Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
June 28, 2025, Last Shabbat Morning

Rabbi Crawley asked me to address the following question for my last Shabbat morning.

“Our Micah community has been deepened and greatly enhanced by your study and teaching of the learning and scholarship of the person we all lovingly refer to as Grandpa Goldman. My question for you is, what of your own Torah, your own learning, do you hope your own grandchildren learn and live?”

Oh my.

Dear Rabbi Crawley, Dear Stephanie,

In a sense, I was the direct inheritor of two American Jewish stories. I speak most frequently about Grandpa Goldman whom I never knew directly as he died when I was an infant.

I am a Zemel. I still remember the Yiddish flavored Judaism of my Grandpa Zemel and the stories about the thickly Jewish old West Side of Chicago. I remember clearly the Yiddish signs in his later Chicago neighborhood, Albany Park. This “Old World” generation brought with it, their world view that explained who they were and why. Grandpa Zemel lived in an immigrant culture.

This culture should not be forgotten. European Jewish culture sustained our people for at least 1000 years and we will forever be poorer for its destruction—forever.

The preservation and study of European Yiddish culture has become an eternal challenge for the Jewish future.

The two most powerful engines of all contemporary Jewish life were born in Europe—Zionism and religious Reform. We dare not forget that.

Yet—my grandchildren are all North American.

SHOW PHOTOS OF WINDOWS !!!

Grandpa Goldman's project was to create an American Jewish culture, perhaps best shown by these stain glass windows whose photos are courtesy of a Micah member's recent visit to the synagogue where I grew up. These are the stain glass windows my grandfather had installed after other windows were broken by vandalism in 1941.

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So--for my grandchildren-

1. The Bible is great literature—not history or science. Our Bible professor at the Hebrew Union College in New York would, upon occasion, with a sly grin on his face say, "I have read the Bible several times from many different texts and scrolls. Never have I seen the words, "Based on actual events in any version." The Bible is literature and should be read as such. This is why I will sometimes use the deliberately radical word, "fiction" to describe it.
   Great fiction offers a world that we enter into. The Bible too can offer a world that we enter into. We are in a garden. We are at the Red Sea. We are standing at Sinai. We are standing at the gates of Jerusalem. We are in exile by the waters of Babylon. We are with Daniel in the Lion's Den.
   How much do we each feel today as if we are standing in a lion's den?
   To read the Bible is to allow yourself to be swept into the narrative and to see yourself.
   In these moments we unconsciously allow ourselves to discover and explore the deepest part of our identities. This is what great teachers do for us in literature classes. This is what great synagogues can do for us in powerful moments of prayer.

   My wish for my grandchildren is to find a way to see themselves in the story and they find a synagogue that helps them do this. Our story is one of human history's greatest sagas. Our story connects us to our homeland of

Israel and has allowed us to flourish wherever we were allowed to live in peace. Every society that took us in, benefitted greatly from our presence. As Rabbi Beraha reminded me this morning, I did not want my rabbinate to be the guarding of an heirloom. I pray that my grandchildren find a place where they can feel themselves as part of this magnificent, dramatic story. I have sought to do that here. It is impossible to be Jewish without a supportive, engaged, grappling, and animated Jewish community.

2. The Jewish practices we embrace have to be interpreted symbolically in order to have a deeper religious meaning. In a sense, this is a counterpoint to my first point. We live our lives on many levels.
   This is the difference between an ethnic\cultural Judaism and a religious Judaism. In my language, a truly religious Judaism requires unearthing or pointing to a deeper message.
   Our Jewish lives are both ethnic\cultural and religious. We frequently – maybe even usually confuse the two.
   Clifford Geertz defined religion as a symbol system that creates powerful moods. Our Jewish literature is a symbol system.
   But to repeat, our Jewish lives are both ethnic\cultural and religious.

   Chopped liver, bagels, bride and groom on chairs at a wedding celebration, joining a synagogue in order for a child to become bar\bat mitzvah. These are ethnic\cultural practices.

   I might even go farther just to make a point. A Passover Seder might also be an ethnic\cultural Jewish event when it is a family reunion filled with great food but does not grapple with the meaning behind the radical proposition of the Haggadah, “In every generation each person one is obligated to look at themselves as if they went forth out of Egypt.”

   Hearing the sound of the shofar without seeking to arouse yourself to the moral demands of the day and taking stock of your life also makes the Holy Days into an ethnic\cultural gathering.

We enter the world of Jewish religion when we are challenged to enter the world of not simply ceremony but ritual (which is simply symbol in motion) and symbol and dig deep, when we are invited or forced to pause and reflect, cajoled or seduced into a journey of personal or moral discovery.

This is one of the reasons that I am so very proud to be a Reform Jew and a Reform rabbi. I am so proud of that. It is my bias that we are the movement that has taken the challenges of modernity (I had to get that word in.) most seriously and struggled to forge a personal, meaningful religion from our Jewish inheritance. We want Jewish prayer to be galvanizing so the worshipper is drawn into themselves to ask the questions of what it's all about. We did that and we do that.

3. Just as the rabbis recreated the Judaism of the Bible, the Enlightenment has recreated the Judaism of the rabbis.
   As we know, the Bible allowed slavery, capital punishment and torture. The rebellious child was stoned outside the camp. Joshua was enjoined to slaughter and dispossess the Canaanites from the land and Saul was punished for not slaughtering all of Amalek including the children.
   Biblical ethics are not our ethics.
   The rabbis effectively eliminated slavery, torture and the death penalty. We read the Bible through their eyes.
   Our Judaism goes farther—I cannot imagine my Judaism without the impact unleashed by the European Enlightenment. This is not simply women in the minyan and that is important. This is not merely women rabbis and that is important. This is not simply GLBTQ+ inclusion. All of these are important.
   We study the Bible as a text of human authorship.
   We allow rabbis like me to say that God is a metaphor.
   Our Judaism requires science, rationality, equality and tolerance.
   We ponder our religious life through the lens of everyone from Jarislav Pelikan to Jurgen Habermas.

To use Professor Harvey Goldberg of the Hebrew University's phrase, we seek to study our Judaism from both within and without. This is key. Essential to my Judaism is the understanding and commitment to what I will call intellectual freedom.

I yearn for my grandchildren to believe that all human life is created in God's sacred image even as we are committed to the pursuit of human knowledge—everything from the physics of Albert Einstein and beyond to the biology of Charles Darwin and beyond.

This then leads to my final bit of Torah.

4. Idolatry is forbidden—absolutely. Anything unethical or immoral is absolutely prohibited. Anything that compromises any human being's dignity is idolatry. I will repeat that. Anything that compromises any human being's dignity is idolatry. To be Jewish is to be in an eternal battle against the seduction of false Gods that take on so many forms. This has become the essential battle of our time.

   We are the carriers of human history's greatest story. It is the saga of an idol smasher who groped his way to forging a new vision for what it means to be human. Ours is the struggle to stand in partnership with an invisible and unknowable God that stands for all that is just, compassionate and true.

   I hope that my grandchildren are able to take a piece of this Jewish worldview and use it to live full, healthy Jewish lives on their own terms, just as I have been blessed with what my forbears bequeathed to me.

   Thank you dear colleague and friend for posing this question.

   Shabbat Shalom—Your friend always,

   Danny