

THE RABBI AS TEACHER

PRESENTED BY DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD, FOUNDING RABBI EMERITUS,
TEMPLE BETH AM, MIAMI, FLA., AT THE CONVENTION OF THE NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF TEMPLE EDUCATORS, 1989

AS THE "OLD MAN" OF THIS CONGREGATION, I WANT TO ADD MY WELCOME TO THOSE GREETINGS WHICH HAVE BEEN PREVIOUSLY EXPRESSED. WE AT BETH AM HAVE A SPECIAL PRIDE IN THE PRESENCE OF NATE ON OUR PREMISES, FOR WE LIKE TO THINK THAT THIS IS A CONGREGATION WHICH HAS EMPHASIZED EDUCATION MORE THAN MOST. PRECISELY BECAUSE WE THINK JEWISH EDUCATION IS SO IMPORTANT, WE APPRECIATE THE CARDINAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NATE.

IF I HAVE ANYTHING DISTINCTIVE TO TRANSMIT TO THIS DEDICATED BODY, IT IS TO TELL YOU SOMETHING OF MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN JEWISH EDUCATION, FIRST AS A STUDENT AND THEN AS A TEACHER AND ORGANIZER. IT IS BECAUSE OF MY NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AS A STUDENT IN A HEDER AND IN PREPARING FOR MY BAR MITZVAH CEREMONY THAT I DECIDED AT A VERY EARLY STAGE IN MY LIFE THAT THERE MUST BE SOME MAJOR CHANGES IN THE WAY AMERICAN JEWS LEARN ABOUT THEIR JUDAISM.

I REMEMBER MR. STAM AS MY HEDER TEACHER IN MY HOMETOWN OF NORFOLK, VA., MR. STAM WAS A FINE GENTLEMAN GENUINELY INTERESTED IN TRANSMITTING KNOWLEDGE OF THE TORAH, BUT HIS AMBITIONS WERE THWARTED BY THE SIZE AND MOBILITY OF HIS CLASS. EVERY FEW WEEKS A NEW STUDENT COMPLETELY IGNORANT OF TORAH ENTERED THE CLASS, AND EVERY FEW WEEKS ONE OF THE "VETERANS" LEFT. AS A CONSEQUENCE, I MUST TELL YOU THAT THE CLASS NEVER GOT BEYOND PARASHA B'RAYSHEET. YOU MIGHT SAY THAT MY ENTIRE TENURE IN HEDER WAS SPENT IN GAN EDEN, IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

MY BASIC HEBREW AND BAR MITZVAH TRAINING INVOLVED THREE DIFFERENT TEACHERS. I WILL NEVER FORGET MR. TABACHNIKOFF WHO INTRODUCED ME TO THE HOLY LANGUAGE. YOU SEE, MR. TABACHNIKOFF NEVER SEEMED TO BATHE, TO WEAR DEODORANT, TO BRUSH HIS TEETH, OR TO WASH HIS CLOTHES. AS A RESULT, WHAT I REMEMBER ABOUT MR. T. IS THAT HE SMELLED TO HIGH HEAVEN. MY SECOND HEBREW TEACHER WAS A VERY SWEET MAN, MR. ASHKINAZI. MR. ASHKINAZI SEEMED TO BE EXCEPTIONALLY OLD. THE POOR FELLOW HAD A TERRIBLE LUNG CONDITION. WITH EVERY BREATH CAME A WHEEZE SO HEAVY THAT I WAS AFRAID IT WAS GOING TO BE MR. ASHKINAZI'S LAST BREATH. MY THIRD AND ULTIMATE TEACHER WAS MR. WEINBERG. MR. WEINBERG WAS BY TRADE A CHICKEN-KILLER, AND MY LESSONS WERE TAUGHT IN HIS PLACE OF BUSINESS. CONSEQUENTLY, WHEN I THINK BACK TO THE GLORIOUS DAYS OF MY JEWISH EDUCATION, I SMELL MR. TABACHNIKOFF, I HEAR THE DEATH RATTLE OF MR. ASHKINAZI, AND I SEE THE CHICKEN BLOOD IN MR. WEINBERG'S MARKET. CAN YOU WONDER THAT I WAS INSPIRED TO BE A RABBI?!

WHEN I THINK BACK TO MY CHILDHOOD, I TRY TO ASCERTAIN WHAT WERE THE POSITIVE INFLUENCES THAT ULTIMATELY LED ME TO APPLY TO RABBINICAL SCHOOL. THEY HAD TO BE QUITE PROFOUND TO OVERCOME THE INFLUENCE OF MY HEBREW TEACHERS. I SPEAK OF THESE POSITIVE INFLUENCES NOW BECAUSE I THINK THEY HAVE INSTRUCTIONAL VALUE. MY GRANDFATHER DIED WHEN I WAS QUITE YOUNG; PERHAPS I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD. HE LIVED IN THE HOUSE WITH US, SO HIS DYING WAS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE FOR ME, ESPECIALLY BECAUSE HE WOULD SPEND A GREAT DEAL OF TIME WITH ME TEACHING ME YIDDISH AND HEBREW SONGS. I MUST CONFESS THAT I CANNOT IDENTIFY ANY PARTICULAR SONG THAT MY GRANDFATHER TAUGHT ME, BUT DEEP DOWN INSIDE OF ME THERE IS AN EMOTIONAL LOVE FOR JEWISH MUSIC. I BELIEVE IT IS FROM MY GRANDFATHER THAT I GAINED THE CONVICTION THAT MUSIC MUST BE A VITAL PART OF ANY JEWISH CURRICULUM. INDEED, THE SOUND OF CHILDREN SINGING, AT ALMOST ANY TIME OF DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, IS ONE OF THE HEART-WARMING THINGS ABOUT THIS CONGREGATION.

A SECOND MAJOR INFLUENCE IN MY JEWISH ORIENTATION WAS MY MOTHER. SARAH BAUMGARD TOOK HER TRADITIONAL BACKGROUND SERIOUSLY. I SHALL NEVER FORGET THE DEVOTION WITH WHICH SHE LIT THE SHABBAT CANDLES. I CAN STILL SEE THE WHITE TABLE CLOTH AND THE GLEAMING CANDLES. I CAN STILL SEE HER PLACING HER HANDS OVER HER EYES AND PRAYING, BUT MY MOTHER DID NOT SIMPLY SAY A PROFUNCTORY BLESSING. MY MOTHER STOOD THERE MANY MINUTES, LIPS MOVING SILENTLY, WHILE THE PRAYERS SHE HAD SAID FROM HER YOUTH WERE EXPRESSED. MY MOTHER WAS THE FIRST PERSON I SAW WHO REALLY PRAYED. PLEASE NOTE THAT I HAVE NOT MENTIONED THE KIDDUSH. MY FATHER WAS NOT PRESENT AT THESE SHABBAT RITUALS. HE WAS BUSY WORKING. THE RITUALS WERE NOT IMPORTANT TO HIM. THE SHABBAT RITUALS I PERFORM TODAY BIND ME TO MY MOTHER. BECAUSE OF HER I HAVE LONG BEEN CONCERNED ABOUT TEACHING MEANINGFUL RITUALS.

A THIRD PERSON WHO POSITIVELY INFLUENCED MY LOVE FOR JUDAISM WAS A VOLUNTEER TEACHER, MINNIE LEVINE. MINNIE TAUGHT A CLASS IN THE PROPHETS FOR A SMALL GROUP OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AS PART OF A YOUNG JUDEA PROGRAM. FROM MINNIE I LEARNED THAT ALL THE IDEALISM OF MY YOUNG LIFE HAD BEEN ANTICIPATED AND LIVED OUT BY A GROUP OF AMAZING MEN AND WOMEN CALLED THE HEBREW PROPHETS. MINNIE GAVE ME THE INTELLECTUAL BASIS FOR MY PRIDE IN JUDAISM. MINNIE ALSO TAUGHT ME SOMETHING ABOUT GREAT TEACHING. ALTHOUGH I WAS THE YOUNGEST STUDENT IN THE CLASS AND NOT QUITE ABLE TO ARTICULATE MY THOUGHTS, MINNIE ALWAYS FOUND SOMETHING WONDERFUL IN WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY. SHE FILLED OUT WHAT I HAD ONLY HALF EXPRESSED AND MADE ME FEEL THAT I HAD REALLY SAID SOMETHING WORTHWHILE. MINNIE NOT ONLY GAVE ME THE COURAGE TO EXPRESS MYSELF, SHE TAUGHT ME HOW TO TEACH. THE WAY TO TEACH IS TO DRAW OUT THE INNATE TALENT AND CREATIVITY OF YOUR STUDENTS.

I SPEAK OF ONLY ONE MORE PERSON WHO INFLUENCED MY YOUNG LIFE AS A JEW. AND AGAIN I ASK YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT I AM RECALLING THESE EXPERIENCES BY WAY OF TEACHING SOMETHING THAT CAN BE USEFUL TO ALL OF US TODAY. WHEN I WAS SEVEN OR EIGHT YEARS OF AGE, MY FAMILY ATTENDED AN ORTHODOX SYNAGOGUE ON THE HOLIDAYS. I RECALL THAT ON ONE YOM KIPPUR THE RABBI WAS DRESSED IN PURE WHITE, AND HE BEGAN HIS SERMON IN HIS USUAL SING-SONG FASHION. AFTER A MINUTE OR SO, MY THOUGHTS BEGAN TO STRAY AWAY FROM THE RABBI, FOR HE WAS SPEAKING IN A LANGUAGE I COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. HE WAS SPEAKING IN YIDDISH. MY FATHER WHO WAS SITTING BESIDE ME NOTICED THAT I WAS NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO THE RABBI, SO HE PULLED ME BY THE ARM AND SAID IN HIS FIRM VOICE, "LISTEN!". SINCE MY FATHER WAS SO SERIOUS ABOUT THE MATTER, I TRIED MY BEST OVER A LONGER PERIOD OF TIME TO LISTEN. ACTUALLY, I LEARNED TWO THINGS ON THIS YOM KIPPUR. I LEARNED THAT MY FATHER THOUGHT THAT WHAT THE RABBI HAD TO SAY WAS VERY IMPORTANT, AND FROM THE RABBI I GLEANED AN EDURING AND STIMULATING MEMORY OF REVERENT MYSTERY.

NOW WHILE I HAVE TAKEN YOUR TIME TO DETAIL SOME OF MY EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCES, I HAVE DONE SO TO MAKE A POINT WHICH I THINK CAN BE VERIFIED IN EACH OF OUR LIVES. THE POINT IS THAT NOT ALL TEACHERS TEACH, AND ON THE OTHER HAND, EVERYONE OF US TEACH WHETHER WE KNOW IT OR NOT. WE TEACH NOT ONLY BY WHAT WE SAY AND DO, BUT ALSO BY WHAT WE DON'T SAY AND BY WHAT WE DON'T DO, AND THIS IS TRUE WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE IN THE FORMAL POSITION OF A TEACHER. LEARNING TAKES PLACE IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS, AND THE WISE TEACHER WILL BE COGNIZANT OF THIS.

THE WISE TEACHER WILL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EVERY SITUATION, WHETHER IT IS A PLANNED OR A SPONTANEOUS SITUATION. AS A RABBI, I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF MYSELF PRIMARILY AS A TEACHER. I PERCEIVED EARLY ON THAT THE GREATEST PROBLEMS FACED BY AMERICAN JEWRY ARE IGNORANCE AND APATHY, SO I TEACH WHEREEVER AND WHENEVER I CAN. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE ARE SOME RABBIS TODAY WHO HAVE RELINQUISHED THE SHABBAT MORNING SERVICE AS A TEACHING OPPORTUNITY. THEY HAVE ELECTED INSTEAD TO BECOME THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES IN THE BAR OR BAT MITZVAH PERFORMANCE OF ONE OF THEIR STUDENTS. I BELIEVE THIS CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF THE RABBI TO BE A SAD COMMENTARY ON THE STATE OF THE RABBINATE IN AMERICA. THE CENTERPIECE OF THE SHABBAT MORNING SERVICE IS NOT THE BAR MITZVAH CHILD, BUT THE TORAH. WHEN THE RABBI HAS A HUNDRED OR FIVE HUNDRED IGNORANT JEWS PRESENT ON A SHABBAT MORNING AND HE NOT NOT SEIZE THE OCCASION TO TEACH TORAH, HE IS IN MY OPINION NOT ONLY LOSING A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY, HE IS BETRAYING HIS TRUST.

CONSIDER NOW THE TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES INVOLVED IN A WEDDING CEREMONY. WE COULD REGARD THE CEREMONY AS MERELY AN OCCASION WHERE ONE PERSON GETS MARRIED TO ANOTHER. OR WE COULD SAY, " THERE ARE DOZENS, PERHAPS A HUNDRED COUPLES PRESENT, EACH IN A DIFFERENT PHASE OF THEIR MARRIAGE. CERTAINLY THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE THESE COUPLES RENEW THEIR COMMITMENT TO ONE ANOTHER AT A DEEPER LEVEL. HOW CAN THIS BE DONE? MERELY BY POINTING OUT THE UNIVERSAL ASPECT OF THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY. MERELY BY MAKING IT CLEAR THAT JUST AS THE YOUNG COUPLE ABOUT TO BE MARRIED ARE SYMBOLIC OF ADAM AND EVE, AS THE CEREMONY SUGGESTS, SO THEY ARE ALSO SYMBOLIC OF EVERY OTHER COUPLE PRESENT. THE LANGUAGE OF THE SHIVAH B'RACHOT INVITES US TO TALK ABOUT AHAVAH, LOVE, ACHAVAH, TOGETHERNESS, SHALOM, TRANQUILITY, AND RAY-UT, FRIENDSHIP. SPEAKING ABOUT THESE QUALITIES IN THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AUTOMATICALLY INVOLVES EVERYONE. THE TEACHING RABBI IS EVER MINDFUL OF HIS PUBLIC OPPORTUNITIES.

THE RICHNESS OF OUR TRADITION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSMITTING THAT TRADITION IN A CREATIVE FASHION IS THE THEME OF TEMPLE BETH AM. WE HAVE CREATED A S'lichot SERVICE WITHOUT PRAYERBOOKS PRECEDED BY A STUDY SESSION. WE HAVE CREATED A CANDLELIGHT SERVICE FOR CHANUKAH WHERE A THOUSAND CANDLES ARE LIT FROM ONE CANDLE. WE HAVE DEVELOPED RESPONSIVE READING FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAY TORAH SERVICES SO THAT THE CONGREGATION IS DEEPLY INVOLVED IN TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING THE TORAH MESSAGE. WE HAVE EMPLOYED DANCING AND DRAMA AS PART OF THE WORSHIP SERVICE. WE HAVE DEVELOPED A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL CONFIRMATION PROGRAM WITH NINTH AND TENTH GRADERS MEETING ON A SEPARATE NIGHT TO TAKE COURSES IN BIBLE, MIDRASH, AND TALMUD ALONGSIDE COURSES IN TEEN-AGE PROBLEMS INVOLVING SEX AND DRUGS. WE WERE AMONG THE FIRST CONGREGATIONS TO DEVELOP MINI-COURSES FOR TEEN-AGERS, TO FEATURE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, AND ADULT BAR/BAT MITZVAH AS WELL AS ADULT CONFIRMATION. I LIST THESE THINGS NOT TO BOAST BUT TO MAKE THE POINT THAT THERE IS NO LIMIT TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE SYNAGOGUE STRUCTURE.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THIS CONGREGATION DID WHEN IT ORGANIZED SOME 33 YEARS AGO WAS TO DEVELOP A NURSERY SCOOl WHICH SOON BECAME A DAY SCHOOL OPERATING THROUGH THE SIXTH GRADE. WE SHARE WITH ANOTHER CONGREGATION THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING STARTED THE FIRST MODERN REFORM DAY SCHOOL. IN SHORT, THIS HAS BEEN A CONGREGATION WITH A PASSION FOR EDUCATION, AND WE ARE BLESSED WITH PEOPLE LIKE CEIL COONIN, LENORE KIPPER, DOROTHY HERMAN, MARILYN HARRISON, SANDY KRAMER, AND MANY OTHERS, TO HELP US DO THE JOB.

(Rudolph Sholem in n.y.)

one of the best qualities shared by our staff is that they are anxious to evaluate what they have done; they are able to admit where they have failed; and they are not afraid to try something new.

LET ME CONCLUDE BY TELLING YOU A QUICK STORY. A DESCIPLE CAME TO HIS HASIDIC MASTER AND ASKED HIM, " MASTER, WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TEACH?". THE MASTER ANSWERED, " AS THE BARREL OVERFLOWS". MY PRAYER FOR EACH OF YOU IS THAT YOU WILL FILL YOUR BARREL WITH SO MUCH OF THE TREASURE OF OUR TRADITION THAT YOUR BARREL WILL OVERFLOW, BRINGING COMFORT AND INSPIRATION WHEREVER THAT STREAM FLOWS.