

Kos Y'shuot Esa : I Will Lift Up the Cup of Salvation

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Installation Sermon – Delivered Saturday night, March 29, 2003

by Rabbi Janet R. Marder, President

They were all together – all the great sages and teachers of Jewish history, gathered in the *yeshiva shel ma'alah* – or perhaps it was at a rabbinic convention somewhere in the Twilight Zone. Their attention was focused this night on events transpiring far below, in a small but self-important city on the Potomac, in a hotel whose very name suggests the all-encompassing and universal: Omni, it was called.

There our Sages witnessed the changing of the guard at the CCAR, and, as is usually the case with rabbis, they had a lot to say about it.

"It's awesome," said Abraham Joshua Heschel, stroking his majestic beard. "Totally awesome. Radically amazing, you might say. As I sat there and watched a woman president installed, I felt like I was praying with my *tochus*. What a holy moment this is – it's like a condominium in time!"

"Get a grip on yourself, Abe," counseled the Rambam. "You always let these metaphors get out of control. Remember: we can say nothing definitive about this event. All we can do is reflect on its negative attributes. For instance: it is not not incredible. It is not not unprecedented. See what I mean?"

Martin Buber elbowed his way into the conversation, as was his wont. "At conventions, you know, a lot of meetings go on," he said. "In fact, it is in convention that we may enjoy a moment of authentic meeting – a meeting with the Eternal Thou."

"The Eternal nudnik – that's what you are," muttered Rabbi Yehuda, who was a bit of a curmudgeon. "Now what's this I hear about a woman becoming *Nasi*? Didn't I make it pretty clear that *nashim* have their own department, their own *seder*? And that's where they belong. As what's his name said, "*motzeh ani mar mi'mavet et ha'isha* – I find a woman more bitter than death" [Eccl.7:26].

"That was me," said King Solomon. "What can I say? I had a lousy redactor. But why don't you ever quote from my poetry? What a song I could write about this new President! 'Behold, she is fair! Her eyes are like doves – yea, like pigeons on the grass they drop their tears. Her hair is an unmown field...flocks of goats may frolic in it. Her nose is like the Tower Hotel, and the smell of her garments is Downy fresh.'"

"Even if they raked my flesh with iron combs," said Rabbi Akiba, "I wouldn't call that poetry. And grass will grow from my cheeks before I'll see a woman *Nasi*." Rabbi Eliezer the Glum chimed in: "Even if the walls of the Beis-Medresh fell down, even if that carob tree jumped a hundred feet in the air, even if the Potomac were to flow backwards...I couldn't accept a woman as *Nasi*."

"Deal with it," said George Gershwin. "The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble, the Pope may say 'oy vey' – but women are here to stay."

And God, with a sidelong glance at Beruriah, winked and said, "*Nitzchuni nashai, nitzchuni nashai*. Those women...Those women have defeated me!"

I stand here tonight in debt to all of them – all the sages I have studied and quarreled with and loved; all the teachers who ushered me into the world of Torah: those who are living today – may their light continue to shine – and those whose lips move in the grave when I speak the words they taught me.

I stand in debt to all those women – to our pioneers, who labored for years to make a new world, and who together made the walls of the study house bend, and the waters flow in a new direction, and the tree of life erupt into the air with new power and vitality.

All of us, along with the men who are our classmates and friends and study partners, the mentors who believed in us, the colleagues who embraced us – all of us, together, have remade the world. Tonight we taste and savor what we have done.

Psalm 116 asks the question that is in my heart tonight. "*Ma ashiv Ladonai? What can I give back to You, Adonai, for all Your kindness to me?*" [vs.12]. The question is answered with words we chant each week, on Saturday night. "*Kos y'shuot esa, uv'shem Adonai ekra*. I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of God" [vs.13]. The message is clear. When your heart overflows with emotion, lift up the cup and give thanks.

I raise the cup, then, first to my wonderful parents, Irene and Alan Ross, who taught me always to do my best – who taught me, in fact, to obsess over doing my best. I am grateful that my dear brother, Bill, and his wife, Zhila, have also traveled thousands of miles to be here tonight, along with my aunt, Barbara Rosenfeld, my cousin, Douglas Ginsburg, Chief Judge of the D.C. Court of Appeals, and family friends Mort Lomask, Elisa Bavin, Julia Winkler and Josh Reynolds.

To the man who shared a cup with me 23 years ago under the *chuppah*, and who continues to gulp down the bitter with the sweet, I owe my very life. I love him for the care he gives to everything he does, from mowing the lawn to crafting a line of verse, for the intelligence and integrity that are my rock, for the laughter and tenderness and friendship we share. Shelly: long before this night, and forever in my heart, you are the first man.

Almost 20 years ago Shelly and I received a gift from Rabbi Wolli Kaelter to celebrate the birth of our first child. It was a tiny silver kiddush cup, engraved with the phrase "*kosi r'vaya* – my cup runneth over." To our precious and beautiful daughters, Betsy and Rachel, who have made those words come true a hundred times over, I lift my cup in gratitude and love. Nothing has made me happier than to be your mom.

A toast, as well, to my beloved colleagues who led our Havdala tonight – as bright and funny and talented and menchy a group as you'll ever find on one stage: to Ken Carr, Ken Chasen and Alice Dubinsky, partners with whom I've worked in years past, and to Susan Lippe, Josh Zweiback and Kay Greenwald, with whom I work now at Congregation Beth Am, along with Chuck Briskin, who could not be here tonight because he generously agreed to mind the shul back home. Each one has extraordinary gifts, and each one has truly been a blessing in my life.

I raise my cup in thanks to the newly-elected president of Beth Am, Jim Heeger, who is here with his wife, former temple president and UAHC board member Daryl Messinger. I'm deeply grateful to both of them for coming to Washington to share this night, and for the visionary leadership, commitment and generosity they bring to our congregation.

My deepest inspiration has come from Marty Weiner, who has served our conference with utmost devotion, and has reached out with infinite kindness to Shelly and me. I am so fortunate to have had him as a model and guide, as are we all, and I promise that I won't bother him too often with one of those 3 a.m. presidential crises. I cherish the wise counsel of Paul Menitoff, who leads us with distinction, and who keeps reminding me not to panic and to take deep breaths. My thanks to all of you for granting me this singular and unforgettable honor. With great joy I join with Harry Danziger, our new Vice President, and with Don, Jody, Shelley, Alice and all of our board members as our term of service begins.

Traditionally this is the night when a new CCAR president sets forth hopes and proposals, new projects for our members to do. My first and deepest hope, though, is less about doing than about being. Maybe you've seen the cartoon that appeared some years ago in the *New Yorker*. It was entitled "James Joyce's Refrigerator," and it showed a note stuck with a magnet to the great writer's refrigerator door. The note said, "To Do: 1)Call bank 2)Dry cleaner 3)Forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race 4)Call Mom."

I immediately identified – because the cartoon captures the disjointed, fragmented nature of our lives as rabbis. We are, like everyone else, immersed in the mundane, but our work requires us to rise on a regular basis to creative heights and to plumb spiritual depths. Writing, teaching, preaching and counseling – all these are merely skills and techniques we employ. Our central purpose is to nourish and inspire – to help others find their way to Torah and to God.

So where does James Joyce get the *koach* to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race? Probably not from his trips to the dry cleaner's and the bank. And how, in the whirl of our daily activities, fulfilling and rewarding as they are, do we grow a soul that can inspire others?

Our public role as rabbis must rest on the foundation of our private religious life. Without that foundation, we become hollow men and women – insubstantial in our learning, inauthentic in our deeds, and, ultimately, inadequate to our calling. That hollowness is

my greatest fear. I run around as much as any rabbi I know, and I am not looking for anyone to give me yet another task I have to do. What I am seeking for myself, and for all of us, is the *koach* to stop running and stand still.

Kos y'shuot esa uv'shem Adonai ekra. Prior to the speech is the silence; prior to action is stillness and reflection; prior to calling out the Name is the holding of the cup. Before we are ready to proclaim the Name of our God to others, we must find a way to be alone with ourselves. *Kos y'shuot esa...* Indeed, the holding of this cup in stillness is our very salvation.

I am talking, then, about developing an inner life – about personal prayer, about seeking the Holy One, and quiet hours inside a book, and the solitude that is essential for a life of clarity and integrity. All of us need help to do this. We need support from our lay people, and we will have to find a way to explain to them why rabbis need to nourish their souls. We need help from the leadership of our movement – a clear statement, not only from our colleague Eric Yoffie, but from UAHC lay leaders, endorsing the value of this "nonproductive" rabbinic work. We are fortunate that the CCAR's Task Force on Spiritual Leadership, chaired by Jim Bennett, is working to provide us with the tools we need to develop our souls.

Most of all, we need help from one another. Each of us needs a small circle of trusted and caring friends we can talk to about the struggle to stop running and stand still. We can help each other find the self-discipline to take this supremely difficult step.

I am using the language of discipline, because, left to our natural inclinations, we will never take on what one writer calls "the covenant of time" – the commitment of regular time to private prayer, reflection and study. "Be assured of this," writes Richard Foster. "Everything will try to pull you away from this sacred time. Your phone will ring... Someone will knock at your door. You will suddenly have an urgent need to do something you have left undone for years. In that split second you alone will decide whether you will hold steady in the inner sanctuary of the heart or rush out of the holy place, tyrannized by the urgent" [*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (Harper/San Francisco, 1992)].

Kos y'shuot esa, u'vshem Adonai ekra. First comes the stillness, and then comes the calling out. How shall we use the gift of our rabbinic voices, and our power to speak out in the world?

Rosh Hodesh Nisan falls in the week that begins tonight. And so we are taught: "One who goes out in the days of Nisan and sees blossoming trees says: "Adonai our God,... You have created beautiful creatures and beautiful trees for us to delight in them." The blessing may be recited, says one commentator, only over fruit trees, and only when they flower, before they have borne fruit [*Be'erHeitev*].

Those who live in this city, where hundreds of Japanese cherry trees explode into pink and white blossoms each spring, grasp intuitively the meaning of the Nisan blessing. In the month of Pesach, it celebrates renewal and rebirth.

But more than that, the Nisan blessing is a celebration of hope. It is the blossom we look for, and the blossom we bless – the flower pregnant with the fruit, the first sign of the fulfillment to come. So it is that in Nisan we take note of beginnings – those that, carefully cultivated, will in time yield a lavish harvest. Beautiful and fragrant are the blossoms on the tree, but fragile as well – quick to drop off and die. Intoxicated by the promises of spring, we dare not forget the labor required to bring them to fruition.

I do not mean to be cryptic in my meaning. I speak in metaphors because literal language cannot convey the depth of my amazement at the greatest and most beautiful miracle of our time. I speak of the State of Israel, first flowering of our redemption.

We are the generation privileged to live in the time when the Jewish people has come back to life, its dry bones risen from the grave. The pain and sadness of Israel's present struggles – and they are great – must never obscure the drama of this extraordinary historical moment. What Ezekiel envisioned in a dream, we are all alive to see: the shattered House of Israel standing on its feet. We are witnesses to resurrection and rebirth.

One who goes out in Nisan and sees the flowering trees must not fail to say a blessing, must not fail to recognize the spring, must not fail to cultivate and nourish emerging life. We who are alive this day to witness the miracle of Israel have an awesome task: to labor until the harvest comes in.

We share with all lovers of Israel the urgent sense that we are charged with her survival. But as Reform Jews we sense another imperative as well. There on the soil of Eretz Yisrael a new kind of Judaism struggles to be born: one that is firmly anchored in Torah, but meets the modern world with an open mind; one that cherishes a distinctive identity, but greets its neighbors with an open hand.

This is the antidote to narrowness and bigotry, to rigid and intolerant fundamentalism, to the religious coercion that has cast the Torah into disrepute and led so many Israelis to turn away from our faith. This is the Judaism we affirm for ourselves, and long to share with our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The trees are blossoming today. Our movement has begun to flower, in a spectacular show of color and vitality. Progressive congregations are springing up throughout the country. The needs are enormous; Israeli Jews are hungry for what we have to offer. Incredibly, thirty-five Israeli students are preparing for the rabbinate at HUC in Jerusalem. These new teachers and spiritual leaders will transform the face of the land; they will shape the very soul of Israel.

But this will not happen unless we give them the resources that only we can provide. We all know what is needed: to build the institutions of our movement so that these new Israeli rabbis can do what they are being trained to do. It means subsidizing rabbinic salaries and developing congregational and educational positions in which they can serve. It means investing our effort and money so progressive Jewish values can flourish in the Jewish state.

No one will do this work except us, the leaders of Reform Judaism in North America. Only we understand the challenges our movement faces in Israel. Only we understand the power of this historical moment, and the opportunity we have to do something magnificent. And only we have the power to mobilize our communities – to show them why Israel matters, and why Progressive Judaism in Israel is urgently important to us.

We have talked about doing this for years. And we have had many other critical needs that demanded our attention, and many reasons why it wasn't the time to act. But Israel needs us now. Our colleagues, struggling to do their sacred work – our sacred work – in a crippled and devastated economy, need us as they have never needed us before.

Less than a third of us have contributed to Rav L'Rav – a CCAR program that allows us to donate directly to rabbinic salaries in Israel. Before we can, in good conscience, ask our lay people for their support we must make the commitment ourselves. And we must ask them – for our greatest power, as rabbis, derives from the lives we touch through the congregations and institutions we serve. Reform rabbis in UAHC congregations alone have access to 350,000 households. Just under 10% of them are members of ARZA/World Union, paying ten cents a day, the \$36 a year required to join the only organization that works to promote Progressive Judaism in Israel.

A number of our members have taken leadership in raising significant dollars for Israel through individual donors – *yasher koach* to all of them. But less than a third of UAHC congregations are on the ARZA check-off system, and of those, only a few – perhaps 25% – promote ARZA membership in a serious and meaningful way. This is the system we have chosen to support our Progressive movement worldwide. It is voluntary in nature, dependent on the freewill offerings of North American Reform Jews. Its effectiveness depends entirely on our ability to educate and inspire our constituents to join ARZA. A focused effort on our part, a modest donation on their parts, could translate into millions of additional dollars to build our movement.

Behold, the winter has passed...the flowers appear on earth. This is the season we have waited for; this is our chance to give life to the values we say we embrace, and now we must bring in the harvest.

Kos y'shuot esa, u'vshem Adonai ekra. So tonight we lift the cup, brimful of blessing, in the way our tradition suggests – in the palm of our hand, with fingers wrapped around it like the petals of a rose. For the beautiful, blossoming rose, say the opening words of the Zohar, stands for Knesset Yisrael, the living body of the people Israel. We take up

the cup, uniting words of Torah, yearning for God, and commitment to our people – and for one brief moment the disjointed parts of our lives join in perfect harmony.

In a Yiddish drama by Y.L Peretz called "*Di Goldene Keyt*," a rabbi refuses to make Havdala. He defies the law, determined to prolong Shabbat, the time of peace and contentment, and thus to force the coming of *mashiach-zeit*. For us, no such resistance is possible. The stars are out, Shabbat has ended, and the new week stands before us, awaiting the sound of our voices and our hands uplifted to serve. "Now we drown the candle in the little lake of wine. The only light we have is kept inside us. Let us take it home to shine in our daily lives." [Marge Piercy, "Havdala", from *The Art of Blessing the Day*]