

A Few Reflections on My Rabbinate
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In today's Torah reading, we read the familiar story about how Moses grew up. After being raised as an Egyptian in Pharaoh's palace, he goes out to his kinsfolk. He witnesses their oppression. He sees an Egyptian beating one of his kinsfolk, a Hebrew, and it triggers something within him. He kills the Egyptian and buries him in the sand.

The next day, he comes upon two Hebrews -- two of his "brethren," the Torah says, fighting. He tries to break up the fight, at which point one of them turns to him and says, "**Who** appointed **you** to rule over us?" At that point, Moses runs away and settles in Midian, far away from the only Jewish community in the entire world.

THINK ABOUT THAT MOMENT when those two Hebrews were fighting with one another. Moses had only recently realized that he and the Hebrew slaves were kith and kin. He was eager to help his people. Nobody had told him he had to stand up for that Hebrew who was being beaten by the Egyptian the day before. No one told him that he had to intervene in that fight the next day. Those acts flowed from his desire to help. And yet, when he tries to help, he's scorned, and as a result, he leaves the one and only Jewish community in the world. As he does, what does he know about the Hebrews? Only two things: They're being oppressed, and they fight with one another.

Would you want to be in a community in which people are fighting with one another?

One of my chief concerns during my years as a rabbi at Temple Aliyah has been helping us **to disagree with one another without being disagreeable**. In many communities, there are conflicts. There is contention. Almost every congregation has a story about how one or another person threw their weight around and got the community to go their way. During my tenure, I've tried to keep us far away from that kind of conflict resolution.



I've tried to encourage us to **talk about our differences, honestly and face-to-face, and to deal respectfully with one another, respecting one another's opinions.**

Now, why is that? Why have I cared so much about that?

Many people assume that the reason is because, like all shuls, we want to keep our members. We don't want people **feeling** like Moses did -- as though this isn't the place for them -- and **doing** what Moses did -- namely, to hightail it out of the Jewish community.

Well, there's some truth to that, but the main reason I believe in maintaining a culture of respectful disagreement is that I want to reinforce what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls, "**the Dignity of Difference.**"

I've long believed that **my role is not to tell people what to think.** It's to lay out the issues; it's to share voices from our tradition; it's to highlight the different, often competing values that should be considered.

If there's one lesson from the Talmud that really speaks to me, it's the following: "**Teach your tongue to say: 'I do not know.'**" (Berachot 4a) The humility that comes from honestly uttering that statement enables growth, personally and communally. It's essential for personal learning, and it's essential for a strong, successful community.

What does a successful Jewish community look like?

It's a **Beit Midrash**, a community devoted to **learning**. It's a place in which people listen to the opinions of others, considering them respectfully and thoughtfully. It's a place in which people are also willing to critique their own opinions.

A successful Jewish community is also a **Beit Knesset**, a place where people come together with others who are different from them -- supporting them and caring for them.

And finally, a successful shul is a **Beit Tefillah, a House of Prayer**. As we know, humility is essential to Jewish prayer. The proud, haughty person

cannot pray, or if he or she attempts to do so, his or her prayers, our tradition teaches, are not answered.

Let's return to Moses. What happens after he flees to Midian? He becomes a shepherd, and he is out there one day tending his sheep when he notices something: he sees a bush on fire, a burning bush, that is not being consumed.

That does it. He heads back to Egypt.

Why? Why was that sight so impactful? Maybe because unlike everything in the physical world around us, that tree symbolizes that some things don't change. They transcend the physical world. They are eternal.

That experience enables Moses to overcome his reluctance to be a part of that contentious Jewish community that he had left. Thank God! If that miracle hadn't happened, the Israelites might never have been redeemed.

Why was that symbol so effective?

Well, let me speak personally. That symbol, the symbol of the burning bush that was not consumed, has some resonance with me. It's the symbol of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I, Rabbi Gordon, Rabbi Bill Kaufman, and my own daughter, Leora, have studied. (It's one of the schools where Shira Farbman is being educated today.) That symbol speaks to me. It was helpful to me in deciding to become a rabbi.

One of my concerns in deciding whether to become a rabbi was whether Judaism would continue to be a source of fascination and inspiration for me. Maybe -- I recall thinking to myself -- it's interesting to me *now*. Maybe it is important to me *NOW*. But maybe it won't be 10, 20, or 30 years from now. What then?

Well, the bush was not consumed. The bush *was* on fire, it *is* on fire right now, and it'll *continue to be* on fire. Like the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light above the ark, it's a symbol of the eternal source of spiritual energy in the world.

It has never failed me. I've understood God differently in each decade of my life; I've prayed differently in every decade of my life. Judaism has meant something different to me in every decade of my life.

But I've never stopped being intrigued, excited, and inspired by all things Jewish.

My goal as a rabbi has been to share that curiosity and that enthusiasm, with the hope that it will inspire each and every one of us to explore Judaism on our own, to claim it and to reclaim it, to turn it and to turn it again, and to continue to learn and to grow and to derive meaning and value and joy from our **study**, our **practice** and our **connection** with the Jewish people.

So may it long continue to be.

Kein Yehi Ratzon! Amen.