraham Lincoln Historical Society; my father regularly took me to the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago [when its founder, Ralph Newman still owned it] to acquire yet another book about Lincoln, which more often than not we both read (even though my father was more of a George Washington fan). When I was in third grade, we took a family trip to Washington, D.C. I remember the White House and the Lincoln Memorial and Ford Theatre and very little else (oh yes, the Spirit of St. Louis). In my little girl's bedroom I had not only a glass menagerie and a bed overflowing with stuffed animals, I also had drawings and photographs of Abraham Lincoln, and quotes from him pinned to my bulletin board: "with malice toward none, with charity for all..." And more than once my father took me to Springfield, Illinois where we got to do the tourist thing about Lincoln – hitting all of the sites, even the very minor ones. Years later, when I "met" Lincoln at Disneyland [opened in 1966, but I went in 1971 or so], I was mesmerized and stayed there for over an hour while my friends went on without me.

But why, exactly, was I so passionate about him? I'm not sure. After Lincoln died, a cast was made of his face and hands – you've probably seen copies of these likenesses. According to my father, Abraham Lincoln's face and hands looked exactly like my grandfather's face and hands, my father's father, who died when I was three, and who I didn't remember. Maybe that's why, as I read more and more about Lincoln, and tried – at age 11 or so to write my own book about him (I sent my first chapter to Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg to see

what he thought – not much apparently – never heard from him) -- I also developed the theory that Lincoln was really Jewish – at heart anyway. I loved the way he talked about God. I felt comfortable with it – it didn't favor a Christian view. Like his famous comment, "[When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion.](#)" **"Trusting in [God] who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well."** [Lincoln's Farewell Address at the Great Western Depot in Springfield, Illinois, February 11, 1861.] Those sound pretty Jewish, don't you think?

Now I come to find out that some historians actually do think he descended from Secret Jews, but that's not why I bring him up tonight.

There's a kind of renaissance of interest in Lincoln lately – perhaps you've noticed it, or perhaps it takes someone like me who already has an ear fine tuned to hear his name, and folks like some of you to give me some of the books about him.

One of the books given to me by one of you a couple of years ago is a small pamphlet, about the size of that first Lincoln book I read back in the third grade. This one is published by the Skirball Cultural Center and is called: "Lincoln and the Jews: 'The Last Best Hope of Earth.'" That subtitle, by the way, is what Lincoln called an America without slavery.¹

In this little book we are told two main things that Lincoln did for the Jews. One was that he made it possible for Rabbis to become chaplains during the Civil War. He did this at the request of some rabbis and some Jewish soldiers, and he did it by removing the word "Christian" in a federal law about military chaplains requiring them to be "regularly ordained ministers of some Christian denomination." Once the law read, "regularly ordained ministers of some denomination," then Abraham Lincoln proceeded to appoint the first Jewish chaplain in American military history. [Harold Holzer, "Lincoln and the Jews: 'The Last Best Hope of Earth,'" p.11, Skirball Cultural Center]

The second remarkable thing that Lincoln did for the Jews during the Civil War was to countermand an order given by his most indispensable General, Ulysses S. Grant. Grant, in an act of either bold anti-Semitism, or just blind ignorance, issued his infamous General Order Number 11, expelling and banishing, under threat of imprisonment, Jewish traders (and Jews in general) from the territories over which he had control. Not surprisingly, an order such as this from the North's most important military general had serious repercussions: the Jewish residents of Paducah, Kentucky – men, women, and children – were expelled (I don't know details). Jews from the North came directly to Lincoln to protest, and he promptly rescinded Grant's Order - even at the risk of alienating his much needed general. [ibid, p.12-13]

Lincoln comes from a long and worthy line of United States presidents and leaders who spoke easily about God, but did not assume that the U.S. was God's favored nation. Perhaps especially because he presided over a *civil* war, Lincoln would not claim God favored one side over the other (although he hinted at it). The view he expressed in his famous second inaugural address sums up his approach. Said by some to be the finest inaugural address ever given, Lincoln spoke in it of the North and the South, saying: "Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His [God's] aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

¹ [In ***giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free -- honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just -- a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.*** [Annual Presidential Message to Congress Concluding Remarks

Washington, D.C. December 1, 1862]

I'm sure you know by now that my intent in bringing up some of the heroes of our nation and how they talked about God in public life is because our nation is currently threatened by a religious right that is attempting to re-write our nation's history, attempting to put our founding fathers, along with Lincoln and others, into a category in which they do not rightfully belong.

And we, you and I, as religious people with a different point of view from theirs, owe it to ourselves and our country to give voice to our different view, and to do so with solid facts on our side as well. We owe it to ourselves and our country to give voice now, and continually.

We've been hearing more and more lately about various groups that are seeking to put God, and especially Christianity, "back" into government, claiming that our nation's founders wanted God there all along. The most succinct and interesting presentation of the two sides to this story that I have found came last summer in a segment of the public radio program "This American Life," a program I highly recommend anyway, but encourage you to go to its website to look for the edition called "Godless America."

The battle is laid out quite clearly. And factually *there is* a right and a wrong. The people around today who are trying to move God into public life in all sorts of ways (remember, God didn't make it into the pledge of allegiance until the 1950s when the Red Scare – the godless communists came along) will tell you that what they want is exactly what our nation's founders wanted. But scholars who study the period, like Cornell University scholars Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore in their book, The Godless Constitution, tell us that today's Christian organizations like the "Wallbuilders," who would have us believe the writers of our constitution wanted God in there are exactly *wrong*. Prof. Kramnick points out the beauty of the facts here – the *Wallbuilders* ARE correct that many of the founding fathers were Christian and did certainly believe in God, but as he and Moore write in their book:

"the nation's founders, both in writing the Constitution and in defending it in the ratification debates, sought to separate the operations of government from any claim that human beings can know and follow divine direction in reaching policy decisions. They did this despite their enormous respect for religion, their faith in divinely endowed human rights, and their belief that democracy benefited from a moral citizenry who believed in God." [p. 1-2 from The Godless Constitution by Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore of Cornell university Norton Press, revised 2005, this is copied from 1996 revision].²

It may not surprise any of us to know that the same sort of interpreting of natural disaster and war as the wrath of God that we are experiencing today, also went on at various other times in our history. When the U.S. found itself in a snarl of one sort or another, it was easy to find prominent leaders – religious and political – who blamed the difficulties on God's wrath for being left out of the Constitution! [Kramnick gives examples in the radio interview, *ibid.* such as: the President of Yale in 1812 blamed the attack on Washington, D.C. on this; Civil War was blamed *not* on God's distress over slavery, but on God's distress at having been left out of the U.S. Constitution (Lincoln would have nothing to do with these people, but it was at this time they were tossed the bone of putting "in God we trust" on our money.)

Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth not only on Good Friday, but also on the Shabbat of Passover in 1865. Seders were dedicated to his memory, and for the first time in the history of Congregation Shearith Israel in NYC, Kaddish was recited for a non-Jew. In many synagogues during that Passover week, Passover melodies were set aside and Yom Kippur prayers recited instead. I couldn't find any information on which prayers were recited, but I like to think it was *kol nidre*, with its accompanying and comforting afterword of forgiveness.

² One more point that Kramnick stresses is how touch and go the ratification of the Constitution was among the states, and the threatened defeat from state to state had almost always to do with the absence of God in the Constitution. It's true, he says, "Most of the founders were believers, who often talked about the presence of God and morality in public life. [That] they were believers makes it all the more profound that these people believed in God, but wanted to keep religion out of government completely." [from radio interview "Godless America" on "This American Life" June 2005]

Do you remember how the *Kol nidre* formula itself is followed by some verses of Torah in which Moses asks God to forgive the whole community of Israel, and God agrees to do so, saying: “*Salachti kidvarechkha*.” I forgive, as you ask.”

Kol Nidre's afterword comes from the Book of Numbers [chapters 14 and 15], during the story of the 12 scouts being sent into the Promised Land, 10 of whom come back with warnings so intimidating that they cause all of Israel to panic. God hates when that happens, hates it that these Israelites, fresh from such miracles as the parting of the Sea, and the giving of manna from heaven, can't get behind the two faithful spies – Joshua and Caleb – who say, “don't worry, it's going to be great over there.”

The midrash about this passage reminds us that Moses went up the mountain for the first set of tablets on the holy day of Shavuot, broke them 40 days later on the 17th of Tammuz when he saw the Golden Calf, begged God's forgiveness for 40 days for the people, then went back up the mountain on the first of the month of Elul, returning 40 days after that – *on Yom Kippur* -- carrying the second set of tablets and reciting God's comforting words: *salakhti k'dvarekha* – “I have forgiven, as you have asked.” [based on Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's derash in Reconstructionist Mahzor, p. 696]. Thus the second set of tablets – second set of tablets of the LAW comes to us with the possibility, and the necessity of *teshuvah*, of repentance and return and forgiveness already built-in, present, available to us. On Yom Kippur more than any other time of the year, God tempers justice with mercy. And we learn that right in the first few minutes of the holy day, as *Kol Nidre* is recited.

To be a Jew, to be a good human being in this scheme of things, one must be willing to change, to grow, to acknowledge our wrongdoings, to right them as best we can, and then to move to what is next – not to our next mistakes (though those will come), but to our next accomplishments. Yes, much of the focus of this day is personal, we do need to take time to reflect on our individual wrongdoings, to make our personal accountings of our own actions. And yet, we shouldn't do that by forgoing or forgetting the communal nature of this day. The tradition of the day is importantly NOT to go off alone, and not even just to pray by ourselves in community, but to offer our prayers in the 1st person plural: this is what we have done, this is why we are sorry, this is how we must change, and at the end of the day, this is what we can do next to help repair the world.

And that is why I'm coming to us tonight with these requests and reminders and these examples from our nation's history of some things we need to do together. When Jews saw their rights and the rights of others threatened by General Grant, or by the first government of the United States, they spoke up. George Washington is properly famous for having said to the members of the first synagogue in the United States: “...happily the Government of the United States, ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...” [1790, Washington's letter of reply to the Jewish congregation of New Port, RI] Few people remember or even learn that Washington was quoting back to them the words their own congregation's warden, Moishe Seixas had written in his letter to Washington. He put the words in Washington's mouth, but gladly so, for President Washington knew what to do with those words (and so do generations of Jewish historians who keep those words alive today), just as Lincoln knew what to do with the requests put to him by the Jewish community when General Grant threatened their well-being as a people.

We need to do that too. We need to speak up, speak out. We must not fear speaking truth to power; we need to lobby our politicians and to join with our religious allies, and our political allies, and our families and friends and neighbors and acquaintances. Our rights and the rights of others are being threatened every day in far too many ways. On matters of marriage equality, on unjust wars, on wrong-headed propositions brought to us in the form of expensive special elections, on doctrinaire Supreme Court appointments, and homeland security efforts that violate the individual rights of people who have not even been charged with crimes. And perhaps most scary of all, we are being threatened by people who truly believe they speak for God, and who, in so doing, would not just put laws in place that deny us rights, but would change the constitutions of states – including California - and of this country in ways that set in stone our *loss* of rights. And worst of all, they will tell us all the while that they are doing all this in the name of God, and in the name of the likes of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, all of whom we know would be appalled – *appalled* - by the ideas, let alone by being aligned with such causes. I'm *not* naïve about my human heroes – I well know that they are human and flawed. And I'm not naïve about God either – I wrestle with God

often enough. And I also know that I am not willing to let my heroes or God be hijacked. And I don't want you to let them be either. We can't let them. We can't give up our authority, our rights, our place in the world; we can't slink back to closets or to ghettos.

As we join together to continue our own work to initiate and pass legislation, to seek judicial precedents, and to turn around gubernatorial and presidential vetoes, to waylay constitutional amendments, to re-direct priorities, we need to keep educating ourselves and each other, and we need to encourage and energize one another. We need to know what the history of our nation, and the history of Jews in our nation, urge us to do. The work is hard; the work is personal; and each time we convince someone to take another look, make a different choice, vote a different way, we do so knowing this is part of why we are here, this is part of tikkun olam. This is what we can do to help make this congregation, this city, this state, this democracy, this world, more the places in which we would choose to live, places in which we can live freely.

Just because I can't resist, I'm going to read you the end of Abraham Lincoln's 2nd inaugural – I invite you to recite it with me. And the real reason to read it now? It still fits – it is still – or perhaps better to say it is, sadly, *again* -- part of our assignment and part of our calling as dwellers in this land:

[placed the top hat on the reader's table]

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

G'mar chatimah tova – may we each, and all of us together, be sealed for good in the books of our lives.