From Fear to Faith…

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A woman attends the opera, and as she reaches her seat she confronts a strange sight. A man in a tuxedo is sprawled across her row, moaning, immovable as he blocks some of the best seats in the house. The woman joins a chorus of others, trying to cajole and even shame the man into getting up and moving. Snickers and mocking whispers begin to arise, as the woman scolds the man for coming to such a civilized occasion so clearly and extremely intoxicated. The usher and manager are equally unsuccessful in budging the barely conscious, well-dressed patron.

Finally, a nearby rabbi joins the fray, and with patience and sensitivity, gets the man to reveal his name: Sammy Stein. The rabbi exclaims, "You know Sammy Stein. He's a mensch. He's no drunk. This is highly unusual behavior for him." The rabbi turns to Sammy, "Sammy, listen, you've got to get up, the show can't begin until you move. Is there anyone I should call? Are you from around here? Where'd you come from, anyway? Sammy weakly points to the heavens and groans, "The balcony."

So much in our lives comes down to a matter of perspective. Hopefully, as we grow, mature and experience more of life, we learn not to make assumptions or to draw conclusions based solely on our singular, narrow field of vision.

But it is human nature to base our view of the world on the stories we create for ourselves and about others. Often, we seek only evidence that confirms our opinions and supports our arguments. This shrunken but widespread misperception is at the root of some of the most daunting divisions currently cleaving our culture and our nation, especially in the run up to the coming election.

We are divided along myriad fault lines: politics, geography, race, and economics. And the break that underlies them all: a broad, encompassing perspective on the world that everything is a cause for either hope or for despair.

But this divide is more than merely optimism v.s. pessimism, or a different take on the half-filled glass. There's something much more fundamental and defining in what we are experiencing: It's really about seeing the world through the darkened lens of fear or the inspiring vista of faith.

A surrender to fear drives much of the most disturbing trends in our nation: An obsessive angst about global terrorism that far transcends its documented effect, *which is the actual goal of terrorism*; a sharp rise in the purchase of easily-accessible, military grade weaponry amongst a civilian population that far exceeds any other Western nation; and a knee-jerk effort to exclude vast groups of immigrants and refugees in

support of a nativist, circle-the-wagons, America First ethos.

And the most compelling recent driver of discontent that translates into fear: the very real swaths of our fellow citizens who have been economically left behind in a dynamically evolving global economy. They see an America unable or unwilling to uphold the promise that the next generation will fare better than their parents.

And yet, so many of these fears are not rooted in reality. Yet as is so often the case, perception, even and especially skewed perception, *becomes reality*.

Journalist Gregg Easterbrook sees a growing trend in which optimism has become "uncool." He recounts a reality that belies that trend: job

growth has actually gone up in the last five years; unemployment is below where it was in the 90s; our economy remains the strongest in the world by far; our military is the most dominant in the world and throughout human history; pollution, discrimination and crime are all down; living standards are up; and we lead the world in every field of entrepreneurship and creativity.

And even if you include the tragedy of 9/11 into the calculus, an American is 5 times more likely to be hit by lightening than to die in a terrorist attack.

Certainly, the middle class and manufacturing sector have taken a hit, but on the broadest scale, it is not as severe as it is portrayed. In fact, new census data offers a much rosier picture of

middle class and rural financial improvement. And the change that has left some workers out in the cold was a shift from manufacturing to the service sector, coupled with the rise of technology and globalization that were bound to alter the way we do business.

Warren Buffet recently lamented what he described as the current moment's "negative drumbeat," adding, "…many Americans now believe their children will not live as well as they themselves do. *That view is dead wrong*. The babies being born in America today are the luckiest crop in history." With his track record, wisdom and insight, the Oracle of Omaha should know.

But even beyond current causes and effects, at its core, fear is inherent in our DNA, a hard-wired response that served us well on the prehistoric savannah to avoid hidden cliffs or stalking saber-tooth tigers.

But in the post-agrarian, post-industrial, largely urban environment in which most of us live, we don't know what to do with this instinct, as we replace tangible objects of our caution with bogeymen of our own conjuring, creating narratives and back-stories to justify our unmoored feelings.

But fear is easy, effective, and in a perverse way, satisfying. We concede to it effortlessly, and leaders exploit it brilliantly to unify and distract the discontented and disconcerted. And our

addiction to fear is *literally* killing us, physically, psychically and spiritually. The rise in anti-depressant and opioid use attests to a longing to escape from within if unable to effect change from without. And if still unable to find refuge, many succumb to the finality of suicide.

Faith, on the other hand, is far more daunting to embrace, requiring more work, more imagination, and the ability to resist our lessor impulses. But faith is truly tested and triumphant, as is our broader character, not when times are good, but when times are tough, both real and perceived.

The classic insight from our Torah on the primacy of faith over fear comes from the portion *Shelach-Lecha* in the Book of Numbers. Its

wisdom resonates today as incisively as it did 3 millennia ago.

The Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, and Moses sends scouts to check out the land. The scouts return with a giant grape cluster reflecting the plenty of the land, but also with a dire report. They tell of massive walled cities filled with fighters that made them seem like insects in comparison.

The people are justifiably panicked, cursing Moses and God for leading them on this long journey to oblivion. *But two* of the scouts, Caleb and Joshua, offer a *very different view*. They saw *all the same things* the others did, but came to a *very different conclusion*. They insisted that, with God's help, and with faith in their mission and in

themselves, the Israelites would emerge victorious.

For their lack of faith, the rest of the scouts suffered the fate of the entire Exodus generation. God punished them by forbidding their entry into the Promised Land. Only their children, born into freedom, and the few who sustained their faith, were rewarded entry into Israel.

By the way, this is why it took 40 years to make a 6 month trip between Egypt and Israel, not the assumed reason that Jewish men don't like to ask for directions.

But unlike most of the Israelites who escaped Egypt, whose slavery-impoverished spirits held little room for faith, there is still hope for this and the next generation of Americans. If we can

broaden and deepen our perspective, supplanting fallacy with fact, and fear with faith, we, too, can reach an American Promised Land that reflects more about *who we are* then what our nation is.

What are some solutions, ways in which we can reach that Promised Land together? First and foremost, it will require those of us who are fortunate in our lives and inspired in our vision to reach beyond our prejudice and stereotyping, seeking to understand and empathize with those with whom we share a common citizenship and a common humanity. Many living in what we derisively call "fly over states" are suffering, experiencing real pain and legitimate concern for their wellbeing and that of their children. While we coastal urbanites can attest to the actual and

factual health of our nation, they are living in another, more anguished America.

As Reform Jews, we are justifiably quick to rise to the defense and support of the marginalized and the minority. Can we not extend that same compassion to beleaguered, belittled, working-class white America?

***Let me be clear*: We can *never* excuse the racism, sexism, and bigotry emerging from a loss of the privileged status afforded to them in the past, often on the backs and with the lives of disempowered communities of color. But while many have used their hardship as a justification for latent, toxic views, many are merely hard-working families struggling to get by in a nation that seems to little care for their future. A quick**

read of J.D. Vance's recent book, *Hillbilly Elegy,* is enlightening.

Another cogent response comes from former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who in a recent book envisions a political movement that unites current divisions, affirming what we all share, what we all want, and what we all deserve: dignity, comfort, security and a reason to get up in the morning.

It is insight rooted in the ultimate distillation of our tradition into 3 little words: *Ve'ahavta l're-echa kamocha*—to love our neighbors as ourselves, extending empathy, outreach and action that emerges from an honest appraisal of ourselves, and then projecting our values and aspirations onto others.

And when our tradition challenges us to become *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations, it is more than a sharing of our ideals and ethical system. It is a critical element of our survival. *We Jews are history's canaries in a coalmine*. The stresses and strains of society have always led to our persecution and annihilation. If the nobility of faith and high ideals aren't reason enough for us to work toward assuaging this Great Fear, the possible recurrence of the tragic lessons of the past should alert and drive us.

Faith's handmaiden is hope. And hope is far more than a trite campaign slogan or self-help step. It is often understood as a secular version of faith, and it is embodied in our people's most iconic verse: *Hatikvah*.

This summer I travelled to Israel on a rabbinic mission. We visited the National Library, and were shown rare documents, including the only copy of *Hatikvah* in the hand of its author, Naftali Imber. Imber wrote these words in exile, at a time when Zionism was a fervent dream, not the ideology of an established state. The history of the poem was tumultuous and full of debate. Perhaps that's why Israel only officially adopted it as the national anthem in 2004.

But the words stir the heart and revive the soul as much today as they ever did. When so many nations root their identity, and thus their anthems, in shows of military force and triumph, Israel and the Jewish people take a different path. We have always spurned violence as a necessity

and not a virtue, articulating a vision that is yet to be, but one that is possible if we, like Caleb and Joshua, rise to meet fear with faith:

Kol od balevav…

As long as the Jewish spirit

Yearns deep in the heart,

With eyes turned East,

Looking towards Zion.

Our hope is not yet lost,

The hope of two millennia,

To be a free people in our land,

The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

May our dream, our vision, our hope and our faith, become our true gifts to the rest of the world. And may we face what lies ahead for *this* blessed nation, not with despair but with determination,

not with expectations of failure but with aspirations toward greatness, not with surrender to the darkness, but with a full embrace of the light. Amen.