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הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן—
אוהב שלום ורודף שלום.
אוהב את־הבריות ומקרבן לתורה.
(*Pirkei Avot* 1:12)

Part Three: Community

Ḥallah is a miracle.

Every Saturday morning when I lift the two braided loaves on the bimah as I recite the Hamotzi for the congregation, I wonder at the fresh cohesion of the ḥallah braids.

It seems a miracle to me. A baker weaves three strands of raw dough together, places it in the oven, and the staff of life is miraculously transformed into a sanctified symbol of religious values and continuity.

The deep wisdom of the ḥallah lies in the triune of its braid.

Anyone who has braided hair knows that it takes three strands for the braid to hold. You can have more than three strands but not less. Two will unravel. As for one, well, one is a pony tail, free, vulnerable to the slightest breeze. A braid has beauty and a substantiality not as easily disturbed.

This is true for Judaism as well. It takes at least three to have the critical mass necessary for miracles. Three individuals can come together to recite the *mezuman* and bring the very presence of the Shekhinah into their midst. Three patriarchs (and four matriarchs) revolutionized the way the world answers the essential questions of faith and quest. Three recitations of Ashrei can heal the soul, repair the world, and coax the messianic age a little closer.

Throughout the ages, the foundation and strength of the Jewish people have rested upon three central institutions, three houses: the *beit knesset* (the synagogue, literally the house of assembly), the *beit hamidrash* (the school, literally the house of study) and the *bayit* (the home).

We need all three houses for Judaism to survive. The synagogue connects us to our community, for we need a community in which to pray our most

sacred prayers. They may be prayers sanctified by the ages or the fleeting prayer of the heart. We find support within the walls of the synagogue and the synagogue reaches out its warm embrace beyond its walls.

The school connects us to our history as a holy people whose purpose grows from our understanding of our sacred texts. This can happen in Hebrew School, day school, an adult education class, even Jewish summer camp, but somehow we Jews must be constantly learning so that we can constantly be able to change and grow. Without a knowledge of Jewish tradition and observance, we would be lost in the vagrancies of modernity, alienated from our source of significance and connection to God and to our People.

The home connects us to a daily identity as an individual member of the covenant through personal observance of the mitzvot. It is in the home that our Judaism envelopes and sustains us even as it fills our days with meaning and spiritual sustenance.

All three bind us to God and to a life grounded in Jewish observance so that we are not vulnerable to the winds of difficulty or tragedy or even to the stiffest pressures to conform to societal standards, however at odds they may be with Jewish values and priorities.

For example, one Shemini Atzeret, I was asked to step out of services for a moment. One of our members had hurried to synagogue to tell us her husband had been rushed to the hospital and was in critical condition. It was not clear he would make it. She had hurried to the synagogue hoping we could recite the "Mi Sheberakh" prayer for him, and be there for her as well. After services that day, I walked to the hospital. The three-mile walk was pleasant on that clear fall day. I found the cantor and several other congregants already there in the ICU waiting room. We prayed together. We cried and hugged each other. At some point we stood around this man's bed and sang Debbie Friedman's Mi Sheberakh prayer. Congregants organized a support system for the family. Kosher dinners appeared on their doorstep. Drivers took them to the hospital and stayed with them. Each of the 150 psalms was taken by a volunteer who read that psalm each day for this man's recovery. A number of the volunteers were bar mitzvah students from our Hebrew school. At first unable to do more than just look up at me, this man and his family later told me how they felt so warmly supported, by God, by our faith, and by the community as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, through little triumphs and frightening setbacks.

The psalm circle continued for almost six months. The sanctuary was filled with smiles and tears Shabbat *erev* Pesach when this man was able to walk himself to the *bimah* for an *aliyah* to *bench gomel,* reciting the prayer thanking God for having survived a life threatening experience. He now can enter the sanctuary leaning just slightly on a cane. He tells me his sense of God and appreciation of life has been changed forever.

This man was changed but so was the congregation. Our congregation has begun organizing a hesed committee to formalize our efforts to reach out to others and we are planning to begin a regular healing service and a

Carlebach-style Sunday morning minyan to experience the power of prayer more consistently in our lives.

Miracles and mitzvot go together.

I try to teach our b'nei mitzvah students this lesson. We have a very detailed program: Hebrew school, davening classes, tutors for Torah and haftarah, a class trip to the U.S. Holocaust Museum, a social action project, parent-child workshops, a six-session interactive course I lead on theology and theodicy (although I don't call it that) in which the students begin to formulate questions, search the tradition, and debate their tentative answers. The highlight of the year, though, is the Shabbaton, a 25-hour Sabbath experience. In my first synagogue, the bnei mitzvah class was small enough (four to six students a year) to have the children sleep over at our house. Now that I have 30–40 students a year, they sleep over in the synagogue. We eat most of our Sabbath meals together there. We organize special Jewish identity games for the evening and afternoon. The most powerful experience comes after lunch, when the students walk with me and my family back to our house. They and a few parental chaperones play games, participate in an "Ask the Rabbi" session, hear some of our teens speak about their recent trips to Israel. We daven minḥa and eat my husband's delicious food for the "shalseudas," the third meal. They notice that we do not turn lights on or off. The oven and stove are preset, the food already cooked. The television, computer and video are silent. We sometimes sing but mostly we talk. Their parents join us at our house—quite packed together—for *havdalah* and a discussion about what it was like to keep Shabbat. They admit they were nervous at first, coming to the rabbi's house, being without television for a whole day. Invariably, someone comments, "I never knew Shabbat could be so much fun," and the others agree.

During the ten years that I have followed this program in two synagogues, I have found almost no members drop out among post-b'nei mitzvah families. Some of the children and their families have actually begun regular Shabbaton sleepovers for the students and their friends. Some even continue to come to synagogue services after their bar/bat mitzvah year. These might be small steps but maybe these are modern miracles as well. At least, I hope they have learned that Judaism is not just shul deep. It is what goes on in one's home and in one's mind and heart, in one's commitment to continue to grow in Jewish learning and observance as well.

It takes three for a braid to hold. Only by maintaining our commitment and involvement in all three central institutions of Judaism: the synagogue, the school (Jewish education), and the home can Judaism remain strong, and can we find strength in our Judaism. That is what Kehillah means to me: the ability to bridge these three arenas of our activity and braid them together into a beautiful and transcending whole as rich in meaning as simple dough transformed into the religious symbolism of a Shabbat ḥallah.

SUSAN GROSSMAN
COLUMBIA, MD
(JTS, 1989)

As I look back over the forty years since I became a rabbi, I realize that the basic concept I had somehow formulated has not changed. Although only fifteen years of that time was spent in the congregational rabbinate, in many ways I have continued to function according to the ideals that guided my rabbinate. That concept was that the only model that made sense is that of the rabbi as teacher. Any other model leads the rabbi toward dangerous grounds which have destroyed many leaders: overwelming ego and separation from the people of the congregation. I suppose now that I was rebelling against a model that was very common at that time: the rabbi as priest and religious functionary. Those were the days of rabbinical robes and hats, of synagogues that were ruled by decorum and of rabbis who were inaccessible. It took me several years to dispense with the robe, not because I wanted it but because congregants were used to it. It took me no time at all to dispense with all priestly roles and deportment, even to the extent of not "pronouncing a blessing" over a child (other than my own) or giving a "benediction." Instead, I always said a prayer or gave a d'var Torah. Nor was it long before I attempted to break down the barriers between pulpit and pew by asking questions and expecting answers and indulging in dialogue and discussion during the service. All of this was background to the attempt to establish in the minds of the congregation that my main work was transmitting the tradition, teaching. A teacher indeed has authority, but a teacher leads and does not command. A teacher knows more than the student—but can learn much from the student.

Mine was a teaching pulpit. Of course there were formal sermons as needed, but they also contained educational material. The service could be interrupted for teaching as well in order to make it more meaningful. And more of my time was spent in the classroom than in the meeting room. Whether it was Sisterhood classes, Sunday morning Talmud study after minyan, Shabbat afternoon Talmud study for teenagers, teaching in high school, or adult education evening classes—that was where my time and energy went. It also went into developing and running educational programs for the synagogue and the community. And part of this was personal study. I set aside time daily to study texts, time when I was not available for anything else. If you do not learn, how can you teach?

I suppose that it was not accidental, then, that eventually I went into academic life, but it has never been an academic life separated from community activity and leadership, devoted only to scholarship with no thought for influencing lives. During my years at the Seminary I had many examples of pulpit rabbis who were also scholars. I am thinking of Robert Gordis, Max Arzt, Jacob Agus, Simon Greenberg, and many others, some of whom eventually left the pulpit, but the pulpit never really left them. I see it as unfortunate that we have suffered the same specialization as has plagued so many other fields so that scholars are scholars and pulpit rabbis are pulpit rabbis.

We need more congregational rabbis who are scholars or, if not scholars, at least educators and teachers.

It is true that pastoral care is of utmost importance in the rabbinate. That is not because one is a rabbi, but because one must be an example of a caring human being. The rabbi's best way to earn not only respect but affection is to show care and concern. But I never felt that that was the ultimate purpose of being a rabbi.

In my sermons I was often outspoken. I did not fear to take unpopular positions. I can think of at least two times when I outraged many in my congregation. Yet they respected my right to say what I believed. I can only think that they put up with this because they knew that I was devoting my life to passing on the tradition in a meaningful way and not to promoting my own person. At least, that is what I would like to believe.

When I was a rabbinical student at the Seminary, many complained that the Seminary did not provide us with the many tools we needed to function as rabbis and required too many scholarly courses that would not be of any use. I did not share that feeling. It may be true that there was not enough time given to practical courses, but the best way to get that is probably by imitation and experience. What I could not get anywhere else, and felt I really needed, was basic knowledge of Jewish texts. If study of Bible or rabbinics could be combined with concern for intellectual questions and a grounding in universal wisdom, as was done by Prof. Shalom Spiegel, all the better. But how many teachers of his capacity were there?

REUVEN HAMMER
JERUSALEM, ISRAEL
(JTS, 1958)

Life in the pulpit is maddening on a daily basis. It borders, at least sometimes, on being insufferable. Some of the situations that a rabbi has to unravel are so peculiar that it beggars the imagination. But, in the end, I have come to think of the congregation as the great laboratory . . . and, in the end, the lab is where scientists who take their science seriously belong. Teaching undergraduates about Judaism—my other career option—is certainly a noble task, and an essential one, but the nature of the academy is such that ideas, or at least religious ones, can only be unraveled and, occasionally, debated in the classroom, never really tested in the only way that truly counts: by applying them to the spiritual lives of real Jewish people and seeing if they do or don't fly. In the end, rabbis who write about God fall into two categories: those who derive their information from other rabbis' books and those who derive theirs from midnight calls they take from teenagers facing first bouts of chemotherapy in the morning and who suddenly find themselves unable to settle down in their hospital rooms before asking why, if God is just and good, their innocent lives are suddenly on the line. I've read lots of books . . . but I've also taken those phone calls—and

plenty of them—and, at least in my own experience, there's no comparison between the two in terms of their usefulness as spurs to honest theological speculation. As Pinchas of Koretz is reported to have said in the Zohar, my life in the pulpit is what has made me into a Jew.

I've written six books over the last decades: three books of essays and three novels. All of them, I think, are infused with the experiences I have had over the years as a congregational rabbi. I actually have read the whole *Moreh Nevukhim*—although, to tell the truth, it left me more perplexed than ever—but, in the end, the endless source of spiritual, intellectual and emotional inspiration in my life is the experience of endlessly testing Jewish ideas and rituals in the great laboratory—not by doping out how they could conceivably work or by studying how they once may have worked, but by seeing whether or not they actually do work in the actual lives of actual people striving to be Jews.

That, more than anything, is the source of my creativity and, although I have occasionally thought of taking my career in other directions, I can't imagine working in any more satisfying context than the pulpit.

MARTIN S. COHEN
MISSION VIEJO, CA
(JTS, 1978)

I was never a person who wanted to try and change the world. I would be happy to change some things about myself, let alone the world. Still, my goal as a rabbi was very simple. I always felt that if I could help one person to use their Judaism to make a difference in their life, if just one person would be better, healed and more whole because of some contact with me, then all of the training, the study and the work would be worth it. And my life would have meaning.

Rabbi Max Lipschitz was my senior rabbi after my ordination. I only had a few days to meet all the people in the congregation, on the search committee, and Rabbi Lipschitz.

At our initial meeting, I was ushered into his office by his secretary, and we sat in chairs opposite one another, no desk or table between us. But just as we were getting started, the secretary buzzed his phone to tell him that he had a phone call. I remember being annoyed and bothered that he would interrupt the little time we had to get to know each other for a phone call. But he did, and he got up, went to his desk and answered the phone.

That call change my life. As I listened to his side of the conversation, I began to understand what it really meant to put people first. Carefully, Rabbi Lipschitz inquired about every member of the man's family, who was well (his children) and who was not (his parents). How was business? How was he doing with his hobby? It seemed to be an endless series of questions, but in reality it took just a few minutes. However, in those few moments; that rabbi

did more than make a member of his congregation feel comfortable; that man knew, from those few questions, that his rabbi cared deeply about his life and his concerns. I never heard what the rest of the call was about. I didn't need to know any more. Rabbi Lipschitz had taught me what a rabbi in a pulpit is all about. It was not text. It was not halakhah. It was not sermons. These were important, but there was something more that a rabbi needed to do. I had learned that the most important task I would have as a rabbi was to take the time to make people feel that Judaism cared about them. That Judaism would always be there for them. That no matter what happened in life, good or bad, there was a rabbi and a tradition that would never let them down.

RANDALL J. KONIGSBURG
HOLLYWOOD, FL
(JTS, 1983)

When I first preached at my congregation, still being a seminarist, I thought people would get up and leave the synagogue because a woman was preaching, but no one did and at the end of services people congratulated me. Several women came up to me and said they were very proud that a woman was to become a rabbi. A month after I was ordained, the second woman rabbi was ordained in Buenos Aires and today five women are studying at the Rabbinical School in Buenos Aires, and I am very proud to have opened for them the way to do it.

My greatest gratification today is that people come to see me not only from our congregation but sometimes even from far away, or from Orthodox congregations, saying that they have problems which they need to talk about with a rabbi, and someone told them that they should come and see Rabbi Margit of Lamroth Hakol. And I know that I can help them.

MARGIT BAUMATZ
BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA
(SEMINARIO RABINÍCO LATINAMERICANO, 1994)

One sentence my congregants have heard time and again: The word *beit-knesset* (= synagogue) does not mean "house of worship" or (God forbid!) "house of God." It means: "house of assembly." In a more elucidative way: Jacob comes to the synagogue to meet with God, Isaac comes to the synagogue to meet with Jacob. Both motivations are equally legitimate. In Israel, the social motivation to associate with other Jews plays almost no role in bringing people to the synagogue. However, the fact that the word "synagogue" is associated with religious services is enough to deter most Israeli-born people from even stepping into a building which bears the title "synagogue." It takes years of patience and persistence to get Israelis overcome their suspicion. Six years ago I started an adult education group that meets every Friday morning to

study Talmud together. Choosing the right time was even more important than choosing the tractate or the chapter! Apparently, many Israelis already take two days off: Friday and Saturday, but they do not wish to spend all of Friday on errands; they wish to start the day with some kind of "intellectual stimulus." I believe that Masorti congregations have a better chance of establishing "learning community" than "praying communities." At least, it worked for me and my congregation.

GIL NATIV
HAIFA, ISRAEL
(HUC-JERUSALEM, 1981)

When I began thinking about becoming a rabbi, I pondered what kind of role I wanted to play. Not being the charismatic type and, anyway, not trusting that people would be really responding to the message rather than to me (sour grapes?) so that it would be integrated into their beings, it seemed by virtue of my interests (intellectual, learning) and my training (the value of study was emphasized), that my primary role should be that of teacher.

More or less, that is what I began to do. Of course, being a teacher is dependent on having students with whom to study. At first, most of my students were school age children—captive audiences of the system. Most of my adult students could be divided into two categories: congregants interested in some course of study that was offered each year and people contemplating conversion.

It did not take long to realize that if my primary role was to be teacher, I would have to create opportunities for teaching. Shabbat morning sermons were rejected for interactive Torah study. Board meetings became opportunities for a *d'var torah.* Even life cycle events became dramatic moments when Torah could be taught with the thought that perhaps, during this vulnerable time when people would inadvertently open themselves up by virtue of the event, they could be enticed to other learning situations.

We tried all sorts of methods, strategies and programs to encourage study. I offered a garden variety of classes demonstrating the relevancy of Jewish study for every aspect of Jewish life.

While there were some who demonstrated interest and might enroll for some specific class that might meet for four sessions, sustained learning featuring my teaching role was not the main event at our congregation.

Along the way, I noticed that people would come to me with a variety of personal, emotional, intellectual and spiritual issues in counseling and non-counseling situations. Not being a trained therapist and dipping into Jewish sources, I would apply some aspect of Jewish tradition to the specific issue at hand. I suggested midrash therapy (à la M. Rothenberg) for people to find a way to use content and method of Jewish tradition.

But I really noticed that my response to people dealing with problems,

crises and trauma was to offer spiritual encouragement. Somehow, I found myself slipping into a mode of helping people through whatever they were confronting. Not that I had any answers that would solve problems, not that I could insure results. Not being a fundamentalist, I refused to use ritual and prayer as a magic balm. To me, that would only demean the tradition. Also, I knew that it would not always work: people might ask for a *mi shebeirakh* for someone who is sick—if they didn't recover, assuming that the prayer should "work," they would be disappointed. Hence, I would never represent the tradition as some type of magical tool for divine problem solving. One is left with the assumption that if God answers all prayers, and someone does not like the response—he/she could only blame themselves for being punished for some sin, or wonder if the request was not worthy. Who was to be the judge?

Encouragement seems to be welcome. It might be holding the hand of a sick person and saying the Shema with them. It might be providing support during time of need. It might mean creating the programs for the congregation to support those in need of some kind of help, visiting the sick, helping people with their wedding plans, providing financial help, bringing a meal to the house of mourning, creating a *ḥevra kadisha,* etc.

Slowly, I find that the congregation is being transformed into a supportive community. People are willing to volunteer to help others and to help each other. Learning is no longer an end but a means to provide support.

And the rabbi has become the head cheerleader. This role is evident during meetings. Rather than solving problems and answering questions, I encourage and try to empower others to take on these roles. I call upon people, supporting their endeavors, offering encouraging words, so that they feel their work is recognized and their actions are significant and meaningful.

GORDON FREEMAN
WALNUT CREEK, CA
(JTS, 1966)

The most brutal area of my rabbinate has been the cutthroat political sphere of kosher *hashgaḥah,* while my most singularly rewarding time has been spent in the quiet and gentle work of the *ḥevra kadisha.* The act of teaching converts and children holds the attraction of opening up new Jewish horizons, while teaching and preaching to adults has forced me joyfully into the most pointedly creative and deep moments I have had with texts. Interactions with folks at the Jewish retirement homes and hospitals and with hazily affiliated Jewish Renewal people have been so important and so rewarding that despite the time they consume, I could not imagine being a rabbi without them. I've learned most about prayer from car crashes, sudden deaths, violent storms and moments of empty loneliness; I have learned most about God from silent

but meaningful hugs, the sky strewn with stars on cool and crisp moonless nights, the brief moment of complete and balanced quiet just after a song is finished, and the myriad ways both words and people can fit together.

The roots of my rabbinate were planted firmly in soil that embodied the sense of holiness present within a normal world, accessible to all. The branches that have sprouted challenge me to throw myself passionately into spreading that idea, giving the gifts I have received—intact and appreciated, along with the grand stories of their transmission—to others.

DAVID BOCKMAN
RALEIGH, NC
(JTS, 1986)

How does a *graduate school* prepare a student for the first time he or she is called upon to bury a teenager who fell asleep at the wheel on the way home from visiting the college he was planning to attend the next fall? How does the *professional school* equip a student to comfort parents whose ten-year-old daughter went to sleep on Wednesday night with a mild headache, and never woke up, succumbing to an odd-ball, freak virus? In which seminar does one learn how to tell an eight-year-old girl that her mother has been placed in a mental institution, and with divorced dad not on the scene, she'll have to stay with distant relatives for the time being?

Life is a swift moving river filled with silt and small grains of sand. As a rabbi, I swim against its current every day. All the forces of American culture conspire against maintaining group identity, personal discipline, loyalty, and the feeling that one should sacrifice some individual pleasure for the greater good of the religious/ethnic group, our extended family, all of which are at the heart of Judaism. Buddhism, with its goal of personal enlightenment and untangling oneself from the sticky web of human relationships, and evangelical Christianity, with its stress on salvation, seem far better suited to American culture than our "life is with people" Jewish culture. Is it a wonder that there are more of them and few of us?

We rabbis work with kids all through their growing up years. They go to day schools, Ramah and Israel programs. They can be our Jewish superstars, come from great Jewish homes, regularly volunteer to chant Torah, keep some semblance of *kashrut* and yet . . . when they meet that special someone, and the chemistry is right, the current is stronger than the strongest swimmer. Our holy profession involves maintaining group identity, yet every influence in the surrounding culture is on the side of individual growth and happiness, at any expense. *Od lo avda tikvateinu,* yes, but you'd have to be a bit crazy to bet on the Jewish horse in this race.

Being a congregational rabbi means, to me, suffering the death of a thousand cuts. I started out with a rock-solid faith, but the sand-grains of time have worn down the edges. I began my career with a fierce enthusiasm, but

the apathy of the descendants of the murmurers at *mai meriba* long ago yawns chasm-like as an energy sink, a black hole which sucks voraciously at my spiritual energy.

On the other hand, the rock which I once imagined myself to be had many sharp, irritating edges. The wails of the mother whose son crashed at age 17, breaking his neck instantly, railing against God and me, as the Holy One's local agent; the vacant stare of the suddenly abandoned little girl, going home early on Shavuot morning when we didn't get a *minyan* in our small congregation; sending my own Ramah-graduate and now counselor son to college in the fall and wondering who he'll come home with—even from a university with one of the largest percentages of Jewish students in the country—all of these have eroded the edges from what was once a rather flinty rock, for good and bad.

As an undergraduate, Asian religions (Buddhism in particular) appealed greatly to me. In time, I realized that derma and pastrami, rather than tofu and brown rice are my dharma and that pacing anxiously around the shul is a more natural meditation position for me than the lotus; that fevered arguing over a text is more my Buddha-nature than a day of silence in a retreat center. (I feel like *killing* someone after a day of enforced silence!) Still, an important lesson comes to us from the east, and I think we can find it in our own texts.

One of my favorite passages in Torah is when Aaron is about to die. Moses is commanded: "strip off the garments from Aaron." Aaron doesn't even get to take off his priestly vestments himself before he dies. They are *ripped* from him. Before death, he must suffer (enjoy?) the final destruction of his ego. A Buddhist retelling of the story: Aaron has reached Enlightenment in this go-round of the *gilgul.* He has "killed the Buddha," that is, annihilated his ego. Symbolically, he no longer needs the outer markings of the *kahunah;* he *is* the quintessential priest. The robes, *ephod* and other vestments and accoutrements are now superfluous.

The day I was ordained, and I stood in a robe with a new *tallit, smikha* in hand, I felt at the top of the world. Much pomp and circumstance attended our ordination ceremony, much as it does at JTS. We were given new sets of *bigdei-kodesh,* first among them, the title, "Rabbi." *Hevel havalim;* all an illusion, a snare and deception. In seventeen years, I have learned that I'm not so smart, not so important, not terribly influential. *Afar v'afar anokhi.* The robe has been torn off by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, one shred at a time. Some may call it "burn-out"; I call it Enlightenment.

DOUGLAS D. WEBER
BOULDER, CO
(HUC, 1982)