



Washington Hebrew Congregation



Remembering Rabbi Joseph P. Weinberg

On Friday, October 16, 2009, we commemorated the 10th Yahrzeit anniversary of our former Senior Rabbi, Joseph P. Weinberg.

During the service we honored his legacy, celebrated the many accomplishments of his life, and recalled with love his service to the Temple and greater community.

For those of you who missed this extraordinary service, here are the comments from Rabbi Lustig and Marcia Weinberg.

Rabbi M. Bruce Lustig

Today, at the Rabbi Joseph P. Weinberg Early Childhood Center, a tree was planted by Marcia and her 7 grandchildren in honor of Joe Weinberg's memory. Tonight, on the tenth anniversary of his Yahrzeit, we come here to the chapel he inspired, to the congregation he loved, to celebrate what one soul planted in our lives... what Joe Weinberg planted in our hearts, in our minds, but mostly in our souls.

It is hard to believe that it has been ten years since Joe left us, since the time of his death, and I have never forgotten, for me, the powerful symbolism of the time of his death. While we were celebrating consecration of new students, fresh with enthusiasm, receiving their first Sefer Torah; while we were reading the end of the

Torah and then turning immediately to beginning this week's parsha, B'reishit, that is the moment that Joe left us-- bequeathing his love of Judaism, his love of community, his powerful prophetic passions for social justice -- to those very children on the bima, and to us, to care for them and nurture them in a love of Jewish life and Judaism. They were receiving, without any knowledge of it, that legacy of love. Torah was being passed from one generation to another at the very moment of his death; nothing could have been more appropriate as a symbol of how he chose to spend his life.

He loved this congregation, he loved being a rabbi, and he loved to work. In fact, no one worked like Joe worked, he never stopped. His rabbi, Rabbi Levy, used his namesake, Joseph, in its literal form in his Bar Mitzvah address to Joe, charging him to "add to -l'hosif"-- and Joe Weinberg added so much to so many of our lives. So many of you knew him in his tenure at WHC in so many ways: he married, he buried, he blessed, he visited, he counseled, he was your rabbi. He did so much for our community, but make no mistake - there was no institution, no cause, no passion that was greater in his rabbinate than his concern and loyalty to Washington Hebrew Congregation. It was here he spent his energy...it was here he dreamed his dreams...it was here he labored to make the world a better place.

I spent nearly every day of 13 years with Joe Weinberg—no joke, really besides a week off, or if Marcia could persuade him, 10 days off, he was here, he was working. I remember my first conversation with Dr. Marcus, my mentor. He had said, “Bruce, you arrive before your boss gets to work and you stay until he leaves even if you have nothing to do.” After a week I called Dr. Marcus and said, “I got here at 7 am but he was here at 6:30 ...he stayed till near midnight. The next day I arrived at 6:30 but he was here at 6, he told me he had run early that day.” I said, “Dr. Marcus, this guy is impossible to keep up with.... He never sleeps and he lives at Temple.” Truth be told, Joe and Marcia lived for Temple. He loved every aspect of being senior rabbi.

We all learned so much from him. It is impossible to recall all he has taught or the myriad of impressive accomplishments. But for me, I loved most the conversations we would have while he opened mail and ate a rice cake with Polaner jelly and a cup of coffee. We would talk between bites or mostly he would listen. I loved the conversations we had on the bimah when he would ease my neophyte nervousness and lean over and say, “That was one great Shema you just gave.” I learned early on it was not a bad thing to volunteer to drive Joe to one of the thousands of meetings he had downtown. We would get a chance to have uninterrupted time. And if you ever saw Joe Weinberg drive, he was somewhere between Dale Earnhardt and Mr. Magoo. I know I added years to his life by driving him; I also cherished the conversations. Yet no one person knew how to navigate this city the way Joe did. I smile everyday when I take one of his crazy but totally effective shortcuts.

But to an effective rabbinate, there were no shortcuts...most what I witnessed in those thirteen years of his senior rabbinate were his passion and love of people. Yes, he was stubbornly principled on many issues but he was one of the most compassionate men I have ever known. He cared for his enemies as he did for his friends. To Joe, there was one God, and we all-- whether white, black, yellow, tall, short, Catholic, Jew, Hindu -- we were all God's children and we all deserved God's loving compassion. Not a bad legacy to leave those children on the bimah one October night ten years ago...to teach them to love others...to teach them we are God's children and therefore we have a responsibility to one another. So in his

vineyard each day I labor, remembering the man, channeling the best I can that passion into action and caring, trying humbly to stay the course.

We have all been blessed because Joe raised his rabbinic family ...each of his children contributes to our community... Jonathan. Josh and Rachel...he would have been so proud of their works ...and Joe shared his rabbinate with Marcia, they did it together...and I felt we would best honor his memory by asking Marcia to share her reflections on Joe. It is my honor to call upon Marcia Weinberg.

Each year, I listen as we read the Torah, ending the words of Deuteronomy and immediately turning to B'reishit, to begin again...each year, I watch a hopeful class of consecrants stand on the bimah and I pray we can teach them to love their faith, their history and most of all, to love all God's children. May we have the courage and the strength to do so. Then his memory will be an eternal blessing.

Marcia Weinberg

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge our family - the lights of my life. Jonathan and Jennifer, Joshua and Alyson, Bill and Rachel. Joe lived to see how amazing his children and their spouses truly are. They are a blessing to me everyday.

Tonight, Rachel, as marketing director of American Israel Public Affairs Committee is at the AIPAC Summit Conference in San Diego, but hopefully has a chance to “listen in.”

And then, of course, the fantastic grandchildren - Zack and Haley, tonight at the 9th grade retreat program in Pennsylvania, a program so dear to Joe's heart.

Jake and Dani who will become b'nai mitzvah in 2010, Josie and Joey both named for their grandfather, and Raina, consecrated at Simchat Torah services just last Friday. How blessed I am to be their grandmother.

On a hot June day in 1968, Joe and I stepped off a plane at National Airport (there was no Reagan then) with Rachel just five, Jonathan almost one and Joshua - not yet. We rented a car, drove up

Massachusetts Avenue and fell in love with a city, a Temple and all of you!

"I have the best job in the world," Joe said many times. Nothing made him happier than being your rabbi.

Joe spoke of his desire to always serve this congregation faithfully, in his installation address when he recalled his Biblical namesake Joseph who embraced his brothers and said, "Ani Yosef"--I am Joseph always ready to reach out to you." "This is the way of this Joseph too," he continued. "Ani Yosef, I am Joseph, always ready to be there for each of you." This was his pledge until the day he died.

I am so grateful to Rabbi Lustig for suggesting this service and for the opportunity to tell all of you how much you meant to Joe and continue to mean to us, his family. Joe loved to give hugs and write notes to everyone. Your hugs, words and cards to us these 10 years have been so special, and I thank all of you for your kindnesses to us.

Joe only had the privilege of working with Rabbi Lustig and Cantor Manevich and, on one summer trip to Israel, Susan Adelman, now Bortnik, a first year cantorial student...but I know how thrilled he would be with the dedicated, hard working creative and talented senior staff that now leads Washington Hebrew Congregation "From Strength to Strength."

There are so many snapshots I see before my eyes at this moment. There are, of course, the pictures of Joe at weddings, b'nai mitzvah, sitting on the floor with the children of the ECC telling a story, comforting a mourner or holding a baby at a naming, but tonight I would like to share a few of the more off beat moments of his rabbinate.

I remember a congregational trip to Jordan when the Jordanian guide refused to call him rabbi, but kept referring to him as "Father Joseph" until, of course, the entire bus, for the rest of the trip, was calling the good rabbi "Father Joseph".

On one Israel trip a female participant could not open the bathroom door. "Rabbi help, I'm locked in." After a certain amount of discussion when

nothing worked, Joe climbed over the partition from the adjoining stall and forced the door open. "You are my savior" gushed the woman, "I'm Joe, not Jesus," was the reply.

After African-American churches in North Carolina had been torched and burned, a group from WHC went down to help rebuild. Joe was standing on a ladder, and hammering nails into the new roof with such force that the pastor shouted up, "Rabbi, are you thinking of any particular congregant, with all that pounding?"

A WHC trip to Spain...the year was 1992, 500 years almost to the day after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Joe was explaining the significance of this date when the group guide from the tour behind us asked Joe to hurry it up. "Sir," said Joe, "we've waited for 500 years to get back here. You will have to wait a few minutes for us."

I see again Joe in boots and parka with Torah in hand trudging through the deep snow to a Marriott hotel in the suburbs where the out of town family and the Bat Mitzvah girl were snowed in. The service took place right on time, just not at the Temple.

And my favorite, the retreat center at Camp Wohelo - now Capital Camps. The first floor was a large gym with a basketball court. The second floor the sleeping rooms. The time, 3 am and Joe and I are awakened with a loud booming noise. One of the campers had decided to play basketball! Joe went down to talk to him. When the weekend was over, his parents asked the basketball star what he had learned. His answer, "I learned that Rabbi Weinberg knows words that a rabbi shouldn't say."

Of course, beyond the laughter and fun, was Joseph's lifetime message of how we should spend our day on this earth. One of Joe's teachers at Hebrew Union College once said that a rabbi really only has one sermon. It is just given in many different ways. I think in Joe's case - he was right.

As I have reread so many of his sermons, I realize that the theme is the same... "Seize the day" Create a life that will be remembered as a blessing. Don't waste a precious moment. There is so much to do. And Joe was always in a hurry.

Tying his tie as he drove to work(I do not recommend that),racing from one meeting to another, re-establishing relationships between the African-American and Jewish communities in Washington, marching in Selma with Dr. King, creating the Carrie Simon House, helping to found Yachad, the Jewish Housing Community Development Corp, climbing ladders and hanging from the choir loft as he watched the Small Chapel being built and the sanctuary remodeled, working to "Let My People Go" in the Soviet Union, or marching against Apartheid - 24 were not enough hours in the day for Joe.

"We do not say words and thereby magically create a blessing," Joe wrote on a piece of paper I found in his desk drawer. "Rather we hold before our eyes a vision of what might be, and then we bend our energies to create blessings.

Interestingly the three prayers we read tonight which were Joe's favorites, are variations on the same theme of living a blessing. "The first, help each other form a caring community, or as you heard Joe say so often," WHC is a family of families" The second, be God's partners in the great work of this world. Thirdly, make your life a sacred pilgrimage. "We cannot do everything, but we can all do something and each of us must try."

Nowhere was this call to social justice, this theme of his life more pronounced than in his last Rosh Hashanah sermon. Surrounded by his children and knowing that this was the last time he would speak to you he said, "Rosh Hashanah is God's great gift to us, a fresh start." "The precious gift of time, the hours of our days, the days of our years, the years of our life. They are all ours to fill wisely, joyfully completely for we are still alive. Still alive to stand for causes that are just, to stand in solidarity with others and to bear witness to the majesty of the human soul." Still alive, still alive.

May these words and Joe's deeds be his continuing legacy to the congregation he so loved. Amen