

The Way It Was
And The Way It Might
Have Been --- Maybe!

RABBI SIDNEY H. BROOKS

The following is an adaptation of an address presented to the annual meeting of the Midwest Association of Reform Rabbis in San Diego January 6, 1986.

The content is substantially the same as presented then. If it is of use to anyone I will be pleased. If it is not, it will be no surprise to me!

The Way It Was And The Way It Might Have Been --- Maybe!
San Diego, California MARR January 6, 1986

Dear Colleagues: I confess at the onset that what I present to you are statements filled with personal violations. They are such as to make me most uncomfortable.

Yielding to persuasion to accept this assignment, I felt honored and pleased. Thinking about the context, I trembled at the thought of how and what I could meaningfully say about the rabbinate and my pathway in it.

It is a violation for me, in the first place, to speak in the first person. I do not preach that way if I can help it. Most importantly, what can I say to you who are my colleagues, and my teachers that you do not already know? This is not a polit~~y~~ amenity. Please believe me.

In my honest judgement there has been nothing distinguished about my career in the congregational rabbinate. Quite the reverse. Perhaps that is the point. I wish there had been someone at the beginning of my practice to help me know what to do and what not to do!

Retirement

The inadequacy of my rabbinate as the months and years have passed has become increasingly clear to me. It is now more than five years since, on my 65th birthday and after 33 years in the pulpit of Temple Israel in Omaha, I elected to retire. So be kinder with my remarks than my schoolmates and I were to the men at my age now who came to talk to us.

When we were students we could predict the opening lines for older rabbis who came to share their experience with us. In one way or another, each declared, "I envy you, boys!" Whether they did or did not they were foolish to say so.

I do not envy those who are younger than I am. At least not in terms of the formidable challenge which the rabbinate holds today. I truly respect and admire the learning, the courage, the strength which I have had the opportunity to observe in so many who are both of my generation and a generation or so later.

That is precisely why I retired just as soon as it was practical for me to do so. Honestly now, I tell you no ~~condition~~ ^{CONTENTION} with our congregation motivated me. I had no reason to leave the pulpit except for this: I knew at least a year previously, and I still think I was right, that I understood what innovative changes were called for. Radical revisions needed to be taken to meet the obvious newer expectations and needs in American Reform Jewish synagogue life. Following my inflexible rule to be scrupulously honest, I said precisely this to my leadership and to our board.

Unlike the protestations I too often read in the letters of resignation and retirement ~~from~~^{FROM} many colleagues, I had no "mixed feelings." I added that I simply did not feel adequate to the task. I had done the equivalent, not once but several times before. I did not want to go through that process again. I understood my limitations of physical strength, emotional stamina, intellectual preparation, spiritual depth, and technical skill.

Changes in synagogue structure, ~~you know the details;~~ alternatives to our congregational educational systems and

new offerings of service to special groups, *were called for.*

A Realistic Self Image

These are points offered to you as matters which became salvational for me:

First of all, a rabbi (or anyone, for that matter) had better have a realistic self-image. Dealing with the selfhood of the rabbi, I cannot resist begging you to try with all your might to understand who and what you are. As I grew toward that -- I became happier and more effective. Most of us by the very nature of our positions are prone to two devastating assaults upon our egos. One is the impression that we really are above most others and the other is that we are really beneath many others. Both are untrue. Always. Excessive praise is harmful lest the rabbi believe all of it! Of course, no rabbi -- or anybody -- ever became ill from over-encouragement. That is different.

Example: In June of 1985, our congregation held a

weekend celebration in honor of Jane and me on our retirement. You can get the details -- really unimportant now -- from Joe Glaser ~~of~~^{or} Stanley Dreyfus, who were there. If I had believed with any degree of seriousness all the extravagant things which were said about me, including the ~~never-to-be-forgotten~~ comments and blessings of Joe Glaser and Stan Dreyfus whom I love much, I would have made it impossible for my wife or anyone else to live with me. Nor could I have lived honestly with myself!

My guide in that respect was a cartoon which I saw, kept and remembered for many years.

Picture this: A man is standing in front of his mirror removing his tie and dinner jacket. On the dresser is an enormous testimonial trophy. He stares at his image and says: "I wonder, dear, how many truly great men there are in this world!"

Behind him his wife replies, "One less than you think!"

I suspect that all of us have regrets. Upon reflection now, I should have done many things differently. But that is because we look back upon our youth as if looking at another person. Indeed, each of us was another person those many years ago. Now we understand why and how we happened to act and think as we did. That is the way it was and we think now of how it might have been -- maybe.

The earliest years were for me the toughest. Right from the beginning, it is clear to me now, that I had no realistic self-image. Maybe that was good and maybe not.

Supportive Counseling

There was no such thing as competent counseling in my early days. At least, I knew nothing of it and never received such.

We are all asked how we entered the rabbinate, or when was the moment of decision. I will tell you mine, not because it will influence your life, but because it might influence the way in which we rabbis speak to other young people with some interest in the rabbinate.

I know exactly my point of no return. From the time I was a very young boy I wanted to be a rabbi. I also had some rather large margin of interest and competency in medicine and science.

Off I trotted to the University at age 17, with no guidance whatsoever. At the University I took two courses in Chemistry. I loved it.

Shortly, I was summoned to the Hebrew Union College registrar, a faculty member, who asked me if I thought there was any shortage of chemists in the rabbinate. "Make up your mind young man, are you going into medicine or coming to us?" "I'm coming to you, sir." I know now that both of us were wrong. The faculty member knew nothing of counseling and I was intimidated. As a matter of fact, what I learned of science then and since has stood me in good stead.

Anyway, that is the way it was. It might have been different -- but only MAYBE.

old chestnut of one board not wishing to bind future boards, I was finally elected to a situation which never would demand reelection but which gave the congregation the right to dismiss me for cause, and to me the right to take another pulpit -- each with ethically ample notice to the other.

By the way, I was elected to that position with one dissenting and recorded vote! Maybe that one man was right!!

For Whom Do We Work?

I think the most vexing trial of the younger rabbi is the matter of authority. I know that rabbis have been told in varying ways that they are employees. I have talked with several in that position. That is the flip side of the contract.

I went through some of the patronage that comes from financial power in the congregation. I found that it was best now and again to remind the congregation that we rabbis do not work for them. We work with our people. In the baldest of terms we devote our lives (call it "work" if you like) to the Jewish people and we serve them as we serve whomever you may mean by "God." Each of us is "God's porters." Each of us is Eved Adonai or servant of God. That phrase has long comforted me.

Pulpit Freedom

8 I have had only two severe brushes with the matter of freedom of the pulpit. In both instances I did not have to utter a word of self-defense. One was during the candidacy

Conclusion

All told I have had a varied and tempestuous rabbinate, a trying rabbinate, a ~~hard~~^{difficult} rabbinate at times. Add it all up and it has been a happy rabbinate, thanks to the greatest blessing that I have: the love and support, the spiritual strength and the wisdom of that sacred contract I have with my wife Jane: the marriage made in heaven.

Aharon aharon ~~hashib~~^{HAUK}

To her and to all of you: my gratitude and my fondest hopes for blessing.