

For a Mess of Pottage
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

The Bible describes two types of threats. The first is external: an outside enemy seeks your destruction. In this week's Torah portion, Pharaoh looks upon the Israelites and concludes that they are his enemy. He launches a violent, brutal, genocidal assault against our nation.

The second threat to freedom is internal: it is the enemy within. In the Book of Genesis that we completed reading last week, Esau — on his own — sells his birthright. No one threatens him. There is no external compulsion, no force, no brutality. It is simply a weak man who cannot convince himself why his inheritance, his culture, his heritage are more important to him than satisfying his hunger — and he barter away his birthright for a mess of lentil stew.

The United States has some annoying international rivals — Iran, Venezuela, various terrorist groups — but they pose no existential threat to us. We also have powerful nuclear-armed foes — China, Russia, North Korea — but these are contained within the ongoing superpower rivalries that threaten mutually assured destruction. It is not pleasant to contemplate, but we have lived with these dangers from abroad for the better part of our lifetimes, and have learned how to contain them.

The way most empires disintegrate is from the inside. Rome ruled the world for 500 years. The Barbarians were only the final indignity. By the time they stormed the gates, Rome was an eaten-out, hollowed shell. Not one shot was fired at the Soviet Union. It collapsed on its own. Like rust on an iron bridge — unnoticed until it is too late — the foundations of the Soviet edifice were too weak to bear its future.

For most of our history, the gravest threat to America has been internal. When united, democracies are strong as stainless steel. Japan and Germany learned the hard and agonizing way — attack democracies at your peril. But when divided — when polarized and disunited — democracies become ripe for the picking. Just read a good history book of the 20th century.

Years of abuse have crashed against the protecting walls of American institutions, weakening the infrastructure of our democracy. We tend to assume that America is indestructible; it is not true. There were periods in our history when internal division was so strong as to rip the nation apart.

Liberty is hard. Democracy is hard. It requires constant and loving cultivation. It can dissolve quickly. We forget that most human beings who ever walked the face of the earth were not free. Most people today are not free. We assume that we live at the end of history, when all the great ideological battles have been won. It is not so. We must be vigilant. Every generation must struggle anew. This is the lesson of the exodus, the reason we retell and reenact the story year in and year out. Liberty is always fragile. It is always at risk. It took 400 years to free the Hebrew slaves. It took 40 years to get to the Promised Land — a journey that should have taken no more than 40 days.

We rarely think about the fragility of freedom. Chip away at the pillars, and slowly, but ineluctably, before you even realize it, you will unleash a tsunami of anger and discontent that will sweep everything away. You will not escape the deluge. You cannot protect yourself by running to the top floor of the citadel. By the time the monster wave retreats, it will have consumed everything in its path. You will be unable to protect yourself from the passions of the mob that you helped to unleash. They came for you,

they crashed into the very chamber of democracy's citadel, and you were rushed out or barricaded in like frightened sheep. You unleashed a monster that turned on you.

It was the logical coda to the Trump era. It began with a constant, callous cacophony of contempt: It was born in lies, conspiracy theories, birtherism, incitement, anger, division, polarization and an underlying energy of violence — a strange attraction to authoritarians and strongmen — and it ended the same way: with the president stoking his supporters, “you will never take back our country with weakness.” The Trump presidency was born in brutishness and ends in brutishness.

You have sown the wind — and now the whirlwind. You told — or enabled — big lies, shameless lies — not the little shadings of truth that all public figures dabble in. For years, you promoted — or enabled — falsehoods and deceptions that debilitate democracy, beginning with birtherism and ending with the long-dead Hugo Chavez manipulating voting machines. You make up fictions that the elections were rigged — and then you seek inquiry why 40% of Americans and 73% of Republicans believe that there was widespread fraud.

Seventy-three percent of Republicans!

As I have emphasized many times, I do not preach political partisanship. I am not a politician. I am a religious leader. I speak moral truth — as I understand it — no matter how painful. We need two strong political parties that sometimes win and sometimes lose. It is intolerable to insist that elections are fair only if we win: that the results for the down-ballot representatives are legitimate while that same vote produced wide-scale fraud at the top of the ticket. Losing is integral to democracy — painful, but necessary. It gives the losing side an opportunity to open the windows and bring in the fresh air of change. Democracies cannot tolerate accepting the legitimacy of elections only if your side wins.

Why do you traffic in deception? You swore to protect the American way of life. You took an oath. You placed your right hand on the Bible that you tell us day and night is sacred to you. What do you have to gain? You sold your soul, your dignity, your integrity and our national honor for a mess of pottage, for ambition — to satisfy your craving for proximity to power. But the con man will con you when the time comes. A man who can double-cross his partners, friends, colleagues and his own family will not hesitate to double-cross you.

Look what you have wrought! Most of you knew better. You could have stood up to the malevolent, malicious, malfeasant narcissist at any time — beginning with the lies about crowd size at the inauguration. When you finally did stand up to him this week, the bully retreated. That is what bullies do when confronted with strength and determination. They are weak inside. They puff and preen, but send others to fight. They will retreat if you stand up to them. Instead, you cravenly licked the boots and spinelessly kissed the ring of the faux strongman. You will bear the mark of Cain for the rest of your lives. You sold our birthright, the American heritage that we entrusted to you, for a mess of pottage, for your own personal ambition.

Shame on you. You are unworthy of us. You encouraged or even fomented insurrection. If a foreign country had carried out Wednesday's attack on the Capitol, we would be at war today. That is the extent of the betrayal — incited by no less than the president of the United States and aided, abetted and enabled by all too many in his party. We have witnessed scenes this week that we never thought that we would see. For years, we warned that you are playing with fire. There is only so much that even the strongest of democracies can withstand without breaking. You have humiliated us. And worse, you set

back the cause of freedom for so many worldwide who look to America as a beacon of liberty. It will take years for the United States to recover credibility.

But it is not too late. It is never too late for America. You can still make good. Wash away the stain on your dignity and our national honor by fighting for truth, justice and the American way. Look for inspiration to those who will be recorded forever in the annals of American heroes. Look to Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's Secretary of State; look to Gabriel Sterling, his chief operating officer, and you will see what dignity, courage and honor look like. Look to Senator Romney or Governor Hogan and you will understand American patriotism.

It is not too late. Judaism teaches that we all make mistakes. Whether motivated by good impulses or those troublesome passions we all share — greed, ambition, power, ego, selfishness — all of us will err. We will all stray. We will do things and say things that we later regret. And thus, our tradition sets aside a full season of repentance. We cannot live with each other if we do not make room for contrition and forgiveness. Judaism commands us to atone and to accept atonement. But repentance must be sincere. It is a profoundly painful process. We search, sear and afflict our souls.

It is the only way to step back from the abyss, the only way to heal. We must reach out to the entire American family and seek common ground — that sacred, hallowed ground of American liberty that holds such promise for the human creature.

It will take a long time to heal. "So foul a sky clears not without a storm." But let this be the season of our repentance. Let the healing start now. There are reasons for optimism. The building blocks are in place. Vaccines will eventually restore our social lives, and a new administration will soon take office. Even mere competence after the chaos of the past four years would be a vast improvement.

Beyond anger, beyond even outrage, I perceive sadness in our country. Americans are sad. It goes beyond policy disagreements. It cuts deep, to the heart. We cry for the beloved country. We are stunned and afraid, experiencing a level of anxiety we have not felt before. We worry for the soul of our country, and yearn for moral leadership.

A word to the younger generations:

You have lived through a disastrous year. I know how heavily this period has weighed on you. Judaism teaches that we must find reasons for hope and optimism. It is not a shallow cliché, as is so common in our tweeting times. It is not a Hallmark Card of canned confidence. Our tradition encourages a deep-seated conviction that human beings are fundamentally good at heart, and that society can be repaired. We are not condemned to our fate. We can make a difference. We can impact on the future. We can shape events.

The future of the United States is in your hands. America is capable of miraculous regeneration and exceptional greatness. Take an active role in shaping America's destiny. Know what you believe. Insist on moral values. Do not succumb to cynicism. Politics can be consistent with moral purpose. Every political choice we make is fundamentally a moral choice. Every election is a contest for the soul of the nation. Ultimately, politics is about conscience and character.

Vote for those who can inspire us to reach our highest potential. Vote for those who remind us to consider the good of others. Vote for those who seek justice, love, and mercy and who walk humbly —

who encourage us to deal loyally and compassionately with each other. Vote for those who remind us of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the suffering and those left behind. Vote for those who seek to soften our hard hearts. Vote for those who lift us up, rather than tear us down.

Call to account anyone who poses a threat to decency, liberty and democracy. Do not elect them to higher office. Vote not only on party loyalty. There are good people on both sides of the political aisle, and there are craven people on both sides of the political aisle.

Vote for those capable of shame. If you are shameless, if you have no scruples, you can get away with much more than the rest of us. You can lie with impunity. The capacity for self-reflection, the ability to feel embarrassed, the willingness to be restrained by decency — these qualities are critical for leadership.

Do not underestimate those entrusted with power. They are often brilliant. The ones who do damage are not the ones who have lost their reason. They have lost everything but reason. They lost their dignity, their values, their soul.

May it be that one day we will look back upon these days and conclude that the last four years were an aberration: that this is not who we are or want to be — that we are better than this.

As the best of us said at the end of our darkest hour:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory...all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when touched again, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”