

JCRC Speech: Pillar of the Community Leadership Award  
June 14, 2007

First and foremost, I would like to say how humbled and appreciative I am to receive this recognition from an organization that epitomizes so many of the values that are important to me. What an honor it is to share this award and this evening, with my namesake, Stuart Kurlander. Stuart has served the community well and taught all of us a great deal through his leadership and example.

It occurred to me that in future years the JCRC might want to continue this trend or theme of honoring two people with the same first name. They could present an award to:

Michael Gelman and Michael Moore  
George Soros and George W. Bush  
Ron Halber and Ron Howard

Amos Elon's book, The Pity of It All tells the tragic tale of Jewish life in Germany from the onslaught of the Enlightenment in 1743 until the beginning of its destruction in 1933. He chronicles the concerted efforts of Jews to assimilate and integrate into German society. They so desperately wanted to be accepted, to advance and to be treated like everyone else that they were willing to shed their Judaism and abandon the customs and rituals practiced by their families for hundreds of generations. In many instances they even converted to be able to partake of all that German society had to offer.

Elon opens with a description of the life of Moses Mendellsohn, often considered the first modern Jew, and intellectual father of the Enlightenment. A brilliant philosopher, he left the ghetto in 1743 for Berlin to enter a world that until then had been inaccessible to Jews. Attributed to him is the saying that one should "be a Jew at home and a man in the street." He suggested that it was best for Jews to relegate Jewish observance to the home, and not to show any visible expression of their uniqueness when in the outside world.

We who live in a post Enlightenment Age struggle with the same issues facing Mendellsohn and his contemporaries, including:

- How Jewish can we be in public without jeopardizing our stature?
- How comfortable are we in the secular world?
- How much should our Judaism influence our public acts?

Mendellsohn offered one model. He suggested that Judaism be restricted and relegated to a limited role. Not surprisingly, none of Mendellsohn's grandchildren were Jewish.

Clearly, the work of the JCRC is the antithesis of what Mendellsohn advocated. For one, it supports programs designed to ensure that our grandchildren will be Jewish. Furthermore, and most significantly, under the capable and energetic leadership of Ron Halber and his outstanding staff and lay leaders, we are Jews in the street as well as in our private lives.

In fact, with JCRC we often take to the streets to stand up with pride for our people and the noble causes we believe in. We are not afraid to be activists or to act upon our convictions and to share our perspective with others.

This approach dovetails with and complements my life's calling as a rabbi --- to help people be comfortable with their Judaism in both their public and private lives.

Either Judaism has something to say about how we live our lives, about the decisions we make, about our moral and ethical choices, about the great issues facing our society, or it is pointless. It demands that we be actively engaged in the great issues of the day; to offer the insights of a tradition which brought and brings God's message to the world on significant matters in every generation.

Unlike those Jews in Germany who had to choose between living a Jewish life or a secular life, we Jews in America understand there is no conflict between the two. We live in accord with the commandment *beshivecha bevetecha, uvlectecha baderech*: to bring these words alive "when you sit in your house, and when you walk along the way."

It has been especially fulfilling to serve as a rabbi in this community and to work with and befriend so many individuals who have inspired me by all they do on our behalf. How fortunate we are in the Washington D.C. area to have such illustrious pillars who work so tirelessly on behalf of the Jewish people. But the next generation must step forward and fill these big shoes as well. We must do whatever we can to strengthen our synagogues, educational, youth and communal institutions in their efforts.

And being a rabbi is also rewarding because of the chance to study and be inspired by our texts, and then, in turn to take that wisdom and that energy and transmit it to others. We have a passion for justice, as we attempt to make sense of the world, and shape it into the vision of the prophets by fulfilling the Divine imperative to work to improve it – not just for Jews, but for all of humanity.

That notion is part of what inspired me to decide to devote my life to serving the Jewish people. When I was a senior in college and was lobbying the State Legislature, involved in political issues, taught in a religious school, and did standup comedy I realized that the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people meant more to me than anything else. That is when I decided I wanted to be a rabbi --- that and not getting into law school.

I was recently with a mother and father after the Friday night services before their child's bar mitzvah. She reminded her husband he could not take his shabbas nap tomorrow, since it was their child's bar mitzvah. I interjected, and said that there was nothing wrong with his taking a shabbos nap on the Saturday of his son's bar mitzvah.

At which point the mother said to me, "Rabbi. You don't understand – He takes his nap during services."

Just look at how much our people has contributed to the world and enriched the lives of so many. From the Bible to the poet Bialik to Max Bialystock, from the Talmud to Trotsky, from the Mishnah and Midrash to our mishagas, from Bashevis Singer to Gerry Springer, from the Borsht Belt to belts by Isaac Mizrahi and Ralph Lauren to Lauren Bacall, from Hollywood to Broadway, from Karl Marx to Groucho Marx and Marc Chagall, from Milton Friedman to Debbie Friedman and Kinky Friedman. We are truly a remarkable people.

All of these influences enrich who I am. I love the secularist Yiddish literature as well as the passion of the Zionists who dared to dream of a nation where we would determine our destiny. I love reading a passage in the midrash as well as the modern poetry of Yehudah Amichai who draws on those images and references and then inverts them. I love being part of a people which has the chutzpah to be God intoxicated, and then to question and challenge His every act.

And speaking of love – it is my love of Israel, of the Jewish people, of our teachings and way of life, our traditions and customs, all of which I want to see live on through eternity that motivates every ounce of my being.

But I could never do any of this without the love and the support of my wife and children. Symcha is my amazing life partner, always by my side, offering advice, counsel and encouragement, and from whom I have learned so much. Because of her, I am blessed with four unbelievable children who share my passion for Israel and love of Judaism.

My oldest son, Ezra volunteered to serve in the Israeli army because he felt the obligation to do his part to protect the state of Israel and its citizens. My daughter, Margalit, serves on the board of Hillel and her first job was working for Hillel International. My son, Micha, was the leader of the pro-Israel group at the University of Maryland. And my youngest son, Noam was captain of the blue team in color war.

People often ask me if any of them will be rabbis. And I say I would prefer for them to be shul presidents. For one, they will know how hard a rabbi works, and will treat him or her with kavod. But also, it will mean that they will have learned how to combine a worldly occupation with derech eretz, thereby being Jews at home and in the street.

Finally, I thank my beloved congregation, B'nai Tzedek for giving me the opportunity to serve the Jewish people, my family for their love and support, my parents for their guidance, and the JCRC for its recognition of my contributions, however, small they may be, to help bring the message of our heritage to our community.

*© Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, MD*