

A Happy, NEW Year

Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
September 8, 2010
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Shanah tovah tikateivu. Aaron and Eli join me in wishing everyone a very happy, healthy and sweet new year. May we all be inscribed for life and blessing in the New Year that begins tonight.

“New” really is the operative word this year. About a year ago now, KKBE filed their application for a *new* rabbi, essentially hanging what journalist and author Stephen Fried describes as “the equivalent of a help-wanted sign” out for all interested rabbis to see. It’s an emotional moment for a congregation to “put itself out there” like that, as it is for the rabbis who then decide to submit resumes and personal statements and “put ourselves out there,” as well. There’s excitement and anxiety, fear and hope. It’s every bit like dating, an analogy that becomes even more acute and complex as congregation and rabbi, by necessity, begin dating several people.

Then the hard work really begins. From a rabbi’s end, when you see a congregation like KKBE listed, it immediately stands out. Due diligence reveals its remarkable history (both Jewish and American), its gorgeous facility, its outstanding city. A survey of its website and newsletters reveals an engaged membership and diverse programming. The longevity of Rabbi Holz’s tenure, and the stability of its rabbinic leadership in general; the growth of the congregation and the parallel growth of its religious school are all encouraging. Yet, if you’ve never been to the temple, never been to the city, never met a congregant it’s hard to complete the picture.

And if you’re the search committee of a congregation, trying to review resumes and judge the numerous applications that a congregation of KKBE’s caliber is sure to receive—well, many, *many* hours of hard work and soul-searching are to come. Difficult decisions must be made to prioritize the most important attributes in the temple’s next rabbi. For as Rabbi Elliot Schoenberg, director of the Conservative Movement’s Placement office, says: “Congregations all want to hire the same rabbi ... ‘The Perfect Rabbi’:

Someone who attends every meeting and is at his desk working until midnight.
Someone who is twenty-eight years old, but has preached for thirty years.
Someone with a burning desire to work with teenagers but spends all of his time with senior citizens.
Someone who smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work.

“They want what every congregation wants [and it’s understandable]: a younger, hipper version of their beloved rabbi, someone who has all of his [fine] qualities and none of his

imperfections, all of his wisdom plus all of the energy he expended acquiring that wisdom.”

But, eventually, congregations and rabbis need to take the same advice to heart: You’re not looking for the perfect rabbi, the perfect congregation. You’re looking for the best *match*, the best fit. At the end of a long process, it truly is the greatest blessing you could hope for. And, while I can only speak from my end, I speak from the heart when I tell you that it truly feels that is what we have accomplished. It is an honor and a privilege to serve, not only as “the new rabbi of KKBE”—a title that will eventually wear off—but as rabbi to the *members* of KKBE— a role that will deepen and grow—and I look forward to all we will share in the new year and, I hope, many years to come.

Of course, there will be a period of adjustment. Rabbi Holz has been nothing but gracious during my transition into the congregation, and I am grateful for all he has done to make the past couple of months as smooth as possible. Yet there are notable differences between the two of us as rabbis that do kind of stand out.

For instance, apparently some have noticed that I am a woman, and I can confirm that, yes, I am a female rabbi. Regina Jonas was the first. She was ordained in Berlin in 1930, but perished in Auschwitz in 1944—her accomplishment forgotten, until her ordination papers were discovered in an East Berlin archive in 1991 and her legacy restored. Sally Priesand’s ordination from my rabbinic alma mater in 1972 paved the way for where I and so many female colleagues are today. There are now over 400 female Reform rabbis, more than 250 Conservative, numerous Reconstructionist, and maybe even one female Orthodox rabbi (depending upon who you ask about Avi Weiss’ designation of protégé Sara Hurwitz as *rabba* this past year). The presidents of both the Reform and Conservative rabbinical conferences are currently women. So we’re not exactly the novelty that many would make us out to be. However, please know that I appreciate the historic significance of my selection as the first female rabbi of this esteemed congregation and am truly humbled by the honor.

Some have also commented—and I’m flattered—that I’m “young”. Yes, I am younger than my distinguished predecessor, who I’m sure would not mind my pointing it out. After forty years in the rabbinate, I’m sure Rabbi Holz feels the difference more than anyone. However, I must tell you that an informal survey among my local colleagues revealed that I am currently the oldest congregational rabbi in Charleston (though I yield to my colleagues in terms of seniority). So I suppose it’s really a matter of perspective.

And then there’s what I imagine must be the biggest difference. After 18 years of Rabbi Holz leading this congregation through the liturgy of services—it must be quite a challenge trying to understand my foreign accent. My nondescript Midwestern dialect cannot possibly rival South African lyricism. But I am what I am, and like my age and gender, there are certain parts of the “newness” on the bimah that are simply beyond anyone’s control.

Yet other changes—or lack thereof—do represent intentional choices. As we stand poised at the start of a new year and new relationship together, I would like to reflect upon what these choices mean to me as your rabbi, and what I hope they will mean for all of us as a congregation.

When I was interviewing with temples, I was frequently asked where I would situate myself on the spectrum of Reform Judaism. I believe it was a question designed to gauge a candidate's level of observance—in other words, the more rituals you perform, the more traditional you must be; the less you do, the more classical. The implication being, I suppose, that a more observant rabbi would lead the congregation to embrace more traditional practices, while a less observant rabbi might strive to take a congregation back to Reform's classical roots.

I always struggled with this question—I imagine we all would. For my observances, like most of us here, run the gamut.

I don't keep kosher, nor a kosher home. I do say Motzi with every meal—sometimes aloud with my family, sometimes privately to myself.

To a certain degree—a level I continue to modify through trial and error, as much as through soul-searching and study—I am somewhat *shomer shabbos*, Shabbat observant. For example, I won't use the computer to check email on Shabbat. I will use it, however, to Skype with out-of-town family.

On Friday nights, I enjoy all of the many instruments we can and do use to enhance our Shabbat worship—keyboard and organ, guitar and drums. On a typical Saturday morning, I prefer the character of an a capella service—simultaneously traditional and meditative in tone.

And here's my favorite conundrum that occurred to me while struggling with my place on the spectrum: My son, Eli, doesn't have an exceptionally Jewish name. Yet my dog, a cuddly cockapoo named Ari, does.

So, I've decided that I'm all over whatever spectrum of Reform practice we might have. And, I must tell you, I am rather proud of that fact. Because, in true Reform fashion, I feel empowered to choose those rituals that enhance my spiritual life and will always, as your rabbi, encourage each of you to engage in your own experimentation and find those practices that can do the same for you. I will never ask you to do what I do, simply because I have chosen to do it. But I will challenge you to borrow from tradition, or create anew, observances in your religious life that can bring meaning to you as mine have to me.

Toward that end, allow me to share a word about the three ritual items I wear tonight. When I lead services, I do wear a *kippah*. For me, it's a reminder that I am in this temple for a different purpose than I am at all other times, on all other days. On other days, I might be in the sanctuary doing a sound check or rolling the Torah. Though I try to do so as little as possible, occasionally I cut through to retrieve a book or folder from the vestry in back. On other days, I am in the social hall delivering an address, sitting

down for a meeting, passing through from the garage, schlepping my things home for the evening. But the *kippah* reminds me, Not today. Tonight it's Shabbat, or the start of the New Year. It reminds me that the sanctuary and social hall, tonight, are for joy and prayer—a place to meet God and celebrate with one another.

So I wear a *kippah* when I lead services. But I wouldn't presume to tell each of you that *you* should wear a *kippah*, any more than I would ask you to take one off. I will ask, however... How do you give yourself permission to enter this temple with a unique purpose? On a typical Wednesday, you might come into the temple to work in the gift shop, docent for tours, pay a bill in the office, attend a meeting. How do you remember that when you walk in for worship, that you do so not as one who gives, but as one who receives? How do you embolden yourself so that when someone asks you an innocent question about work or money or scheduling, you can respond simply, but resolutely, "Not tonight." That kind of transition doesn't come easily for me. So I use a *kippah*—like a string tied to my finger—as a symbol to help me remember. What might your reminder be?

I also wear a *tallit*, a *tallis*. Each of the ones I own is very near and dear to me. The one I wear at more informal services was a gift made for me by a former congregation. The first temple I served, Temple Isaiah in Lexington, MA, surprised me by sending ribbons around board meetings and religious school classrooms, inviting people to write well wishes upon them, and then weaving them together into a gorgeous *tallit*. The *tallit* I wear tonight was a gift from my grandparents upon my ordination as a rabbi, and the words embroidered around the *atarah* say in Hebrew, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto You." I chose the words because they remind me that my prayers are both for God and for you. But also because they are the words my mother used to sing to me as a lullaby many years ago.

When I wrap each of these *tallitot* around me, even standing alone as I often do on the bimah, I feel the embrace of loved ones. How do you bring loved ones into this space? What heirlooms and rituals help you feel connected to those far away, to those no longer with us? Sociologists Arnold Eisen and Stephen Cohen describe "transcendent belonging" as among the chief objectives of our modern generation of seekers—that "feeling of deep connection to previous generations and future generations as well as to Jews of today who are scattered around the globe." What rituals offer you a tangible reminder of the embrace and support of loved ones, strengthening your spirit, helping your prayers reach even higher?

And the robe... There's a particular reaction to my wearing a robe on the bimah that I've found very interesting. Several people have told me: "While rabbis have historically worn robes here at KKBE, I don't think you necessarily have to." Some might be reflecting their own ambivalence toward the robe—perhaps feeling a robe is too "high church," too formal, too distancing between rabbi and congregation. Others might simply want me to feel comfortable, supposing that newer generations aren't used to such a classical and formal style. But the important part of their statement, to me, is: "Rabbis have historically worn robes here at KKBE."

Wearing a robe is one way in which I tip my hat to this congregation's 261 year history and its great leaders. It's a subtle, but constant, reminder to me of KKBE's pivotal role in articulating the foundational principles of Reform Judaism. And it is therefore, I hope, an inspiration to all of us to use our pulpit, our programs, our collective power to continue that legacy—to take the lead in efforts of social justice here in Charleston, and share with Reform congregations nationwide our newest ideas, innovations and accomplishments.

So, your rabbi wears a *kippah*, a *tallit*, and a robe. Are we a classical Reform congregation? Are we becoming one of those “traditional” Reform congregations feared by some, enthusiastically sought after by others? The answer, my friends, is simply this: We are Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, a Reform congregation who is eager and willing—in the best manifestation of our movement—to employ a variety of styles, approaches, and rituals toward the end of forming meaningful connections with one another and with God. And as for the resulting diversity, as for what some call the “predicament” of various constituencies within our congregation? Yes, it can be a challenge. There's a name for a congregation who has older members and younger members; single members and family units; single-faith households and interfaith households; those with tremendous institutional memory and a natural desire to preserve what has been, and those who are new to KKBE, new to Reform Judaism, new to Judaism altogether whose lens is to consider not what has been, but what can be? Do you know what you call a congregation who has all of those diverse constituencies and more? We call it a *healthy* congregation with a bright future, and I am thrilled to be a part of its next chapter.

Chazak, chazak v'nitchazeik. As we write that new chapter, as we begin a new year, may each of us, our families, and our cherished congregation journey from strength to strength, and may we so be strengthened. Amen.