

JEWELS
Rachel Tasch, April 19, 2009

When my son Sam was four, he used to collect shiny things and carry them around in a bin -- rocks, coins, sequins, and other treasures. He called them his "jewels," and anyone who would take an interest would be treated to a description of where each one came from -- what he was doing and who he was with when he got them.

I was reminded of this image of Sam a few years ago when, in his Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Zweiback referenced the writing of Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, of blessed memory. Rabbi Wolf compared the mitzvot in our tradition to jewels. He wrote: "I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road there are many jewels. One is marked 'Sabbath' and one 'Civil Rights' and one 'Kashruth' and one 'Honor Your Parents' and one 'You Shall Be Holy.' There are at least 613 of them and they are different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up, and I pick them up. Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels as I walk the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up. I believe that God expects me to keep on walking Judaism Street and to carry away whatever I can of its commandments. I do not believe that God expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can" (Arnold Jacob Wolf, *The Condition of Jewish Belief: A Symposium*, compiled by the editors of *Commentary Magazine* [New York: Macmillan, 1966] p. 268).

To bring it full circle -- Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf was the senior rabbi of KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation, where my husband Ted and I belonged during the six years we lived in Chicago for graduate school. Rabbi Zweiback connected these

dots for me – the writings of a rabbi I knew well and an image of my son -- using a very powerful metaphor for the way I have come to see Judaism. His insight felt like a gift to me, and it has blossomed in a way I'd like to share with you. It's a cliché but useful to think of Judaism as a journey. The Hebrew word for the law, halacha, comes from the same root as the verb "to walk," after all. But the layer I'd like to add to the image is this – for those of us walking this walk, who is it that is walking with us?

My first thought is that we are walking down Judaism Street with our rabbis and teachers. They are often the ones pointing out the jewels embedded along the way. They encourage us to pick them up and try them out. They shine new light on jewels that might be hiding in the mud, or that might need a little polishing up for us to carry them. But they are with us, and I'll give you a few examples.

Rabbi Chuck Briskin, who was Beth Am's assistant rabbi earlier in the decade, officiated at our daughter Joanna's baby naming when she was about 5 months old. During the few minutes she was up on the bima, right here, in front of the Torah, Joanna was transfixed – not by the crowd or the attention but by the Torah itself. Her whole face lit up. Rabbi Briskin pointed out how fascinated she was by it. He blessed her that she might always find strength and beauty in the Torah, and he gave Ted & me the gift of seeing, at an early age, our daughter's eyes shining with the light of Torah. Although Rabbi Briskin is now in southern California, I think of him and the wonderful gift he gave us in seeing our daughter in this way.

And as far as Rabbi Marder is concerned, if I had a jewel for every bit of wisdom she has shared, my pockets would be bulging indeed. She helped me pick up the jewel marked "wear a tallit" by understanding it as a way to feel God's presence wrapped around me. She helped me summon the strength to persist in ensuring my children's Jewish education by portraying it as a gift we give our children, not a

battle to be chosen. I could go on and on, and I hope to at the celebration of her 10th anniversary we're planning for the last weekend in May. The vision she shared with us is so full of jewels it's like a crown. The reason I am here and ready to commit my time and leadership energy to this role is because I feel called to be her partner in making this vision a reality.

I'm sharing this theme of jewels with you as a way for you to understand my Jewish world view and how I came to be here today. I'd like to ask everyone to stop for a moment to think about a rabbi or teacher who has inspired you to pick up a jewel. (.) I hope you will find some time to say thank you to that person. Because, if you see the world in this way -- if you see these insights as gifts -- it will lead to gratitude. Gratitude is another big part of why I'm here. I want to give back to a community I feel has done so much for me and my family.

I'll share one last insight from Rabbi Zweiback. When we were preparing for Sam's bar mitzvah last summer, he encouraged me to think of the experience not just as the special day for our son, but as one of the most ordinary things that takes place in Judaism. Hundreds of young Jewish adults were also reading from the Torah that Shabbat morning around the world, and many more have been doing so throughout history.

That duality of experience is something I feel at this moment as well, and it gives me comfort. For me, personally, of course, this is a very special moment as I assume the Presidency of the board. My parents, Freddi and Joel Felt, are here from Memphis. They created a home filled with Jewish experiences of all kinds that I aspire to emulate with my own family. By their own involvement they model for me the importance of serving the community and finding meaning in something larger than ourselves. Because of their support and that of my husband, I find myself at the right place at the right time. I feel, as Rabbi Kushner wrote in

his novel *Kabbalah: a Love Story* (p. 82), "the elusive satisfaction that comes from knowing you are doing what is set before you to accomplish."

I also know that I am the 30th person to take on this role at Beth Am. So while we're in a transitional moment in our lay leadership, it's one we've been through before. And while we're saying goodbye to our beloved Rabbi Yoshi and Rabbi Adam, many of you who have been here longer than I have know that Beth Am has a long history of bringing in clergy, educators, and teachers who inspire us. If they do their jobs, they connect us not to them personally (although many do that, too) but to our Beth Am community and to our Jewish heritage and traditions. They fill our pockets with jewels that keep shining even when they're no longer working here. Ethan (my 11 year old) -- you'll always be part of the Royal Matzahs, the rock band inspired by Rabbi Yoshi, right?

Of course, it's not just rabbis and teachers who inspire. By your example, many of you in this room show me how important your Jewish journey is in your life and Beth Am is in particular. Your dedication to this place and commitment to bring Jewish values into everything you do is infectious. Those of you who are past Presidents, past board members, involved committee chairs or engaged congregants – you've already given me lots of support and sage advice, and I'm very grateful for the pearls of wisdom you have shared. Together we're continuing to build *kehillah k'doshah*, sacred community, a goal laid out and furthered in large part by Charlie Rothschild over the past two years in partnership with the board and the program team.

We face challenges, of course, as has every board and group of congregants before us. Our challenges include the ongoing financial crisis and how to maintain Beth Am as a safe and fiscally sound refuge from that. We continue to strive to retain the best program team members and have developed some guidelines related to

housing assistance to make staying in this area more sustainable for the young, bright professionals we attract. We continue to innovate in each of the pillars of our mission: education, worship, community and now tzedek. As we continue to grow, some years faster than others, we want to implement the aspects of our facilities master plan in a way that is “plan-ful” and thoughtful.

And how do we do this – build our sacred community? We build it one Jewish journey at a time. No matter how many staff members or how many rabbis we have, they can’t do it for us. The board of directors can’t do it alone. It is up to everyone in the congregation to walk actively and with purpose down Judaism Street. But don’t forget to pick up those jewels along the way, appreciating the richness and color they add to our lives and the truth of our tradition. Which ones do you walk by every day on Judaism Street, intending to pick them up when you have the time?

There is a blessing Jews say before a journey, even if in this case it’s a metaphorical one – T’filat HaDerech, the traveler’s prayer. I’d like to close by sharing part of it with you. It is my prayer for my own Jewish journey over the next two years as President, and it is my blessing for the congregation as we all make progress along Judaism Street toward becoming a sacred community.

Hebrew text

Y’hi ratzon milfanekha A-donai E-loheinu ve-lohei avoteinu v’imoteinu she-tolikhenu l’shalom v’tatz’idenu l’shalom v’tadrikhenu l’shalom, v’tagi’enu limhoz heftzenu l’hayim ul-simha ul-shalom.

May it be Your will, Adonai, our God and the God of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace.