

A Plea to Rabbis: Be Positive
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The stakes are high.

Let's be honest. For most of the people who attend High Holidays services this is the only time they will be in shul the whole year. It might be the only sermon they will hear.

It is our chance to inspire and uplift them. It is our chance to encourage them to deepen their connection to Judaism and the Jewish people. It is our chance to convey something we discovered and that motivated us to want to become rabbis: that Judaism is intellectually challenging and stimulating; that being a part of the Jewish people offers meaning and fulfillment; that it is a calling that is the path to working to create a just world. It is our chance to make them want to deepen their commitment and to explore this magnificent and beautiful tradition.

So please, dear colleagues, I urge you, be positive. Be positive about what it means to be Jewish. Be positive about what it means to be a part of the Jewish people. Be positive about your fellow Jews. Be positive about Israel. Motivate your congregants. Challenge them. Speak about what matters to you from your understanding of Jewish sources. Urge people to act out of Jewish conviction. Make them feel good about being Jewish.

The first question people will ask each other when they get together for family meals will be, is, "when did you get out", as in how long were your services. The second question might be, "how long was the rabbi's sermon?" But then once the time-keeping questions are out of the way, the question that will most likely become the focus of the conversation is what did the rabbi speak about? Some will agree and some will disagree with what the rabbi had to say. Some will be upset by the choice of the topic the rabbi addressed. Some will say the subject matter was inappropriate. Some will complain the sermon was too long, while others will retell the jokes the rabbi told.

Something truly unique is taking place in these encounters. I know of no other people who will debate and discuss so intensely, and take such a strong interest in the subject matter a preacher has presented.

As you are composing your messages, ask yourself if this will cause people to have a greater connection to Judaism and the Jewish people, or might it cause greater distance and alienation? Will it contribute to a desire to deepen one's connection, or might it cause people to question why they would want to identify with the Jewish venture?

We should be especially cognizant of this when we speak about Israel. Rabbis can denigrate and criticize the policies of the government of Israel, or they can help provide context to its struggles. We can go beyond the critical articles in the media and inform

people how Israel addresses the very real and serious challenges it faces. We need to think about the impact our messages have on those who come infrequently at best to a Jewish place of worship.

A number of years ago when members of my congregation accompanying me on a trip to Israel heard a vitriolic sermon harshly condemning Israel for its treatment of non-Orthodox Jews, they asked me why we would bother travel to Israel if things were so terrible. The question I urge my colleagues to consider when composing their High Holiday sermons is how to express our concerns in a way which engenders greater connection, attachment and the desire for more connection not to disconnect.

This is our moment.

What will we do and how we will use this opportunity to reach so many? Hopefully we will embrace it as a chance to inspire and to encourage Jews to seek a connection to their heritage, to the eternal messages of Judaism, as well as to God, the Jewish people, and the national aspirations of the Jewish people.

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