

# **KISS TODAY GOODBYE, AND POINT ME TOWARD TOMORROW**

Reflections on Forty Years in the Rabbinate

by

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April 30, 2010 - 16-17 Iyar 5771 - Parashat Emor

## I

The story is told that at the height of his career Frank Sinatra visited an old folks home to entertain the residents. He arrived early, ahead of his advance team, and walked in alone. He saw an old woman sitting quietly in a rocker in the front lounge. "Old Blue Eyes" walked up to her and respectfully asked, "Do you know who I am?" The lady looked at him and smiled kindly and replied, "No, but if you go over to the desk, there's a lady there you can help you remember."

Well, fortunately I do know who I am, and I know where I am. And most important, I know how blessed I am to be here with you this evening where I have been given the opportunity to share some reflections about how I got here, what I think I have accomplished, and where, with God's help, I am headed in the years ahead.

I want to thank Rabbi Citrin and the Board of Trustees of this Congregation for giving me the opportunity to share this shehecheyanu moment with all of you.

*Baruch Atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam,  
Shehecheyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higiyanu lahzman hazeh.*

*I am grateful to able to praise and thank You, O God,  
and the many wonderful souls, living and past,  
who have shown me such love, taught me so much, inspired me to carry on,  
and have kept me alive, sustained me with love and care,  
and brought me celebrate this special day.*

## II

"A rabbi??? What kind of job is that for a nice Jewish boy?" When I was growing up in Paterson, New Jersey a little over six and a half decades ago that was a standing joke and a standard question asked of me whenever I expressed my interest in becoming a rabbi.

The truth is, I wanted become a rabbi because I felt something very special about being and doing Jewish. Also, candidly, I loved to perform in front of an audience, Hebrew came easily to me, and I was a good talker and a careful listener. My friends and family often sought me out for advice. When you mix all those ingredients together, and bake them for twenty-two years, out comes a rabbi!

A unique blend of "Re-Conserv-adox" Judaism was practiced in my home, where I was the apple of both my parents' eyes – an only child – spoiled rotten. But most especially from my maternal grandparents, my Bubbie and Zaide, Bella and Morris Goldberg, of blessed memory did I really feel Judaism's mystical aura.

I was fortunate to spend a part of every day with them while I was in grade school. It was my grandparents who taught me how to speak and read Yiddish and Hebrew. From them especially, and from the rest of my family as well, I experienced a deep faith and respect for things Jewish and learned how to perform the rituals of daily Jewish living as they did. May they all rest in peace and know how much I love them, and owe to them.

How well I remember sitting on my Zeide's lap holding a popsicle stick that he whittled down to be used as a pointer. We read through Hebrew readers, Yiddish readers, and later the Siddur, the Torah and the Forward. On Saturday evenings after Havdalah, I would sit by my Zeide as he studied Talmud from Rabbi Teich on radio station WEVD in New York. I sat next to him at our elaborate family seders, and he pointed his way through the Haggadah it seemed, just for me. I also remember my Dad saying to him on more than one occasion, "Enough already Pop, do you think he's going to become a rabbi?"

In addition to my Jewish education at home, I was dispatched to the Miriam Barnert Memorial Hebrew Free School, after school every Monday through Thursday, and also every Shabbat morning and Sunday.

There I was blessed to be entrusted to a caring role model of a lawyer- turned-rabbi named Harry Bornstein, alahv ha-shalom. He was like the Pied Piper, he gathered children along the way as he walked from his home down to a small synagogue in downtown Paterson, New Jersey every Shabbat morning, no matter what the weather.

As I think about it, those weekly Shabbat morning walks planted dozens of seeds in my mind about how kind and caring Rabbi Bornstein was. He had remarkable patience with each one of us. As we walked in a small, mighty band, he kept us entertained with dozens of stories and taught us many sayings from Jewish tradition. Sometimes, we sang a new version of a prayer we would sing during services. And once at the Miriam Barnert Memorial Hebrew Free School, we knew exactly what to do.

We were taught how to conduct services. We were treated with care, respect and vision. We represented the future to the older congregants – the "regulars" who attended weekly. We had kind words for all of the older congregants who kvelled continuously at our achievements in leading worship. They liked us and respected us as well. If we stumbled or made a mistake, no one shouted out the correct word. If we were nervous, lost our way in the Hebrew, or didn't chant loud enough, no one shouted out "Louder, I can't hear." I had to wait until I was ordained to hear those words.

Ah, those were the days. With Rabbi Bornstein by our side, we grew, we thrived, we loved being a part of the Jewish community.

Not that I knew the meaning of every Hebrew word I was reading , singing or chanting. That was when I knew that I was a Reform Jew.

As my bar mitzvah approached, and I got to spend more time with Rabbi Bornstein, on Shabbat afternoons in his home, without the benefit of computer programs and tape recorders. As always, he sat patiently with me and helped me learn the meaning of every word I would chant from the torah and in my haftarah.

This week's torah portion, Emor, on this the fifty-third anniversary of my bar mitzvah, teaches us the ways in which to make each day – each season of the year meaningful with special practices and rituals. I didn't realize it at that time, but I do realize it today, if our faith is going to thrive in future generations as it did in my youth, we must be role models for future generations and make each day count and put a bit of Jewishness into each day of our lives and celebrate "L'chaim" to Jewish life.

### III

My decision to become a Reform rabbi with a special focus on education was shaped by the progressive thinking and love of learning of my parents, my grandfather and my uncle, Rabbi Martin Goldberg who served as the senior rabbi of Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo New York for forty years and as Emeritus until his death in 2002, coupled with my own frustration and curiosity.

I moved unhindered along my career path through Eastside High School and the University of Buffalo – so I could learn from my uncle firsthand. Despite the protestations of my uncle, who threw virtual snowballs and boulders in my path to convince me to make another career choice, I applied on my own to his assistant, and was hired as a sixth grade teacher at Temple Beth Zion, where I discovered that I wanted to become a specialist – a rabbi / educator.

This evening I have gleaned from my virtual treasure chest of memories and artifacts a few items which represent the areas of focus during not only my forty years in the rabbinate, but the years of preparation for my ordination in 1970.

**The first is a shirt cardboard.** Do you remember them? They don't even use them any more, but I used to find them in the shirts I took to the cleaners in Buffalo, and I would turn them into posters or flash cards for my Religious School classroom.

Rabbi Mark Shapiro, my uncle's assistant, who was my supervisor, asked if I wanted to earn some extra money by tutoring b'nai mitzvah students. I readily agreed. "This won't be easy," he said, "But I am positive that you have the temperament to do this." I was up for the challenge.

My first student, who we'll call Norman, was legally blind and significantly deaf. He also had a profound speech impediment. But at our first meeting, his parents informed me that they wanted Norman to celebrate his bar mitzvah, "just like everyone else." And so I began my weekly sessions with him.

Norman was bright and could recognize the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, provided they were written large. He would place the page up to his "good eye" and trace the letter and the vowel underneath and say it. I decided to try writing one word from his torah portion on a shirt cardboard and began working from there.

Lo and behold the method worked, and with pieces of cardboard all over the carpet in his family's large living room, Norman mastered the words of his torah and haftarah portion.

From Norman I learned that perseverance and determination to succeed can overcome almost any learning challenge. I learned patience, and at Norman's bar mitzvah, where there was not a dry eye in the crowded sanctuary, I understood that Jewish education was a field which could provide untold rewards.

Over the years, I have taught "Normans" of all ages, and learning abilities. Together we faced an abundance of challenges, physical, psychological and spiritual. For instance, one of my mentally challenged adult b'nai mitzvah students in Kansas City taught me how to treat and cope with her almost weekly seizures during class. So excited was she about attending Bat Mitzvah class, that she would forget to take her anti-seizure medication.

Over the past fifty years, whenever I face a student with unique challenges, or any student for that matter, I think of Norman and the shirt cardboards.

As my career expanded at Hebrew Union College into administration and supervision, I think of the many conversations with parents, and the special bonding I established with students of all ages as they prepared for a bar or bat mitzvah.

I developed teacher training workshops. I designed and facilitated curricula for members of my staff. I spent hours in every congregation I served convincing members with special skills, whose potential would benefit the congregation and the school that they had the ability to be a teacher and role model, even if they had never set foot in a classroom before. I promised to be by their side every step of the way, and I was.

And today, what a privilege it is to teach university students what is unique and special about our Jewish heritage through films. It is a weighty responsibility to live up to our reputation as the people of the book.... and now the internet and a variety of media.

How proud I am to have been selected to become a rabbi of this congregation where I found so many imbued with a passion for Jewish learning. How doubly proud, that during my tenure here Temple Beth-El, our congregation was recognized nationally as the most educationally innovative small congregation in the Union for Reform Judaism, and also designated as a recipient of the prestigious Talmud Torah Award for such a high percentage of our congregants involved in ongoing Jewish learning.

#### IV

As I look at the top layer of my treasure chest, I find a **variety of projects created for me by the Jews by Choice** who studied with me. I developed this activity as part of the conversion process because I felt that each person's journey is a unique one, with opportunities to see and adapt one's loves, passions, hobbies and skills through a Jewish lens. I see :

- a stained glass window crafted by a young woman who grew up in Germany and only saw a synagogue from the outside and now, through her studies could see it from the inside and be a part of a community at which she could feel at home.
- a chanukia formed from a piece of driftwood from the Oregon coast where one of my students would visit regularly to nurture herself spiritually.
- there is the database of games and recipes created by one student in order that she, her husband and child could have more fulfilling Shabbat and holiday experiences.
- there is a handmade intricate patchwork quilt entitled "Undeniably Jewish," making a proud statement, each stitch sewn with passion, pride and love.

Working with Jews by Choice is truly an area which has provided me with deep satisfaction and personal accomplishment.

I realize how much the world has changed since I attended rabbinical school where one of my professors said, "If someone comes to you to convert for a reason other than marriage, look for a deeper problem." How wrong he was. I learned how much passion, drive, and need there is in the souls of these fine and dedicated individuals. And that is why I have committed a good deal of my years in the rabbinate to working with Jews by Choice and with spouses who have not converted for reasons of their own. While in this congregation, these efforts earned us two Belin Awards from the URJ.

## V

The final item I want to share with you from my virtual treasure chest is a **magnificent tzedakah box** crafted by my amazing pottery teacher and former student Corry McKissack, presented to me at a wonderful tribute here before my retirement. Not only does this tzedakah box represent the essence of a skill I have tried so diligently to master for the past ten years during my weekly pottery classes with Corry, but it represents a value which I have set before me – an aspiration through which I try to live my life and upon which my rabbinate is grounded and founded – that of Tzedakah – not "charity," but rather doing the right thing.

- Yes, giving tzedakah is a part of it, but it is much more than that.
- It is seeing the eyes of God in the eyes of every person of every faith with whom I have come in contact and who reached out to me.
- It is doing justly, always learning and teaching and finding divine sparks wherever I can.
- It is pursuing tzedekah and hesed, acts of love and kindness
- It is speaking out – not remaining silent when I see injustice all around
- It is remembering as best I can that life is short, but a life needs to be well lived and shared. I thank God each day that my life is shared with a precious friend, a loving, caring, understanding partner by my side. And I am grateful as well for the love of our children and grandchildren, and extended family and dear devoted friends with whom many good times were shared, and, God willing, many more dreams and good time will be realized.
- It is not just reading Torah, but being Torah. These activities require daily maintenance and practice which is why each morning when I awake, I recite Psalm 121 and lift up my eyes to our beautiful mountains to seek help, sustenance and guidance.

And Finally, the tzedakah box reminds me that after forty years in the rabbinate, I have given as best I could, and with God's help and help of God's messengers or angels – those who I have tired so hard to serve – I must be grateful for the abundant blessings I have received many times over.

## VI

And so, where am I going fifty-three years after my bar mitzvah and forty years after my ordination? Geographically – nowhere. We are proud to call Las Cruces our home, and Temple Beth-El our spiritual home, God willing, for many years to come,.

But as I face tomorrow, I will use the words of the song from "A Chorus Line" by Marvin Hamlisch to sum up my feelings:

I kiss today goodbye,  
And ask God and those around me to point me toward a beautiful tomorrow.  
I did what I had to do.  
I won't forget, can't regret  
What I did for love.

Love – love of learning and teaching torah – of performing mitzvot large and small

Those loves will never be gone.  
As I travel on  
Those loves will I remember.

I kiss today goodbye,  
And look forward to tomorrow.  
I did what I had to do.  
And I won't forget – don't regret  
What I did for love.

Kane y'hi ratzon. May it be God's will. Amen.