

"Down to the Lower East Side..." (November 2005)

Dateline: Sunday, October 16. I took a group of Ner Tamidians down to the Lower East Side today to buy lulavs and etrogs for Sukkot. I've been doing this ever since I arrived here in 1980. I guess as a Detroit, a Midwesterner for whom New York City was a collection of photos in a tourist brochure, the opportunity to walk along the streets of the old neighborhoods of our immigrant ancestors has a kind of Isaac Bashevis Singer appeal. There's just something about dirty streets, crumbling buildings, the smell of pickles and crowds of vibrant people to stir in me the latent pangs of urban romance. I love the Lower East Side.

Standing on the corner of Essex and Canal, buying palm and willow branches from an Israeli, surrounded by Chinese and Yiddish speakers, I am smothered in a confluence of cultures in a city continually driven to reinvent itself. I look across the street to see what used to be the Garden Cafeteria, once a thriving locus of socialist debate in a less-than-mediocre vegetarian enclave is now a take-out restaurant. A few storefronts away looms a large Chinese sign filling its side of a building whose façade still proclaims its once-majestic Yiddish identity—Forverts. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is 4 streets to the west; built in the late 1880s, just a few Jews still pray there but on this Sunday morning craftsmen work assiduously to restore its once grand exterior. There's something about this part of New York that cannot be destroyed.

Except for Ratner's. After lunch, on our way across Delancey to take the kids to Economy Candy, we have to walk past the space once called Ratner's. If you're lactose-intolerant, you wouldn't have enjoyed Ratner's. It was a dairy restaurant. If you expect decent treatment as a cash-paying patron, you wouldn't have liked Ratners. The waiters there were brusque, rude and impatient. But if you savor fresh onion rolls, buttery rich potato soup, cheese blintzes from heaven and a cream soda drawn from the tap—then Ratner's was a destination for the soul. Alas today that double-door entryway into what was a cultural oasis is now but another storefront.

Time marches on.

This month I celebrate 25 years of serving as your rabbi. It is, I confess, a daunting thought. Sometimes it feels as if I've just arrived, like I'm still a Midwesterner. Sometimes I have to pause and consider all the water that has flowed under the bridge of the last quarter century. Sometimes I think I can still play shortstop and comb my hair. But it is true, I was thirty years old when I moved here from Milwaukee. I have celebrated my marriage with you, watched our

four children stand on your bimah and read from your Torah scrolls, sat in my living rooms in Bloomfield and Montclair when you came to console me following the deaths of my father and mother.

I humbly accept your good thoughts and affirmation of my service to Temple Ner Tamid. But for whatever nice things (I hope) you will say about me this November, know this: what you are really celebrating is a decision made some 27 years ago to merge two synagogues, to keep alive a community, to stave off a fate like that of old restaurants. To be sure, the passing of time has brought change. The old Temple B'nai Zion is now a church. And the stores once owned by Bloomfield's merchant Jews are long since sold or closed. But the soul of this Jewish community is stronger than ever before, and this is true not because of anything I have done but for what our leaders bravely chose to do—stay home and reinvent themselves. For me it has simply been a privilege to be part of this experiment. And for that I thank you.

When I got home from our day walking through New York's Lower East Side, I came across an HBO film entitled, *Everyday People*. It's an intelligent and sensitive story about a Brooklyn restaurant choosing to close its doors and sell out to a developer. Somehow watching this examination of a neighborhood in transition and the place institutions have on the community made my day of walking along Essex and Delancey and Orchard streets that much more poignant. But the more I watched this film, the more it seemed just a bit too familiar. Of course movies set in New York all seem to look familiar, but there was something here that went beyond the usual. And then I realized that Raskin's, the fictitious Brooklyn restaurant that is at the center of this film, was in fact Ratner's. It was the same double-door entryway. The same vista out the front window onto Delancey Street. The same swinging doors into the kitchen.

I found something comforting here. Just to be able to catch a glimpse of the old Ratner's I used to know as an immigrant from Detroit, watching *Everyday People* was a doorway into a world of memories and almost forgotten tastes. At the same time I also appreciated how grateful I am to those who let me be part of their dream, of their heroic plan to not break from the past but build on it. Our doors are still open. Many of the faces are different, but many are the same. And because of their devotion to what has been and their vision to what can be, there will be no nostalgic movies made or books written about this place, at least not for the foreseeable future. We still have so much more to do.