

Reflections of a "Lame Duck" Rabbi
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These are days when both Christian and Jew are likely to think introspectively and sentimentally. The midwinter holidays and the imminent turn of the year cause us seriously to consider the gift of life and those so close to us among family and friends who give us the quality of life.

Today is the last day of Dedication--Hannuka--among Jews. Ours is a simple ceremony of lighting candles in our homes for eight days. It is made meaningful by the presence of family--children, parents, relatives--and friends.

In just a few days the Christmas holiday will do the same for Christians.

This year my own thoughts and recollections have been intensified as never before.

I am about to make a dramatic change in my life and my activity. Now, after 33 years in my present position as Rabbi of Temple Israel, and having served in the rabbinate for a total of nearly 45 years, I am about to retire from the active rabbinate. For the next few months I am a "lame duck" until my successor takes over. I have spent a large part of my life here with you in Rotary. I am grateful for your important friendships.

So I thought that I could reminisce a bit with my friends about some episodes, some experiences in my life and at the same time tell you about some of the lessons to be learned. I have never heard such presentations by any clergy. I will tell you some stories, all true and instructive.

As a very young boy I had fantasized about becoming a rabbi. I came from an extremely liberal home. It was not an overly ritualistic home. My Mother, who was the greatest influence on my life and thought, raised me as a single parent in the formative years of my life. She set a pattern for Jewish ethics, prayerfulness and piety.

I do not ever remember her urging me into the rabbinate. She thought it wrong for parents to push children into their life's work. That desire came from me, and I think, largely because I idealized my rabbi who was infinitely kind and paternal in his relationship with me.

I followed him about and, because of my family habit and because of him, I seldom missed Sabbath worship. Ours was an unusual congregation in a resort community. I listened to great visiting preachers from all over the country. To my eyes they were intellectual and spiritual giants.

One was a close friend of my rabbi and I wanted desperately to meet him. My rabbi introduced me to the great man, telling him that I aspired to be a rabbi. The man took my hand and said, "Allow me to be the first to offer my condolences!" I was shocked then and still am. I never forgot that egotistical, theatrical put-down, the terrible incomprehension and disappointment I felt.

Lesson learned long after the fact: Never, but never be flippant or humorous or cavalier about something someone else takes seriously.

I know that in some religious denominations it is believed that clergy are "called" to the ministry. Frankly, I will tell you that I do not know what that means. In my view, clergy are not closer to God--every person who is dedicated to any occupation is as close to God as he/she wants to be. I certainly remember my first "call", so to speak. I was 18 years old and had been only in the first year of my eight year course at the rabbinical school. The call came to me while I was home on vacation. I lived in a resort community. The city was flooded with millions of people in summer. They came from the large eastern cities to enjoy the magnificent beaches, fishing, and the cool ocean breezes while the rest of the country sweltered. In that setting the "call" came to me from the emergency room of the local hospital. My rabbi had sent for me. He wanted to talk to me before he went into surgery. Lying on the stretcher he simply said, "I will be ill for some time. Sidney, please take over the congregation!"

I will never forget how frightened and literally panic stricken I was. Conduct services for those large crowds alone? I never thought to argue or to refuse my rabbi. Who could do so at the doors of an operating room? What happened? I did it! Lesson learned long after the fact: The best cure for panic and anxiety is to get on with the task, to face the issue and get it over with.

At 17 I went to college. I mean I *went* to college. No previews. No looking it over! My grandmother, with whom I lived, was dying. Mother stayed with her. I got on the train

and went to college. This was the year 1937 B.C. B.C. means "before counseling". I was still ambivalent between interest in the rabbinate and interest in medicine. I loved science then, and still do.

Nobody said anything to me about courses. So I took two courses in chemistry or perhaps it was one course with both theory and laboratory work.

One day I was summoned to the registrar of the Hebrew Union College, which was very close to the University of Cincinnati campus. I stood shaking before the man. Those were the days in which students were in awe of professors, and not the other way around! He was the sweetest, most gentle of men and a renowned scholar of medieval biblical commentaries.

"Young man," he said, "are you still interested in carrying out your application to come to us next year as a rabbinical student?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"In that case, I have your transcript from the university and I see you are taking chemistry."

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Young man, make up your mind. Are you going into medicine or the rabbinate?"

There, right there, the crucial moment in a person's whole life. I was a young indecisive boy. My next remark was "the point of no return". The real beginning

of my life as a rabbi.

"I will choose the rabbinate, sir."

"Good. Now may I remind you there is no shortage of chemists in the ministry. I suggest you take humanities and not sciences."

For all his goodness, the man was wrong. What I learned of science stood me in good stead. What a way to make a life's decision! Lesson learned long after the fact: one should not serve one's own interest in manipulating the lives of others. Give people all the facts and let them do what they wish to do, study what they wish to study, love whom they wish to love, go where they wish to go. Help to do what they think is right from *them* to do.

At the Hebrew Union College all students were required to serve a small congregation bi-weekly. For experience, they said. Except no one supervised us. No one ever asked me how I was getting along or if I had problems.

I was assigned to Marion, Indiana. What a drag to get there. No one had private cars in those times. I took a so-called milk train at 6 a.m. Friday morning to travel only a relatively few miles that today could be reached in a car in 45 minutes. I got there at 3 or 4 p.m.

Sunday mornings I taught the young children at the Sunday School. At the hour I started out, nothing, but nothing was open except a diner which I recall was named the "Bachelor" cafe. In winter I trudged through the snow and cold to get breakfast. I loved

it there, it was the high point of the weekend. To this day I savor the steamy aroma and warmth and friendship I found there. Even then I was prone to talk to everybody.

Now--and this is the real point of the story, I walked to the synagogue and after opening the place, my first dedicated rabbinical duty was to fire up the furnace. I shook down the ashes in what, to me, was an enormous fire box and shoveled the coal on the red embers so the building would be warm when the kids came in.

In later years, after hearing this story, not a few would say, "Why would the rabbi have to do *that* kind of work?" I never thought of it that way. The lesson, learned long after the fact: No honest work is demeaning if its purpose is worthwhile. You are no less a person performing a so-called menial job. There *is no such thing* as degrading work unless you make it so.

To this point I had one preemptive goal: Academic excellence to the limits of my abilities. I loved scholarship and still do. A remarkable coincidence moved all that into *second* place. I met a girl.

At the time of our meeting, her ethics were somewhat inferior to her good looks...she lied about her age. She was not 16. She was *almost* 16. It took me a long time to make up my mind about the young lady. Maybe a day or so. Even that decision was accelerated by her appearance in a swimsuit. At that time I was not interested in her brains. Of course, the biggest bonus of my life turned out to be Jane's extraordinary intelligence and emotional

stability, and her remarkable insight and devotion to the life we have led together, her marriage to the rabbinate as well as to me!

It also turned out that her interests and compassion caused her to make far more contributions to our children and community than I ever could. Convincing her parents that we should marry two full years before my ordination, and at her age was easy; rather like climbing Mt. Everest with one leg in a cast. Convincing the president of our rabbinical school from whom it was expected to win approval for such a daring matter as student marriage was, in those days, accomplished by my telling him I could keep my mind on my studies in those last two tough years a lot better if I married than if I didn't! That was that.

Lesson learned long after the fact: If you see what you want, if you know your goal, it is morally permitted to you--don't shop around and don't procrastinate--go get'em tiger!

Finally into the rabbinate I went, absolutely sure of everything. Apprehensive even with all that supposed knowledge!

We had studied with a professor of homiletics. He was a fine congregational Rabbi as well as a scholar. He was not a native American. He spoke with a thick accent from someplace in Eastern Europe. His name was Rabbi Israel Bettan. The saying was: Bettan came to America, learned English and never got over it. He was a master. His job was to teach us how to preach sermons, addresses, eulogies, wedding addresses, lectures, and the like.

Eulogies were tough. What did we know about life--much less death? We had to practice. "Whom shall we write about?" we asked. "Makes no difference," he said, "bury a good friend!" We wrote funeral addresses about each other!! Our teacher stressed, never tell untruths. You don't have to. You can find something good in everyone.

Off I go. Then lo and behold, a traumatic experience in my very first congregation. The first death was that of a young man. He ran a sleazy bar. In the early hours of last Saturday night or early Sunday morning, as you will, he left his bar by a back door opening on an alley. There a thief relieved him of his cash receipts and with a neatly placed bullet right between the eyes, also relieved him of his life.

I did not know the man. I inquired and quickly discovered he possessed a reputation about as savory as an open sewer. I called on his wife. She was no problem. A beautiful young lady. She wept copiously. I still see the mascara all over her face. Only much later did I wonder whether those were tears of sorrow or of relief. No one had a good word to say about her deceased husband. I thought of my professor as I anguished over what to say at the man's funeral. Easy for him to say, I thought, but finding good in this guy is like extracting blood from a stone.

I went back to his widow. Almost a pleasure. She cried some more. "Tell me about your husband," I pushed. Silence. Some more tears. Finally, "You know, rabbi, no matter how late he got home Saturday nights, he refreshed himself, took the children to the park

and played with them for hours. He adored his kids and they worshipped him."

Ah! With one stroke the man's name was saved and so was I. Lesson learned long after the fact: There really is something good in everyone. Why not try to discover it before death?

The rabbi from the very beginning, in the earliest centuries of this era, has been expected to be a scholar and teacher. It was that interest, not the rest of the functions about which I have been talking, that led me into the profession in the first place.

The most thrilling experiences I have had were in that capacity: in the pulpit as preacher and in the synagogue and college classrooms as a teacher. In our tradition, preacher and teacher are essentially the same.

Students, who can be both depressing and exhilarating, have taught me so much about myself. Nothing is so satisfying as the hope that a spark of knowledge from a teacher can ignite a flame of insight in the life of a student. From all of this I learned a lesson long after the fact: Knowledge is the most precious thing you can have in abundance, constantly acquire and increase, give it away happily and still have it yourself!

There are many stories I could tell. They're no different from those which other clergy could relate, except these are mine.

People are truly tragic and humorous, illogical and predictable, faithless and faithful. But are not we all?

What tender feelings stirred the heart of the lady who came to in her room in the hospital from surgery after a hysterectomy, held my hand and said staring at me with bleary eyes, "Oh, Rabbi, I pray to God you never have to go through anything like this!" So far, her prayer has been answered.

The time I was preaching in a church and the minister introduced me as a great rabbi who was also a fine *Christian* gentleman!

The time I asked a lady, "And how is your husband getting along?" She replied, "You ought to know, you buried him two months ago."

But we survive our trials and errors and stupid mistakes just the same.

Questions: Would I choose the rabbinate again? I don't know. I know that my choice was right when I made it.

Have I felt my life was worthwhile? I am mildly satisfied. That is a judgment for others.

Am I leaving town? No plans for that.

What will I do after retirement? I do not know. Talk about firm decisions!

Each of us tries in his own way to serve God and our fellowmen. If we serve one, I think we serve the other. So we go on the best we can.

Now let's try to extend the mood of *this* season and be men of *all* seasons. We have each other.

As Joan Rivers says, "Can *we* talk?"

I have talked with you about just a few incidents in my life as a rabbi. The larger more serious side is a topic for another time and another setting. Only this needs to be said: The rabbinate has provided me with the greatest adventure of which I can conceive. It has been just that.

From the thrills of the wails of infants at birth to the inaudible last breaths of the dying. From the exaltations of love at the marriage altar to the despair of broken trust. From the pain of the ill reaching out for support to the joy of health renewed. From the spark of comprehension in the classroom to the remembered word that gave strength through the years.

From the idealism and certainties of youth to the more quiet conservatism of accumulated experience. From the challenges of academic questions to the wonder of newly found knowledge.

Above all there has been the adventure of being exposed to brilliant minds and gorgeous personalities, precious friends like yourselves that have enriched my soul and my mind. That's been my path, my adventure.

If you think about it, is it any less yours as well?