

*After nineteen years as the rabbi and Executive Director at UC Santa Barbara Hillel, I came in the summer of 2004 to be the rabbi of Congregation B'nai B'rith, the large Reform synagogue in Santa Barbara. Many of my new congregants had been our friends for years, but this was an enormous and daunting new beginning. I chose to speak on my first Friday night about my vision of the role of the rabbi.*

## **First Shabbat Sermon at Congregation B'nai B'rith**

**August 6, 2004**

Shabbat Shalom!

I'd like to start with a joke, just to help me relax. This is one of my father's favorites. Forgive me if you've already heard it. It's a story of a rabbi, cantor and synagogue president who are traveling together and are captured by bandits. The chief bandit says to them, "I'm sorry to tell you that we have to kill all three of you. But to show you that we're not all bad, we will grant each of you one last request." He turns to the cantor and says, "OK, you first. What is your final request?" And the cantor replies without hesitating, "if I am to die my last wish is to sing the whole Kol Nidre, in the way it's traditionally done, three times through, with everyone standing and no short cuts." The chief bandit says, "I think we can arrange that," and he turns to the rabbi and asks "what about you? What is your dying wish?" The rabbi replies, "I would like to give the sermon of my dreams, a dazzling and erudite exposition of this week's Torah portion, replete with citations from the Talmud and medieval commentaries and with a bit of contemporary social and political comment added for spice." The chief bandit says, "that'll be fine." And he turns to the synagogue president and asks, "well what about you?" and the president replies, "Kill me first."

I hope that if my sermons ever start making you feel that way, you'll let me know! As you are all aware, this is my first Friday night service as the rabbi here, at the end of my first official week of work. And it's now been about two months since it became clear that I was going to be leaving my old job at Hillel and coming to Congregation Bnai Brith. I have learned in the past two months that there is a lot to learn.

The truth is that even though I have been a rabbi for nineteen years, I am having to learn a completely new job. And the most difficult part of it is that I have no single teacher to tell me what to do and how to do it. I have teachers...many, many teachers: my rabbi friends and colleagues around the country, some of whom have been successful congregational rabbis for twenty or thirty years, are teaching me. And my wonderful new partners on the staff here at the Temple: Cantor Mark Childs, Craig Rosen, Karen Greenberg, Audrey, Janet, Marian and Michelle are teaching me. And the members of the Board of Trustees, who hired me, especially Deborah Naish and Gail Teton Landis and Aaron Ettenberg...all of these people are teaching me how to do this job. But so are the other people whom I have learned to listen to: my friends both in the congregation and outside of the congregation, friends I have known for years and amazing new people who I am meeting every day. And also my family: my kids, and my parents...especially my mother who this summer has more than doubled her usual output of clippings, articles, and words of wisdom, and most importantly of all, my wife Marian who is the wisest person I know, and certainly the one who knows me best.

It's not easy to have that many teachers. I've always tried to be a good student, and to listen to my teachers, but those are a lot of voices, many of them offering radically conflicting advice. And there is some temptation to say thank you very much; I've had enough teaching!

But here is what I have realized after 47 years of learning: the very best thing I can do is to listen carefully to all of my teachers, to all of you here tonight and to everyone else I have mentioned, and then to go to *myself*, to find a way, a time and a place to become still, and to listen to the voice of my own heart. And that is the way I will learn to do this job.

And by the way, I don't think it stops there. After listening to my own heart, I need to find ways of communicating that voice, as clearly and as honestly as I can, to all of you, and then to listen carefully to what you tell me in return.

So tonight is a good opportunity to share with you a few preliminary findings, some thoughts I have at this point...one week into the job...about what my job here is. I am counting on each of you to find a way to tell me if what I am saying makes sense...or not.

Very briefly, I'd like to touch upon four dimensions of the job, which I will refer to as: *storyteller, friend, witch doctor, and gardener*. Just about now, by the way, the members of the search committee are thinking to themselves, "I don't remember us putting witch doctor on the job description..." Well, let me try to explain what I mean.

First, storyteller. There is a book behind those doors...the Torah. As a physical object, it is a beautiful thing—ancient fiery letters written by hand in black ink on a parchment scroll, animal skin. Those of us who come here regularly may sometimes take the beauty of the Torah scroll for granted, but people who see the Torah for the first time are usually blown away. The physical Torah however, to be honest, is a lifeless artifact. It is like an object in a museum, until it is brought to life by a reader, somebody who knows how to take the written letters off the page and turn them into spoken or chanted speech. This is the magic which we teach our children when they become Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

But as we all know, there are many ways of reading. I can still read my college math book, but sadly it means absolutely nothing to me. A beautiful and complex language which I once understood twenty-five years ago is now gibberish to me. And in the same way, for the Torah to truly come to life, it requires not just a reader, but a storyteller...a human being who will read the story of the Torah with *understanding*, with *feeling*, with *love*.

We have been a people of storytellers, and that is what has kept this religion alive for three thousand years. Parents telling the stories of Torah to their children. Teachers telling the stories of Torah to their students, passionately. In our time, many of us have forgotten our stories, forgotten how to read the Torah with love. My first job as rabbi, I think, is to help this community of Jews to remember some of our great stories, and to help us all become storytellers again. This is my favorite part of the job.

The second dimension of the job of rabbi is the dimension of being a friend. I know to some of you this probably sounds great...wow, getting paid just to have friends!! But in fact I think this is the hardest part of the job. Because even though Marian and I do like to socialize ...it is obvious, or should be, that it is impossible to have real, ongoing friendships with a thousand people, which is approximately the number of

people in this congregation. And it's growing. The rabbinic role of friend is difficult precisely because it is so intense and intimate, but only at certain moments.

Being a friend becomes the most important part of this job when a Temple member is in crisis. When someone you love dies...a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a child...and it feels like the whole world is flying apart into a million pieces...it can be very helpful to have a rabbi there to let you cry, and to tell you that you are not going crazy. And when you get married, it's nice to have a friend under the chuppah with you, chanting the old Hebrew words and speaking words of blessing, and not a stranger. And perhaps most importantly of all, when you are dying...and every single one of us is going to die sooner or later....it is good to have a friend right there with you, helping you not to be afraid. Actually, I think that while it is difficult, being a friend in moments of life and death is my favorite part of the job!

Now what about this witch doctor business? How is a rabbi a witch doctor? Well that's the part where Cantor Childs and I lead everyone in reciting ancient incantations in a language that most of us don't understand and guide everyone through mysterious rites involving ram's horns and ancient fertility symbols of yellow citrons and waving palm branches and the lighting of many candles and the consuming of sacred foods and libations of wine and so forth. Not to mention clipping off little boys' foreskins. This religion still has some pretty great tribal ritual, and tribal ritual requires a shaman, a witch doctor!

What does a witch doctor do? He or she is an artist, just like the conductor of a symphony or the director of a play, helping all the members of a company to know what notes to play and what words to say, and how to move their hands and their feet, and most importantly, pushing everyone to do it all with *honesty* ...to make it true. Then, *a magic spell is created*, and everyone present is suddenly lifted out of their everyday lives and into a strange and beautiful reality in which we are all children again....fully human, laughing and crying, singing, and playing.

This sacred play, this sacred theater, is the essence of all real ritual, and it can happen anywhere: It can happen on a high school stage. It can happen in a preschool puppet show. It can happen in your home on a Friday night. It can happen here. It just needs a witch doctor. I think this is my favorite part of the job.

And finally, gardener. The fourth and final aspect of this job of rabbi is to be a gardener: planting, fertilizing, watering, pulling weeds, pruning and mulching. The garden, of course, is this community, which is already full of gorgeous and fragrant flowers. But there is still plenty of work to be done.

A good rabbi plants seeds: ideas, projects, undertakings, hints, suggestions ....They won't all germinate, and many will never grow. But with care and attention and with help from heaven, some seeds will grow...into a new study group, or a new minyan, or a new social action project, or a new chavurah. Part of my job is to plant seeds.

And this human garden needs fertilizing...with optimism and honesty and a sense of humor....the essential nutrients without which the garden of community becomes tired and worn out.

Lastly, the garden of community needs to be watered...with money. Yes! A community without money is like a garden without water. We would all like to be as drought tolerant as possible, but the fact is that money is as fundamental as water. Sometimes a rabbi can help get the money flowing to where it is needed.

Any of you who have a garden know that the real mark of a good gardener is patience... after having worked hard, to have the wisdom and self-restraint to do nothing. I first learned this when my brother and I were little and we planted our first vegetable garden, and were ecstatic when the first carrot sprouts started to pop up and every day we would dig up the carrots to see how much bigger they had grown. For some reason those carrots never really grew! So I learned that sometimes gardening means being able to wait and to watch and to allow the miracle of life to unfold.

A rabbi also needs to know when not to do anything...when to sit still and simply allow the miracle of community to just happen. It takes wisdom and discernment. I think that being a gardener is really my favorite part of this job.

So those are my initial thoughts about my new job, after one week. Four aspects, each very different from each other: storyteller, friend, witch doctor and gardener. As I've indicated, each one of them is the piece of the job I love most. I hope I can do them well, and I pray that the Gardener who planted each one of us here on earth will bless us with rain and with sunshine, with wisdom and courage...and help us to grow together as a truly holy community.

Shabbat Shalom.