

Twenty-Five Years and Counting

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This was unquestionably a tough year for business, especially for people in my line of work. Yes, it was a difficult year for the American economy, and it adversely affected too many. But it was also a tough year for religion, and those who practice it.

The Catholic Church scandal, which has been brewing for years, exploded full force as the cumulative impact of so many cases of pedophile among the clergy could no longer be ignored or viewed as aberrations. It took a significant toll on countless individuals and will be difficult if not impossible to undo the damage to the lives which have been shattered, as well as to repair the esteem of the church which bears responsibility for its complicity and cover-up of the scandal. It is amazing how widespread the problem is, and the extent of it.

One Catholic archbishop sought to explain the crisis by blaming it on, you guessed it, the Jews. Somehow, it always comes back to being about us. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Meridiaga said that the story is really an old one, and that the only reason we are hearing about it now is because the Jewish media wanted to give these incidents which took place so long ago prominence and played it up in order to divert attention away from criticism of Israel. The scary thing is this guy is not some marginal kook, but is actually pretty high up in the Church hierarchy, and is mentioned as a possible successor to the Pope. How reassuring to hear his accusations – just when I was worried that our power and influence were on the decline!

On the local scene, *The Washington Post* has chronicled the situation of a minister who has gotten into trouble for the indiscretion of passing off the sermons of others as his own, never something which goes over that well among parishioners. At the least it is an embarrassment. On a larger scale, it diminishes the level of trust worshippers place in the authenticity of their leader and his message.

And speaking of trust, in New Jersey, a rabbi accused of murdering his wife eight years ago was convicted of the crime and sent to prison. Arthur Magida, author of the book, “The Rabbi and the Hit Man” has been covering the story for a number of years. He was attracted to the story because of the theme of tension between the yetzer hatov, and the yetzer hara, the inclination to evil. He wrote, “I see that evil’s great, fearsome talent is its power to creep up on us, bit by bit and day by day, until we say farewell to our better side, to our yetzer hatov.” In a scathing indictment of the rabbi, he writes, “He stole the souls of his congregants, the hearts of his children and the life of his wife. His very life is a sharp, scolding sermon: do not trespass, it says, where I have been, for I have met evil and I have done evil and I am evil.”

Yes, it was a tough year for religion.

And then there are the Moslem clerics who sanction and express sympathy for radical, destructive acts of murder. It is beyond me why Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the mastermind behind the terrorist organization Hamas is consistently referred to as a “spiritual leader.”

Billy Graham is a spiritual leader. The chief rabbi of Israel is a spiritual leader. The Pope is a spiritual leader. The rabbi of Washington Hebrew is a spiritual leader. Sheik Yassin is not a spiritual leader. He is the head of a terrorist organization. He is the leader of a group of thugs, but he is not a spiritual leader.

With leaders and role models like these – a philanderer, pedophiles, terrorists, and murderers, one can understand the cynicism towards religion and religious leaders. Not that it is much consolation, but religious leaders are not the only ones guilty of indiscretions and errors in judgment.

Having been misled so often, people wonder if they can place their trust in politicians. It should come as no surprise that voters are beginning to feel, who knows, maybe we will have better luck with a bodybuilder. In the realm of business, executives of Tyco, Enron, and Worldcom have recently been sentenced to prison terms for their crimes and the lies they told about their company's finances. In the world of the print media, the New York Times was embarrassed by the case of Jayson Blair, a bright, arrogant rising star who fabricated stories and quotes. It comes as little consolation to know that no profession is immune to these infractions.

I am thinking a bit more about the disturbing things that transpired in the religious community, in part because this is my profession, and since the heinous actions of some religious leaders reflect on all members of the clergy and also reveal something about our society. Furthermore, the Yamim HaNoraim lend themselves to the theme of introspection and reflection. It is a time to think about what we may be guilty of and how we want to grow and change in the coming year. It is the time to ponder what we do and how we spend our days on earth. Perhaps I am musing about these matters since this coming spring will mark the 25th anniversary since I was ordained as a rabbi, and so I find myself thinking these High Holidays not just about personal issues, but about the career I have chosen to devote my life to.

Other factors contribute to my ruminations, for this is not the only life cycle event on my mind these days. This past year, I celebrated the milestone of my 50th birthday. And just last month we celebrated the bar mitzvah of my youngest son, Noam.

Finally, I find myself in a particularly pensive and reflective mood because the past few weeks have also been somewhat emotionally wrenching and draining as my family has been in the process of dismantling the home I grew up in, since my father just this week moved out of his home of over 46 years, and into an assisted living home. The walls are bare. It is stripped of the furniture. The tzoctzhes, each with its own memory and association and all the things that made it a home are gone. It is a shell, and it is on the market to be sold. (So if you or anyone you know is looking to buy a house in Pikesville....)

Such are the cycles of life, and of this season.

Stephen Fried, author of "The New Rabbi" writes, "Changing lives is the theme of the entire High Holiday season. Rosh Hashana is a celebration of the new year and its possibilities; it signals the beginning of a period of taking emotional, personal and theological inventory."

In that spirit, I think back and recall my decision to become a rabbi. It was not until late in my senior year of college that I decided to apply to rabbinical school.

My Christian colleagues speak of receiving the “call” to become a minister. We Jews usually do not speak in such terms. For me it was most definitely not a calling from beyond, but much more a voice from within. Predicated upon my conviction that ultimately, the survival of the Jewish people and of Judaism is the most important thing in the world to me, coupled with my desire to use whatever God-given talents I possess to serve God and His people, it was an easy choice.

After a year of ulpan in Israel, where I learned to conjugate verbs, and the difference between the hifil and niphil forms, I was thrust upon the unsuspecting Jewish families of Harlingen, Texas for my first high holiday experience, and the first time people would be looking to me as their rabbi. I just kept worrying what I would do if they asked me about anything other than Hebrew grammar, since that was about all I knew after a year of Hebrew studies in rabbinical school in Jerusalem. Somehow, I survived, and so did they.

The next year, now a veteran of introductory courses in midrash, bible and Talmud, once again I took on a high holiday pulpit. When I asked my bride, new to America where she would like to go, she said somewhat adventurously, “Choose the farthest congregation available.” So we wound up in Caspar, Wyoming, where I returned for the next three years.

The reasons I decided to become a rabbi are as compelling for me today, as they were when I first started thinking about becoming a rabbi almost 30 years ago. The survival of Judaism and the Jewish people is still what motivates me. My love of Jewish sources and Jewish texts continues to excite me. I find so many wonderful messages and meaning in them. I delight in the way in which such ancient writings seem so contemporary and have such profound applications and relevance for today. I revel in the challenge of how to share its message with you, and struggle with how to convey and impart my passion, convictions and enthusiasm to you. Needless to say, I still have a deep love of the Jewish people, and continue to worry about our survival, and agonize over our future.

In many respects, the issues confronting the Jewish communities and congregations I have been blessed to serve remain the same. It is the challenge of imparting a love of Judaism to our members, of helping them to realize that without rituals and customs our heritage cannot be passed on to the next generation; of teaching those traditions; of getting people to realize that Judaism is more than just a set of vague ideas, concepts and values, but something spiritually rewarding to be lived in the context of home and community, and which can profoundly affect how we conduct our daily lives; of feeling connected and part of a people; of being excited to study its texts and moved by the potency of its intellectual sophistication; of seeing the beauty of celebrating the holidays and Shabbat; of marking life cycle events, and seeing how meaningful, especially at times of loss and death of a loved one fully observing the halakha and minhagim can help people through a difficult time; of being inspired and uplifted by the majesty of our liturgy; of feeling both the pain of our people’s suffering, and the joy of our celebrations; of appreciating our accomplishments and sense of humor, as well as our unique outlook and perspective on life, and so on.

One example of how the absence of Judaism can lead to unfortunate circumstances will suffice. A number of years ago a congregant spoke with me about the concerns he had, as his 15 year old teenage daughter, like many of her friends, was spending Friday nights going to parties and getting drunk. What can we expect, when we do not offer our children the anchor that is offered by our tradition. Just think how in this instance, celebrating Shabbat at home would have provided a framework that would have helped prevent this situation.

And to illustrate my point about how relevant Judaism is to our lives – The Talmud tells the story of a child who is overly sheltered and protected, whose every need is provided for by overindulgent parents. The father places a pouch of gold around the child's neck and sends him to stand outside a house of ill repute. The Talmud asks, "Does he really expect that his son will not sin?!" The story beckons to us from across the ages, and warns us of the consequences of giving our children everything, without placing any limits or restrictions on them. It calls upon us to come to terms with our responsibility for the consequences of the choices we make and to take steps to prevent the inevitable outcome caused by our shortsightedness.

Whereas in biblical times, our ancestors contended with idolatry, the rabbis of the Talmud already knew that the idolatry of their times, like that of our day and age is materialism. It speaks to the vacuity we feel, due to the paucity and emptiness of our values. Deep down when we are honest with ourselves, as we must be on this day, we agonize over the bankruptness, hollowness and shallowness of our lives as we simply pursue pleasure and bigger and more material things. These are the most serious problems facing all of us.

I have yet to meet a parent who says they want their children to be materialistic. Every Jew I know says they want their children to have values, or that family is the most important thing to them. But what are the values we want to pass on, and where are they to be found? How do they propose to do this if they themselves are not familiar with and conversant in them? How can they be passed on, if they do not put the ideals of our faith into practice? And in reality, merely emphasizing family or family togetherness can be self serving, if it is an end to itself. What is the antidote to a materialistic, narcissistic society? How do we learn to say no to our children and to ourselves, and to set limits? How do we achieve a balance in our lives? How do we come to learn that happiness comes not from what we have, but is based on what we are, how we act and treat others, and how we feel about ourselves? These are the questions we must grapple with, and in every instance, I remain convinced the answer is Judaism.

Being a rabbi is an exciting and challenging undertaking, offering the opportunity to touch people, to teach and to make a difference in people's lives and in our world. Just the other day, I received a call from the head of the campaign of one of the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination for President in response to concerns I expressed in a letter about recent statements he had made about the Middle East. The conversation ended with the request that I send along any suggestions I had for language the candidate should include in upcoming speeches about Israel. (So if you start hearing some lines uttered by one of the candidates in the Democratic party debates that sounds like it comes from one of my sermons, just remember – you heard it here first!) A few

days before Rosh Hashana, I spoke at a rally in front of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia protesting their support of Hamas and fundamentalist Islamic terrorists. This was my third speech in front of an Arab embassy in recent months, as I was invited to be the keynote speaker at rallies in front of the Egyptian and Syrian embassies as well.

Exciting as it may be, it is not just the public role, which is fulfilling, but also the quiet private moments of counseling or consoling, of helping a couple, of offering support to a congregant in a difficult or trying time, of speaking with a child about what is bothering him, of knowing that people can feel comfortable confiding in me, of assisting a congregant find a job which can be so rewarding.

One of my favorite aspects is the opportunity to share special moments in people's lives, and with their families. I will never forget the first time I officiated at a funeral, as a student rabbi in Muncie, Indiana. There were just a handful of people, all members of the congregation in attendance, as the only surviving relative was his non-Jewish wife. She insisted that before the funeral I take a look and see how nice she had him made up, with his glasses on his eyes, (as if this is going to help him see better, I remember thinking to myself.) At the conclusion of the service, imagine my surprise when the funeral director proceeded to the front of the chapel, and announced to the assembled guests, "I just want everyone here to know that this is this young man's very first funeral. And I am sure you will all agree with me that he did an outstanding job." Somewhat sheepishly I accepted the congratulations of the people there, and just tried to get out before they would start applauding and give me a standing ovation.

My next funeral, this time, my first as an ordained rabbi, was in Miami, Florida. A meeting with the children of the deceased yielded little information about the man I was supposed to eulogize. So just before the service, I met the gentleman's attorney. I said to him, in order to elicit some more information, "Abe must have been quite a guy." He responded, "Rabbi, you are one of the lucky ones. You didn't know the guy."

There is much more to tell, but I have probably already said too much. I hope I have not been too overly personal in my remarks this evening. I feel a little bit like the lawyer in that wonderful commercial who tells his client sitting in a jail cell that he just got great news. Excitedly, the prisoner asks his attorney, "You mean you arranged for me to get out?" And the lawyer says, "No, even better. I just found out I can save a lot of money on my car insurance."

Although I find it extremely stimulating, challenging and fulfilling to serve the Jewish people, Dr. Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote this past May in Commentary magazine about the crisis of the diminished status in the American rabbinate today. He laments the reduced role and authority of the rabbi in American Jewish life, saying we are not better off if, "The relevant question becomes not how much the rabbi knows about Judaism and how effectively he instills it, but how the rabbi treated me and my family at our life cycle event, ...and whether at our last encounter the rabbi uttered the words I needed to hear."

What is it that congregants really want? As Rabbi Elliott Schoenberg, director of placement for the Rabbinical Assembly says, congregations want as their rabbi someone who attends every meeting and is at his desk working until midnight, someone who is 28

years old, but with 30 years of experience, someone who relates well to teenagers, but spends all his time working with senior citizens; who is always available in his office, but is active in the community, and constantly visiting congregants. He should be an effective leader, but let laymen run the congregation, a person of principle, yet flexible; firm in his convictions, but with the wisdom not to impose them -- basically someone who does everything and will stay with the congregation forever, but not too long.

A story is told about a synagogue that hired a rabbi based on the glowing recommendation given by the president of his previous shul. The president praised the rabbi saying he was like Moses, Shakespeare and God. After a few months, the new shul realized that they did not quite get what they had expected. Their rabbi barely knew anything about Judaism, was extremely inarticulate, and did not get along with anyone. Angered, they called the person who gave such a positive reference and demanded an explanation. The president of the old shul said, "Everything I said is true. Like Moses, he stammers, and is a poor public speaker. Like Shakespeare, he knows nothing of Judaism. And like God, he has no human qualities."

Being a rabbi is most gratifying – especially when teaching a class or getting someone excited about taking on more mitzvot and living a life of greater commitment to Judaism. But if asked to choose just one moment that is my favorite, it would have to be during the wedding ceremony, when I am standing at the chuppah. The first to enter, I watch the drama unfold before my very eyes. From my vantage point, I see the parents and sense all the emotions they feel and the groom standing awkwardly in anxious anticipation awaiting his bride. How fortunate I feel to be a part of this transitional moment. I have the best seat in the house. As I watch the unfolding of this scene, which is a glimpse of the future, I often quietly say a blessing to myself, which I first heard uttered by Rabbi Samuel Karf shortly after my ordination. "*Baruch atah adonai*, blessed are you O Lord, king of the Universe, *she'asah lee rav l'amo yisrael*, who has made me a rabbi to his people, Israel."

I am reminded of what Judith Viorst wrote in her book, *Necessary Losses*, "At each stage of our life we are going to be confronted with experiences that will require us to say goodbye; that will require us to relinquish something we may not want to relinquish; that will require us to move on whether we are ready for it or not. And yet if we can do that without denying it, fighting it, refusing it, we grow."

Indeed, time marches on, and so must we. Yom Kippur is one of those times, when each year we can say goodbye to those things we need to relinquish. That is part of the message of this season. We are forced by our tradition at this time of year to confront our past and to imagine our future.

Yom Kippur is the time when each of us can and should pause and think about what we have done this past year, and what we hope to change about our actions and behaviors in the coming year. Yom Kippur affirms that we are constantly re-writing both our past and our future. It is the day when we must honestly confront who we are, and where we wish to go. To do that, we must honestly deal with our past and who we are.

A colleague told me a story about a family that was proud of their ancestors who had come to America on the Mayflower, and who decided to commission a family history. In

the course of doing research, the historian they hired found that the family tree included many prominent individuals, but he also discovered a great uncle who was executed in the electric chair. The author assured the family it would not be a problem. He wrote in the book, “Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution, was attached to his position by the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock.”

This is not a day for deception, but a time when we must be honest with ourselves, so we can become what we should strive to be. Where we see faults, shortcomings, and practices we should not continue, we need to make changes.

Again, I quote from Stephen Fried’s marvelous and insightful book. “Yom Kippur, a day of atonement, solemn fasting, introspection and immersion in past misdeeds, is when the book is closed for the year. It is the April 15th of Judaism. And, like a tax day for the soul, it is spent doing last-second calculations of self-worth, all without the benefit of food or water.”

At this solemn hour, may each of us reflect on the meaning of this day. As the medieval Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda wrote, “Days are like scrolls. Write on them that which you wish to remember.” May we use our days wisely, and may we write on the scrolls deeds of loving kindness, of devotion to our loved ones, of dedication to the principles of our religion, so that we will be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year.

As we proclaim in the morning blessings: *Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech haolam*, Blessed are you O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, *she’asani yisrael*, who has made me a Jew. I thank God for having made me a Jew, and I thank you for the opportunity to serve the Jewish people. May each of us, in our own way, serve God and His people in the coming year.

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