

The Larger Task

A sermon delivered by
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A few weeks ago I came across an offprint of an address entitled *The Larger Task*. It was written by Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus of blessed memory. Dr. Marcus was the rabbi's rabbi, the father of American Jewish History. He was the only honorary president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and his signature has been inscribed on the *smicha* of more rabbis than any other teacher in history. Just to give you an idea of how many *smichas* he signed, his signature was on the *smicha* of Rabbi Keller, of Rabbi Spiro, of Rabbi Fields, and mine as well; and it is also on the *smicha* of many of my assistant Rabbis, too

A few months prior to my ordination Dr. Marcus called me in to his office. He wanted to speak with me about my "future." The conversation went something like this:

"Boy!" He called all of us, "boy;" even Sally Priesand he called, "boy."

"Boy!" he bellowed, "I want to give you some good advice. Don't take any job west of the Mississippi or south of the Mason-Dixon line."

I answered; "OK, Dr. Marcus, I won't."

He then looked at me and asked, "Boy, you married?"

"Yes, Dr. Marcus, I am."

"Boy, you have any children?"

"Yes, Dr. Marcus, I have a beautiful little 8 month old daughter."

"Boy, you take any job you can get. You have to feed that baby!"

Well, I listened carefully to his advice. I didn't take a job west of the Mississippi, nor south of the Mason Dixon line. I took the first job I got, right here in New Brunswick.

As I sat in my study at home and read through the text of his address I thought about that moment in his office and I also thought about the moment I heard him deliver the words that were now printed on the text before me. For that moment was June 1, 1974. The speech was delivered in the City of Cincinnati. It was the address given by Marcus at my ordination. I felt then that he was talking directly to me.

Three decades later, I could still hear his booming voice. I felt the weight of his authority as he spoke with authenticity and with power instructing us, the ordainees, about the challenges before us.

In his address he declared:

American Jewry is the greatest adventure in world Jewish history. We are the most distinguished of all Jewries because we have numbers, culture, sympathy, the willingness to help and to lead. We are generous and wealthy. Noblesse oblige; because we are rich, we have the obligations to help others and because we are generous we are doing this. Every year we send hundreds of millions of dollars across the seas to aid Jews whom we have never seen and will never know. This is the most magnificent feat in all philanthropic history.

But money is not the sum of eminence. Our job is to make our Jewry the greatest Jewish cultural center of all times. We are called upon to consummate a golden age, one reminiscent of Spain.

Marcus went on to challenge us further. He stated:

Every rabbi has 3,000 years of intelligent ancestors. If you do not become increasingly more and more a learned rabbi, you betray the heritage of those who gave you birth. Without learning there is no Judaism. Count the day lost in which you have not opened a Jewish book. If you do not learn, you cannot lead; if you do not study you are only a hireling.

Every one of you was born with a patent of nobility; be worthy of it. As Jews you wear the proudest badge in all history. I would ask of you that you conduct yourselves as if the congregation you will serve was the last hope of man and it was your sacred privilege to save it. The centrality of Jewry, of Judaism, lies in you and in your aspirations, nowhere else.

As I sat alone and read through the text I began to ask myself, “how have I fulfilled the challenges that our revered teacher placed before us? What have I done that has been true to the calling that Marcus asked of each of us on that wonderful June morning when the title of Rabbi was bestowed upon me as the hands of the president were laid upon my shoulders?

As all of you know, the next and last stop on my journey since that moment was right here. To this place I came, a young, naive and idealistic rabbi, ready to take on the world, filled with a passion for Jewish learning and living that I wanted to share with young and old alike. And our journey, together, began.

I knew then that I was determined to follow the path set out for me by Dr. Marcus and his fellow teachers. I was convinced that I and you were to be responsible for world Jewry, for the Jews we would never meet or know but who would require our assistance in order to survive in this world. I felt passionately about the places from which our ancestors came, the small towns, shtetlach, and the cities of Europe. And I possessed equal passion for the land and people of Israel, the birthplace of our heritage.

I knew then that I would make demands of myself to continue to be a student of Torah, to push myself to further my studies and to be the very best rabbi that I could become. To do less would be to do a disservice to the title, Rabbi, and an even further disservice to you.

Dr. Marcus passed away a few years ago. He died just short of his 100th birthday. He never stopped working, he never stopped teaching, and he never ever stopped challenging us, his students, the ones he always called, “boy.”

Noblesse Oblige: we have obligations

Over the course of the years I have been privileged to visit many of the Jewish communities that exist in the world. From my very first journey to Romania to celebrate Chanukah in 1978 to my most recent visit to Ukraine just a few months ago – each journey has been powerful and profound. I have shared almost all of them with you. In a sense, together, you and I have visited with our brothers and sisters in far off lands and in the land of Israel. Remember how I spoke to you of the elderly and frail who are assisted through the kindness of our generosity? Can you recall the pictures in the slides that I shared with you, of people in soup kitchens, of elderly Jews living in small apartments without running water? Each mission that I took proved again and again the story of the generosity of our American Jewish community. Noblesse Oblige; our obligation – no, actually, our privilege.

This past year, on a journey to Kiev and to Odessa I experienced parts of Jewish life in those cities that I had not experienced before. Yes, I visited with the elderly, in their tiny apartments, at the cultural centers. Those people reminded me of my grandparents and their generation. They had that old world Russian Jewish look, the cork-bottle glasses, the Yarmulke attached to their heads but tilting to the side. These were the folks who remained behind, who survived Stalin and Communism, who never made it out to come to Israel or to America. Some of them stayed to take care of their elderly parents; others were just too afraid to leave. The tragedy for them is that with the fall of communism all of the security provided for them by the State is gone. No pensions, no health care, no safety. They are the poorest Jews in the world. I am not talking about a few elderly people; I am talking about two hundred thousand elderly Jews living in three thousand places. Theirs are governments that are corrupt, bankrupt, and that don't care about elderly and poor Jews. Without us, these people will live the remaining days of their lives in sickness, in poverty, in hunger, and without hope.

But there was something else that I saw. I met young people who love being Jews, who desperately want to reconnect with the Judaism of their great grandparents; young Jews who are willing to take enormous risks to go public, to create new Jewish communities, to celebrate Jewish life. And these young Jews look just like our young Jews here at the Temple or on college campuses, because they are the same as our young Jews. They are working together to build Jewish communities, to study their history, a privilege that could not be done since 1912. They don't have rabbis, they don't have Torahs, and they don't have teachers. One by one they are re-acquiring synagogue buildings and restoring them so that they can be used by the Jews once again.

I also visited Jewish orphanages, filled with Jewish children, children who have been taken away from their parents because their parents are not capable of caring for them. These children are

clean and well cared for precisely because they live in Jewish orphanages. What I saw is an incredible story unfolding on a daily basis. It is a story of hope, of promise, of renewal. Noblesse oblige; our obligation – no, actually our privilege.

In those countries, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania, and so many more, young people are looking to you and me for support, for encouragement, for help. They don't want a Judaism that is the orthodoxy of their great grandparents. They want a vibrant form of Judaism like ours. They want a Judaism that they believe will speak to their generation and to the future.

Last February, on a very cold Shabbat morning, I walked to the Reform synagogue to meet with the young people. They greeted us with a sense of wonder. They had recently moved into the basement of a small building and converted it into a synagogue. They sang the same songs we sing. They brought out their guitars and led the service. They fed us with food they had brought from their homes; they were so proud to welcome us and be a part of world Jewry. Noblesse oblige; our obligation – no, actually our privilege.

Our job is to make our Jewry the greatest

In another part of the world there lives a group of Jews who have been cut off from our people for over two thousand years. These Jews of Ethiopia have dreamed of being restored to the Jewish People and living in Israel. At first, they came by walking through the desert and the sands of Sudan. Then, later, many were allowed to leave and come directly by special flights. Now, the last group is waiting. Every month, more and more are coming. They represent the last mass immigration to Israel in our time.

A few weeks ago I visited with some of them who have recently arrived and with others who have lived in Israel for some time. They are a beautiful people, dedicated Jews, committed to a full and productive life in Israel. But these are people who have passed through two thousand years of civilization in a matter of months. They come to Israel with little more than the clothes on their back, with no knowledge of modernity, and with little or no understanding of the Judaism that you and I love and practice. Only now are they beginning to develop community structures, after school programs for their young, learning and mentoring programs so that their children will be able to succeed in Israeli society.

Truth be told, these Jews of Ethiopia have been allowed to come to Israel primarily through the efforts of you and me, the Jewish communities of America. Had it not been for the lobbying and cajoling of American Jewry, these Jews of Ethiopia would probably continue to live in squalor, living under tyranny and oppression, and would eventually be the last of the lost tribes of Israel.

But there is an opportunity that now exists. One hundred thousand currently live in Israel. Sixteen to nineteen thousand more will arrive over the next few years. If they are to be settled and acculturated and given true opportunities for success they will need the help of every Jew in the world. If not, they will become a permanent underclass and World Jewry will bear the responsibility and the shame of a failed opportunity for success, not because of lack of funds, but because of a lack of will.

Israel cannot handle this responsibility alone. A country that has to spend so much of its resources on security does not have the luxury to provide for new immigrants. And yet, new

immigrants arrive every day and the future of Israel is nourished by the new immigrants who do arrive and by the commitments that you and I make to help those who arrive.

I want you to know what it is like to sit in a small apartment of a new Ethiopian immigrant. I was invited in as if I was royalty. I sat on a small couch and received wonderful hospitality and kindness. There was a glow on the faces of our hosts; they were so proud to be able to welcome us. They spoke a simple Hebrew that they had been studying in the absorption center. They introduced us to their children and we learned about their speedy journey from antiquity to the twenty-first century. They were and are so proud to be home, to live in the land of their ancestors, to be part of the future of the Jewish people. They want to help make our Jewry the greatest! Dr. Marcus was right. Our job, our privilege is to make our generation of Jewry the greatest in history. You and I are so privileged to be a part of it.

Born with a patent of nobility; be worthy of it

You may be asking, why is he talking about Jews from other lands on Kol Nidre? Why isn't he speaking about sin and repentance; after all, aren't those the themes of this day?

But that is precisely why I am speaking about the Jews of other lands. In recent weeks, you and I have witnessed the terrible effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and Stan; we have seen the destruction of earthquakes and floods. Our Jewish community responded in two ways. We gave help and assistance to all who were in need and we also gave help and assistance to the affected Jewish communities. I wonder, if not for us, would anyone else have provided for the Jews? Would the churches and mosques and government agencies provide housing and office space and salaries for the Jewish communities that were uprooted so that they could rebuild and take care of the young and old? Who would have cared for the Torahs, for the synagogues, for the institutions of Jewish life?

I wonder, if God forbid, there was an earthquake in Israel, would the rest of the world respond with great humanitarian aid? You see, we as people know that we are alone in the world, that the phrase, *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh la-zeh*, all Jews are responsible for each other, obtains not in the abstract but in the reality of every day life. At the same time we know that we have a responsibility to the rest of humanity as well. It is a "patent of our nobility." We should be proud and worthy of it every day. And we should bequeath that nobility to the generations that follow.

In your hands are the tools to nobility. An Israel Bond card, a form to register to vote in the coming World Zionist Congress elections, addresses for providing aid and relief to those whose lives have been devastated and whose communities have been uprooted. In our own community is the opportunity to achieve nobility through participating in our Jewish Federation's campaign. Soon, you will also hear about Operation Promise, to raise the necessary funds to assist the Jews of the former Soviet Union and to help in the resettlement of the Jews of Ethiopia. As the greatest of Jewish communities it should be our privilege to help, our "patent of nobility" to join in the effort to make world Jewry the greatest in history.

So how is this about sin and repentance? Because I am afraid that all too many will say, "He's not talking to me." Or they will say, "Let someone else do it." I am concerned that some will find excuses of politics or policy to be used to say "no." My friends, to do so are forms of arrogance of the spirit, smugness about life. After what we have seen in recent weeks not one of

us should feel so secure that we will never need the assistance of others. To think in such a way represents a self deceit that none of us can afford. Yom Kippur is about stripping away the arrogance of the spirit, about coming clean with ourselves. Yom Kippur represents an opportunity for each of us to recognize that in our loneliness we are only alone when we separate from the demands of our faith, when we part from the communities that sustain us, and when we believe that our own personal survival is all that matters.

On the last page of Dr. Marcus' text he implores us with these words:

So now we turn to you the generation in whom lies our hope for a better world. "Ride on and Prosper." And may the God of our ancestors give you the courage, so to rise to ever greater spiritual and intellectual heights, that you and all of us may cry out, triumphantly and exultantly, to all the ages yet to come: "I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord."

To each of you who have shared my journey and who walk with me now into the future, I pray that I have been true to the challenge of my teachers. I pray that I have led you to carry out lives of dignity and self-respect and generosity. I pray that together we will carry on our shoulders the mantle of nobility, transcending our fears and failures, and bringing our people and our world to achieve *The Larger Task*, which is to reach for heights never before attained in human history.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon. So may it be God's will.