

Installation
Rabbi Esther Lederman
October 23, 2009

As my family and friends,
and even my new colleagues will affirm,
I am rarely speechless.
But I admit that at this moment, it is difficult to put
my gratitude, my joy, my love, my awe into words.

But I owe it to you, to tell you the story,
to tell you why I believe Temple Micah and me are
as we say in the Yiddish, *basheret* – intended.

I was a rabbi who needed to be reminded how to laugh.
And Micah, let's just say it knows a thing or two about laughter.
A recent example:

This past week, I was leading services with Danny Moss,
our fabulous Machon Micah fellow and song leader.
We were with the fifth and sixth graders
and many of them were struggling with the *siddur*, with the prayer book,
whether it was the music or the words we weren't sure.

Towards the end of the service,
in an attempt to make them feel better about their struggle,
I told them that they did not need to be experts in the *siddur*.
I said that even I was not a real expert in the *siddur*,
there was still much I had to learn, even though I was a rabbi.

Without missing a beat,
a child in the front row looked up and said, "You mean assistant rabbi."

Danny and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.
We tried to continue the service but we were laughing too hard.
We explained to the young man that we weren't laughing at him,
it's just that, well, how do you explain to an 11 year old that
after spending five years in school,
ordination and a year as a rabbinic fellow,
you'd prefer the title rabbi mean more than the adjective in front of it.

But I quickly swallowed my pride,
said a brief thank you for the chance to laugh,
and thought to myself – I am the luckiest assistant rabbi in the world.
Because I get to work at Micah.
And I get to laugh.

Many of you know the story of my first encounter
with the Micah universe.
But I believe it bears repeating.
It was through a class at Hebrew Union College with Liz Lerman.
Truthfully, I didn't know very much about Liz at the time –
But I had heard she was a recipient of the elusive MacArthur “Genius” grant.
And I take any chance I get to be around people
who are smarter than me.
Clearly, I picked the right synagogue to work at.

On our last day of class, we used our worship services at HUC
to experiment with what he had learned in class.
A lunch followed, in which Liz and Rabbi Zemel
shared their experiences of collaboration at Temple Micah.
She shared a story of how early in her work with synagogues,
she had asked people to take their *siddurim*, their prayer books,
and place them on the floor, so people would be unencumbered
and could move around.

She got a couple of serious frowns; one person explained
it was a no-no to put holy books on the ground.
She explained that as a dancer,
she considered the ground to be sacred.
Loving her answer –
for it had given me a perspective I had never considered –
I leaned in, wanting more of this wisdom.

And then Rabbi Zemel took hold of a *siddur*, shook his head, and said,
“Idol worship is forbidden in Judaism,
but sometimes we insist on engaging in it.”
We gasped. But as I gasped, I was also grinning from ear to ear.
How refreshing – how honest.
A rabbi who forces us to confront what our actions say about us.

A rabbi who isn't afraid to push, and to push a lot.
It was a moment that woke me up and kept me awake for some time.
That's the kind of rabbi I want to work with.
That's the kind of rabbi I want to be, I thought.
A seed had been planted – a seed that is now beginning to bud.

Exactly a year ago,
Temple Micah's job description for an assistant rabbi
appeared on the rabbinic job board, just as I was beginning to look for a job.
And I knew, I just knew – I had to have this job.
I took a walk with a girlfriend, another rabbi who lived in New York,
and I told her about the job opening.
Knowing what she knew of Micah,
she looked at me and she said, "That job is for you. It was made for you."
It felt *basheret* – intended.

And then,
when I opened up to see the materials
you had provided about the job,
essentially your application,
I grinned again, from ear to ear.
You see – you had refused to play by the rules!
Something else I love about Temple Micah.
Most synagogues in their applications
supply all the dry facts about the place --
how many kids in the religious school, the budget figures,
information about the local Jewish community –
not unimportant things but not the kind of things
that really tell you about the soul of a place,
not the kind of things that will convince you that you want to be there.
Micah changed the format of the application, literally.
You literally got rid of questions you didn't want to answer
and created new ones!
You told me about the values by which you live.
You told me how you seek to be
unpretentious, open-minded and non-dogmatic in all that you do.
You said you seek to make acts of love and kindness real in your daily lives.
You said you want to build a community where everyone's voice is heard.
You told me how you all go bowling together.
You said this is a place where you work hard but laugh harder,

I found that the pages you wrote were, quite literally, speaking to me.
Again, a feeling of *basheret* – of being intended.

In the nearly four months since I have been here,
there have been many more moments that have convinced me
why I am so lucky to have been selected as your assistant rabbi.

When I think of Micah,
I think of the decision to construct this building
without naming opportunities for the wealthiest among us.

When I think of Micah,
I think of the beautiful music that is created,
with the loving guidance of Teddy and Meryl,
and the your willingness to sing.

When I think of Micah,
I think of the courage to throw out old models that no longer work,
like religious school,
and people like Deborah Srabstein
and the leaders on the education task force,
who developed a vision for education at Micah,
that can transform child and adult alike.

When I think of Micah,
I think of how packed the hallways are on Tuesdays and Sundays, and the
occasional Shabbatot when we are all together,
how parents come in the door and stay to learn or meet others,
and don't see this as one more errand they have to run for the day.

When I think of Micah,
I think of underwear.

When I think of Micah,
I think of the people who built Micah House,
a transitional home for homeless women
who have struggled with drug and alcohol abuse.

When I think of Micah,
I think of a rabbi who is never satisfied with the status quo or his success,

who always wants to dream bigger and deeper,
who pushes us to think critically,
who always want to learn more.
who claps his heart out at every service,
even if he knows he's marching to the beat of a different drum.

When I think of Micah,
I think of all of you,
who know that the choice to live a Jewish life is not a convenient one
but a choice you feel compelled to make, each and every day,
and not take it for granted.

When I think of Micah,
I think of all of you who have made a commitment to this place,
even if Micah wasn't the convenient synagogue for you.
Because you love this place; because it is your home.

When I think of Micah,
I think of the people Marge Piercy describes in her poem, "To Be of Use."
"The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
And swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight...
I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
Who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
Who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
Who do what has to be done, again and again."

When I think of Micah,
I think of the following story.

On Yom Kippur afternoon,
Rabbi Zemel and I left the bimah to sit among you, in the pews.
It was time for the 'Liz Lerman' service –
I had been waiting for this service for a very long time -- three years –
since my first encounter with Micah at HUC.

I sat in the pews, wiped out and hungry,
but awake by what I witnessed.

We began to follow the movements Liz and fellow Micah congregants developed in response to the theme of Searching for Wisdom.
I began to move with all of you.
We were all on the same page, yet each of our contributions was unique.
No one looked exactly the same.
It was such a release,
after so much thinking and talking and standing,
to finally be moving, to be offering our wordless prayers to the universe.

As I was moving, repeating each gesture,
I turned to my right and saw an elderly gentleman,
struggling to stand, but doing the movements,
lifting his hands in front of him, looking up.
He was supported on either side
by what I assumed were grandchildren.
His head was lifting ever so gently,
and he had the most beautiful smile on his face.
I began to weep.
It was one of the most meaningful moments of prayer I have ever seen.
His offering, the way he gave of himself,
the effort of his life in his imperfect body,
the subtle way his grandchildren held him without forcing him to do it,
how they were there, but not in his way.

The image of this man with his grandchildren
is a metaphor for what Jewish life at Temple Micah
is and can be.
The effort of our lives in imperfect bodies
is the gift we give to God and the universe.
We hold each other up; we catch each other when we fall.
We create spaces for our individual dances,
with their unique nuances and wisdom,
but we dance them at the same time,
creating something that wasn't there before.

My dream is that we can build a world where
Judaism is relevant to the Jews and the Jews are relevant to the world.
My dream is that our synagogue
can be a place of healing for our broken spirits
but also a place that encourages us to break out

of our comfortable thoughts and routines.
My dream is that my generation,
those of us in our 20s and 30s,
will become stakeholders in the Jewish communities of today.
For without dreams, we remain asleep.

I thank you for picking me
and allowing me the privilege of being your assistant rabbi.
I thank Rabbi Zemel, Meryl and Teddy,
for being partners, mentors, and friends.
I thank our president Larry Cooley, the search committee,
and the board of Micah for believing in me.
I thank my parents and family for supporting me
and my friends for loving me and letting me love them.
I thank Rabbi Larry Hoffman, my rebbe, my teacher,
for giving me and Temple Micah the greatest honor of being here tonight.

And even though she is in my native Canada tonight,
I thank Liz Lerman –
for being the first person on the path who pointed the way to Micah.

Lastly, I thank you, the people of Temple Micah,
the best way I know how – through a blessing.

To the God who invites us into life through breath,
To the God who invites us into the dance called life,
Bless this community with Your Presence,
with Your Comfort,
and with Your Peace.
Micah is place where gates are opened
and doorways are unlocked.
Baruch atah adonai, Poteach Shearaim.
Blessed is God, the one who helps us to open the gates.