

“President Obama and Prizes of Peace”  
Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Parashat Bereishit 5770  
by Rabbi Judith Schindler

I’ve told this story once before several years ago, but because of its relevance, I repeat it today. When my brother and I were 15, we got to hang out in Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s living room while my father met with the Prime Minister. They were close friends. My twin Jon and I were definitely mischievous, and as we played with the Nobel Prize that was a coin on Begin’s coffee table, we debated whether, if we left with it, we’d be caught. That was certainly no way to gain a Nobel Prize – the Nobel Prize for peace no less.

The rightful way to receive a Nobel Prize has come under intense debate from a week ago today when it was announced that President Obama received the 2009 Nobel Prize for peace.

The Internet can be compared to the Talmud where you capture and hear the voices of rabbis from different places and times in thoughtful conversation. That was the case on Facebook last Friday. In response to spreading news of President Obama’s becoming the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Rabbi Jeremy Barras, who was Rabbi Streiffer’s predecessor, asked on Facebook: “Does anyone even care about the Nobel Peace Prize since Arafat won it?”

To which Rabbi Bennett, my predecessor responded: “I am proud of our President. For the first time in a long time, the United States has the potential to be a leader in multilateral efforts to create peace in our world. Despite the hatred and racism that is so rampant these days in this country, it appears that the Nobel Peace Prize committee believes in the possibilities his election represents. I hope they are right.”

Rabbis, reporters, politicians, pundits, world leaders, past Nobel laureates and simple people like ourselves are debating the worthiness or unworthiness of this year’s selection.

Even Obama himself questioned the decision. “To be honest,” he remarked, “I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who've been honored by this prize, men and women who've inspired me and inspired the entire world through their courageous pursuit of peace.” Yet he accepted this award, alongside all of us as Americans, as a call to action, and a call for all nations to confront the common challenges of the 21st century.”

Even President Obama's young daughter Malia put the prize on a different par as she said, "Daddy, you won the Nobel Peace Prize, and it is Bo's birthday." And then Sasha, his other daughter, added, "Plus, we have a three-day weekend coming up (for the Columbus holiday)."

Kids say things like it is – a three day weekend, the dog's birthday and the Peace Prize. In Malia's and Sasha's eyes, all were on an equal level.

The truth is, controversy surrounding the Nobel Peace Prize is common. Unlike the Nobel prizes in Science that are for achievements attained in the past, the Nobel Prize for Peace is less concrete. Winston Churchill, who fought the evils of the Nazi killing machine and led the world to defeat Hitler, was dismayed to win the Nobel Prize not for peace but for Literature. Other recipients who received the Peace Prize, even after they intensely lobbied for such an outcome, still experienced the letdown of feeling inadequate upon receiving the award. The achievement of peace is hard to define and often elusive. Even as we reach it – whether personally in our relationships, or as nations with new partners who were once adversaries or enemies, we can still slide back and descend into tension and turmoil.

Nobel Peace Prizes are not always given to those who achieve peace but to those who lead others along the path to peace.

Working for the peace that wins the Nobel Prize is an awesome task, and I would venture to guess it is out of all of our leagues. Working for the peace that wins peaceful souls and sound nights' sleep is more attainable. We should all strive for the latter type of peace.

Our parashah has lessons to teach as we reach for prizes of peace personally, as a nation and as a Jewish people.

Bereishit bara, and God created. Just as we begin the Torah anew each year and just as God in this week's text creates the world anew, so new beginnings are possible. In order to move forward we need to let go of the overpowering and paralyzing pain of the past as we focus on the present and future.

Bereishit bara, and God created. On day one God created light. The Kabbalists are quick to note it was not the creation of the physical light of the sun, moon and stars that was given to us on the fourth day, but on the first day God gave us spiritual light. Light that can be unveiled through our peaceful relationships with others.

Bereishit bara, and God created. On only one day of creation does God not look at God's creations and use the words, "it was good" or "it was very good." Day two of creation is not labeled "good" because of the separation that was created. "God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water." Separation has the potential for a negative impact. Prizes of peace are attained by removing barriers of enmity, distrust and miscommunication.

Bereishit bara, and God created. In the beginning, God created a Garden of Eden in which a world of perfect peace existed. Yet unlike God, as human beings we are imperfect. We often falter and fail. Hence we were quickly cast out of that idyllic garden, never to return. Never again would a peaceful world be given to us as if on a silver platter. We have to earn it. That is our life task to continually plant and labor and tend to that garden of harmony and tranquility for which we strive.

Berishit bara, in the beginning God created the first siblings – Cain and Abel. Sibling rivalry tore at them as Cain, out of jealousy, took Abel's life. The Torah teaches us the greatest life lessons, as any astute teacher would teach, through profound questions.

God asks: "Where is your brother?" And Abel responds, "I do not know. Hashomer ahee anochee — am I my brother's keeper?"

The answer is self-evident for all of us to see... yes we are our brother's keeper, whether it is our brother who lives in our home, across our city or in a distant land. Peace comes with striving to be the keeper of our brothers and sisters of humanity.

Light versus darkness. Unity versus separation. Creating a Garden of Eden not back in the Bereishit land of Paradise but in the real world. Being our brother's keepers.

We all have life goals, realistic goals. Nobel Prizes for Peace are grand. But personal prizes of peace are attainable.

Were I on Facebook with my colleagues Rabbi Bennett and Rabbi Streiffer last Friday, I would have written in:

Yes, the award to President Obama was premature.

Yes, it was yet to be rightfully earned.

Yes, it was intended to be a powerful statement to the world.

And yes, I believe it will, in the coming months and years of President Obama's leadership, serve as a hindrance rather than a help.

Yet, let us pray that the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to him will be predictive in nature and prescriptive in its power to move our Presidential leader to follow the path of peace, of diplomacy and of international partnerships in responding to world crises.

Let us hope that President Obama's receiving this most esteemed Prize for Peace will be a metaphoric prayer that will be answered in the years to come. Amen.