

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*Hospitality at the White House ... and in our hearts*

This morning I am going to do something that the *New York Times* seems to be unable to do: I am going to say something nice about President George Bush.

The truth of the matter is, the *New York Times* is not alone; most people's opinion of George Bush is very low. Indeed, it was not just Democrats who ran against him; it seemed as if Republicans ran away from him. And everyone is entitled to their opinion ... even the *New York Times*. During much of the Bush presidency, the *New York Times* editorial pages have been filled with one editorial after another, one columnist after another, one opinion writer after another, attacking the policies of George Bush. And yes, it must be said: a newspaper is also entitled to its opinion. That's why newspapers have editorial pages! But newspapers are not supposed to allow their opinion to creep into the pages of the newspaper that do just what it is supposed to do: give the news. And one would expect a newspaper as illustrious as the *New York Times* – the newspaper that is considered “the paper of record” – to keep its opinions on the editorial pages and out of the news. But the *New York Times* seems incapable of doing that. A perfect example was an article that ran this Monday in anticipation of President-elect Obama and his wife coming to the White House for their first official visit. What would the visit be like? After all, Obama and Bush have had some harsh words to say about each other. Mr. Obama once declared: “The world is going to breathe a sigh of relief” when President Bush steps down. Mr. Bush, on the other hand, is quoted as telling aides that he felt Hilary Clinton was more qualified than Sen. Obama to be President.

Of course this was not the first time a President-elect comes to meet the man he would be replacing in the White House; not the first time that two men in this position who had spoken ill of each other had to meet. And some of these meetings have been better than others. It is told that Jimmy Carter was disappointed when newly-elected Ronald Reagan first came to the White House. He felt that Mr. Reagan wasn't really paying attention to what he had to say. And when Mr. Bush himself first came to the White House to meet with Bill Clinton, Clinton made him wait 10 minutes, and that didn't sit well with the always punctual George Bush.

So, what would this meeting of Obama and Bush at the White House be like? That was the subject of a news article in this Monday's *New York Times*. Now, despite the fact that most everyone agrees that George Bush's statement after Barack Obama was elected was one of the most gracious and cordial of all Presidents about their replacement; and despite the fact that Mr. Obama, when attending a White House reception just three years ago, after shaking Mr. Bush's hand ... Mr. Bush had his hand spritzed with some hand sanitizer. But being the gracious host, Bush offered a spritz to

Mr. Obama, which he accepted; a meeting – according to Mr. Obama’s own recollection – that had Mr. Bush take him aside and say, “You’ve got a bright future, very bright ... everybody will be waiting for you to slip, know what I mean? So watch yourself.” ... Despite all that, the *New York Times*’ story on the meeting that was to take place that day carried the headline: “OBAMA WILL VISIT BUSH, WATCHING OUT FOR TACKS ON CHAIRS IN OVAL OFFICE.” Now I ask you: is that nice? Is that the news? Is that fair? There is only one word I can think of to describe that headline ... and the word is “tacky!”

As it turns out, by every account the meeting went well. The Bushes’ were extremely hospitable in welcoming the Obamas and giving them a personal tour. And that should not have come as a surprise because Mr. Bush reads the Bible, and I guess he knows the rabbinic commentary on the incident that took place in the first verse of this morning’s Torah portion.

Our Torah portion this morning begins with Abraham communicating with God, “*Vayera elav Hashem b’eloni mamreh v’hu yoshev pesach ha-ohel k’chom hayom* – and God appeared before Abraham by the plains of Mamre, as Abraham sat in front of his tent in the heat of the day.” According to our tradition, God had appeared to Abraham to pay a sick call, so to speak, as Abraham was recuperating from his circumcision. So here is Abraham literally talking to God, but then suddenly on the horizon, “*Vayisah enaiv vayar v’hinai shelosho anoshim nitzovim elav* – he lifted up his eyes and looked and lo – three men were coming toward him.” Who were these three men? They were angels. But Abraham didn’t know that. To him they were just three men; travelers, homeless, who knows? All he knows is that these are people who are in need of food and water.

Now picture the scene, Abraham was in the middle of the most important meeting imaginable for any human being. He was involved in an encounter with his Creator, and here are three people in need . . . what is he to do? Abraham here is confronting the ultimate religious question: which takes precedence – do I take care of God, or do I take care of man? Which is more important?

Abraham, the man of religion, the founder of our religion, does not hesitate with his response. “*Vayartz likrasom mipesach ha-ohel vayishtachvu artzah* – and he ran to meet the three strangers in front of his tent and bowed down to the earth” and tells them: sit down, relax, let me give you something to drink, something to eat. Imagine, Abraham left God to serve man! And our Sages in the Talmud tell us that from this incident we learn an all important principle of Judaism: “*Gedolah hachnosas orchim yosir mikabalas p’nai ha-Shechinah* – greater is showing hospitality to your fellow man than even receiving the Divine Presence.”

Yes, hospitality is important ... very important. It takes precedence even over God. In fact, we are told that Abraham brought people closer to God by exhibiting proper hospitality. In the Biblical verse: “*Vayita Avrohom eshel b’ber sheva* – and Abraham planted an *eshel* tree in *Ber Sheva*” ... our sages read the three letters of “*eshel*” as representing “*achilah*” – food, “*sh’siya*” – drink, and “*lina*” – lodging. Abraham

opened his home and his heart to these people, who were so impressed by his behavior that they also drew closer to his God.

Juxtapose this with what comes later in our Torah portion ... the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why were they destroyed? While many commentators speak of the sexual depravity which took place in these cities, the sages in the Talmud lay the blame on the inhospitality of the inhabitants of the city.

So, George Bush was very much in keeping with Jewish tradition in the warm welcome he gave this week to Sen. Obama. But it is a tradition that we Jews oftentimes fail to live up to. You see, hospitality begins at home, but it doesn't end there. Stores like Wal-Mart and Home Depot have greeters at their entrances to make customers feel welcome. Synagogues like our own now have greeters in the lobby to help people find their way. All too often people come to synagogues like ours and no one ever says "hello" to them. We are looking for greeter volunteers, but I tell you now: you have to be nice!

But, being hospitable extends beyond the home and beyond stores and synagogues. There are manifestations of it on the street as well. You know, rabbinical school really does not prepare one for the rabbinate. You learn everything in theory, but not in practice. I spent more than a year studying all the laws of what makes a chicken or cow kosher ... but in my forty years in the rabbinate, no one has ever brought me a chicken or cow. But here is a question that is not covered in rabbinical school, but one that every Orthodox rabbi confronts in the rabbinate: What do you do when you are walking to shul on Shabbos or a Yom Tov and someone drives past and stops to wish you a good Shabbos? How do you respond? Do you turn away so as not to seemingly give approval to a Sabbath violation? Or do you answer back so as not to seem insulting? Which would make a more important religious statement? The first time I confronted this question, I immediately thought of the story of two rabbis walking through their village in Eastern Europe. It was late in the day and they came upon a Jew who was fixing the broken axle of his wagon. At the same time, the Jew realized that the time for Mincha had come, and so while fixing the axle he started to daven ... to which one rabbi said, "What a *paskudnyak!* Look, while he is praying to God he is fixing his axle." While the other rabbi proclaimed, "Look what a *sheiner Yid* ... while he's fixing his axle, he is praying to God." To which I say: what wonderful Jews we have! Even on their way to shopping or the country club, they take the time to pause and wish their fellow Jew a good Shabbos. And I wish it to them in return! I am told – but I have never been there so I can't say for sure – that there are times on Shabbos morning on Park Heights Ave. where Jews walking to shul won't acknowledge the presence, or give a greeting, to someone who obviously is not going to shul. Abraham opened his home to three strangers ... to him all they were, were Arabs. If he could open his home to them, can we not – as his descendants – open our hearts to our fellow Jews?

And not just to them, but to their opinions as well. I've mentioned how disappointed I was in the reaction of many Jews – Republicans and Democrats – during this election campaign. There was a case to be made for voting Republican. There was a

case to be made for voting Democratic. But there was no case to be made, as some Jews did, that Barack Obama was a Muslim ... or that the election of Barack Obama would mean the destruction of Israel. There was nothing in his record to make one think this. And there was no case to be made for the claims of some that the election of Sarah Palin would lead to the banning of abortion or the destruction of the separation of Church and State when her record as a Mayor and Governor in Alaska clearly indicated otherwise. We don't have to agree with each other's opinions but at the same time, we don't have to demonize each other's opinions. We can be hospitable in listening to the opinion of others ... even when we disagree. Do you remember that *eshel* tree that Abraham planted? Well, in one of my favorite Midrashim we are told that one day an old man came to Abraham's house. Abraham served him a fine meal with wine and with many courses. When it was over, the old man got up and, in Abraham's house, thanked the pagan gods for this food. Abraham was incensed ... how dare anyone do such a thing in his house; to pray to idols in front of his family? And so Abraham threw the old man out. That night, according to the Midrash, God appeared to Abraham and said, "You didn't do right. I've put up with that character for so many years ... you could have put up with him for one night. Go out and find him and apologize."

So let us all learn from Abraham, and learn from George Bush. George Bush did not put tacks on the chairs where President-elect Obama was to sit. George Bush did not make his successor feel uncomfortable in his home, despite their conflicting opinions. Abraham taught us the importance of being open to others; something that our rabbis said takes precedence even over our relationship with God. It is our tradition in the Ethics of the Fathers which tells us: "*Havei m'kabel p'nai chaveiro b'sever panim yafot* – greet your fellow human being with a cheerful countenance." Let all of us – Republicans and Democrats – do what George Bush did ... greet our newly-elected President with a cheerful countenance. And let all of us as Jews – Orthodox and non-Orthodox – greet our brothers and sisters with a cheerful countenance as well. And, as we smile at each other, God will smile down on us. Amen.

\*\* Rabbi Wohlberg's book, *Pulpit Power*, can be ordered through: [www.BethTfiloh.com/Register](http://www.BethTfiloh.com/Register).

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