

The Nightmare Ends
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Our long national nightmare is ending.

It feels to me like the last moments of the most frightening dream. You have had these nightmares, right, when you are caught between the dark and the dawn, struggling to wake up— but still unable to shake the dread? Your heart is racing, but you can feel the panic leaving you slowly, but ineluctably. It is in these moments of suspension between dusk and day that you feel yourself coming back to yourself. Little rays of light stream across your face and the words of the prophet Malachi may come to mind: “The sun will rise again bringing healing in its wake.”

Healing is what we need now. We could not begin to heal while Donald Trump was president. But now, there is so much work to do.

How do we heal?

First, we must stare reality in the face and be brutally honest with ourselves. We were — and still are — in peril. We elected a president manifestly unfit for the highest office in the land. It is not only his unsuitable temperament, his troubling emotional makeup, his inexperience and incompetence. Even more, I always believed that the most severe threat is his refusal to honor the centuries-old constitutional norms that define our way of life.

Take a good look at the electoral map. Take a good look at the raw numbers of voters. Take a good look. This is our country. This is who we are. When it is all said and done, over 70 million Americans will have voted for the president — the second highest vote total in American history behind only Vice President Biden, himself.

While President Trump is apparently defeated, Trumpism is not.

Therefore, our second task in the years to come will be to relegate Trumpism to the margins of American society where it belongs. The president has inflicted enormous damage upon the fabric and fiber of our country.

Our institutions are under severe stress. We must strengthen them, and restore their credibility in the years ahead.

Freedom depends upon the institutions of freedom. There are always threats to our freedom. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Danger lurks everywhere — from foreign competitors to our own internal demons. We can be our own worst enemies. We have within us the yearning to be free — but also the lust for power, domination, and exploitation. We have compassion but also selfishness within us. We are peace loving, but also violent.

Jewish tradition termed this conflict within every human soul “the *Yetzer*” — the impulse, “*yeter ha’ra*” — that destructive inclination that can overwhelm us. Plato described this internal struggle as a charioteer seeking to control two horses pulling in different directions.

The genius of the Founding Fathers, the uniqueness of America, is rooted in the system created to control these conflicting human impulses. The separation of powers was designed to separate the

power of any one person or group of people — from the power to dominate society. Yes, they created a presidency (there must be a senior executive of government), but they limited the powers of the presidency.

The separation of powers is rooted in skeptical realism about the nature of the human creature. Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton — they knew what human beings were capable of. They suspected everyone, including themselves, and thus took care not to give anyone too much power. George Washington became one of our greatest heroes — not because of what he did in office, but what he did at the end of his presidency. He refused the position after eight years. He knew the seductions of power.

Institutions of freedom protect freedom. The Bible tells us that while the yearning for a king was accommodated, his power would be limited by the prophets, the priests, the laws, judges and magistrates and by God, who would punish immorality and disloyalty.

I find it fascinating that a full third of the Book of Exodus is dedicated to the building of the *mishkan* — the Tabernacle. If you were to ask someone, “What is the Book of Exodus about?” They would probably answer, “It’s about freeing the slaves, the 10 plagues, the splitting of the Sea.” Some might even mention Mount Sinai and the 10 Commandments.

But few who are not learned in the Bible would respond — or even know — that a third of the book of Exodus is filled with the most mundane description of building the Tabernacle. It reads more like an architectural manual: how much wood, where to pound nails, how to design the structure. I always wondered why all these mind-numbing, eye-rolling details, that only an engineer would enjoy?

It is for a reason. It is to pound into our very essence that the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness endowed by our Creator in every human being is dependent on the small details of constructing institutions of freedom — the mundane daily work of pounding nails and designing houses of liberty.

The institutions of freedom are the protection of American freedoms. I grew up taught — and believing — that America was different: That what happened to Russia, Italy, Germany, or France in the 20th century, can never happen here. But Americans are not endowed with special genetic material — super antibodies protecting us from the virus of extremism that devastated other nations. Study the aftermath of World War I in Europe.

Leaders make a difference. It is true that historical forces create circumstances giving rise to charismatic leaders. But it is also true that the leader — one individual — can permanently alter the direction of a country. Would Communism have ended up dominating Eastern Europe without Lenin? Would America have evolved as it did without Lincoln?

It turns out that our institutions — the protecting wall of American democracy — are more fragile than we, at least I, imagined. We forgot that institutions are not permanent unmovable pillars built into the framework of the universe. Institutions are made up of people.

And people are people. They have good impulses and bad impulses. And history demonstrates conclusively that a convincing enough leader, who understands human weaknesses, who has an uncanny ability to persuade, intimidate and manipulate others, can corrode the very institutions that were designed to protect us from such leaders. We see now more clearly than ever that the people

pledged to uphold the integrity of American institutions do so more through custom, traditions, values and norms than through legislation and coercion.

That is the threat to America now. Will the institutions hold?

Did you catch President Trump's disgraceful statement last night? "Stop the count!" "I win if you don't count the votes of those who voted against me." Could you have imagined in your wildest nightmares a United States president demanding that votes not be counted — but only the votes of the other side, and inciting violence along the way?

At the heart of the American experiment is the right to vote and the peaceful transfer of power. These are so fundamental to the fabric of our country that no one in any position of influence ever challenged counting the votes. I realize that shenanigans often occurred in past local and national elections. But this is different. This is the head of the government — the personification of American leadership, sworn to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States — himself shaking the very pillars of American democracy.

All of us, Democrats, Republicans, Independents — everyone who loves America and cherishes liberty — must do whatever they can to protect the institutions of freedom that are under the kind of stress that we never imagined. Americans have fought, sacrificed, and died for the right to vote and the peaceful transfer of power. Donald Trump has so influenced so many people that even those who should (and do) know better are silent or weak or intimidated.

Part of the reason is that the incessant attacks on these very institutions from the beginning of his presidency have weakened us substantially. Few have the legitimacy they did in the past. Even the justice system, even the reputation of the Supreme Court itself, to adjudicate fairly, has declined. All the insults, the race-baiting, the cheating, the attacks on the media — and on the independence of the justice and law enforcement establishments; the ridiculing of expertise, evidence, and science; the promotion of conspiracy theories have made us more fragile, more angry, more vulnerable. We are less able to do what we used to do. We cannot fight the pandemic effectively because physically, politically, and communally, we are less healthy than before.

Even truth is just a commodity to be sold to the highest political bidder. In retrospect, that funny, strange, seemingly unimportant little dust-up about crowd size at President Trump's inauguration was a tell. The insistence that Hillary Clinton's 3 million majority in the popular vote was because of massive fraud was a tell. There is a direct connection from that to today's "the only way we lose is if the elections are rigged." "Stop the counting, but only in Pennsylvania because I am ahead there." If the president of another country were to say the kinds of things Donald Trump has said in the last four days, we would have condemned that person as an autocrat, an enemy of democracy.

It turns out that criticizing the media — not because of its plentiful mistakes, distortions or prejudices — but to attack its members as "Enemies of the People" was a tell. "Enemies of the people" is a political slogan most often used by history's authoritarians and dictators. Mao, the Khmer Rouge, the Soviets all employed this language. They learned it from the master orator of the French Revolution as it descended into violent madness: Robespierre said, "The revolutionary government owes to the good citizens all the protection of the nation. It owes nothing to the enemies of the people but death."

The guillotine of extreme rhetoric decapitated social cohesion. As Simon Schama wrote in his masterpiece on the French Revolution: extreme rhetoric “progressively dehumanized adversaries, recognizing no middle ground between total triumph and utter eclipse.” (Schama, Citizen, p. 792)

Increasingly, this is what we are witnessing in America: no middle ground between total triumph and utter eclipse. Every dispute is a matter of life and death. No middle ground between those who want racial justice and those who want law and order. No middle ground between socialism and a compassionate capitalism that protects and offers more opportunities to the disadvantaged. No middle ground between Democrats and Republicans. One side is good, the other evil. One side will save the country, the other will destroy it.

And so, our third act of healing must be to restore the middle ground. We must work to rebuild our essential unity.

We should not confuse unity with uniformity. Debates are good for democracy. We need a sane Democratic party and a sane Republican party. We must build back a culture of respect. No one person, one party, one group, one class, one association, one religion, has a monopoly on truth. Persuasion, vigorous challenge, openness to debate, a willingness to reconsider when new evidence emerges — these are the tools of democracy. Reflexive dismissal of those who disagree are lethal to the American political and intellectual culture. Diversity is a good thing. Censorship and cancelling leads to authoritarianism. “Come let us reason together,” Isaiah urges. Freedom is messy. Healthy societies are full of noise. We need not be afraid of vigorous debate. We must avoid so objectifying opponents that we no longer see ourselves as on the same side.

“We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained - it must not break - our bonds of affection.”

In the coming years we should fight when necessary, but compromise when possible.

Our fourth act of healing should be internal. Take care of your physical, spiritual and emotional health. Attend to your wounded spirit.

You can choose for yourself how to act. You can assume — or avoid — responsibility. You can choose to be kind or cruel, considerate or contentious. Stay positive. Be constructive. Do not be seduced by cynicism. Idealism is compatible with politics. Morals are the heart of social life. Values are the core of politics. Virtue is fundamental to national character.

The American Dream is alive. It is still alive. The sun shines on this country and dawn will come tomorrow as well.

I said the following words in this sanctuary at the beginning of the Trump presidency, and I conclude with the same words now as, apparently, the presidency of Donald Trump is ending:

Do not begrudge these years. They can make you better. There is nothing that inspires us more than to fight for principle. Moral sentiment and grim resolve lift the heart and feed the pure running waters of the wellsprings of life itself. These years may concentrate our minds and force us to think through what we really believe. What are the principles that guide our actions? These years may deepen our resolve to never take anything for granted. Everything can change in human affairs.

We get better through struggle. We do not seek, nor do we expect, a challenge free world. We do not seek to empty challenge from our lives but to challenge the emptiness of life. Not to escape struggle but to struggle with escapism.

We should want our fight to count. To mean something. Amidst the challenges of the years ahead lay opportunities for sacrifice and service and ennobling struggle.

“With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right,” let us pledge to make America First:

First in kindness. First in generosity.

First in realizing the American Dream: the dream of equality, opportunity, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. First in harnessing the immense natural and human gifts of this country, not for ourselves alone, but in service to all.

America First to protect the dignity and worth of every human being.

America First as a force for good.

America First to pave the highways and clear the byways holding back human progress.

America First to bring light to the dark places of the earth:

America First to raise every valley; to lower every hill; to level the rugged ground and to smooth the high ridges preventing human happiness.

And when we do these things;

When we unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage;

When we let the oppressed go free;

When we share our bread with the hungry and take the poor into our home;

When we clothe the naked;

When we banish the menacing hand and evil speech;

When we do these things; when America is first in these ways, we will win the struggle for meaning and overcome our darker selves.

Victory! Victory! Victory at last!