

Presidential Address - C.C.A.R. Convention
Jun. 22, 1997
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Miami, Florida

Dear Colleagues, *Chevre*:

There are so many things that I want to talk to you about in this, my valedictory address. But let me begin by reiterating the words with which I concluded my final column in our CCAR Newsletter, paraphrasing *Moshe Rabbenu*: "*Ashrecha, CCAR; Mi chamocha!*" I treasure the friendships that I have made in this Conference over the past forty years, and I thank you from the depths of my heart for having enriched my life.

These past few weeks have been a particularly hectic time in my life. We have been winding up the celebration of the 150th anniversary of my congregation, Keneseth Israel. In a period of four days recently, I participated in the HUC-JIR Ordination in New York, a regional *kallah* in south Jersey and then another in Florida, returning home to a series of weddings and funerals. Exactly one week ago today, I sat alongside Eric Yoffie, Dick Hirsch and Uri Regev in Jerusalem, along with our Conservative counterparts, trying to negotiate a way out of the tragic threat to Jewish unity posed by the intransigence of an unabashedly self-serving Israeli Orthodoxy; I'll be discussing that later. And exactly one week from today, I shall complete forty years of service as a congregational rabbi and, without any kicking and screaming, I shall enter retirement.

In the midst of all this rush and bustle, while trying to find odd moments to concentrate on this address, my congregation presented me with the gift of a computer. As some of you know, I was a cyber-illiterate, but I have resolved to master the devilish thing in order to help me with the writing that I have planned in retirement. And so I find myself now at odd hours, seated at that arcane but seductive screen, discovering unimagined resources and hardly believing my ears when the little man in the monitor gleefully says: "You've got mail."

While trying to steal a moment here and a moment there to organize my thoughts and to write this presidential address, I was reminded of an assistant rabbi (who will remain anonymous) whose sermons were incomprehensibly disorganized. For months I tried to explain to him about the progression of an idea from point A to points B and C and to a conclusion that would wrap it all together. It didn't help. But then one morning he came into my office beaming and said: "From now on my sermons will be good." I said: "I'm delighted to hear that. What happened?" And he answered: "I bought a computer." When I heard just two weeks ago that I was going to Israel for three days of intense negotiations about *Chok Ha-Hamarah* – the days that I had set aside to write this address – I wished that *my* computer had the magical properties ascribed by that former assistant of mine to his.

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Over this past year I have been dropping little memos into a file folder labeled "Presidential Address." When I dug them out just before leaving for Israel and looked them over, I realized that they all centered around one basic idea, and that my task this morning is to iterate and reiterate that idea. And so my message will be a theme and variations. What is the theme? Simply this, dear *Chevre*: *We did not become rabbis in order to preside over the demise of the American Jewish community.* It is that simple – and that complex!

Let me begin with a little personal history. As many of you know, I was raised in a learned Orthodox home. Although we lived in Boston, I attended high school at Yeshiva University in New York. I wasn't happy there, but, often against my will, I learned text at the Yeshiva with an intensity and depth that unfortunately is not replicated at the more liberal seminaries, ours and others. The fact that all that text was taught *without* historical or sociological context and *with* large helpings of superstition and chauvinism was something that I didn't realize until much later. When I entered college, all I knew about Reform Judaism was that it was the way *out*. I was taught at the Yeshiva and at home that, first, you become Conservative, then Reform, and then a *goi*. Inexorable, like the tides. That was – and still is – a given in Orthodox circles.

The first Reform rabbi whom I ever met was Maurice Zigmond, the director of Hillel at Harvard back in the forties and fifties. I found him to be a wonderfully intelligent and caring man, but my early conditioning made it impossible for me to think of him as a rabbi. You know, a *real* rabbi like Rabbi Soloveitchik whom I was raised to venerate. I may not have recognized Rabbi Zigmond – we called him Ziggy – as a rabbi, but I did recognize him as a real *mensch*, who was concerned about *me*. Ziggy is today 93 and long retired from Hillel. But he had a tremendous influence on a generation of young Jews in their formative years, and somehow, the fact that he was a Reform rabbi did not make *goyim* out of us. At Harvard Hillel, then as now, many "who came to scoff remained to pray."

When I said that Ziggy was the first Reform rabbi whom I ever met, I wasn't completely accurate. Actually, I met a Reform rabbi in the uniform of the United States Army when I was a twelve-year-old. His name was – and, thank God, still is – Harold Saperstein, who later had a distinguished career in Lynbrook, New York. But to me then, Harold was an army officer, Captain Saperstein, who came occasionally to the Shabbat dinners that my parents conducted during the war years for soldiers stationed in the forts around Boston Harbor. I knew nothing about Reform or Conservative rabbis, but I was thrilled to be sitting next to a Captain at Shabbat dinner. And when I heard that he had been shipped over to Europe, I knew that Hitler's days were numbered. (I was right.)

When I graduated from college, I had no idea what I wanted to be, but I was absolutely certain about what I *didn't* want to be: a rabbi. What I knew of the rabbinate was Orthodox and, much like the majority of Israelis today, the synagogue that I didn't go to had to be Orthodox. Courses in western literature, anthropology and paleontology had

made me skeptical of religion generally and of the Judaism that I knew, Orthodoxy, in particular.

Truthfully, having nothing else to do after graduation and pretty much on a lark, I accepted the offer of a fellowship to the Wharton School at Penn to work for a Master's in government administration. But I needed to make a few dollars to live on, and so I went to Penn Hillel, where I met my second – or, if you prefer third – Reform rabbi, Theodore H. Gordon, who, I am very pleased to say, is here this morning. I asked Rabbi Gordon – now my dear friend, Ted – if he might know of a job to keep me in food and dating money.

Ted inquired about my background, and then he offered me a part-time job as his assistant at Hillel. Among other things that he did for me during that year at Hillel was to introduce me to a pretty freshman, Judy Blumberg, who later became my wife. Let me pause here for just a moment to acknowledge with love my dear wife Judy, whom I met forty-four years ago in the parlor of the Hillel House at Penn, and who has been a full partner in my rabbinate these forty years.

Ted Gordon was a wonderful rabbi and friend. He had a rich Jewish background and a lovely cantorial voice, and for the first time I began to wonder about these Reform rabbis. Why was it, I asked myself, that I could speak so easily and dialogically with Maurice Zigmond and Ted Gordon, whereas I was so utterly put off by the rock-solid certainties of my Orthodox rabbis? I remember someone back in those years – it may have been Ted – suggesting that I measure the Orthodoxy of my youth against the motto of Penn: "*Leges sine moribus vanae* – Laws without ethics are meaningless."

Before I go on to the point of all this personal history, let me pause here for a brief tribute from a forty-year veteran of the *congregational* rabbinate to the *non-congregational* rabbis among us – the hospital and nursing home chaplains, the academics, the military chaplains, the organizational staff people, and, most especially, the Hillel directors. Considering the crucial role that Hillel played in my life, let me tell you how delighted I am to be passing the mantle of the CCAR presidency on to Richard Levy who has devoted the past thirty years of his life to bringing Judaism to college students. I would not be a rabbi today – in fact, I am not sure how much of a Jew I would be today – were it not for two utterly devoted Hillel rabbis, Maurice Zigmond and Ted Gordon. Richard Levy, our next president, has had a similar impact on more recent generations of questing young Jews. It is about time that we congregational rabbis give those non-congregational rabbis, who meet and influence Jews in places that we never get to, the recognition that they so richly deserve.

And now back to Ted Gordon.

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After we had worked together at Hillel for a year, Ted left to establish a new Reform congregation in the western suburbs of Philadelphia, Main Line Reform Temple. The new congregation did not have a building, and so they rented space for religious school and for services. Ted invited me to teach in his new congregation and especially to drive around to the homes of his bar and bat mitzvah students to tutor them. To this day I suspect that Ted hired me because I had an old jalopy, not because of any expertise that I might have had as a bar/bat mitzvah tutor. And so, as I was completing the requirements for my Master's at Penn, I spent two afternoons a week driving around the western suburbs teaching sixth and seventh graders in their homes.

Now, this was back in the early fifties, and most Jewish young mothers then worked at home. Very often, during the course of my lessons, these mothers would drop in and ask me questions about Judaism, especially about Shabbat and about things having to do with their up-coming bar/bat mitzvahs. Often, if the lesson was before the dinner hour, they would invite me to join them at table so that I might meet their husbands. And what would happen around those dinner tables? Unplanned and unstructured adult Jewish education. Now here we get to the crucial part.

I was curious. Remember: all I really knew of Judaism was Orthodoxy, and I was increasingly uncomfortable with it because of all the contradictions that I saw, the vast difference, for example, between the morality of Leviticus 19 and *tikkun olam*, on the one hand, and the particularist ritualism that called itself "Torah true" Judaism, on the other. And so I began asking these young parents, the charter members of the first Reform congregation on the Main Line: What was your Jewish background?

Almost invariably they were the products of nominally Orthodox homes where little or nothing was observed. The synagogues that their parents didn't go to – except for *Kaddish* – were Orthodox. Theirs was a religion of death – *Kaddish* and *Yizkor* and *Yahrzeit*, with all the attendant superstitions. Most of the fathers had had bar mitzvahs, learned by rote; I cannot recall even one of those mothers from forty-odd years ago telling me that she had studied Hebrew. But in each of those parents there was that *pintele Yid* that made them affiliate with this new congregation so that their sons and their daughters could learn Hebrew and learn how to be Jews.

I should tell you about one more element in my post-graduate education that prepared me to appreciate what I was learning from Ted Gordon and from the mothers and fathers of those bar/bat mitzvah students. Somehow, I got a scholarship to attend a two-week session at Brandeis Camp just before going to Penn. There I met two absolutely superb teachers, Ellis Rivkin and Leo Honor.

Ellis Rivkin taught me that Jewish history was not just about saints and miracles. He taught me history the way that I had learned it as a history major in college. His insights into the revolutionary content of early rabbinic Judaism were mind-boggling and brilliant. And Leo Honor, z'l, taught me that one could use God-language without anthropomorphizing a cosmic bell-hop waiting to hear our petty requests or a vengeful

bookkeeper keeping track of our ritual credits and debits. I remember asking Ellis where he taught, and when he answered, "Hebrew Union College," I remember grimacing and thinking instinctively, "Sedom." But the seeds had been planted, seeds that began to mature in those Main Line homes.

The more that I learned about the backgrounds of those bar/bat mitzvah parents and the more questions they asked me about basic Judaism, the more I realized that, contrary to the teachings of my childhood, these were not Jews on the way *out*. Quite the contrary: these were Jews on the way *back in*! I discussed all this with Ted Gordon, and I asked him where he had studied to become a rabbi. And he answered: "Hebrew Union College." This time I didn't grimace and think: Sedom; this time I said to myself: that's where that brilliant guy, Ellis Rivkin, said that he teaches. I'm going to check it out. Maybe there is a Judaism that doesn't conflict with modernity; maybe I can be a part of this process of bringing alienated Jews back to Judaism. And that's what brought me to Cincinnati forty-three years ago.

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All of this has been the lengthy *mashal*; in a moment I'll get to the *nimshal*. But first, I must interject two brief notes about our colleagues, Maurice Zigmond and Ted Gordon. Ziggy has been a rabbi for 68 years. He had a distinguished career in Hillel and had a profound influence on many of us. He is now very frail and being cared for with devotion by his wife, Kathy. I offer a prayer for Ziggy's and Kathy's well being, that God may give them the strength to bear what must be borne; and I ask you to say: Amen.

As for Ted who, as I said, is here this morning in his 88th year; first, our sympathy on the loss of his dear wife, Florence, who passed away just two months ago. Second, I was absolutely thrilled to see Ted standing on the pulpit of Temple Emanuel in New York five weeks ago, participating in the Ordination of his granddaughter, Debbie Gordon, who is today attending her first CCAR convention as a colleague. What a wonderful reward for a truly dedicated rabbi, a role model for us all.

And now to the *nimshal* – the point of this lengthy introduction. The immediate past president of the Rabbinical Assembly, our distinguished colleague, Alan Silverstein, published a book three years ago entitled: *Alternatives to Assimilation*, subtitled: "The Response of Reform Judaism to American Culture, 1840-1930." I first met Alan Silverstein over the phone, when he called me for some archival material having to do with the early years of my congregation, Keneseth Israel. In *Alternatives to Assimilation*, Silverstein traces the early history of four historic Reform congregations: Emanu-El of San Francisco, Sinai of New Orleans, Bene Yeshurun (or Wise Temple) of Cincinnati, and my own Keneseth Israel of Philadelphia – west, south, mid-west and east.

Alternatives to Assimilation is an excellent resource for a fuller understanding of nineteenth-century American Jewry, and its thesis corroborates what I observed as a teacher at Main Line Reform Temple 43 years ago. By offering a meaningful response

to the seductive secularization of American culture with its pressure on Jews to give up their distinctive traditions, Reform Judaism offered questing American Jews an "alternative to assimilation."

What I found in suburban Philadelphia 43 years ago, what inspired the founding of Reform congregations all over America in the two decades after World War II, was the latter-day version of what Silverstein saw as the impetus of the founding of all those German-Jewish congregations of the 1840s and 1850s.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the fledgling Reform movement offered the beginnings of a professional rabbinate, a decorous service, a Judaism consonant with the best of contemporary America, and, after a few decades, an organization of American Hebrew congregations and a seminary to train rabbis capable of serving this new phenomenon, the American Jew. In the mid- twentieth century, in suburban Philadelphia and all over American suburbia, the Reform movement built synagogues for the children and grandchildren of that vast wave of East European Jews who, like the German Jews before them, were all-to-often unable to provide any meaningful Judaism for their American progeny.

The Reform movement that mushroomed in the mid-twentieth century was – again – an "alternative to assimilation," not a way *out*, as I had been taught, but a way *in*. I thank God that I was able to recognize that phenomenon at first hand back in 1953, and that that recognition led me into the Reform rabbinate where I could do my small part, as you are all doing, first, to bring Jews back to Judaism, and second – and I'll explain this – to bring Judaism back to Judaism.

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Chevre: as I said earlier, *we did not become rabbis in order to preside over the demise of the American Jewish community*. We hear so many prophets of gloom today predicting that the horrendous rate of mixed marriage here in the United States and our low birth rate will complete Hitler's job. And they throw into the formula for our demise the low rate of synagogue affiliation and attendance, the shallowness of Jewish education, the dissolution of the traditional Jewish family etc. etc., all of which must surely trouble us. But I hope that you are all as far from despair as I am.

Let me suggest that there are at least a couple of items in that distressing Jewish Population Survey of 1990 that might be viewed in a more positive light, or at least as challenges to us. That Survey discovered over eight million Americans, not the five-million-odd that we usually claim, who responded that they identify themselves in some manner as Jews. Some of these self-identifications may be bizarre, but over eight million? Interesting, to say the least! And I am going to suggest that there might even be something encouraging about that fifty percent intermarriage rate that has redirected millions of Federation dollars into "continuity" programming. In our open society, where over 97% of potential marriage partners are non-Jews, half of our people choose to

marry Jews. And if that statistic still depresses you, consider that, when you factor in family synagogue membership, over seventy percent of our people choose to marry Jews. As I look out over the American Jewish landscape – and as I look in particular at the potential of our Reform movement – I feel certain that all that we have achieved toward the creative survival of Judaism in America until now is but a prelude to what we are capable of achieving. What a challenge!

I don't believe that there has ever been a moment in history as receptive to what it is that we stand for as the present moment. I am not as naive as Isaac Mayer Wise and many of the early graduates of HUC were in believing that there was evolving around them a liberal American religion that would merge into liberal Judaism. No, I don't believe that our Reform movement is going to convert America. But I do believe that we are capable of bringing into our fold hundreds of thousands of people – many of them living today on the periphery of the Jewish community – for whom Reform Judaism can be *the way back in*. I see us as the alternative to lives devoid of meaning, lives of banality and materialism, lives of superstition and religious coercion. The new American Judaism that we are creating can provide a spiritual home for multitudes who are today alienated or in quest.

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Are there encouraging signs? Of course. To begin with, there is the new leadership that our movement has chosen to direct our congregational Union and our College-Institute into the twenty-first century. I will omit any comment about the excellent leadership of the CCAR, because lay people were not involved in the choice of our leadership. But it was substantially the laity who selected Eric Yoffie and Sheldon Zimmerman, with, of course, some rabbinic input. Why did they choose these two men?

There has never been any doubt about the deep commitment of both Eric Yoffie and Sheldon Zimmerman to Jewish learning, to Jewish tradition, to personal piety, to the Hebrew language, to Israel, *and* to modernity. Yes, they are both excellent spokesmen, and yes, they are both committed to social liberalism, and yes, the lay leaders surely hoped that they would be good fundraisers. But it was not for these reasons that they were chosen.

They were chosen – and I know this from having been involved in the selection processes – they were chosen because they were recognized by our lay leaders as models for Jewish living. They were chosen because they were seen as authentic Jews, with a lot of other good qualities thrown in. And the early indications are excellent. For one thing, the level of cooperation between the Union and the College-Institute – and the CCAR is deeply involved in this cooperative effort – has not been this evident and excellent since the days when Isaac Mayer Wise led all three organizations himself. I have had the privilege of attending, along with Paul Menitoff who is a dynamic partner in this process, the first meetings of the new Reform Leadership Council. The agenda is a

simple one: to deepen and to reinvigorate Judaism both in America and in Israel. And it is beginning to happen.

Before going on to other encouraging signs for the future of American Judaism, let me pause here for a heart-felt appeal. If ever the Union and the College-Institute needed our support, it is now. There is a severe economic crunch that is affecting virtually all religious institutions, except for those which, with personal assurances from strange gods or messiahs, offer guarantees of eternal salvation. We must redouble our efforts to make our lay people realize how essential to the American Jewish future are the institutions of Reform Judaism – our camps, our day schools, our Israel programs, but most especially our College-Institute and our Union. We must strengthen the hands of our colleagues, Shelly and Eric, and our movement, *all of us*, now, at this crucial time.

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A second encouraging sign is the impact that women have had on our rabbinate and also on the cantorate. This year, as you know, is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of the first woman rabbi, our distinguished colleague, Sally Priesand. I have been richly blessed by the associations that I have had with some of our female colleagues over the past quarter century. It is hard to believe that we ignored or overlooked that rich vein of spirituality, wisdom and sensitivity for the first century of our movement's history. But, thank God, that ignorance is over.

I could spend the next half hour or more recounting the contributions of many of our women colleagues, but I would be leaving out too many others. Let me simply say that I know that I am a better and a wiser rabbi because of some of the women with whom I have studied, prayed and worked over these past twenty-five years. They have added a dimension to my Judaism that I admit was lacking, and I am deeply grateful.

I hope to see our women colleagues more fully integrated into the leadership of our Conference, our Union and our Yeshiva in the years to come. But I have already seen how they have made Reform Judaism more accessible, more relevant, more spiritual and more welcoming than in the past. This is not a matter of political correctness; this is an essential part of our Reform recreation of Judaism for the future.

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A third sign, one that some see as problematic but that I see as a truly positive development in American Judaism, is our increasing self-reliance, our growing sense of independence from both Orthodoxy and from Israel. Now before some reporter runs for a telephone with a headline about the CCAR president repudiating Israel, let me attempt to clarify what I mean. But first a few words about Orthodoxy.

I have spoken and written a lot about Jewish authenticity over the past two years, and I don't want to repeat all of that now. Let it suffice for me to say that my reading of Jewish history differs markedly from the Orthodox reading. As I learned first from Ellis Rivkin and then from other scholars: early rabbinic Judaism was a revolution against fundamentalist Judaism. The *takanot* of Hillel and Yochanan ben Zakkai and the *Chachamim* were essential *departures* from "Torah true" Judaism so that Judaism might survive. We, along with our Conservative and Reconstructionist brothers and sisters, are the heirs of that process which enables Judaism to evolve and to flourish in the contemporary society.

But, dear *Chevre*, if we are to keep Judaism alive and vital in any meaningful way, we must deepen our Jewish literacy. In this we might well learn from the Orthodox. As I said before: we must bring Judaism back to our Reform Judaism. If we are to claim the mantle of Jewish authenticity, we must eschew *hefkerut* and *am ha-artzut* wherever they arise and realize that our *semichas* are licenses not only to teach but to learn.

And if the *Haredim* – here and in Israel – continue to attack and insult us? Listen to these lovely words:

They worship in a most insane fashion, following a different ritual which does not conform to the religion of our holy Torah. And they tread a path which our fathers never trod ... All of their writings are opposed to our holy Torah, and they contain misleading interpretations. . . .

It was with such words as these that the Vilna Gaon and others condemned the excesses of the Chassidim.

Well, let me tell you, as a card-carrying Litvak: I agree with the Vilna Gaon's characterization of those who attempt to subvert Judaism. Today it is not *we* who are the subverters; it is the descendants of those very "Ultras" whom the rationalist Gaon attacked over two hundred years ago. It is *they* who are attempting to fragment the Jewish people, *they* who know that God speaks only to them, who sell conversions at a steep price in Jerusalem, who drive away sincere worshipers from the Kotel, who venerate the graves of terrorist murderers and so-called messiahs, and who use criminally-acquired funds to support their *yeshivot*. Aside from devotion to learning, Orthodoxy offers very little to American Jewry in the twenty-first century. But enough about our independence from a discredited Orthodoxy; let me proceed to the more important subject of our independence from Israel.

Chevre: I am a life-long Zionist, and I am an ardent supporter of the Zionist Platform that will be debated at this convention. But I made my choice about the future of Judaism long ago, and I have no regrets. There will be two major centers of Jewish life in the world in the twenty-first century as in the fourth and fifth centuries. Then it was Palestine and Babylonia; tomorrow it will be Israel and America. Creativity will flourish in both, as it did back then. We must never forget that the greatest intellectual and spiritual treasures of Jewry, from the Ten Commandments and the *Talmud Bavli* to Rashi,

Rambam, Yehuda ha-Levi, Spinoza, the *hidushim* of the great European *yeshivot*, Freud, Einstein, Kaplan, Heschel, Bellow, Wiesel and on and on are all products of the so-called *Galut*.

Chevre: I do not live in *Galut*. Many American Jews do but not *I* – and, I trust, not *you*. To live in *Galut* is to live as an alien to Judaism. An educated Israeli, who is so unfamiliar with the synagogue that he cannot recite *Kaddish* properly, lives in *Galut*. And an educated American Jew, who does not appreciate the fact that he is a descendant of prophets, is also living in *Galut*.

Wherever Jews labor to create environments that are nourished and informed by the vast treasury of Jewish tradition, *there* they have found a homeland. Must Israel be a part of that environment? Absolutely; a Judaism disconnected from Zion is an aberration. But while Israel is a major element of Judaism, it is not its surrogate.

At the recent Rabbinical Assembly convention last April, I heard A.B. Yehoshua deploring the Jewish void that he said characterizes so much of Israeli life. That majority of Israelis, he said, who are not *datiim* have no spiritual or cultural rootage. Their religion is materialism, and while it is true that they will, for the most part, marry Jews, they will not produce Jewish children; they will produce – and are today producing – latter-day Canaanites.

The same can be said about a large segment of American Jewry, devoid of any meaningful Judaism. Both groups live in *Galut*, and both groups are in desperate need of a faith community that can provide meaning and purpose in a world of technology, glitz, TV-talk-show culture and emptiness. Both groups need to be challenged by the kind of Judaism that can provide a way *in*. And there, dear *Chevre*, is our challenge. *That is why we are rabbis*.

Since I have made reference to Israel, let me interject just a few words about our recent emergency mission to Israel. I was so proud of our colleagues, Eric Yoffie, Uri Regev, and Dick Hirsch, and our Conservative counterparts, last Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, as we argued the case for Reform and Conservative Judaism at private meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu, various Cabinet ministers, leaders of the Knesset, and at a formal Knesset hearing. We stood on their turf and demanded that that obscene conversion bill be scuttled. And, while very little is ever certain in the area of Israeli politics, it seems that we emerged victorious from those three days of virtually non-stop meetings. We requested and received from Prime Minister Netanyahu and from the leader of the Knesset coalition, Michael Eitan, an agreement to withdraw the conversion bill and to work with us toward the official recognition of our conversions. I will have more to say about this in my report to the plenum tomorrow afternoon.

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And now I want to proceed to a fourth and last encouraging sign that I see for the future. It has to do with a resolution that you will be asked to approve at one of our business sessions, a resolution entitled "*Sh'lichut*/the Rabbinic Service Corps." I have mentioned bringing Judaism back to our Reform Judaism through greater devotion to learning.

I want to add another vital element from our tradition, and that is *mesirat nefesh*, which I shall translate as a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of Judaism.

The Rabbinic Service Corps that I am advocating is no panacea, but it is a new element on our Reform horizon that could re-inspire the American rabbinate. *Chevre*: the Former Soviet Union is now open to us, but are we open to it? Through the good work of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, we have established over fifty Reform groups in the Former Soviet Union. Obviously not all or even half of them could provide full-time work for a rabbi, but ten or more of them could. And we finally have *one* Reform rabbi going to Kiev, an idealistic new HUC-JIR graduate by the name of David Wilfond. What are we establishing congregations for in that vast Jewish wasteland if we cannot supply them with rabbis?

There are over twenty Reform congregations in great cities in England, France, Switzerland and Germany, to say nothing of Australia, South Africa and the Caribbean, that are desperately searching for rabbis. *Ein kol, ve-en oneh!* There is no one there! Do you realize how frail is the possibility of Jewish survival in those desirable locations? Are you also aware that there are *Sh'lichim* from Lubavitch in all of those places?

You're not ready for an overseas adventure? Well, how about the fact that there are over a hundred viable, UAHC-member congregations in North America that cannot attract rabbis. Yes, some of them lack major Jewish resources; some of them are rather remote; some of them might not have suitable employment possibilities for spouses. But where is our rabbinic dedication to service? our self-sacrifice? our *mesirat nefesh*?

I have spoken about the Rabbinic Service Corps at dozens of rabbinic meetings and at meetings with students and faculty at HUC-JIR. Everybody loves the idea in the abstract, but then there are the problems: dual career families, student loans, medical insurance, reintegration into the mainstream rabbinate, etc., etc. I know that there are problems. I faced them myself when I undertook five years of service overseas. But surely there are colleagues who, at some point in their careers, might be willing to devote two years of extra-ordinary service to the Jewish people, to communities that have not been able to attract rabbis. Our mega-temples will survive without a second assistant rabbi for a couple of years, but the Reform congregations in Prague or in Rostov or in Kalamazoo might not.

We now have a *Sh'lichut* committee involving the UAHC, HUC-JIR, the World Union and, of course, the CCAR. I have volunteered to work over the coming year to establish *Sh'lichut*: to try to solve the many problems, to find not only *Sh'lichim* but also mentor rabbis who will keep in touch with them regularly, to find funds to supplement salaries and travel and medical insurance etc., etc. Now we need the volunteers. They

might be recently ordained rabbis; they might be recently retired rabbis who still have the energy and the will to serve; they might be rabbis who would welcome a fascinating two-year hiatus in their mainstream careers; they might be *you*.

Chevre: if we are truly serious about the future of Judaism in America, we must have a rabbinate that demonstrates a level of self-sacrifice that goes far beyond what we see on the horizon today. And I refer not only to *Sh'lichut* to unserved communities; I refer to imposing requirements on ourselves, to adopting regimens of study, to increased levels of Shabbat and Yom Tov observance, to all that we must do to inspire modern American Jews so that they will want to join us and emulate us and recreate Judaism with us. This is *Sh'lichut* in its wider sense.

How significant it is that, as we discuss *Sh'lichut* and the ideal of service, the Torah portion for this week is *Shelach*. Recall the word that Moses used to inspire the twelve spies: "*V'hitchazaktem* – Make yourselves strong!" [Numbers 13:20] Two of those twelve *Sh'lichim* took Moses seriously, just two. But it is they whose names we remember and revere to this very day. *Chevre*: we need more Joshuas and Calebs if we are to recreate and inspire our Reform movement so that our American Jewish community may flourish in the twenty-first century.

I am sure that many of you read the article by Jo-Ann Mort that appeared on the final page of the most recent issue of *The Jerusalem Report*. She explained why at this point in her life, without children to educate, she joined a Reform congregation, Beth Elohim of Brooklyn.

. . . I joined a Reform temple because Reform Judaism is going through a transformation that I think matches the promise of its tradition in America – a commitment to social action and a high caliber of intellectual Jewish study coupled with a new found embrace of Hebrew text and a gloss of spirituality – moving Reform Judaism into a new era.

That is about as good a summary of where I pray that we are headed as I might offer: "a commitment to social action and a high caliber of intellectual Jewish study . . . and a gloss of spirituality." These are the way *in* for the next generation of American Jews. These are what you, my dear colleagues, can and will provide, *b'ezrat ha-Shem*.

* * *

Let me conclude, dear *Chevre*, with some words of gratitude. I don't have to tell you that a rabbi's life is often a lonely one. My life as a congregational rabbi over the past forty years has been made easier and infinitely richer because of my friendships and my interactions with colleagues in the CCAR. I feel this especially on those precious occasions – at a *kallah*, at a Convention, at a Board meeting – when we pray together or study together. *Then* I feel that I am a part of a congregation, one of a group of Jews

who can feel stirring within them the yearnings of generations of prophets and sages and simple pious Jews. More than once, praying with you, I have been moved to tears – tears of gratitude for our mutual understanding, our dedication to the recreation of Judaism and to *tikkun olam*.

Dear *Chevre*: We are our *kehillah kedosha*. We are our "caring community." We can strengthen the hands of our colleagues as together we bring Jews *in* to join our sacred endeavor. I am so grateful for the opportunities that I have had over the past forty years of my rabbinate. There have been disappointments; there have been defeats; there have been moments of deep grief. But there have been accomplishments, victories and joys that far outnumber them. And always there have been colleagues, co-workers, *shutafim im ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

Let me conclude then with two lines from a poem by Nobel Laureate and Poet Laureate Joseph Brodsky. After describing the tragedies and griefs that he experienced as he moved in mid-life from despair to freedom, he uttered this cry that so resonates for me:

*. . . until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.*

["To Urania", p.3]

"Only gratitude . . .".

Ashrecha, CCAR; *Mi chamocho!*

— Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin