

Harry Truman—On Becoming a President

On April 12th, 1945, Harry Truman was summoned to the White House. Ushered into Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting room, the vice president was gently informed that President Roosevelt had died.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Truman asked after a moment's reflection. "Is there anything we can do for you?" Eleanor replied. "You're the one in trouble now!"

I am the one in trouble now! As Vice president these last six years to Bob Gan, Yosef Kanefsky and my good friend Stuart Vogel—I can only hope to lead with as much compassion, dignity and chesed as these wonderful now past presidents of the board of rabbis. I am so honored to begin the next two years as President of the Board of Rabbis. Thank you to my colleagues for their confidence in my leadership.

Leadership is an interesting thing. It is a gentle balance between being strong and authentic and authoritative and yet open to compromise, consensus and most importantly I think listening rather than talking. So tonight even as I say a few words on this notion of leadership—I am humbled by my colleagues with whom I have had the pleasure of working on this Board for many years and their extraordinary talent, ideas, Jewish learning, and menschlikite. I look forward to working closely together in the next two years with such a strong and diverse group of rabbis whose creativity and commitment to Jewish life is unparalleled and whose respect for one another goes so deep into the fabric of what makes the Board of Rabbis of Southern California such a model of Klal Yisrael. Our shared concern and devotion to the whole Jewish people regardless of where we daven or if we daven should be I believe our paramount mission. Z

Klal Yisrael used to be an important principle in Jewish life- Growing up in Memphis TN we all understood that we needed one another. But increasingly as partisan pressure has mounted in the outside world—this same lack of reaching across the aisle or should I say mechitza has reared its ugly head in the Jewish community. We Jews love to argue and engage in pilpul—in the art of examining every possibility, but all too often some in the Jewish community forget to love and respect one another too. Leadership demands this. Creating a community that embraces everyone demands this. The Board of Rabbis is the address that embodies this ideal of Klal Yisrael.

Anita Roddick was the CEO of the cosmetics company, The Body Shop. Her company was one of the first to prohibit animal testing and promoted fair trade in the Third World. She said:

“Leadership is creating a vision to which others can aspire and energizing them to work towards this vision”.

I hope that in these next two years—together we can shape a vision that will energize our chevre—our rabbis to lead the Jewish community to think creatively and to work cooperatively with the lay leadership of our congregations, organizations and especially the Jewish Federation to connect more Jews to the community even as we reach out to interfaith leaders to build a better Los Angeles!

We need to reach beyond gender and sexual orientation, ability, and class to help ensure that all our welcome at the Jewish communal table. The Board of Rabbis is uniquely able to educate and create opportunities to help even the unaffiliated become connected once again.

Leadership is a combination of factors-and yet according to William George and Walter Bennis—gurus of the modern ideals of leadership, the most important quality a leader can possess is authenticity. To be a leader is to be authentic. It is not about style but about 5 essential characteristics that must be practiced and lived to be authentic: understanding the purpose, practicing solid values, leading with the heart, establishing connected relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline.

These are not a sequential process but good leaders acquire these principles and practice them continually. Authenticity matters in crafting a leadership ideal. Authenticity is what we strive for—not some image of rabbi from another time or place—but authenticity in 21st Century Los Angeles has a different ring to it. This is what we will look to—thinking beyond the narrow boxes that have for so long kept us stuck in the same old ways.

In these fractious times, when our lives are so compartmentalized, even as we pursue the Messianic ideal of shelymut-completeness and wholeness, we know that authenticity is often elusive. We rabbis like our families and our congregants and those we serve are pulled in as many directions as they are and sometimes even more. People cry out for our attention and our skills. Our families need us and yet the immediacy of serving God and the Jewish people can distract us and take us away from our families. And so our Board of Rabbis is even more essential to create a community of rabbis across the Southland that can provide support for one another and Torah learning, dialogue and outreach to Jews and gentiles, chaplaincy to our jails and prisons and convalescent homes, and create a platform to speak

with one rabbinic voice on the important issues of our day be it support for Israel or the orphan, widow or stranger in our midst.

This is the vision that we set before us tonight. And I hope we can continue to aspire to this vision-that will bring collaboration and comfort, caring and creativity and yes, a true sense of the sacred community that we have with one another.

Tonight is Lag B'omer—the 33rd day of counting of the Omer period between Passover and Shavuot. Each of the 49 days in between we wait impatiently to receive the covenant at Mt. Sinai once again so we can affirm our place in that historical chain of tradition and revelation.

But on this day-the Talmud (Yevamot 62b) teaches that a divine plague was sent and killed Rabbi Akiva's students. More than 24,000 of them. All because they did not show the proper respect to one another, they begrudged one another their learning and spirituality. Let us hope that no Divine plague will be ever rendered again especially to scholars and rabbis or anyone.

Our Board of Rabbis exists to help us know one another and respect one another even in our differences. And that is a message that is not just for Rabbis alone. It is a message that we all need to hear. The Jewish community, the interfaith community, and our country. We must listen to one another, and yes, Love our neighbor as ourselves.

The custom of Lag B'omer is to light bonfires—in part as a memorial to the great mystical rabbi, Shimon Bar Yochai who is said to have died on this 33rd day of the counting of the Omer. These great fires light up the night as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's light lit up our world and before his death he revealed the deepest hidden secrets of the Torah. So tonight while we will refrain from building a bon fire in the middle of Temple Emanuel—let me suggest that we build a bonfire of light and enlightenment that can indeed light up our city-and help us embrace a message of love and welcome.

Again, thank you for this great honor. I am humbled and ready to join together with you in transforming ourselves and the world.