

A striking image from this week's Torah portion bears direct relevance on our work at temple. It takes place when Joseph, alerted to the fact that his father Jacob is ailing, comes to the bedside of Jacob with Jacob's two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh in tow.

Jacob summons his energies to be completely present in the encounter with his grandsons, of whom he confesses, he never thought he'd have the blessing to see. He looks at the boys and asks playfully, "who are you?" in what is a familiar peek-a-boo trick of aging grandpas on the young people in their families. But then all kidding aside, Jacob draws them close to offer a direct blessing to them. Yet when he reaches to the boys with his frail hands he crosses his arms in an uncomfortable pose, placing the right hand over the head of the younger grandson and the left hand over the elder child.

Joseph swiftly tries to correct him. You know the sound of the role reversal here, where the son says to his aging father, *Lo cen avi*. "Dad, that's not right. You've got the wrong hand on each of my kids. The birthright and your right hand belong to Manasseh, not Ephraim." And Jacob responds in a stubborn independent tone. *Yadati*. "I know. I know my son." *Yadati*. And Jacob proceeds to show that the way in which he is now offering this blessing, though it sounds and looks different, has great purpose and intention behind it. You might say Jacob wants this to be a memory trigger. He wants this moment remembered as one of transformation, of new possibility. Jacob wants us to turn away from the end of his life's work, and cast our eyes on a future that will certainly look different when the birthrights now in our hands belong to our grandkids.

This text is at the core of my faith. I am drawn to it as a person who had the blessing to know a great-grandfather Jacob and a grandfather Joseph well into their eighties and nineties. I hear in it the blessing of these generations in my family, calling on me to do something with my faith that would support the faith my own children's children will know. All the more so, because I am a rabbi in the Reform Jewish movement, I say to you that any effort I make to do so, counts on me to draw those who are not in the mainstream of Jewish life close and convey to them, even when it looks odd to the eye, true purpose and blessing. For our actions as rabbis engaging the Ephraims and Manassehs of this age have the capacity to be as binding in life as if they were, like Jacob, our last moments on Earth.

What I am talking about is making my rabbinate a calling out to every possible student by name. I must call out to them with tenderness and love and without judgment, doing everything possible to help them say *Hineni*, here I am, in return.

Recently you may have heard that the President of the United States has been getting out of the White House to try and draw attention to vision for the future. It has been hard to miss him, even as he visited this week here in Northeastern Ohio.

But I imagine most of you hadn't heard with any detail about how he addressed the delegates of the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial. Sixteen of us who were present were members of our temple, our staff, and clergy, who heard the President convey a *d'var Torah*, one of respect and admiration. In his talk, the President showed his understanding of that same obligation- to respond *Hineini* when called upon to serve the greater good, and to make of our lives a shout out to the young and disenfranchised. He ultimately called upon us to make our lives consistent with the Jewish value of *Tikkun Olam* and worthy of each generation saying *Hineni* back to us, because we leave society better than we found it.

It was a very intense feeling of being addressed with common concern and mission by the President of our nation. And it was a powerful nod to our Reform Jewish community and its standing in the nation's capital. The President spoke about how President Kennedy came to dedicate our movement's Religious Action Center, how civil rights legislation was drafted around our conference tables and in the presence of our Torah. He and Congressman Eric Cantor and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and others gave voice to our vision and activism toward a State of Israel living securely, peacefully and with justice and Jewish values intact. Thousands of delegates came pouring in to attend this convention. But I think that there was more to it than a chance to meet other synagogue leaders and be addressed by national leaders of the U.S. and the State of Israel.

Many coming to Biennial did not have high expectations of what our movement could still offer to synagogues. In recent years, there have been voices suggesting that the URJ was in no position to unify us and that hope emerging from this gathering was unlikely. The combination of economic crises facing national organizations, restructuring of leadership and pressures on local synagogues have led to a disheartening cacophony of sounds in the national Jewish dialogue.

**Having the Back of Kids Outside Our Walls: The Charge from our President at URJ Biennial 2011
Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk, Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple – January 6, 2012**

My teacher Dr. Larry Hoffman of Hebrew Union College suggests that the idea that denominations are on their way out is premature. In a blog post he wrote after teaching and attending the URJ Biennial Convention, he argues:

“... That religion is just changing, not disappearing. Religion, as we know it, is a post-World- War-II response to the Cold War era, baby-boomer children, and suburbia. Synagogues insulated Jews against latent anti-Semitism, and provided safe spaces to rehearse ethnic identity and support of Israel. Plenty of post-war money paid denominational offices to provide the programs that a synagogue needed to ramp up and reach out. Denominations back then had bureaucracies that churned out personnel and services; what they did not have is a clear ideological mandate to justify the personnel and services they churned out.”

In reading Rabbi Hoffman’s words, I’d suggest that what he is conveying is a continuation of the struggle between Joseph and Jacob about blessing their children and grandchildren . For ultimately Joseph only grasped the path he had traveled, but his father could envision a new transformative path of blessing. He says to his father, *lo cen avi*, “that’s not right Dad.” But what he is mistaking and what many mistook in a previous iteration of our Reform Jewish movement is that our national Reform movement leaders were not providing us a service. That’s not true! Services were provided. Meaningful work has been done, and believe me, it has been a job, a difficult job. *But was it the job, the job needed to continue to transform our faith and make it possible for us to help the next generation to recommit?*

Dr. Hoffman suggests with candor and honesty that no synagogue today would offer its resources and energies to the denominations of the past. But after teaching and engaging the new generation of leadership that is now taking a hold of leadership of our movement, he concludes that denominations are truly “what we make of them.” Like Jacob bending one arm over the other and holding true to a forward-thinking vision, our movements can now “define what religion is becoming not reflect what it used to be.”

He continues to explain that our new movement leaders: “...Must acknowledge the fact that, unlike the Cold War era, ours is a time of spiritual search. The limited liability synagogue that trades dues for services will find competitors for those services. [So] who needs denominations just for [supporting] that?”

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“But assume our synagogues respond to the spirituality surge and urge us on to be our better selves. Assume they deliver purpose, meaning, and a reason to be alive. Assume further that they ritualize these higher human goals by connecting people to each other, to their past, and to God. Assume also the existence of rabbis who have something deep to say – rabbis... whose intellectual acumen is equal to whatever society offers elsewhere at its thoughtful best. Assume, in a word, that synagogues manage to ennoble the human condition... where the scar tissue of entrenched routine is replaced by an intentional response to the human yearning to matter. Suppose all this, and you get synagogues that need denominations.”

I know. I know. I must look like as though I have URJ Kool-Aid drenching my lips from all that poured out at the recent Biennial Convention. And yes, I am absolutely moved when a first-lady or a President, a Prime-Minister or a Presidential leader of another faith comes to address synagogue leaders in the context of our Reform movement.

But the most meaningful and challenging presidential address at the Biennial... the one that really provoked me to think that about the transformative path of blessing we must now walk on was the one shared by our new incoming URJ President, Rabbi Rick Jacobs.

Rabbi Jacobs and I share a passion for drawing young disenfranchised Jews close, and he indicated without delay, that a new campaign to engage youth would be the number one priority of his tenure as our movement's leader. His passion and vision for engaging youth in relationships, was in my heart just last night, when a friend who was part of my previous temple, whose daughter is a student at Oberlin, and visited with my family over dinner. We talked about the ins-and-outs of her daughter Rebecca's Jewish identity. We talked about the recent Biennial and whether or not Rebecca, who mistrusts a lot of what the mainstream Jewish faith tradition offers, would have felt if she were at the recent convention with her mom.

Then Rebecca's mom remembered aloud the time period right after Rebecca's Bat Mitzvah, when she began to say things to her parents like: “I'm not really Jewish,” and “I don't believe in what you believe.” Rebecca's mom looked at me and said, “That was Ok. Because she knew she could get out for awhile from the kind of Judaism offered in synagogues. She knew it was Ok because you had her back. *She knew you had her back. You knew her. You were her rabbi and she could come back on her own terms and in her own time.*”

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I have to tell you. Hearing Rebecca's story told back to me by her mom is exactly what I strive to do and what Rabbi Jacobs is asking all our movement's rabbis to do. For engaging the kids of every generation- the ones who've been out of our synagogue's walls, engaging those who have no intention of responding with an easy *Hineni*, "here I am," just because we call out to them, that is a precious task.

Rebecca, who joins my family's Seder table here in Cleveland for Passover, is not about to be defined simply or described a pithy phrase that will summarize the terms on which she'll ever connect formally with Jewish or synagogue life. That's why Rabbi Jacobs, in one of his talks at the Biennial Convention, charged us implicitly to twist our arms into a pretzel if we have to, in order to reach her outside of the synagogue. And we should do so- not because we're certain she's about to jump back in to synagogue life- but because it's what Jacob told Joseph an enduring blessing requires.

Friends, I want you to hear with your own ears what Rabbi Jacobs had to say at our movement's convention. I want you to see the footage taken of his remarks, that available for you to see at the URJ website, and in excerpts soon to be printed in our temple bulletin. For Rabbi Jacobs echoes to me the confidence of Jacob that there is a meaningful way to bless and transform the lives of the next generation.

At the Biennial Convention, he said:

"In this new era of Jewish life, synagogues are far from obsolete, but they must specialize in bringing depth to our lives; they must speak to the soul; they must keep up with the best human thought. Such a synagogue will remain the central address for cultivating a deep and nourishing Jewish life." He then acknowledged that "To accomplish this crucial work, the URJ will need to undergo a transformation by rethinking and refocusing everything we do."

He then asked some questions which we at Fairmount Temple ask you to be considering, right here. He asked:

- Is my congregation the most compelling Jewish community I can imagine?
- What's inspiring about my congregation, and what's broken?
- What's shoddy, or ordinary, or so drab that no one cares whether it is broken or not? In a word, what's "not really excellent?"
- And what would help me make my congregation the place I dream of?

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Listen to the key words in his questions again: compelling, inspiring, excellent, worthy of our dreams. We'd do well to listen carefully to those words and to consider how to make ours a community in which to live up to all they convey.

It is simply imperative that we touch the lives, inside and outside our walls, of every Ephraim and Manasseh that emerge in our families. They might be your kids or grandkids. They might be mine. But in all likelihood we'll have just a moment like Jacob did to convey our blessing.

So I'd suggest at this time in temple life that we each take time for reflection on each of these transformative questions Rabbi Jacobs is asking. For if he and I have any hope of leading in a Reform movement of meaning in people's lives, then our movement must be sensitive to our youth as we seek to engage them. We simply must reach out as a movement to every Rebecca we can- reminding her that she can call it like she sees it from in our outside our walls, because we have her back, and because she has our confidence to speak her truth and ours, forever, *Amen*.