

“Aseh l’kha Rav, uk’neh l’khakhamim - Get for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend.” These words from Pirke Avot define the way in which I have always pursued growing into my rabbinate. I have been blessed with incredible teachers and mentors. You have heard me say this. You have met some, Reverend Leo Woodberry, Rabbi Gene Levy, Rabbi Dan Freeland to name a few. Today I want to share three more stories of my heroes ... and a few thoughts on how I am dealing with some of the very difficult news over the past year.

Eric Heiden was a past president of Beth Israel Congregation, my first congregation. He was also my dentist in Florence, SC. Eric is a fisherman and owns a touring yacht. I got sick on that yacht once.

Reverend Fred Reese was the District United Methodist Minister in Florence County. If you ask me who taught me how to be a Rabbi who serves a community, Fred Reese is the first name I will always mention.

The two of them were good friends, and they became dear friends of mine. They were activists. One night, they broke into the school district offices to steal records that proved that the superintendent had been embezzling tens of thousands of dollars from the

Florence County School District. On the one hand, hearing this story, I knew that I could never condone breaking and entering into a government office to steal records. On the other hand, I was really proud of two men who would put their careers at risk, when no one else dared say anything ... despite the reality that one powerful man was stealing part of our children's future.

Then there was Reverend Burt Wilson. Burt was a retired Baptist Minister who left the Baptist church because of the bigotry he was supposed to uphold if he was to retain his ministerial status in the area. He joined the Methodist church, served as a Chaplain, and spent his retirement umpiring little league, teaching, and studying. Prophetically, Burt had moved to Florence from Kentucky, from right near where I was destined to move 8 years after first meeting him.

These three men taught me ... and continue to teach me the most foundational lessons pertinent to this Yom Kippur day. Eric is an enigma. He possesses a loud personality and there is no mistaking when Eric is in the house. He just turned 80 this year. Just over a year and a half ago, I presided at his wedding. He had been married to the even more enigmatic and louder Bari Heiden for years, until she passed away from cancer several years ago. They had to have been the most engaging ... and loudest couple I ever met! Eric met Rosalie, his new bride, and honored me,

asking me back to Florence to do the wedding. We shared old stories, and I watched as Lori listened and blushed over some of the “family” secrets. Eric is a photographer on the side. He really has done some amazing work. We share a mutual favorite shot. He photographed a circus elephant harnessed to the ground with one leg in a chain attached to a stake.

If I heard the story once, I heard it a million times ... Eric said, “What’s wrong with this picture?” He would pause, and then become really animated, “I’ll tell you what’s wrong! The strongest land animal in the world is held back by a chain on one leg. The best that the strongest land animal can do is walk in a circle! One leg held back and the entire beast can’t do anything!” Each time I then say, “Eric, it’s an elephant. Why couldn’t the elephant just pull the simple stake out of the ground?” “Because elephants are strong but they don’t know any better.” The smallest things hold us back; we often fail to look past what is right in front of us. We get stuck, even when the power to move forward is within us.

ERIC also specializes in double exposure photography and always said that nothing was ever only how it seems. For everything that we think we see, there is always more to be seen. He would just artistically expose another picture in to the first. Eric taught me to pay attention. We jump to conclusions about what people can and can’t do on often very little data. We pick sides in

fighters without paying attention to what the fight was really about. Like the elephant, we get stuck believing that we are bound, and as with the double exposures there is always more to see in any given situation than we are normally accustomed to seeing. The combination is deadly for any relationship.

Fred Reese was all about engaging with people in impactful and uplifting ways. He dedicated his ministry to bringing people together. I will never forget the first day he asked me to lunch. We sat down, he asked me to bless the meal. He said, "Amen," and then launched into a sermon on chesed. Chesed is the Hebrew word for "grace." It was awkward to have a Methodist Minister lecturing me on the value of a Hebrew word. I soon learned that he was seeking and not lecturing. He spent years trying to understand one of the oldest words in all western scripture. What he intrinsically knew it meant, had very little to do with how it was used.

Grace is best defined as the act of unmerited divine assistance given humans for their sanctification. It is a quality our tradition attributes to God; the disposition to kindness, courtesy, or clemency. Grace is the quality or state of being considerate or thoughtful. This comes from the same tradition that demands that we see ourselves as made in the image of God; we must act accordingly.

There is no room for chauvinism in grace. There is no room for bigotry in grace. Fred insisted that parts of the Christian world throw the word grace around the same way that the rest of the world uses the terms love and peace. They are catch phrases that sound good but are not backed by a whole lot of substantial behavioral changes. Whatever God is, God has to love us all equally. From this dear friend I learned that all faith matters. Most religious chauvinism stems from our ignorance and fear of each other, more than anything innately inferior in other traditions. It is because of Fred's impact on me that I can be proud to be Jewish and also proud that people I love are other religions. While I had always been an activist for equal justice, Fred helped me learn that there is only one God ... whatever that God is. We are all blessed equally; we are all stuck equally. As we studied our respective traditions together, we both came to realize that the word "Israel" translates as all people of faith – those who wrestle with God. Torah predates the word Judaism and Judah is but one of the twelve tribes of Israel. From Fred, I learned how to most truthfully translate the Shema, "Pay attention Israel, people of faith, there is one God ... all of ours."

Burt Wilson was an old country preacher. He was Fred's good friend, and the two of them became as influential on my approach to faith as is my own Rabbi, Gene Levy. Burt taught me that there

was nothing new in the New Testament, only new ways of telling and teaching the same values; new stories and new plots to help people from different frames of reference to learn the values of Shalom, of Rachamim (Compassion), Khesed (grace), and Tzedakah (Righteousness). I am not sure whether he bought into the notion of a Messiah or not, but he certainly spoke as if the world was still looking for one. He would laugh when I would tell him he was dangerously close to being Jewish. The most impactful thing Burt ever said to me came to me on my last day before moving to Kentucky, "Marc, becoming your friend, I learned that the traditional church is wrong about heaven. They say that only faithful Christians get to heaven. They also say that there is no disability in heaven; no pain, no anguish, only bliss and celebration." I agreed that this was my understanding of mainstream Christian doctrine. He went on, "They are wrong! You are never going to become a Christian." I agreed that he was most probably right. "So, either there is pain in heaven, as I will ache for eternity if you are not there with me, or you will be with me and our chauvinism is wrong." Burt passed five years ago, he has not yet let me know which it is up there, but the blessing he shared with me has certainly elevated the way in which I see people of faith.

Because of these three men, I have learned that there are four most important lessons in faith. WE really do have to pay attention to our own power to bring healing to this world. WE cannot wait for someone else to lift us. Everything we observe has the potential to hold greater depth. For everything that we see, there is far more that we cannot even imagine. We are called to grace. We cannot be people of faith and not hold each other in grace. Most prophetically, I know that the boundaries that separate us are artificial. The differences between our labels, the differences in our practices ... we created them. Faith transcends these divergences, and we have to respect even that which we cannot understand ... for it moves someone else's soul.

Thusly armed, I was able to perform weddings for a Baptist Minister and two Episcopal priests, help ordain a Lutheran and a Presbyterian minister, serve as lead consultant for a Disciples of Christ Church as they re-envisioned their Christian mission. I taught pastoral care, liturgy, Old and New Testament bible, and diverse cultural worship at a Christian seminary. I never felt compromised as a Jew in helping others be faithful.

From these three men, I learned to love faith. From them I learned how to appreciate being able to speak with people, even when we come from different points of view; even when our differing points of view are on important matters that hold weight in the world.

This lesson has helped me a lot this year, for we are stuck, seemingly unable to communicate with each other in any respectful or responsible way. With technology and social media we have lost our filter and our sense of each other's dignity. Not having to look each other in the eye, and not hearing the inflection of voice, we say unnecessarily hurtful things. This reality plagues us publicly and privately in ways which can leave irreparable damage. Our lack of concern for each other has destroyed any sense of a bigger picture than "ME." We don't care about each other's faith, we insist on pushing narrow agendas into governing policy. We cyber-bully, we hack into each other's privacy, and now, we have the ability to launch drones and weapons remotely ... this is serious business.

Perhaps one most egregious example of how far we have fallen, involve our "conversations" involving the "deal" with Iran and its impact on Israel. I am not going to talk about the politics of Israel or the Iran debate or the dissolution of any separation between religion and state. Let's go for coffee and I will be happy to hear your perspectives and share my own. I am, however, I need, however, to call attention to the way we have handled ourselves through the machinations of talking about Israel & Iran. I am deeply pained and egregiously saddened, as the values instilled in me by my mentors do not translate into our real world debates.

I feel more compromised as a Jew, in some of these conversations with other Jews, than I have ever felt in my interfaith work.

The Iran “deal” is a done deal. Like it or not, it was a done deal before we started tearing each other’s throats out over which side we were expected to stand. Whatever the merits of either position, what we have done is set us up to do more damage, potentially irreparable damage to our own faith and community ... and our relationship with Israel. This existential threat is stronger and more real than any threat or non-threat of what may or may not happen because of the deal, in the future. I am horrified by the lack of respect for each other, the sanctity of our peoplehood or our place in the wider community ... or for the commands of Torah and our tradition. Torah teaches us that destroying one’s dignity is a greater sin than killing him ... the fate worse than death. Even the New York Times published a front page article entitled, “Iran Deal Opens A Vitriolic Divide Among American Jews.”

That Rabbis accuse each other ... and our nation of being NAZIs or NAZI sympathizers is an abomination and most assuredly and thankfully not close to being true. This rhetoric began before there was even a final agreement available for anyone to read! For a host of reasons, this “DEAL” is not the greatest threat to Israel’s

existence, it is just the sexiest. Not one of us wants to see Israel destroyed. Whether you love Israel or just love peace, not one of us wants the destruction of a people. Not one of us is “in this” to see bombs dropped on innocent lives ... anywhere.

But the way we have been posturing and screaming at each other is not how people of faith behave. This is not how a religious tradition that demands respect for each other plays out in public or private. Our tradition contains warning after warning as to what happens when we devolve to our lowest and basest selves. The rabbis teach us that this intra-Jewish character assassination destroyed the Temple that stood in Jerusalem and continues to be our greatest existential threat. It is not the sexiest ... in fact no one wants to speak of it, at all.

Pirke Avot tells us that in world where no one behaves like a human, we are obligated to behave like a human.

We really ought to be affirming each other’s love and support and figuring out how to best prepare for the future, irrespective of whether or not the deal is a good one ... whatever that means. We are not prophets, we are all concerned. We have to rebuild the rupture in the fabric of Jewish America ... in the fabric of America.

We have to start talking with each other again and not at or about each other. We can disagree ... even vehemently and still continue as close friends. We find there are many more things that bind us to one heart, than the one issue that drives us apart. Are we really so willing to cut off otherwise flourishing relationships over a matter in which we disagree?

Sometimes we get so set on being "RIGHT" that we forget how much we love. It happens in the public arena and it happens in the privacy of our homes. We have a choice to make in life and in our interpersonal relationships: we can choose to be right or we can choose to love. Choosing to love allows us to have conversations. Needing to be right destroys the most sacred of ties. Even if we are right, the sacred relationship needs to always come first in our conversations. I owe it to the men who taught me how to be a rabbi who loves, who respects, and who looks beyond his own boundaries to teach and live their message. Burt, Fred, and Eric ... three of the most diverse men I ever have been blessed to know, and yet, they shared one heart. Let's return from our exile from each other. Let's talk to each other. Let's appreciate where we agree and even where we disagree. Perhaps ... especially in those moments where we disagree ... we have a lot to learn from each other.

2600 years ago, Lao Tze wrote:

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.

Whether we are speaking about the status of the world or the peace in our homes, shalom begins with how we feel about and how we respond to each other.

How different would the world be if we could see past our differences; focusing instead, on the blessings we share? How different might our conversations be if really listened to each other, and presumed first that there was more to any story than we might know? How different might we be if we started with grace?

Let's talk, but let's first listen. Let's talk, but first let's respect. Let's talk, but first let's love. May every conversation we share be for

the sake of heaven, and may we bless each other with the gift of shalom ... of wholeness, of grace, and of peace.