

## “Joy in the Rabbinate”

*Dear Congregants: The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) asked me to contribute a brief article for their fall newsletter on the subject of “what brings you joy in your rabbinate.” I share it with you here. Granted, this is not a Chanukah article or a commentary on the most recent spate of anti-Semitic incidents in our vicinity, or even a reflection on our national drama. We all have much to talk about as we enter the holiday of “light in the midst of darkness.” Yet this piece calls to mind another important aspect of our shared experience, namely, the comforting of mourners even as world events swirl around us. Whatever transpires “out there,” we are obligated to care for one another close to home. This, too, is Chanukah, literally “rededication.” LB*

When rabbinical students or potential candidates for the rabbinate ask me what brings me joy or satisfaction as a rabbi, I keep revisiting the painful image of standing at a cemetery with a family of mourners. Sleet is falling. The mourners are staring into a deep, muddy hole in the ground. Their loved one’s body is in the box at the bottom of the hole. I turn out to be the one person who can hold them together at that instant, who can help them turn this moment of indescribable grief into an opportunity to seal the meaningfulness of their entire life together. To bring them a sort of “joy,” if you will.

Later, it will be the crew of dedicated congregants who “hold” the mourners – with meals, visits, shiva minyans, and every imaginable form of support, far beyond anything the rabbi can do singlehandedly. Still, there’s a role for the rabbi, and it’s a role that affords the rabbi an indescribable “nachas” – a light in the darkness.

We rabbis accomplish this through our compassion, yes, but also through our experience with morphing the ancient liturgy around the unique needs of these mourners. This is something we are “good” at, and it brings us profound satisfaction *while we are doing it*, as well as upon reflection afterward.

The same is true at “joyous” life cycle events, of course. All rabbis agree that a standard wedding is no less fraught with anxiety than a funeral. I admit to feeling a sense of satisfaction when I know I have helped all of the players at the wedding to transcend their fears (and often their palpable dislike for one another) and come together around the higher purpose of experiencing sacredness, covenant, and shared love. They say complimentary things to me, all of which I appreciate, but my real joy comes from knowing I helped them get along with each other at that crucial moment.

My local colleagues in the ministry (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Zen, and more) report similar experiences, leading me to realize that the rabbinate’s joys and travails are not unique to us. The difference might lie in our knowing that each time we rabbis help our people navigate

these liminal moments, we are also imprinting them with the imagery of the greater Jewish story. We help them connect a particular life moment to the big Jewish picture, and thus to their life-long development as Jews.

Here, my “particular” Jewish self finds nourishment as a rabbi. I went into the rabbinate to help the Jewish people continue our creative journey toward universal *kedushah* (“holiness”). Still, I get great joy from seeing my b’nai mitzvah students and their parents, my wedding couples and their families, my mourners and their comforters – connecting *this* moment back to the *eternal* story of the Jewish experiment. In those instants, I feel fulfilled as a teacher, but I feel *joyous* as a rabbi. I feel I have “brought Jews close” to their deepest Jewish selves.

This is why, when I’m heading off to conduct some Jewish ceremony, my wife always says to me, “bring ‘em close.” As in, “make it as holy as an ancient *korban*” (the Hebrew for “sacrifice,” from the root word “near” or “close”). Close, indeed. And joyous, too, not only for others, but for yourself.