

# Regional Biennial Speech, 2004-2005

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When I took my first congregation at age 27, my wife and I had no children, and I preached a number of sermons entitled "Rules for Raising Children." My daughter was born five years later, and after that I preached some sermons entitled "Guidelines for Raising Children." When my children got to be teenagers, I stopped preaching on the subject altogether.

Now that my kids are in their twenties and are adults, more or less, I feel that I can safely return to this theme. And I also feel that it is important for me to do so. This past summer I spent time in two of our Union camps, talking in particular to teenagers, and trying to get a sense of what is on their minds.

I am quick to admit that these kids and I are not always on the same wavelength. I am 57, a certified old person in their eyes. We do not always understand each other. For example, it is not easy for them to comprehend the brutal hardships that I and other baby boomers had to overcome when growing up: we had only 4 or 5 television stations, and no DVDs, Playstations, Internet, or even faxes. And not only that. No cell phones. That's right, I tell them. When we needed our moms to come pick us up at the mall, we had to walk, manually, until we found a pay phone—sometimes dozens of yards away.

But, all kidding aside, I do not envy them. And despite all the wonderful technology that they have at their disposal, I suspect that it is much harder for them to grow up than it was for me.

We adults tend to have in our heads two sets of conflicting stereotypes about what it means to be a teenager today.

The first is the image of the teenager as a separate, malevolent species: them of the dirty room, them of the smart mouth, them who cut classes, them who once sat in your lap and now can't stand the sight of you.

The second is the image of over-indulged kids paying zero attention to anything but each other—flirting, laughing, and wrapped up in the self-absorbed obliviousness of Teenager Land.

Both stereotypes, of course, contain a measure of truth, but neither, I think, accurately reflects the complex reality of our kids' lives.

When my son was a counselor for 13 and 14 year olds at the Union's Camp Harlam in Pennsylvania, I asked him what was the hardest part of his job. His answer: trying to figure out whether or not the girls in his unit were eating. Some of them put food on their plate, pushed it around, took a few mouthfuls, and then dropped it on the floor. Young Jewish girls, who otherwise seemed completely normal, were starving themselves, and were exceedingly clever about the way that they did it. And unless he was very careful, it could take 3 or 4 days until he caught on.

And that's not all. Our boys are taking steroids and body-building supplements, drinking too much, and using drugs. Our kids are cutting themselves, and we are seeing sexual acting-out in our camps that starts at a younger age than ever before.

When I talked with our kids at camp this summer, they were quick to acknowledge all of this. It is true, they said, that not everyone engages in these behaviors, but more do than we know; and what we are seeing is far more than just a few stray acts of rebellion. All of this, in their minds, points to some troubling trends in our society, even if they could not articulate what exactly they are

I have been struggling to understand all of this. One explanation, it seems to me, is the deep loneliness produced by our individualistic culture.

When I was in junior high school, my first girlfriend was the daughter of a man who owned a grocery store in a tough part of town. He himself was a pretty tough guy. When I called, he would usually answer the phone so that he would know who was calling, and he made it very clear that he did not like long phone calls. Unable to make progress by phone, I would go to the house, where he would greet me, look me over, ask me questions, and stay close by while I sat in the living room and talked to his daughter. When we went out to a movie or a dance, he would usually drive us there in his truck. I remember all of this because, for me, this was an important part of growing up. Except for my teachers, this was the first adult outside of my family whom I had to convince of my worth as a person

But today, of course, it is unlikely that any of this would happen. Using email and instant messaging, I would have simply outflanked him on the Internet. Thanks to modern technology, teenagers today can shield their social lives from adult scrutiny; but while they are more connected to the world at large than ever before, all of this comes at a price: they are also more cut off from the social experiences that allow them to leave adolescence behind and grow into adulthood.

The Net, it turns out, is more isolating than television. And research shows that the kids who use it most frequently become lonely and depressed. A vicious cycle is at work here. The kids who are socially awkward to begin with are those who end up hunched over computer screens—with the result being that they miss the real-world experiences that they desperately need, and often are left with no social skills whatever.

Another, even more important problem for our kids is the obsessive focus of our culture on the superficial: on how you look, on how much you weigh, on what clothes you wear. As our campers told me this summer, body image is **everything**. It's not exactly news, of course, that teenagers are concerned about appearance. But at a time when all mass media are teen media, our media moguls are finding ever-new ways of exploiting traditional teen compulsions.

Have you seen ABC's "Extreme Makeover"? Or Fox's "The Swan"? In "The Swan," girls are given makeovers that include lipo-suction and other surgical procedures that will make them more glamorous. But that is not all. Once made over, the girls then compete in a beauty contest from which a single winner is chosen. So what is the message? That the only ideal worth living for is to be thin and beautiful; that any method or procedure, no matter how radical or physically invasive, is acceptable in pursuing this ideal; and that, despite all of this, if you do not emerge as the Swan, as the uncontested champion of good looks, you are nothing.

All of this strikes me as sad and more than a little perverse. Adolescence is a tumultuous time, when our kids are suddenly vulnerable and suddenly sexual. Why would anyone think that this is what they need to be happy? And what of feminism? We have spent 35 years saying that we do not want our girls to be plastic Barbies; and yet this is exactly the message these shows convey. Nonetheless, the youth culture grinds inexorably on, proclaiming that image is all. And the truth is that most Americans don't disapprove of the current media fare—they love it.

There are other pressures at work on our kids. As we all know, while their friends pressure them to look good, their parents pressure them to build their resumes and increase their test scores. And sometimes, their parents are intent on running their lives.

Let's admit that the Jewish community has made its own contribution to this culture. Despite the pleadings of our rabbis, every congregation here has experienced what my colleagues call "The Bar Mitzvah that ate Chicago." At a time when the whole world is in the grip of surface images and materialism, these extravaganzas only contribute to the problem. And to make matters worse, they are really for the benefit of the parents; our kids, who are 13 and at their most insecure, could care less.

What is the result of all this societal pressure? Many of our kids are exhausted, confused, and overwhelmed. And many parents, too, have no idea how to cope.

I know parents who tell me, only half in jest, that you are an expert in child-raising if you are a parent and your children have done no jail time.

So what, if anything, can our synagogues do? The time has come, it seems to me, for a Jewish spiritual extreme makeover.

Our synagogues can be a place where our kids go to find refuge from a difficult world; a place where they do not feel powerless and insignificant and where they know that their lives really count; a place where a kid can just be a kid.

We always say that the test of a synagogue is how we treasure each and every person, no matter how smart they are, and no matter how much money they have. This is true for the elderly, the sick, and the home bound, and it needs to be true for our kids as well—no matter what they look like or how well they do in school.

In high school you have the jocks here, and the geeks there, and the drama people over there, and the druggies somewhere else. When I talk to kids, I hear again and again about the issue of cliques and social groups, and the endless infighting and struggle to be included. "What high school is really about," one teenager said to me, "is trying to find someone who cares about me." The synagogue needs to be the place where nobody is mocked or derided, where nobody is "in" and nobody is "out." Where there are Jews, just Jews, and where there are people who care.

And not only that. In the midst of materialism, we need to be the place that nurtures spirituality. In the midst of indifference, we need to summon our kids to a higher standard—to say that "justice is important to us and to God whom we serve in this institution." In a world obsessed with the superficial, we need to share with our kids our most sacred principles: the sanctity of human life, the dignity of the individual, and the moral claims of the vulnerable and the powerless.

If we are the place where morality rings louder than materialism, where unconditional love is stronger than test results, and where the contribution that each of us can make is held in higher regard than the body image that few of us can achieve, we will find a way to touch the genius and the Jewish soul that is in every child.

And how exactly will we make this happen? By doing those things that many of our synagogues are already doing. By strengthening our families long before our kids become teenagers. By offering family social action projects, family choirs, and family Torah study. Yes, our kids drive us crazy: they tattoo their bodies and wear rings through their noses. But sometimes, if we give them our undivided attention, they might just be willing to come to Temple and spend some time with us.

But often, of course, they do not want to be anywhere near us. And for those times, we need to provide them with youth group advisors and teachers and staff members who care about kids, who are good Jewish role models, and who know how to really listen.

We all know that synagogues are supposed to pay careful attention to the Jewish well-being of their teenagers, and most do. But in some cases, I am afraid, caring about these kids is little more than a rhetorical flourish. We lose most of our kids after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but not because they are hostile to the Temple; on the contrary, they almost always have warm feelings for their synagogues. We lose them because we don't have much to offer. Our task, then, is to back up our rhetoric with program and resources, and to really put kids at the center.

But we can't do it alone. And some of our congregations just don't have the money to hire the staff that they need. That is why camps and NFTY events are so vital.

You see: religious school is important, but it is not enough. Because knowing information does not move today's youth; but experiencing holiness does. For many years, we have expected teenagers to fall in love with Judaism because the information that we share with them in religious school is true. But our kids want to experience Judaism, and holiness, and God. Sometimes we forget in our work with youth what we've always known about romance: location, music, candles, ceremony, and atmosphere all enhance the experience of falling in love. If we want our kids to fall in love with Judaism, then we must give them what our camps and NFTY give them: heartfelt music and prayer, authentic Jewish ritual, Shabbat candles, and the experience of a loving and inclusive community.

And to this we must add a little subversion. Judaism for kids must be not only inspiring, but also subversive. We want a Judaism that not only seduces their soul but also stimulates their brain. This means Torah study about real issues that will trigger debate and challenge their lives as they currently live them.

Still, passion is the key. Let's not forget the connection between the passion of youth and the passion of faith. Passion is a symptom of adolescence, but also a symptom of being Jewish. If our youth enlist their passions elsewhere, then our movement must receive this as a judgment not on adolescents, but on us.

And so NFTY, Union camps, and youth groups cannot be a secondary concern. This is where we enlist the passion that binds our kids to Judaism. What this means is that if our congregations don't upgrade their youth staffs and help their kids go to NFTY conclaves and camp, shame on us. And if we at the Union don't expand our camps and provide a massive scholarship fund for every NFTY and camping session, shame on us again.

Can we reach our kids and give them what they need? That depends, I suppose, on what kind of synagogue leaders we are. But I am filled with optimism that we can do what must be done.

None of us is naïve. We will not turn our kids into something they are not. We will not legislate an end to the cliquish behavior of adolescents. We know that our teenagers are angry, repressed, moody, inconsistent and secretive on a bad day, and often on a good day.

But we older people always have difficulty recognizing the gifts of the young. And from what I saw and heard this past summer, our synagogues have young men and women of most remarkable gifts that God is helping us to raise up.

These kids have high expectations of us. They are disgusted by halfhearted commitments. They are suspicious of religious establishments. They are dissatisfied with what they often see as the coldness and empty formality of our religious life. But they are also hungry for direction, and willing, even anxious, to construct new Jewish identities.

What I saw in them were signs of a thirst for the noble and the spiritual. What I saw was a desperate search for credible values and a personal center. What I saw were kids who are ready to join with us in the creative process of Jewish tradition.

For centuries, we have passed on our faith and way of life to our children. No other people has cared more for its children than the Jewish people, invested more energy in them, and shaped the whole of its religious life in order to hand on to them what it finds precious. Not all of us can have children, but all of us can do something to help raise them up and to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people.

And so we will offer our teenagers inspiration and direction, worship and learning, teachers and role models. We will help them to create an island of interpersonal meaning in a sea of impersonal forces. We will show them a community united by kinship, and joined by a covenant of shared destiny and fate.

And if we do all of this, our sons and daughters will respond.

I would like to conclude with a few words about what is happening in the world around us.

I am worried about our country right now. I am worried that jobs are less secure and health care costs are more difficult to handle. I am worried that our government, as Rabbi Saperstein has told us, seems intent on dismantling the safety net that has protected Americans for three-quarters of a century, replacing it with a system of individual risk that says "you're on your own, Jack." I am worried that the elderly are being asked to swap an insurance policy for a lottery ticket. I am worried that we have forgotten a fundamental rule of American life – that Americans who are not wealthy fare far better when we share the risks rather than face them alone.

And I am especially worried that all of this is being justified in religious language, as an expression of family values.

Well, I believe in God, and I have a hunch that God might feel special concern for the 45 million Americans who can't visit a doctor because they have no health insurance.

And I believe there are many religious Americans who, like me, regard poverty as a moral issue; who believe that giving tax cuts to the rich and a deficit to the grandkids is a matter of religious concern; who value a child with diabetes over a frozen embryo in a fertility clinic; and who don't want their country racked by the fundamentalist religious wars that we see across the world.

I believe that there are many people who know that it can never be religiously right to be craven toward the economically powerful and vicious toward the economically weak.

Don't misunderstand me. God is not a Democrat or a Republican and neither are we. We are not in anyone's pocket. We are not reliable defenders of any party or any politician. We are reliable defenders only of the values we cherish and the beliefs we hold.

And what are those values? What guides us is not liberalism or conservatism, but *mentshlikeit* and *rachmones*. When our grandparents and great-grandparents came to these shores, they brought with them a legacy of social institutions dating back to Mishnaic times: societies to protect the poor, homes for the aged, charities to clothe the naked, homes that cared for orphans, and societies that buried the indigent without charge.

This was accepted as the duty and responsibility of the entire society. We address our God as *EI Mole Rachamim*—God full of compassion. And compassion for the Jew means to act—to intervene in the world and to stop the suffering of those who must do without.

This means that we support personal responsibility when it says: "we will help you, but you must do your share." But we oppose the kind of crude Social Darwinism that says: "you're on your own, so heal yourself." We oppose the smoke screen of "family values" that seems to mean: "God-bless-me-and-to-hell-with-you."

This means that 12 million American children without health insurance is an abomination. We ask those children every day to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and the time has long since passed for us to pledge to them the unfettered access to decent health care that they need and deserve.

This means that the moral test for this and every administration will be what is done for the least of us—the deprived, the hungry, and the homeless.

Now, I know that there are those who say that in these conservative times, it is best to be cautious and accommodating—to be accepting of more restrictions on abortion; less tolerance of gays; more God in public places; and a more unilateral foreign policy.

But to this we need to respond: our values do not bend with the political winds.

On the contrary. This is the time to appeal to idealism and public service.

This is the time to energize the forces of social justice in our synagogues and in the churches—in an effort to kindle a rebirth of hope, community, and commitment.

This is the time to fight back—by joining with women's groups, civil rights groups, and mainstream Christian groups to revitalize those coalitions of decency that will join us in this battle.

And there is one issue in particular on which we will not bend.

It is hardly a secret that the Christian right has made a conscious effort to expand its ranks by bashing gays. It has come to believe that prejudice against gays runs so deep in America that if it champions the anti-gay cause, millions of Americans will flock to its banner. And it is not entirely wrong. Thirteen states have passed bans on same-sex marriage, and we have an administration that advocates writing anti-gay prejudice into the U.S. constitution.

But the fact that gay marriage is widely unpopular in some places cannot obscure the fact that it is morally momentous and morally right. Liberals once lost elections for supporting civil rights and now look back on those losses as badges of honor. And we must do no less. Since young people are far more supportive of gay marriage than their parents, the day will come when conservatives will apologize for trying to deny yet another group of Americans their full human rights.

And in the meantime, we need to educate our fellow citizens. Yes, many Americans have religious reservations about homosexuality, and they are entitled to that. But they can still be made to understand that America does not mistreat people because of what they are. And they can understand too that the right to have the benefits that others have when they make a lifelong commitment to a loved one is not a "special right." It is simply a component of equal citizenship.

Therefore, we Reform Jews will fight this battle, even if others in the Jewish community choose not to join us. Most of the Orthodox community opposes gay marriage, and others in our community who have spoken out for gays and lesbians have done so far more gently than we would like.

But if that is the case, then so be it. We will raise our voices as we have so many times before, and we will stand behind our gay brothers and sisters—Jew and non-Jew—no matter what the dangers and no matter what the cost.

And in the end we will win. Because history is moving toward more tolerance and liberty, and because Americans, despite the battles that lie ahead, still aspire to be united in a sense of high national purpose and common cause.

And as religious leaders and Reform Jews we see it our task to further that purpose and advance that cause; we see it our task to do what God and Torah demand of us; we see it our task to help heal the soul of America, this great country in which we live.

It is no easy matter, this enterprise of being Jewish; it summons us to be fired by a very broad vision. But as leaders of the synagogue we expect no less. As leaders of the synagogue, we are destined to be healers and fixers and pursuers of justice, and thus to be a blessing to all humankind.

Shabbat Shalom.