

## What I Have Learned in 34 Years in the Rabbinate

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We're in a new book of the Torah, Bemidbar and it begins with an enumeration, a census. So, in keeping with this I'm going to go down a list of 12 things I've seen and learned in 34 years in the rabbinate. The first and larger set of these land somewhere between the theological and the institutional. The last ones dwell within our personal lives. Some are joyful, some concerning, and some trip over into wisdom.

1. The blessing of the Jewishly adjacent. When I was ordained in 1988 a burning question in my class was whether we should fight to stem the tide of intermarriage or welcome intermarried families into the synagogue. To some degree it was about doing both at once. Of course, synagogue life would be simpler if all Jews had married/partnered with other, born Jews. But that's not how it works in an America where Jews sit comfortably at almost everyone's kitchen table. What we didn't see was the energy and joy so many of the Jewishly adjacent in our families (a much better term than non-Jewish) would bring to our congregations. Where we have felt it most strongly has been in our religious schools. What I didn't see then was how much of a spiritual home our synagogues would be, are, for everyone these households.
2. The dance between seeking out Jewish authenticity and happily constructing one's own Jewish life. The same person who loves going to Chabad for both the welcome and the authenticity they find there, has no problem driving to shul on Shabbat, eating great seafood, and marrying out of the faith. 50 years after *The Jewish Catalogue* came out, the famous handbook of the Boston Chavurah, which lovingly toyed with things from t'fillan to kosher non-marital sex, this is still the soup of American Judaism. The best description of this is Chabad on campus, where Jewish kids flock to Kabbalat Shabbat and then go out to clubs or a frat house party. They are half there to greet the Shabbat bride, half to pre-game<sup>1</sup>. Try navigating those waters as a Reform rabbi.
3. The non-draw of synagogue worship. I keep telling TBI-niks that our turnout on Friday nights is impressive. I did a job search in 2014 that didn't come to fruition (long story.) Every synagogue I looked at was having trouble turning out a minyon – everyone. At TBI we have the love of community to draw us in. But most places don't even have that, and worshipping God is challenging for most American Jews. No fabulous band, no visual t'fillah, and no off the wall, brilliant rabbi will solve this, Central Synagogue in NY notwithstanding.
4. Which brings us to mindfulness. Spirituality without God. When I was in rabbinical school part of the worry about inter-marriage was about syncretism; that our intermarried families would develop a kind of hybrid Jewish Christian faith. No worry there. Christmas presents and Jesus really are two different things. But the impact of American Buddhism on Jewish life cannot be understated. It's fascinating. Read *American BuJu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change* by Emily Sigalow, for some insights into this.

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-gaming means to drink alcohol at home or at a friends place before heading out to bars etc.

5. The collapse of mainline Christianity. It is the corollary to this. In the summer of 2017 I was in a chaplaincy training program with a bunch of students from United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Often the table talk turned to the sad fact that the pulpits they would go to didn't pay a living wage. I don't say this triumphantly or judgmentally. It's just something we've all witnessed that is a profound change in the American landscape.
6. Jewish learning. If we American Jews avoid services like the plague, we love Jewish learning. In my 29 years in Wisconsin, I never made inroads in attracting born Jews to Friday night services. Thank goodness for the congregation's Jews by choice. But 20 plus lifelong Jews would turn out from over 9 counties for our monthly Shabbat morning Torah study. Jewish learning is a profound entre to Jewish spirituality.
7. The welcome of LGBTQ Jews into American Jewish institutions. One might say the journey since the Stonewall riots. Rabbi Alexander Schindler, who was president of the URJ, began welcoming gay and lesbian congregations into the Union in the 70's. It was a gutsy move and a wise and loving one. Having all of us in our Jewish family living openly as ourselves has been such a gift. When I graduated, I never thought I would officiate at a LGBTQ wedding. Now it is proforma. Wonderful.
8. The anti-Semitism of our parents' world is gone. It's the darndest thing. Every institution in American is open to Jews. Most of our recent presidents, Clinton, Trump, and Biden have Jewish sons or daughter in laws and Jewish grandkids. And, yet, mythic anti-Semitism, the world of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that forged work of Tzarist Russia, lives on. We saw it only a few weeks ago in Buffalo, where it was written into the screed of the murderer, criminal, thug, who slaughtered the mothers, fathers, and grandparents of the African American community there. It is an anti-Semitism that lived on the margins, but with AR-15's and innumerable chat groups now keeps us awake at night. It's a hatred that I thought I would see die in my lifetime, one that mocks the work so many of have done to build bridges.
9. Okay, this is getting dark, so let's shift gears to the gem that is our young families. I wrote a bulletin article on this. There is a spark in today's young synagogue families that is a wonder to behold. Yes, the numbers are down but they love to bring Judaism alive for their families. Here is a Wisconsin story. I had two families approach me in 2012 and ask if we could have a Shabbat morning Tot Shabbat and brunch. I was deeply skeptical but how could I say no? But they came. To be sure, when their kids were older sports kind of did it in, but still. And they also asked for a family retreat which worked! And I see the spark here too. Many of the families today are eager to have Judaism present in their homes, things like celebrating Shabbat and gathering in their own Sukkah. Our numbers are small here, but the spark is there. It just goes to show, you never can tell.
10. And three things about our personal lives. One is concerning and two life giving. The first one is that addiction touches so many Jewish households and, especially, alcohol addiction. And as so many of you know, this is a tough one, with lots of stumbles before the successes and not always successes. I name it because there was a time when the Jewish community thought it was a problem of other groups and places. It's important for us, as a community to

acknowledge it and support each other through our struggles, whether it's one's own addiction or helping a loved one.

11. Toggling. If I had a nickel for every family I've known that enrolled their loved one in hospice three days before they died, I'd be a rich man. It's like we haven't gotten the memo that we're going to die. For most of our life curative care is the way to go and today's medicine is extraordinary, we can get better and there are remarkable treatments for chronic conditions. But especially as people enter the land of the frail elderly, our doctor often knows when someone has an illness or condition will not get better and they know whether it will be months or weeks until that person will die. In those moments it's time to toggle to palliative or comfort care, care that helps us be our most comfortable, really our best, through our end days. Palliative care is not giving up. Hospice is not giving up. They are love made manifest.
12. And finally love. I have an ex-priest, social worker, friend who married an ex-nun and she worked across the operating table with Julie. They are dear friends. Their son had a big heart but was a sociopath. He was in and out of jail, but then seemed to get his life together and then it all collapsed and he committed suicide by cop. Their experience, their pain, taught me what really matters. I once thought success for one's children was all about achievement. But now I define it as 'one's kids having a job with benefits, not in jail'; in other words, a little independence and not profound self-destructiveness. Of course, we need to give those we love guidance and direction. If we have kids that means a stable home and plenty of structure. We need to be there for aging parents and for siblings who struggle. But most of all, we need to love the people in our lives. As a rabbi I have learned, painfully, that I cannot control the outcome of people's lives, that people are autonomous. But love, love is redemptive. My kids need my ear more than my advice; a spark of interest, an always open door, and the unbreakable tie that we offer to family and close friends are gifts like none other. *V'ahavatah l're'cha*, love the stranger, *cavod av v'em*, honor your father and mother, and *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, teach your children. Love.

That's it. 12 things. Tomorrow my list might look different. Each of us has our own list of our 10, or 12, or 5 ways, life has surprised and instructed us. Each list is a treasure. Write yours down, or record it, but be sure to share it with the people you love.