

Dvar Torah on Parashat Vayeshev 5774
On the 50th Anniversary of JFK Assassination
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As I studied this *parasha* in light of all the commemorations of President Kennedy this week, I was struck, as I often am, by a seemingly extraneous moment in the story. It takes place as Yosef is traveling on his way from home, in Chevron in the south of the land, to meet up with his contentious brothers in the north. The Torah tells us that he encountered a man along the way, who told him to go on to find his brothers in nearby in a place called Dotan. The commentaries wonder what the purpose of this man is, why the Torah bothers to add the fateful conversation that sent Yosef on to Dotan -- where he would find his brothers, who want to do him in. Had he not met this man, he might have turned around and gone back home.

One of the medieval commentator says that the conversation is here to show simply that Yosef was intent on following through on the purpose of his travels. He was following the plan of the moment, which he thought was simple, but nonetheless an important commitment to his father. He thought he was just going to check on his brothers and report back -- even though we, as readers, know that something terrible is coming, which will be a turning point for a family and a nation.

Looking back today, we know that Dallas was President Kennedy's Dotan. The president, like Yosef, was crossing the land, traveling from the north to the south, with some simple purposes -- to meet with his contentious Texas Democratic

brothers, in advance of the fall campaign; to make some appearances outside Washington along with his popular wife, which had been unusual for this president. How small these considerations look to us in the light of history, when we know what is coming, what was to happen in Dallas and all the aftermath.

What can we learn here in shul, about our nation and ourselves, fifty years after President Kennedy's assassination? To me, the most important questions are about leadership and our relationship to our leaders. What do we think we lost when President Kennedy was killed? What do our fascinations tell us about what we seek, what we need?

Put aside the conspiracy theories. More interesting to me are the what-ifs, which speak to our longing. What if JFK had lived, served out the two terms as president he was likely to be have been given?

Yosef's dream, at the beginning of the *parasha*, was that he was standing in the center, with the sun and the moon and the stars bowing down to him. It was a prediction with some truth in it, as it turned out, but it was really a fantasy. Yosef *was* destined to become the center, the leader, and there would be some bowing. But that's too simple; that was never what God had in mind as the meaning of his leadership. So too, there has been this glow around Kennedy -- the idea that had he served out his presidency, everything would have been different, all the troubles of the sixties would have been better. Very quickly, in the mid-'60s, as things became

more troubled, Americans were swept into a kind of bowing down. Kennedy won the nomination in 1960 just barely, at the convention. He was elected in 1960 with less than 50% of the popular vote. Yet soon after he died about two-thirds of the population claimed they had voted for him.

But the fantasies were really fueled by what followed after President Kennedy's death. The decade that began with his assassination continued with not only with the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, but with the dethroning of President Johnson and the resignation of President Nixon, and the exposing of the "best and brightest" who had led the country into the disaster of Vietnam. It wasn't just that one leader was killed -- it was three presidents in a row interrupted. America seemed to be like the words of Amos in today's Haftarah: *And I raised up prophets from among your sons/and nazirites from among your young men....but you made the nazirites drink wine/and ordered the prophets not to prophesy.* Increasingly, it looked like the country could simply not tolerate being led. Maybe this is what Mick Jagger meant -- "I shouted out: 'Who killed the Kennedys', when after all it was you and me."

For the past fifty years, we have this two-sided legacy: martyred leaders we wish we could have back, along with incredible suspicion of the leaders who live and the very idea of leadership. Even Ronald Reagan, who was probably the only comparable leader we have known since then, was submerged by this, left office small, in the disgrace of Iran-contra and the early phases of his disease.

We have all kinds of good reasons to be suspicious of leaders in this country. Start with our culture, unique among nations on this earth, that believes that all good things come from individual effort. Then add all the let-downs -- the politicians who turn out to be corrupt, to seek their own fortunes or the fortunes of their friends, who coax us with their promises and their promise and then let us down, who betray their own families. Leaders who underestimate us -- who ask of us great things but ask no commitment beyond a little more money of our pockets.

So we doubt leaders, and the idea of authority -- whether it's the president, or parents, or religion. And yet that too is unbearable, so we look for better leaders, and find them only in our past.

People have tended to idealize John F. Kennedy not just because of his charm and youth, but for his depth -- his military service and heroism, at great physical cost; the fact that he was an intellectual, a thinker and strategist; his apparent willingness to begin to take risks for civil rights.

Had Kennedy lived, and served two terms, it's not likely that he would be considered as highly as he is today. In *The New Republic* this week, Georgetown historian Michael Kazin writes that it's highly unlikely that Kennedy could have made racists in our country any less angry or violent about civil rights and voting rights, or that he could have headed off the anger of the urban ghettos. Even had

President Kennedy avoided committing troops to Vietnam in the mid-sixties, he would have been savaged for letting Southeast Asia fall to the communists, and his own party was still in the sixties full of hawks.

Professor Kazin writes that it doesn't help us in any way to look for another president who will live up to the fantasy version of JFK, which even the man himself would not have been able to do.

On the day he died, President Kennedy was exactly seven months younger than I am today. You could say it's laughable that a person my age could ever be entrusted to lead a country -- to make the decisions about war and peace, or to try to inspire people around a common purpose. It is completely understandable why we are skeptical about our leaders -- why we look for their hypocrisy, why we are not shocked when they bungle. It's good for us to be critical, not to be swept up. But the cynicism about our leaders and the idealizing of the president who might have been are not enough to help us as a society.

We have tried to look somewhere other than politics for leaders. From Lee Iacocca to Ross Perot to Steve Jobs, we have been fascinated with business leaders -- with know-how and effectiveness, and even a little beauty and inspiration. But we are not filled. As much as we prize our suspicion of leaders, our critical eye, I think we are left vulnerable. And it's not because we need a father figure. I believe, in fact, that we need leaders, as hard as they are to find.

Indeed, we do need people in our world who seem larger than the average person. Without leaders to admire, we shrink ourselves too small, and settle for small things from our society and from humanity. Instead of appreciating the small things in life, and the small scale differences we can make, we will settle for them. They become the ceiling of humanity, rather than the spur to more. We lose hope for *tikkun olam*, for a real transformation. We forget that human beings can be larger than ourselves.

Without great leaders, we will help some small number of people climb out of poverty, but rage against a world where so many are still poor. We will build one great school, with twenty other people committed to the same vision, but we will not not feel closer to a just world where every young person has the opportunity to develop. We will insulate our buildings and buy local food, but the global climate disaster will still loom.

There is a feeling that in Hebrew I would call יִרְאָה *yir'ah*, an awe in the presence of someone whose integrity and achievements for the world are beyond my own. When I have met people like this, their presence does not make me feel small or insufficient, but fills me with appreciation and hope. These leaders do not leave us alone to our own devices, or ask that we regular people figure everything out on our own. They don't leave us with the cliché that enough little acts of goodness add up.

A great leader blends integrity and achievement -- the unique combination that makes a vision not just inspiring but attainable. Great leaders respect us not by pretending that we are the same, but by helping see how our smaller work, and our smaller lives, fit specifically into the bigger picture. They don't need us emotionally, they don't need to lead us; they need our citizenship.

In Kennedy's presidency, this kind of leadership was exemplified in the space race and the Peace Corps. Here was the combination of hard-headed Cold War realism, coupled with dreamy ideas about space and justice, pegged to specific goals and roles and results, that engaged and involved thousands of people in science or in international development. This dynamic, of leadership and led, had nothing to do with popularity, with a need to be loved.

Margaret Mead's famous quote is that we should never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. But she is wrong that it is the only thing that ever does. Yes, we absolutely need to be leaders on our own whenever we can. But we need large leaders as well.

Such leadership and such leaders are hard to find today. Maybe we are still, after the sixties, a society that fundamentally cannot be led. I don't see these leaders in our national politics today, and that's one reason why for my own soul I try to be engaged in the big picture locally. The scale may be small, but there is a scale. There are not just doers but leaders in our city, our towns, our state, and they can

enlarge us too. They can give us hope, and help ready us for the kind of leadership we haven't had in this country for so long.

A couple years ago, we went as a family to the John F. Kennedy Museum. I hadn't been there since I was in high school, when I remember being captivated by everything captivating about JFK -- I left with a campaign poster from the gift shop, which I brought with me to college. At the end of our walk through, we were standing in the pavillion that looks out to the ocean on one side, with white walls bare but for some words from President Kennedy's inauguration address. I stepped back and took a picture of Alex, looking up and reaching up, not quite touching the words.

That's just how I want it: the memory of a leader we don't quite touch, but one whose words and actions make us stretch. As we remember, and as we mourn, let us continue to open ourselves, to the possibility of leaders who call us to great purposes. Let us begin to make a place in our society for leaders, who can honestly look at themselves and at us, and harness us together in ways that we can never do on our own.