

Confessions of a Rabbi-

A Lecture by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

(This is a transcription of an audio recording which can be found at www.schulweisinstitute.com)

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We entitled this brief relationship as Confessions of a Rabbi. When I started to gather some of my thoughts together, I realized that that's not a minor talk but a major talk and take a long time. So I'm going to just give you one or two small confessions. These confessions are dedicated to my good friend and colleague, Rabbi Johnson, who has a great deal to learn from my mistakes. It so happens, and I think Malka will bear witness to this, that when I was in Oakland I was installed also around Sukkot to the same reason that Alvin Yulipson pointed out, the hesitation and the lack of certainty as to whether or not this is a bar khayama, whether this is a viable candidate.

There came a venerable rabbi from San Francisco on the conservative persuasion to give what I suppose was a kind of address to install me. He took advantage of the fact that it was Sukkot, to bring this particular parable. I remember it very, very well. It was the Athens Club, if you remember. It went like this, he said, "Rabbi, Schulweis..." -- he said nice things, that Rabbi Schulweis was a young -- and that's what they called me, young, promising, very promising, always promising, rabbi, the man in every addition, etcetera, etcetera. Since this is Sukkot I want to tell him something and use something as well. He said that once came to a very great rabbi a young man who was not sure as to whether or not he should become a rabbi or he should become a scholar. There was a distinction between the two.

So the rabbi said to the young man "I want you to wait and I want you to watch." He took this lovely Etrog, and the Etrog, as I told you, is a very valuable commodity, very difficult to get a hold of, beautiful, one magnificent fragrance without a flaw, without a blemish. He gave it to the congregation. The rabbi went on to say, "The congregation was absolutely exalted. They were so surprised and wondrously happy that everyone sniffed at it and everyone squeezed it and everyone held it and everyone adored it. When it was returned, it was shriveled and blackened and old and wrinkled." Then he said to this young man "Now you have to make the decision whether or not you want to be a rabbi or not."

Well, it was a very well-intentioned talk, I remembered very clearly, because the rabbi was a wonderful man. He's a really wonderful man. He wanted to tell the congregation to go easy on me and not to push me too much and not to be too judgmental, to be kind to me, etcetera, etcetera. I must say that I was sitting there next to Malkah, and I tell

you, it was no comfort at all because hearing this I said, "For God's sakes. What kind of a career did I choose?" It's ridiculous. It's not a career. It's a calamity. I recognized as well that there is some wisdom perhaps to that expression that this is not in fact the job for a nice Jewish boy. That was roughly give or take, about 25 years ago. I want you to know that the rabbi was profoundly wrong and seriously wrong.

There is no profession but literally no profession in which there is greater opportunity for growth. There is no profession in which there is a greater opportunity for service. There is no profession in which there is a greater opportunity for joy and honor than the rabbi. It is not only a very fine job for a Jewish boy but I shall be arguing in January also for a fine Jewish girl. I would say in general, there are very few positions which are more intellectually, morally and spiritually fulfilling and satisfying than the rabbi. Still, having said that, I must admit that that pointing image of that withered Etrog has always remained me. I often wondered whether or not I had bought myself into a lemon rather than anything else.

As there are some problems, clearly, with rabbinate. It is a strange career, it's a public career. There is nothing that one does a very few things that are done privately. You're always judged, good, bad, mediocre, could have been better, it was better last time. Rabbi generally is wrapped in a kind of mystique, mystery. On Friday night he's incomprehensible. During the week he is invisible. In personal conversation, insufferable. In short, a very difficult thing to understand. Public figure, vulnerable, and has to be a lot of things, teacher, preacher and pastor and counselor and conservator of a tradition and innovator of a tradition, a progressive and a traditionalist. He has to be the administrator, preside over the staff, et cetera, et cetera.

The truth of the matter is that for many rabbis, and it was even true for me for many years, there was something deeply unsatisfying about being a rabbi. It was like having an Etrog, owning it. Etrog I suppose represented all of the advantages of a seminary training, his opportunity for learning, his every addition, it's passion, etcetera, etcetera. And he earns it, he owns it, and each year he tries to become better, he learns more and he is more active in the synagogue. He is more present in the synagogue. The more that he tires and the more that he becomes -- excel, so to speak, and the more indispensable he becomes, the more unhappy he is. It's a phenomenon which has been reported seriously by people like Professor Len in a famous report on the rabbinate.

The chief complains, for example, of the rabbi is that he is alone, that he's very lonely. That sounds paradoxical. It almost sounds contradictory because who in the world is more invited to every bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah and wedding than the rabbi. There are rabbis who are more sociable than others, more extrovertish, there are some rabbis who are palsy-walsy with every member of the congregation, and who trade jokes with them and even play cards with them. Yet, the amazing thing about the Len report in my experience with my colleagues is that they feel a tremendous emotional distance from the congregation, a tremendous gap between the rabbi and the congregation. They feel

estranged because they simply do not share the sanctities, the fidelities, the excitements, the passions. They have a totally different kind of agenda than the congregation, so they believe.

So in fact he is indispensable, and at the same time that he is indispensable, he is irrelevant. Now, how could it be that a person is indispensable and irrelevant? I thought of the roofer. The roofer. It's leaking in my house and there is no one in the world who is indispensable, more indispensable than the roofer, and at the same time, no one more irrelevant to my life. I need him when it rains and when it leaks but I am not interested in what he puts on that roof, what kind of tiles he use, what times of resin he uses, whether it's black or it's white stone or plastic. I am simply interested in his doing a job.

The rabbi is very much like the functionary. That's why the rabbi made the complaint that he did because he feels himself tremendously indispensable. Everybody needs him. He is not only the tenth man. He is the whole minion. He's absolutely needed for every particular function and yet he feels a little estrange and even foolish. That's the format that you get, little folk humor, in which the rabbi says, "Oh, Jews, I have an answer. Who has a question?" There are no questions that coming to the rabbi because real questions require real living.

I don't mean funny questions that are incidental and trivial like "When is Rosh Hashanah next year or why can I have seats father up to the front or why are the dues so high?" Those are the trivial questions but real questions such as "What can Judaism do to help me interpret my life and give meaning and purpose and direction and help me cope with my children, with my husband, with my wife?" those are questions that are not raised because real Jewish questions come out of Jewish living, and Jewish living requires a real Jewish community.

Now, the rabbi knows that there is no such thing as a community. It's a figment of the imagination, of great thinkers and philosophers that there is a community. So what does he do? He has to invent a community. It's one of the great virtues and necessary talents of a rabbi that he must be able to live in a world of fantasy. If he doesn't, he's dead. That's why the most gifted rabbis are rabbis who essentially are able to practice the magical art of the ventriloquist. Every great rabbi is a ventriloquist.

That is to say you think that he is talking to people who are asking him questions and his lips don't even move, but you think that there is somebody out there asking him "What should we be doing about this particular?" whether it's into marriage or whether it's the family or whatever the case may be. The truth of the matter is that the rabbi throws his voice in such a way that you think that it's a dialog when all along it's a monolog. The reason that he gets sad is that once in a while after he finishes this tremendous kind of discourse, he realize that he's been working with a dummy. That's not fun. That's not fun at all.

What good is it, for example, to have an Etrog and you come to the synagogue and you're the only one with an Etrog and Lulav, and you march around with a hakafa, and you're the only one doing it. You feel like a fool and you begin to develop that remarkable fantasy which Hans Vaihinger once called, philosophy as if make believe. That's what this rabbi was talking about, the one who installed me the Sukkahs some 25 years ago. What he did not know, what he did not really understand is the meaning of the honga, of the congregation that wanted to grab hold of that Etrog and wanted to touch it and to feel it. What he did not understand is how to enjoy being a rabbi and how do you rejoice by having an Etrog?

One of the ways you rejoice by having an Etrog is by giving it up. Give it up. If you hug it to yourself and you say "Mine is mine," then it's a form of spiritual selfishness. It's a form of spiritual egoism. What you have to do is you have to share it with the people. That's not an easy thing to do. First of all, you have to have people who are willing to take part of this, to be part of the Shutfoot, part of the partnership. Secondly, the law is that I cannot lend this to you.

By law, you can't simply barrow an Etrog. It has to be yours, your own. Therefore, there has to be a partnership in which the rabbi relinquishes part of his indispensability and exclusive ownership, and he has to share it with the congregation and enter into a collegiality with variety. That means that the rabbi is going to have to be less indispensable, and rabbis don't like being less indispensable. Why should they? Why should they? They worked so hard for it but they will have to exchange it if they want friendship. If they want to have relevance, if they want to overcome the emotional distance, then it is necessary for them to share with. That is the joy of the rabbinate as I have come to understand.

The joy of the rabbinate is that there are havurah in a congregation who have lost a portion of their dependents, of their infantilism, and who are willing to do things by themselves. It is a fact that I can ask a member of a havurah "What are you doing in your havurah?" and he immediately will talk to me about an agenda of his Jewish life. We are building a sukkah. We are going to have a dinner in a sukkah.

We are talking about intermarriage that you spoke about because we think you're wrong, or divorce or about homosexuality or about the family or a visiting a Museum. The truth of the matter is that it is since just a few years ago that there are more sukkot in this congregation this year than ever in its history. I want you to know that Mr. Gru is here as a witness to tell me that this is the first year in which he has over 70 Lulavim and Etrogim which have been bought by members of the congregation. I just hope they know to come on sukkahs then to share it with us. That's the joy.

The joy is what happened in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in three special installations in which there were Balikriya, people who read from the Torah who are lay people, Balitila, people who led the community in a service and who were lay people, Balitkiya, people who blew the shofar and who are lay people. The joy is to come on a

Shabbat to hear how the rabbi can be asked a question sometimes invariably bettered given commentaries and explanations and interpretations by the congregation. The joy is when a congregation asks. The joy is when a congregation sings because when a congregation doesn't sing, not only is the rabbi unhappy, but the cantor also is lonely because the function of the cantor is not to the soloist. The function of the rabbi is not to engage in soliloquy. It may make them indispensable but it makes them irrelevant, and ultimately creates the deepest chasm, the tremendous split between the congregation and the community.

When the rabbi does it all, when the cantor does it all, they become performers, this becomes a theater, you become spectators, and Judaism a spectator sport which basically is more upon and dies. The joy of the rabbi is the creation of lay people who are paraprofessionals, who can serve as counselors and advisors and helpers and instructors in order to help people in their lives. That has to be the joy of the rabbi.

Is the ego of the rabbi threatened? You think that I now feel less important, less significant, less a rabbi because I am in fact less indispensable? The answer is yes. For that, I have a congregation of friends who share my worries, who are worried with me, who are frightened about certain things, but who also want to do something to change the quality of their lives and the lives of that community.

So I say to my good friend and my colleague, Rabbi Johnson, whose mind and whose heart and whose spirit I know well, whose openness, whose compassion, whose tremendous desire to learn and to grow and to serve the Jewish community is something that I know well, that I do not know what the congregation can offer you, but one thing I can tell you that you will not be blackened and shriveled and distorted and unhappy here because the Etrog does not belong to you or to me exclusively.

The beauty of it, its taste and its fragrance will be shared by all of us. One thing we can give to Rabbi Johnson, the joy and the knowledge that he is not alone, and to know that we are his colleagues and we are his friends and we will give him our wisdom and our patience and our understanding and our love. Together we will rejoice, rejoice in your festival the only happy, you Rabbi Johnson and your wife and your child and your family and your congregation and all of us.

Rabbi Gary Johnson: Thank you very much, Rabbi. Twenty-five years ago you heard a midrash about a shriveled Etrog. Twenty-five years later I hear the same midrash, however, fortunately, you gave that midrash a new interpretation so that I can still recognize that this is, a time of our rejoicing.

Earlier this week I prepared a response, of course at that time I didn't know what I was responding to. The response is written on these papers in front of me here but I will not read those, rather I think I'll say a few other words in response to what you have said. When I just think about the fact that I am being asked to give a response on this bimah, I can't help but think back to about eight years ago when I was sitting in the congregation as a beginning rabbinic student. Rabbi Schulweis called on me to do a

reading, a responsive reading in English. I stood up and my hands were shaking. To think that Rabbi Schulweis called on me to do a reading, and that eight years later here I am standing at this bimah and being asked to respond to my teacher. As you know in Jewish tradition, the teacher is not merely looked upon as a teacher, per se, but also has some of the connotation of being a parent. So in addition to Rabbi Schulweis being a teacher of mine, he is also a spiritual parent of mine. It is no easy matter for me to stand before you on this bimah and to speak to you in response to something Rabbi Schulweis has said. Only a few years ago it would be quite an accomplishment for me to merely tell you what Rabbi Schulweis said, let alone respond to what he said.

Several years ago as I began rabbinical school, I had a philosophy about Judaism that I wanted to learn as much about the various movements within Judaism because I had basically a little bit of background in the conservative movement. In fact, Cantor Fortus this was my cantor about 21-22 years ago. Rabbi Burkman was my rabbi at that time.

Then we moved Redondo Beach where there was an only reformed temple at that time, and we affiliated with the reformed temple. So I had a little bit of experience with the reformed congregation. Then I went away to college. At college I served as president of Hillel where we had orthodox, conservative and reform as well as seculars, ionistic and everything else. Serving in that capacity at Hillel, I came to see that there was so much to Judaism more than my limited experience as a student or as a student in religious school.

As I progressed from university and I went to rabbinical school and I served as camp counselor at various camps -- my first summer at a camp I served as a counselor at a camp sponsored by the reformed movement. Then the next two years I served at Brandeis Camp which sort of attracts members and congregants from various movements.

Then the next year I served as a counselor at Camp Berman. I see one of my campers, they run Shulman. I guess that was 1970. That was my first experience as an adult serving in a conservative institution. It was that summer that I first came to Valley Beth Shalom, 1970, summer '70, when Rabbi Schulweis came here. I heard about Rabbi Schulweis from various kids at camp and saying how wonderful, how articulate, how inspiring Rabbi Schulweis is. My first opportunity, I wanted to come here to hear Rabbi Schulweis. Well, that was a few years ago.

From there, I went to Israel and I was studying at Hebrew Union College. I was taking the third year in Israel program there. I was very interested in what that had to offer me. However, at the same time some of my friends were venturing off and doing other things in Israel. A couple of them who had also come to Valley Beth Shalom quite a few times during that summer that Rabbi Schulweis began here, they ventured off to an orthodox yeshiva. I followed suit and I took a leave of absence from Hebrew Union College. Anyway, during that next year in Israel, I wrote away to various rabbinical schools. Here I was already a student at Hebrew Union College but I wrote away to the

Reconstructionist Rabbinical School, Jewish Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University. Then I wrote a letter to Rabbi Schulweis just telling him about my feelings that here, as a student in Los Angeles in rabbinical school, I felt that I really had a purpose, I had a sense of who I was, and also a feeling that I had something to offer. Here, by going to Israel, I felt that here I was the student in Israel but in America I could be the teacher. In Israel I had too much to learn, and I felt so ignorant and so in need of completely immersing myself in Jewish studies. I was confused as to what I should do after that year in Israel.

Rabbi Schulweis wrote back to me. Very much the words he said tonight, Confessions of a Rabbi, and telling us about his experiences and how beautiful and meaningful and purposeful and inspiring that experience is for him, as much as he inspires us, he too is inspired by the experience.

That letter to me gave me a sense of "Well, this is something I can pursue and I can continue in." Fortunately I did not remain in Beth Yeshiva forever. I did stay an extra year in Beth Yeshiva but I continued on to rabbinical school. I think that by keeping in touch and corresponding and visiting Rabbi Schulweis each time that I was able to come back to Los Angeles, that one day I would be serving this congregation and be able to speak to you from this bimah in response to something Rabbi Schulweis has said.

This has been a very wonderful last four months. I'm glad there was an explanation as to why I'm being installed after four months. It is a Zman Simchateinu. I'm very happy that the Torah put simcha, to put Sukkot and Simcha Torah after Yom Kippur. Can I imagine what the rabbis - if we would have to celebrate and feel this was a before the the impossible.

I'm very happy that this sense of harvest, Chag Ha'asif, the time of gathering in all the bounty of life can be celebrated now just after Yom Kippur, it's the time of fulfillment and happiness for me. It's not only a harvest that is given to me but also, I hope, an opportunity for me to give of my harvest to this congregation. I'm very pleased and happy that I'm here, Todah Rabbah.

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis: Early this morning, Len Smith called me and said, "Are we going to have the kiddush and the sukkah?" I said, "What is the question?" He said, "It's raining." I said to him, "By dint the power vested in me I can assure you that it will not rain."