

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
Kol Nidre 5785, October 11, 2024

WHAT I TRIED TO DO

Kol Nidre

This is our evening of judgement. We enter this sanctuary and stand utterly open, before

God.

Our loved ones.

Our most vulnerable selves.

The Torah stands as our witness as the Kol Nidre is chanted.

We yearn for something unknowable, inexpressible. We long for some place in the world that is wise, true, just, compassionate, forgiving, safe, secure—even dare we say, sacred.

We open the doors to the ark, searching perhaps for a sense of transcendence.

This is my final Kol Nidre as the rabbi\senior rabbi of this community so for me this Kol Nidre, this Yom Kippur, this entire holy day season has been something different -- a life cycle moment —a ritual rite of passage. Transition is in the air and we know that transition carries with it anxiety. Am I here or there? What is beyond? Religion creates ritual to carry us from one state to another. Kabbalat Shabbat, for example eases us from the work week to the Day of Rest. As Shabbat is ending, Havdalah brings us from the sacred Shabbat to the secular world of work and its realities. Transition times, are those cracks in the sidewalk that many people try to avoid. This is a liminal moment for me. Therefore, nothing that I will say this evening can possibly capture the thoughts and feelings churning within. I am sorry for that because there is so much I would like to express.

With that, I probably should sit down right now.

At the risk of appearing egotistical—something that I quite frankly dread— (and then I wonder do I dread appearing egotistical or being egotistical); I want to try and begin to articulate, even for myself, what it is that I have tried to do here at Micah, over these past forty-one plus years.

(P A U S E)

What I sought to avoid, clarified much of my thinking.

My final year of rabbinical school—autumn 1978-The Chicago White Sox finish last in the American League Western Division. The dreaded New York Yankees win the World Series (apologies to all Yankees fans) and I am working on my rabbinical school requirement, the senior sermon.

This rabbinical school rite of passage is delivered before the student body and faculty followed by a lunch discussion and critique offered by that same faculty and student body. It is that greatest of all anxieties---public judgement! Some of the faculty could be withering in their comments. In my era, Eugene Borowitz and Stanley Dreyfuss were particularly notorious.

My sermon was an articulation of fears of what I might become as a rabbi.

I did not want to be what I labeled a Rabbi X. Rabbi X was the kind of rabbi who droned on seemingly endlessly without saying much that seemed to matter. Rabbi X was skilled at combining the ability to sound learned while being irrelevant. Everyone was polite to Rabbi X and treated him (they were almost all “hims” in those days) respectfully but no one took Rabbi X very seriously—or no one took him as seriously as he took himself—which would have been impossible, anyhow.

I didn't want to be Rabbi X. That much I knew.

What I did not know, is what I wanted to be.

I was certain that Judaism was important.

-that being Jewish could be life defining and life informing.

-that Judaism was huge and wise and smart and complicated, and like life itself, contradictory.

It is both the weekday and Shabbat

It is kodesh (sacred) and chol (ordinary)

It is Yom Kippur but also tomorrow

It is the life cycle and the yearly cycle.

It is formulaic as “Baruch atah Adonai” and as incomprehensible—as the Yerushalmi, Spinoza, Rosenzweig, or Levinas.

Judaism is anything but trivial, yet synagogue life, from my vantage point as a rabbinical student, appeared, so often, to be a kind of decorative afterthought.

As a student, I was not at all sure how the Judaism I was studying added up to what I was supposed to be or do as a rabbi.

On top of that—and what I will say now sounds truly unbelievable, especially to me but this is true. In my five years of study at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem and New York City, there was not one course on Reform Judaism. There was not one course on the history of Reform Judaism, the theology of Reform Judaism. There was no studying the origins of Reform Judaism of Europe. There was no study of American Reform Judaism.

There was also not one offering or discussion on the sociology of American Jewish life.

There was no modeling on how a worship service should be led.

There was no conversation about a Reform Jewish sense of Shabbat.

I could tell you about the rabbinical legal principle of the “*Migo*” which relates to the believability of someone who confesses to a crime and the responsibility of the rabbinic court to accept such testimony but I experienced no discussion whatsoever, for example, on the role of Jewish law in Reform Judaism. What, for example, did we mean when we said that we were a non-halachic movement?

No one asked us to consider how we thought about God—no conversations about our personal Jewish beliefs or commitments.

I was ordained a rabbi on June 10, 1979. I think I embodied the wisdom that was offered about the founder of the Hebrew Union College, Isaac Mayer Wise who in 1875 first opened the doors of the school in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was said of him that he sought to create a school to serve the needs of 19th century American Jews. As I held my ordination diploma, my smicha certificate, in mid-town Manhattan on that beautiful spring day, I think I agreed that Rabbi Wise had succeeded in his goal. I was most prepared to be a rabbi for 19th century Jews. I had no real sense of how I might meet the late 20th century.

I thus stepped from rabbinical school into the world.

There is a wisdom that teaches that all theology is autobiography. I, therefore, am regularly inspired by a sentence in Micah member, Ariel Sabar's book, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Family's Past*: "We are who we come from as much as who we make of ourselves." As I consider what I have tried to do at Micah, I keep coming back to three pivotal people—my father, my grandfather whom Micah knows as Grandpa Goldman, and of course, my teacher, mentor, rabbi, and dear friend, Larry Hoffman.

My father was a model of modesty and self-confidence. He was a totally self-made man, an expression that has fallen out of use. He quietly worked his way through college and law school. No one ever paid any bill for him. One year when I was probably 11 or 12, on the way home from summer camp, I asked my father where he had gone to summer camp. My mother's response. Dad went to Camp Hard Knocks and came out best. She was right.

I never heard him boast about even one accomplishment. Pirke Avot asks

אֵיזוֹהוּ עָשִׂיר, הַשְּׂמֵם בְּחֵלְקוֹ,

Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion.

My dad was the happiest person in the world and I never saw him afraid of anything.

When I look back and think about all of the ongoing challenges to being a rabbi in a congregation, I know that my father's self-confidence was speaking to me with every unpopular and contested decision that I made. In my head and heart, my dad was and is always in my corner in every tense meeting down to this day.

This was the necessary foundation for "If it's not broken, break it." I sought here at Micah to create a culture of change, experimentation, thinking outside the box and then going outside the box, and not being afraid of things going wrong when something doesn't work. The confidence it takes to be challenged and criticized, get things wrong and not panic, comes from my dad.

(P A U S E)

Grandpa Goldman—My grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Goldman was among the greatest rabbis in this country in the early years of the 20th century. I never really knew him. I was six months old when he died in 1953 at the too young age of 59. I am going to be speaking about Grandpa Goldman and teaching from his writings this coming February so I will go very lightly here. I simply want to say that the environment in which his four grandchildren (two others are here this evening, my sister and cousin) were raised kept his memory vibrant and alive. We all were students in the Jewish Day School which he founded. My classmates from that school remain among my dearest friends. Louise will tell you that my knowledge of Hebrew grammar comes from that school. Thank you Mrs. Dubovic and Mrs. Lubowsky.

Growing up in the synagogue that my grandfather led for nearly twenty-five years one could literally see his vision. The stain glass windows he commissioned for the Anshe Emet Synagogue of Chicago include a huge depiction of New York Harbor with the Statue of Liberty--flanked by giant windows of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The stain glass window in the dome of the sanctuary has the words "All Men Are Created Equal."

Grandpa Goldman was far ahead of his time. His prayerbook published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1938 contains special readings not simply from the Bible and rabbinic literature but also includes Lord Byron, Albert Einstein, Heinrich

Heine, Thomas Huxley, Percy Shelley, Rachel Bluwstein (Rachel), and Rebecca Hyneman to name just a few. This is far more progressive than any comparable Reform Movement prayerbook of the era.

Grandpa's writings on Jewish prayer included the following 1952 observation: "(The prayerbook) has to be dynamited, not revised..." —is this the inspiration for —if it's not broken, break it?

But more about Grandpa Goldman in February.

Rabbi Hoffman—

Pirke Avot offers us this wisdom (1:6):

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רַב, וְקַנְיָה לָךְ חֲבֵיר;

Joshua ben Perachya teaches, "Acquire for yourself a teacher and make for yourself a friend.

In one fell swoop, I managed to do both.

This is not the moment for me to attempt to wax poetic about my beloved mentor but I will, briefly.

Rabbi Hoffman is simultaneously a-

-deep and creative thinker,

-patient teacher,

-brilliant scholar,

and

-a generous, caring, kind rabbi.

He is extraordinarily passionate about the possibility of what synagogues can be.

He inspires.

My gift is having this teacher for going on fifty years.

Rabbi Hoffman provided not only an ongoing course of study in Jewish liturgy and rabbinic literature. He opened up the field of ritual studies by asking such basic questions as what is prayer and then pointing out that the correct answer involved not only the words of the prayers, but the entire aesthetics of the worship experience. The study of prayer thus included—poetry, linguistics, theology, music, anthropology, sociology, architecture, philosophy, and more.

My father, grandfather and mentor\teacher\rabbi combined to inform my approach to trying to understand Judaism and then trying to help influence the direction of Micah.

I do not know when it first stuck me really deeply why we needed an American Judaism or what even an American Judaism was but when I read Jarislav Pelikan's, for me, remarkable book *The Vindication of Tradition*, something clicked. In this work, Pelikan, a scholar of medieval Christianity, examines the role of tradition in culture. It is a critique of post-modern, post-Enlightenment thinking. At one point, he compares tradition to a ladder that cultures are climbing constantly as they evolve through time. Some Post-Modern thought, Pelikan claims, seeks to kick away the ladder leaving it rootless and in peril of being without values.

Pelikan proceeds to offer the formulation that urgently rolls around inside me: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism, is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add," he writes, "it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name." (p65)

(READ AGAIN)

The goal, for me became to take our inheritance, our tradition and make it the living faith of the dead—that is a living faith of what has been bequeathed to us by our past. This mean striving to make it alive, which meant, of course, relevant—socially, emotionally, ethically, intellectually.

Too much religion—including Reform Judaism seemed to be a form of Pelikan's traditionalism—a dead faith of the living---or synagogue as decoration.

This helped me look at puzzle number two—my ongoing frustration with the study of rabbinic literature —not as an academic discipline, but as someone who was trying to understand how to be a dynamic living Jew.

The questions the traditional commentators asked of the texts never seemed to coincide with my own questions. My go-to example. The Talmud begins with the question- "What time do we recite the Sh'ma in the evening? The Talmud is concerned with the range of hours that one has to fulfill the mitzvah for reciting

the evening Sh'ma. How early? How late? How do you measure when it is evening on a cloudy day? All these questions in an era with no clocks. The Talmud text then offers a wide variety of ways to gauge the time of day. Fine----but not my questions. I, you see, own a watch.

I wanted to know. Why do we say the Shma? What does saying the Sh'ma mean to the person who is saying it? What does it feel like to say the Sh'ma? What did the ancient rabbis see as the meaning behind the Sh'ma?

These are not the Talmud's concerns but it seemed to me that this is what needed to be addressed in any contemporary conversation about Jewish prayer but not only prayer, which I offer here as an example. All of our inherited literature had to be excavated differently if the goal was tradition as a living faith.

Why?

Because, tourists see the landscape differently than natives.

We need an **American** Judaism because we come to our Judaism as Americans fully immersed in American culture.

The Talmud assumes.

We do not.

Our ancestors entered the world as Jews. They had no choice. That was the pre-modern world where the group defined who you were. Arnie Eisen once said to me jokingly that if in the pre-modern world, a Jew woke up and was able to even conceive of the idea not to keep kosher, they would starve to death. To the non-Jewish world they were an "other." The Jewish world could not conceive of eating any differently than they had been raised.

We moderns, on the other hand, enter the world as individual selves with multiple identities, one of which is English speaking Americans. Temple Micah people enter the world as NPR listening, Washington Post and New York Times reading, socially and politically attuned Washingtonians. We live in a world of multiple identities but some of them are blasting inside of us all of the time—some speak to us in a softer voice that needs fine tuning.

This is how I came to fully realize the obvious--we need an American Judaism that literally and metaphorically speaks our language so that when we tune to that

Jewish station in our heads, we want to stay tuned to it. It is simply so easy to push the button and go another station or another website—if you will.

An American synagogue requires what I call a translation grammar from all of our inherited language—and here I don't mean simply Hebrew.

Every single one of our ancient inherited texts were written in a pre-modern world. In order for them to speak to us, we need different modes of interpretation that ask different questions and a new religious vocabulary that might speak to both our minds and hearts.

Richard Rorty taught “speaking differently ...is the chief instrument of cultural change.”

We needed to speak differently—we needed new words to explain our religion to ourselves:

We did that:

Being Jewish is about the Human Project

Prayer is an act of identity formation and/or affirmation

Without a synagogue we might be Spiritually Homeless

Faith pushes us to Reach for a higher note

Community is about Co-creating

We need a new Jewish narrative

And

Religion as that which enables us to speak in a register that brings dignity to the human condition.

This became the gateway to many of the names and handouts that have graced Friday evening services and study groups for many years: Rorty, Wittgenstein, Taylor, Nagel, Durkheim, Ricouer, Geertz, Douglas, Pelikan, Berger, Putnam (Hilary and Robert), Eagleton, Cottingham, Gray, Satlow, Walzer, Postman, Junger, Simon, Tamir, Margalit, Neiman to name but a few.

I wanted us to read anything that would help us gain perspective on what we were trying to do and who we were seeking to be.

These thinkers and writers became part of both Micah Shabbat and my Vine newsletter column adventures.

Years ago, in a pivotal essay, Rabbi Hoffman challenges American rabbis and synagogue leaders to think about a synagogue as a place of profundity. Hoffman offered us a new word for the synagogue lexicon—profundity. Not a house of prayer or study or social gathering, but a place of profundity. This struck a chord in me, even as I had no sense of what made a place profound. But—now a pause-- So often I hear people say—that they or we are in search of community. At Micah people say that they find here in Micah, a sense of community. I am never quite certain what this means.

What is a sense of community, I wonder?

I wonder—what is community and what is a sense of community?

How do they differ?

I do know this. \We never consciously focused on creating a sense of community and not because \we were trying to be exclusive or clubby. In fact, at staff meetings when we have explored other synagogues to learn about them, a common descriptor we find is the phrase the “warm and welcoming.” It consistently gives us pause.

We never wanted to be cold and rejecting but “warm and welcoming” we never conceived as a stated goal.

I have come to believe or at least hope that we have been able to create what we have here—including, even, community, because people have found **something** worthwhile and community became natural simply because of who we are.

After all, isn't Micah's most amazing thing--you--the people who are here?

Am I the only one who finds really remarkable people here?

Smart people

Humble people

Curious people

Caring people

Kind people

Generous people

People with a sense of humor

I believe that we have a sense of community because we share curiosity, compassion, generosity, and humility.

What an un-humble thing to say!

Synagogue? Warm and Welcoming?

Profundity?

I worry, are we relevant?

My sense was and remains that many Jews have limited or defined expectations of what a synagogue is and even more challenging than that—limited vision and tolerance for what a synagogue should and could be and do. At Micah we have tried to stretch those preconceptions.

I know that there are people who come to us and just don't get us. I also know that Micah is not the place for you, if you do not have a sense of humor. That is a real key.

My sister in law once commented to me that one of the things that makes Micah distinctive for her is that we have a particular Micah language—a shared vocabulary. There is something to “get” here. I took that as a sign of success. Too much of American synagogue life feels generic.

All of this is in service of that desire for a cultural translation of our Jewish inheritance. I use to hear rumors that people counted how often I uttered the word modernity in a sermon but I was simply being mindful of the Talmud's question about the time for prayer and reaching for a higher note.

I was obsessed with the fact that every single inherited text of our tradition written before the 17th century was produced by a culture with a radically different world view than our own.

Charles Taylor put it like this: “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but inescapable?” (Taylor p25)

We read every single, so called, traditional text with a totally different set of assumptions than those who composed them and until the relatively recent past, interpreted them.

I came to ask myself —Why do we read these? What is their claim on us? How do we understand them differently than those who wrote them and then read and interpreted them for hundreds of years? I wanted to create a culture of deep inquiry that took little for granted.

I sought to help create a synagogue community that did its best to honor Rabbi Hoffman's teaching- “Reform invented the idea that authentic Judaism is not

doing what our ancestors did, but doing what they would have done if they were still alive today.” (URJ at 150 Statement) In that statement, my teacher is not saying that our ancestors would have created a Union for Reform Judaism. I believe that what he is saying is that the language they used, were they writing today, would have been, for example, the language of the Human Project.

As I understood that prayer is not a recitation of a theology or a rational practice and that prayers are not essays but poetry, I felt deeply the challenge that meaningful prayer required an ambiance that would allow for a suspension of disbelief.

The modern American Jew has to be re-enchanted into

turning off the cynicism and the I DON'T BELIVE THAT BUTTON!

I came to see that more than any one specific thing-

Tzedek, Social Justice,

Talmud Torah, Jewish learning,

Tefillah, worship,

we are together shaping a Micah culture—an environment, a feeling—even a desire.

(P A U S E)

Transcendence—To be human is to yearn for a sense of joy, uplift, challenge and purpose in being alive.

Music thus became a more and more vital tool.

Here too, we have sought to push the boundaries in search of a musical language that touches our spirits and brings both joy and tears.

We are in an era where –to use another phrase—we find the sacred in the secular and then bring the secular into the sacred and it becomes ours and religiously Jewish.

Just think of last week—Rabbi Slakman and our musical ensemble turning Nina Simone’s Turn, Turn, Turn into a Rosh Hashanah theme.

Religion is an enterprise of the mind and the heart and sometimes we seek for the heart to conquer the mind. HA-LEV KOVEISH ET HA-ROSH.

Again if it’s not broken, break it—the Micah project.

I longed to create a distinctive sound for the synagogue that was both understandable as well as one that would transport us to a different reality. A sound that would help to tell us not only who we are but what we longed to be.

I tried to conceive of our Micah worship experience to be akin to stepping into a novel or a great play where while you are reading the book, or absorbed in the play that is the reality you are in.

My favorite modern example—Harry Potter—

“Let me alone, I want to read the book!:

“Do you really believe in witches and wizards?”

“Of course not—but let me alone, I want to go back to the book!”

Great art makes you part of the work of art while you are in it.

(For more on that read Susanne Langer.)

There is something very subtle here that makes our Judaism so very challenging. We believe—or at least I believe that none of this was written by God. There is nothing, supernatural, so to speak about my Judaism. The Bible is a work of literature—not a revealed text. All God talk is metaphor. God is a metaphor for that which is totally indescribable and eternally unknowable.

I like to say that we love God and we cherish doubt.

So prayer becomes an exercise in creating a fiction and becoming enveloped in it. I seek for us to forget where we are, to lose a kind of self-consciousness. We enter Paul Ricoeur’s second naivete. Then, it all washes over us and through us. We might even feel a sense of something that we call sacred. Eternal values become real. In those moments, there really is such a thing as God, the Jewish people, Sinai.

Do you get it?

And then it is over—services have finished and we are outside on Nebraska Ave – if it is Yom Kippur, Wisconsin Ave if it is Shabbat.

Here is when it gets hard. We have left the bubble. We are now outside the fiction in reality-land but the religious experience we seek has a takeaway for the real world. The fiction has to change us when we meet the outside. What we

strive for is for the ambiance that we have created to have informed and helped to define us.

That is what art does.

This our prayer ambition—for it to really count.

Torah, in other words, really matters:

All life is sacred.

The worker is to be paid fairly.

Humiliating someone is absolutely forbidden.

The refugee and stranger must be welcomed.

Hineni, Micah House, Succoth Shalom, Underwear Month, fishing boats for the victims of the Tsunami, a truckload of diapers shipped in response to Hurricane Katrina, reading the names each and every week as we stand for kaddish of those murdered in this city, the Micah Israel Fund that supports so many working in Israel for a shared and equal society—all this and more are tangible manifestations of the Torah culture we strive to create.

We strive for Micah to be a place where we come to get a deep sense of the reality of this thing we call the Human Project.

So—if it wasn't really broken—we simply had to break it. It was just too important not to try to see what we might together do.

Slowly—step by step, you have allowed me to learn and grow. Slowly—my vision has evolved, our remarkable staff has grown—these incredible rabbinic colleagues have taught all of us so much as they have refined our vision, and we have together with an amazing staff created the Micah we have. (Beth Werlin)

Micah has enabled me to have, what for me has been, a remarkable career.

Thank you--

There are way too many to thank—that will be for another time-but please—all of you should know how incredibly grateful I am.

As I conclude these remarks, I simply have to thank one person—Louise who has been the best life partner a person could have and Micah's best friend and the wisest and best critic of Micah's rabbi these past 40 plus years. I do not wish to

break our Kol Nidre moment but thank you to Louise simply has to be said—by me and by all of us.

Kol Nidre—our most sacred night.

To conclude simply with a prayer:

Baruch Atah Adonai Sh' mchabed oh ti l'hiyot rav l'kehillah kedosha Temple Micah.

Blessed are You Dear God who has honored me with the opportunity to serve as rabbi for this sacred community—Temple Micah.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam She hechiyanu V'Kiamanu,
V'Higiyanu La Zman Ha-Zeh.

Amen