

Making It Up as We Go Along

Shabbat Behar/Bechukotai

May 11, 2018

Mount Zion Temple

Rabbi David Stern

Mazal tov everyone. Congratulations to Mount Zion on turning 162 years old – you look terrific! My congregation in Dallas is only 146 years old, and I am envious of your seniority – mostly because for the past 12 years, you have had the privilege of never again having to say the word “sesquicentennial.”

Mazal tov, too, on this joyous occasion of the 20th anniversary of the inspiring, caring, visionary and down to earth leadership of your very own dynamic duo, Rabbi Adam and Cantor Rachel Spilker.

When Rabbi Spilker first invited me to be part of this celebration, I jumped at the opportunity because of all the ways I have admired his leadership not only here in St. Paul, but in our national Reform movement. The Brit Olam, the central organizing document of our movement’s current social justice efforts, simply wouldn’t exist and wouldn’t have been implemented without him.

And Cantor Spilker’s creative work – in deepening spirituality through music, in leading our whole movement in prayer at the URJ Biennial, in redefining what a cantor can be, and of course in leading the family’s way to Saint Paul in the first place, has been its own great gift. Add to that the talent of the rest of your clergy and staff team and outstanding lay leadership, and you have ample cause for celebration – not only on the state occasions, but every day.

The publicized theme for my remarks tonight is “How is Reform Judaism Saving Judaism?” Rabbi Spilker and I cooked up that title months ago, and the truth is, neither of us

really liked it – because Judaism probably doesn't need saving, though Jews might. But we thought the title was just vague enough, and perhaps just intriguing enough, to create the space to focus on whatever might be important once this night finally rolled around.

So I am now going to suggest a different title, related to an additional anniversary we observe this year. Because 2018 is the year of the Leonard Bernstein Centennial—we will mark the 100th anniversary of his birth on August 25. Bernstein once defined a great performance this way: “If I don't become Brahms or Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky when I'm conducting their works, then it won't be a great performance... the only way I know that I've done a really good performance is when I'm making the piece up as I go along... as if I have the feeling that I'm inventing it for the very first time.”

That strikes me as a pretty good description of this gift we call Reform Judaism. Jewish practice, Torah and the teachings of our sages are our core composition, and it is our job to approach this ancient wisdom with the same sense of discovery and creativity that Bernstein brought to a performance of Brahms. Our charge is to stay true to the original, while at the same time animating it with our own understanding and drive.

And thus my real title for tonight: “Reform Judaism – Making It Up As We Go Along.” (Now you see why we never could have put it in the publicity.) Out of context, “making it up as we go along” seems to confirm every bad stereotype about us - that we are lazy assimilationists, cavalier with the tradition and seduced by society. But in the Bernstein context, making it up as we go along is the highest spiritual standard. When we Reform Jews are at our best, we neither replicate nor replace the tradition – we discover it anew: with integrity and invention, producing new vistas of meaning in our hearts and our world. And as Rabbi Gunther

Plaut *alav hashalom* taught from this bima decades ago, that creative imperative is not only the lifeblood of Reform Judaism, but of Judaism itself.

Reform Judaism has always embraced the task of reinvention, and that task has changed with the challenges we've faced in each era. It's probably in the nature of things that each generation feels its own challenges are unprecedented, and our generation is no different. No, your congregation and mine do not face the challenges of our nineteenth century founders, nor of a generation going off to war, nor of 1950's anti-Semitism, nor the upheaval of the 1960's. But the challenges we do face are profound and significant, and summon us to Bernstein-like levels of imagination and heart.

You know the litany. Society is fragmented, politics are polarized, the Israel that used to be the one thing we could all agree upon is now the thing we sometimes disagree most about.

Our kids are stressed out or shut down, bundled into little packages of achievement who start thinking of college at 12, their major at 15, and choose their summer activities based on what will look good on a resume. And we all know that social media present a series of double-edged swords: a source of amazing connection and dangerous isolation; our kids have access to a world of information, and can fall into some pretty dark echo chambers as a result. How will we reinvent Judaism, make it up anew, for a world in which terms like friend, community and relationship have been radically redefined?

And we their parents aren't a whole lot better. We take our laptops to bed; even if we don't text while driving, we text while passengering, which is not exactly conducive to meaningful conversation with the person behind the wheel or our kids in the backseat. My wife and children and I once dashed in and out of a family gathering because we had multiple commitments that afternoon. As we headed out the door, my nephew Sam, then about eight,

looked up and said: “They’re not a family, they’re Bobbleheads.” And we have plenty of Bobblehead company.

Some say that the very thing we celebrate tonight – a vibrant congregational community – is itself at risk. The studies tell us that more and more people are not joiners – that they value experience far more than they value institutional affiliation. In a virtual world, what does it mean to have a religious organization with a building and a street address and a physical threshold that marks whether you are in or out?

As uncomfortable as these questions might make us, we should embrace every one of them with the passion of Bernstein on the podium. In the best of Reform tradition, to make up the piece as we go along - to bring the Jewish tradition into a full dance with the challenges of the day.

Because who is better equipped to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century than a Reform movement founded upon creativity and adaptation? If a new generation is saying “show me the meaning,” who is better qualified to create meaning than religious communities like yours, where those seekers can find a spirituality of song and word, the soul’s stillness and embodied prayer?

Because when we are at our best, our Reform communities are places where soaring creativity is grounded in the deep wisdom of our ancient texts, and rabbis and cantors do not run from the issues of the day, but reflect on them, out loud and humbly and with a sense of invitation. Where Jews of color and LGBTQ Jews, interfaith families and singles, teens who know who they are and teens who are trying to figure it out, all find themselves valued and loved.

Creativity, Torah, justice, inclusion – that is and has always been our Reform DNA, and it is more important now than ever.

Who is better positioned to address the ills of fragmentation than our communities, with our emphasis on both relationship to tradition and relationship to one another? When a Musar group gathers to share text and heart, that is not just a program, it is a reknitting of the frayed fabric of the society in which we live. When a Reform congregation helps people understand that Shabbat is not a day of onerous restriction, but the Sinai voice of our tradition telling us Bobbleheads to slow down; when a rabbi or cantor meets with a wedding couple to suggest that Judaism invented date night a long time ago – we call it Shabbat – and saying blessings and offering gratitude in the light of Shabbat candles might deepen your relationship more than the next Avengers movie (and I love Avengers movies). When we bring Shabbat possibilities into people's lives, we are offering healing as powerful as any Mi Shebeirach.

Who better than we to recognize the spiritual power of genuine relationship in an increasingly transactional culture? When a congregation offers small group opportunities so that people can feel at home in a large place, when instead of saying how can we get 100 people to this event we say how can we get ten groups of ten, when we acknowledge that our congregations have sometimes felt impersonal and double down on what it means to be welcoming and curious, that's not just hospitality, it's theology – the assertion that God shows up in how we show up for each other.

When we tell the truth about ourselves – about the struggles of our loved ones with substance abuse, about the burden of mental illness, about caring for aging parents – something sacred stirs.

When we tell the truth about ourselves - that our Jewish learning has become too thin, our Jewish practice too low on the ladder of priority, and seek creative ways to move Judaism more powerfully towards the center of our lives, we refute those negative stereotypes of Reform Jews as minimalists, a stereotype we ourselves have been too willing to believe, and instead manifest the best of a Reform tradition of rootedness and response.

And most of all, and this especially here at Mt. Zion where it is your hallmark – who better than we to remind the world, and to remind ourselves, that our society needs the Reform movement’s enduring focus on social justice now more than ever? Especially in politically polarized times; especially when norms of decency have withered, and every potential debate devolves into mudslinging and worse, the voice of Isaiah and Jeremiah calling us to our better selves is Reform Judaism’s most profound and vital offering.

One of the most harmful byproducts of the contemporary culture is that toxic polarization has given argument a bad name, and stilled our voices, whatever our place on the political spectrum. When everything becomes a hot button, when everything becomes a third rail, we simply avoid argument altogether, and that may be most dangerous of all. Because while we’re busy avoiding unpleasantness, too many people still go hungry, and too many people can’t afford medication, and too many people hide in the shadows, and too many children are victims of gun violence.

The genius of Reform Judaism has been our willingness to both integrate into the surrounding culture, and to cry out against its injustices. My father Rabbi Jack Stern *alav hashalom* used to say that to be a Reform Jew means to have one foot in the world, and one foot at Sinai – not to get too cozy with the norms of the day – to stand a bit apart, and never

lose the lens of morality and justice as our primary means of seeing, that seeing the first step towards critiquing and healing the world in which we live.

The Torah is not a policy manual, and we will not always agree on how its values will be manifest, and that is well and good. But if we allow polarization over policy to silence the higher call to morality and justice, cause us to lose our footing at Sinai, then we are lost. Our congregations, more than any other institution on the American landscape, have the potential and the responsibility to challenge people to reach higher than the mud pile, maybe even to the mountaintop.

To fulfill that potential, in the best of our tradition, we are going to have to figure out how to have difficult conversations. We Jews are the descendants of the Abraham who argues with God. We are the people of the Talmud, which records and honors dissenting arguments. “Two Jews, three opinions” is not just a joke, it’s an ethos.

Too often, we have confused community with homogeneity, saying that my community is the place where everybody is just like me. Instead, I would suggest that community, and our Reform Jewish faith community in particular, is the place where I come to practice being with people who are not like me, where we share such powerful bonds of values, story, history and hope, that we can tolerate disagreement on the issues of the day. Even and especially when it comes to Israel, we have to find a way to talk to each other. Because if there is more than one way to love America, then there is surely more than one way to love Israel, and Israel needs all the love it can get.

So from all of us at the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *mazal tov*, Mount Zion, on this Shabbat of celebration, and *mazal tov* to Adam and Rachel. But there is one more anniversary coming, and one more mountain. Because with Shavuot next Saturday night, we will

observe the anniversary of our standing at Mt. Sinai – the annual recommitment to reinvent Torah, to make the ancient call to justice and compassion new in our lives.

How blessed you are to stand at that mountain of promise again and again with this community, for 162 years and counting; how blessed you are to stand there each day with these beloved leaders, for twenty years and counting; how blessed you are in each other. May you have the wisdom and the courage to keep the desert mountain timeless, to keep it moving. May you find deep strength and shining spark – in your relationship with the Holy One, in your relationship with each other. As a new decade of sacred leadership begins, may you make it up as you go along. Shabbat Shalom!