



## BEREISHIT

Toldos

Non-Partisan Lessons from the Mid-Term Elections

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## NON-PARTISAN LESSONS FROM THE MID-TERM ELECTIONS

### ABSTRACT

Who won the mid-term elections?

Whether you hate or love President Trump, the split results of the elections offers us an extraordinary lesson: The power of balance.

This is not a small matter; one that should not be underestimated. History is fraught with nations and empires who were torn apart by the conflicts between opposing parties, or have imploded or exploded in the hands of one individual or party, or in the most extreme case – the inordinate or absolute power and authority of one leader, despot or monarch.

So it's quite an achievement – actually an unprecedented one – to have a nation like the USA which is peacefully governed by people from different, and even opposing parties.

Indeed, we can derive some extraordinary lessons from this balance of control – this level of checks and balances – both in our collective and personal lives.

The historical and spiritual roots of this balance and harmony can be traced to the story of Jacob in this week's Torah portion.

And therein lies the fundamental strength at the heart and soul of this nation: The power of balance.

Despite the fact that the elections were not determined by one coordinated region, but by many different districts, scattered coast to coast, the end-game result was that the consensus of this country is to have a balanced government, one that is not controlled by any single party.

No surprise when you consider that the divinely inspired wisdom of the Founding Fathers established a republic whose governance would always remain checked and balanced. This is based on the balanced truth that all of us are created equal, and E Pluribus Unum – a truth that is not just bi-partisan; it is non-partisan – it is beyond politics and transcends all our differences, and at the same time unites us all.

## 1. Disputes (Joke)

So who won the mid-term elections? The Democrats, who now gained control over the House? Or the Republicans who expanded their control over the Senate? Or neither of the two? Or both of them and all of us?

Seems difficult to determine. If things were complicated until now, this really confuses things. Or does it?

It reminds me of the story they tell of two individuals who had a major dispute and agreed to go to the rabbi for resolution.

The first party to the dispute came to the rabbi and carefully outlined his side of the argument. The rabbi listened intently and finally said, “My friend, you are right.” The man went away satisfied.

Later in the day, the other party to the dispute arrived and told the rabbi his side of the issue. The rabbi again listened carefully, was impressed with the arguments, and replied after some thought, “You are right.”

Later, the rabbi’s wife, who had overheard the rabbi’s conversations with both men, said to him, “Rabbi, you told both the first party and the second party that they were right. How can this be?” The rabbi, listening closely, nodded and replied: “You too are right!”

## 2. Mid-Term Election

The mid-term elections this past week were historical and unprecedented in many ways.

In addition to the largest turnout (first time in history that over 100 million people turned out for a mid-term election) and most money spent, in addition to President Trump’s aggressive rallies and President Obama’s efforts – the first time that a previous president has campaigned against a sitting president – beyond all that, I want to speak about what may be the most unique element of these elections: The election results.

Historically, in mid-term elections a sitting president’s political party usually loses seats, and often control of both houses of Congress. Over the past 21 midterm elections, the incumbent party has lost an average 30 seats in the House, and an average four seats in the Senate. (Only twice has the President’s party gained seats in both houses.)

Yet, in this election the President’s party gained seats and expanded its control in the Senate, while losing control over the House.

The most obvious lesson from this is actually quite remarkable:

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This is not a small matter; one that should not be underestimated. History is fraught with nations and empires who were torn apart by the conflicts between opposing parties, or have imploded or exploded in the hands of one individual or party, or in the most extreme case – the inordinate or absolute power and authority of one leader, despot or monarch.

So it's quite an achievement – actually an unprecedented one – to have a nation like the USA which is peacefully governed by people from different, and even opposing parties.

Indeed, we can derive some extraordinary lessons from this balance of control – this level of checks and balances – both in our collective and personal lives.

We can appreciate this power of balance – and its message to us – by looking into the story of Jacob in this week's Torah portion, which reveals for us the historical and spiritual roots of balance and harmony.

### 3. The Birth of Balance

The historical and spiritual roots of balance and harmony can be traced to the story of Jacob in this week's Torah portion.

Following the story of Abraham and Sarah, then Isaac and Rebecca, we read about their son Jacob.

Abraham and Sarah pioneered a way of life driven by virtue and social justice – *la'asos tzedaka u'mishpat*, to perform righteousness and justice.<sup>1</sup>

This way of life was perpetuated by Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac and his spouse Rebecca.

Yet, this righteous path does not come easily. How, for example, do you balance virtue and charity to others with your own needs? How do you commit to an ethical system in a society that may not share your values? Do you become judgmental? Or do you show love and compassion to all – but then how do you ensure that your love is not abused? How do you stand up for your values while also respecting others? Can you co-exist with other opinions without compromising your own integrity?

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:19.

How do we find, in one word: Balance?

Enter Jacob – the son of Isaac and Rebecca.

The psychological eloquence, and relevance, of this sequence – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – can be appreciated by looking closely at the personalities and the life stories of these individuals.

#### 4. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob: Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet

The mystics teach us that the characters in Torah are archetypes of different traits that we all carry within ourselves. Abraham embodies Chesed, loving-kindness. His life is one of enduring generosity. Isaac personifies Gevurah, awe and discipline. Jacob incarnates Tiferet, beauty and compassion, which balances the first two.

Chesed, Gevurah and Tiferet are the three central forces and building blocks of all existence. Every aspect of life is comprised of a right, left and center. Right brain, left brain, middle brain. The entire body is structured in three columns: The right side (right arm and leg), the left side (left arm and leg) and the center – the spine, which creates balance.

In the order of things, first must always come love (Chesed). Like watering a flower, the nurturing and flowing nature of love nourishes the spirit and allows it to emerge. Then comes restraint and discipline, which allows for proper discretion and containment. Following the water analogy: Free flowing water will flood the earth and actually damage the flower. Rain must fall in measured drops so that the soil can absorb it. Successful communication necessitates a transmission that is tempered and tailored to the recipient. A brilliant teacher will overwhelm his/her students if no “brakes” are used to channel the information.

Chesed is the gas, Gevurah the brakes.

Then comes the more complex Tiferet, which blends both Chesed and Gevurah, and adds a new dimension called balance. Balance is not just the absence of chaos, nor merely disciplined love. It is an entity of its own.

The spine introduces a new dimension; it gives the body structure and support.

Tiferet is also beauty, which is not the absence of uncomeliness, but a power in its own right. Beauty is not merely the combination of several colors, hues, shades or shapes. It is not just the sum of the parts; it contains an invisible force that transcends the details while revealing how they all reflect a bigger picture. Without this third element the individual parts lack cohesion.

Shalom is another property of Tiferet. Shalom is not merely the absence of war, but a powerful force that transcends differences, and is therefore able to reconcile diverse, extreme and even diametrically opposed positions. Shalom in Hebrew means not only peace, but also completeness, wholesomeness.

The number three throughout Torah literature has cosmic power. The third day, the third month, the third year, the third verse – all channel a new dimension that embraces a higher unity, a unity that is not the absence of diversity, a unity that is not the converse of individuality, but one that reaches a deeper place where one and many are not a paradox.

Take the human body (“from my flesh I behold G-d”<sup>2</sup>): The healthy body consists of myriad systems, billions of cells, all working together as one unit. On one hand, each organ and limb, each system (e.g. circulatory, nervous, respiratory) has its own unique structure and needs. On the other hand, they all are coordinated in one seamless whole. If someone who never saw a body were shown all its dissected parts, it would be utterly unfathomable how all these components can work together. Yet, the fact is that despite the utter diversity, the body functions as one entity, as if an invisible voice is telling each body part to work together with the others.

This is the power of Tiferet: Harmony within diversity.

In Kabbalistic terms: Tiferet is the “middle rod” – the spine – that “runs [secures] from end to end.”<sup>3</sup> Tiferet is the center column that runs a direct line from “one end,” Keter (the crown), to the “other end,” Malchut. Like the spine, which runs from the skull down to the lower back.

Tiferet therefore embodies a paradox: It is one of the structured Ten Sefirot, yet it gleams energy from Keter, which is beyond the Sefirot structure. This dual nature gives Tiferet the power to integrate extremes.

## 5. Jacob: Tiferet

Jacob personified Tiferet.

Of all the Patriarchs Jacob faced the greatest challenges. He suffered more than the others. When Pharaoh asked his age, Jacob later says, “The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable”<sup>4</sup> First his lifelong battle with his twin brother Esau (which begins in this week’s Torah reading). Then 20 years suffering in the employment of his corrupt uncle and father-in-law, Laban. When Jacob wants to finally settle down, his beloved son Joseph is ripped away from him, only to be reunited 22 tragic years later.

<sup>2</sup> Job 19:26.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 26:28.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 47:8-9.

Indeed, even the name Jacob captures his difficult life. Jacob (Yaakov) is so named because he was born grasping the heel of Esau<sup>5</sup>. Hence, the name “ekev.” Add a yud in front of “ekev” and you have the name “Yaakov.” Why give a son such a strange name? Because this name reflects the life that Jacob would live. A life in which he would be thrust into the lowest extremities – the “heel” – of existence, with the mission to illuminate it with, and reveal within it, the “yud” –the Divine spark: “Yud, Ekev.”

Embodying the balance of Tiferet, Jacob had the power to bring down the “yud” of Keter into the “heel” of Malchut, and transform the hostile challenges that he faced.

But for Jacob to be successful, he needed to build on the accumulative strength of Abraham (Chesed) and Isaac (Gevurah) who preceded him.

## 6. The Lesson for us

Jacob introduced and infused us all – his children – with this power of balance and harmony of tiferet.

Our mission in life too requires these three steps/dimensions. First the love of Chesed, then the discipline of Gevurah, and finally the balance of Tiferet.

In healthy circumstances (the way it is meant to be), our lives don’t begin with immediately facing a hostile world. A child is nurtured protected and provided for, building up his/her confidence and resources, before entering the untamed elements. So, first comes love and nurturing (Abraham). Then the child learns discipline, self-control and discretion (Isaac). Finally, the growing adult is ready to leave the more spiritual environment and enter “Charan,” the wrath of this world.

And so the story unfolds: First we learn of Abraham’s journey – which reflects the journey of the Abraham within each of us. It is the loving search for a mission – a labor of love not of obligation, and a labor that is expressed with deep love, not in judgment.

Too often people in their embrace of their perceived Divine mission feel the need to condescend, judge and even impose their beliefs on others.

Next, comes the discretion of Gevurah. Unbridled love can “spoil” a child and undermine the healthy boundaries necessary in any relationship. The flowing love must be tempered and channeled into productive behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 25:26.



But here too we must take great care. Excessive Gevurah leads to intolerance, aggression and even violence.

Once love and discipline are in place, we can then complete the structure, with Tiferet – the critical spine that carries the entire infrastructure. Tiferet creates a cohesive unit that includes all the variances of love, discipline and beyond.

All problems – personal, social and global – can be traced to the lack of balance and integration offered by Tiferet.

Most mistakes in relationships are due to an imbalance of love and boundaries; either too much Chesed or too much Gevurah, too little Chesed or too little Gevurah.

## 7. Balance in the Nation and the World

Microcosm macrocosm. Just as our personal lives require the third dimension of tiferet/balance, the same is true globally.

Most conflicts are rooted in the Chesed/Gevurah dichotomy.

History is a sad witness to this phenomenon: Excessive authority or excessive permissiveness are the hallmarks of our millennia-old journey. The tunnel of history is splattered with the casualties of harsh tyrannical regimes and religious institutions imposing themselves on entire populations, crushing individuality and basic freedoms. At the other end of the spectrum, extreme left-wing positions – perhaps in rebellion of the extreme right – in the name of individuality have stooped to unprecedented decadence, ultimately infringing on the rights of other individuals to choose a more disciplined life.

The missing ingredient then and now – and always – is Tiferet. At Sinai (called Tiferet<sup>6</sup>) a third, vital component was introduced: power to integrate “above” and “below,” faith and reason, the sacred and the secular, individuality and G-d and matter and spirit. Indeed a paradox, but Tiferet reaches a place where paradoxes are not paradoxes.

## 8. The Foundation of the USA

An echo of tiferet/balance/harmony helped shape, and is contained in, the fabric of the United States – one which has in time impacted other nations as well (though there is still a way to go especially in countries still driven by fundamentalism and autocracy).

<sup>6</sup> Berochos 58a.



Etched in American currency are two tiferet/balance expressions:

E Pluribus Unum (from the many, one) – the beauty of integrating both individuality and community, individual liberty and the greater good, without compromising the “many” or the “one.” Indeed, from the many becomes one – harmony within diversity.

And this is made possible by In God we Trust: Integrating faith with a strong separation of church and state, by embracing the Creator that endowed us all equally with “unalienable” rights (in the words of the Declaration of Independence) – a non-denominational G-d, not defined by any religion, individual or group.

This divinely inspired wisdom of the Founding Fathers established a republic whose governance would always remain checked and balanced.

And therein lies the fundamental strength at the heart and soul of this nation: The power of tiferes/balance.

And this fundamental tiferes/balance truth – that all of us are created equal, and E Pluribus Unum – is not just bi-partisan; it is non-partisan – it is beyond politics and transcends all our differences, and at the same time unites us all.

Tiferet teaches us that we must align ourselves and follow G-d’s lead – not the G-d of any particular man, not any god created in man’s image, but the G-d that created us all equally in the Divine Image, and the One that is the bedrock of a free civilization.

## 9. Our Children

This, my friends, is the deeper lesson from the mid-term elections, which happened in this week when we begin reading Jacob’s tiferet/balance narrative.

The nation – despite its differences – has chosen a government that will not be controlled by one party, but by a balance of both parties, on both sides of the aisle.

Yes, we are living in polarized times. And many are digging into their partisan corners, ready to brawl. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t have a tremendous opportunity to achieve and realize actualize the *raison detre* of this nation: E Pluribus Unum.

You may wonder: This may all seem nice and theoretical. But how can we ever hope to implement this? Especially in this hostile climate?

First and foremost, know that Jacob and many others after him actually lived their lives in this way, facing the paradox and... thriving (not just surviving). An eternal reminder to their

success is their offspring, who live till this very day, despite formidable and unimaginable odds.

What was Jacob's secret, and the secret of all those that lived the Tiferet way?

The secret was Bittul – the power to suspend your ego, your personality, your perspective, your everything – and allow yourself to be a channel for something far greater than yourself.

Suspend is the operative word, not annihilate (G-d forbid). Suspend and empty so that your unique faculties, your individuality, your ego, your personality, your perspective, your everything can become a conduit for the Eternal.

Imagine if our political leaders in Washington would adopt a bit of Jacob's approach to life.

Is that an unrealistic dream?

Perhaps. But it is due to such dreams of our ancestors –under far harsher circumstances – that we have a world today that is the most peaceful in history.

Remember: If you can dream it, you can do it. Those crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.

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