

Notwithstanding the classic Jewish sermon starter-joke:

“So let me ask, are the Holy Days early or late this year?...”  
what I’ve come to realize is that our getting together,  
whenever the New Year falls, is like a resetting of our spiritual clocks...  
For these Holy Days compel us to find our place in time.

Which is why a Moment Magazine Symposium from February caught my eye,  
this year of all years,

Asking “*What Will the Jewish World Look like in 2050?*”

[Talk about time! If I’m around to see, I’ll be in my early 90’s...]

Prof Samuel Heilman, master sociologist of Jewish life projected:

“There will be some Jews who are highly distinctive—mostly Orthodox...but likely the majority will consider their Jewish identity as largely symbolic...And so the role of the rabbi will be far less important, as more people who are not halachically Jewish call themselves Jews. Thus, rabbis will increasingly have to figure out what rabbinic leadership means.”

Here’s the problem with Heilman...

Because he is a “Jewy Jew”—he regards the role of the rabbi as providing answers;

To make certain Jewish Law serves as a sacred guide to life.

What Heilman doesn’t understand is that—for us,  
non-Halachic Jews yet ostensibly holy just the same,  
the role of the Rabbi is not necessarily answers,

But rather to ensure people are asking the right questions....

So, though a fast-forward three decades down the road may not be all that helpful,  
I thought it might be beneficial to look three decades back.

Believe it or not, these Holy Days mark my 30<sup>th</sup> year as a Rabbi,  
as you probably know, all right here at LT.

May sound trite but it is truly anything but: I don’t know where the time has gone.

In July of 1987 when Susan and I rented an apartment on Jensen Avenue in Mamaroneck,  
The boys were just 2; Gabe would not arrive till almost a year later.

The Temple was a 435-family congregation.

That year when we got here, Rabbi Poller, my senior rabbi, was 2 years younger than I am now.

I was 28. As the Assistant-Rabbi/Education Director, running the Religious School of 167 kids  
I knew we had work to do and room to grow.

We welcomed 5 kids in our brand-new Kindergarten class,

Had 14 B’nai Mitzvah that year, and six 10<sup>th</sup> graders in Confirmation.

The post-BBM program was non-existent, so I started the Academy...

And with my wife telling me we needed a pre-Nursery program,

Together we also created what we then called Mommy & Me...a big hit!

Though we were 400 families fewer, a smaller physical space,

And a very different feel in Worship with Cantor Graham & Rabbi Poller,

Classic throwbacks minding the spiritual store...

Just the same as today, members were hungry for meaning.

So the questions people asked paved the way...

“WHY did you become a Rabbi?”

Every week at Oneg Shabbat after services...on Sunday AM in the RS hall...

Sisterhood luncheons...Brotherhood breakfasts, again and again, people asked.

But of all the hypothetical queries,

I'd spent five years of rabbinic school honing my answer to this one.

“Well, being a rabbi combines all the things I love to do most:

Teaching kids, inspiring teens, leading prayer, telling Jewish stories...”

My rationale went on...and on. Most people nodded politely, or smiled,

Delighted by my enthusiasm...

But one very wise woman, 30 years ago,

who'd become among my primary spiritual mentors,

Rita Grunbaum, 50+ years my senior,

explained after the small group of members dispersed:

“They don't want to know what you do, but Why it matters!”

Huh! It wasn't a rabbinic resume they were seeking.

Congregants wanted to know why I cared, and even more important—WHY should they.

They were not asking me about *me*—but in truth, about *us*...

Their question was a quest: for making life-meaning;

for understanding how Judaism framed our life-purpose,

helping us discover why we are here...

For me, that purpose has been the privilege of being your rabbi...

And though these past three decades of sacred service

have been beyond rewarding,

Turns out—perhaps not at all by accident—that the overarching life-lessons

which have emerged for me these past 30 years are not meant for me alone.

For when applied not simply to a spiritual leader, but all of us as sacred seekers,

The three-predominant life-lessons can likewise be seen

As keys which unlock the gateway to Jewish spirituality,

enabling us to find our place & discern our purpose in the unfolding of time.

NOW, if you are wondering: “*Spirituality*” ...Is that a Jewish word?

The answer would have to be: “Not really!”

At least not in the way the term is popularly understood.

In a 21<sup>st</sup> century sense, accentuating the mind-body-spirit connection,

affirming the inner life of the individual

through practices like yoga or mindfulness or meditation,

spirituality and religion are often perceived as diametric opposites.

Just Google SBNR [not now] and you'll find the self-identification of

**Spiritual But Not Religious**, an anti-doctrinal, anti-organized religion approach

that understands “spirituality” as uniquely advocating

personal questioning, intellectual freedom and spiritual experimentation.

But being part of our Reform movement,

And unquestionably this congregation [a not-so-organized religious institution]

We are all about those very same claims.

Our [self-identification] acronym would probably be:

**SASR—Spiritual And Sorta Religious.**

For if religion—our being Jewish—are the traditions and texts and teachings which create the communal context—the backdrop, then spirituality is how we perceive our place in that picture—how we navigate our journey; mapping our way through the landscape of our lives.

Master liturgist of our movement, personally a wonderful colleague/counsel, truly a Sage of our age, takes spirituality out of the monastery and places it back where it belongs, in the midst of the moments that fill our days.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman perceives spirituality as the system of connectedness by which we make sense of our lives. As meaning-seeking animals, we humans look for patterns in the various events of a day or a week or a year.

“Spirituality is our way of being in the world...how we overlay our autobiography in the making within a template of time and space...It is the way we find our way to how we matter...the way we know we belong in the drama of the universe...” [The Journey Home, LH, pg 17]

In this crazy day and age in which we live,  
awakening each morning to a Tweet or a newsfeed that makes us wonder  
about the drama which has become the state of our reality,  
we need to know that we share in a greater purpose; that, despite the drama,  
our being here brings meaning beyond the absurdity which often surrounds us.

As Hoffman explains:

“Our most important challenge is to find shape in our lives...Life is very much the process of connecting the disparate dots of daily events that befall us...ordinary or monumental; planned or unexpected; joyous or disappointing...To struggle for meaningful patterns among life’s dots.”

[The Journey Home, LH, pg 22]

Disregard the dots and life becomes a random sequence.

Obsess over the interconnections and we get lost in the intricacies...

But stepping back, we can gain a renewed life-perspective

Thus Hoffman’s essential challenge that is Jewish Spirituality:

“Our singular most spiritual act of faith is when we determine that we, like God, will connect random dots into a single shape that tells us who we are.” [The Journey Home, pg 29]

...My dearest friend Cantor Ellen Dreskin, teaching at Kutz Camp this summer, our national Reform Teen Institute, distributed a handout on the first day of her Jewish Spirituality class to the ten high-schoolers sitting in a circle.

It was a copy from one of those classic Kid’s Activity books;

a connect-the-dots page with one essential alteration: all the numbers were erased.

Her instruction: Can you make sense out of it? What’s the picture that appears for you?...

And so too the opportunity this High & Holy moment presents:

Aligning my three principal rabbinic life takeaways these past 30 years  
with their corresponding keys to Jewish Spirituality,  
can we unlock the door to deeper life-meaning,  
taking our place in the unfolding of time  
by connecting the dots?...

## Rabbi Revelation 1: YOU ARE SMALLER THAN YOU THINK

My very first funeral was for the founding treasurer of LT, Irving Mintz.

Rabbi Poller, who'd left on day 7 of my tenure here for his 6-week stint in Hillsdale, his/Priscilla's Berkshire getaway, reminded me on his way out the door:

"OK My Boy—Mind the store while I'm gone."

The next day I got the call from Anne: "Irving has died. I want the real Rabbi."

Reluctantly I called Rabbi Poller in the Berkshires, and related what she'd requested.

"Well that's good, because she's got the real Rabbi!"

The funeral was fine; even better than fine.

And Anne, who just passed away this Spring, [her memory be for blessing]

Became a staunch supporter...

Yet the lesson was never lost on me; It remains to this day.

My senior rabbi, to whom I lovingly referred by his initials, HLP,

Was not trying to teach me that my ordination credentials sanctioned my sacred status,

But rather that with enough humility of heart,

I'd be as REAL as any rabbi could be...

I saw him go and sit on the front steps of the family whose 40 something year old mother died of breast cancer, waiting for them to get home from hospital...

I was with him in the hospital meeting-room of the family

whose late 30's father died of an aneurism after dinner...

As a barely 30-year-old Rabbi, I witnessed Rabbi Poller running into the midst of tragic, inexplicable loss, time and again,

not because he had the answers, but because he shared the questions

to which there was only one real answer/response: Be There.

Rabbis sometimes mistake their ultimate-aim as achieving faith-worthy fame, being the public presence;

shining for 5-Star performances—wowing worshippers, inspiring the crowd.

But being there in the moment when nobody's watching,

When nobody knows except the dying hand you are holding,

Without anything approaching an answer but together, holding on to the question, we recognize: We are much smaller than we think...

...The greatest danger of the Rabbinate, I have come to learn,

Is believing your title makes you somehow larger than life;

too big to fail—or even to admit you don't know,

leaving no room for the other to enter the sphere of your life-orbit.

Rather than engage in constructive dialogue all rabbis hear then is themselves.

Tales of rabbinic triumph do not travel nearly as fast as those of rabbinic downfall.

"Did you hear what happened to the guy at Beit Meshuggeh?"

The truth at the core of most all such tales can be traced to one key factor:

Inflated EGO, or, [with Papal undertones] a belief in Rabbinic Infallibility.

The Rabbi must be right, after all, s/he's the Rabbi!

Such hierarchical assumptions make "real" rabbis the ones who dress the part;

And Synagogues the sole repositories of sacred moments.

But once we—all of us, truly sense our own smallness,  
we connect to the corresponding Spiritual Key:  
ENTRANCES TO HOLINESS ARE EVERYWHERE...[Bamidbar Rabbah 12:4]  
What are we doing here anyway, if not trying to summon God's Presence?  
Worshipfully praying away, singing up a storm, we wait for a sign—a glimpse—a spark...  
And though God might well somehow show,  
it probably won't be in the place or the moment you'd likely think.

We are Jacob...running away from a past we'd rather put behind us,  
Sleeping in the middle of nowhere—uncomfortable, unprepared.  
And out of nowhere—God appears.  
“What's with the ladder?” Jacob asks  
And the Holy One, now sitting alongside the weary, would-be patriarch explains:  
“It's what I have been doing since the finish of Creation;  
Making ladders for you to climb. Problem is...” The Holy One continued,  
Having now caught Jacob's attention, “people don't think the ladders are real.”  
That's when Jacob awakens from his dream.  
Startled, sitting up; feeling a bit fearful...still unsure,  
He catches his breath...  
Wiping the sleep from his eyes, just now able to focus,  
He can still see the image of that ladder God has set out for him to ascend...  
ENTRANCES TO HOLINESS ARE EVERYWHERE...

Yet we get conditioned by BIG-mindedness to believe  
God appears only in pre-arranged places, at predictable times;  
Those High & Holy moments, mind you.  
But while you are anticipating regularly scheduled awe up here...  
You might very well miss the Sacred in the smallness:  
Of hands touching hands—of spirits filled with hope,  
Of broken souls mended by kindness,  
Of memory transcending time & space—of generations linked in love.

There's a TV ad, I think for some mobile App,  
That pictures a city couple camping out in the woods,  
Trying to get to sleep in their peaceful tent as the sounds of owls and crickets serenade them.  
Eyes wide open, they turn to each other acknowledging, “This is awful.”  
Next thing you know they've used their smart-phone to turn on an App: the sounds of the city:  
Honking horns, traffic tie-ups, people parading about...and in a flash, they are fast asleep.

Rabbi Larry Kushner describes it as background Muzak,  
the constant static we intentionally create that drowns out the sound of God's Voice  
which has been here speaking to us all along. [\[God Was In This Place, pg 30\]](#)

The ladder is right before our eyes, and, thinking it's only a dream...we fail to climb.  
If only we understood—all we need do is enter the moment. The ascent happens on its own.

...With my kids at Tanglewood [in the Berkshires] this past 4<sup>th</sup> of July,  
my first time back in three summers since Susan's gone,  
the place the two of us went on our first teen date  
and every July for well over 30 years running,  
as James Taylor sang his second encore, "You can Close Your Eyes,"  
the very song Susan and I sang to each of our kids to put them to sleep,  
all of us arm in arm, my boys and the girl singing every word along with JT  
as tears streamed down my cheeks, clear as a bell—from somewhere out of nowhere,  
I heard another voice...  
ENTRANCES...ARE EVERYWHERE.

## Rabbi Revelation 2: EVERY PERSON/EVERY ENCOUNTER MATTERS

Rabbinically speaking, of course, all encounters cannot, actually, be equal.  
Presenting at the Board of Trustees is a whole different deal than telling a story to the NS kids  
Shmoozing in the Religious School hall on Sunday AM is sweet,  
But going up to sit next to and hear the featured speaker is a higher level of discourse.  
Such prioritization is not alone damaging; it runs counter to all that "congregation" must mean.  
What 30 years of chance encounters on the street, drop-in visits from sundry congregants,  
amazing inquiries from all sorts of kids reminds me is that  
not only is every exchange a learning opportunity, but every person has a vital lesson to teach.

Of all I am privileged to do as a rabbi,  
There is nothing I cherish more than teaching.  
Teaching 7<sup>th</sup> graders Doin Drash...learning Torah so they themselves can teach as B'nai Mitzvah;  
Teaching 10<sup>th</sup> graders as Confirmands...searching the centuries of God-thinkers;  
Teaching 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders at Diner Dialogue...confronting questions of our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives;  
Teaching Chevrah Torah, our Shabbat AM text-poration, a table filled with insight.

WHY, of all things, is teaching so transformational?

I used to think it was the lessons I brought to life through the learning process  
that touched people's hearts, so significantly that it changed them.

Now, I understand: it's the learning-exchange that changes me.

The bond that forms when you learn together is nothing short of covenantal:

Mutually enriching—genuinely open—lifelong...

SO, once a Confirmand, always a Confirmand.

I'll often refer to 40-year-old mothers of three as among my "favorite kids."

And though the list is long, there is one former Confirmation student who,

More than any other, taught me what it means to get closer to God.

...I was skeptical from the start. Yes, Tommy had become a Bar Mitzvah, along with his brother Max,  
But Confirmation was different. And so was Tommy.

How would he handle all the God-thinkers? What would he comprehend?

Would this wonderfully impulsive, speak-your-mind kind of kid be able to listen?

Intellectually, would it be too much for him, or for his classmates?

His parents, amazingly loving, gracious people validated my questions and simply said:

"Jeff, let's give it a try..."

And by the end of the learning year in April,  
approaching Shavu'ot, Confirmation's culmination in May, it was clear:  
Tommy had become our teacher, helping us understand no two kids learn quite the same;  
Reminding us that outer labels only serve to blur the label we all wear inside:  
"Made in God's Image."

Sitting with Tommy in my study we worked together on his Sinai statement,  
the 10<sup>th</sup> graders' insight about God's Presence in their lives. His teaching remains the greatest gift...

*"I have been coming to Temple every Tuesday because it is important to me.*

*Getting to be with my class, and to be with my rabbi is great...*

*As much as anything though, being part of Confirmation is like getting close to God.*

*For me, God is like a voice inside, sometimes very loud, saying things I know I should do  
Like: "Listen to your mother!"*

*Most of all though, God is making other people feel good...*

*When I do...special things for other people and they are nice back*

*I feel close to God. Getting confirmed has helped me remember that God is inside me,  
and us all, every day."*

Tommy was more than a transformational teacher; he was a "Malach!"

And so, the corresponding Spirituality Key [#2]: WE ARE ALL MESSENGERS.

In the neo-mystical mindset of Rabbi Larry Kushner...

Each one of us is a *Malach*—a word that could mean angel, but also "one who is sent,"  
which makes us all messengers on what could be a sacred mission.

We just don't know it...And yet, we all carry pieces of one another's life-jigsaw puzzles,  
Pieces worthless to us, that may mean the world to someone else when we share them.

Indeed, the piece you are holding could make another person whole...

We enter people's lives, then, for a reason, as Tommy entered mine...

To share some wisdom—to instill some wonder;

To challenge an assumption—to inspire a commitment;

To broaden a vision—to open a heart.

Simply by being ourselves, sharing our gifts as only we can, we become messengers.

BUT, our missions only find their fulfillment if that 'other'—significant by way of encounter,  
Is ready enough to receive the puzzle piece we are holding.

Spiritually speaking, that makes anyone we meet, everyone we meet,

Any relationship or connection we share potentially life altering.

As it makes our role in this world a sacred responsibility:

To give all we have in caring for God's Creation—the people we know and love,

The folks we see but hardly notice every day,

and the many we meet in the briefest of exchanges

Yet who cannot be complete without us...

Rabbi Revelation 3: BE YOUR SELF

I know what you're thinking: Sirkman, it took you 30 years to figure that out?

Still, the seemingly simplest life-principle, not at all as easy as it sounds,

Is also the most spiritually significant.

The great Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf of KAM Isaiah Israel in Chicago  
Symbolized all it could mean, as a rabbi, to be your self.  
For nearly five decades, from serving as the Navy's only Far East Jewish Chaplain,  
To being Hillel Director at Yale, and then his Chicago area Reform congregations,  
Boldly challenging the communities he served, his prophetic conscience  
held everyone to a higher standard, most especially, himself.

As his HUC rabbinic school college roommate and closest friend,  
Rabbi Eugene Borowitz wrote: "Arnold was never trusted by his colleagues to observe the conventions of safe  
rabbinic leadership. Yet, for that very reason, many a colleague and congregant loves and reveres him. He has  
inimitably fulfilled this era's new commandment:

To create and be oneself." [Forward, Unfinished Rabbi, AJW]

...It is no coincidence that Wolf, who was the primary influence on the two rabbis  
Who've most shaped my theology/thinking, Dr Borowitz and Rabbi Larry Kushner,  
[who's first job was serving as Wolf's Assistant Rabbi,] ...It is Wolf's reflection  
with which I begin Senior Seminar, the 5<sup>th</sup> year Rabbinic School class at HUC I teach.  
Wolf does not hold back:

"Rabbis are not, in my view, spiritual leaders, administrators, organizers, fund-raisers.  
We are teachers...and if we really teach, we have little time for anything else."

You can just imagine how upsetting this is to the senior rabbinic students. It's great!

"Jews want to learn from their rabbis.

They no longer seek spiritual imperialists, or political sages or pulpit magicians..."

What is Wolf getting at? After all, he was fired from his post as Yale's Hillel Director for his  
groundbreaking political leadership in the mid-70's, calling for a Palestinian state.

What he is saying simply is this: As a rabbi, don't play a part; just be yourself.

Of course, that implies, you know who you are. Wolf continues:

"When rabbis used to be superstars and congregations basked in their glory, the  
congregation did just that: basked, but did not do. It watched, applauded, but did not  
act. It criticized, but did not collaborate....Which is why my responsibility [as a rabbi] is  
to be the best Jew I can. They are in charge. The future of our Jewish world is in their  
hands. My responsibility is to help them see their responsibility."

Now I'd call that COVENANT, the sacred relationship we share.

And it is somehow dependent on the rabbi making room for congregants

To pray and to think—to teach and to act—to learn and to lead,

by being nothing less, and nothing other, than him/her SELF.

The corresponding key is the ultimate Jewish Spirituality Secret

Remember Jacob's Dream? The verse he utters in waking up [Gen 28:16]

Is the single-most essential response to making God's Presence real.

***"God was in this place and I, i did not know."***

YES, a repeated pronoun, "I"...WHY? The Hebrew word, ANOCHI, the pronoun in question,

Is not the simple self-identifier, but a term more deeply describing the Self.

Somehow, each of us being our SELF and God's SELFHOOD are linked.

We share the same pronoun, after all, most would assume, because we are created in God's Image,  
It's the Divine spark implanted inside. But [Get Ready]...



What if God's not in us, rather—what if **we...** are in God.

Let our teacher Rabbi Larry Kushner clarify:

“Spirituality is always in reference to two “I’s,” two selves.

The “i” of the person and the “I” of the Universe...Our ‘selves’ are made of God’s Self...

Indeed, God’s Presence already permeates all creation...For the Universe, like you and I, has a Self, a Self that nourishes and sustains each individual self...God is to being as the self is to us. God is the ANOCHI—the “I” of the world—the SELF of the Universe...We, then, are agents of God’s Presence... not at odds with the Self of the Universe, rather, we are part of it. To be aware of this is to give our lives ultimate meaning and purpose.” [God Was In This Place, pgs 133, 144-148, 150]

OK, breathe for a second...

So, spiritually speaking, what’s all this mean?

In a word: IT’S ALL GOD...

By discovering our true selves, perceiving & allowing ourselves to be who we are:

More caring, more committed, more genuine, more impassioned, more generous of heart;

By growing towards/into our most godlike selves,

We become part of the unfolding of the Universe—agents of God’s very Presence.[God Was in This Place, pg 150]

The secret to Jewish Spirituality is just this awareness:

That for each of us our selfhood is made sacred, made real,

Sustained and fulfilled, by a unifying Force, the Source of our Reality.

GOD is not in us; WE are in GOD.

“Whatever makes each individual unique, that innermost core self,

is precisely what we each share with one another—and with our Creator.” [God was in This Place, pg 133]

THUS, the unbelievable *realization* which is the ultimate Jewish Spirituality *revelation*,

And likewise, why being your rabbi brings me such joy and fulfillment every day:

As we succeed in connecting the dots of our life-page,

Finding our place in time by finding our way on the map of meaning,

We likewise clarify points of connection—too many to count, for others.

For our pictures overlap; our life-images intersect.

Trying to understand our place in life’s drama, to discern the dots,

We eventually come to realize, we are all on the *same* page.

Which means you are never alone in your life-struggles, your disappointments, your yearning...

On the contrary!

Attempting to make sense of the moments that make up the lines of our lives,

Trying to give shape to our journeys that help us know who we are, we discover,

like a giant puzzle, we are all bound up with one another, unknowingly, we fit together;

a human harmony—One Voice.

SO this new year,

my gift of gratitude to you is the hope that the secrets to spirituality will be the reality of your lives

Like Jacob, that you will awaken every day to a world where God’s Presence is all around you,

Where Every Person, including you, has something significant to share,

Where Entrances to Holiness are everywhere...And, no matter the steps you take,

Where you cannot help but climb...

AMEN.

*ALT Ending...*

So this New Year,

With entrances to holiness everywhere,

And sacred messengers all around

May you live fully spiritually aware,

Connecting the dots that point to greater purpose

helping you to see the ladder still there/set out for you to climb.....AMEN