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THE EXTRA EYES AND EARS OF A RABBI:
INSTALLATION OF RABBI BRADLEY BLOOM
CONGREGATION BETH YAM, HILTON HEAD, SC

Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, Ph.D.

Congregation Emanu-El

I have had the privilege of being a friend and confidant of Rabbi Bloom, a distinguished, respected, and devoted rabbi, for almost two decades. During that time, I have witnessed his devotion to the people he has served as well as his deep love for klal Yisrael—the unity of the people Israel. What greater satisfaction could another rabbi have than to play a role, however insignificant, in the advancement of the career of such an outstanding Jewish leader? I know the pride and joy that Linda, Lea, Brad's mother Ruth, my cherished congregants Roger and Carol, his brother and sister-in-law, feel at seeing one of the most promising young American rabbis fulfill all of the potential he holds through devoted service to Congregation Beth Yam and to the Jewish people.

Let me tell you a story of when I was a young rabbi. I had arrived at my first pulpit and found three inscribed sealed envelopes in my desk, left by my predecessor. The first one counseled: "Open if the staff becomes obstinate." The second one cautioned: "Open if the members become uncooperative." The third warned: "Open in the event of a board uprising."

As soon as this then 28-year-old rabbi met opposition from the staff, he opened the first envelope. It read: "Blame everything on a lack of resources." That seemed to work for a while until some months later I was embroiled in a dispute with the membership, and opened the second envelope. It read: "Blame everything on your predecessor." Finally, there was a board uprising. I opened the third envelope and it read: "Prepare three envelopes!"

Casey Stengle once was asked how he managed to survive as a ball club manager. He said, "There is always one-third of the team that likes you, one-third that is indifferent, and one-third that hates you. The trick is to prevent the last third from speaking to the second third. (It is O.K. if the first third speaks to the second third.)"

Being a rabbi is more than just survival. Nevertheless, it is difficult to be a rabbi because we frequently deal with Jews who carry a great deal of excess baggage like Woody Allen who, when asked what his religion was, replied: "Jewish—with an explanation!" Jews are wonderful people, but we all have explanations that frequently play themselves out in our synagogues. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once defined the role of the clergy in a different context. He said that it "is to tell unpleasant truths to the people we love." Most rabbis discover a resistance to such outspoken forthrightness: "Rabbi, tell us the truth, but not when you describe our frailties and failings. Remind us about the importance of *tzdakah*, but do not call us what Rabbi Harold Schulweiss termed 'alimony Jews' who support Judaism but are unwilling to live with it. Tell us about the importance of the synagogue, even though we engage in so few Jewish practices at home that synagogues have become, in effect, homeless shelters—homes for Jews without Jewish homes. Speak to the great social issues of the day but do not

expect us to rally around the cause because we have no time or because we want you to do it for us.”

Rabbis feel the tension between telling unpleasant truths to the people we love and trying to be charitable and forgiving toward them. Surely, if members of a congregation expect a rabbi to be their “Shabbas Jew”—the one who does it all so that they can sit back and do nothing—then you are creating an unhealthy rabbinate for your rabbi.

At the same time that rabbis try to manage this delicate balancing act, their constituency incessantly scrutinizes them. Rabbis are expected to be good at everything and often are. But when scrutiny uncovers shortcomings, congregants must be supportive. Otherwise the undue pressure of the myriad expectations rabbis are required to fulfill results in an unhappy rabbi and an unhappy congregation. Rabbi David Wolpe, author of *The Healer of Shattered Hearts*, describes many talents necessary for success. A rabbi must be a sympathetic personality; a scholar; a dynamic speaker; a whiz at performing life-cycle events; be politically informed and culturally savvy; teach adults; captivate adolescents and children; be an administrator; have a good grasp of budgetary issues, building maintenance, and the synagogue support staff; attend daily meetings; arbitrate disputes; be a community leader; have contacts with the non-Jewish community; engage in interfaith and political dialogue; be active in rabbinical organizations; be a writer; be there when someone is sick, or celebrates, or simply needs him; make regular hospital rounds; visit homes; attend receptions and parties; be a good listener; sort out personal dilemmas; answer convert’s questions; deal with issues of intermarriage; solve family problems and spiritual crises; be a fundraiser; and so forth. Wolpe questions the wisdom of living up to this ideal by noting that no human being can meet all these.

For the rabbi-congregational relationship to work, it must be a partnership that stresses the Jewish values of: *kehilah*—community, *hach’nasat orchim*—hospitality to strangers, *tzdekah*—acts of charitable giving, *talmud Torah*—Jewish learning, *bikur holim*—visiting the sick, *g’milut hasidim*—acts of kindness, *neemanut*—faithfulness, *chesed*—goodness, and *tikkun haolam*—perfection of the world. A rabbi must go forward, lovingly teaching these values even when he does not have the opportunity to speak to the people who most need to hear his words, or when he realizes that the people he is leading are not listening or following.

Abraham is the centerpiece of the *Lech Lecha*, this week’s Torah portion. Abraham goes forth at God’s call to what Bible scholar, E.A. Speiser called “the most fateful commencement in history.” Abraham’s pilgrimage from the Mesopotamia to the coastal plain of Canaan is instructive on this auspicious occasion because, like Abraham, a rabbi must intuit God’s presence, and he must help you, his congregants and friends, feel the Divine presence when you celebrate moments of joy and at sad times feel when you feel abandoned.

But a rabbi cannot do it all alone. Thus, the relationship between a rabbi and a congregation must be more than one in which the rabbi is an officiant and a congregation merely a passive audience that observes rites and rituals. If that is all a rabbi is and all that a congregation is, then the temple becomes a theater, the pulpit a

stage, the cantor a vocalist, and the rabbi a master of ceremonies. No, it is a partnership. Your job is to be Rabbi Bloom's extra eyes and ears. Do not assume that he knows that someone is in the hospital, or in trouble, or is celebrating a simcha. Even if you think he knows, call him and let him know. It is better that ten people call with the same information than he not hear from anyone and be deprived of an opportunity to reach out to someone in need.

Rabbi Bloom is also your eyes and ears, here to guide your steps, uplift you when you fall short of Jewish ideals, and lead you to principled lives, worthy action, and high ideals, but he cannot and should not go it alone. Furthermore, your rabbi wears the Crown of the Torah. That is why initials kaf"tav—for *keter Torah*—are often inscribed on a rabbinic talit. The Crown of Torah enables him to be more than an angel, guide, and leader because he is also an exemplar. But being an angel and an exemplar is not without stresses and strains. The mantle of the *keter Torah* can weigh heavily on his head and shoulders as he serves long hours, at times with a lack of appreciation. No wonder burnout and unhappiness plague many rabbis today.

When a rabbi builds his own home, he also nurtures your homes. However, to do so, the rabbi is frequently absent from his home so that he can be at your home. Some years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner, addressing a graduating class of newly ordained rabbis, admonished them with these words:

There will be Friday evenings when you will rush your family through dinner so that you can get to services on time to give a sermon about the Sabbath as uninterrupted family time. There will be days when you will leave a sick child at home or a child studying for a test, while you go to teach religious values to the temple youth group. There will be Sundays when you will cancel plans for a family picnic to officiate at a funeral, where you will praise the deceased as a man who never let his business interfere with his obligations to his family. And worst of all, you won't even realize what you are doing as you do it.

Over the years, I have found that people see better than they hear. They discover more by watching behavior than they do through eloquent elegant sermons. To influence others, a rabbi must truly be a role model. He must be devoted not only to Jewish learning and Jewish values, he must be devoted to his own family. Rabbis are more than *morei derech*—teachers of the way. People can learn best from those they believe in and admire. If we rabbis live by the highest ideals, then our congregants can hold out hope that, even if they fall short of their own expectations, they can improve. They can hope to be better people if they see that we are better people. Thus, although we want to be there to celebrate, rejoice, and mourn with our congregants, we also need to be at home with our families. We cannot be in two places at once. By being good spouses and parents and living exemplary lives, we not only are being faithful to our Jewish tradition, we are also more successful in our work, because a well-balanced life enables us to serve people with full devotion and spirit.

A rabbi teaches us to serve the living God and reminds us that our greatest needs are not material but spiritual as the prophet Amos reminds us: "A time is

coming—declared the Lord God—when I will send a famine upon the land; not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

Our affluent society lacks few physical comforts, but God has set a spiritual hunger in our hearts. The late Rabbi Jacob P. Rudin described how a rabbi ought to address spiritual hunger:

You keep the book near and teach its eternal truths. You look to the far horizon, and you bring a big world to their little one. You give lassitude no peace. You light a candle, however small, against a darkness, however great. You go forward when others say, "Stand still." You speak when others say, "Keep silent." You hold the near book. You seek the far horizon. You trust the ever-present God.

When Moses anointed Aaron, he took the blood of the sacrifice and placed it on Aaron’s right ear, right thumb, and right big toe (Ex 29:20; Lev 8:23-24; also see Lev 14:14, 17, 25, 28). Although puzzling, the text suggests a metaphor for a leader’s responsibilities: to hear people’s hurts and pains, reach out a helping hand to those in need, and be fleet footed in willingness to serve and meet people wherever they may be. Tonight, I symbolically touch the ear, thumb, and toe of your rabbi as we invoke God’s blessing upon your rabbi:

Elohaynu v’elohay avotaynu v’eemotaynu, Eternal God of our Fathers and our Mothers, bless this worthy congregation and its new rabbi. Enable him to enter the lives of Your people in gladness and sorrow. Let him not be impervious to their troubles. When in pain, may he feel their anguish; in their joy, enable him to rejoice with them. May he bring sanctity to celebrations, and comfort to bereavement. In so doing, may he empower this congregation to cherish their faith and bind themselves to the Covenant with greater determination and devotion. May Your dedicated servant help us remember that just as You are sympathetic to our imperfections and You goad us to make ourselves better than we have been, You also help us as we struggle to find *tzelem Elohim*—Your image in each of us.

When burdens oppress him, let him turn to You for help. When rewarding moments come to him, let him not forget that You are the Source of all the we prize and cherish. May he, like Jacob, struggle, and through patience and love become Israel. We thank You, God, for raising up a leader who will always look to a far horizon, light a candle against the darkness, and trust in the ever-present God. In so doing, he will bring honor to the title of rabbi—a mantle he wears with dignity and grace. Amen!