

A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

Reprinted from the May 2009 Adath Jeshurun Newsletter

“Shhh... It’s an AJ Secret”: Thank You!



Yes it was. A secret well known, by everyone but me! And I thank you for it from the bottom of my heart.

On Shabbat morning, April 4, I came to *shul* with Cindy expecting to see few cars in the parking lot, and few people in the pews. After all, there was no *Bar or Bat Mitzvah*, no *ufruf* or baby naming, and it was almost *Pesah*. The Hazzan was away celebrating a simha in his family and I expected to lead the davening to a very small congregation.

Since coming back from vacation with an injury to my lower back, I have been riding to *shul* on *Shabbat*. So as Cindy made the turn down Ashbourne Road from Old York Road and I got my first glimpse of the parking lot, I noticed many more cars than I had been expecting. “I wonder what this is about?” I mused aloud. “Oh,” she answered without missing a beat, “there’s probably something going on at the church.”

Then I walked into the lobby and saw it abuzz with people rushing to their seats. And my curiosity was piqued again.

I scratched my head. Did I forget something? Was there a sudden catastrophe that brought everyone to *shul*? Was I totally confused, and it was not *Shabbat* at all, but the first day of *Passover*?!

I quickly put these thoughts aside because it was late and I had to go to my office to get my things for the service. My *siddur*, notes and props, and announcements. Had to hook up my lapel microphone. I got lost in my normal routine.

Then I went into the Sanctuary and saw what, for the opening of the service, was a huge attendance. “What is going on?” I said to myself. And then, as I was ready to go up the steps to get to my robing room, I noticed Cindy’s brother Mark and his wife Donna. “What are you doing here?” I asked incredulously. They just smiled. And at that moment there was a glimmer of understanding.

But then I thought, no. They could never do something to honor me without my knowing about it.

Could they?

So I went to my robing room. Met with the head usher. Organized the officers, reminding them that it was a little different since Hazzan was away, and we headed out for *Mah Tov*. As I turned the corner from behind the Ark to enter the Sanctuary, I looked into the first row and there were my sons sitting with big smiles on their faces and waving!

At that point, it was obvious. Something big was happening. And it was about me. I don’t know how I got through *Mah Tov*, because I was already overcome with emotion. How did you keep it a secret from me? There was a congregational mailing. People were talking about it to one another. Stuff was happening all over the building all week long before the event. Even people not affiliated with AJ knew what was happening.

And I was literally clueless.

And, looking back, I would not have had it any other way.

It was wonderful to be honored for my thirty years of service in this manner. What could be better than to have a full Sanctuary on *Shabbat* morning, surrounded by family and dear friends, smiling happily at one another, and lifting our voices in prayer. It was just perfect. I loved every minute of it. I am so grateful. As I write these words a few days later, I am still smiling, glowing, grinning whenever I think back to that splendid service.

There are so many people that I want to thank and have done so personally. But I want to express my gratitude publicly as well. First to **Naomi and Skip Atkins** who chaired the program. As Skip explained from the *bima*, the kernel of the idea came at a *Rosh HaShanah* lunch at their home with our dear friend **Eileen Dwell-Fishman**. Originally we were all to be together for *Yom Tov* at our home. But, as you may recall, it was the “*Rosh HaShanah* the Rabbi Went to the Hospital” for emergency eye surgery. They knew I had been working on the new edition of *Seder Avodah*, how it has been my passion for the last four years. And they thought it would be fitting to have a special bookplate commissioned for it. And then they thought why not base it on an original work of art which would be presented to me. And maybe we should do it at a program marking my thirtieth anniversary with AJ.

And that got the ball rolling. It was Cindy’s idea, I learned later, to make it a surprise. Gavi Miller said, “You’ll never be able to do it. The rabbi knows everything.” Steve Sussman said, “It will never work, someone will give it away. Too many people will have to know.” But Cindy was adamant. We can do it. We will do it. It will be a surprise. She must have been inspired by President Obama’s chant of “Yes, we can!”

I am so grateful to the dedicated committee that worked so hard to make this day a reality. In addition to Skip, Naomi, and Eileen, thank you to **Amy Blum, Mindy Goldstein, Gavi Miller, Rene Smith, Janet Lewin, Debra Strauss, and Sima Sussman**. What a team. Simply fantastic!

I was overwhelmed and humbled by the speeches. Skip, in introducing the program, and Naomi in presenting the magnificent art piece, a papercut filled with symbolism about my life and interests by local artist Karen Shain Schloss, touched me with their love.

I was awed by **Steve Sussman**’s articulation of the meaning of my rabbinate. I was impressed with the research he did, and his insightful observations about what I was all about. He expressed my rabbinic role exactly as I would have wanted it to be understood. I don’t know that I could have explained myself as well. Steve gave me insight into my own work, and what it has meant. I will always be grateful for that gift of the spirit.

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Marshall Bernstein, chair of our Board of Trustees, was the perfect counterpoint to Steve. He was reflective and whimsical. He made me laugh at my idiosyncracies, and acknowledged how far I have come in my knowledge of Philadelphia sports. At least where the Phillies and the Eagles are concerned. Marshall has been so much a part of this congregation’s history, and I am grateful for his being a part of this celebration.

And finally my wife spoke, quoting from the letters written by several congregants, selected with skillful sensitivity to reflect the aspects of my service to this congregation that were described by the other speakers. Of all my blessings in life, Cindy is the most special. She is a woman of great spirit and consummate heart and soul. She has taught me so much about life and faith, hope and gratitude. She has made my life better, and made my rabbinate better. I may get the public acknowledgment, but it is Cindy who has enabled me to be worthy of it. I love her with my whole heart, and am so grateful that I can share my life with her.

Our children are our special blessing. To see **Josh, Daniel and Adam, Josh and Stefanie**, all at the *Torah* for an *aliyah* was thrilling. And to have had some of them read *Torah* that morning was a great joy.

My thanks go out to all of the *Torah* readers; to **Joe and Pam Yohlin**, who chanted the Haftarah; to our **AJ Choir**, led by **Robert A. M. Ross**, and our organist **Dr. William Gatens**, professionals all, who were so good-natured in dealing with this amateur; and to all the many people who worked on the myriad of details that all came together so perfectly.

Most of all, to the congregation, thank you. It is a privilege to be your rabbi. It is you who has taught me how to be a rabbi, because it is in your face and voice, your tears and smiles, your touch and embrace, that I have come to know how Judaism and the spirit of our people can affect others and make their lives better.

I was very moved by the many thoughtful and loving cards and letters about our relationship over these years. I am so grateful for them.

I am struck by a passage in one of those letters, written for this occasion by one of our congregants, a dear personal friend. “I used to wrestle all the time with whether or not I really am a good Jew,” my friend wrote. “But what does it even mean to be a good Jew? I find now that my personal question has changed and evolved through the years—largely because of how you’ve inspired me through your sermons, writing, and our conversations. I no longer ask if I am a good Jew; rather, I now ask myself whether or not I am a good person who is informed by my Judaism.”

I don’t know if I could have said this thirty years ago, but this is the way I judge my rabbinate today. Through my rabbinate, through the teaching of our tradition, have I influenced others to be better human beings? Indeed, am I influenced to be a better human being because my own life is informed by my Judaism?

This must be the goal of my rabbinate at AJ, and I thank you all for helping me understand what a rabbi’s work is really about, for acknowledging it in so meaningful a way, and for embracing me for it.

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