

THEN, YOU REMEMBER....
Rabbi Dennis C. Sasso
Rosh Hashanah (First Day)
1 Tishrei 5783/September 26, 2022

It is good to celebrate the High Holy Days together. It's been three years since we last gathered in this sanctuary in person to welcome the New Year. These High Holy Days usher my 47th year with Beth-El Zedeck. Next year, Sandy and I will inaugurate our 50th anniversary in the rabbinate. (50 years! It will be a long sermon!)

Nearly two thirds of my life and better than 90% of my rabbinical career have been spent with this congregation. So, it is with bittersweet feelings that I formally announce that these will be my last High Holy Days as Senior Rabbi of Beth-El Zedeck, as I plan to retire in the summer of 2023.

When Sandy and I arrived in Indianapolis in 1977, two young and eager rabbis, we had no idea what was ahead of us. We loved Judaism and the Jewish people, we loved each other and our growing family, and we came to love you. We grew together with Beth-El Zedeck. Who I am today, personally and professionally, has been shaped in relationship with you. I take it all with me, and I leave it all with you.

I knew that I would be a rabbi since I became a Bar Mitzvah. Throughout high school and college, the rabbinate beckoned and compelled me. Judaism was my passion, the Jewish people my extended family.

At the beginning, I aimed at repairing the world, *Tikkun Olam*. Eventually, I learned that what I needed to do was *Kiyyum Haolam*, sustaining the world. As age teaches humility and patience, we learn that small steps make lives sweeter and the world kinder.

Some time ago, I spoke at a rabbinical convention about how rabbis see ourselves at various moments of our career. Looking back, it surprised me how much these stages still resonated.

I called the first stage, "I want to change the world." Stage two: "I want to touch your soul." Three: "Wow! I can make a difference!" Four: "What's it all about?" And, five: "Integration."

In the "I want to change the world" stage, I was ready to unpack and transmit everything I had learned in rabbinical seminary and make every congregant a maximalist Jew. I wanted to change the Jewish people and the world in one clean sweep. I had so much to teach, so many good ideas, if people would only listen.

But then I realized that what mattered in seminary, like learning about Jewish trade routes in medieval Europe, or accounting for the *hapax legomena* in the Bible, or explaining a difficult *sugya* in the Talmud, is really not that interesting or important to the Jew in the pew.

Young rabbis believe that our incredibly wise ideas can shape Judaism and the Jewish people for the future. As we mature, we realize that our presence is more important than our ideas, and our compassion more important than defending faith and

tradition. We recognize that we inherit the teachings of those who came before us, who were wise in their time, and from whom we learned. We honor that wisdom, even as we seek to share and reshape it for our generation and transmit it to the next.

The rabbi discovers that there are other issues in the garden of Judaism, in the lives of vulnerable human beings. The rabbi begins to own the role of pastor, of counselor, and enters the stage of: "I want to touch your soul." We are not just enactors of rituals and ceremonies, preachers of theology and ethics, but spiritual counselors, whose caring and appropriate words and gestures, whose loyal presence and nurturing, can help to "ease the burden" and "double the joys" of our congregants.

The title "rabbi" means teacher. I love sitting in a circle surrounded by children, singing with them and sounding the Shofar before Rosh Hashanah; I am amazed by our B'nai and B'not Mitzvah as they begin to engage and own their Judaism; I find delight in the intellectual curiosity and questioning spirit of Confirmants; I am energized by the passion of Jews by Choice and adult seekers from whom I have learned as much or more than I have taught.

As I was graduating college, I seriously considered pursuing an academic career. But I soon realized that for all that I loved biblical exegesis, comparative religion, and process philosophy, it was being with people gathered in the sanctuary for prayer, celebration and memory, for the performance of acts of justice and mercy, that most compelled me. I cherish my continued involvement in higher education, in history, research, and publishing. But I prefer being a mentor, a guide, and fellow traveler with the Jews of today. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan reminded us: "The rabbi should not be a walking sarcophagus of dead ideas about religion, but an interpreter of the experiences of religion that are understandable and relevant."

No one taught us in seminary what to do when catastrophes like 9/11 devastated our sense of security, when swastikas appeared on college dorms, when antisemitism, anti-Zionism, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia run rampant. And yet we must find the words and be the presence that channels anxiety, acknowledges grief, and calls forth human dignity.

With the passing of years, the rabbi becomes a leader in the broader community, with growing influence, sometimes drawing strong reactions. One of my rabbinic mentors warned me – "Some people will love you without reason and some will hate you without cause. Be yourself. You will know when you have done well and when you have not."

Inscribed on the walls of the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv is a quote of Rabbi Israel Salanter, a 19th century teacher of Jewish ethics: "A rabbi whose community can never agree with him cannot be their rabbi; but a rabbi who never disagrees with his community is not fit to be a rabbi." The rabbi does not speak "for" the congregation, but "to" the congregation, as a servant and spokesperson of the Jewish people. It is a dance about the right balance between governance and guidance, policy and persuasion. It is about trust.

One of the most challenging and rewarding experiences I had was working with my dear departed friend, Sam Jones, director of the Urban League, with whom I co-chaired the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee's Race Relationships Leadership Network. Mayor Steve Goldsmith (whom we are honored to have with us here today) appointed us to oversee a committee to revise the Police Community Complaint Process. It was a significant learning curve for me, daunting at first. It taught me the importance of patience, respect, and cooperation among diverse constituencies. This became a catalyst for my involvement in civic and interfaith concerns and engagement with city, state, and grassroots leadership. It led to my efforts to counter discrimination, to labor on behalf of justice for immigrants, to engage in efforts to abate hunger, and more.

There will be stressful times when a rabbi questions ideals and vocation, moments of frustration and doubt, cynicism and potential burnout. This is the "what's it all about?" stage. Some may leave the rabbinate, as so many clergy have done as a result of the difficult last three years of pandemic. For others, questioning and struggle become opportunities for personal depth and professional growth.

Then, you remember....

...you remember the love in the faces of new parents holding in their arms a hoped-for child and praying for a long life of health and joy.

Then, you remember standing on the bimah next to a nervous 13-year-old Bar or Bat Mitzvah, offering words of encouragement and blessing.

Then, you remember the times under the huppah with a young couple with whose parents you had stood under the wedding canopy a generation before, celebrating the chain of tradition and the rebirth of love from generation to generation.

Then, you remember being at the hospital bedside of an elder in the community chanting prayers that he had cherished and sung for the congregation over decades.

Then, you remember moments at the grave of one who died too young, too tragically; of a senior taken by Covid, whom the family could not visit during the final days and hours of illness. You clasp hands and realize that you are both mourner and pastor, trying to contain your own grief in order to offer the wisdom of tradition and your comforting presence.

Then you remember the long distance open phone conversation with a grieving family at the bedside of a beloved mother who is about to be taken off life support, the tears, the memories, the questions, the love, the last breath.

Carl Sandburg observed that "Life is like an onion. You peel it a layer at a time and sometimes you weep." And so, you remember the layers, the joys you celebrated, the griefs you shared, the challenges you helped others to overcome, the grace and the strength that sustained you as you sought to sustain others.

As the years flow, a rabbi enters a stage of "Integration." The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, reminded us that there are some things that are true when they are whispered but not true when they are shouted. Mature religion is less

about the exclamation sign and more about the question mark. With humble and grateful spirit, we begin integrating our roles as teachers and pastors, preachers and social activists, leaders and servants, loving rebukers and faithful friends.

On these High Holy Days, I stand before you with a satisfying sense of integration, a feeling that my rabbinic self and my persona are one. These past near five decades have caused me to realize that being a rabbi is not what I do, but who I am. Even after I am no longer the active Senior Rabbi of this congregation, I will remain a "Rabbi in Israel," a servant and teacher, in love with Judaism and the Jewish people, its culture, spiritual values, and moral imperatives, its answers, its questions.

Now, a word of challenge and of hope, which I address especially to our youth, because we adults have messed up things a bit. As Americans and Jews, we are living through difficult, bewildering times. We are uncertain, confused. We feel the impact of Covid, of climate change, of political turmoil, of war and displacement, of social and economic adjustments. This is a time of transition for Judaism and the synagogue. We cannot yet foresee the consequences and the direction in which we are headed. Synagogues are merging; seminaries are closing; fewer gifted young Jews are choosing the rabbinate.

But Judaism has never been static; it is always in process. This is not a time for timidity; it is a time for daring. It is not a time to close institutions; it is a time to revitalize and repurpose them, to open new venues and imagine new possibilities. It is a time to elicit generosity and invest in the Jewish people. Someone has said that hopelessness is a failure of imagination. It is time to imagine.

A story is told of a wise and wealthy Jew who was concerned about the legacy he would leave. He decided to build a synagogue for his town. It took a long time. When at long last the building was completed, the townspeople entered the synagogue and marveled at its magnificence. But noticing a seemingly obvious flaw, one of the townspeople asked: "There are no lamps! Where are the lamps? What will provide light?" The wise and generous Jew pointed to the brackets strategically placed all along the walls. He handed each family a lamp and said: "Whenever you come to the synagogue, bring your lamp, and light it. Each time you are not there, a part of the synagogue will remain dark! This lamp will remind you that whenever you are not present, some part of God's house will be dark. The community relies on you for your light."

At the end of Neilah, the people were told to take the light that still remained from the burning lamps and use it to illumine their way home.

My request for the year ahead, and for the years to come, is that you bring your lamp. Let your light shine at Beth-El Zedeck! And then, carry it with you to light and warm your home, and then, the world.

At this moment, I wish to honor the memory of my beloved parents, Leita and Colman Sasso. In life and in remembrance, they have inspired me to keep the light of my dreams alive. Their memory is a blessing.

Banayikh-Bonayikh, taught the sages. "Your children are your builders." David and Debbie, Brad and Naomi, Darwin, Ari, Levi and Raven, thank you for your love and your light. David and Debbie, I imagine that growing up as the rabbis' kids must not have always been easy, but you made it easy for us to be your parents. We are so proud of you, and of our perfect grandchildren. Mom/Bubbie and I want you always to know that in you, our dreams and our hopes are fulfilled. You are the lamp that illumines our lives with joy and shines upon our future with meaning and hope. We love you.

Sandy, you have been my beloved companion and partner, personally and professionally. Whatever I have done and whatever I may have accomplished would not have been possible without your constant patience, presence and inspiration. You have edited and added a touch of poetry to my sermons. You can anticipate the moment I will make a pun. You have kicked me under the table at Board meetings when you sensed that I might speak out of line. You are my rabbi and storyteller. More importantly, Sandy, you are the light and story of my life.

Finally, my dear congregants and friends, too many to list. Today is not my valedictory. I trust I will have other opportunities to speak individual and collective words of gratitude in the year ahead. Some say that being a rabbi is a solitary path. I am fortunate that I have seldom felt alone in my journey thanks to outstanding colleagues and staff, supportive presidents, board leaders and volunteers, faithful congregants, both living and honored in memory. For nearly five decades, you have helped make of my rabbinate, step by step, a sacred pilgrimage.

Today, I give thanks to the Source of Life for the blessings of serving this congregation, for being enabled to do what I like most: to teach, to learn, to serve, to lead, to cry, to laugh, and to love as a Rabbi in Israel.