

## **The Death of a Dream**

**Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen**

**Friday, July 1, 2022 – *Parashat Korach***

Earlier this week I realized this Shabbat would be my fifth consecutive “Fourth of July weekend” service at Temple Isaiah. My own “Welcome Shabbat” - marking my start date as part-time cantorial soloist - took place Friday July 6, 2018. Some of you were there. A few of you may even remember an “America-themed” music medley as the finale. But, sadly, no fireworks.

I thought back on each Shabbat service closest to Fourth of July weekend - 2018 & 2019 in our Sanctuary; 2020 broadcast from home, in the thick of early Covid, when I nearly set fire to my hair with Shabbat candles; 2021, here on Vollmer Deck, minutes away from giving birth to Sidney.

I thought back on each of those Friday evenings adjacent to America’s birthday, our annual celebration of independence from Great Britain. Our ancestors’ recognition of new beginnings, free from the tyranny of King George III.

Looking back on each consecutive year - the words I shared, the prayers I sang - it’s clear the schism between my real, authentic patriotism and my real, authentic disconnect from my country’s leadership was growing.

But this year - 2022 - I’m not sure where to begin. I love my country, and I will always, *always* feel grateful to carry an American passport. Especially witnessing what my sister-in-law has lived through these past few months, watching her beloved home, Ukraine, torn apart by war. There are freedoms I as an American do not, and will not, ever take for granted.

But honestly, it feels like an entire year has passed since last Friday - when the Supreme Court struck down *Roe*. When our nation - founded, however imperfectly, upon the ideals of freedom,

equality and the separation of church and state - began a dangerous, devastating chapter in its complicated story.

This past Sunday I participated in a moving, heartbreaking vigil to mark this seismic shift, this terrible violation of autonomy, this heinous attempt to constrict and control women's bodies. The vigil, cosponsored by multiple synagogues around LA, led by brilliant female-identifying clergy, was beautiful, and powerful, and I was so grateful to participate.

Later that evening, I walked to my car with a dear friend, Lisa, a rabbi from Leo Baeck. She and I traveled all six years of rabbinical school together; we started HUC in Jerusalem apartments a block and a half from one another, and we were ordained together at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills in 2014. We've known each other a *long* time; we've seen one another evolve from recent college graduates to wives, mothers, and rabbis with nearly a decade of experience in the field.

After a bit of small talk, Lisa turned to me and said, "*Jac - how are you?*"

*"Lise -" I began. "I gotta tell you, I'm ok - but, my God, we didn't sign up for this."*

You see, Lisa and I started in Israel in the summer of 2008, during the sunset of the George W. Bush administration. John McCain appointed Sarah Palin as his running mate while we sat around our friend Leslie's Shabbat table, yards from Jerusalem's Old City. Barack Obama was elected on a gorgeous November evening as we prepared to fly from Tel Aviv to Berlin to commemorate Kristallnacht. Our understanding of our roles as Reform Jewish leaders began with a changing of the political guard, a shift toward greater inclusivity of marginalized folks, an opening to a future of greater equality.

From this vantage point, in 2022, it feels almost quaint.

Back then, like now, we often heard the phrase, *don't talk politics*. As aspiring congregational rabbis, we were often reminded ... folks in our synagogues might bristle at the mention of initiatives, propositions - and God forbid you talk about a candidate. Yet, at the same time, our Reform Movement training is fiercely, unapologetically rooted in justice. The roots of our denomination are planted in the soil of dissent; truly, our German ancestors sought to break away from what was then “normative” but what we now call “Orthodox” Jewish practice.

The foundation of our Reform Jewish identity involves pushing back against the status quo.

For years I - like so many of my colleagues - have walked that line between “widening the tent” and “sharing unfiltered thoughts on current events.” And yeah, at times I’ve set my own personal beliefs aside to empathize with and relate to the beliefs of others.

And to be honest - that never felt problematic. For me it was just ... being a decent human being. Creating space for one of my lifelong principles - this world exists not in black & white, but in shades of gray. Part of serving as a congregational rabbi is recognizing that, to serve diverse communities, you have to find comfort somewhere in the middle. And if you truly live by the mantra *B'tzelem Elohim* - created in God's image - that includes folks with whom you personally disagree, too.

And then came the Trump era.

Now, at this moment it doesn't matter to me how you voted in 2016 or 2020. I don't care if you're a registered Republican or Democrat, if you're fiercely Independent, or if you support the Rainbows & Joyful Magic Party, if it exists, and if it does - maybe I should join.

What I do care about - indeed, what matters much more to me - is manners. Decency. Truth. Empathy. Kindness. How we peak with one another. How we adapt when things don't go our way. Whether we recognize the inherent, God-given dignity of every individual. Whether we create space for all folks, from all walks of life, to thrive.

For me, that's not political. That's *human*. And no matter how any one of us votes, since that 2016 election, it's been one wild & chaotic ride for us humans.

I became a rabbi because of the human condition. I became a rabbi because I wanted to *help* others live fuller, more complete, more connected lives. Like many of my colleagues, I endured trauma and tragedy in my childhood and thus chose to do something with my life that helped others through their own pain & suffering.

You could say I became a rabbi to try and make the world a better place.

I knew it wouldn't be easy. I knew there'd be uphill battles, disagreements, polarizations, **board meetings**. I knew things would get messy around election season. I anticipated conflict. And I knew the face of organized religion was changing, and would continue to change, over the course of my career.

But I can tell you without hesitation - I'm quite sure I never signed up for all of this. And I imagine if you asked most Reform clergy if our world today is what they thought they'd signed up for when they chose to devote their life to the service of God and humanity, I would imagine most ... would have a similar realization as me.

This weekend, as we celebrate America's birth, I'm mourning a loss. I am grieving the death of a dream ... a dream I once held of what it would mean to serve as a rabbi in North America in the 21st century. (pause)

But here's the thing about death. For some it is an ending. For others ... It's the beginning of something new.

This week's Torah portion ... is *Korach*. It's about rebellion. It's about uprising. It's about a group of folks deeply dissatisfied with their leadership. God doesn't love it - God's response is to open up the Earth and swallow Korach and his followers whole. But as many modern scholars of Torah have affirmed again and again, "*not all rebellions look - or end - like Korach's.*" Think of the suffragettes of the early 20th century. Civil rights warriors. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. John Lewis on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Stonewall Riots. Climate activist Greta Thunberg outside Swedish parliament. Teenagers from Parkland, Florida leading us to "March for our Lives," in pursuit of a future free from gun violence.

To push back against the status quo can be deeply holy ... and it is deeply Jewish. Because rebellion has the power to transform people's lives for the better. And I can say - *without hesitation* - removing women's access to reproductive health care will not - I repeat *will not* - ever transform anyone's life for the better.

I know I'm not the only clergy person for whom a veil has been lifted, showing us a version of America there all along. I know I'm not the only Jew for whom last week's Supreme Court ruling in *Dobbs vs. Jackson* felt like an affront to everything we hold sacred.

And I know I'm not the only human who's struggled with just about all the Supreme Court's activity over the past couple weeks - but maybe I'll get to ((that)) in a future sermon.

The truth is, I don't know what comes next. But I do know ... that with the death of my original dream ... that early, idealistic, dare-I-say rose-colored concept of what it would mean to become a rabbi in 21st century America ... comes the birth of a new dream. A more authentic, realistic dream. A dream of fierce, unapologetic pursuits of justice. A dream of deeper, more real, more compassionate, more honest dialogue. A dream of renewed purpose and inspiration, fighting - truly - for our lives. A dream of Torah shining new light onto all I thought I knew and understood from my thirty-eight years on this planet.

A new American dream.

This coming Monday, America celebrates her 246th birthday. 246 years of highs and lows, ebbs and flows, peaks and valleys, triumphs and defeats. A full, complicated life and then some.

As I said, I don't know what comes next. I am afraid, and grateful, and inspired, and exhausted. But I know ... as I begin tonight my fifth year at Temple Isaiah ... as I look around at this community ... as I look to the faces of my own beautiful children ... and hear from the hopeful, curious minds of our congregation's youth ... and listen to the passion and the wisdom and the determination and persistence of colleagues and mentors of every age and life stage and, yes, socio-political belief system ... that we are evolving together. That we will enter new chapters together. That we will create new worlds of access and sustainability, inclusion and assistance, together. That we will fight for what is right ... and just ... and holy ... and rational ... together.

That *together*, as a community, we do have the power to make this world a better place.

And *together*, we say: amen.