

Who's Your Rabbi!

A sermon for Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778

Delivered by

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I begin with words of humility, for this morning I am feeling a bit overwhelmed by the fact that you and I have spent a lifetime together. From the very first Rosh Hashanah to today, you and I have shared in these precious Days of Awe and all of the years that have transpired in between them.

As I think of all of our years together I can't help but consider the challenge that I have faced each year and each Shabbat throughout the year – how to bridge the gulf between the rabbi and his congregants, how to make clear the meaning of the sermon for me and what I would have it be for my congregation, for you.

As I sat in front of the computer screen contemplating my words and thoughts I found that the more I wrote the less successful I was becoming; my efforts to shape my thoughts into words were coming to naught. And then I considered that perhaps what I was seeking to write and say had already been articulated by another.

So, permit me to begin with these words of the poet John Hall Wheelock, from his poem "Return into the night." He wrote:

What shall a man do when he looks upon
His work, at close of day, discovering there
The little done, the much that is undone –
The little of any worth.
The much unworthy of the lifelong prayer
And labor that gave it birth –
A man unlearned, willful, without scope,
Nursing one hope:
To render articulate the joy that sings
Within him, the deep joy
Behind the tragic mask of things –
Glory that he would share,
And trembles to impart.
Whom does he speak to – there is none to hear.
He speaks to his own heart.

Here is a truth to be told. Each year, every sermon I have ever delivered and shared with you over these years – that sermon – has always had to speak first to my heart, challenge my

soul, urge my action. If the words would not speak to me first I knew that they could not possibly speak to you.

I

My friend and teacher, Danny Siegel, who will be with us in November, as one of our scholars in residence has often used this phrase, “Who is your rabbi?” When someone performs a mitzvah that touches another soul, Danny asks, “who is your rabbi?” because he believes that the rabbi would be proud of that person, or because he believes that the person is doing the mitzvah because he learned it from his rabbi. And conversely, when someone does something shameful, Danny will ask, “who is your rabbi?” as if to say ‘how could your rabbi teach you to behave like that’ or “if your rabbi knew what you did, would he be proud of you?”

Now, I have been blessed with wonderful students over the course of the years. I think of those who have gone on to have successful careers as rabbis, teachers, lawyers, doctors. I think of those who have entered the world of business, and those who have entered the non-profit world, too. There are those who have dedicated their lives to children and those who have sought to change the world. So many students, so many who performed acts of kindness, deeds of worth, with healing hands and caring hearts and sharp minds, too.

And I have been rabbi to several generations of members of this Temple. I think of the families that I have known for four generations or more, grandparents who became great grandparents, parents who became grandparents, children who became parents, and now grandchildren who have become parents as well. So many brises and baby namings, consecrations and b’nai mitzvah, graduations and weddings and funerals. So many and all so very precious, indeed.

This morning, as I contemplate the meaning of all of this I want to invite you to join with me as I ask myself the question that I would hope you would reflect on this day and in the year to come: Who is Bennett Miller, your Rabbi? I don’t ask it to be self-critical or self-aggrandizing; rather, I raise the question as a means to ask what have I imparted to you over our years together, what will be of lasting worth, not so much to me but to you, and how have my values that I have shared with you through my teaching and preaching and writing and doing – how have these values helped in shaping our lives, the life of our community, and will they continue in the years to come?

II

I didn’t know when I accepted the position to be your first assistant rabbi that I would come to spend my entire career here with all of you. I thought this would be a short-term assignment, where I would learn the ropes from Rabbi Harvey Fields (of blessed memory), and where I would try out any crazy ideas that I might have on all of you. I was quickly confronted by the challenge of educating our special needs students, by a youth group that demanded excellence of me, and by adults who wanted and expected me to provide them with opportunities for learning. I recall the global antisemitism and the boycott of Israeli products and fondly recall how I arranged for a shipment of Jaffa oranges (that supposedly were tainted with poison) to be

brought here, a shipment that otherwise would be left rotting on the ship. Fortunately, with the help of a few congregants we arranged for the shipment to be brought to the Temple. Keller Hall was piled from floor to ceiling with boxes of oranges and you bought them all, refusing to be intimidated by the Arab boycott intended to choke Israel's economy and strangle the young Jewish country to death. How exciting those first years were. Every day was a new adventure.

And then you asked me to lead you as your Senior Rabbi. Truth be told I was terrified. I was twenty-eight years old and was now expected to be a rabbi with at least thirty years of experience. What wisdom could I bring to the task? What vast treasure of learning might I have to impart to a congregation more than a hundred years old. And so, I asked? Bennett, what will be the nature of your rabbinate? What kind of Rabbi shall you be?

While in college and rabbinical school I swore that I would never be a congregational rabbi. I heard too many horror stories of rabbis and congregants engaged in battles, of congregants making outrageous demands of their rabbis, and treating their rabbis with disdain. I wanted nothing to do with this kind of life. My efforts and calling were to work with youth, with young people who I could shape and mold and have a real impact on their life.

As you know, the trajectory of my journey took me in a different direction, here to New Brunswick. As I got closer to ordination I realized that I wanted some more seasoning, to learn from a master teacher, a skilled rabbi who would guide me and shape me. And Rabbi Fields did just that, in a loving and embracing way. I hope that I have been such a guide to my precious colleagues who have joined me here over the course of the years. I hold each of them so very dear.

My task was to educate and shape your children. I took it on with zeal and passion. I loved running your education program, and I really loved being rabbi and friend to your children. And I have always made sure that I had a hand in the school, taught all of our kids, and found time to be with them in special ways. Who is your rabbi? A man who loves your children, who loves learning with them and with you. Your rabbi is a man devoted to the next generations, committed to showing them the joy of Jewish life, the incredible story of our People's encounter with the Divine, and helping them to make that story their own. As the midrash informs us: Don't see the young as your children, your *baniyech*; See them as *bonayech*, as the builders of your future.

As a child, I attended Shabbat services each week with my mother. She was a member of the choir; so that meant so was I. I loved the sound of the music, the rhythm of the service. I had no idea of the meaning of the words but their melody and pattern had a comforting feeling for me. It was later, as a student of liturgy, that I came to fully understand the power of prayer and its meaning for all times. Prayer is the religious language of the human soul. Without it, our lives are often empty.

Who's your rabbi? Your rabbi is one who has treated every Shabbat and every worship experience, and every funeral and wedding and baby naming as a liturgical expression, a way for us to make our lives holy. How often we are faced with an overwhelming moment of joy or thanksgiving and we don't seem to have words to express our inner feelings. Each time you

have entered the sanctuary I hope you have found our worship to be transformative. The worship is not about me; it is about moving us from the profane to the sacred, from the mundane to the holy.

Do you recall our moments together in the sanctuary just sixteen years ago when the twin towers came down on 9/11? I threw the doors open wide and people came, one after the other; we sang, we prayed, we held each other in an embrace. And we have done the same so many times: that wedding under the chuppah with tears of absolute joy, the bat mitzvah with the uncle in the hospital and via live stream and cellphones he recited the blessing for an aleeyah; the 50th wedding anniversary, the beautiful baby looking out and feeling love all around. As your rabbi, I have dedicated my life to making liturgy sacred, new music ever fresh, changing hours of services, choral singing with choirs of all ages, and a congregation that sings and sings loud. I still haven't gotten you to get up and dance, but hope does springs eternal.

Who's your rabbi? One of my teachers, Reverend John Talbot used to say that "people need community or else they die." The first time I heard him say it I understood the power of those words. It's true. People live in community; without it they surely do die. Over and over I have seen the power of community, especially here at Anshe Emeth. That is why I have sought with all of my energy to make this the most significant community possible. Look who we touched: The *Gan* that we created for the babies and youngest children in our community, the kids from the school behind us, too. When people of all ages cross the threshold, and walk into the building they know that they are safe. When we come here we focus, not on ourselves but on others – providing food for the hungry, medical equipment for the needy, giving blood, car seats, winter coats and gloves and hats and scarves, too; and diapers and more diapers. When the cold of winter approaches we open our doors so that the homeless can feel our warmth and our welcome. When we comfort the mourner and embrace the lonely, we become ministering angels of the Divine. Not me, not you, but all of us. I pray each Friday night as we begin our worship that our community and all that we do will be worthy of the Divine so that the Shechina, the Presence of the Divine, will want to enter our midst and give strength and encouragement to our community.

Who's your rabbi? My life has been shaped by a devotion to ongoing learning, to engaging with our sacred texts, and then making that learning come alive in all that we do. How often have I asked you to join me in such learning? And you did. You made Shabbat morning come alive here. You made Monday evening and Sunday morning and afternoons times to grow and be challenged by thinkers and leaders and writers. You have travelled with me to our beloved Israel and to Jewish communities throughout the world.

And my life has been fulfilled by a commitment to a strong and vibrant and democratic and pluralistic Israel, and by a devotion to Jews all over the world. As you have encouraged my connection to Israel and to world Jewry I hope that doing so has empowered and shaped your lives, too. In the words of the Mishnah, *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh la zeh*. Every Jew is dependent, one upon another.

For me, perhaps the greatest challenge has been this: in a world of rampant assimilation have I taught you to remain true to our faith. At a time of weakening religious passion, have I been able to encourage you to be strong and true to our faith and to what our faith represents? It isn't always easy; so much enticement and seduction to a crass and vulgar world that focuses on self, urging us to give up our calling as Jews.

The truth is that when we live our lives as Jews in the larger world, when we contribute to the community as Jews, we are our very best and most fulfilled. I know, as I walk the streets of New Brunswick, in the hospital or at Rutgers -- when I meet people of all faiths, all walks of life, and I tell them that I am a Rabbi of Anshe Emeth, they tell me that ours is the most special sacred institution in our community -- that Anshe Emeth touches the lives of so many people, and how truly fortunate our community is to have Anshe Emeth.

Who's your Rabbi? I am. And today I express my deepest gratitude to all of you -- for your faith and support, for your willingness to go with me on my journey, and for your determination to create together a *Kehillah Kedoshah*, a community worthy of the divine.

IV

I opened these words with poetry. Permit to close with poetry as well. For poetry is the language of the spirit. It is a poem that I wrote but with inspiration from the poetry of Yehudah Amichai, one of Israel's great poets. He, too, was among those who came and taught you and me.

I didn't come to you to be God. I came to you to be Rabbi
And what did I give you?

I gave you my dreams and my passion,
and shared the Ten Commandments, too

I taught them to you
Neither in thunder nor in fury, neither in fire nor in cloud
But rather in gentleness and love, adding caresses and kind words
Urging and challenging along the way.

And I sang with you *Shamor v' zachor et Hashabbat*, "keep" and "remember" the
Shabbat,
in a single melody but with many tunes.

Of course, there was pleading and
crying quietly between one spoken word and the next. "Care for your brother and sister,
for the stranger, too. Do not put a stumbling block before the blind, and protect the
orphan and the widow and the homeless in your midst.

I hugged you and whispered in your ear
Do not steal. Do not murder. Do not speak *Lashon Harah*.

I placed the palm of my open hands
On the heads of your children, reciting these words “May God bless you and keep you,”
“Honor...,” “love...,” “so that your days might be long on the earth.”

Yes, these are my words that I learned from my rabbis
And give them to you again, our *Aseret Hadibrot*, the set of ancient utterances.
I pray you will carry them with you always. Not as commandments but as loving embrace
Like on the day we first met, and began to walk our journey together.

And allow me to add two to the Ten:
The eleventh commandment – “Thou shall not change.”
Remain the sacred community we have built together.

And the twelfth commandment – change everything.
For I did, too, and look what we crafted on our own way.