

Yom Kippur Morning 10/4/14 5775

Rabbi Arthur Z. Steinberg

Late one night, a motorist, let's call him... Steinberg..., was pulled over by a policeman. After checking his ID and noting his mature age, the policeman asked Steinberg where he was headed at that time of night. Steinberg replied, "Well, if you must know, I'm on my way to a lecture about the abuses of alcohol, its toxic impact on the human body, the damaging effects of late night carousing, and the harm to family relationships of a wild lifestyle. In sum, how to be a better and more responsible person." The officer responded, "Really? And who exactly is giving that lecture at this time of night?" To which Steinberg replied, "Mrs. Steinberg."

Our world, broadly speaking, may be divided in two: the world as it is, and the world as it should or could be. Take any issue, whether it's global, like the environment, international like the tensions between cultures or personal, like how we treat our bodies... there is the descriptive, that state of affairs as they really are and there is the prescriptive, the unrealized condition of how things "ought" to be. On one side is how Steinberg behaves, and on the other is how Mrs. Steinberg tells him he should behave.

In philosophical terms it is what John Dewey identified as the gap between the real and the ideal.

The most interesting element is not the recognition of the two worlds, and not even the awareness of the discrepancy between them – that who or where we are, is not who or where we should be. The most interesting part is the interplay between the two – in other words, that Steinberg has chosen to come home at all! He knows what he is doing, he knows what the missus is going to say, he knows they are not one and the same thing and yet, imbedded in him must be, not only a moral compass to show him the way home, but a gravitational pull that brings him there every night even knowing that upon walking in the door he will be reminded of how he has fallen short.

A combination of loyalty and guilt tugs at him, along with an unspoken hope that, while he knows he's falling short –and may even continue to do so- he can always come home and perhaps, one day, that gap will narrow, and who he is and who he can be, will become one and the same.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that “Faith is a blush in the presence of God.” If I understand Heschel correctly, he is saying that the purpose of this building, or any house of worship, is to remind us of the gap between who we are and whom we know we can be, an awareness that gives us pause and reminds us that we should blush.

The Hebrew word meaning “to pray” is not from the Latin, *precaria*, to petition or entreat, but a reflexive

verb, l"hitpallel, literally, "to judge oneself." To remind us that there is often a gap between who we are and whom we can be.

The goals of this institution are three-fold. First to draw us in- i.e. to welcome us home and then... secondly, to remind us of the work still to be done both in this world and in ourselves and, finally, to provide the paths through which those goals may be accomplished.

All of this makes the job of rabbi really, really interesting. Because if the project of Judaism is to inform or inspire people towards bettering ourselves and our world, it follows that a rabbi's task must be the same. Rabbis are not here to describe the world as it is or as you see it. For that you can read a newspaper or see a therapist. My job, no different than Mrs. Steinberg's job in my story, is to tell you how you should be.

Do you treat each other kindly? I don't know if you do, but I know we should. Do you give charitably? Some may, some may not, but I'm here to remind you of our obligation to do so. Are you involved in bringing aid to the fallen? Some are, some are not. Let me tell you that we must.

You get the idea. We live in an age of radical autonomy and permeable social boundaries. You know that I know that, at the end of the day, your choices are yours. Ever since the Enlightenment, rabbis no longer possess the political authority or, for

many of us, the inclination to check up on what Jews are and aren't doing. The only thing a rabbi can command in this day and age is respect for learning and an appreciation of some leadership skills. But just because the dynamics of the playing field have changed, it doesn't mean the values have.

I want you to be kind. I want you to be charitable. I want you to be involved in the status of the downtrodden. As a rabbi, I want all sorts of things. And you know what I think? I think you want me to want those things of you. You may not actually do these things and, in most cases, only you and God will know. But even in modernity, sound religious leadership demands not that I parrot the choices you would otherwise make, but rather that I inspire you to a life you may not otherwise lead.

We enter this gorgeous room and listen to this breathtaking music and give attention to those inspiring writings of our history because they call on us to reach beyond what everyone else, everywhere else, tells us is inevitable.

I think very carefully about what I do -and don't- state as values. I'm sure you'll agree with some and disagree with others. I believe that women and men stand equally before God, at the Torah, in prayer, and everywhere. I believe that homosexual relationships should be sanctified no differently than heterosexual ones. I believe that to live in this moment of American Jewish history and not advocate on behalf of the

miracle of the modern state of Israel is to abdicate our responsibility as Jews. I believe that we should be sending our children and grandchildren to Ohel Sholom's Religious School and to Jewish summer camp. I believe that these matters and a few important others are justified by the tradition and offer the greatest possibilities for growth, strengthening, and defense of the Jewish people. I am fully aware that some here have chosen and will continue to choose otherwise. But stating a Jewish value can never be contingent upon the assent of the Jew in the pew. Or as Rabbi Israel Salanter said: "A rabbi with whom the community does not occasionally disagree, is no rabbi." This sacred space should, at one and the same time, embrace you like your home and prompt you to revisit your beliefs and assumptions.

The most important thing you need to know about me is that I struggle, too. Long before I was a rabbi I was just another Jew. I can't claim to know, for sure, what combination of Jewish experiences hold the greatest promise for us and for the future of our families. There are a lot of ideals that I believe should be held sacred and I admit that I don't live up to all of them. While some may call that hypocrisy, the words that I would choose are personal honesty and some measure of intellectual integrity.

By now you should have figured it out. After a lifetime of your listening to sermons and lectures and teachings, you've come to understand that the most honest and effective form of religious leadership a

rabbi can provide is not pontification but to share our struggles with you, to let you know that even rabbis don't have it all figured out and certainly can't expect you to have figured it out either.

How amazingly fortunate we are to be able to hear the sermonic presentations that Rabbi Roz offers this congregation and this community. Thoughtful and thought-provoking, analytical and challenging, heartfelt and hopeful. As I approach the 49th anniversary of my becoming a rabbi, I've heard a few sermons in my life, from "God will be your friend only if you light the Channukah Menorah candles in the correct direction," to "the reason this man was killed during a drug-store robbery was that the scroll in his doorpost mezuzah was not kosher." I've heard them all and they give me bad dreams. How lucky we are to have such a sensitive, intelligent, and loving rabbi. When I walk into this building, I'm trying to traverse that gap between the person I am and the person I should or could be, just like you are. She helps me with that task.

One of the most moving passages offered by our tradition comes toward the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, it's in the Torah Reading we heard just a few minutes ago, when Moses enjoins his people to live a life of mitzvot. "It is not in the heavens, neither is it beyond the sea no, it is close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." Our faith and our tomorrows are not meant to mirror our todays. We do not live in the world as it ought to be and we

are here to be reminded of that fact, but the drive is not so far and the door is open if we are willing to enter it.

That's what it means to be one of the Children of Israel. Not a promise to have it all figured out but an honest, lifelong commitment to wrestle with that still, small voice within us – today, tomorrow, and every day of our lives. And what forces us to do that?

We know the secret.

We know the secret of living the most decent lives that can be lived. We know the secret that too many of our friends and neighbors of other religious traditions do not know. We know that real worship of God, however we define, or have difficulty defining, those words, real worship of God is what we do with our lives between visits to this building and to this very room.

And, so, with some degree of regularity -weekly, monthly, annually- we come here, to recharge those batteries, to strengthen community, to greet old friends, to make new friends, and finally, ultimately, to remember our obligations to ourselves and, therefore, to the world.

And, returning to my opening story about the motorist who knows about the lectures he is destined to face when he gets home... here we are today, home again.

Amen