

FIFTY YEARS IN THE RABBINATE

RA CONVENTION-MAY 2019

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It's my privilege to reflect briefly on behalf of my classmates as we celebrate the passage of these fifty years bridging one millennium to the next. I must admit feeling somewhat inadequate representing my class of 1969. After reading their reflections printed in our convention program book, I'm completely overcome with the range and depth of their achievements. I hope you will take the time to read them as well.

Of course, this milestone is a trigger to remember vividly our beloved colleagues who have departed from this world. One of them, Isaac Bonder, whom we all knew affectionately as Zicky, surely one of the most gifted among us, was diagnosed with cancer during our senior year and died within months of our graduation, depriving our people of a very special spirit. We still live with the shock of his absence. Five other classmates also have departed much too soon, Ronnie Levine, Mark Shrager, my roommate, Bobby Abramson, Michael Manson, and Irving Schreier. Each of them was able to make a difference within communities across the continent, and we miss them terribly today. Y'hay zichronam boruch.

During our student years, all of us found ourselves at the epicenter of change in the sixties in Manhattan where the turbulence throbbing through our society was palpable. We lived on the edge of Harlem so we could not help but witness the struggles of our neighbors. We were present as the epic battles for civil rights, the protest against the war in Vietnam, and the effort to free Soviet Jews shook the earth around us. We watched as our remarkable teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel did what was rare in those years among his colleagues, to leave the security of his library and go out to pray with his feet. In those days, it was not common among students at JTS to act boldly in the public sphere for justice and for peace. The emphasis was emphatically on learning despite what was swirling around us. Yet each of us had to face these changes and ask ourselves what was the most essential demand of the hour. JTS was beginning to open up. Some of the most memorable moments for me were sitting amidst a huge crowd at Riverside church in 1968 being moved by the sight of our teacher, Dr. Heschel standing to speak with Rev. Martin Luther King against the war in Vietnam, then joining with a capacity crowd in Unterberg Auditorium in 1969 to grieve at the yahrzeit of Rev. King addressed by his dear friend Dr. Heschel, and, finally, joining with a crowd of students, staff, and faculty in the seminary shul to support and then to accompany a former student who

was being picked up and arrested by US Marshalls for refusing to be inducted into the military.

At that time, questions about the military chaplaincy raged. To serve in the chaplaincy was, of course, voluntary, a privilege not shared by most young men. Were we to turn away from aiding the war effort in any way, or was our obligation to provide some support for those fellow Jews who were subject to the draft? We struggled with the ambiguity of those issues and came to different conclusions. Upon ordination, many of us were asked to choose between serving in the military or working in a “service pulpit”, a place located on the margins unlikely to attract a rabbi. In those days, there were many more positions available than rabbis to fill them.

While the atmosphere around us was charged and unsettling, there were some amazing gifts we enjoyed during our stay as students. Tuition, room, and board were provided for us totally free of charge from endowed funds. There was no need even to apply for this aid. All we had to do was to write a letter of gratitude annually to the generous donor responsible for our scholarship. None of us walked away from those years with student debt. It was truly unreal; and, speaking for myself, I do not think I was fully aware and sufficiently grateful for the special status we enjoyed.

Our years at 3080 Broadway, then the only full pathway to ordination in our movement, were upended in other ways as well. In the spring of 1966, the catastrophic library fire took place. I vividly recall the plume of smoke rising from the tower as I returned to the Seminary. Our academic year ended abruptly six weeks prematurely as we all leaned in day and night in the urgent effort to save whatever precious books and manuscripts could be salvaged page by page due mostly to water damage. We were led heroically by Rabbi David Kogen. Everyone was totally immersed in that urgent call of the hour. One year later we experienced the trauma and then the relief of the Six-Day War. Some among us left immediately for Israel to volunteer. Much of our class spent the academic year, 67-68, learning in Jerusalem amidst a totally new reality.

I suppose that we might characterize our subsequent decades in the rabbinate as forcing us to engage with overlapping cascades of momentous change with one revolution following the next in rapid succession. Civil rights for African-Americans and war protest were followed and intertwined with the revolution in women's rights, with the movement to bring down the barriers that restricted people with disabilities, and with opening the doors for LGBTQ brothers and sisters in our own families, in our communities and in the rabbinate itself. Each of us had to face the implications of these deeply felt currents, first within

ourselves, and then within the communities of people where we served. Each chapter in this saga of change had major implications for Jewish life and demanded communal transformation. Truly these were very challenging times, mostly brought upon the Jewish world from outside; and we were transformed by them. If we imagine ourselves as we were in the sixties and then scroll forward to the people and the rabbis we would become over this period, we can begin to perceive how we have changed. We changed for the better. Our class of 1969 was all male with no one openly gay. It seems unreal now to somehow think that we were content with that reality. Now we relish how the rabbinate has opened-up and embraced its magnificent tapestry of difference.

I especially want to hold up the movement to free Soviet Jewry on our watch for special consideration. I have a feeling that my personal experience affected my colleagues as deeply as it shaped me. We were thoroughly joined at the hip with people we would most likely never meet half a world away. We knew their names, their stories, their traumas. We were brought low by their experiences of oppression and raised up by their courage and resilience. So many of the people we served were equally connected to the life stories of those around the globe. Many of us went on missions to furtively meet and support Russian Jews, often repeatedly. Saving Soviet Jewry truly moved to the epicenter of our communal life. The struggle was intense bringing us to

act in ways we had never acted before including civil disobedience and speaking truth to power. Our rap sheets started at that time. What is remarkable now is to see that the movement to free Soviet Jewry was a complete success! After reaching out and lobbying hard for people across the globe, we then found them coming to settle in great numbers as our neighbors markedly enriching our communities with a million more making aliyah! How often can we say that about any great social movement! Mostly there are small steps forward and then some backlash too. The Soviet Jewry movement can serve us as a beacon of hope in the many challenges for social justice we face to this hour. We know we can effect profound change. We have power.

The choices in direction our class made covered the entire spectrum of the choices we were given. We served, and in some cases still are, serving in the pulpit, in academia, leading Hillel on campus, directing Camp Ramah, educating young and older, writing books, serving as scholars in residence, assuming many varied roles in communal leadership, linking with leaders of other faiths, devoting ourselves to movements for social justice here and in the Middle East. Three of our classmates have lived in Israel for decades. We were all determined to make these years count; or, as my classmate Nason Goldstein teaches us to say everyday: "Make it a great day!"

We are deeply indebted to the Seminary for nurturing us and to the RA for supporting us to this day. To serve as rabbis in 20th and 21st century America and Israel for these 50 years has been a very great gift. If I were to characterize the key sentiment of my beloved classmates, I would name “gratitude”, gratitude for reaching this milestone, gratitude to the people and institutions that shaped us, gratitude for the opportunity to serve, and, ultimately, gratitude to HaShem.