

## Building a K'hillah K'doshah With Shira At The Center

When I was a Rabbi in St. Thomas, already now more than 15 years ago, I would often converse with a dear friend and colleague, Reverend Marty Weiss of the Dutch Reformed Church which was just down the street from our historic synagogue. One day, standing on the steps of the synagogue built in 1833, Marty and I happened onto a conversation about the Messiah. Of course for Marty, the messiah is well known: Jesus of Nazareth, who will return in what's referred to as the "Second Coming". We, as Jews, if we do believe in a personal Messiah, meaning a person who will come and announce the time of God is at hand, is still unknown to us and has yet to come a first time. I decided to go along with Marty's version and said, "You know Marty, if it is Jesus who comes back, he will walk into my synagogue right here and pick up where he left off, reading Torah, reciting Kiddush on Friday night and singing the Shema. If he goes into your church, it will all be foreign to him and he'll even ask, "Who is that guy hanging on the cross?"

We both laughed and moved onto another topic. Then it hit me. Jesus would have had a question for me too. He would ask with a perturbed look in his eye and a disgruntled croak in his throat, "Who changed the way we sing the Shema? Who changed the tune? Geez, I'm gone for just 2,000 years and everything changes!"

We laugh because we recognize ourselves in this scenario. We get used to certain beloved melodies which nurture our sense of nostalgia, reconnect us to our childhood and fill us with warm fuzzies. Music has that power. Music in our tradition is even more than that. Music is a means of connecting with God, connecting with our people and helps us in connecting with our inner lives and deepest sense of self. Music is so instrumental in what we try to do in creating space for prayer, that a recent study conducted by a colleague of mine, confirmed this in fact to be a fundamental reason which brings us here to this Holy Place. Rabbi Lewis Kamrass of the Isaac Mayer Wise Temple in Cincinnati asked his congregants what made the prayer experience a meaningful one. Overwhelmingly they responded – the music. But not just that. They said music they can sing, that they're familiar with and that moves them spiritually and emotionally.

This finding prompted me to suggest to our Professional Staff that we dedicate the coming New Year, 5772, to Jewish Music, to honor the place music plays in our efforts to build a K'hillah K'doshah here at Kol Tikvah. In "Building a K'hillah K'doshah, With Shira at the Center, With A Song In Our Heart", I want to explore with you exactly how and why music is so central to our lives as Jews. Let's begin by understanding how music connects us to our God.

To begin this exploration, I need to take you to Mizner Park in Boca Raton. One afternoon while strolling around the area, my daughter Talia and I were talking about the idea of this sermon when suddenly she said, "Dad look up, you won't believe it." I looked up and

there, written in stone on one of the central buildings was the following quote by Thomas Carlyle:

“Music is well said to be the speech of angels. In fact, nothing among utterances allowed to man is felt to be so divine. It brings us near to the infinite.”

Wow! Talk about b’skert! Talk about timing! If ever there was a message from above whose purpose was pre-ordained, it was surely this. In the words of Jacob our Patriarch, “God is surely in this place, and I almost didn’t realize it.”

One of the most awesome moments in our people’s history, one that is rehearsed in song twice daily in prayer, is the event that made our ancestors not only proclaim God’s hand in history but set it to song. For them and for us, God was surely in that place and they sang this song:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said:

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and driver He has hurled  
into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and might;

He is become my deliverance.

Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials;

Who is like You, majestic in holiness,

Awesome in splendor, working wonders!

The Song of the Sea, Shirat Ha-Yam, which contains the “Michamocha”, we are so familiar with, is a moment frozen in time because it recalls a time when we as a people intimately felt God’s presence. It was too powerful an event to leave to prose; it had to be set to song!

Another emotionally charged experience set to song is the one we will share together in just 10 day’s time. Most would agree that the words of the Kol Nidre by themselves are legalistic and mundane. Yet set to the haunting melody which stirs our hearts and moves them to contrition, the Kol Nidre is transformed into a spiritual Aria, the likes of which are unequaled in its ability to help us become one with God. Music indeed has that power to open the gates of prayer, to evoke in us reverence for the divine. In the words of Carlyle, “it brings us near to the infinite.”

A second purpose of Jewish Music is to deepen our bonds with our fellow Jews. When we sit at the Seder table and sing the 4 Questions and welcome Elijah with his song we are surely one people. When Dayenu is sung, just the way it’s been sung for a thousand generations, we are at one with our fellow Jews. When we chant the Chanukah blessings together as a family we know we are being joined by our fellow Jews the world over. But two stories in particular demonstrate this point most poignantly.

The first takes place in Cleveland, Georgia, the other in Tel Aviv.

As many of you know I have had the privilege of serving as Rabbinic Faculty at URJ Camps for the past 25 years in a row, the last two at Camp Coleman in Cleveland, Georgia. Like all good Jewish Camps, Coleman and the other URJ Camps offer the expected regimen of camp activities and Jewish programming we would want for our children and grandchildren. And yet, if you asked them what was their favorite part of camp, almost all would say Shabbat and specifically Song Session. There have been so many times I wish I could capture the enthusiastic, almost ecstatic singing and dancing of the campers at Coleman and bottle it for use back home. If you would see the “Ruach”, the mighty spirit of these children ages 8-18, 500 altogether singing Jewish and Hebrew songs at the top of their lungs, you would know the future of Judaism is secure. Israeli and American counselors, kids and adults, men and women, altogether as one united by the music, knitted together as one camp family, connected musically with our people Israel in time and space. I sometimes wish that the Rabbis of 2,000 years ago who originally wrote the words to many of these songs and prayers could be alive to witness generations hence of young people, singing and dancing to their very same words. The famous sayings of the Rabbis, the spirituality contained in the emotions of the Psalmist, the prayers of our people all set to music connect us inextricably to our heritage and to our fellow Jews.

Similar is the experience at Independence Hall in Tel Aviv. After hearing a live recording of Ben Gurion’s Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948, followed by the Chief Rabbi’s recitation of Shehechianu, suddenly on the top floor of what was then the Tel Aviv Art Museum, unbeknownst to the gathering crammed into the basement below, an orchestra began playing, Hatikvah. Everyone stood up as if to honor the angels in Heaven above who were singing, and nary an eye was dry. To this day, I well up inside whenever I think of that moment. Hatikvah has that power to link us not only with every other proud Jew, but to our history as well.

Finally, music has the ability to build a bridge over troubled waters, to enhance our joy and diminish our despair, to inspire and cause us to aspire to achieve lofty goals.

When the Cantor leads us in Misheberach, or “Heal Us Now”, one feels as if the melody itself can heal what ails us. When the Choir leads us in “Oseh Shalom”, or “Shalom Rav”, one feels the sense of peace the prayer evokes and inspires us to work for peace. When we sing and dance to Debbie Friedman’s “Mi Chamocha” or “Miriam’s Song”, we feel the joy of liberation experienced by our ancestors so long ago on the shores of the sea. When the Cantor chants the “Ale Maleh” at a funeral or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, we are comforted in knowing that our loved ones are at peace and safe in the surety of God’s loving embrace.

In so many subtle ways the melodies we treasure do indeed touch us deeply and leave a lasting musical imprint upon our souls.

The power of music to connect us to our God, to unite us with our people, and to touch us deeply is summed up in the following Hebrew words;

“The days pass and the years fly by, but the melody forever remains.” The Songs of our lives which help define our existence individually and as a people are larger than life. They transcend time and space. They are eternal in their power to shape and mold us. The music itself can help us transform our K’hillah into a K’hillah K’doshah; it can help us build a K’hillah K’doshah with a song in our heart, with shira at the center of all we do.

This year at Kol Tikvah, we will try to do exactly that. We will use music as a way to bring us together, to connect us to our people, and to blaze new pathways in our quest to feel God’s presence in our lives.

Looking at the year ahead, plan to be uplifted and inspired, enlightened and transformed by the following artists and musical events, all at Kol Tikvah.

- October 21st – Rock Shabbat and every 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday of the month at 6:30 p.m.
- October 23rd – A Musical Surprise band for our concluding celebration in honor of completion of our new Sefer Torah.
- October 14<sup>th</sup>-16th – Songwriter and Artist Alan Gudis for our teens
- December 5<sup>th</sup> – Friends of the IDF and Kol Tikvah bring Ha-Lahaka – The Israeli Army Musical Troope to perform at Kol Tikvah. Small charge to support the IDF and Kol Tikvah’s ARZA Committee.
- December 11th - Miss Emily, especially for our ECC Families and younger children.
- March 4<sup>th</sup> - The Maccabeats – Purim
- April 25<sup>th</sup> - Yom Ha-Zikaron/Yom Ha-atzmaut  
Joint Choir – Kol Tikvah students and Israeli children/  
Debbie Hafetz and Ariela Benit  
\*Every Fourth Shabbat – Our Choir sings

What a musical extravaganza! A Shira Palooza! (show brochure) Sponsors:

The very last Psalm, Psalm 150, is an ancient tribute and recognition of the important place music plays in the life of our people. We sing it every Shabbat morning here at Kol Tikvah. It’s words echo the rich diversity of sound which filled the Temple in Jerusalem so long ago. It’s words inspire and uplift us.

Hallelujah  
Praise God in His sanctuary;  
praise Him in the sky, His stronghold.  
Praise Her for Her mighty acts;  
praise Him for His exceeding greatness.  
Praise God with blasts of the horn;  
praise Him with harp and lyre.  
Praise Her with timbrel and dance;  
praise God with lute and pipe.

Praise Him with resounding cymbals;  
praise Her with loud-clashing cymbals.  
Let all that breathes praise the Lord.  
Hallelujah.

I conclude this discourse not with words, but with the sounds of music – a beautiful setting by Debbie Friedman of Psalm 150 – It's musical refrain is Hallelujah. Let us join with the Cantor and Choir in the refrain.

Hallelujah – Let's praise God's name together – Hallelujah!

## Lessons Learned...Looking back on a Quarter Century as a Rabbi

“Are you ready to serve the Jewish people with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might?”

These were the immortal words seared into my memory 25 years ago as I stood before the open Ark in the historic Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati Ohio. The very same Ark before which my daughter Ariel will stand this coming June as she is asked the very same question. Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk (Z”l) laid his hands upon my shoulders and looked into my eyes. Awaiting the affirmation which would shape the next 25 years of my life, he listened intently for my reply. Without hesitation I accepted the privilege and the burden which has been passed from Rabbi to Rabbi for more than 2,000 years. Rabbi Goltschalk pronounced the three fold benediction of the Torah, I lifted my head...and I was now and forever more, a Rabbi in Israel.

From the time I was 11, I had thought about being a Rabbi...and a star forward for the Philadelphia Flyers. My parents imagined me one day skating down the ice with the Torah in one hand and a hockey stick in the other. Hebrew and Hockey, Hockey and Hebrew, these were the twin passions which defined my adolescent years. Then at the age of 18, I travelled to Israel for the first time. If ever I doubted what my future would hold, after walking the land of milk and honey, I became steadfast in my ambition and desire to be a Rabbi.

Life is surely about transformative moments, pivotal points in one’s life. Looking back upon these turning points, it is easy to discern some existential truths about our lives. I have been blessed to serve the Jewish people as a Rabbi in 5 different congregations and in 3 student pulpits. Indianapolis, St. Thomas, Danbury, Baltimore and Parkland, as well as Winter Haven, Dayton and Marian, Indianapolis. Each one of these congregations provided me with experiences which have helped to shape my “geshtalt”, my worldview, the way I choose to live my life and the values and philosophical principles that guide my decision making.

I’m sure all of us upon reflection, can surmise “life lessons”, pivotal teachable moments which informed our outlook, our beliefs, and ultimately our behaviors. In fact, that is what these “days of awe” are all about; A time to reflect on what really matters in life, the lessons learned over the past year, the one’s we’re still working on.

As I begin my 26<sup>th</sup> year in the Rabbinate, I thought I would share some of the life lessons I have learned (sometimes the hard way), over the past 25 years. Corresponding with the theme of the 10 Days of Repentance, (Aseret Y’mei Ha-T’shuvah), I have identified 10 real life stories, each of which contains an important lesson for better living. While each one is wrapped in a true story and is a personal experience, I hope that these stories illuminate a path to help guide and inspire you as well. I pray that the benefit I derived from these experiences can and will be a source of wisdom for you too.

The first story I call, “People Over Paper”. This is a story that still hurts to retell, but its message is one I will never forget. It was my first year as an Assistant Rabbi at Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. The year was 1986. A Sunday morning at 9 A.M. I gathered up my teaching supplies and bolted from my office to be on time to greet my 7<sup>th</sup> grade students who

were awaiting my arrival in the classroom. With my lesson on my mind, my hands burdened with books, I was stopped in my tracks by a woman in her 40s. She asked politely if she could speak with me. Looking at my watch, I explained I didn't have time now as I was rushing to class, but would be glad to speak with her at the end of Religious School. Without even waiting for her reply I ran out the door to greet my students.

The next day I was called into the Senior Rabbi's Office. Rabbi Stein looked at me disapprovingly and proceeded to tell me that the woman who needed to speak with me yesterday was a congregant whose mother had just died. She needed my attention but I was too busy with "more important things" or so I thought. I felt so ashamed. I apologized profusely, but the scar it left upon my heart still speaks to me. It says, "Put people over paper"; when a human being says I need to talk with you and you think you have something more important to do, stop for 30 seconds and ask "is it urgent, can it wait?" Give enough Kavod, respect, to this fellow traveller to at least inquire as to the nature of the need. Never be so busy with admistarivia, that you miss the cry for help. Especially in trying to build a K'hillah K'doshah, a sacred, holy community here at Kol Tikvah, we must always be ready to put people over paper!

The Second Life Lesson is a corollary to the first. It also occurred during my first year as a Rabbi; in fact, it was almost my last year as a Rabbi. You see, in a very short period of time, the Senior Rabbi came to trust me, in fact so much that he often would be away and leave me in charge. Unfortunately, invariably every time he left town, someone died. Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation in those days numbered over 1200 families, so it was not inconceivable that one could have a half dozen funerals each month. The only problem was they all occurred during the same week Rabbi Stein was out of town. Going to the grave, several times a week, as a young, impressionable 26 year old was simply heart rending. Within a span of a few months, I had dealt with a double suicide of a husband and wife, both 75 years old, where I was the first person on the scene with the son who found them asphyxiated by carbon monoxide in their garage. At the same time I ministered to a family who had a 19 year old son who was dying of AIDS and then ended up doing that funeral too. After only 8 months in the pulpit, I had had enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I was emotionally a wreck. I went to Rabbi Stein and poured out my heart, begging him for some wisdom on how to survive such emotional trauma, asking for some trade secret which would allow me to wrap myself in Teflon so I wouldn't hurt anymore. I'll never forget what he said. He said, "It's good that you feel the way you do. When you stop feeling, you will no longer be an effective Rabbi. You must learn to live in the moment; feel the pain of another. That's what it means to be a compassionate and caring human being. In time, he said, you will learn how to process the pain so it does not destroy you. As usual, he was right. In fact, the name of God spelled "Yud Hay Vav Hay" is based on the present tense verb to be – meaning to be present. Like God, we are called upon to be present to those who need us, to reach out "B'rachamim", with empathy and compassion to those around us who are hurting.

Lesson Number Two: Learn to be in the present, in the moment and to feel the pain of another, no matter how much it hurts.

The Third Life Lesson is entitled: "We are all oh so human...and it's ok."

The year 1999. The place, United Jewish Center, Danbury, Connecticut. The occasion: The Bar Mitzvah of a close family friend and very active member of the congregation. At the UJC, families had a choice of a Reform style service or a Conservative service. This family chose the 3 ½ hour Conservative service. Well, as you can imagine, there comes a time in such a long span of time when "nature" will not wait any longer. I waited for the best time to sneak off the bimah, when I would be missed the least. Ah, the long Haftarah. The perfect time to relieve myself of the pressure that was building in my bladder. With great relief and a steady stream, all was well until I heard an urgent knock on the bathroom door. "What are you doing in there," exclaimed the Cantor. I knew something was wrong if the Cantor had left the bimah too. I responded, "What do you think I'm doing in here?" She whispered, "Turn off your mike. We can hear everything."

Oh my God, you've got to be kidding me. Now I had to return to the bimah, where over 400 people, not only knew where I was, but what I was doing. Talk about embarrassing and humiliating. I didn't want to return to the bimah. I wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out. But I had no choice. I decided to go bravely into the abyss of my own humiliation and I learned to embrace it. I learned not to take myself so seriously and more than that, to be able to laugh at myself. The ability to laugh at oneself, at one's imperfections, foibles and inconsistencies is not only a sign of mental health and well-being; it is an indispensable way to keep us humble. After all, we are all so human...and it's okay!

The Fourth Life Lesson teaches the all-important truth which says, "Know what the "real" issue is."

All too often we spend way too much time sweating over things which really are NOT the issue. We get ourselves all worked up over things which are not a problem at all. This lesson was made abundantly clear in two separate incidents both in St. Thomas.

The first episode took place before I ever even conducted my first service in the historic Virgin Island Synagogue, the building itself, which dates to 1833. My new President inquired if I would be wearing a black robe when I conduct the service. Since my predecessor did so for 15 years, it was assumed I would do the same. I hated even the idea of it. It seemed so Protestant, so not Jewish to wear a black robe every Shabbat; besides I would be so uncomfortable in this un-air-conditioned building in the tropics. The Temple President pleaded with me, explaining that this was the tradition and that people will be so upset with me from the start if I didn't wear a robe. At least begin wearing it she said, let them get to know you, then you can discard it. It sounded reasonable, but I also felt, "I'm not the old Rabbi, I'm the new one." I had to be who I was from the start, so they will accept me, for me, without a robe. I wrestled with the decision up until moments before the service was to begin. Do I wear the robe or don't I? – (Show of hands – what would you do?)

Well, I decided to chance it and not wear the robe. I walked onto the bimah...and the earth did not stop spinning, the clocks continued to run, and the roof did not cave in. After the service was over, I made a bee-line for the President and asked why there wasn't any

commotion over my robe less attire. She answered matter of factly, because you wore a tie and jacket. “What does that mean?” I asked. She said, “Since we are all so casual on the Island, we thought you would look like the rest of us and we wouldn’t know who the Rabbi was. Since none of us wears a tie or jacket, and you do, that’s all that mattered.” “You mean it had nothing to do with the robe?” “Not at all,” she said, “in fact most of us never liked it in the first place.”

Knowing what really matters, can save a lot of unnecessary grief.

The second story is even crazier. I would do a lot of weddings on St. Thomas of people who would come to the Island for a ceremony in the historic synagogue and then be ready to party in paradise. – Destination weddings became a big part of the synagogue’s revenue. The only problem was that I would never meet the couple until the day of the wedding. I would speak to them by phone, but I had little opportunity to know much about the couple. 98% of the time, the weddings were intimate, special and quite uneventful, except for the time when the groom and his entourage arrived an hour late for the ceremony. When they finally showed up, they were, let us say, already in a party mood. I knew this was not going to be the smoothest ceremony, but I could never guess what would take place immediately after the wedding. Apparently following the ceremony, the groom and his inebriated buddies went out into the street and began to moon anyone who came by. When I heard about this, I was so embarrassed on account of their juvenile behavior, especially since right next door to the synagogue lived two elderly women in their 80s, who were members of the synagogue their whole lives. Gladys DeCastro and Elaine Robles were two sisters who were legends on the Island. In fact, Gladys was the first lady when her husband Morris was Governor of The Virgin Islands.

As soon as I heard about these humiliating antics, I went next door to apologize for any upset these clowns had caused. The two ladies looked at me like I was nuts to be apologizing. Without missing a beat, they looked at me and said, “There’s nothing to be sorry about; we only wished they had turned around.”

Sometimes you can never know how people see things. The things we fret about are often not worth fretting about.

One of the most important of all Life Lessons is Number 5: The Value and demonstration of Humility and Modesty.

From the time I was old enough to understand, the following teaching of my Rabbi, Rabbi Cohen of Philadelphia has permeated my soul. He taught and lived by the Yiddish Maxim, “Don’t make yourself so big, you’re not so small.” In other words, if you cultivate a healthy sense of self, if you have a well-groomed ego and self-respect, then you don’t have to make yourself so big, because you won’t feel so small. In other words, one has no need to put another down, if they themselves feel tall inside.

Nevertheless, it is easy as a Rabbi to get a big head, when there are those who offer praise in abundant quantities. It’s like the time when I sat down in a pew in the sanctuary in

Danbury and a 5 year old turned to his mother and asked, "Why is God sitting down?" His mother looked up at me and said, "Rabbi, don't let it go to your head." I responded, "Don't worry it won't, I'm married." Or it's like the time when a congregant passing through the receiving line after a High Holy Day sermon said, "Rabbi that was the best sermon I've ever heard. You must publish it someday." I retorted, "Well maybe posthumously." She said, "Well Rabbi, I hope that won't be too long from now."

Seriously though, one of the best self-imposed laws I try to live by is, "Don't believe everything everyone tells you, it might cause your head to swell." By the way, that's why I wear a kippah. When my head does get too big for my shoulders, the kippah stays the same size, reminding me ultimately from whence all my blessings flow.

The Sixth Life Lesson speaks to the healing power of good religion via the transformative nature of ritual. This story takes place in Danbury, Connecticut. Sometime right before Rosh Hashanah, I was making my customary rounds visiting elderly members of the congregation who lived in Assisted Living Facilities or were just not able to get out of their homes. Since this might be the only time they would get to hear the sound of the shofar, I would visit my charges with a Ram's Horn in tow. One day after completing my visits at The Bethel Nursing Home, one of the nurses stopped me on the way out. She said, "I know you regularly visit your congregants, but would you take the time to visit a gentleman who is not a member of your congregation." I gladly acceded to her request but was duly warned. "Rabbi," she said, "Mr. Rosenberg has not spoken a word in 2 weeks to anyone. He won't even turn over to look at you. He only stares out the window. You see," she continued, "Mr. Rosenberg had a parakeet who he adored, which suddenly died 2 weeks ago. Since then he has refused to communicate with anyone." I knocked on Mr. Rosenberg's door and walked in. He was indeed lying on his side in bed, looking away from the door. I asked how he was doing. No response. I told him I was sorry for the loss of his pet parakeet. Still no response. I asked for his Hebrew name, so I could hold him in my prayers, still nothing. Finally, I decided to tell him that I had a shofar in hand, and that I will sound it for him, but before I do, he should think of something he is praying for this New Year. Then with the sound of the shofar, his prayer will ascend to the very heights of heaven. I counted to 3 and then I sounded a long blast. I bid him a Shanah Tovah and turned to walk away, when I heard the first words to pass his lips in 2 weeks. He said, "T'kiah!!"

I was so moved by the power of this shofar and the emotion it evoked in Mr. Rosenberg, I couldn't stop talking about it to anyone who would listen. That evening I told our Cantor and the Choir who were practicing for the High Holy Days. They were so moved by this story, they decided to all chip in and buy Mr. Rosenberg a new parakeet. Within a few days I returned to the nursing home to deliver the bird to Mr. Rosenberg. When I arrived I was met at the door by the same nurse who had asked me to visit Mr. Rosenberg. She, along with a gaggle of other healthcare professionals surrounded me and demanded to know what I did to Mr. Rosenberg. They said ever since my visit, his depression lifted, he began speaking, and interacting normally once again with his family and the staff of the nursing home. They were dumbfounded on what could have caused this dramatic change. I explained about the shofar and told them about the gift from the choir. When I visited Mr. Rosenberg, he thanked me for my previous visit, and he was overcome with joy to the point of tears in receiving this new parakeet. We talked for a

while and then as I was about to leave, he said, “Rabbi, I have a name for my new parakeet. I will call him, “Tekiah”.

This amazing story taught me first-hand how powerfully healing and transformative Jewish rituals and customs can be. They truly have the capability of taking a sad soul and teaching it to live again.

The Seventh Life Lesson is one that can be summed up in 3 words: Ribbono Shel Olam. This experience took place before I was ordained as a Rabbi, when I was a student Rabbi in Marian, Indiana. I would travel twice a month, 3 ½ hours by car, to serve this small but vibrant congregation to lead services, run their Religious School and teach Adult Ed. I would also visit members who could not make it to synagogue. One such woman I visited was named Celia Wootner (Z”l). She was a very with it, relatively healthy 103 year old. I loved hearing her tell stories about her life growing up before commercial air travel, automobiles or television. She loved to laugh and tell jokes. Linda and I even danced with her on her 104<sup>th</sup> birthday. As it would turn out, hers was to be the first funeral I conducted as a Rabbi. After meeting with her regularly for the better part of a year, I finally had the courage to ask her “the question”. “So how do you do it?” “How do you live so long and so well?” “What’s your secret?” I expected her to say things like, eat well, exercise, don’t sweat the small stuff, blow off steam and so forth. You know the usual bromides one might imagine. Instead, what she said next has stayed with me ever since. She simply said in her thick Yiddish accent, “Ribbono Shel Olam.” Simply put, “The Master of the Universe.” She explained. She said, what chutzpah for me to say why should I live to a ripe old age, when others die young. While I might have some control over the direction of my life, I have next to no control over its duration.”

What Celia was teaching me is that who’s to know whose D.N.A. contains the gene for long life or has the right genes to fight disease and recover. Who’s to know why some people are cut down before their time due to accidents or natural disasters? Who’s to say what is our fate or our destiny? “Who shall live and who shall die?” Celia’s profound response was that only a Power in the universe greater than ours controls the ultimate length and breadth of our lives. We may control its depth; “The Ribbono Shel Olam” controls the rest. Celia’s unabashed humility struck me deeply, teaching me that only a sincere faith in something greater than ourselves can secure for us a heart of wisdom.

Lesson Number 8 is entitled, “Mitzvah Gorreret Mitzvah”, One Good Deed Leads to Another Good Deed. This story takes place in Cincinnati in 2007 when I travelled there to witness the Ordination of a dear friend who I inspired to be a Rabbi. As I robed in my black Academic Robe to join in the procession in Plum Street Temple, I was assisted by a woman who almost literally fainted when she realized who she was helping. The woman asked my name and then burst into tears. I thought, “What did I do?” She asked, “Do you know who you are?” I said, I think so.” She went on to tell me how 8 years earlier in Danbury Hospital, I had held the hand of this woman’s dying father. I was with him when he passed from this world to the next. She told me that she never forgot what I had said to him, with her standing at my side. She said that I spoke tenderly to him in his last moments, telling him that “he may have cold hands, but he will always have a warm heart.” She told me her name was Sara and that she never forgot

me, even though she had lost track of me, remembering me as the Rabbi with a leather jacket and an earring in one ear. Since the death of her father, who was Jewish, and with her mother, a Christian, she decided to convert to Judaism. She told me she was inspired to do so by the way I treated her father and now she was working as an assistant to the Dean of the Rabbinic School in Cincinnati.

I was dumbfounded. It all came flooding back and now our lives' paths crossed again. I told her about my daughter, Ariel, who would be starting Rabbinic School after her year in Jerusalem. She told me she was anxious to return the favor I did her father, by coddling Ariel, taking good care of her during her time at HUC when she arrived. Anything Ariel needed, she would watch over her like a guardian angel.

From this experience, I learned what it really means to pay it forward. You can never know the impact you might have on another's life and you can never know when it will come back to you as an unanticipated blessing.

The Ninth Life Lesson takes me back to where it all began, in my first pulpit in Indianapolis. I had no sooner arrived as an Assistant Rabbi, when the rumors flew that they had hired an Orthodox Rabbi in a Temple, that shall we say was very proud of its "classical Reform roots." I arrived in July and by August there were members who were threatening to leave because of what they "heard". Most had not even met me. So how did this begin? All because of a Tallis. The tallit I wore was one my mother gave me as a gift when she visited me in Israel 5 years earlier. It was one of those large tallis's that you wrap around your shoulders. Someone got it in their head that this was an Orthodox Tallit, and therefore I must be an Orthodox Rabbi. "What kind of Rabbi is HUC turning out with our money," cried the leadership of the congregation. They complained bilaterally to the Senior Rabbi, telling him to forbid me from wearing it on the bimah. I'll never forget the day I sat in my office and what he said to me. He told me that the "tallit" was just the tipping point, the match, the symbol for those in the congregation who felt threatened by the shifting ritual trends in Reform Judaism that were taking place across North America, trends which were bringing back more traditional forms of Judaism, like wearing a kippah and the use of more Hebrew in the service.

He said it was not fair that they made me the fall guy for their unwillingness to recognize these changes, especially since they hadn't even met me. They couldn't get past the tallit. He told me that if the tallit meant so much to me, he would support my wearing it, but warned that the road ahead would be rocky. He asked if I was up for the challenge. I told Rabbi Stein, that at the August Board Meeting I would address the issue head on, reassuring them that I was proud to be a Reform Rabbi, and of the sentimental value the tallit held for me. I asked them not to judge me by the size of my Tallit, and to tell anyone they know who was concerned about this to please come and meet me in person. That next month, 4-5 individuals made appointments to see me and beg me not to wear that Orthodox prayer shawl. Most, after meeting with me, accepted my explanation although they made it quite clear that "real Reform Jews don't wear Tallisim." One woman said, "Rabbi, I can understand your wearing this on Shabbat, but do us all a favor and forgo wearing it on the upcoming High Holy Days." "After all, why upset those who come just twice a year?" "In other words," I retorted, "I should give up

something that means so much to me, for those Jews who frequent the synagogue so sparingly?”

With great trepidation and a good deal of courage, I continued wearing that “Orthodox” Tallit right through the High Holy Days. The storm passed over, people got to know me and I ended up staying 4 years in Indy. From this episode I learned to stay true to who you are, have the courage of your convictions and to not shrink from controversy, but to meet it head on.

By the way, my non-Jewish assistant at the time couldn’t quite grasp what all the fuss was about. She said, “Why don’t you tell them that you are the incredible shrinking Rabbi. When you first bought the Tallis, you were much bigger.

Finally we come to Lesson Number 10; the most important one in fact, I’ve saved for last. In fact, this lesson is so important and meaningful, there’s no story attached to it. It’s simply this: It’s yet to be written, it’s yet to be learned. As long as we are privileged to have life we have the opportunity to learn and grow. There’s always the next one to grow on, there’s always going to be room for Lesson Number 10.

The High Holy Days are about reflection. In fact, the Hebrew word for prayer, which these days are after all, all about, is L’hitpalel. L’hitpalel is a reflexive verb in Hebrew, which means literally, “to judge oneself”. These are the days to do as I have done. We are called to look back over the course of our lives, to discern from our experiences what lessons we have learned which can help us be better human beings in the year ahead.

So this is the time to write your own sermon for these sacred and awesome days.

What stories will you tell, both the ones you’re proud of and the ones you would rather forget, but won’t?

May each of your own individualized sermons that you write this year, lift you up and make you better. May each life experience bestow its own special blessing upon you and let us say