

## THE RABBI'S GIFT

by Dr. M. Scott Peck<sup>1</sup>

There once was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was a great order, but now there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. It occurred to the abbot that a visit to the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi said, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "All I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you." When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?"

"The rabbi said something very mysterious. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant!"

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the significance of the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

As they contemplated, each of the old monks thought, "He couldn't possibly have meant **me**. **I'm** just an ordinary person." So they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

<sup>1</sup> The Different Drum was written by Scott Peck. He did not write this story. The author is unknown. It has been edited by Rabbi Krishef.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, and thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

There are some who feel that Conservative Judaism or our Conservative synagogue in Grand Rapids are like that of the dying monastery. Some suggest that we look back at what we used to do in the 1950's, 60's, 70's, when we were strong, and anything that we do today that is different must be the cause of our so-called decline. The synagogue has changed too much. The congregants have changed too much. The movement has changed too much. We have abandoned our principles. We begin to panic because we are losing numbers, and we lose sight of what a movement or community ought to be about.

The answer is not that our primary goal should be to have the greatest numbers. Largest doesn't mean best, just as smallest doesn't mean worst. No one thinks that Orthodoxy is weak just because their numbers lag behind Reform and Conservative. On the contrary, people see them as strong because they have a faithful following who participates and lives their life in accord with the principles of Orthodoxy.

The answer is that we ought to stand for a certain way of living and thinking about living. If that makes us the largest, it means that we have been successful in convincing the greatest number of people that our way of living is fulfilling.

I think what defines us as a movement or community is this: We are an open, welcoming community for anyone who wants to explore Torah and Tanakh, Talmud and Midrash, Hasidic and other texts in a context which embraces classic answers unless there is an overwhelmingly strong reason to overturn them. We seek people who want to uphold the traditional Biblical idea that there are boundaries that define our community that do not change - but people who are willing to push those boundaries to see how much they can flex to accommodate an ever-changing world.

Over and over again, I hear from people who have chosen to become Jewish that one factor in their decision has been that Judaism is a religion that openly welcomes questions. There is no question that is out of bounds. Our tradition is built on a Talmudic practice of taking apart the Torah and Tanakh by asking questions, even outlandish questions, to try to get at a set of behaviors and practices that bring us closer in our relationship with God.

We can confront difficult and offensive texts, reject their halakhic teaching yet continue to read them, year after year, in order to be challenged by them and learn from them. We can ask the difficult questions about homosexuality, intermarriage, instrumental music on Shabbat, interfaith burial, domestic violence - speak about them in the sacred space of our synagogue - and accept that sometimes Judaism can accommodate new answers, and sometimes that answer must remain no.

I suggest that part of what defines Conservative Judaism is that we accept that others in our movement have different theologies and different practices but we don't write them out of our community. We are a Big Tent movement. We do not define ourselves by a set of specific behaviors, but rather by cultivating a common understanding of how we get to those behaviors. Rabbi David Wolpe suggests that we are united by a common understanding of covenant comprised of the following three covenants:

The first covenant is based on the Hebrew phrase *Brit Shalom*, Covenant of Friendship. The Jewish relationship to God may be seen as a friendship, a partnership, though of obviously unequal partners. The Torah also speaks of God as a parent, a lover, a teacher and an intimate sharer of our hearts.

Conservative Judaism believes in the continuous partnership between God and Israel. For the Conservative Jew, dialogue between the Jewish people and God began in the Bible and continues today. The Bible is, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, the record of the search of human beings for God and of God for human beings. The First Covenant is the Relationship with God.

The second principle is that all Jews are involved in the Abrahamic covenant — not only those Jews whom we like or those of whom we approve, but all Jews. The emphasis on the responsibility of Jews to other Jews is uncomfortable for some. It seems narrow minded.

However, we are built to care in concentric circles: first one's own family, then one's community and then larger groups — rippling out to the world, always modified by the degree of need. The Talmud teaches that the poor of one's own city come first, *aniyei ircha kodmim*. This sense of Jewish responsibility explains why Solomon Schechter, the first major figure of American Conservative Judaism, was an outspoken Zionist. *Ahavat Yisrael*, Ahavas Israel, love of Israel, is not an emotional impulse but a covenantal responsibility. That is why we need to care passionately about the land of Israel and the people Israel. The Second Covenant is the Relationship Between Jews.

The third principle is based on the fact that the first recorded Biblical covenant was not made with the Jewish people. God sent a rainbow in the time of Noah as a sign to the world, to all of humanity. Noah lived 10 generations before the first Jew. The meaning is clear: We have a responsibility toward others of whatever faith; we share a covenantal relationship with the non-Jewish world.

Judaism has many precedents for religious learning from non-Jews, beginning in the Bible. The world begins with Adam, not with Abraham. Noah, the first man called righteous, is not a Jew. The chapter of Torah containing the Ten Commandments is named “Yitro” (Jethro) — named after a non-Jew. The traditional response when someone asks after our welfare, “*barukh Hashem*” (thank God) is mentioned three times in the Bible. All three times, by a non-Jew.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we learn how to praise God from those in our community who were not raised as Jews.

The rabbis of the Talmud insist that compassion is a characteristic of the people of Israel. The first statement about human beings is that each is made in God's image. Teachings that raise the inherent worth of Jews above others are fundamentally at odds with the Covenantal tradition. The Third Covenant is the Relationship With the Non-Jewish World.

What does the lessons for Congregation Ahavas Israel? We need to be concerned equally with the past and the future of Ahavas Israel; but above all, we need to care for each other in the present.

The secret of our strength is in the idea that our covenant with God is expressed through mitzvot and through the communities we build in sanctity, compassion and love.

Don't search for reasons to think the Congregation has done wrong. Don't try to find reasons to be offended by something we have said or done.

<sup>2</sup> Noah (Genesis 9:26), Eliezer (Genesis 24:27) and Jethro (Exodus 18:10)

Do try to find reasons to be supportive of your community. Do as Pirke Avot teaches, *dal l'kaf zkhut*, and presume that no member of Ahavas Israel has a malicious desire to harm the community.

Remember that there is a range of knowledge, ability, and familiarity with Jewish tradition and practices among our members. Find reasons to praise and understand, rather than to criticize and be superior.

Be thankful that we have leadership committed to maintaining the shul rather than being critical that they are not doing everything as you think it ought to be done.

May our covenant with God infuse our lives with mitzvah. May we treat each person around us, whether a member of the tribe or a visiting stranger, as a potential messiah. May our community be a vibrant center of light and spirituality, attracting serious traditional minded Jews for generations to come.