

SHABBAT SERMON
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Obama's Nobel Prize

When I heard that Barack Obama had won the Nobel Prize, I immediately felt bad for my brother, Saul. Based on the standards the Nobel Committee must have used in choosing President Obama, my brother Saul deserved to win the prize in 1954. It was in 1954 that my brother graduated from elementary school. At that time, next to his yearbook picture, were the following words: "Saul is our most promising student ... he is always promising to do better!" That's quite a way to build up a child's self-esteem, but obviously being "promising" the Nobel Committee feels is worthy enough to win the award.

By now there has been plenty said about Barack Obama's winning the Nobel Peace Prize. But perhaps the longer lasting effect will be on the real losers in this year's award. The losers are the Nobel Peace Committee itself! Let's keep in mind who granted this award. It is five obscure Norwegians named Thorbjorn Jagland, Kaci Kullmann Five, Sissel Marie Ronbeck, Inger-Marie Ytterhorn and Agot Valle. Never before did the world pay much attention to who was actually making the choice of this most distinguished award. But based on its choice of Barack Obama, many now focused on who makes up this Committee ... now we know: its five Norwegian politicians! And now that we know this, I suspect that never again will the Peace Prize carry the weight that it has had until now.

Lots of theories have been offered to why the choice of Barack Obama:

- Some claim that the Norwegians, living where they do, are out of touch with reality.
- Others say it was meant to encourage the President to think more "European" style than American.
- Then there is the belief that the intention was to tie President Obama's hands on Afghanistan and Iran. How can he advocate for military force when he just won the Peace Prize?
- And then there is the theory that this was meant as a slap in the face to George Bush for his "go it alone" way of dealing with the world.

Whatever the theory, most everyone agrees that Mr. Obama received the award not for his achievements – after all, his achievements, even according to his supporters, are limited. And besides, to have won the award Mr. Obama had to be nominated in February when he hadn't been President for more than a month! No, the award was not for what he has done but for what he hopes to do! Not so much for his past but for his future. And that leaves us with a very important question: What is it that we admire? What is it that merits recognition and

admiration? What is worthy of approbation? Is it our achievements or is it our aspirations? Is it our dreams or our accomplishments? Is it our goals or our successes?

What do you think? Or perhaps, more important, what does Judaism think regarding these significant questions? The answer can be found in this morning's Torah portion ... not in its beginning but in its end. Our Torah portion primarily tells the story of Noah and the flood. But at the end, a new person comes on the scene who is to change the course of history. His name was Abraham.

Who was Abraham? Abraham, we are told, was the first monotheist, the first believer in God; the one who heeded God's call and left his country and came to the land of Israel. And yet, if you look carefully, the Torah tells us: "*Vayikach Terach et Avram b'no* – and Terach took his son Avram, his grandson, Lot and his daughter-in-law Sarai and they set out together from the Ur of Chaldans for the land of Canaan. But when they had come as far as Charan they settled there." This seemingly simple sentence is really rather remarkable when you think about it. We always think that Abraham came to Canaan because God called on him to do so, and he heard the voice of God. But here we are being told that the journey started before that. It started when his father took him – and the rest of the family – and started out for the land of Canaan. So what's going on? What actually happened?

Writes a noted Biblical commentator in his book, "The Arugat Habosem," that even before Abraham, Terach experienced an awakening of the spirit of purity to go to the land of Canaan, but he stopped halfway there, as it is written, "But when they had come as far as Charan they settled there." Terach started off headed for the Promised Land but on the way he stopped at Charan. Terach was motivated simply to get away from the paganism and corruption of Ur Chaldans, but he didn't have it in him to continue on a long journey. Once he reached Charan he was content to remain there. Abraham, on the other hand, sensed that his departure from Ur Chaldans was just the first stage in a lifelong journey away from paganism to the mountain of God. As our Biblical commentator points out: "Abraham, our father, did not stop to rest and did not call off in the middle of the way."

And that is why the story of Christians and Muslims as well as our people has become the story of Abraham, not of Terach. Just think about it: if the Nobel Prize had been given for goals and aspirations then it would have been jointly given to Abraham and his father, Terach. How special that would have been ... a father and son both headed in the right direction, both having great aspirations. But Terach stopped along the way; Terach never fulfilled what he was capable of. And so, it is Abraham who becomes our noble person, the one worthy of emulation and admiration.

To some degree, this may play a part in Maimonides' understanding of the soul. It is generally thought that all of us are born with a fully developed soul. But that's not how Maimonides understands it. From his perspective all of us are born with the "potential" to acquire what can be called a soul. And it becomes our goal in life to actualize our potential.

That's the challenge that each and every one of us confronts. Will Barack Obama meet that challenge? Will he achieve the greatness that the Nobel Committee and many others think he

is capable of? It is too soon to tell! Will he be a Terach or an Abraham? It's too soon to say. But just as so many have said that it's too soon to say how great he will be, I would remind you that it is equally true that it is too soon to say how terrible he will be!

After 10 months in office, many have already turned on him ... and many of them are Jews. Something like 25% of Jews didn't vote for him, but even amongst many who did, Mr. Obama's Cairo speech, his extending a hand of friendship to the Iranians, his demanding an end to Israeli settlement building ... led many to conclude that he is going to be a disaster for Israel. A poll in the *Jerusalem Post* revealed that only 6% of the Israeli people feel Obama is pro-Israel, 50% believe he is pro-Palestinian. And as he started out there was reason to feel that way, but let us remember that in recent weeks there has been a change in his administration's perspective. It denounced the Goldstone Report which was designed to bash Israel over the Gaza war. Mr. Obama, in his speech at the U.N. specifically referred to the "Jewish state of Israel," an important Israeli demand. He has stepped back from the demand for a total cessation of settlement building and when Turkey dis-invited Israel from a joint military exercise, the United States in turn pulled out. And this week the President announced that he will address the leadership of the American Jewish community at November's Federation General Assembly. Critics of the President's Israeli policy were right to criticize, but it is wrong to think that the way someone starts out is the way they are going to end up!

Just look at George Bush. If ever there was a President elected who has the potential to be the worst enemy of Israel, it was George Bush.

- He was nurtured and raised as part of the whole Texas oil culture, for whom Israel is an impediment to America's global interests.
- He has a brother, Neil, who has traveled through the Arab Middle East trying to cut multi-million dollar business deals, and while in Saudi Arabia spoke at an international business forum and talked about the role of "public opinion" in shaping U.S. mid-East policy.
- And I'm sure you all remember George Bush's father – Poppa Bush. He was no friend of Israel, to say the least. Old man Bush fought against Israel when it asked the U.S. to co-sign as guarantors on loans to help re-settle Soviet immigrants. And when he was asked about this at a press conference, do you remember how he responded? He pounded on the table and went on to say that on the issue of the loan guarantees, he was not going to give in to "powerful political forces." He had me and you in mind – the American Jewish community.
- And do you remember old man Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker? You remember what he said about the Jews? I can't repeat it in the synagogue, but he uttered a disgusting expletive and went on to say about American Jews: "They didn't vote for us anyway."

We didn't vote for Poppa Bush and we didn't vote for his son. He had the potential to be a disaster for Israel. But look how things worked out. He ended up being one of the best friends

Israel will ever have in the White House. Will that someday be said of Barack Obama? Like it is said of his Nobel Peace Prize: It's too soon to say.

Our sages bring this thought home in a remarkable midrash that tells us that when Adam saw written in the Torah the words, "and there arose no prophet in Israel like unto Moses," Adam protested claiming, "I am greater than Moses for I was created in the image of God." But the answer he received was, "It's true Moses didn't have as great a beginning as you ... but he grew in holiness and wisdom and ended his career in a blaze of glory ... while you, Adam, started off in the most marvelous way – being created by God Himself – but you violated the only command given to you, and thus in one day you lost Paradise."

Adam had a great beginning but you don't win a Nobel Prize for that! Let's hope that President Obama – and all of us – will fulfill the potential that makes our soul. We may not be able to win a Nobel Prize, but we can all be noble people; the kind of person that Abraham turned out to be and why God was able to say to Abraham, "*V'heya b'rocho* – you shall be for a blessing." Amen.

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