

Rabbis Make A Difference!
Post Scripts From Ten Years In The Pulpit

Jack H Bloom

Having served in a congregation for ten years, I quickly learned that a rabbi is a walking, talking, living symbol of the best that is in humankind. Being credited with superlative inner qualities and inordinately deep-set commitments makes life difficult for those who have chosen the pulpit. Trying to live up to high standards, calling upon others to do the same, serving a congregation full of individuals who are testing, testing, testing whether those ordained are really what they "should" be, all these make life tough. In working with rabbis I find that as they move towards mid-career, their symbolic exemplarhood is a drain on them and often the root of their discontent. Rabbis complain about the gap between them and their congregants; living in a "glass house", loneliness in the midst of the crowd, always having to be "on"; and even being treated differently than anyone else. Rabbis want to hold their spouses' hand, and not have congregants offer, "Oh, what a cute couple they are; look at how they kiss each other."

Having picked one of the most public of callings, rabbis yearn for anonymity. They are relieved when going to the movies they find no congregants present. Paradoxically, they often expect people to treat them with deference and respect befitting those who exemplify moral, ethical, and spiritual values. Symbolic exemplarhood gives their work its power and their lives its frustrations. In the maelstrom it's hard for them to see the powerful effect they do have. It was hard for me, God's decidedly recalcitrant servant, to see it back then. What follow are a few examples of some minor incidents in which I unknowingly participated that demonstrate how my being a rabbi touched others in ways unknown to me.

P.S.#1-The Hats That Said Thanks

Back in my last days in the pulpit, Mildred Swist was dying of cancer. Her husband Herman and two adult children, both in their early twenties, were keeping the seriousness of her situation a "secret", in order to "protect" her. I went to St. Vincent's Hospital to visit her and entered a room full of friends and relatives all chatting happily away All knew the "secret" but

were acceding to Herman's wish to protect Millie. "Don't worry, Mildred, you'll be fine; everything will be O.K.; don't worry about it." There was a feigned and forced optimism. Mildred was going home the next day. There was nothing else that could be done in the hospital.

When I went over to her bed Millie said, "Rabbi, so are you going to tell me stories too." I said; " No stories Millie, but if you want to talk I'm available"

After some pleasantries with her visitors, I left.

A couple of days later, following discharge, Millie called the synagogue office, asking me to come visit. When I arrived at their home, Herman was there with her son and daughter. I went upstairs to Mildred's bedroom. She made it clear that she knew what was wrong with her, that she was very ill, despite all the lies she was being told. 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".

That moment began a most moving experience. She started to talk (the first visit was two hours) about her feelings, about dying, and not being able to see the wedding of her two kids, leaving her husband, and about the fulfillments and losses in her life.

I went downstairs and said to her family; "You can talk to Mom truthfully. No secrets! She knows how ill she is and that she is going to die." The family made contact and Mildred was no longer isolated from those she loved best and who loved her most. We had a number of other visits, in which she was able to be straight and talk about what was really happening to her. 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. "

For years following her death, Herman, a hat salesman, would appear at our door once a year. In his hands, he always had two funny hats, one for Rachel and one for Rebecca. Refusing our pleas to come in, he would just hand me the hats, say "thank you," and depart into the night.

Sometime during my divorce, (more about that, anon) the early spring of 1982, Herman died in Florida. A couple of months later, June or July 1982, a memorial service was held for him at Beth El. I was at home in the sunroom crying about my divorce and totally missed it. I have felt bad about that to this day. I sometimes wonder how the hats feel.

P.S. #2

I was listening to a speech delivered by Amos Oz at the local Jewish Community Center. Cindy Dimenstein, director of the Bureau of Jewish Education, reached over, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "

There's something I have to tell you, something that I've been waiting over thirty years to tell you. Do you remember when my family and I were members of your congregation, back around 1966 or 67? I was six or seven. Remember how you did birthday blessings, with all the kids standing under the "tallis"?

I nodded politely. *(I remembered that I hated doing them. I only did them because Rabbi Harry Nelson z'l of Cong. Rodeph Sholom our neighbor and former sponsor was doing them and my congregants wanted me to do the same.)*

"I (Cindy) was standing under the tallis. 'By the way, what day is your birthday?'

I responded, '**September 26**'.

'Mine (Cindy's) is **September 27**' and you asked each kid what his or her birthday was, and when you came to me you said;

'September 27!!!!!!! Cindy that's a really important birthday, cause that's the day right next to my birthday!'

Well, I felt so big, so puffed up, so important that I never forgot it. My birthday right next to the rabbi's **WOW!!!!!!** And every birthday since, I have that wonderful feeling of being someone important."

P.S. #3

While I was officiating at his mother Abby, long time friend and former congregant's marriage to Joel Schine,, Danny Paul, who I had known as a little boy, introduced me to his ten year-old daughter. " Do you know who this man is?" he said to her. She shrugged. " What is it that we do every night when I put you to bed?" "Every night, Daddy, you ask me what I learned that day." "Well this is the man who taught me that. He said that a Jewish child should learn something new every day!"

I had no recollection of ever having said anything like that. Maybe it was a throwaway line; maybe it was something I read. Yet, because the rabbi said it, Danny heard it and shaped his daughter's life with that statement.

P.S. #4

Returning to synagogue, on his parents' forty-fifth wedding anniversary, Dr. Brian Meyer called me aside and said, "There's something I have to share with you." He told me how I called him into my office one day when he was nine years old, and said to him, "'Brian, you're a bright and special student and we are going to send you to Camp Ramah.' That day changed my life. What you said that day and my going to Ramah was a turning point in who I am today. I wanted to thank you for it." A rabbi does more than he or she realizes, yet seldom knows what he or she is doing that makes a difference.

P.S. #5

I was doing a gig in Greensboro NC invited by an interfaith group at the suggestion of Rabbi Fred Guttman, a very good friend. Upon arriving Fred took me to his home where his wife fed me and said that I was going to see a woman whose name I had long remembered as Karen Sclare. (Not her married name.) Karen was one of the last Friday night Bat Mitzvah's in Beth El in 1961, before we moved Bat-Mitzvah's to Saturday morning. Karen came from a difficult family only tangentially related to Beth El. Her father Milt suffered from Manic Depressive illness before Lithium led it to be called Bi-Polar and was quite difficult.

Karen's parents told her that she did not have to continue her studies after Bat Mitzvah, and resigned from the Congregation. Karen continued

on in her studies at Beth El, which through my intervention allowed her to do so. I sent Karen to Ramah in any capacity I could figure out, baby sitter, administrative assistant etc. and Karen completed Hebrew High School and even went on to Israel. I was told by Fred that she was going to come over with her daughter. Her daughter a tall attractive young woman showed up with Karen and Karen's live-in partner. Karen's daughter in response to my inquiry, said that she was going to be a senior at Brandeis. I asked what she had planned after that. She told me she was going to be a rabbi. **Who would have believed!**

P.S. #6

November 21 2005, I got a call from New York from an Adrienne Asch. She said that she had been talking to Rabbi Joy Levitt, spouse of Rabbi Michael Strassfeld of the SAJ, (The Society for the Advancement of Judaism), and said that she had been returning to Judaism after having been alienated for many years. In response to a question by Joy about her Jewish background, she told Joy that she had grown up in Ramsey New Jersey, and had been "Bat Mitzvahed" by a Rabbi Bloom. Joy said; You mean Jack Bloom and shared with Adrienne the work I had been doing with and for rabbis, and said, "We know Jack, he's alive and well and lives in Fairfield, CT. Adrienne phoned me and asked if I had been in Ramsey, and I offered that I had been the weekend rabbi in Ramsey, from September 1958 to June 1959. She asked if I remembered her. I said that I did not. She then asked if I remembered her parents Ruth and Julian Asch. I said no. I asked her when her Bat Mitzvah had taken place. She responded; it was in September 1958. She said that her father had remembered me quite fondly. She then said that "perhaps the following would jog your memory?" Do you remember that I was blind. Yes, I did have a memory of a young teen-ager who was blind and despite my worry about what would happen, did quite well at her Bat Mitzvah. She offered that she had experienced me as caring and energetic, leaving a Judaism is alive impression on her. She then recounted her history and my place in it as an anchor for coming back to Judaism. She had been very, very far left, politically and in every way imaginable, and was now finding her way back, and had come to the SAJ and Reconstructionism, as part of that journey. She had just been appointed University Professor of Bioethics at Yeshivah University of all places. **One never knows!**

P.S. #7

On a recent Rosh Hashanah morning, immediately following services, Ellen Harrison M.D, one of my Hebrew High/LTF (Leaders Training Fellowship, the Jewish Theological Seminary's intensive program for Synagogue High Schoolers in the sixties. came over and said;" You know you changed my life.". In the tremendous mix and confusion of people on the front lawn of Beth El, I never got to ask her "how I did that!"

P.S. #8

A side interest of mine is the Romanian Genealogy of my antecedents. As a result I receive from time to time postings from ROM-SIG, the Romanian-Special Interest Group of the Jewish Genealogical Society. A somewhat arcane discussion of Romanian Jewish Middle Names evoked a modicum of interest in me and I sent the following to Rom-Sig.

"As I was following the discussion on middle names, I was reminded of my father's World War 1 draft card. My grandfather's name was Yekutiel Zalman, although he was known generally as Zalman. On my father's World War 1 draft card his name is listed as Samuel Zalman Bloom age 23 of 155-157 E. 4th Street, (across the street from where he lived on date of Naturalization in 1919, which was listed as 142 East 4th Street) with birth date of DEC 28 1894 (on other occasions it was Dec 29) and the added information that he had submitted his first papers. He was from Frumusica (Romania) and was a salesman working for Eagle Bag & Paper CO of 57 1st Ave. He affirmed that his mother was single, solely dependent on him for support and he was Caucasian. He claimed exemption from the draft on those grounds. Listed on other side as tall, of medium build, brown eyes, and brown hair, not bald and not disabled. Date of registration looks like June 5 1917. The draft card was signed Samuel Z. Bloom. The Z (most likely for Zalman,) may have been taking on an American custom of listing a father's first name as one's own middle name. There on my father's draft card I found he had listed his name as Samuel Z. Bloom. I never knew him to have a middle name before or after. I assumed he was imitating what the Irish here in the US do. Now I'm not so sure. Any enlightenment would be appreciated"

Jack H Bloom PhD

My post bounced. I had not sent it in "plain text."

Trying to be resourceful I noticed a post from one Paul Pascal of Toronto Canada. I took the liberty of asking him to do the following.

Paul;

Not sure we have ever met. Nevertheless perhaps you can be of help getting this message to them. It's not world shaking but it comes from my work on my family genealogy.

Have tried to forward the following to Rom-Sig, get bounced every time, for its format, (not plain text) tried to send it plain text, got bounced. If you could forward it to them (you don't get bounced), I would appreciate it.

Thanks in advance

Jack

Paul responded;

"Dear Rabbi Bloom, Jack,

I have sent on your message to ROM-SIG; I hope it gets through this time.

As to whether we've met or not, there is one possibility that I can think of, and the odds are increased by the fact that you are a graduate of JTS and live in Fairfield: did you ever teach, even for a day, at Camp Ramah in Palmer, Mass.? I'm talking way, way back--in the 60's. (I don't know when you got "smikha", so I don't know if this is an outrageous question).

Other than that, I don't think we've met in genealogical circles, although I can see from your website that you are deeply involved in Romanian Jewish genealogy, which would have made such an encounter more likely.

Best wishes, and Hag Matan Torah Sameyach,
Paul"

I answered him;

Paul;

For two summers in the sixties I returned to Camp Ramah in Massachusetts. Being less than two hours from my congregation in Fairfield, made my being away geographically and temporally viable. I had been banned from Ramah (see my book, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar*) by Seymour Fox z'l, until Ray Arzt who had moved to Fairfield, because I was there, and we were close friends, which began in 5th grade in Ramaz got me removed from Fox's black list. Ray and Roz his wife who became my (former) wife Meryl's best friend, moved to Fairfield Connecticut and was head of Ramah in Palmer, Mass., Ray brought me back to Ramah as head of Tarbut (culture) for the waiters. It was a politically safe sinecure that allowed our wives and families, always close, to spend the summers together.

Were you there?

chag sameach and kol tuv

Jack”

Paul responded;

“Yes I was. I was a dishwasher at Ramah Palmer in 1966 ("sent" there by Zalman Schachter), and unless I'm mistaken, you gave classes in Jewish history to the staff. If you are the same guy, let me tell you how grateful I am for your classes. Although I had a day school education, and took Judaic studies courses at university (by then I was a Junior), I never knew anything about the explosive effect of Napoleon's questions to his ad hoc Sanhedrin and the results down to the present day. I still have the handouts, if I can figure out where I put them. (I know for a fact that I still have them, because I was enjoying them anew when I found them at my wife's and my last move.)”

Paul

Mordecai Kaplan z'l had taught me about the French Revolution marking the end of life for medieval Jewry as a corporate entity in society, and I had taught that to the kitchen staff, probably because I had good notes.

Rabbis seldom know the effect of what they do!

P.S, I asked Paul if he finds the handouts to copy them and send them to me. I am an inveterate collector of such stuff.

He graciously responded;

“If I come across your handouts (I am assuming I was correct in attributing them to you) I will definitely send you a copy. They were mimeographed in those days and consequently sort of light, so I can't guarantee quality, but I'm sure they will be at least legible. This year we're doing a house purge, in preparation for renovations next year, so hopefully I will indeed come across them.

Best,
Paul

I was the administrator of a conference in 1963 at the behest of the chancellor of the seminary, Louis Finkelstein. I was still in the pulpit before I went back to Columbia for my PhD in psychology. I was the Director of something in New York called The Herbert H. Lehman Institute of Ethics. It was done by the seminary...a thing that the Chancellor used to do. I was interested in the Rabbinate and they invited a guest presenter from Harvard named Sol Levine who was later at John Hopkins University. He was a nationally recognized sociologist. He came to a conference for rabbis and those training them and he said that there are two fields, which have immense trouble measuring what they are doing and even more what they are accomplishing. He gave an example. The guy who is from City Bank is very clear, he comes in and says I've been to Texas and we want to sell these 85 resorts to a big banker in Texas. So for him, the bottom line is, does the banker sign the dotted line or not. That's the outcome and it's very crystal clear. This guy says that there are two fields that have immense difficulty with it and dissatisfaction and that's Clergy...in knowing what the outcomes are because how do you measure things like spirituality, how do you measure things like commitment, how do you measure things like morality. How do you measure getting those messages across? The other profession is teachers. You remember that there was a high school teacher that made a difference in your life but he doesn't know it. He said something back then and unless you went back 15 years later and said hey, you made this happen in my life.

I have always maintained that my ten years in a congregation changed more lives than all the years working as a psychologist. And I had no idea. I was focused on congregants' attendance, on stray remarks they made to me, on their response at salary time; on whether they invited my wife and me to go to the movies with them. In weighing how much they loved respected and listened to me I never really knew the impact I had. Perhaps there was no really obvious way of measuring it. Perhaps I was

looking in the wrong place. However it is, it happened one person at a time, often in the least expected places. It's a pity I was conflicted about it and felt uncomfortable with the power that being a symbolic exemplar gave me. Looking back, I'm in awe at what can happen.