

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Shmini

My Rabbi gave me some great advice before I left the practice of law to head off to Rabbinical school. Rabbi Gene Levy told me to remember the following: 1. If I don't ask myself every day, "What am I doing here?" I do not belong. 2. Hebrew Union College (the Rabbinical seminary) is a means to an end. I knew that I loved this man and respected his wisdom, so I took the leap of faith, closed my practice and moved to Jerusalem to begin my studies. Gene has been right on every count.

Each day I have to remind myself why I made this choice. Some days, the reminder comes from the midst of dramatic frustration or painful engagement. I remember that I chose this work to make a difference and help bring an end to frustration in the world. Other days, the reminder comes from the most incredible blessings. I have to take a step back and give thanks that I get to do what I do, and that I find myself in the position of experiencing miracles. Some days bring both experiences. At either end of the spectrum or anywhere in between, I have to remember that I have to be intentional in waking up each day and in re-engaging. There is no way to take any of this for granted and still be able to come back for more.

Perhaps the greatest piece of this advice was the reminder to keep the seminary experience in perspective. Gene told me that the classroom experience was important, but one's ability to engage the heart and soul of great teachers would have a greater say in the type of Rabbi I would become. He was correct; the classroom afforded me many opportunities to learn, but my passion came from the time spent with some wonderful souls. Several of my now deceased professors stand out in these memories. Rabbi Chanan Brichto, zt"l, was as dear a friend and engaging a mentor as a man could have. Dr. Gene Mihaly, zt"l, welcomed us into his home and taught class, and then taught us to love our tradition. Just last night, I learned of the passing of my thesis advisor Dr. Ellis Rivkin. Ellis was one of the most unique individuals I was ever blessed to know. I sought him out because he was my Rabbi's advisor and friend, as well. Ellis was not a Rabbi, by ordination, but is more responsible for my rabbinate than any individual other than my late wife Cindy who blessed me with her permission to go on this journey. At 91, this amazing man had spent years garnering disciples, developing rabbis who learned to look at history through lenses that focused on process and not dates; relationships and not events. Take time to read "The Shaping of Jewish History," "The Hidden Revolution," "What Crucified Jesus," or any of a host of his work. You will never look at history the same way again. He epitomized the definition of the word mensch, the most righteous of individuals, and his unconditional acceptance and love for his students was unparalleled at the seminary. From the hours he spent helping me to focus on the task of writing my Rabbinical thesis to the Totalitarianism class final exam he administered over a gourmet Chinese dinner, I grew to love this man's soul and stand in awe of his diverse insight. He predicted Perestroika, he taught me to understand the equal dignity of all faith traditions, and he made sure that I understood that being a Rabbi was a call to love our tradition and people first and a paying profession second.

This week, Torah introduces us to the concept of kosher. Kosher means appropriate. This is not a matter of hygiene or health. This is a matter of discipline, and it has been the source of incredible angst and argumentation not only within our tradition, but between ours and other traditions. What I know, is that this text demands that we pay attention. An animal's place on or off the list speaks to its relative value in

the lives of humanity. There are abundant commentaries arguing that the call to pay attention to what goes in our mouths merely begins a conversation that focuses a whole lot more on the appropriateness of what comes out of our mouths. Every time I teach this message, I find myself back at that final exam dinner at the Blue Gibbon, a Cincinnati restaurant I have enjoyed many times since. Rabbi Jim Egolf and I asked Ellis why such a nice dinner in place of an exam. His response was simple. The greatest value of food was that it gave us the strength to do great work. If we could really enjoy what we ate and with whom we ate it, then we would use its energy to bless those around us. This has been, for at least this rabbi, the single most important lesson ever learned about kosher. Pay attention to what you eat - it should not be accidental (regardless of the literal list), for the atmosphere and substance of the meal will determine the appropriateness of how we behave after it is over. And, pertinent to the class, if we can truly appreciate the gift of the meal and the atmosphere, we will, true to all human values, want to ensure that others get to enjoy the same blessings moving forward. It is only when we take for granted what and how we eat, that we can ignore another's need for blessing and think we can demean their lives to a checklist of basic needs which we then often ignore. Ellis demanded that we serve first, love first, and learn first, anything short of this demeans the blessing with which we have been granted in getting to do what we do and enjoy what we enjoy. There is no more profound understanding of kosher - of appropriateness - than the lessons this wonderful man taught by the way in which he lived. Gene Levy, I know you are out there reading this, for turning me to this path, I am grateful - even more so, for the greater gift of blessing my life with the directions to discipleship with Ellis. I hope and pray that I can share this blessing with those who come after me. Shabbat Shalom.