

“The View From Up There”

On several momentous occasions in our lives, Benjie and I got the “chair” treatment. At our three children’s b’nai mitzvah, at our daughter’s wedding, and at our own wedding, we were hoisted into the sky by some of the *morestarker* celebrants at the party.

Each time I gripped the sides of the chair rather tightly. Each time I barely looked. The sensation makes one feel remarkably unstable. No one should do it on a full stomach. Fortunately, the *ba’aley simcha*, the hosts of the party, rarely get to sample the exquisite food before finding themselves airborne.

On a magical Saturday night in March we got the chair treatment once again. Our loving congregation celebrated Benjie’s and my thirty years at the synagogue. Everyone’s palpable appreciativeness could not have surpassed our own. Words of thanks will never adequately contain the magnitude of our feelings for this flock of dedicated, talented, innovative, spiritually sophisticated human beings who have helped us raise our children and nurture our aspirations for Jewish peoplehood and sacred community.

We couldn’t have been up on those lifted chairs for more than a minute. The music swelled, the crowd cheered, and the room spun around. But in that brief minute, time stopped for me.

I opened my eyes and looked out. Suddenly I could see the whole congregation, both literally and figuratively, from that removed vantage point. I could see them as they are now, and in the past thirty years, and even a bit into the future – all in one swirling look.

How one could wax philosophical at a time like that is beyond me, but that is precisely what happened in my head. I realized at that moment that it is useful to “rise above” the congregation once in a while, but *only* for a short while. One needs a bit of that displaced perspective if one is to understand the global scope of one’s charge. But then one should hurry back down to floor level.

From up there, all I could see was the folks I had spent my entire career with, whether in their b’nai mitzvah rehearsals, in their hospital rooms, in their shiva homes or at their gravesides, in our large and small prayer halls, in countless Hebrew school Shabbat dinners, in our buses touring Israel, or in small Torah study circles late at night or early in the morning. All of it was totally recognizable, totally familiar. The only way I could have identified the *gestalt* of our community from up there was from never having spent much time looking down.

Throughout my three decades here, I had no choice but to slog it out in the *mitten d’rinnen* of the community, rather than at an elevated distance from it. This congregation would have had it no other way.

When I came here, you barely wanted a rabbi at all. If you were going to deign to allow a rabbi into your midst, it was only on condition that he facilitate *your* Jewish activity, whether it was giving your own d’rashos, teaching your own classes, running your own shivas, or making your own decisions about the level of your Jewish observance. For most of my first ten years, congregants never stopped reminding me that they did fine without a rabbi in the decades prior to my showing up.

Somehow we found a dynamic that worked. My rabbinic training was excellent, but it could not have prepared me for this particular way of working alongside a congregation rather than at some safe distance from it. It is not the easy way to

do it, but I wouldn't trade it for any of my colleagues' rabbinates. And many of them would have liked to have mine.

Much of our success together as a clergy-congregation partnership had to do with Benjie's unique relationship to all of you. Without ever taking a full-time role here, she nonetheless anchored our prayer life in an all-encompassing way. Your willingness from the start to trust the two of us as a leadership team, without focusing on the fact of our being married to one another as either an asset or a distraction, essentially made this great experiment possible. A less grounded congregation could not have withstood that dynamic. But here it became a force for good. Again, it was something my training could not have prepared me for or predicted. But thank God for it.

The gala came to an end. The band and caterer went home. Benjie and I were returned to our rightful places *on* the dance floor. My legs are still sore from dancing more intensely than I am accustomed to doing. The planners continue to kvell at their brilliant success.

And everyone has already returned to the grounded tasks we love best: Torah, prayer, social action, the education of children, the feeding of the hungry, the welcoming of the stranger. All at ground level, with no one hovering overhead.

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