

DEAR PRESIDENT BIDEN

Dear Mr. President:

Warmest congratulations to you and to Vice President Harris upon this historic and long-awaited occasion of your inauguration. You and the vice president have already demonstrated your ability to listen to the wisdom of others. Much of the wisdom I listen to comes from my Jewish tradition. As people committed to our respective faiths, you and I both know that the voice of the new is often louder, but the vision of the old is often clearer. Our respective traditions are treasure houses of insight that can help us as our guides on the side, as we serve as the sages on the stages of our congregational and national pulpits. Therefore, in your honor, I share with you some of those insights from Judaism, many in response to things you said during your inaugural address. I hope that they can serve as notes in your pockets which you remove from time to time to help you in your sacred tasks.

- 1. Do not be like servants who serve the master for the purpose of receiving a reward; be like servants who serve the master for the purpose of not receiving a reward.*

Mr. President, you and I know that genuine leadership is servant leadership. Your enormous power and prestige are obligations thrust upon you, not privileges gifted to you. Power and prestige must always be wedded to higher purposes, or

they become nothing more than the playthings of the Pharaohs of every generation. Even and especially the great King David, progenitor of the Messiah, was humbled by the prophet Nathan who spoke God's truth to the king's abuse of power. I pray for you that your leadership will always be that of a servant of God and the people.

2. Be in the habit of judging all people fairly.

Mr. President, as you declared again, you are the president of all Americans; even the ones who didn't vote for you, who oppose you, who hate you, even, God forbid, the ones who want to destroy you in word or in deed. We know that one of your greatest challenges will be to find the potential for good buried deep beneath the most hateful and misguided members of our citizenry. And in finding it, may you help everyone of us to see it within ourselves and each other.

3. Weeping may endure during the night but joy cometh in the morning.

Mr. President, I so appreciate this quotation during your address from King David's 30th psalm, one that has carried me through many a night of weeping and many a morning of joy. How well these words of faithful hope, often-times a hope against hope and against cynical reasoning, can carry each of us forward in our own bodies and souls. Our collective body, the body politic of America, is wounded, bleeding, and weeping through this long night. I share with you that

hope against hope that joy will come in the morning, by the grace of God and by the grit of our good will and work.

4. *Every controversy which is for the sake of heaven will in the end endure. Every controversy which is not for the sake of heaven will in the end not endure.*

Mr. President, you spoke of our nation healing from its deepest divisions, of turning down the heat on our controversies, of learning to listen to each other without turning every disagreement into violence. How do we distinguish legitimate from illegitimate controversies? My tradition tells us that we must determine which controversies are for heaven's sake. Later teachers of Judaism explain that a controversy for heaven's sake is one in which we stay focused on issues and not on attacking people or name calling; in which we are more concerned with truth than with always being right; in which both sides listen to each other and admit that they might be wrong; and in which both sides see that they could both be right. These last few years of controversy in American politics have certainly not been about arguing for the sake of heaven. In this respect, you are now tasked with being the educator-in-chief who can show at least the majority of our people, if not all our people, what it means for Americans to argue like *menschen*, the Yiddish expression for decent people.

5. It is not your task to complete the work, neither are you free to desist from doing it in the first place.

Mr. President, the work before you of helping us to heal is beyond urgent, which is why you have already set for yourself an enormous agenda. Please, for our sake, go forth and do the work. Yet also for our sake, do something for your own sake: do not burn yourself out or lose critical focus by trying to complete all of that work too fast and too soon. May you always, like the truly wise person of Jewish tradition, be able to learn from all people. May you help us to locate within ourselves and each other the better angels of our natures.