

“It’s A New World Golda!”
Kol Nidre
September 17, 2010
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Man walks up to an anti-Semite and asks: “What do you think of Jews?” “I hate Jews!” replies the anti-Semite. “What do you think of Goldberg,” the man asks the anti-Semite. “Goldberg, my next-door neighbor? Well, he is actually quite a nice guy, salt of the earth, a real sweetheart of a man.” “And what do you think of Cohen?” the man asks the anti-Semite. “Cohen, why I do business with him – as honest and dependable as the day is long – a swell guy, a true pleasure to do business with...” and on and on this goes until the man says, “and what do you think of Jews?” “Oh, I hate Jews!”

Man walks up to a Jew and asks: “What do you think of Jews?” “Why I love Jews!” the man responds. “What do you think of Goldberg?” the man asks. Goldberg? That no-good louse. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him a mean inconsiderate no-goodnick!” “And what do you think of Cohen? “Cohen? Don’t like him either – he is too loud, always thinks he is right – don’t like him, his wife or his kids.” And on and on it goes until the man asks, and what did you say you think of Jews? “Oh I love Jews!”

Now I don’t know how accurate a definition that is of anti-Semitism but I have to tell you – as a definition of who we Jews are – I think it is pretty dead on. I think it was Edna St Vincent Millay who was credited with the quote: “I love humanity – it is just people I hate.”

As a rabbi, I am privileged to stand here and address you, the Jewish people, as an aggregate – to love you and inspire you en masse year after year from this pulpit. But every year after these High Holy Days I descend from this pulpit and I am challenged to love you one by one – as we wrestle with the challenges of your daily lives – and I get to see you each close up – in the best of times and in the worst of times – and the challenge is for me—and for you – to learn to love each other in those moments as well as these - in the midst of the challenges of everyday living as well as the inspired collection we present on this most sacred of days.

On Rosh Hashanah I presented a strategy to help you navigate a divided world – in a world where too often it is about us versus them. Tonight I would like to try and extend that strategy to how we relate to our Judaism and to each other as Jews. To help us be more loving of Jews – as an aggregate and as individuals. To be able to embrace Jews as a community as well as the individual choices that Jews make.

On RH I invited you to predict how based on the strategy I had presented to you – of not reducing the world to us versus them but engaging it as us and them – how you thought I might react to the Chelsea Clinton – Mark Mezvinsky wedding. Interestingly – of those who took the time to share your thoughts with me – and I thank you for doing so – most of you were more interested in sharing your opinions than divining mine – fair enough. I was impressed that of those of you who did share your thoughts with me – understood the inherent tension involved in this issue – if you are successful at convincing a child who is in love with someone who is not Jewish to break up – your success results in a broken heart. If you are unsuccessful – you may have done serious damage to your relationship with that child: “broken hearts or broken family relationships – choose your poison,” as one member beautifully stated it. In responding to the Jewish rituals included at the Clinton/Mezvinsky wedding another member observed: “The Jewish rituals and traditions at the wedding should

not be just token Jewish gestures, present for one occasion, but signs of the creation of a Jewish life together.” And finally a touching note from one of our members who has raised his children with us and been involved in many aspects of our synagogue life – who wrote, “the marriage doesn’t have to have a negative effect on religious upbringing. How would I know? I know because I am not Jewish. I was raised in a religious Catholic home, attended Catholic schools and have not converted to Judaism...however I do feel strongly that if two people of different religious faiths want to marry, they **MUST** decide on the religious upbringing of their children before the marriage takes place.”

Wow! I have to say, I am impressed by the thoughtfulness and sensitivity that so many of our members shared both in taking the time to write and in the sophistication of your thoughts. There are many of you who seemed to appreciate my attempt to find an alternative way to view the world from just seeing everything as a matter of “us” verses “them” – but you also grasped the challenge of applying this rubric to issues that cut to the very core of Jewish identity and survival.

The Clinton/Mezvinisky wedding interests me because I believe in some ways it is a watershed moment in American Jewish life. As one friend put it, “it was the day that Judaism married America.” We may well look back on this wedding as we do on the day that Sandy Koufax decided not to pitch on Yom Kippur, or the day we had a Jewish Vice-Presidential candidate, or the day that Oreo cookies became kosher. These were seminal moments in our perception of who we were and our relationship to this great country. And even if it never rises to that level of importance in our consciousness – it does give us an opportunity to talk about some things that we do need to talk about. As a rabbi I care about the welfare of Chelsea and Marc – but as a rabbi – ultimately I am also concerned about the welfare of Judaism and the survival of our way of life. And the tension that this wedding lays bare – gets to the very heart of the kind of Jews we are and the kind of place I want this to be.

There are three kinds of Jews I meet as I go about my ministrations as a rabbi during the course of the year. And I think there should be a place for all of them and a shul for each of them.

The first type of Jew is the one who insists on doing things his own way. This Jew has no interest in rules and regulations. He is going to do what he wants to do, when he wants to do it – and if we don’t like it – tough. This kind of Jew wants a Rabbi who will bless her choices – whatever those choices may be. I know these Jews, I deal with them every day – and I love them but I am not sure I can be the rabbi they want me to be – these autonomy people.

The second type of Jew is the one who needs things to be in black and white. This Jew is *only* interested in the rules and regulations. He does not want us to change the rules, modify the regulations or tamper in any manner with the way things have been. She just wants to know how she should do it and when it needs to be done – because he wants and needs to do it the right way. I know these Jews as well, I meet them every day – and I love them as well – although here to I am not sure I can be the rabbi they want me to be either - these people of the rules.

And then there is the third type of Jew – those who comprise the vast middle between the first two. These Jews believe that there must be a way of accessing the richness of Jewish tradition without sacrificing our own sense of autonomy and individuality. These Jews understand the value of autonomy *and* the value of rules and search for a way that seeks to combine them.

These Jews believe that Judaism needs to be dynamic as all living things must be – that we are complex, always changing as we interact with our world – and yet there is something in us that is eternal, unchanging – that there is a continuity that binds us with the past as we move forward into the unknowable future. These are truly my kind of Jews – I love them no more and no less than those other Jews – but it is for these Jews that I became a rabbi.

It is not easy to be this kind of Jew – to feel the pull of the past and the lure of the future – to truly value tradition and yet also be willing to embrace change – no it is not easy – but it is possible and it is enormously rewarding. If you love being Jewish – if you believe that as a Jew we are heirs to an ancient and sacred tradition and at the same time privileged to live in a wonderful and miraculous time in human history; if you believe that we have a sacred task to transmit this sacred tradition to a new generation but at the same time believe that we also have a challenge to live in and of this world – then I want to be your rabbi. And if you are this type of Jew then my job is to make this place your place.

As your rabbi, I understand those who see intermarriage as a great and significant threat to the survival of our people. As a Conservative Rabbi, I am not permitted to perform such a marriage. The statistics speak for themselves – some 80-90% of children of intermarriages (and I want to make sure you understand I am speaking only of intermarriages – where there has been no conversion to Judaism) – some 80-90% of those children do not identify themselves as Jews when they grow up. We live after all in a non-Jewish world – it is only reasonable that the future of Jewish identity requires a conscious act of association. It takes enormous effort to produce Jewish kids – Day Schools, Jewish camps, hours upon hours of Religious School and countless holiday celebrations and Shabbat experiences – and while it is possible that children of such marriages will identify as Jews – and I am proud to say we have many such families in our own congregation – they will tell you as the one such person affirmed in the note he wrote to me that it does not happen by itself – it requires concerted effort and commitment to create a Jew – absent that – the default position in our society will be Christian or no religion at all. And what would I say at such a ceremony? My sacred wedding ritual is one that has been developed over thousands of years to unite two Jews in a moment of sacred *kiddushin*. How could I recite half a bracha? Break half a glass? Stand under a *hupah* with only two poles? And what would I do as I shared that moment with a Methodist Minister – would I smile and nod as he invoked the name of Jesus? And blessed the couple in the name of God's only son?

So, I understand those who spoke against such ceremonies as some did in reaction to Chelsea and Marc's this past summer.

But I also understand those who embraced it. Who saw something good and positive in this remarkable moment. The daughter of a president of the United States and the Secretary of State of this great nation was marrying a Jew – and not only was she marrying a Jew but he wore a *tallit* and broke a glass and they were married under a *hupah* and Bill and Hillary were lifted up on chairs – albeit – the Secret Service wouldn't let anyone else but themselves lift their chairs – but what a country – what an incredible country that such a thing could happen. Is there not something here to celebrate? Was not Marc in some way trying to find his way to affirming his Jewish tradition and not abandon it? Was not Chelsea in some way not respecting who he was – who we are – and embracing the beauty of our sacred tradition in a way that had never been done before?

So the Jews of laws and regulations saw this as a moment of sackcloth and ashes – that only highlighted the hypocrisy of an American-Judaism devoid of all rules and boundaries.

And the Jews of autonomy rejoiced in the affirmation of a young couple that was finding its own way – unconcerned with the lines that were crossed and the barriers that were breached.

We are not used to living in a world where *they* like us and some of them even want to marry us. In pre-modern times – Jews lived isolated from the world – in ghettos and shtetls. How we would integrate with *them* – was not a pressing issue for the pre-modern Jewish community. We were more concerned with how we would survive them – we were truly *am yosheyv badad* – a nation and a people who dwelled alone – isolated and separated from the world in which we lived.

But then, the ghetto walls came down. Many of them still hated us – but not all of them did. The great Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem (Shloime Rabinowitz 1859-1916) wrestled with this issue in his wonderful Tevye the Milkman series of stories. Most of us are familiar with this from the adaptation of his stories, which became famous as the Broadway play and later movie – “Fiddler on the Roof.” Each one of Tevye’s daughters represents a different challenge that modernity presented to poor Tevye – the archetypical shtetl Jew. Tevye is aware that his world was crumbling as he wrestled to respond. When his beloved Chava falls in love with Fyedke – the Russian Intellectual – we feel poor Tevye’s pain as he is forced to choose between his daughter whom he loves more than life itself and his entire way of life, which she is ready to abandon.

But more than 150 years later we understand that Chelsea Clinton is not Fyedka. She is not asking Marc to abandon his family or his religion. Good God – they had a *hupah*, he wore a *tallit!* And if Tevye had a painful but simple choice to make – ours is not simple at all. I can almost understand a father who sits *shiva* for a daughter who rejects everything he holds sacred and dear (almost) – but our children are not rejecting us or our tradition – they want to have everything, they want to embrace all things – they reject nothing and want to include everything. They are not turning their backs on us – on the contrary – they are confused and disappointed when I tell them I cannot perform their marriage ceremony. They see their love as a positive thing, a good thing – and do not understand why I can’t endorse it and embrace it with them. Surely Chava though pained by it – must have understood Tevye’s ambivalence. Our children are not only pained – they do not understand our ambivalence.

If you are over 45 years old – look at your children or your grandchildren – they, I am coming to understand – they experience the world very differently than we do. People in their 20’s experience the world as a society without boundaries. It is hard for those of us who schlepped our portable typewriters to college and remember that the cc in our emails actually means carbon copy – and remember what carbon paper actually was – it is hard for us to understand that the internet represents not only a revolution in how we communicate but a transformation of how our children perceive the world in which they live.

It means that inclusivity rather than exclusivity is their primary way of looking at the world.

They look at our traditional Judaism and they do not understand how we can embrace a way of thinking that seems to only know how to divide – Jews from non-Jews, men from woman, gays from straights -- they look at Marc and Chelsea’s wedding and they ask – what’s wrong with a

wedding that includes both traditions, acknowledges both religions and affirms multiple identities?

And I know how poor Tevye must have felt when he was confronted by daughters who challenged everything he held dear, everything he held sacred. And I know I have to do a better job than Tevye did at coming up with a response.

To those parents and grandparents who are sitting here today and hope and pray that their children or grandchildren will marry someone Jewish so that they will have Jewish grandchildren – to those parents who are scared to death that I am now about to undercut everything they have been insisting on when they have preached to their children to marry someone Jewish -- I feel your pain. I am the rabbi for God's sake. I know that the best way to insure the continuity of Jewish living and Jewish life – is through the marriage of two Jews. I know that when the non-Jewish partner is willing to convert – this can be and often is a wonderful boon to Judaism and the Jewish people and many of you know the hours I am willing to put in to help guide a willing convert to find a place amongst our people. Jews of choice – have enriched our people and our synagogue and their own families as they have reminded us that we all need to be Jews by choice if our Judaism is to have any meaning.

As parents, as synagogue and as rabbi – we all need to do more so that our children will know the joys of Jewish living and Jewish life; that it will be as natural to them as breathing – so they will want to marry a Jew like them and create a Jewish life like the one they experienced - for their own children. It is the reason for almost everything we do here. Why we have re-imagined our Religious School and incorporated Family Experiential Education as a core component of our curriculum. It is why we have a Family Life Educator it is why we have created our Machon High School – with even more innovations this year to appeal to our teenagers so they will want to be here and find meaning in being here. It is why I encourage you to send your kids to Schechter Day School and Camp Ramah – because these are remarkable vehicles for transmitting the joy and meaning and vitality of what it means to be Jewish and why we should be Jewish in the 21st century.

But even if we do everything right (and we are far from doing everything right) – the fact is, “It's a new world Golda!” And for all of our best efforts, some of our children are going to come to us and want to marry their version of Chelsea Clinton.

So, how do I respond to a whole generation of young Jews who demonstrate an incredible energy and willingness to embrace their Jewish identity – but in ways we could never have imagined a few years ago. How would I respond to Marc and Chelsea?

My friend and colleague Rabbi Hayim Herring wrote an open letter to Marc and Chelsea with full acknowledgement of his effort, I would like to try my hand at such a letter.

Dear Marc and Chelsea,

Mazel Tov! After all the anticipation and speculation you are now married. And how you managed to maintain your privacy and dignity with such public families is quite remarkable. While much of the response after your wedding was obsessing over the details of what you wore and what you ate, I am more interested in what the future holds for you as a married couple. You invested an enormous amount of time and effort in the details of your wedding and it clearly showed. But while a wedding is truly one of the most significant moments you will

ever experience, your love will last a lifetime and there are some important decisions that need to be made after the wedding.

Both of you, in a public and proud way, drew upon the symbols of your respective faith traditions. I don't presume to know what conversations you've had or decisions you've made about involvement in a religious community. But I hope that you will want to explore participation in the Jewish community – in fact I invite you to do so.

I hope you will choose to have children some day and I hope you will choose to identify as a Jewish family and participate actively in our community. In the spirit of complete honesty, I must alert you to the fact that the strategy you chose for your wedding will be harder to follow should you choose to have children. At your wedding you each chose to affirm your own religious heritage – but if you have children – what will be their heritage? You have proudly incorporated your religious traditions in your wedding – as thoughtful young people, I can't help but conclude that this means that these things matter to you. But raising children in both religions really means that you are raising them with none – and that would truly be a shame. You have already demonstrated that you are willing to meet challenging decisions head on – I hope you will continue to do so with respect to the raising of your children and I hope you will consider identifying as a Jewish family. We are a small people with a proud history that has much to offer you to make your life meaningful and we have contributed much to the enrichment of the world – and with people like you joining our sacred journey – we believe we have much to offer the world in the future.

Your relationship with the Jewish community won't be and can't be a one-way street. The richness you derive from it will be in direct relation to the time and energy that you give to it. I know that people like you, who have high aspirations for our world, help our community increase its collective impact.

I have to warn you – should you choose to become part of the Jewish community – it will not be easy. Community – like family can be a pain at times. We make demands of your time. Sometimes we say no to what you want. It is not just about your needs – but our needs as well. It is not just about your future, but our future as well. That is the nature of living in a family – learning to listen, learning to compromise. Family is hard work (and Jewish families are the hardest work of all) – but it is worth it. Your life will be richer and more meaningful for the effort. We Jews do not by any means have a monopoly on wisdom about what it means to live a fully human life as individuals and as a couple, but we do have thousands of years of experience and practice.

When you chose to be married under a hupah, you did something important and significant. You indicated that you care about the Jewish quotient in your relationship. I would like to make that caring a place to start our conversation toward the creation of a life journey that will be enriching for you and for the Jewish people whose future depends on people like you.

With warmest wishes and blessings,

Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Yes, the easy thing to do would be to condemn this wedding or to embrace it uncritically. But the real challenge is to build a Judaism that can affirm our sacred tradition to a generation that embraces autonomy as its birthright.

That is what this shul is dedicated to be.

I think our Chancellor Arnie Eisen is correct as he seeks to find a new name to replace Conservative Judaism. I think that the old labels are dead – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform – these were Movements that sought to answer a very different challenge to the one that

confronts us today. Our Habad friends are being successful because they get it – that exclusivity is out and inclusivity is in – they accept all Jews in a true spirit of love. The only problem is that they have not quite figured out what to do with these Jews once they get them – and few stay with them once they get beyond the warm welcome because these Jews demand a two way street that Habad is unwilling to entertain.

I believe that our friends at Habad have the right approach but the wrong answer. I believe we have the right answer but the wrong approach.

If you, like me, believe that we have the right answer. If you agree that our brand of Judaism that reveres tradition and embraces the modern world is the correct path for this time and this place in human history – then I need your help.

Synagogues are struggling all around us – yet we remain vital and vibrant. Why? Because we have two things going for us: A philosophy and approach that I have tried to capture for you tonight – one that is faithful to our sacred tradition and also makes us relevant and reasonable to a large number of contemporary Jews; and because we have *you* – a committed membership who are willing to provide the wherewithal to fund the programs that will speak to a new generation of Jews.

The new generation of Jews is looking for a place that knows how to build bridges that connect us – not walls to separate us. I believe we are uniquely positioned to speak to a new generation that wants what we have to offer. Look at our new *Mahzor* – woman's voices are now included, in *Yizkor* there is a prayer for those who remember a partner. There is a prayer for children who struggle with the memory of abusive parents – this new *mahzor* gives voice to a new generation that values inclusivity, and this is now our *mahzor* – and this is our voice. I want the next generation to sit next to you in shul, in this shul – as you did with your parents – I want this to be a place of sacred continuity – and to build that I need your help.

Today's unaffiliated Jews are not going to pay what you are paying for Jewish affiliation – at least not initially, not until we can get them in the door and demonstrate the value of what we have to offer.

Never before have so many people wanted what we have to offer. And never before have so few people been willing to pay the price of synagogue affiliation. It is the paradox of contemporary Judaism. Our Services on Shabbat are filled – hundreds of people come week in and week out – because they want to attend our shul – to daven with us, to learn with us, to be with us. What other shul gets five hundred or more people for *tashlich* at the Roslyn Duck Pond? Look at tonight, we are filled to overflowing and hundreds more worship down the hall. There is a shul not far from here – that sends out free tickets to any Jew who wants one – and it is a beautiful gesture – but go look and see how many people are there and how many are here – because we have what you want. How many of you have called me and asked if I could do a favor for a friend? They are not members of any synagogue you tell me, and they need a rabbi for a funeral, or a wedding, for a baby naming or to talk to as they struggle with one or another of life's challenges. They want what we have to offer. So why aren't they members – these unaffiliated friends of yours? For some it is too expensive – beyond their financial reach – we cannot allow this to be the reason they do not join us – to reach them, I need your help.

For others – they can afford us – but do not initially see the value for the cost. We have created a system that is all backwards – if we have any hope of attracting this new generation

of Jewish consumers. We say – support us, pay your dues and we will then demonstrate why it is well worth the cost. They say – demonstrate that it is worth the cost and we will then support you.

If we want to reach these Jews, I need your help – as we explore new ways to attract them, these Jews who are interested, who I believe can and will become committed Jews, like you – if we can only welcome them into our midst and not make money our first point of conversation.

Universities have come to understand that students may want what they offer – but there comes a point when they just can't afford it or won't pay it – so they embrace endowments as a way to try and keep cost down.

Hospitals have come to understand that patients want and need their services – but there comes a point when they just can't afford or won't pay the high cost of health care – so they to seek ways to endow their operations – and I am proud that many of your names adorn those hospitals.

Synagogues are also now coming to understand --- the importance of endowments – and High Holy Day Appeals from dedicated and committed members – who will make it possible for us to continue to do our sacred work – as we reach out to a new generation.

Last year we were able to expand our program because of the success of this appeal - we were able to underwrite Religious school scholarships and synagogue memberships for those who wanted to be here but couldn't afford to. Those wonderful and dedicated members who stepped forward to underwrite the choir and the first part of the repair of our roof – are a wonderful example of what I am speaking about. Others have already indicated a willingness to step forward to do more than their fair share to help us meet our needs. I am pleased to announce that one of our dedicated and devoted members who asked to remain anonymous – has pledged up to \$100,000 in matching funds to help us meet our goals. If we raise \$100,000 tonight he will match it with \$100,000 and we will all be on our way to a very successful year!

I cannot put it more succinctly than this: your generous response to this High Holy Day Appeal will determine whether this will be a year of retrenchment or growth for our synagogue; a year when we can aggressively implement the vision I placed before you tonight – or a year where we will have to expend all our might – just to hold on for dear life. I, we, need your help.

Man walks up to a Jew and asks: “What do you think of Jews?” “Why I love Jews!” the man responds. And then he goes about denigrating all the Jews he knows. He knows only how to love in the abstract. Real love – means embracing one another in all our imperfections and contradictions. That is what we do here. And I believe we do it very well.

If you, like me, believe that this is the right approach. If you agree that what we have to offer is what is needed now more than ever – than help us: Support this Kol Nidre Appeal, get involved, come to shul, tell your friends about us; tell them how wonderful this place is – and that with them we can be even better!