

That Holiness May Blossom

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I would like to preface my talk this morning with some well-deserved thank-yous—most of them to members of the CCAR staff who have made this Convention and indeed everything we do possible. Before that, though, I would like to acknowledge an important event in the Jewish year—this is the Bar Mitzvah year of Mazon, the inspired creation of Leonard Fein, Irving and Susan Cramer. I would like to ask Susan, the Executive Director, and Irving, the Senior Executive Director, to please rise and accept our hearty mazel tov for raising the consciousness of all of us, and for assisting the *Ribono shel olam* to be truly *ha-zan et ha-kol*.

To turn now to the CCAR—all of us made an inspired choice 5 years ago, when under the presidency of Shelly Zimmerman and the vice-presidency of Shim Maslin, we chose Paul Menitoff to be our executive vice-president. An impassioned, principled, courageous rabbi, he has turned the office and this organization around—and he is an incredible partner to work with. Let's show Paul how much we love him. Nor could this Conference function without the wise and devoted work of Arnie Sher, who has without any additions to his staff, greatly expanded the scope of his work in the past couple of years to encompass professional mentorship as well as placement. Thanks also to Elliot Stevens, whose work in publications has helped put us in the black the past two years, who is the Tanna Rishon for the history of this Conference; and to Shelly Limmer who oversaw the move to new quarters, who manages our financial life and so much else. In addition to the rest of the support staff, I would particularly like to acknowledge Dale Panoff for all her wonderful, good-humored assistance. Please thank them all. I would also like to thank the indefatigably creative Elaine Zecher and her Convention Program Committee—and to extend a special appreciation to my old friend, colleague and successor, our vice-president Chuck Kroloff, who played such a crucial role in ensuring that we would be in close touch with our Israeli colleagues during all the months of the Neeman Commission, and who led a spectacular Jubilee mission of colleagues to Israel earlier this year. Chuck, *y'yasher koch'cha*..

Our gathering place for this Convention reminds me that when Carol and I got married, our mutual attachment to A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* led us to explore it for a quotation appropriate to the momentous event we were celebrating. What we found—and used—was what seemed to us both a remarkable definition of *kedushah*—the possibility of transforming the ordinary into the holy.

" 'When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,' said Piglet at last, 'what's the first thing you say to yourself?' "

"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting *today*?" said Piglet.

"Pooh nodded thoughtfully. 'It's the same thing,' he said."

We have been much occupied with questions of *kedushah*—and *kiddushin*—this year, and of wrestling with how gay and lesbian colleagues and laypeople can share in the transformative aspect of a ritual celebrating a couple's commitment to each other. The compromise we reached for this convention—recognizing the reports of our two committees—Responsa and Jewish Sexual Values—as part of the spectrum of opinion of this Conference without polarizing ourselves into a vote between them, is to me a testament to the regard all of you are showing to the importance of our relationships to each other, of our *chaverschaft* with each other. While many of you reacted to this decision with relief, many others reacted with disappointment, and I am sorry about that. As one who believes that this Conference should stand up for what it believes, should take leadership in this Movement, I regret that a number of you believe that we have backed away from leadership. As I will try to indicate in the course of these remarks, I think we have exercised another kind of leadership, a leadership I hope we can learn from, a leadership that is sensitive to the beliefs of a wide enough panoply of our members that when we help to shape the direction of this Movement we do so with a lot of strength behind us..

My mother, a very wise woman, once taught me a Yiddish phrase about rabbinic leadership. "*Der Rov meg*," she instructed me—literally, the Rabbi may—people will accept interventions in their lives from rabbis that they often won't accept from other people. We have to be careful not to misuse this permission, she warned me—but we also have to be careful not to be so cautious that we miss an opportunity to help change people's lives, to help them transform its too-frequent ordinariness into something that can be *kadosh*.

Holiness in Culture: The Roots of Reform

Meeting here in the shadow of the Disney empire reminds us of the power so many people in public settings have to transform society. Walt Disney and those who have followed him liberated figures in children's literature from the dusty, scary tomes of the Brothers Grimm into household images—even into household toys. In recent years Disney has used its influence to stand up for the rights of its gay and lesbian workers in a way that has earned it the wrath of the Southern Baptists—and indeed, as the Southern Baptists go after more and more groups in this society, from Jews to gays to women, it is becoming a badge of honor to oppose them.

But in other ways the Disney organization has used its influence to humble culture, while still other media organizations have degraded it. How simple-minded Disney's Pooh is compared to A.A. Milne's! How sweetsy Disney's Mary Poppins is compared to the complex woman whom P.L. Travers created! Who nowadays is following in the

footsteps of *Fantasia*, in a time when support for classical music, serious theatre, uplifting and troubling art, seems to grow less each year? What we see more and more is not the suggested violence, the subtle sexuality, of great literature, drama and classic film, but an oeuvre that has married sex and violence, rubbing our faces in writhing, bloody bodies on the evening news and the latest box-office hit. To meet in Anaheim should lead us to reflect on what so much of popular American culture—and therefore world culture—has become as we prepare to close out this violent century. If Pooh's kidnappers have rendered him powerless to transform the ordinary into the holy, are we who grew up on him to stand idly by? Do we Reform Jews in 1998 have anything to say to the degradation of culture we see all around us?

And some of you may be thinking—why should we say anything? When our people are crying out for a spiritual transformation that can help them understand why they should continue to be Jewish in this open society, when so many of them are mired in subservience to the material parts of their lives, when in the State of California alone great social experiments like the Master Plan for Higher Education, Affirmative Action, openness to immigrants and an effective but misrepresented program of bilingual education have all been trampled underfoot—why should we be concerned about popular culture? Is that a Jewish concern?

Is culture a Jewish concern? Have we Reform rabbis forgotten our roots? The founders of our Movement—Hegelians, most of them—believed that the culture of the waning 19th century was at the highest possible peak, indeed, as the Pittsburgh Platform writers called it, "a universal culture of heart and intellect." They seem to have believed that God's will was making itself known through this elevated culture, and that the best a Reforming Judaism could do was to try to keep pace with it.

We did keep pace with it, indeed, we embraced it—to the degree that as it cheapened with the waning of the 20th century, it became difficult for us to extricate ourselves from it. But if we could not save Winnie the Pooh or rescue the evening news, we do not have to silently suffer assault after assault on the cultural world we used to live in. We can stand up for *kedusha be-tarbut*—the possibility of holiness in culture. When our new Joint Commission on Interreligious Affairs begins operation in the fall, I propose that one of its chief priorities be to explore with Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy approaches to national networks, filmmakers and others that will raise the level of cultural options now available—without, of course, infringing on First Amendment guarantees. I would urge you to begin such interreligious conversations in your own communities as well, so that around this continent producers of mass culture can know that there is a serious constituency of religiously liberal North Americans who will support non-violent, uplifting, thoughtful offerings on the small and large screen. I would also urge you to explore ways to encourage your members to support your symphony orchestras, choruses, jazz and dance groups, and art museums. Perhaps a universal culture of heart and intellect might once again be within our grasp.

Holiness in Society: Spirituality and Social Justice

And what shall we do about the assault on public education, on immigration, on those lingering in the netherworld between work and welfare, on hopes for equality between women and men, on all those who don't look or speak like the people who wield power on this continent? I fear that we Reform Jews are less actively committed to social concerns than we used to be—and while for a long time we erred in seeing social justice as the mainstay of our movement's religious life, I believe too many Reform Jews today err in seeing social justice as irrelevant to our religious life. We need to address *kedusha be-chevra*, the possibility of holiness in society.

In the fall, as you know, our President's Kallah will begin exploring Reform approaches to *kashrut* from several perspectives: deepening the *kedusha* in our lives, supporting the cause of those who toil to harvest our food, attending to issues of *tzar ba-aley chayim* [the pain of living creatures] and *bal tashchit* [the ban on needless destruction]. I hope that this will not only open up the possibility of Jewish dietary practices among Reform Jews, but that it will also create a model of blending issues of spirituality and social concern that we can carry into other areas like the clothes we wear, the shelters we live in, the uses we make of money, the roles of serious learning and action, and the nature of family intimacy. I hope that the *CCAR Journal* will publish some of the products of the President's Kallah, and as the *May Newsletter* announced, I urge anyone who is interested in participating in this opening discussion to contact Paul Menitoff or myself. Here too, I urge you to open up these issues in your home communities through study, discussion and action.

Holiness in Mitzvot: Liberation from Pittsburgh

But wait a moment—Reform approaches to *kashrut*? To clothing? How can such words be uttered by the descendants of the Pittsburghers who said, "We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state"? (*Pittsburgh Platform, Fourth Principle*) We can utter these words because we are Reform Jews who believe in ongoing revelation. We can utter them because we know that our people are crying out to elevate their lives in a culture so fraught with banality and violence. We can utter them because in a world of vegetarian restaurants, macrobiotic cuisine, low-fat, low sodium, and low cholesterol, there is no reason why we should not offer our cuisine of high *kedusha* and high mealtime *kavanah*. We no longer all eat the same way or dress the same way (you're in Southern California—look around!)—why should we not open ourselves to the ongoing revelation of the diversity of North American life: that diet should reflect beliefs, clothing should reflect ideals? Why should we not open ourselves to the *kedusha be-mitzvot*, the spirituality revealed in mitzvot we too often felt were not meant for us?

When the Pittsburgh Platform declared, regarding the *mitzvot* of food and dress, that "their observance in our days is rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation," we have tended to forget that they said, "in our days." The Columbus Platform modified this with its phrase, "the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value," and the Centenary

Perspective said, "within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge." Despite these qualifications, the denunciations of Pittsburgh are what still resonate to most Reform Jews, and if we want to be true to Pittsburgh's "in our days," I believe that in *our* very different days we have to liberate our people from the view that if they are Reform they should not keep kosher or wear special religious garb.

Holiness in Our People: Toward a New Set of Principles

How shall we liberate them? Not by saying, "you have autonomy"—for despite the Centenary disclaimer, "based on commitment and knowledge," our people have tended to understand, "You have autonomy" to mean, "You don't have to." Nor shall we liberate them by saying, "You must"—for to lay out a separate Reform list of required observances and beliefs is to say that whatever is not on that list is unnecessary. Rather, we need to act on my mother's advice to rabbis—*Der Rov meg*. We should tell people, "you may," you *may* engage in these ancient rites, meaning—you have permission. To light the way for our people into the 21st century, we need to offer them a new statement of Reform principles, and I hope this week you will all join in the discussion of the draft Ten Principles for Reform Judaism, which after a year's discussion and revision, I hope we shall adopt next year when we return to Pittsburgh as this century draws to a close. As you will see from the discussions, these Principles are intended to give direction to our movement and to include people, as has been our movement's way, and not, as some Reform Jews fear, to exclude them.

What other issues would a new set of Principles address? The Centenary Perspective spoke of the balance between the "claims of Jewish tradition" and "individual autonomy." Many of us no longer believe that we are really autonomous—we know that many factors lie behind every choice we make. I think there is a different balance, indeed, a different tension. It is reflected in Rabbi Akiba's paradox: *ha-kol tzafui, u-reshut netunah*—all is seen by God, is part of God's plan, yet authority, free will, is given. When we all stood at Sinai—an event we re-enact each year at Confirmation—we heard the Torah revealed both as individuals and as members of the community of Israel. Sometimes we call that community *Knesset Yisrael*—which in the mystic tradition is equivalent to the most approachable of the sephirot, that of Malchut, or Shechina. Sometimes it is called Klal Yisrael—a more secular, worldly, connotation. But whatever name we use., the Community of Israel is one of the sources for our understanding of the will of God. We need to open ourselves to the *kedusha be-Yisrael*, the holiness of our membership in the Jewish people.

As Reform Jews we have often resisted listening to Klal Yisrael, to Knesset Yisrael—but "in our days," I believe we need to overcome that resistance. Klal Yisrael cannot be the only ear through which we hear Sinai's call—and when we affirmed patrilineal descent in 1983 we demonstrated that we were not always bound by the interpretations of Klal Yisrael. This year, part of the reasoning of colleagues who did not want to vote on same-gender officiation was that they were not ready to stand again in opposition to Klal

Yisrael. For we need to remind ourselves that Klal Yisrael is not some other group of Jews—we are part of that Klal as well, and so we influence the direction of Klal Yisrael too. We are part of Knesset Yisrael, and Knesset Yisrael is the embodiment of the Shechina. We hear God's word as individuals, who stood at Sinai and stand anew in our days; and we hear God's words as part of the people Israel as well. What we hear need not always be in tension—they may sometimes be in harmony.

Holiness in Peace-Seeking: Toward Orthodox Jews

This is one of the lessons that I, at least, derive from the Torah portion chanted so beautifully this morning. After the confrontation with Korach and his followers, God commanded all the tribes to place their staves in the *Ohel Moed*, announcing that God would show who had been chosen by the staff that sprouted blossoms. As we know, the staff of Aaron blossomed, Aaron whom Hillel would later call *ohav shalom ve-rodef shalom*—Aaron who in the midst of confrontations strove to bring peace. Leadership, I believe God is saying, is the way that finds peace between warring factions—leadership is choosing the staff of *ohav shalom ve-rodef shalom*. Leadership is affirming the *kedusha be-shalom*, the spirituality of seeking peace.

That is the leadership we have exercised with each other in the question of same-gender officiation; it is the leadership I would like us to exercise in other areas as well. I warned you last year at my installation that as a Hillel rabbi I have spent 30 years working with, teaching and learning from Orthodox rabbis—as well as those from other movements. Reform rabbis in the military, health care and prison chaplaincies have had similar experiences. We have enriched each other's lives—and I regret that so many of my colleagues in congregations have not had such experiences. It is one of many reasons why this Conference must work even harder than it has in the past few years to bring colleagues from a variety of rabbinates into active CCAR participation, to learn from us as we want to learn from those in congregations, that we may share our insights into the world in which we exercise our rabbinates—a world in which Knesset Yisrael is a reality, not an abstraction. As one way of showing that the Conference takes rabbis like us seriously, I would like the CCAR to make a concerted effort to reach out to Orthodox rabbis, to talk with each other, to find out who we are, and what we all heard at Sinai. Rather than attacking each other, rather than merely railing at each other over patrilineality or insensitivity to one group or another, let us try to understand how we each are dealing with the issues whose solutions we may abhor, but whose problems we must all confront—are there any problems we can confront together? There will be an opportunity for such conversations at our Pittsburgh convention next year—but until then I would urge all of you, in your own communities and at regional kallot, to do it as well. If we are rebuffed, let's try again; if there is still no response, so be it—but I believe there will be a response, because I think most centrist Orthodox rabbis are as unhappy at the growing schism as we are. In Los Angeles we are trying to bring rabbis from all the movements together around an issue dear to my own heart: to pool the names of college students from all congregations so that Hillels around the country can contact them and help them further their own kind of Jewishness on campus. When it comes to concern for the Jewish growth of college students, all the movements can unite. We can

unite around other causes too, if we will only talk with each other, if we will pick up the staff with *shalom* inscribed upon it.

Holiness in Israel: On Transforming Lives

But we all know that there are times when try as we might, we cannot only pursue peace, but we need to advocate for our cause when others are out to destroy it. To say it another way, to bring the kind of *shalom*, the kind of *kedusha ba-aretz*, our movement has discovered to Israelis who yearn for it, we must be *rodfim* in a very assertive way. And so we did this past year when on weekly phone calls with our MARAM colleagues, we helped them work out our negotiating position on issues before the Neeman Commission, and supported them when they decided to return to court rather than submit to the further undermining of their position by Professor Neeman and the majority of his Commission. Now we must stand with them again as the Israeli Prime Minister threatens to return the Conversion Bill to the Knesset—deceptively sweetened by the inclusion of the Neeman-inspired Beersheva Institute for conversion training in which Reform and Conservative rabbis would participate—but which the Chief Rabbinate has disavowed. On Wednesday we shall be presenting an emergency resolution against the Conversion Bill, which I hope will pass by a very large margin. Our colleagues never agreed to the Neeman proposals, and the inclusion of those proposals in the revised Conversion Bill is an insult to all of Uri Regev and Mickey Boyden's struggles on the Commission.

But we must do more than merely pass a resolution—and convey our displeasure to our local Federation leadership and Israeli Consuls. Ultimately Uri and Mickey and Meir and Kineret and Chupi and Moshe and Michael and Moti and Levi and Naama and Yehoram and Maya—and all those I have omitted—need our commitment to help them raise the money to build and staff their synagogues and centers, so they can reach out to the Israelis who are looking to our Movement to help transform their lives. And to transform the lives of all Israelis, we must do all we can, even from this so often impotent distance, to keep the sputtering peace process from dying out altogether. We cannot only support the cause of Progressive Judaism in Israel, my friends, as essential as that is to Israel's soul; the security of her body needs a Palestinian state rising peacefully alongside her in the context of the Oslo accords so that our two wounded—and too often wounding—peoples can also finally become disciples of Aaron unto each other.

Finally we need to help the staff of Aaron blossom among our colleagues. The same-gender debate has uncovered some of the schisms among our members, as the debate over the gender-sensitive *Gates of Repentance* did last year. In the sessions we shall hold tomorrow, for the rest of this convention, when we return to our regions and our homes, I urge you to reach out to those you disagree with on these and other issues, to reach out to those who want to officiate and those who don't, to those who long to affirm the *kedusha* of their partnerships and to those who feel it is wrong to do so. God created men who love men and women who love women, as well as men and women who love each other. *Hakol tzafui*—let us strive to help each other understand how all our relationships fit into God's plan.

In the shadow of the happy banality of Disneyland, we are reminded how much work we have to do to uncover the *kedusha* in our culture, in society, in the mitzvot, in our people, in peace-seeking, in Eretz Yisrael. Our convention in Pittsburgh falls a day or two after Shavuot, when we shall all have stood again on the holy ground of Sinai. In the secular calendar, it falls in the month of May—the month of "May". In Pittsburgh next year let's say "you may" to our people through a new set of Principles to guide our movement; in the year that will take us to Pittsburgh, let us be guided by the staff that says "Aaron"—*ohav shalom v'rodef shalom*—Make peace, bring the contenders together, let the Community of Israel and the individual Reform Jew kiss. As Pooh might have said—one day, perhaps in our days, they may turn out to be the same thing. Thank you for listening.