

***Shabbat Emor 5783: Chai Society Shabbat, May 5, 2023***

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### **Judaism and its Leaders at an Inflection Point**

Our annual *Chai Society Shabbat*, at which we bless our congregants of longest vintage (pro tip: never say “oldest congregants”), and induct the newest “class” of those who have affiliated for 18 years, prompts me to take us on a walk down memory lane.

This year we look back to 2005, when our newest *Chai Society* members joined the synagogue. At that point, at the age of 32, I had served for two years as WRT’s associate rabbi, working alongside Senior Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Cantor Stephen Merkel of blessed memory, and Rabbi-Cantor Angela Buchdahl. Rabbi Jack Stern and Cantor Joe Boardman, now both of blessed memory, lent their friendship and support.

Times have certainly changed. Among other distinctions, I am now not only the *oldest*, but also the *tallest* member of the WRT clergy.

Don't get too excited. I am soon to be eclipsed by Isaac, who joins our team full-time on July 1st. (I will enjoy lording my temporary and not particularly impressive stature over my colleagues for as long as I can, thank you very much).

But back to 2005. Major headlines included the 2nd inauguration of President George W. Bush, the death of Pope John Paul and election of his successor, Benedict XVI, the terrorist bombings of the London Underground, the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip, and Hurricane Katrina.

Amid all these, one minor headline also caught my eye. From the April 2nd, 2005 edition of the *Washington Post*, it says: "For a Big Conservative Synagogue, a New Style of Rabbi," and the article goes on to declare that, with the hiring of Francine Green Roston, age 36, "A New Jersey synagogue [Congregation Beth El in South Orange] has secured a small place in Jewish history, becoming the first Conservative temple anywhere with more than 500 families to hire a female rabbi since the denomination began ordaining women in 1985...."

The same year, the Conservative Movement was roiled by a debate about whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian clergy, a decision that they reached in the affirmative the following year. Given WRT's own long history of hiring diverse clergy, including clergy who are women, who are gay, and who are Jews of color, it might surprise you to learn that just 18 years ago such matters even made the news; it might also surprise you to learn that the Conservative Movement was not really all that far behind our own Reform Movement, which ordained women beginning in 1972, started admitting openly gay clergy to Hebrew Union College only in 1989, and which hired the first woman to lead a major metropolitan congregation, Rabbi Laura Geller at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, in 1994: less than 30 years ago.

In other words, the rabbinate, and, at the same time, the cantorate, have been changing rapidly and relatively recently. And gender, sexual orientation, and skin color are only a few of the lenses through which to observe and explore this phenomenon. Many other changes—less overt, perhaps, but no less significant—have also transformed the role, definition, and expectations of Jewish clergy, at least in the non-Orthodox world.

The images of cantors and rabbis that I carried into my rabbinate came, as expected, from childhood, growing up at a Reform congregation in Allentown, Pennsylvania: Cantor David Green, portly and jovial, with a bushy black beard and glasses with Coke-bottle-thick lenses and a magnificent baritone voice, who, when I was 10, took me under his wing to study trope, Torah and Haftarah cantillation, and, later, cantorial *nusach*; Rabbi Herb Brockman, also lushly bearded, who spoke with passion and eloquence and who blessed the congregation at the end of the service with a formal benediction, hands extended in the sign of the *Kohen*: “*May the Lord bless you and keep you....*”

They wore black robes and stood on a high *bimah* and we listened politely and raptly to the organ and a choir who sang from a loft, heard but never seen. It was all very impressive.

When I was a teenager, we also affiliated at a Conservative shul in nearby Bethlehem, where I learned to *davven Shacharit* on Shabbat mornings, to refine my skills in *leyning* Torah, and to tutor students for Bar and Bat Mitzvah (a gig that proved to be a whole lot more lucrative than my first after-school job as a Customer Service Representative at Blockbuster Video).

*Blockbuster Video: now there's a sign of how times have changed.*

In a world where you can stream services online (and, hi, we appreciate that you're joining us out there), thank goodness synagogues like ours have not become the Blockbuster Videos of Judaism.

We have not resisted change, but, rather, have found meaningful ways to adapt to the relentless march--more like *sprint*--of technological advancement. After all, as I often remind us, here at WRT, ***Reform*** is *our middle name*, and our embrace of innovation has long distinguished us as a congregation on the vanguard of Jewish life in America.

Still, change, even when necessary, is rarely easy, and I know that I speak for innumerable colleagues as well when I confess that the changes in the rabbinate and cantorate of the last couple of decades (at least in the non-Orthodox world) have oftentimes knocked us off our keel. Many of us Reform clergy shed the robe, lowered the *bimah*, sold the organ, brought the choir out from the loft, picked up

a guitar, and hired a world-famous jazz pianist to lift our voices and our spirits.

And that's just what happened in *this* room; everywhere else, our work and our role has also changed. My first rabbinic mentor, Les Gutterman, at my first pulpit, Temple Beth-El in Providence, Rhode Island, where I served as Assistant Rabbi from 2000-2003, received handwritten pink telephone call memos from an assistant he called his secretary, who also took dictation for his sermons and newspaper articles. In contrast, I was the first rabbi to sign up for Facebook and to use it as a workplace communications tool for reaching high school and college students who had grown up at WRT.

In those days (and yes, it sounds funny even to me to refer to the the year 2000 as “those days,” but still, “those days” applies), the rabbi was perceived to stand not only above the congregation, but also, in significant ways, above the cantor, with highly differentiated roles and responsibilities: cantor sings, rabbi preaches.

And even if this public perception failed to capture the nuanced behind-the-scenes reality of rabbis, cantors, and other leaders, both

lay and professional, working together, it nevertheless contained a kernel of truth.

But that was then and this is now, and cantors today are not merely invested, but *ordained* with the authority to lead communities alongside rabbis. Here at WRT, for instance, *all* of our rabbis *and* cantors not only lead worship and teach, but also preach, conduct weddings and *b'nei mitzvah*, namings and funerals, counsel congregants and represent our congregation in local and national leadership positions.

Just this year, Cantor Kleinman represented WRT at the National Council of AIPAC in Washington, DC, and was recently elected to the Board of the American Conference of Cantors.

Each week she joins me, the temple president, and Executive Director at our leadership conference and participates actively in temple Board and Executive Committee Meetings. When I took sabbatical, Cantor Kleinman served as our senior spiritual leader, managing the clergy team and many of the day-to-day decisions for WRT.

Even as rabbis and cantors have, at least in congregations like ours, begun to share the responsibilities of leadership, we have all seen our perception in the Jewish community shift as well. Over the last couple of decades, rabbis and cantors have become radically more accessible to the community. And as we have come down off the *bimah*--literally and figuratively--congregants have come to know their clergy as human beings, with all the wonderful and beautiful qualities that come with human relationships, as well as the disillusionment that often accompanies the recognition of another's humanity, with all our flaws and frailty.

In the Jewish tradition, clergy, that is to say, spiritual leaders, today's rabbis and cantors, sometimes collectively go by the nickname כלי קודש, *k'lei kodesh*, which means "instruments of holiness."

Originally the term applied, in a literal sense, to the vessels used in the ancient Temple--the utensils used by the *Kohen*, the Israelite Priest, in the sacrificial service; it also applies to things like *kiddush* cups and *Shabbat* candlesticks and *Seder* plates and all sorts of other Judaica you have in your home. But idiomatically, *k'lei kodesh*, "Instruments of Holiness," refers to those who serve as Jewish spiritual leaders.



The original *K'lei Kodesh*, the *Kohanim* or Priests, were subject to Biblical regulations and restrictions that defined and maintained their status as instruments of holiness. They were to be kept from ritual contamination and, on account of this, could not even mourn their dead relatives, death being a primary source of ritual impurity. To this day, as many of you are surely aware, a Jew who derives from priestly lineage, a *Kohen*, may refuse to enter a cemetery, even to bury a parent. These restrictions designed to maintain priestly holiness comprise the several opening verses of this week's Torah portion, *Emor*.

Another way of protecting the holy status of the *Kohen* was by restricting his selection of a wife to a virgin bride from among the Israelite nation--divorcees, widows, harlots, or non-Jews need not apply.

Lest you think that public scrutiny over whom the *k'lei kodesh* may marry is but an arcane relic of an ancient cult, I would draw your attention to a debate that has, from time to time, garnered public attention, including over the past several months and years.

For as long as anyone can remember, Hebrew Union College--our seminary, the training ground for Reform *k'lei kodesh* and other Jewish professionals--has restricted its admission for the rabbinical and cantorial programs based on the religious identity of a candidate's spouse or significant other.

From the website of HUC:

The Reform movement and HUC-JIR share a proud record of reaching out to all who seek to develop their Jewish identity with love and acceptance. Even as our students actively engage in this important work, as rabbis or cantors, we expect them to model a firm and lasting commitment to the Jewish home and the Jewish future through the choices they make in their own family lives. We celebrate the contribution of people of all faiths toward building and sustaining loving Jewish homes, and yet we believe that rabbis and cantors should exemplify a distinct standard of Jewish continuity. Therefore, HUC-JIR will only admit, graduate or ordain candidates who, if in a committed long-term relationship, are in such a relationship with a Jewish partner. It is important that

candidates for our program be aware of this policy at the point of application. We encourage you to speak with an admissions director if you have questions or concerns.

To say the least, students have indeed expressed questions and concerns over the last many years and presently the leadership of the seminary is weighing a possible change in policy, yet to be announced.

Recent decisions by both the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philly and Hebrew College (not to be confused with *Hebrew Union College*), a trans-denominational Jewish seminary in Boston, to admit candidates in marriages or serious relationships with non-Jewish partners, have accelerated and amplified the debate within Reform Jewish circles about HUC's own restrictive policy.

I will not opine here about how I think the decision should go, because I do not wish to exert undue influence on *your* ability to think through the issue; I *will* go so far as to say that the *fact* that this long-standing policy is up for reconsideration is *itself* another sign of the times, a sign of the changing role of *k'lei kodesh*, another indicator that Jewish society is grappling with how much its clergy

should mirror the Jewish practices and family norms of the people we serve, or should adhere to different (that is, more stringent) standards, the same way the *Kohen* and the expectations surrounding his choices were different than for those of an ordinary Israelite.

It's also a sign of the times that, a little over a month ago, New York passed a law, sixteen years in the making, that authorizes any person to solemnize weddings for one day--a shift in the longstanding state law requiring that only duly ordained clergy or permitted government officials preside over weddings.

As a result, the rabbis and cantors of WRT might expect to conduct fewer weddings over the coming years, as more and more couples ask friends to officiate and the unique role of *k'lei kodesh*, at least here in New York, is, as a consequence, diminished.

A few concluding reflections. This Shabbat is, for me, bookended by two celebrations. Just yesterday, I attended the graduation ceremonies of the Hebrew Union College at Temple Emanu-El, that great Reform Jewish cathedral at 65th and 5th, at which degrees were presented to many of my closest friends and colleagues who were ordained in 1998 and who are receiving an honorary 25-year D.D.,

which stands for “Doctor of Divinity,” but about which the inside joke is that it stands for “doctor of durability” or even, “didn’t die.”

These colleagues, including Rabbi Ken Chasen whom I met in rabbinical school back in 1996, Rabbi Laurie Katz Braun, who happened to grow up on the same block as me, and Rabbi Daniel Gropper of Community Synagogue of Rye, all of whom served WRT “back in the day,” and who have toiled in a milieu of Jewish professional service that is changing faster than any of us ever imagined.

And on Sunday morning, the clergy team of WRT will all go back to Emanu-El to witness and celebrate the Ordination of the new class of Reform *k’lei kodesh*, including our own Isaac Sonett-Assor who will be called to the *bimah* to be ordained Cantor (considerably later in the morning than he would have, had he not hyphenated his name when he got married, but what can you do).

These newly minted spiritual leaders face challenges and opportunities that we have only just begun to contemplate. As Israeli historian, philosopher, and best-selling author Yuval Noah Harari wrote just this week in *The Economist*:

What will happen to the course of history when ai takes over culture, and begins producing stories, melodies, laws and religions? Previous tools like the printing press and radio helped spread the cultural ideas of humans, but they never created new cultural ideas of their own. ai is fundamentally different. ai can create completely new ideas, completely new culture.

And so this Shabbat, at least for me, stands between two windows: one that allows us to appreciate the veteran *k'lei kodesh* who have adeptly navigated these challenges and changes in Jewish life, and one that allows us to look ahead with joy, excitement, wonder, and yes, a great deal of uncertainty, at the needs and priorities of the Jewish community and its *k'lei kodesh* in the decades to come.

In order to succeed, both those of us of longer vintage and those for whom Jewish professional service is still an open vista will need to lean into the enduring relevance of Judaism, our unique value proposition, our undying message and mission: to bring holiness into a mundane, often vulgar, world; to transform lives with purpose and vigor; to heal the brokenness in hearts and homes and communities; to live beyond ourselves; to teach and

model Torah in a world deprived of its sustaining wisdom; and above all, to affirm God in a godless era.

What is most important to understand in this moment is that even as the role of *k'lei kodesh* evolves, so do the Jewish people whom we serve.

Indeed, the evolution of one cannot be separated from the evolution of the other.

Together we will ride the current of an accelerating river, the ever-changing and yet eternal river of Judaism, the river of God, Torah, and Israel.