

the clear cool air of life cleanse it of its sickness, free at last of the chains of fear . . .

Confronting life and death

A musical bridge . . . *Lecho Dodi* . . . *Oseh Sholom Bimromov* . . . we moved into the tradition. New prayers mixed with the *Sh'ma*, the *Torah* portion, and a new *Olelu* and new *Kaddish* followed.

ALL: There is one anxiety. The anxiety of not being that each of us in turn faces. Faces it. And as we mature accepts the ultimate limitation of our existence. By the recitation of this *kaddish* we reaffirm the memory of those who have died. A thank you to God for lives given and taken. Our *Kaddish*, a healing, something to say together. We shuffle uneasily as we reflect on memories and our limitation. We accept death, but it is life we are accepting. We shall live, live life. Life is a process, A totality – birth, growing, creating, dying – and death.

After new prayers for the *Shabbat nairot* (candles) and the *Kiddush* were said, we all joined hands and sang familiar tunes of Sabbath joy and peace.

The service ended. The feeling of community and the spirit of the Sabbath lingered with us. They didn't immediately rush for the coffee . . . even the kissing seemed more on the lips than on the cheeks . . . there was *Shabbat shalom*.

There are problems with creative services. It is hard to get the feeling and the rhythm of the words during a first reading. Concentrating on the reading one loses the meaning. Some people always want more Hebrew. Others complain that this isn't prayer. It's a personal statement of the creator, rather than an expression of the Congregants' feelings.

I suppose all that is true. But most people in our time do not know how to pray, even when they want to. I think they need to start with themselves, which is where they feel the need. And then they can start to pray, which is the first step in a long and important Jewish pilgrimage.

An orthodox simchat bat

Joseph C. Kaplan

When my wife, Sharon, gave birth to our first child a short time ago, we were overjoyed that our prayers appeared to be answered and that we were blessed with a healthy baby. In addition, the fact that our firstborn was a daughter had, at this time in our lives, an addi-

tional special personal and religious significance; it gave us the opportunity to express our joy and our thanks, on this most joyful and thankful of occasions, in a religious ceremony of our own choosing and design. As Orthodox Jews, we of course confined ourselves to work within the *halachic* tradition, but we felt certain that we could still prepare and perform a *simchat bat* in a manner that would be within the traditional framework while still giving expression to our own deeply felt emotions, thoughts and desires.

And so we did. On the Sunday following Thanksgiving (a singularly appropriate day), we celebrated, together with about 100 of our relatives and friends, a *simchat bat* in honor of our daughter Micole Seanne (or in Hebrew, Sara Michal). Although we consulted with our rabbi, Steven Riskin, as to the appropriateness of the ceremony and received his approval, it was *our* ceremony, saying what we wanted to say, and bringing our daughter into the covenant between God and the Jewish people in a way that we hope *she* will appreciate as she grows older.

The following outline (written for the sake of clarity in the third person), is a summary of the ceremony as it was actually performed.

1. Micole was brought into the room by her grandmothers, and was then passed from her aunts and uncles to Joseph's grandparents who, as the senior members of the family, ceremonially presided over the *simcha*. Her voyage to the front table (where she was laid on a white pillow upon an antique silver platter) was accompanied by her uncle's singing of two verses from the Bible which, by starting and ending with the first and last letters of her Hebrew names, symbolize them:

(a) Hatred stirs up wrath, but love covers all transgressions (Proverbs, 10:12).

(b) How good are thy tents O Jacob, thy dwelling places O Israel (Numbers, 24:5).

The tree symbolizes life

2. Joseph explained the section of the *Talmud* (*Gitin*, 57a) which recounts a custom in ancient Israel. Upon the birth of a daughter, her parents would plant a pine tree, with the prayer and the hope that their daughter too would grow strong and fragrant. And the tree they planted would not be cut until their daughter was engaged to be married, so its branches could be used for the *chupah* under which she and her beloved would stand.

In order to perpetuate this ancient, beautiful and very meaningful – although unfortunately neglected –

custom, it was announced that both sets of Micole's grandparents planted a tree in Israel in her honor, in the hope and prayer that she would be raised to be a source of pride to her family and the entire Jewish people, and that all who celebrate at her *simchat bat* would be together once again as she stands under the *chupah*.

3. As we planted for the future, Sharon thanked God for the past and present by reciting the two blessings symbolizing this gratitude: the *birchat hagomail*, thanking God for bringing her through this wonderful experience in good health, and the *birchat shehechyanu*, thanking God for bringing all to that day of joy and *simcha*.

4. Sharon then compared Micole's birth to the blessings over the *Torah*. Before the *Torah* is read, we refer to it as "His *Torah*" (*torato*); only after it is read, after we have had a personal experience of *Torah*, do we call it a "*Torah* of Truth, a tree of life" (*torat emet, chayai olam*). So too with Micole. While we appreciated and loved our many nieces, nephews and children of friends and relatives, it took the birth of Micole, our own child, for us to understand and appreciate more deeply what it means to care for, raise and love a child.

Meaning is created through prayers and blessings

5. Sharon, her sister, Joseph's sister and their sister-in-law (all mothers), then read from the prayer of Hannah (Samuel I, 2: 1-10), whose words of gratitude to God upon the birth of a firstborn are one of the most striking and touching prayers recorded in the Bible.

6. Although all of Israel is a nation of priests, since Joseph is a *kohayn*, Micole was born into a family of priests, and thus was privileged to be blessed by her paternal grandfather with the traditional Priestly Blessing (Numbers, 6:24 - 26).

7. Micole's maternal grandfather, a practicing rabbi, then recited the special prayer from the Song of Songs, and the *mi shebayrach* (with certain minor emendations) found in the Spanish and Portuguese Prayer Book. Once again, her name was proclaimed as a true daughter of Israel (as was her namesake, Sharon's paternal grandmother). While the aforesaid was being recited, Sharon inscribed Micole's name into a family tree prepared especially for this occasion, so Micole could take her rightful place in the family, and hopefully follow in the tradition that was set for her.

8. Joseph again thanked God for all the good he bestowed upon them by reciting the blessing of *hatov vehamaytiv* (the God who does Good).

9. The blessing was recited over the wine (which was shared by Micole and Joseph), words of Torah were spoken by Rabbi Riskin and Micole's grandfathers and great-grandfather, and, as in all traditional Jewish ceremonies, a sumptuous homemade spread, indeed a *yom tov* feast, was enjoyed by all.

This was our ceremony; it said what we wanted and felt should be said. Others need not follow it; they should say and do what they want and feel. But if they truly appreciate their daughter and her relationship to the People of Israel and its covenant with God, they must say and do *something*; they must sanctify her birth and her becoming part of that covenant with a religious ceremony of gratitude to God.

The holy days became a semester

Andre Ungar

I have come to the conclusion that the High Holy Days are far too important an occasion to be expended in mere sermonizing. Because essentially, preaching is a matter of show business, of entertainment of a specialized sort. Conversely, some of the famed practitioners of the sermon have been known to use the sermon for nothing but cheap laughs, animal passions, demented ego-trips, displays of utter ignorance, and at times the dissemination of deliberate lies.

After years of uneasiness, doubts, probing, thinking, I have decided to try something else: This year I devoted my time slot to teaching pure and simple. Moreover, it was straightforward, systematic instruction; not just haphazard topics and random references to names and places and texts. I started at the very beginning, assuming no previous knowledge on the part of my congregants. We began with what we are — Jews — and how we came to be what and where we are.

We had a series of talks devoted to modern Jewish history. Rather bravely, and maybe a shade naively too, I determined that we need more than a mere handful of brief sessions for the achievement of anything even remotely significant and worthwhile. So I publicized through our Temple mail that a series of nineteen units, (adding evening and morning *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services (plus one before *Neilah*), *Sukkot*, and *Shemini Atzeret*, as well as the two intervening Sabbaths.) of some half an hour's duration each, would replace the sermons which, in past years, I delivered on corresponding occasions (A sample of the courses we had were: the Hasidic revolution; the Birth and transformation of Reform Judaism; The