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"Compassion, Sensitivity, Understanding: The Hazzan As Pastor"

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Hazzan Robert Scherr

We are very pleased to have Dr. Jack Bloom with us today. His background in the synagogue includes years as a pulpit rabbi, so that his experience is very similar to ours. In his practice as a psychologist, he has had a wide variety of experience in working with clergy and the problems of the ministry including a very interesting series of seminars on mid-career analysis, which he has recently been leading Central Conference of American Rabbis. If Jack Bloom is familiar to many of us it is also because he appeared at the Cantors Assembly Convention two years ago. We are very pleased to be able to have him with us again this morning.

Dr. Jack Bloom

What I'd like to do is to spend sometime talking and then open up the floor for whatever questions may have and for whatever specific ways I might be of use to you. I don't know exactly how long I'll talk but we'll have a lot of time. Lunch isn't until one o'clock. If you get bored, you can feel free to leave, although the best part with me is always at the end.

The Hazzan as Symbolic Exemplar

When considering the clergyman, the hazzan, the rabbi, the minister, whoever it might be, the first and foremost thing for that clergyman to keep is his role as a symbolic exemplar. I've done a lot of work on this; it is my favorite hobbyhorse and I want to say a few words about it.

You are, whether you like it or not, a walking, talking, living symbol. Where you appear, whether that be in the hospital, at the house of *shivah*, on a visit, and even sometimes, for better or for worse, at a social visit, you are, what I call a symbolic exemplar. You stand for something other than yourself. This does cause all kinds of problems in terms of being, of living day-to-day in this role. It

is also, I don't want you to forget it. It is also the source of your strength and power as a pastor. It is also the source of your strength and power when you walk into that hospital room; when you walk in to make that *shivah* call; when you get up to *daven* for and with a congregation. The fact that you are a walking, talking symbol, that you stand for something other than yourself is where your potential power, and, in terms of being a pastor, where your potential influence and healing comes from. If you're in touch with that, as we go through the number of issues I want to talk about, when you're in touch with that you'll find that how you act, how you behave and how you are with the people whom you want to be pastor to will in some way change and your effectiveness will also grow.

I also want you to remember that you have, as hazzanim, you have a special area of uniqueness (we will get to that a little later, too). You are the expert, whether you like it or not, whether other people agree with you or not; it makes no difference. It matters what's in you. You are the expert on issues of music and prayer. You are the one person, very clearly, in the congregation. You are the *sh'liach tzibbur*, do not forget that. You are the person who has been designated to pray on behalf of others. That, in itself, is a very potent instrument for you not to lose sight of as you go about your pastoral work. A very important thing that you have--you are the hazzan. You are the person who prays for and on behalf of others.

Keeping these things in mind, I want to go through some of the pastoral situations very briefly, that you no doubt are involved in. I will make the full round to sickness to death and back to life again.

I remember very vividly two experiences in the hospital. I had two very brief experiences. I will never forget the experience of being in my hospital gown, and I am tall so the gown barely does the job. Lying on one of those rolling carts, strapped down, when one of the nurses in the hospital, which shall remain nameless, says: "Whose going to take this one down?" I wasn't this one; I was me. I was damn important to me and I wanted to be treated as a human being. I was aware that I was having very minor surgery; I was going home in two hours. It was really not anything that should bother anyone. But when you visit a person in the hospital, remember that one of the processes that has begun is a sense of deep depersonalization, a sense of being cut off, a sense of isolation, a sense of being in the hands of others. When you get into that antiseptic atmosphere of the best hospital, it doesn't matter. when you get into that antiseptis, that white kind of place where people do become objects, your

visit, as the person from whatever congregation, when you come in there, representing that congregation, by your very presence, you are a statement that the person there is not alone, that he is not isolated, that there are people on the outside who care.

When you come into that kind of situation, I am going to make some recommendations today on how to behave as well. A lot of us still, after all these years, come into that situation and start to make small talk; some come in and start to give pep talks to the person--don't worry, you'll be all right, in 24 hours, 48 hours, 6 weeks, you'll be out there, you'll be ready to get back into the rat race and go, go, go. That's not what the person wants to hear. When you lie on the bed sick, and you're hurting, either before the operation or afterwards, or before a procedure or afterwards, what the pep talks do, incidentally, is to deny what the person lying there on the bed is feeling. The person in bed has been feeling scared, maybe has been somewhat depersonalized by now, is hurting, and when you give the pep talk you don't do very much good.

I find the most useful thing to do when you come in is to say who you are, indicate that people on the outside are concerned, that you are there for yourself and on behalf of the congregation, too. It is important for the person to know and to ask a very simple question: Is there something I can do for you? You don't know what it may be. It may be that someone will ask: Will you go downstairs and pick up a cup of coffee for me? I don't know what. But when you are there and indicate your availability. the person may say no, there is nothing I want. You may end up sitting there quietly, in silence. Don't feel obliged to make conversation. You don't have to fill the space. If you're sensitive to a person, if you've been through a similar experience, what you can do is to share some of your own feelings, some of your own being scared the night you had minor surgery. It's important. Whatever you do, please don't shut off the feelings of the person there because you are uncomfortable with him. The person lying there, sitting there, is frightened, scared, whatever the nature of the procedure is going to be. If you're there and you realize that what you stand for is not just yourself, but you are also Hazzan Cohen of Congregation, if you realize that, your effectiveness will be much greater. You do have a tool; you have a great one, which is what you can offer a person and you can make an offer like that, is to pray for them.

When I was a rabbi, I was uncomfortable with that, especially early in my rabbinate when I didn't appreciate the power of being the walking, talking

symbol. I don't think you can be uncomfortable with praying for anybody else. You have to do that; you are the *sh'lich tzibbur*. If you, in some way, can indicate your willingness to include that person next Shabbat; don't assume that it will be done administratively, that the office will give you the name and you will do it. I don't know how many of you offer *misheberachs* regularly with people's names in them very specifically. It is important for the person to know that you, when you pray next Shabbat, will in some way be thinking of him. That you will be praying for well-being, healing and those kinds of things. It's a potent kind of instrument. Don't minimize it. I was very uncomfortable in my early years. I used to come from the theological position that everyone has to pray for themselves. No one can pray for anybody else all that kind of *narishkeit*. Let me tell you, now that I am in my office sometimes, when I function as a rabbi and I say to someone, maybe we can pray together, maybe we can do something like that, that's a very potent thing that you have. So please, no pep talks when you go in there. Hear what the person is saying; try to respond. Your very presence is very important.

Let's assume that we've moved beyond the state of regular kinds of hospital visits, regular kinds of procedures and you are dealing with someone whom you know has a terminal illness. I want to tell you a story that I feel took me a long time to come to it, but it was probably one or two of the most important experiences of my pulpit. I want to begin by telling the story because I think the story speaks for itself.

There was a woman in my congregation who had had her breast removed and was assumed to be cured and later had a metastasis of the cancer to her spine. This was going to be a secret that the family kept. The father and two adult children, both in their early twenties, were going to keep this secret in order to protect Mom. I walked into the hospital one day and around Mom's bed, who was still a relatively young woman in her 40's, and an assortment of sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, and they were all joking and laughing. Don't worry, Mildred, you'll be fine; everything will be O.K.; don't worry about it. There was a kind of feigned and false optimism. She was going home the next day. There was nothing else that could be done in the hospital.

I said to her, "how are you, Millie?"

"Are you going to tell me stories, Rabbi?"

I said, "no stories, Millie, but if you want to talk, I'm available."

That was all I said. There was nothing else to say to the people there and I walked out. A day later I got a call that she had called and she wanted me to come, maybe two days later, I don't remember, it was a long time ago. She wanted me to come to her house. When I came to the house, she said to me, it was clear that she knew what was wrong with her, despite all the lies that were going on around her, and I said, yes, I know, that's very clear. She said, you know I am going to die and I said yes, that's true.

From then on began one of the most moving experiences that I ever had in which she started to talk; (the first visit was two hours) about her feelings were about dying, and about not being able to see the wedding of her two kids, about leaving her husband and all of that kind of thing. I went downstairs after that visit to her husband and kids (they weren't kids) and I said: "You know you can go talk to her, she knows that she is going to die." Their contact began and we had a number of other visits this way in which she was able to be straight and talk about what was really happening to her and she died shortly thereafter.

There were maybe a couple of other things in my ten years in the pulpit that were as important as that. Certainly, to that family there was nothing as important as that one statement that made that possible. The statement was simple: no stories, but if you want to talk, I'm available. That family made some contact, I made some contact.

One of the things about people who are terminally ill is that because of the anxiety of the people around them they are treated as dead before they are dead. Dying is not dead. Dying is a part of living and when we start to lie to the person who is dying, when we start to treat them as a nonperson, who shouldn't have feelings, who shouldn't be scared, who shouldn't be going through what they are going through, we collude in having them not live to their very last breath. If you do anything, and I don't care what the others are doing around you, if you do anything that can be important as a pastor and as a caring person, you can let the person know that you will not collude in that.

You do have to respect the person's boundaries. You don't become more frank than is reasonable for a patient to accept at first blush. You can't do that. You have to allow for the limits of what the person is able to handle. But if your ears are open, and if you are hearing, you will know what that person is willing to share with you. You have to be secure in yourself, too, to know that you are willing to open up and talk despite your own fear of your own death, which is

where we are all coming from, that you are willing to talk about the dying with the person that you are visiting.

Again, your role as a *sh'lich tzibbur*, as the expert in prayer, can be a very, very important one. You can offer yourself, at that point, as one who can help with that very important connection. How you are going to do that depends on your own uniqueness, but don't minimize yourself. You don't have to get into small talk. There'll be some of that - how are the Mets doing? What's happening? - that kind of avoidance. You don't have to get into that and one way that you can avoid that is sometime to get into your own feelings, your own fright. If a person doesn't want to hear it, they will make it quite clear that they don't want to hear that.

Now let's shift a bit of focus to the living, to death and *shivah*.

Once a person has died the focus shifts to the living. The question is how you as the hazzan, as a clergyman in your congregation, what you can do. The most important thing that you can do is to help the people do the grief-work. You know what happens often, I still do that. What happens very often during shivah is that people come in, they shake hands, the initial hug goes on in which there is some crying every time a new person is seen, then *vert men freilakh*. People talk about this and that-a wonderful place in the community to visit, and except for the little stools that are there, you wouldn't know. It would be synonymous with a lot of other kinds of parties. I make it my business and you can make it your business, to go over to the mourners and to start a conversation about the person who died. I always do that. If you are visiting a *shivah* house, I would never walk out of that house without doing that. To sit down with that person and say: Tell me about your marriage; what was Dad like? You can begin with any kind of question that interests you. If music is your bag, you might want to talk about that. You might want to talk about where that person was at with music. If that doesn't go any place, if the person pretended he was tone deaf and didn't know anything, so something else. Get the family to talk about the deceased; don't hesitate to ask about the illness; don't hesitate to get them, in some way, to do that grief-work. That's very important work. You take away a percentage of the mourning-very important work. Don't ever leave a *shivah* house without having done something like that.

I was thinking of a crazy idea. I don't want it to sit with me. I want to put it out. If you people reject it, that's O.K, I know that if it would have been my father's shivah (I don't know about my mother's), it would have been very nice.

I grew up in a small congregation that did not have a hazzan. It would have been very nice. As I was preparing for today, I want to share what I thought I would have liked a hazzan to do for me. The hazzan would have come in that week, he would have sat down with me and asked me, during shivah, maybe even before, about my father's taste in Jewish music. What song, what melodies my father liked; was there something that really moved him? And if that fictitious hazzan, if I would have told him what Yiddish melody, what Hebrew song my father liked, if sometime during shivah, or even at the funeral, the hazzan would have sung that, kind of in memory, or expression of my father's feeling about Jewish music, as an expression of his tenderness and the music in his soul, I think, that for me, as an *avel*, that would have been one of the most moving experiences of my life. I don't want to give that as an *eytzah tovah*, you may have your own thoughts and ideas about it, but what I am saying is that for me that would have been very important. Maybe it had to be done at home, one night after *maariv*. Something that Sam Bloom loved. You know, I have a thing about music. I am convinced that when I play Jewish music at home, I am envious of a hazzan, because that's the stuff that grabs me. I want my kids to have that, so I keep it on all the time. Of course, it kills me when they want the rock 'n roll and that stuff and "Saturday Night Fever." I saw "Saturday Night Fever" and I thought the music was fine, but it wasn't me, it wasn't in my *kishkes*. The melodies that I heard from my father, the melodies that I learned as a kid have had profound influences on me. I think that that would have been a most moving experience for me that a hazzan could have, in his own uniqueness, could have really touched me and moved me and added something to that whole experience.

Another thing I want you to know which is one of the things about pulpit clergymen is that when our obligations call on us to do things for the 430th time, they easily become routine. A *shivah* call is an obligation; a bar mitzvah kid is an obligation; a eulogy, a funeral that is really an obligation. What follows Israel Moshowitz z'l first said it to us when we were seniors at the Seminary, in his catchy way words that I have never forgotten. He said, for you it's funeral number 4,853, for the family it's number one. I want to come back to my own *shivah* that time when it was number one. Though I knew as a professional how obligatory paying a *shivah* call was; yet the people who came during shivah moved me beyond words. When you come, as the hazzan, as the clergyman, your presence is not just the presence of some other person there. Don't forget that. When you come in and when you leave, your presence takes on an added importance and you do something for that family by your very presence. That becomes a burden and an obligation, I understand that. But it also is very

important. I have not forgotten that Mr. Laefsky, who when I was growing up I couldn't tolerate, that he was there during the *shivah* at Inwood Terrace, every morning and evening, 17 years ago. Everyday he was there. Of course, when the clergyman comes, he is not just another member, he is someone; he is someone very special.

Again, during *shivah*, don't try (I don't like to give prescriptions), don't ever tell people; "don't feel that way." Wipe that off your list. Hear what people are saying to you. When it is guilt, you can do some reassuring; but the most reassuring thing that people hear is not: Don't feel that way. The person says, if you had a suicide (we had a suicide in our congregation the past week), you don't tell the father, don't feel guilty. He is going to stop talking to you. He feels guilty. He's wondering if he did everything that he should do. You can say something like: Hey, listen, we do the best we can with our kids. Hey, I know where you're coming from. I haven't had a kid who has done that, God forbid. I can't imagine anything more painful than that, but, sure, I sometimes get feelings of guilt, maybe I'm not doing enough. You can offer some reassurance. You can say: We do the best we can. The art of being a parent is an imperfect job. We all fail. You know what my therapist told me, years back? He taught me a very important lesson. I want to share it with you; it just came to my head. When I was in the fourth year of my therapy, having worked out a lot of my problems with my dad, I said: I'm going to be a better father than he was. I was worried about that, am I going to do that? He said: Don't worry about that, put away money for your kids' therapy. I said: He must be crazy. Do they teach him this at convention, to build for the future? It was one of the most profound messages he ever told me, because as my father failed with me, I'm going to fail with my kids, and they're going to fail with their kids. This is a job that none of us does right and the best thing we can do is to know that we are not going to succeed at it. That sense of how difficult it is, you can share with people.

There are two ways of shutting off feelings. You can say, "Don't feel that way," or you can start with the pep talks. If you can hear the feelings, respond to them, let them be and respond from your own experience. As a pulpit clergyman you have a much richer experience than most people in that congregation. You've experienced a lot, you've seen a lot and you can respond out of that experience.

Coming back, even more to the land of the living, I want to say a couple of words about divorce. I don't know how you run into the divorce thing, sometimes it will be that someone, after *shul*, in the congregation, comes to

you, considers you a friend of his, starts to open up about the problems. Sometimes you've been in a place long enough, it may be that a couple wants to see you together. My suspicion is that that most often happens unless you have a reputation as a counselor already with one of the parties opening up to you. You should install, on the inside of your forehead, a neon sign, and whenever someone starts to mention problems with their marriage, you should push the button on and the neon sign should go on and it should say: No matter how this looks, and no matter what I am being told, the responsibility in this relationship is 50%. Even if the woman coming to you says my husband beats me and he's a drunkard, and he's out with other women and he's having an affair and look at me, I'm sitting home, suffering, devoted to the children, trying to do my best while he's out gambling, carousing, etc. Your neon sign should say no matter how it seems, it's always 50%. If you have that neon sign in your head, you'll be in a much better place to deal with the person.

Another thing you can do if you get involved in that, and these are just my honest suggestions, is to remember to keep what's going on between you and the person, keep the person on you and the person you're dealing with. Let's say someone catches you, say walking home from *shul*, and he starts to talk to you about his terrible marriage. He's happy, he's finally able to unburden himself. Let's assume it's a man. He's talking about his wife, she's impossible, she does this, she does that, she hasn't done this, hasn't done that. If you allow yourself to go for a long period of time listening to him complaining about her and not saying anything about him, you are not going to be of very much use. If you can very gently focus on, what's that like for you, what goes on with you when your wife does that, what happens to you, how are you feeling? You may have a chance of being some use to that person. Just the sharing of that can be very, very useful. And, of course, if you have the neon sign in your head, what you'll find yourself not doing, with time, you won't end up taking sides. If you end up taking sides, in that relationship, you're not going to be of any use to the person on the other side, it's very simple. Hard struggle, incidentally, when a couple gets a divorce, if you're a friend of both; it's a hard struggle not to take sides. Even if you try not to one of the partners is going to perceive you as doing that and can easily force you into that position. If you have a neon sign in your head, and you also can focus on what's going on between you and the person and focus on that person, you will be of some use.

I want to move on and if you want to raise some thing about divorce later on, that may be the best way to handle it.

The Hazzan as Pastor to the Healthy.

I read last week that the rabbi who officiated at my bar mitzvah died. He was in the little town of Cliffside Park for ten months. It was not a good experience for both parties. He was and remains, the rabbi who officiated at my bar mitzvah, for better, for worse. I never forgot that. I followed this guy all over the country.

He was in California, came back East, somehow I knew where he was because he was the rabbi who officiated at my bar mitzvah. If you are involved in training bar mitzvah kids, you are involved potentially, what is pastorally one of the most important experiences of that child's life. For you, if you do 25 bar mitzvah kids a year, it's another kid, another *sidrah*, another *haftorah*. You know the beginning of all of them. I know because when I go to shul, when I hear the first words, my head goes on with the rest of the *haftorah* because I used to listen to the kids. But that, pastorally, is one of the most crucial things that you can do, and how you treat that kid and how you act, and how you respond on the *bimah*, and how you respond afterwards, not only educational role, is a very important pastoral role. It's the same thing. It's another *sidrah* for you, but for me, *Haazinu* is the *sidrah*, because that's my *sidrah*; and there's no other *Haftorah* like *Shuva Yisrael*, because that's mine, even chopped, one part from here, one part from there, one part from there and usually on *Shabbat Shuva* it doesn't appear completely, but that's the thing. I have distinct memories of the person who taught me the *trope* and sitting at his kitchen table and what it was like to learn the fourth *aliyah* and how that person treated me. For each kid you can have a lifelong effect by how you handle that. If, in your congregation someone else does the tutoring, you do the hearing or something, how does that interview go? It's a very important experience for kids. When I get up and I watch (the congregation I'm a member of) how poorly the Seminary prepares rabbis in terms of the importance of that day, I'm appalled, I am utterly appalled. I watch the rabbi standing there. The kid has just finished and the rabbi delivers, in this case, an English *misheberach*, in *der velt arein*. I don't know what he is saying and I know that some guys, if they have a sense of it, talk to the kid. There is one rabbi, I am sure, who does a fantastic job, not in a Conservative congregation, and all you watch him doing is taking the kid next to him, putting his hands on the kid, and whispering to him. You never hear a word. I am sure that kid remembers what the rabbi told him the rest of his life. If you can do something, in your prayer-role again, if you can do something for that kid, I don't know what the structure is in your particular congregation, whether it's the *misheberach*...if you can make that *misheberach* a personal one

for that kid, not just with the name, maybe you can be somewhat creative and include something that that child would want to have said about him in the *misheberach*...I don't know, some kind of way that you can use the interview before, the experience on the pulpit as a part of your pastoring to that kid. You will make an investment. It's not accidental that Hazzan Putterman said that the people whom he had taught were the backbone later on. You will make an investment that will have lifetime benefit and that I think is crucial and very important.

I want to end this part with a *vort*. I heard the *vort* on WEVD, and I thought it was a lovely *vort*, and I want to share it with you. I was on the way to have some pictures developed. Whenever I'm driving I turn on WEVD (WEVD is the station of the JEWISH DAILY FORWARD in New York and broadcasts many hours of Jewish programming). The guy was talking about the *Sh'ma. Sh'ma Yisrael haShem elokeynu haShem echad*. He says, *echad*, of course, does not mean one. He says what's the *hiddush* of **one**? And he quoted Hermann Cohn saying that what *echad* means is unique, that God is unique and further, since man is made *b'tzelem elokim*, and since God is unique, so is man unique. Therefore, when in *Pirkei Avot* it says that Ben Zoma says, *eyzehu chacham halomayd mikol adam?* what's the *hiddush* there? what does a person of lesser intelligence, what does a person I don't like, what does a person who never had any education, what does a person who is obnoxious, what can that person teach me? Only if we recognize that there is something that is unique and different in that person. If there is something unique in that person then there is something that I can learn from him, whatever it is. I am aware that since I heard the *vort* that kind of phrasing, my work in my office has kind of changed a bit, the way I work, the sense that being aware of the uniqueness, of how the person I'm with handles their life, what it's like for them to live the way they do how they handle their problems and dilemmas has become ever more upfront for me. These are people with problems and dilemmas. Because each person is unique there is something we can learn from each person.

If you go into any pastoral role with any of the congregants, try to remember that, that there is something unique and different about this person than any other person. But try to remember something else, too. That you as a hazzan, you have a commonality with other clergymen and you also have a uniqueness. You have something special that nobody else in the world can offer. A piece of that is being the *baal t'fillah*, the master of prayer, of being the person who touches the soul of the Jewish people through music and a piece of it is your being a symbolic exemplar, that's a piece of it, and another piece of your

uniqueness is being you. You can give something because you're a you that no one else can give and if the two uniquenesses have a chance of touching, then you've really done something pastorally. That's really very important for the people whom you care about, whom you love and even sometimes for people whom you don't love. If you can value their uniqueness, you have a chance to reach them.

What I would like to do now is to open up for any questions that you may have.

Question: UTH

I'd like to ask about a case we have to deal with from time to time, and that is a bar mitzvah coming up and the parents are separated or already divorced. You have this problem of whether they are going to sit together, or whether one is going to bring his new wife, or the boyfriend or girlfriend. Perhaps there's a way of dealing with this tactfully, if there's no right or wrong answer.

Dr. Bloom:

I think you have to leave it. I think the most useful thing you could do is probably to bring the divorced couple together to negotiate on this and talk about it, unless they've worked it out already. For some it's not a problem. If you bring them together to negotiate with you, if you're the determiner of how that goes, then I think it ought to be worked out with them with some help from you and some of your expertise. If they say, I don't want that bitch to even be there, you may have to say, it's your child's mother and certain things would have to be handled. I think the best thing to do is to put most of the responsibility on them with you being the kind of gentle intermediary if you can do that.

I have learned that I have to often turn the neon sign in my head on brighter and brighter and brighter. It's very hard when a person moves you, hard not to take sides. It's very hard. It's very important because the responsibility is always 50%. If two people are married, there are two people who are choosing to stay married and they collude and participate and as you watch them in each other's *mishegaas*, one hits the other with a sledge hammer, and you say, *vey iz mir*, that's terrible and you forget that the other had a stiletto and is just removing it from the ribs: except you don't see it as easily. There are some people you can't deal with. You say, I just don't like her; you're just not going to be able to deal with her.

Questioner continues:

I had a case where a man had a foot amputated, who complained about organizations not having anything to do with him and then if I go to see him the next week, and he wants to talk more, how long do I stay? Usually I have other people to see. Can I stay all day with one man? Also, with hospital visits and *shivah* visits, how do I turn the focus from myself, coming into a community -- How do you like the community? How does your wife like the community? How do you like the job?

Dr. Bloom:

Your second question about shifting the focus from yourself to the mourner intrigues me. The best way you can do that, if you are in a *shivah* house after you've politely responded for a little bit -they may be genuinely interested- is to politely shift the topic. Simply say: I'd really like to know something about your dad, tell me about him. He came from the other side. I've always been impressed with people who had the guts to do that. I don't care how you begin. What was it like to have your mom for a mother? You will be surprised how people want to talk about that. As soon as you get them talking, they'll stop talking about you. You can be very gentle with the questioning, very easy with it. Whether it is a widow or widower, I always ask them how they met, how long they have been married, what it was like, anything like that.

When you get involved with people who really are *m'shugah*, or maybe paranoid, then you have to make your decision, how much you can handle of it. and how much not. If some guy starts to get very paranoid about his family, his friends and goes on and on with you, you may have to say that someone else will have to take that person on and you can't do that. You might suggest then that I have 25 calls to make and maybe you really have a problem that you should take up with somebody. You are certainly free to make a referral. The person may not take it, but you are certainly free to do that. The art of being a good referral source is also important.

Question:

Every parent sees his own child, naturally, as the most important child in the synagogue. Speaking of the hazzan as a bar mitzvah teacher, who has many

students, how do you handle the case of a child who is not so capable and whose parents want you to take so much extra time with this child so that he can do as much as everybody else, when in fact, it would really take you three times as long and it may not even be worth your taking all this time?

Dr. Bloom:

What do you mean by "worth?"

Questioner:

In other words, the child is really not capable of doing anything with it. How do you handle the parents in this situation?

Dr. Bloom:

You have to make a decision. What I do in that kind of situation, or parallel to it, is to focus on the kid and find out what the kid wants, too. "Would I tell the parents that the child is incompetent?" I'd try to be careful about dispensing words that later could be used harmfully. I'd be careful about using words like incompetent. If you take a kid who learns a *Haftorah*, you have to remember when our non-Jewish neighbors come in, they're amazed: the kid is singing notes in a foreign language. So if a kid does part of a *Haftorah*,, our neighbors say *vey iz mir* --a Jewish genius. They're all geniuses. With some, if he does part of the *Haftorah*, and if he doesn't also read from the Torah, he is a Jewish ignoramus. What it's worth depends on your own integrity. Sometimes you'll think it would be too much of an effort for me to do this, and I am not willing to make that kind of effort. I think you have to deal with that. It's your own decision. I can't solve that for you.

Question:

A question that must be in the minds of some of the hazzanim sitting here: How do you come to a rabbi of a congregation who feels that this particular activity --visiting a *shivah* house is strictly his own domain and that the hazzan should deal with other matters. If you were the hazzan, how would you deal with it?

Dr. Bloom:

That's a very tough question. What that gets into, really, is the staff relationship between the rabbi and the hazzan and the Jewish professionals. Wherever you have one professional who is anxious, who is feeling insecure, he's going to try to keep somebody else out. I think, inevitably, if you are in a congregation a long time, you will develop pastoral relationships. There is no way around that. The Beth Abraham Youth Chorale, which has performed here, is an example both of an educational tool and of pastoral relationships. It's not accidental that its director, Jerry described himself as the "father" That's indicative of a pastoral kind of relationship. If you are in a place for a while, you are going to have that. If it's worth quoting to that insecure rabbi that every Jew should be *m'vaker cholim*; if that works with him, it will work. Otherwise you will have to sit down and maybe get some third party to work out what the staff relationship is going to be. If you're interested in doing that kind of work. If you're in a place ten years, you're going to end up with that kind of work anyway. The only question is whether you are going to do it well or badly.

From the floor: Remark that people don't really want to know if they or a loved one has terminal illness.

Dr. Bloom responds:

Had he said to my father what the statistics indicated, he would have done my father a disservice. What he provided my father with were the facts. Because the truth is, that though we may see someone who is terminally ill, we don't know that for a fact. People have remissions. People whom they say are terminally ill, live for 25 years. In a certain sense, all of us are terminally ill. That's true. What I really do advocate, without making any kind of absurd predictions is; let the person know what the facts are and indicate your own availability. What does happen with the dying is that for a lot of dying people there is denial that goes along. I'm not suggesting that you go in with a bulldozer and breach that denial, but a lot of dying people when the people want to keep the secret, it's for their own comfort. What ends up happening is that for the most important event in a person's life, and I suggest that you read Kubler Ross on this (any clergyman should have a copy of "On Death and Dying" by Elizabeth Kubler Ross), if you isolate the person so that they cannot talk about the most important experience in their lives, you've really made them dead before their time. Your availability as a clergyman, your accessibility, your place as a *sh'liah tzibbur*, and your role in prayer all give you added ability for that person to be able to share that with you.

One of the things that a lot of dying people get into is, I don't want to inflict it on my spouse. You may be the conduit for that. I'm not talking about riding roughshod. What that doctor back in the Mayo clinic did was that he gave my father the facts, my father was then able to deal with the facts as best he could either to put them aside, or not to put them aside, to do what he could do in terms of his life. It was no longer a secret. No one had to go around pretending that he was going to get well tomorrow.

Comment from floor:

I was shocked some years ago by a colleague at a funeral of another colleague, where the wife of the deceased was in a state of hysteria at the synagogue, and I said, I don't see how this gal is going to react at the cemetery... At the cemetery, the colleague went on with a twenty minute *El Maleh Rachamim*. I wonder, are we of comfort, in that particular situation, when we go on a small minor ego trip for ourselves? Are we doing good for the person involved? My feeling is that we are wreaking havoc in this situation. I would like your feelings.

Dr. Bloom:

I don't know about making a 20-25 minute *Maleh*. It's clear that you made a statement, not a question. I don't think the attitude towards that kind of thing ought to be the sooner we get away the better. I don't think you ought to drag people along for hour upon hour, but the fact that someone is crying and carrying on, is not at all bad. Very often we get into discomfort with other people's tears and crying because something is shut down in us. If you do the job you have to do within the limits that you know, I think you'll do fine. I don't think stretching it becomes the thing; I don't think, Max Arzt used to say, if you don't strike oil in fifteen minutes, it's an old one, stop boring. I think that goes for other things as well.

Comment from floor:

I had a situation where I was officiating at a funeral recently, since there is no rabbi in my congregation, I have to do that. I went to the family to ask if they would tell me about their father (in preparation for the eulogy). The answer was that he was a no good bastard. They wanted me to tell the people this. I said that type of eulogy you would probably be better giving. At that point they realized it was not a realistic thing because obviously they weren't going to get up and do it. It is a difficult situation to handle. Obviously, you are not going to

get up and praise the man. What I did was give a few greetings and also mention how difficult life is and sometimes people have difficulty in coping with life. I wonder how you would have handled such an incident.

Dr. Bloom:

You reminded me of a situation in Bridgeport. I was a very young rabbi. There was a guy who died in Florida who had the most atrocious reputation in Bridgeport. I won't mention his last name, but his first name "Muscles" because he used to go around showing himself off. He used to ride downtown Main Street, back in, the time when you used to do that kind of thing, with a blond on each arm, in an open convertible, totally, terrible despicable kind of man, supposedly. The mortician told me this since he was a member of the other congregation. I didn't know the man. I was covering for the other rabbi who was on vacation. He said to me: *nisht tzu Got, nisht tzu leit*. That's the extent of what I was told. I lucked out, because they decided not to have the funeral service in Bridgeport, but to have that in Florida and just have the interment in Bridgeport. This man had treated his wife with disdain, contempt and anything else you can imagine, apparently for thirty years, at that time. All we had was the interment at the cemetery in Bridgeport. I have never seen a woman cry so much for her dead husband, as I saw this woman cry. But I'm glad I didn't have to do it.

What I do in those situations, what I used to do in my previous life, I would always aim the talk at the family their mourning, their sadness, something like that.

Comment from floor:

Death in a family is a very sad experience. One of these days a parent has to die. That is a normal situation. What do you do in an abnormal situation, when a child dies?

Dr. Bloom:

When a child dies, the parents need comforting. Don't make up fairy tales. What I do in that kind of situation I have one thing that always comes to my mind. There was a picture in LIFE MAGAZINE, thirty years ago, of the Queen Mother of England burying King George VI. They made some kind of comment about the unique pain on a mother's face as she buries a child. If parents have to bury a

child, I don't know if there is any more painful experience the world. I would just go with it, be with them, share how painful you imagine that must be. I would go with what an unfair world this is. If you're there, the healing will be done of itself. You don't have to do the healing. What you have to do is make it possible for the healing to take place. Do you know any more than they know? Do I know any more than they know? Why does God do that? If you had a theological position on that, then you better put that out. If you were as confused as they are, I wouldn't tell anything that is a lie to you. I don't know why God permitted Auschwitz. What am I going to say? I don't know. We had this past week a suicide of a 22 year old. What the devil do you tell the parents? It's terrible. If you provide air, it's like a wound, what a wound needs to heal is some air and some time. That's a metaphor. If you provide the air, if you provide the listening, the ability to talk, to complain, to grieve, to say how unfair God is, or whatever, if you provide that, you'll help the healing. Just your availability. If you're a man of God, which is how you are seen and you can listen to that, and hear that and know the unfairness, and still have your own faith, you'll allow the healing to take place.

Comment from floor:

I had a graveside service. I met the son as I got out of the car. I didn't know anything about this fellow and he said the same thing. He said, Just tell us he's no good and that's all. At any rate, when I got to the graveside, I spoke extemporaneously about the value of life and the human being a little lower than the angels. No matter how much a guy is a *mamzer*, the fact is that we are alive and we have to live the best kind of life we live. At a time when you can't say anything about the dead, I find it very beneficial to say something about what you do with your own life. The person falls into some of those categories. No matter how rotten a person is, there is a little bit of good in every person.

Another speaker from the floor:

An incident happened in my congregation and up until today I was of the opinion that I was the injured party. After hearing the replies that you have given to the members of this august body, I feel now that may be it was my fault and this has to do with rabbi-cantor relationship.

I was sitting at home one evening with the membership list in front of me and thought, wouldn't it be a nice idea to call a few of the members to say hello. I sat for an hour calling members and thought it was the most wonderful thing in

the world. The next day, I met the rabbi, went into his office and said, look this is what happened. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if we both did it? He said, I wish you wouldn't do this because it makes me look bad. I thought, what kind of a guy is this to put me down when I thought I had such a wonderful thing. Maybe I was the one at fault because had I gotten this idea and gotten together with him before, both discussed it, before I called these people, maybe then he would have thought it was a good idea.

Dr. Bloom:

There are times... my wife and I have an agreement which is that though she makes the arrangements for Saturday nights, I want to know about the arrangements; I don't want to be surprised. We have lived with that agreement for a long time. About a month ago she made some arrangements for Saturday night. I was surprised and I got sore as hell. The agreement is back in force.

To some extent your relationship with the rabbi, is a marriage. You do have to learn, after a while, each other's sensitivities, where you hurt, that kind of thing. You did a nice thing, a really pastoral thing in calling people. People do like that. You know how important it is to be remembered. You're up on the *bimah*. You know how important it is that some one bothers to call to say, Hello, how are you. It's very important; people respond to that. But you have to take cognizance of who you are living with, what your marriage is with that rabbi. My wife has learned that I get very insecure and uptight if suddenly on a Saturday night she says we are going to the Goldbergs and I say, yuch! Sometimes it turns out that if she says four weeks before that we are going to the Goldbergs, I say, all right, you make the arrangements and that night I say yuch, but at least I made the agreement. I'll take responsibility for my decision. It's sad that people respond that way, but you have to know who you are living with.

Comment from floor:

First of all I'd like to thank you for your presentation. I'd like to elaborate about the problem we had before about the *b'nai mitzvah*, as far as teaching and the relationship with the family. Each child, boy and girl, I think, at least I've found in my experience, has to be treated individually. There is a line between building their self-confidence and the pressures that we want to apply to them. Some can take it and some cannot. I have found, to be brief about it, that one of the important things that we do in teaching *b'nai mitzvah* is not only what is to be

taught and what they are going to do at the service that particular Saturday morning or Friday evening, but building this confidence for the future as a human being. If they appreciate it, in the long run it carries over into a continuation of their Jewish education whereby they feel they can continue this way, to have more interest, their ability is extended when they are confident.

Now may I ask two questions. Number one, we have been discussing what's happened to ourselves in relationship to the rabbi and other personnel. I think a good many of us, for better or worse, know these relationships, have had enough experience with it, but there is something that's bothering me, on and off through the years, with other relationships, that is our personal relationships with our congregants. I know that we have to use our judgment, tact, discretion, etc. in these relationships, but is there something you can tell us, please, as far as certain lines to be drawn because we are the clergy and they are lay people, etc. Can you get as friendly as you want, open to them?

Dr. Bloom:

You have me on my hobbyhorse with that question. Once you have undertaken to be a clergyman, once you've made that kind of commitment, you are putting yourself in a position where you will be a symbolic exemplar. The symbolic exemplar (someday when I get my dissertation out, I will be able to refer you to my book) is really made up of both how the clergyman acts and how he is treated by the layperson. What happens is a system of editing, presentation when we use the words here to describe the errant husband or the impossible wife. They are part of our general street vocabulary, but the fact is that we are not allowed to use that kind of language at board meetings or to the congregation. Certain things you're not supposed to say, so there is a kind of participation by the layperson and the clergyman in maintaining the symbolic exemplar. We are not the only symbolic exemplars; you know the Queen of England is a symbolic exemplar; Jimmy Carter is a symbolic exemplar. You do find it very hard, in your head, to imagine the Queen of England going to the bathroom. you know on one level that it happens, but she is a walking-talking symbol. The symbol cannot be broken without doing severe damage. It is also from that symbol that whatever power you have to affect people comes. No question about that. If you really smash the symbol in your perception and in theirs, then you won't be able to function as a clergyman. There is a lot of stretch in the symbol.

Rabbis have been introduced and described in Bridgeport-Fairfield, where I'm from- - as the tennis-playing rabbi; the flying rabbi, even the "goyische" rabbi. I was introduced a few years ago as the rabbi who isn't a rabbi. The symbol kind of holds and follows you around. It is very hard to divest yourself of it. Some things precipitate breaks in the symbolhood, so you hear issues where clergymen get divorced. In some congregations that's considered such a radical break in the symbol that the only thing that ends up happening is that the clergyman has to leave town and go some place else. There is stretch but there is no doubt that you will never be the same with a lay person in terms of friendship as you might be with another hazzan, and as you might be with another clergyman. That is the sad thing; that resource doesn't get used more often.. That's a place where you could let your hair down, really be yourself; he could be himself and there might be some mutual nurturing instead of the crazy kind of competitiveness that goes on.