

Dr. Elsie Stern—Guest Sermon
November 7, 2025

Whenever I speak at a congregation, I open by sharing how I am connected to the community. Sometimes, this is quite straightforward. I have been at places where I say: “I have known your rabbi for 40 years.” At others, it is a bit more attenuated: “While I have never been here before, my dear friend and colleague grew up in this congregation.” Sometimes, it is a real stretch: “Over dinner, before services, I learned that your temple president went to summer camp with my sister-in-law, so I know you are in good hands!”

But in all my years of speaking at congregations, I have never before said: “I owe my existence to this congregation.” But here it is true! My mother, Priscilla Rudin Stern, grew up at Beth-El. She was the daughter of Rabbi Jacob Philip Rudin and Elsie Katz Rudin. In about 1954, she was a student at Wellesley College and seemed on track to marry a lovely guy from Harvard (I know he was lovely because he and his family ended up longtime family friends of ours).

Then, as a result of some strategic maneuvering by my grandmother, my mother went on a date with Beth-El’s relatively new assistant rabbi. His name was Jack Stern—he was short, red-haired and, in pictures I have seen from the time, sometimes bore a disturbing resemblance to Peter Lorre. The two fell in love and, in 1956, my father married the boss’s daughter, ushering in a loving and laughing marriage that resulted in the existence of my brothers and me. So, thank you Beth-El—I am very glad to be here (both on earth and on this bimah).

I am especially grateful to Rabbi Stoller for this particular assignment. He asked me to talk about my grandfather’s legacy in contemporary Reform Judaism. I tried to fudge it a bit. “Oh,” I said, “I can talk about how his legacy shows up in the new Torah commentary.” But your rabbi held firm—“No, I want you to talk about his legacy in contemporary Reform Judaism.”

I am very grateful for the push and the challenge. In a series of lectures that my grandfather gave at Hebrew Union College (HUC), he encouraged the students to preach “a difficult sermon” once a year—“one with which [they] would have to wrestle, for which [they] would have to study hard and prepare meticulously.”

This was a hard sermon—it made me learn and think and provided a few good cries along the way, and I am excited to share my reflections with you. The opportunity is made even sweeter because my own rabbi, study partner and friend, Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, is a child of this congregation and it has been a delight to reflect on the ways in which he carries forward my grandfather’s legacy and the legacy of this congregation.

In preparation for this talk, I spent a lot of time reading my grandfather’s writing—the sermons that are collected in the volume *Very Truly Yours*, which was edited by my father and Rabbi Jerry Davidson, and a series of lectures entitled “On the Nature of the Rabbi and the Nature of his Preaching” that he delivered at HUC in 1959.

In some ways, immersing myself in these texts was an experience of time travel—back to a time when bimahs were high, rabbinic voices boomed and rabbinic rhetoric soared. My grandfather’s God was awesome, transcendent and entirely necessary. In the sermon he delivered at the HUC ordination in 1962, he wrote of God:

“On every page, we have proclaimed Him our King. We are blind without His sight. We are purposeless without His purpose. We are as beasts of the field without the transforming touch of His divinity.”

While grandpa’s God was perfect, we people—alas—were not. One of the things that surprised me about the sermons was how exhortational they were. Even when he set out to speak to the brokenhearted, he often ended in a place of instruction or exhortation. While it is clear that he loved the people he served, he also believed that we (and I do think he included himself in some of his critiques) fell short. In that same ordination address, he warns the newly minted rabbis of what he saw as the realities of human nature:

“So many people aren’t so much brothers of man as they are first or second cousins. We aren’t so much pioneers toward tomorrow as we are caretakers of yesterday. ...We don’t embrace evil, but we only ceremoniously touch nads with the good, tentatively and warily. We don’t hate anybody, especially, but we don’t love very many especially, either.”

This biting criticism arose, I think, from what he saw as the rabbi’s prophetic calling. A central part of his task as preacher was to goad us into getting closer to our best selves. I did a very informal survey of friends who attend different (and different kinds of Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative synagogues), and they affirmed that they rarely hear this kind of sermon. It seems, and I am grateful for this, that while our rabbis are deeply invested in our spiritual and moral growth, they don’t yell at us as much as they used to.

But once I got past (or perhaps got reaccustomed to) the oratorical grandeur, I noticed, and took comfort in, the striking relevance of his central and recurring themes. My grandfather returned again and again to the messages that I, at least, need to hear most often: the importance of loving relationships, the need to look above and beyond the daily “grind,” the conviction that there is enough.

In other words, love and be loved, appreciate, find wonder, experience abundance, seek justice. In his 40 years in the pulpit, my grandfather returned time and again to these themes. In 1971, my father and Rabbi Davidson, ensured that these themes were refrains in *Very Truly Yours*. As a semi-regular synagogue attender for the past 30 years at least, I am grateful to be reminded of them by the many rabbis whose Torah I have been blessed to receive.

Of all the sermons in the book, the one that I kept returning to is the sermon I mentioned earlier—the ordination address from 1961 entitled “The Three Verities.” In it, my grandfather talks about what he saw as the three essential truths for rabbis: The Near Torah—in which he talked about rabbis as students and teachers of Torah who passed on its eternally relevant messages. The Far Horizon—in which he talked about the prophetic role of rabbis—helping people see the meaning of their own actions, as well as of events in the world, in the sweep of time, in the context of essential values, and in the arc of justice. And, finally, the Ever-Present God in which he talked about the rabbi’s persistent and (lonely) awareness that our very lives depend on, and are shaped by, the presence of the holy.

Of these, the second one—The Far Horizon—most captured my attention and shaped my remarks tonight. In moments of upheaval, like the one we are experiencing now, we tend to get historically self-centered, obsessed with what is happening now, or else strategically selecting historical analogies that support our analysis of events. Attention to The Far Horizon invites us to think about the present in relationship to the really long game—both past and future.

I was helped in orienting toward The Far Horizon by a great book called *We Shall Build Anew: Stephen S. Wise, the Jewish Institute of Religion, and the Reinvention of American Liberal Judaism* by Rabbi Shirley Idelson, PhD, who is the director of the Zelikow School of Jewish Nonprofit Management at HUC. Contrary to what you might expect, it is actually a page-turner. From it, I learned about the context that shaped my grandfather as a rabbi. He was a student and disciple of Stephen Wise and was a graduate of one of the first classes at the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR). I was surprised (and comforted) to learn that the circumstances that shaped my grandfather as a rabbi are happening again today. They provide part of The Far Horizon in which to understand some pain points of our current moment.

The American-Jewish community was changing dramatically. The influx of Jews from Eastern Europe was drastically changing the nature of the American Jewish community. By the 1920s, more than a million Jews from Eastern Europe had emigrated to the U.S., and they were challenging the dominance of the German-Jewish establishment.

The American-Jewish community was deeply divided over Zionism. In the 1920s, the German-Jewish establishment was staunchly anti-Zionist. They believed and attempted to enact the conviction that Judaism was a religion, not a nationality. They believed that the creation of a Jewish state would be a violation of this definition of Judaism and endanger Jews' ability to participate fully as Americans in American life. American Jews who had emigrated from Eastern Europe were more likely to be Zionists and pushed to have American-Jewish institutions lend support to Zionist ideas and causes.

Conflicts over Zionism frequently erupted at gatherings of Reform leadership throughout this period. Even after 1937, when the Reform movement included support for a "Jewish homeland in Palestine" in its national platform, debates over the wisdom of this move, as well as debates over forms and tactics of Zionism continued in the Reform movement. While many advocated for diplomatic means, according to Shirley Idelson, JIR students were running guns to the Irgun from their rabbinical school lockers!

Dr. Idelson's accounts of the fierce battles over Zionism in the American-Jewish community in the 1920s-'30s reminds me that we Jews have not only decades, but millennia of practice fighting over things we care very deeply about. In the 1920s and 2020s, Zionism and Israel are at the top of the list. In mid-19th century Germany, it was Reform; and in the 18th century, it was Chasidism—you get the idea.

In 1961, my grandfather preached a sermon opposing the death penalty for Adolf Eichmann. He preached: "Any nation could say 'take his life.' I wish that Israel had said, 'The crime is beyond so simple a punishment. He is guilty, but we will not add, even though we ought, to the violence of the world.'" He concludes: "Maybe it was a time to say to the world, 'It is not enough merely to be right. It is more important to be righteous.'"

While some of you may be able to correct me, I am pretty sure that this was not a universally popular opinion in this congregation in 1961. But he said it anyway—and while he may have had some cleanup conversation with angry congregants, he continued to serve Beth-El until his voluntary retirement in 1971. In other words, my grandfather said highly controversial things from the bimah—some of which were probably received as shots across the bow—and this community and his contract survived.

We Jews are a resilient people, and we have had many conflicts and survived. I don't say this just to comfort you that we will all get past it, that we will be OK. Rather, this Far Horizon awareness reminds us to, as the couple therapists say, "fight well." Fight with honesty and vulnerability and respect. Fight in ways that will

allow reconciliation to be possible. When we disagree, when we are afraid for the future and safety of the Jewish people, when we are angry and frustrated with one another, let us remember that, God willing, we will be coexisting in Jewish community long after this current conflict is resolved or subsides and we should try mightily not to create harm that will beyond our power to repair.

Another insight from *The Far Horizon: Centers of Jewish life wax and wane*, and this fact does not diminish their importance. In her book, Dr. Idelson talks a lot about Cincinnati and about JIR. Both these places were hugely important in the history of liberal Judaism. Cincinnati is the birthplace of American Reform Judaism and the site of the first Reform seminary. Rabbi Max Lilienthal, an early architect of American Reform Judaism, called it “our Zion and Jerusalem.”

While Cincinnati remains home to one of HUC’s three stateside campuses and home to a vibrant Reform Jewish community, it is not Reform Judaism’s center or hottest destination. Similarly, the central argument of Dr. Idelson’s book is that JIR fundamentally changed the American rabbinate and, along with it, American Judaism. JIR was the first rabbinical school to admit Zionists and, unlike HUC it actively welcomed Jews from Eastern European descent, even going so far as to hire a dialect coach to help students erase their Yiddish accents, which were seen as obstacles to employment.

JIR introduced pastoral care and social work into the rabbinical school curriculum and trained rabbis to be prophetic, moral voices in the Jewish community and public square. According to Dr. Idelson, much of what we think of when we think of a rabbi was born at JIR. However, after 28 years as a site of innovation and influence, JIR merged and was eventually absorbed into HUC. Neither Cincinnati’s Jewish community nor JIR are in the Jewish spotlight. However, both shaped the American liberal Judaism that we all experience and enact today.

And so too with Temple Beth-El. Your congregation has gotten smaller and older. While it continues to have a thriving and diverse Jewish community, Great Neck is no longer a destination for young Reform Jewish families. But the impact of this congregation is oceanic. The best evidence is this fall’s issue of your *Shema* magazine. It profiles 14 Jewish professionals—rabbis, cantors, educators and organizational leaders—who grew up here at Beth-El. What an amazing list of leaders. If you are ever feeling despair about the Jewish future, I recommend it as a tonic.

What struck me most about the article was the range and diversity of the leaders you have grown here. I’ll give one example: It would be difficult to find two congregations more different in style than Temple Emanu-El in New York City and my own Kol Tzedek in West Philadelphia. Emanu-El is a flagship Reform congregation more than 100 years old, housed in a magnificent cathedral-like building on Fifth Avenue. It is home to multigenerational families, New York luminaries as well as a vibrant young-family and young-adult community. Their tagline is: a bold Reform congregation where warmth and majesty meet.

Kol Tzedek is a scrappy Reconstructionist housed in a storefront space between a car repair shop and a thriving African-American church in West Philadelphia. With about 400 households, Kol Tzedek has become a magnet for young Jews, many of them queer, many of them radical, all of them deeply committed to Judaism and the Jewish people. Kol Tzedek doesn’t have a tagline, but the vision statement reads: We are transmitting an inclusive and liberatory Judaism for the next generation. Both of these thriving synagogues—that fulfill such vital functions in the American-Jewish landscape—are led by children of this congregation.

But your impact extends wider than the leaders who grew up at Beth-El. If you were to imagine a rabbinic 23andMe that illuminated the connections among rabbis who, in some way or another, trace their rabbinic “DNA” to Temple Beth-El, you would need a very, very big spreadsheet!

My grandfather mentored many rabbis. The two I knew best were my father and Jerry Davidson; but in the *Shema* story, the Jewish leaders mention several other Beth-El clergy as inspirations and role models, including Rabbis Pinsky, Gelfand, Bender, Altman and Folberg as well as Cantor Ostfeld and countless teachers and lay leaders.

While I can’t trace the “descendants” of these rabbis, I can sketch for you some of the impact of my father and Rabbi Davidson. Both of them were/are “rabbis’ rabbis” who mentored countless colleagues. The list of mentees includes my brother. Rabbi David Stern and Rabbi Josh Davidson are both spiritual and biological sons of these two rabbinic greats.

It includes those who served as their associates and assistants—in my father’s case, this list includes Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism and Rabbi Aaron Panken, who served as HUC’s president from 2014 until his untimely death in 2018. Add to the list the generations of Reform rabbis who learned from Rabbi Davidson in his classes on social justice at HUC and from my father in his various roles in the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Add to them the many, many rabbis who grew up at the synagogues led by people who were inspired to become rabbis by these rabbinic “children and grandchildren” of Jacob Rudin. At Reconstructionist Rabbinical College alone, there are at least five students who were inspired to become rabbis by rabbis who grew up or were mentored by clergy who served here.

And these are only the professionals. If you consider how many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of this congregation are members of synagogues, students in religious schools, volunteers and contributors to Jewish and other social-justice organizations in Brooklyn, Seattle, Chicago, Tucson and beyond, you come to know that the Jews nurtured here have not disappeared off the face of the Jewish map but rather, have just left the Beth-El nest—and are carrying the love for Judaism and that the values that they learned here to new centers and outposts of liberal Jewish life.

In 1961, my grandfather concluded his address to the ordainees, with these words of benediction: “May you see the fruits of your labors in your lives, but may your lives be bigger than your years, and your aspirations as deathless as our people and our faith. Go forth on your way, with a near book, toward a far horizon. May the ever-present God be with you.”