

“The Faithful Shepherd”: A Vision for My Rabbinate at Temple Beth-El

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And so we understand that ordinary people are messengers of the Most High. They go about their tasks in holy anonymity, often, even unknown to themselves. Yet, if they had not been there, if they had not said what they said or did what they did, it would not be the way it is now. We would not be the way we are now. Never forget that you, too, yourself may be a messenger. Perhaps even one whose errand extends over several lifetimes.

—Rabbi Lawrence Kushner¹

In the spring of 1960, a rabbi from Houston, TX, gave a Shabbat sermon to Hebrew Union College’s graduating rabbinic class on the eve of their ordination. His topic was: what it means to be a rabbi.

A rabbi, he said, does many things: He teaches, and he preaches; he leads services and officiates life-cycle events; he visits the sick and comforts the bereaved; he’s active in civic life and works for justice.

These and many other things are what a rabbi *does*, he said. But the essence of what a rabbi *is*...well, *that*, he said can be captured in one word—one word that gives unity to the many and varied functions we perform on a daily basis.

And that one word can be found in the very title we bear.

In Hebrew, the title “*rabbi*” is spelled with three letters: *reish, bet, yod*. And if you take those three letters as an acronym, he said, you get the phrase *ro’eh b’nai yisrael*—which means: “shepherd of the children of Israel.”

At the heart of it all, our role is to be a *shepherd*: to guide our people in their quest for meaning, purpose, sacred community, and God.

The rabbi who gave this sermon in the spring of 1960 was Rabbi Robert I. Kahn. He was the rabbi emeritus of my home congregation in Houston. He was my mother’s rabbi when she was growing up.

Like Rabbi Rudin, Rabbi Davidson, and the Rabbis Feldman are to so many of you, Rabbi Kahn was a larger-than-life figure to me and my family. We revered him and we loved him.

I first heard Rabbi Kahn’s sermon, which he titled *The Faithful Shepherd*, on a CD recording given to me about 20 years ago, when I was applying to rabbinic school.

I felt as though he was speaking across the ages, directly to *me*—calling me to this sacred duty. And it was overwhelming.

Imagine hearing Rabbi Rudin’s voice, or Rabbi Davidson’s, or Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Tara’s voice calling out to you—like Moses at the burning bush: “I am sending *you*—*God* is sending *you*—to be a faithful shepherd to this people. Now GO!”

As the Reform theologian Jakob Petuchowski taught: Once you hear the commandment that is addressed directly to *you* like that, you can’t run away from it like Jonah. You have no choice but to answer the call.

I had not always wanted to be a rabbi. In fact, until I was about 25 years old, it never even crossed my mind.

But something profound happened for me just as I was starting out as a young Senate press secretary in Washington, DC.

Like Rabbi Kushner says in that reading, people come into our lives—sometimes in very ordinary or unremarkable ways—and change us forever.

For me that person was my friend Susan. She and I worked together in Senator Fitzgerald's office.

Susan was an evangelical Christian, and, of course, I was a Jew—although at that point, Judaism wasn't a big part of my life or my identity.

Susan was curious about Judaism, and she would often ask me questions—and to my embarrassment, I couldn't answer her intelligently.

So, I decided I needed to learn more about Judaism. I called up my rabbi from home and asked him to recommend some books for me to read.

And the more I learned, I gained my earliest spiritual insights. I realized I was living on the surface; that I wanted more meaning in my life; that there was a better, deeper, kinder version of myself yearning to come into being.

For a few years, I toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi, but I couldn't find the courage to take the leap of faith and just do it.

But my perspective changed on September 11, 2001. Like all of you who were in New York that day, 9/11 affected me deeply.

I saw the Pentagon burning from my office window, and we thought the Capitol would be next. Had things unfolded differently on Flight 93, I easily could have died that day.

About a year later, one of my childhood friends died from brain cancer. She was 28, and so was I.

And it was then that I finally understood:

Life is fragile; we don't know how long we're going to be here.

If there's something you want to do—something you feel you're *called* "in the mysterious realm of the spirit" to do—don't wait.

Whatever it is for *you*, go for it. Now.

The rabbinate is more than my life's work; it is the essence of who I am.

A friend once asked me about my approach to the role of being a rabbi. All I could think of was something very simple: "I guess I just try to be myself."

- I think of myself not as a hired professional, but as a *member* of the community—and I try to lead that way.

I genuinely enjoy people, and I hope to be not only your rabbi but also your friend.

In the three weeks I've been at TBE, I already feel like I'm part of this community. I'm so grateful to you for welcoming me so warmly into your temple family.

- I love to teach and learn, and I'm excited to study with you because I believe that Judaism can help us navigate the challenges and circumstances of our own lives.

When I teach, I try to draw not only on my knowledge of Jewish sources—but also on insights I gain from *you* and from my *own* experiences—to speak authentically to the struggles and aspirations we all share.

- As a prayer leader, I strive to pray not *on your behalf* but *with you*, so that together we can rise toward the heavens.
- I try to lead with compassion and humility, because I am mindful of what Rabbi Kahn said:

...that, although I am a rabbi—and a *shepherd*—of this community, the more important truth is that “I am *creature* and not *creator*; that I, too, am a sheep in God’s pasture.”

In this week’s parashah, as Moses is preparing to retire from his leadership role, he asks God to choose a successor carefully.

Whoever takes over, he says, should be someone “who will go out before them and come in before them, and who will take them out and bring them in, so that God’s community will not be like sheep that have no shepherd.” (*Num. 27:17*).

I know I have big shoes to fill here. TBE has had some incredible shepherds in its history.

Rabbi Rudin, Rabbi Davidson, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Tara: These rabbis were and are giants—and they each made their own indelible impact on you and on the other members of this community.

I will never be them.

I wouldn’t make a very good Rabbi Rudin, or Rabbi Davidson, or Rabbi Feldman—and I won’t try to.

But here’s what I *will* do:

I will give it my all to be the very best Rabbi Brian Stoller I can be. I will go out there every day and be *myself*.

Because I believe that, in the end, all of us are seeking the same thing: to feel loved, to find meaning and purpose in life, and to be embraced by people who genuinely care.

In my view, it is the synagogue’s mission—and the *shepherd’s* mission—to create this kind of community. All the rest, as they say, is commentary.

But the commentary is important, too.

Temple Beth-El is a diverse congregation: We have members from many different backgrounds, in all stages of life—and each of you have your own interests and spiritual needs.

That means each of you will have your own pathway into Jewish life.

- For some of you, it may be rigorous Torah study that stimulates your mind, challenges your assumptions, and invites you to think differently about the world.
- For some of you, it might be prayer or other kinds of spiritual practice that help you get in touch with your essential self and experience the mystery of being human.
- Some of you may find that caring for people in need is your pathway, because serving humanity is the essence of what it means to serve God.

Whatever your own personal pathway is, I believe that when you finally discover it, something happens that ignites a spark in your soul and changes your life forever.

I know this because it happened for me, and I want it to happen for you, too.

I want to be your shepherd—to help you discover your pathway—so that when you walk down it, you will experience the transformational power of Judaism and feel the loving embrace of God and community more deeply than you ever have before.

But you won't know it until you give it a try. And you may have to keep trying until you find a pathway that feels right to *you*.

Cantor Adam and I are here to help you, but we can't do it *for* you.

As Rabbi Kahn put it: "We are shepherds but not sheepdogs." We can help you find your way *only* if you're willing to participate actively in the journey.

So, I want to invite you to do that: to be our partners and our companions in our shared quest for meaning and purpose.

Open your heart to it; share your time with us; show up, be here, walk with this community—and I *promise* you, your life will be enriched by it.

The prayer on the opposite page, Shalom Aleichem, is about opening ourselves to the possibility of being transformed in unexpected ways by the ordinary people who come in and out of our lives—who may just be messengers of God.

I believe Susan came into my life for a reason.

We have come into *each other's* lives for a reason.

So now that we're here, let's take this journey together.

Shabbat Shalom, and Shalom Aleichem.