

Yom Kippur 5783

Congregation Beth El, Voorhees New Jersey

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Three Rabbis

A number of people, my ever helpful older brother included, have said to me, well, in changing jobs at least you have 23 years of sermons to draw on, so you don't have to worry about writing new ones. Well-intentioned, but not possible. It reminded me of one of my very favorite stories out of JTS, where most rabbis and Hazzanim of the movement went to school. The story is true, and it quite possibly actually happened.

Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism but also a fine educator, was teaching homiletics to a group of rabbinical students. Every week a student would present and every week Kaplan would tear him apart - and then proceed to teach that week's lesson.

Knowing he was up the following week, one student took copious notes of everything Kaplan said. The next week he gave his presentation and included verbatim what the professor had said in the prior class. Kaplan proceeded to rip into him like he had cut him off in line at the JTS

cafeteria. But professor, the student protested, these are your exact words from last week, how can you criticize them so sharply? To which Kaplan replied, yes, they are my words, but I've grown since then.

I couldn't authentically give a sermon I've given before because I, too, have grown since then. But while I can't regift old sermons, no one said anything about the jokes. So here's a quick old favorite. A mother calls upstairs to her son one morning - Jonny it's time to get up. Jonny shouts back I'm not getting up and I'll give you two reasons why. I hate them, and they hate me. Mom calls back I'll give you two reasons why you have to: you're 45 years old...and you're the rabbi! The joke is not about me cause I'm not 45. And it's certainly not about three accomplished rabbis and some of the lessons I have learned from them as they have decided this year not to stay in bed, but to transition from their full time congregational work to other productive efforts that will continue to make a positive difference in the world.

My first question is where did they get this idea, to step down from their esteemed positions while they could still be very effective, you might even say while they are at the peak of their rabbinic skills and the beneficiaries of the power of decades of relationships? If you were in shul last night you heard my world Yizkor list. One who did not make the cut was actor Michael Constantine, who played the father in My Big Fat Greek Wedding. You may recall that one of that character's claims was that every great idea in the world was of Greek origin. Even every word - even those that were clearly not - were also of Greek origin. Spraying Windex on everything is another story entirely.

Kaplan could relate. He knew that not only was every good idea not Greek, but not every good idea has Jewish origins either. We are happy to learn from other cultures just as others have absorbed and adapted ideas from Jewish thought and life. This is a sign of strength and we should be glad we contribute and that we are able to successfully accommodate good things from the so-called

outside world as well. We gave the world ethical monotheism, the world gave us a path toward egalitarianism, democracy, and more generally embracing ideas of inclusivity that were mostly foreign to the Biblical and rabbinic tradition. As I said, it's a good thing.

The most famous senior cleric to step down in recent memory was Pope Benedict the sixteenth, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who in 2005 was chosen to don the white Yarmulke. He said he prayed to God during that process that he not be chosen, and that God ignored him. He introduced himself to the world as a "humble laborer in the vineyard of the Lord." Whether it was the stress of the job, advanced age, or dealing with unending scandal in the church the likes of which we do not need to describe here, eight years later he did something no Pope had done voluntarily in over nine hundred years. He retired, and took the title of Pope Emeritus, and still spends his days reading, writing, praying, and reflecting while his popular successor carries out the full responsibilities of the papacy.

As I said, not every good idea is a Jewish idea. But...we kind of, sort of, a little bit did this first. That same school I mentioned earlier has always been led by an individual of great scholarly achievement. While they serve mainly as the head of JTS, effectively a very small Jewish university, they are also looked to by most who care as the head of or at least the spokesperson for the whole movement. When I was in rabbinical school that chair was held by Professor Ismar Schorsch. An erudite scholar and soft spoken, principled leader, he led the Seminary since his appointment in 1986 until - you guessed it - he stepped down in 2006. It was the first time the head of JTS did not work until his tenure ended like it did for most popes. Schechter, Finkelstein, Cohen - that chain of extraordinary scholar-leaders lasting some seven decades - all worked until they simply could not anymore. Comes Chancellor Schorsch, after the good round number of 20 years, he says I am stepping down while I can still make productive use of the years I have left. And now sixteen years later, he still is. I heard him teach about five minutes before

Covid shut down our world, and he was as clear, thoughtful, and insightful as ever. So, Chancellor Schorsch in 2006, Pope Benedict in 2013. Coincidence? Probably.

I want to share with you something of what I have learned from three rabbis who have gone the Schorsch-Benedict route, which is probably the first time those three words have been uttered together in the English language. All are stepping down really at the top of their games. I wish one of them was a woman so this could be more gender balanced, so let me throw in my and our congregation's official congratulations to Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, the new Chancellor of JTS, who I hope to be able to welcome to Beth El and our community sometime in the reasonably near future. She is Chancellor because she is eminently qualified; that she is also a woman is a JTS first and over a hundred years in the making.

Ed Feinstein has served as rabbi at Valley Beth Sholom synagogue in Encino, California for almost thirty years.

After serving as a head of school and also as a camp director, probably the most famous rabbi in America at the time, and arguably the most revered Conservative rabbi in his or any other era, Harold Schulweis, invited Ed to come work with him at VBS. He worked with Schulweis from 1993 until 2005 when he succeeded Schulweis as senior rabbi. And in this last year, Feinstein stepped down from that role but is sticking around to continue to be of service while he also explores other avenues of influence.

He is a noted author, storyteller, and teacher of rabbis and laypeople alike. His book *Tough Questions Jews Ask* is used as a curriculum in many middle and high school classes, and his retelling of classic rabbinic midrash is readable and memorable. I have met him a few times. As the most famous non-senior rabbi in America for the years he was in the shadow of the great Schulweis, it was enlightening and affirming for me to see just what a great impact he was able to have without being the so-called number one. If Beth El is fortunate in the coming year we will hire a new assistant rabbi. I don't expect to get

Feinstein, and that person better not be expecting to work with Schulweis. But we have an opportunity to shape engagement and outreach in ways that we have thought of already but not implemented and in ways we have not thought of yet as well. I know if we do bring someone on in that position you will go out of your way to welcome them to the Beth El family with open minds and hearts.

The Feinstein thought I want to share with you is something I heard him say at a pre-holiday workshop many years ago. Rabbis often refer to these days as a family reunion. People who have not seen each other for quite some time reunite and catch up. It is not true that they are called the High Holidays because they give everyone a chance to say “Hi”.

He might think that a family reunion is a fine metaphor but he said something else that works even better. They are, he said, “a gathering of the tribe: A re-covenanting ceremony to reconnect with one another, with community, with the synagogue and its traditions, with Judaism, and

with God. The Holidays present the unique opportunity to set the theme of a Jewish year in a synagogue community, to introduce new vision, and to speak about what is uniquely important this year.” I recall him saying it was a good opportunity to review some of our history and our origins, reading as we did about Abraham last week and the work of the first High Priest this morning. A chance to remind each other that our lives are best lived when the connection to the covenant and our people is maintained and strengthened through our actions, one of which is gathering together here, whether annually, weekly, or daily. The important thing is that everyone gets that they are an integral piece of the overall community puzzle, and without you it is incomplete, and with you our potential is great.

As for what is uniquely important this year, I tried to outline some of that on Rosh Hashanah - how we will welcome everyone back to the building who can be here and keep our cameras on so those joining from further away can be included, emphasizing synagogues being a hub of volunteerism of all kinds because that is motivating Jewish

identity especially for the younger generation, and turning outward toward the broader community and the world so that we can be both informed and effectively helpful in helping others achieve their potential and some of their dreams. So welcome to the annual meeting of the tribe, as we recommit together to remember, celebrate, dedicate ourselves to, be very proud of what has been achieved so far, and understand that there is much yet to be done.

The second rabbi I want to share a word and lesson about today is one I have spent a lot more time with. David Wolpe is retiring after twenty-five years at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. The reason I know it is twenty-five years is not from some press release but because for the entire third year of my rabbinical school experience he taught a seminar on Jewish ideas and leadership. Once a week for ninety minutes or so we got to hear and interact with a someone who even back then had a real way with words, who brought expansive reading and scholar-level knowledge to all he engaged us with, and who challenged

us to think deeply about the kind of rabbinate we wanted to build, wherever it would be.

It was in Los Angeles that he became one of Newsweek's most important American rabbis, sometimes taking the number one spot on that list. Like the Talmud says if you seek fame it will flee from you and if you don't it will find you, he didn't seek to be an oft-quoted rabbi. He found himself in a place that knows how to create and package content - that would be Los Angeles - and leveraged his knowledge with that new form of rabbinic outreach to create a national audience. He was one of the first to record and make his sermons available, and was a go-to voice on issues that the community, and the country, were facing or struggling with. His and Craig Taubman's Friday Night Live has been emulated far and wide. He referred to Middlemarch as the greatest book ever written in the English language so I read it. It took me two years on and off, but I read it. He manages a complicated community with erudition, wit, and a fully intact sense of humor. And he has truly mastered the ten minute sermon and taught

me the expression I wrote you a long letter because I didn't have time to write you a short letter. Long sermons are not exactly easy - but short - and good - are very hard, and he is both.

But the story I want to share, which I really never had reason to before, comes from that year we sat together with a small group of future rabbis. He said toward the beginning of the year listen, for all of you who are going into the pulpit I wish I could help you more but I really can't - I've never wanted to be a congregational rabbi. Now, he grew up as the son of a very fine pulpit rabbi, his dad Gerry who some of you no doubt remember because he was at Har Zion just across the Delaware. David would often honor his father, and his mother too, by referring to his work and her influence throughout their lives. Through them and because he was already doing the second service at Sinai Temple on the High Holidays, he certainly knew about the effect a rabbi in this role could have. But he loved teaching and the Seminary and probably thought he would stay there or do similar work somewhere else,

maybe even returning at a later date to lead the place where he was working when I knew him there.

Middle of the year comes, maybe January, and he says I have something to tell you. Remember what I said about never wanting to go into the pulpit? I've changed my mind - and I'm in conversations with Sinai and I'll keep you updated on how it's going in case my experience might one day help you. And he did. It was a major change in direction for him, and a reminder to everyone that we have to keep our eyes open to how we can be of best use to our families, our communities, and our people. In a thought I have kept in mind over this rather pretty intense year for us - change can be energizing and a good thing.

And the last rabbi who is stepping out of the spotlight while at the top of his game is working just a few yards from where I stand, once again inspiring and engaging congregants of all ages with his compassion, humanity, wisdom, and accessible grace. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, we will all have ample opportunity to thank and

honor Rabbi Krupnick for his years of service to Beth El, and I know that you will join me and the rest of the synagogue's leadership in doing so. Beth El has been served ably and well by an accomplished builder, visionary, teacher, and total mensch.

We haven't worked together for all that long but I have seen in action his exceptional capacity to connect to anyone and everyone. He knows all your stories - that may be partially a result of longevity but it is much more a product of caring deeply about you. Sitting with him on the bimah is like sitting next to an Alexa for Beth El membership and history. And he could not have been more gracious and continually helpful in the early months of this transition. As George Bush wrote to Bill Clinton, your success is now our...success, [and] I am rooting hard for you - that is the gist of his entire approach and I'm sure it surprises not even one of you to know that.

Some rabbis are really good with little kids, some with bnai mitzvah students, some with high schoolers, others with

young adults and young parents and not so young parents and seniors. Some are good at weddings, others at funerals. And the list goes on. While no one can claim perfection I can tell you that I have never seen in one person someone who is so good with all of these groups. I have witnessed it in many ways: his alter ego, the green and red puppet-of-uncertain-ancestry named Bamba who the little kids scream for like it is the fifth Beatle, or his joking with but also teaching middle schoolers, or sitting for hours with a family talking about a loved one who has recently passed away and encapsulating all of that information in a beautiful eulogy often delivered just a few hours later. Always identifying people by name, sharing a memory he has of their family, gently but firmly reminding us that the capacity to be good or at least better people rests within each of us - this is an aspect of Rabbi Krupnick's legacy that we will be fortunate to absorb, honor, and continue as best we can.

It is actually to Rabbi Feinstein that I want to return to conclude today. Think about his image of a tribal meeting.

When I picture it for some reason I am a Native American, gathered with the whole community around a fire, dressed in holiday clothes and speaking about or listening to others recite the order of the service and ritual we have come together to participate in. And as part of that sacred communal gathering, I know for sure that we will call to mind by name those who we have loved and lost from the world. Those gone too soon, and those who passed peacefully after a long life. Those we knew and those we did not have the chance to know. And in doing so we will honor their memory and their legacy and commit to carrying it forward in our own way. Without them, we could not have been. And others we don't yet know rely on us to do our part to push forward the stories of our families, our tribe, our people. To bring the world a little closer to the potential God has embedded in it and in us.

Out of all of God's extraordinary creations we are uniquely able to remember deep into the past, live meaningfully in the present, and prioritize a future that we know we will not see. Three great rabbis have taught us these lessons.

Those we will remember in Yizkor demonstrated them for us. How well we have learned them will be reflected in our lives and in our choices over the year that has just begun.

Shanah Tovah, G'mar Chatimah Tovah.