Shabbat Message
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"An Inaugural Reflection"

On Wednesday, January 20th, I suspect that we watched the inauguration for two reasons. First, to witness the spectacular event as we often do when a president and vice-president take the oath of office. Second, to see for ourselves if any protests or worse might take place. Thankfully, we were rewarded with the former and not the latter. I trust that no one was disappointed.

The inauguration of President Biden and Vice-President Harris was a momentous occasion. Ultimately, it was a peaceful transition of power that signaled to our nation and the nations of the world that the United States and its democratic principles, its institutions, and its focus on the world are intact. We also observed Martin Luther King, Jr., day on Monday, with the timeless theme of taking steps to improve our lot in life through respect, civility, dignity, honor, humility, and trust, no matter the color of our skin or the faith in our hearts. Never before have the juxtaposition of these two events meant so much to us.

As we ran to social media to post our thoughts and impressions, we struggled to find the words and the ways to express ourselves just right. But there was someone who found the words and the ways not only to express herself at the inauguration, but also to express for us what we couldn't possibly find the words to say.

In her bold yellow coat and red headband, Amanda Gorman, a 22-year-old poet laureate, struck a pose that would be a mere introduction to her deeply chosen words, moving cadences, and profound messages. A day before, I heard her on PBS, in a casual interview. She spoke eloquently and deeply. For me, the most anticipated moment at the inauguration was her poem, "The Hill We Climb".

I won't read it to you, because I wouldn't do it justice. It must be heard, and better still, it must be viewed. Ms. Gorman's hands and body added movement and energy to the words she carefully enunciated as thoughtfully as she composed them. But there are highlights that should be lifted up.

Gorman had the country's future in her sights but also the riots of insurrection that preceded the inauguration by only two weeks. She spoke to President Biden, but she held all of us in her hands while she aimed to open our hearts. She began with a question:

"When day comes we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" Her question is an observation about life's other side. In contrast to light, which we seek, there is darkness, and in its wake, a never-ending shade. Judaism acknowledges both. In the morning, we say, "Baruch Atah Adonai, Yotzer Or," blessed are You, Adonai, Creator of light. We don't take for granted the new light that we wake up to see and enter. In the evening, we say, "Baruch Atah Adonai, Hama'ariv Aravim," blessed are You, Adonai, Who brings on the

evening. The cycle of evening and morning surrounds us as we enter and leave it and enter it, again. Where, then "can we find light in this never-ending shade?" In a world of God's creation, it is always here, if we seek it in faith.

Even in light, she suggests, our search isn't easy. She wrote, "We've learned that quiet isn't always peace." We know it's true. Our prayers almost always end with a prayer for peace. In the morning, we recite, "Sim Shalom," God, maker of peace, grant us peace. In the evening, we recite, "Shalom Rav," Grant us peace, Your most precious gift. We don't pray for quiet; because we know that outside our still room and our private settings, there is no peace outside and around us. So, we pray for what we still seek for ourselves and others. We pray for peace.

When Gorman tells us that we live in a "nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished," she taps into the potential for optimism that might have escaped us. But in Judaism, nothing is ever finished. We use the term, Tikkun Olam, not to overstate the obvious, but to prevent us from every thinking that our nation, let alone the world, is finished. So, Jews are taught to see what is and then work for what ought to be. Whatever has been given us is now our obligation to transform.

What should we make of what we've been given? Gorman compels us, "To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man. And so we lift our gaze not to what stands between us, but what stands before us." Her aim is to dismantle the obstacles, real or imaginary, factual or conspiratorial, and deal with what we can't look away from seeing. What stands before us? To Jews, we're taught, "Da lifnei mi atah omeid," know before Whom you stand. We stand before God. And, in Gorman's poem, we stand before God, and, like the burning bush from which Moses couldn't look away, in America, we stand before potential, hope, and faith, too.

Her worldly outlook is anchored in what she urges us to do and be at home. She writes, "Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true: that even as we grieved, we grew; that even as we hurt, we hoped; that even as we tired, we tried; that we'll forever be tied together, victorious; not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division." We need to see ourselves in the work of our nation. We need to see that, though we hurt, we can hope. When we grieve and hurt and lose, our Judaism permits us time to feel what we must feel; but Talmud teaches that God mourns with us for only a prescribed amount of time. Then as we've also been taught to do, we "Choose life!" Though grief and hurt can't always be avoided, Gorman echoes Judaism's charge, "But we will never again sow division."

Our effort begins by recognizing what we hold in our hands. In one hand, we hold our strength. In the other hand, we hold our compassion. Gorman writes, "If we merge mercy with might and might with right, then love becomes our legacy." The Hebrew prophet, Zechariah wrote, "Not by might, but by My spirit, says God," shall we prevail. We possess much more than might. In what God has shown us, we also have mercy. Gorman foresees that their merger is love.

She ends her poem as she began. Where can we find light, she wonders for us? She answers, "For there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it; if only we're brave enough to be it." In Proverbs (20:27), we learn, "The light of God, is the soul of man." The light is already in us. "It's time for us to see it," says Gorman, "It's time for us to be it.

Indeed, it's time for us to be a light. Individually, we have used our life's light to illuminate people and places where there's suffering. Congregation Beth Israel is deeply engaged in the well-being of our community. We are represented in many non-profit organizations as board members and program volunteers. They're not vain attempts to make a small difference. They're sincere responses to our Jewish call to "love your neighbor," "to lift up the wretched," and "to welcome the stranger." And those who can't lend their hands can provide financial resources to sustain their efforts.

As a Jewish people, we are, at our best, an "Or l'goyim," a Light to the Nations. We are at our best when we learn in our own Torah and its teachings how to be a light to the nations. The mitzvot compel us to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). We'll fail if we don't know our own Torah and its teachings; we'll stumble if we don't understand why we do what we do, and how to do it better. We'll succeed if we take time to learn, to study, and also do. Our legacy is love, as Gorman hopes for us, but also, and most importantly, deeds, good works, mitzvot.

A day before his inauguration, President Biden and Vice-President Harris did a mitzvah. They stood with their spouses on the national mall to pause and reflect on the hundreds of candles burning in honor and memory of the 400,000 people who lost their lives to COVID-19. Their expression of empathy for the people of our country was a picture of hopefulness that would inspire all but the coldest hearts. This is the country we love. This is the faithfulness that our Judaism, like other religious traditions, consider a sign of deep humanity for all God's creatures. How we care for the sick and dying, and how we regard the elderly and the vulnerable among us, are expressions of who we are as a nation.

Though we are unelected in our individual roles as Americans, we are no less obligated to and responsible for the America we share. We are grateful for leaders who are role models for us; we're grateful to Amanda Gorman for her inspired words at her remarkable age. How much more will we learn from her and how we'll grow with her!?

On this Shabbat, as we do on High Holy Days, too, we pray: May the President and his administration give voice and meaning to our dreams and aspirations. May the Vice-President rise in her role to provide support to the President and inspiration to all the children who see themselves one day in her place to lead us. God bless all of us this Shabbat, with quiet and peace in our hearts and our nation. Amen.