II

CHANGING MODEL OF SYNAGOGUE AND RABBI'S ROLE

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Alex, Joe, Rav, Arthur—if I may use your Christian names: I want to thank you, first of all, for making me feel very much at home. I know that we may not all be cut out of the same denominational cloth, but we are all made from the same denominational cloth. We are all made of the same blood and flesh and dreams for our people.

It has been said by others that all Jews, whatever their theology, recite the same prayer, only with different dialects. The religious Jew prays, "*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad.*" The atheisitic Jew prays, "*Sh'ma Yisrael,* I deny *Elohenu,* I deny *Echad.*" while the agnostic Jew prays, "*Sh'ma Yisrael,* I don't know *Elohenu,* I don't know *Echad.*"

I myself appreciate the transectarian impulse that motivated this very gracious invitation. I want to speak to you, colleagues and friends, in a confessional mode, to speak of my failures and my frustrations in the rabbinate and of a glimpse I've had in the last five years, a promise of *n'chamah*—of some comfort and of some success.

Twenty-five years ago this very month I was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary. A very distinguished member of the Seminary addressed us as "masters of the community, with the power to bind and to loosen, to issue interdictions, and to offer remissions."

I cannot tell you what a terrifying experience it was to be thrust into the congregational world and to experience what Dr. Gottschalk referred to as a gap, namely, the recognition that the world of the seminary is not the world of the synagogue, to recognize that the agendas of rabbinic conventions are not the agendas of the temple board of directors, and that the range of expectations and settled convictions which are presupposed in rabbinic thought are not shared by the silent majority of our synagogue constituents. To call me *Mora d'atra* is ridiculous. *Mora d'atra* belongs to my grandfather's and my *zedah's rav,* who was able to issue prescription and proscription and to use a particular rhetoric that resonated in the beings of the congregations, because my grandfather and the Rabbi lived in the same world.

There was a *mehitza* in my grandfather's *shul* that separated the men from the women. But the *mehitza*—the multiple *mehitzas*—in my temple, all of them invisible, are far more formidable barriers. First the *mehitza* between the world of the pulpit and the nether-world of a pew; then the *mehitza* between "Sanctuary Judaism" and Jewish life in *profanum;* finally the *mehitza* that divides one congregant from another. This implies community, and community means a universe of discourse and a universe of experience.

I have found that my rabbinic frustration is rooted not in theological or *Halachic* ritual or liturgical inadequacy, but in sociological failure, the failure to overcome the dying sense of community. For if, as I believe, that what is unique to Judaism as opposed to other individualistically-oriented faiths is the centrality of the community, then when I lose that sacred kinship of people, I lose with it the possibility of being rabbinically effective.

How in the world do you preach "covenanted community"? How do you preach peoplehood to Jews, to individuals who have not experienced the most elemental forms of inter-human relationships? How do you speak about the variety of modes of *Halacha,* the dialogue of meeting, the divine human encounter, to people—Jews—who live situationless lives, monologic existences?

For Judaism, can there be communion without community? Can there be *Kedusha* without the presence of a *minyon*? Can there be *Halacha* without *Halicha*?

That is why rabbinic Responsa, rabbinic resolutions—be they Conservative, Reform, Orthodox or Reconstructionist—however wise and noble they may be, are not only inadequate, they are premature. For real *teshuvas* grow out of the soil of a real community that raises real *shilas.*

I come from the Seminary. I come from ecumenical conventions and I am filled with answers to questions that are unasked. Without a rabbinic transaction within a community, the most sophisticated rabbinic ideology that you and I can hammer out simply are games Rabbis play.

First things first. Whom in the world do I think that I am talking to? Who is out there hiding behind the *mehitza,* not listening? Again I am misled by wishful thinking. My own inclination is philosophical and theological, and I would like to feel that out there are the true adversaries: the secularists, the universalists, the anti-Zionists, the assimilationists. If it were only so, then the proper response would be ideological. Then I could speak about the relationship of particularism and universalism, give them demonstrations of the existence of God, and provide a more adequate theodicy.

But that is not the audience I address. I am dealing with a new post-ideological character ideal whom Philip Rieff, the distinguished social theorist of the University of Pennsylvania, has described in three of his books, the most recent of which is *Fellow Teachers.* He speaks of the new character ideal who has succeeded the religious, political, and economic man of western civilization as psychological man, and the psychological Jew is his particularistic counterpart. He is not a partisan of any ideology. He is apolitical and areligious. He has developed and cultivated a polytheism in which he is open to all gods because he refuses to be committed to any one. He lives beyond the passions of negation or affirmation and he would boggle the imagination of the researchers.

"Are you religious?" "No." "Are you an atheist?" "No." "Are you a Zionist?" "No." "Are you an Anti-Zionist?" "No." "You observe the Shabbat?" "No." "You oppose the observance of Shabbat?" "No." "Are you for more social action in the synagogue?" "No." "Are you against more social action in the synagogue?" "No."

You have to understand that this deliberate, "neither/nor" response is part of the therapeutic wisdom of the psychological Jew who understands that a community—any kind of community, whether it is religious or secular, whether it is political or whether it is of a sacred variety—threatens to suffocate his individualism, his freedom and his pleasures.

Therefore, he is counselled in this new psychological wisdom of his towards a posture of detachedness, of distance, of coolness, of deconversion of all altruistic passion. In the name of individualism, *tiphrosh min ha-tzibur.* In the name of privatism, *hotzeh et atzmechah min ha-k'lal.* This man to whom I

am talking and who represents the huge bulk of my congregation, this cult of "Seventh Day Absentists," has as his philosophy a privatism in which he is opposed to all forms of community, because to be a member of community is to be disciplined by various prescriptions and proscriptions. Yet his therapy and his eschatology is centered around the self.

You want me to be a *mora d'atra* to this man who joins the synagogue not to extend his privatistic self to the larger order of community but to contract the community to meet his private needs.

We have a whole literature of ascerbic rabbinic humor—which ought to be collated—in which we have identified the privatistic character of the psychological Jew who has converted the synagogue into a catering hall, who has converted the Rabbi into a ritual functionary, and to whom the psychological Jew will run to be hatched, matched, and dispatched.

How do you manage to keep your sanity in such a situation, in which you are serving sanctuary without community? The secret is something that no one ever taught me in Homiletics and nobody ever taught me in practical theology, the theology that transcends all denominations. It is the theology of *Als ob*—"as if." You preach and you talk as if you are speaking not to an audience of discrete individuals but to a community, to a *kehillah*, to a congregation that shares some experience and some universe of discourse. And you preach that way, too. You preach by developing the great gift of pulpit ventriloquism; that is, the capacity to throw one's voice in such a fashion that you create questions and answers and stimulate a dialogue.

But it is a pseudo-dialogue and we know that where there is no community the synagogue is fated to become theater; the *bima* becomes a stage, the *chazan* a vocalist, and the Rabbi the pulpit virtuoso: producer, director, performer, writer of creative, experimental, traditional, authentic, warm, moving services.

And I say this because I have indulged in that kind of ecumenical plagiarism, having taken from the Reformer and Reconstructionist. But one thing I know as a Rabbi, an old trooper, whatever audience may show up on Friday night, the *shul* must go on.

Where there is not community the Rabbi feels himself compelled to function in *loco parentis* which may be translated loosely as "crazy like parents." The synagogue becomes compelled to function in *loco communis*. We know the truth. This is nothing that is revealing to any of you and I don't say it because of novelty. Who builds the *succoth* and where is the *succoth* placed, and who brings a *lulav* for an *esrog*, and who owns it, and who possesses a *Mahzor*, a *Siddur*? In my congregation they wear *yarmalkas*.

Where is the community seder held? And by virtue of what is it properly called a "community seder"? Who conducts it? Who has paginated it? Who has translated it? Who has transliterated it? Who has assigned parts? Who has added? Who has deleted? Who sings?

And so, inevitably, I have become—and twenty of my twenty-five years will testify to this and no one can contradict my failures, no one, least of all the board of directors of my congregation—indispensable. One rabbi makes a *minyon*.

Now, there is a very painful paradox and it is a paradox. Rav, I think you referred to it in the Lenn Report. The fatal paradox is: the more indispensable

I grow, the more irrelevant I become; the more active I become, the more passive the congregation; the more ubiquitous I am, the greater the Jewish distance between myself and the congregation. Now we have to wonder: Who is more indispensable than the plumber, and who is less relevant to our lives? Where the community does not function, the Rabbi becomes functionary; where the community is absent, the Rabbi becomes omnipresent.

But there is a deeper, more painful failure that gnaws at me, and I say this to you as my friends and colleagues. How is it that after all these years, having poured so much intellectual and psychic energy into sermons and seminars, lectures and services, after so much effort there is so little effect in terms of the behavior of Jews? And by behavior I mean their ritual behavior, their moral behavior, their liturgical behavior, and their cognitive behavior. If, after all, Judaism is what I think most of us sense it is, a matter of doing, a matter of talking, a matter of practicing, a matter of conduct, a matter of behavior, how is it that I have not been able to do a thing in terms of altering behavior? And it is odd because even where I succeed, I fail. Now, let me examine that for a moment.

Even when the services are moving, the congregants remain impassive. Even when I have convinced them of the importance of Shabbat, of prayer, there are no observable observances which are consequent to that kind of conviction. Even after I have persuaded them of the beauty of the *Havdalah* and of the importance of Succoth, no *besamim* is inhaled, no board is nailed. And this is a question, and it is the critical question for all of us: How can I operationalize my theology of covenant, my theology of dialogue? How can I bridge this gap between *theoria* and practice?

It seems to me that I have been operating on a false principle and I think it goes to the very character of my failure. I have been operating on the pedagogic principle that if you alter the attitude of people, you alter their behavior. So all along in services, in preaching and in teaching, I have created an atmosphere in which I deal with their feelings, their believing, their knowing, on the assumption that if you change the attention of the Jew you will change his conduct.

But after two decades of introspection and observation, I am convinced that the noblest resolution of Rosh Hashonah and the most sincere of intentions on Yom Kippur die at the threshhold of the sanctuary one minute after the gates of *Neilah* are closed. The road to nowhere and nothing is paved with good intentions.

Now, I should have learned that from my readings of Leo Baeck, from my readings of Buber and of Heschel and of Kaplan. Feeling is not doing; believing is not doing; knowing is not doing. I don't need to have a theory of James Langer to know on the basis of empirical observation that people tend to believe what they do rather than do what they believe; that people tend to feel what they do rather than do what they feel; that people tend to know what they do rather than to do what they know.

And so this suggests to me, rather late in my rabbinic career, that there must be an inversion of my rabbinic-pedagogic philosophy and practice, that I have got to concentrate less on intention and the altering of intention and more on the behavior. But how? How do you change behavior without preaching or teaching?

I suggest to you on the basis of failure and partial success, that what is important is not intention but situation: If you change the situation of the Jew you may change his fortune.

You have to place the situation-less Jew into a more natural environment of peers where, through interaction with others, they can begin to experience personally community and the community of experience. You have to place them into a situation where they are forced, compelled, encouraged to respond behaviorally so that they themselves teach, they themselves learn, they themselves will celebrate and themselves will learn to sing and to dance. They themselves will develop Jewish competencies.

We have to situate the Jew in an environment of peers where he feels free to disclose his doubts, his self-doubts as a Jew, his fears and his ignorance.

Remember the story that was told about a Jew who is dragged from the congregation up to the *bima*, to recite a *brocha* and he turns to the *shamos* and he says I don't know how to make a *brocha* and the *shamos* says it for him. That man has been embarrassed. He has been embarrassed in front of his family and in front of his children. That kind of shame leads not to self-accusation but to a condemnation of the whole natural synagogue. He will not blame himself. We have to create an environment in which Jews are able to recognize that for them it is not true, but that on the contrary we don't know, we don't understand, but we have got to learn and we've got to learn in an atmosphere which is not judgmental.

The rationale of synagogue *havurization* is to create situational Judaism where Jewish intentions are lived out; where Jewish muteness will not shut up the congregant but will open him up so that he can speak, and so that he has the hunger and the interest to listen to what it is that we have to say to him. But he's got to be freed of that overdependency, of that terrible passivity, that over-dependence upon the ubiquitous Rabbi if we are to create a common agenda so that what goes on here at this rabbinic convention can be discussed in the havura of the congregation.

My own enthusiasm for this concept of the *havura* is not theoretical. It grows out of, as I mentioned before, twenty years of failure and five years of hope in which I have created over fifty *havurot*. I can tell you that the *havura* is the most important single instrument that I have been able to find, in spite of its failings and all of its stammerings and stumblings, in order for me to create my own dignity as a Rabbi and my own relevance.

The idea of the *havura* is an idea whose time has come. The psychological Jew and all of his therapeutic wisdom has backfired against him. He has been outsmarted, and the literature abounds in it, and your observation will testify to it. His vaunted individualism has borne fruits of loneliness. His non-involvement in the community and its commitment and claims have resulted in nausea and boredom. Behind the mask of autonomy and of self-sufficiency, and his detachedness into a terrifying anonymity, lies the longing for belonging, the craving for community and purpose.

What else does it mean when there is only one question that everyone of us has been asked, one universal *shilah*, always one question: "Say, Rabbi, I bet you don't remember my name"?

What does that mean? Does that mean to indicate a sadistic manner in which he will aggravate and insult my attentive memory? I think it is a

pathetic outcry of Jews who are placed into the anonymity and facelessness of a congregation dependent upon a "Good Shabbat" by the official greeter, and who hopes that by the Rabbi at least knowing his name he is someone and something.

I am not a layman, and this is not my convention, but I will tell you in our conventions I have experienced that sense of non-recognition, that loneliness, that anonymity and that craving for *havurot*. Out of my failures there is a promise of *n'chamah*. Out of the *nitsatsot* of burden buried under the potentialities of *klipah* there is a promise of *kehillah*.

Havura, I will tell you, brings out the best in Jews.

I ask you very simply: Can I, or a committee, or the bureaucracy of the most efficiently run synagogue do what *Havura Aleph* did, namely, to see to it that a member, cancer afflicted, should be lifted out of her wheelchair twice a week, carried into a car, and taken to the hospital for cobalt treatments?

Can I do what *Havura Bet* do on their own, a simple matter: prepare a Shabbat dinner for a woman who has returned from the hospital and is unable to cook for herself and her family? Can I do more than attend *shiva* once or twice? But I have seen *havura* after *havura* sustain those who are bereaved not only at the funeral and during the *shiva*, but also after that, to absorb the widow into their *havura* so there can be life.

Is that not the success of teaching, *bikur holim* in a living situation fashion? I can talk about *levayat ha-met* and *nibum avelot*, and I can convince every one about them, but it was a *havura* which came to me when they learned that one of the children of a member who was deeply emotionally disordered required the attention of private hospitalization. They came to me and said, "What do we do?" I say, "I want you to talk about this among yourselves." They did. They decided they would raise some money, but because they refused to demean that individual who was part of their *havura*, they gave it to me, to put into my discretionary fund. They asked that I anonymously, in their name, without mentioning the source, contribute the money.

Unemployment hit California hard. My good friend and colleague, Rabbi Steven Jacobs of Temple Judaea, who himself has fathered some successful and unusual *havurot*, will testify that we have been very hard hit by unemployment. In my congregation, *havura* after *havura* has on its own written letters, helped with resumes to secure jobs for their unemployed. I am not talking about a book club, I am not talking about celebration. I am talking about a total situation of cognition and affection and celebration.

I have eliminated the community Seder because it is a lie; it is not community. Instead I have said, and they have willingly accepted that if there is any member of the congregation that does not have a place to be, then a *havura* will have to absorb and will absorb that individual. But that is not the important point. The important thing is this: When they ask me, as they always ask in their terrible self-effacement, in their lack of Jewish self-esteem, "So, Rabbi, tell me, what *Haggadah* should we use?" I say, "You can use all kinds, the Reconstructionist *Haggadah*, the Reform *Haggadah*, the Orthodox *Haggadah*, the Conservative *Haggadah*. I want you to discuss among yourselves how to go through the process of what to add and what to delete. You want to have Moses in the *Haggadah*, or do you think it is

inappropriate? Do you think the *shfoch ha-goyim* belongs there or not? Do you think *eser makot* belongs there or not?"

I want them to experience the excitement of discovery and of decision, and I want them to share the same kind of joy in that learning process, in that theology. Then when they finish, they often say they are deadlocked. I say to them, "I will speak about it Friday night," and it is not for the purpose of getting a bigger body count. I will give them a sermon but the sermon is now a *teshuvah* to a *shila*—an answer to a question somebody asked. And they listen differently.

How is it that all these years I have not convinced them of the importance of a *succah,* but now there are fifty, sixty *succoth* in a community that did not have any? Why? Because of the interpersonal support; because, if you will, of the peer pressure in the finest sense of the term. And I cannot tell you what it means to have young people see clumsy Jewish males, with hammers and nails, putting up the boards, their mothers decorating the *succah* with flowers and fruits. And they are doing this outside of the synagogue and without the presence of the indispensable, ubiquitous and omnipresent Rabbi. Rituals that have died in the lecture hall have become revived. One illustration:

Channkat ha-bayit was unheard of in my congregation, which was no different than yours. You can interchange pulpits with me, they would never know the difference. I know this, because I had a sabbatical at Bet Abraham for one year, and they didn't know I was gone.

But we have a relationship which I don't know whether you, Rav, have been able to achieve, or even you, Arthur. I don't attend board meetings, and they don't come to the *shul.*

Suddenly, in *chanukat ha-bayit,* the dedication of a home, we have a capacity of people who are able to do very important things. I remember the last *chanukat ha-bayit;* the family came with prayers, with salt, with *chalah,* with a *mazuzah*—which I told them about—and affixed it. But they also added something I never would have; namely, they came with shovels and planted a sapling tree in the garden. I said to the members of the *havura,* "I want you to say a few words" the reply was, "I can't do it, Rabbi, how can I possibly be as eloquent as you are?" After all, how many lay people do you know that can seriously go around saying "bequeath," or "vouchsafe," or "countenance"? So it requires some degree of courage to stand aside. But I put it to you that there is a feeling of sanctity when an inarticulate man puts the *mazuzah* up on his home and says he is dedicating his home to some ideal and to his family.

Let me turn to the conclusion. I say to you, dear friends, that given a situation in which Jews are freed and allowed to respond to the circumstances and conditions of natural Jewish life, you will find, as I have, an explosion of Jewish creativity and of Jewish closeness.

One *havura* decided to invite grandparents together with their grandchildren to discuss how they and their parents have raised their children. One *havura* decided that there must be a place for the divorced who are not very easily integrated with other *havurot.* Now we have such a *havura* of people, divorced people, men and women who with their children are at least able to celebrate a Hanukah, a Purim, a Seder together.

One *havura* is now experimenting with transcending age differences and

marital status differences. We have a camping *havura* that goes to the desert and on Shavuoth went to Yosemite, each of the couples talking of a different Commandment. We have one wonderful *havura* that decided they would cater the *Bar Mitzva* of their members. I cannot tell you what it means to witness the joy of a *havura* bringing the bowls of fruit, vegetables, food, and cake into the home to celebrate and to write poetry for the Shabbat.

Of course, there are problems, failings, stumbling; but there is success even in failure, just as I have had failure even in my success. What is important is that I have given an opportunity, created a situation in which Jews existentially, not propositionally, can learn what it means to live in a community; to learn what unity, diversity, and pluralism really mean; how to create a consensus; how to relate and how to disrelate; how to tolerate dissensions. Is there anything in American life that affords that kind of autonomy? Does it form a clique? If you are not a member of a clique, then everybody else is a clique.

But I ask you, my friends, what has been my alternative? I have a congregation, a *kehilla* in which the psychological Jew has divided himself into hundreds upon hundreds of private, insular cliques. By analogy, if particulism is not a contrdiction of universalism by the way in which one prepares for it, then by the same token the havura is not a contradiction of *kehilla* but a way of preparation.

So I conclude by saying to you, colleagues and friends, let us put an end to being judged by the number of people we can attract on Friday nights. Let us put an end to judging ourselves by a body count. Let us put an end to the fault-finding masochism in which I say there must be something wrong with me, with my lack of erudition, or my lack of piety, or my lack of charisma, or my lack of theological approach.

It is not true. It is simply this: The synagogue is the consequence and not the cause of Jewish life. The synagogue cannot be the surrogate of Jewish life because then you will stultify it, you will freeze it into sanctuary Judaism.

My *zedah* came to the *shul* because he was a Jew; his grandchildren come to the temple to become Jewish, but it can't be done in the sanctuary because nothing Jewish will happen inside the sanctuary until something Jewish happens outside the sanctuary. *B'gapo yavo b'gapo yetseh.* Kierkegaard told of the man who passed a store in which it said, "We press suits here." And he brought his suits into the store and the proprietor said, "You made a tremendous mistake; we don't press suits here; we only make signs."

The Rabbi is impelled to stop making signs and to start creating community. My friends, out of love, out of experience, out of failure and out of the first glimpses of success, I ask you to consider the havurization of the synagogue for yourself, and for the sake of the Jewish community.

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