

Since I have arrived here in Port Washington, some of you may have noticed that there is a game of liturgical ping-pong taking place here on the bimah. When Rabbi Z. leads, we hear *m'chayei meitim* used in the Amidah. However, when I lead, we hear *m'chayei hakol*. *M'chayei meitim; m'chayei hakol; m'chayei meitim; m'chayei hakol; m'chayei meitim; m'chayei hakol*. Back and forth, back and forth – I'm surprised that the cantor hasn't slapped us both upside the head. The difference between terminologies (the One who causes the dead to live versus the One who causes everything to live) comes in our understanding of God's nature, whether or not we believe in bodily resurrection, and our views on the interpretation of the liturgy. Now, I'm not going to try to explain Rabbi Z.'s take on the issues involved. I'm not even going to try to explain my own take on the issues involved. In fact, it would make me very sad if the message you took from this sermon, which hasn't even gotten up to cruising speed yet, were Rabbi Z. and Rabbi Sternman don't believe the same thing about resurrection. No. I only mention it because it's a real and present example of how the Reform Movement in Judaism got started, as a Reform of the liturgy. Reform eliminated passages in the liturgy that were deemed repetitive and unnecessary. Reform eliminated passages that were deemed theologically outdated. Reform modified passages, for example, changing *m'chayei meitim* to *m'chayei hakol*, to fit the new beliefs of the time. Reform eliminated Hebrew as the major language of prayer and substituted the vernacular.

However, Reform did not end with the liturgy; rather, it continued on into ritual aspects of Judaism. Reform ended particularistic dress such as wearing fringes on our garments or kippot. Reform ended restrictions on diet and began to allow foods that were previously considered treif and unfit to eat. Reform ended restrictions on Shabbat activities and some congregations even moved Shabbat observance to Sundays.

It's no surprise with all these changes and endings of traditional practices that some people define their Reform Judaism as: "oh, we don't do that because we're Reform." The difficulty, for me at least, is when people say: "I don't want to do that and that's why I'm Reform." The difference between these two seemingly similar statements is the reasoning behind why we abandon certain practices or ideologies. The first statement, "we don't do that because we're Reform," starts from the position that we as Reform

Jews hold certain beliefs and therefore liturgy is used or practices followed based on those beliefs. The second statement, “I don’t want to do that and that’s why I’m Reform,” starts from the position that we as Reform Jews act based on our personal preferences.

Here’s the dirty little secret of Reform Judaism: we never actually did get rid of the *halakhah*. We are still bound by Jewish law. Let me explain. Reform Judaism has always stated that the ethical laws have always been, still are, and always will be in full force. Don’t murder. Don’t steal. Uphold the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. None of these have changed or been dropped from Reform Judaism. “But wait!” I hear you cry, “What about the ritual law? In Reform I don’t have to wear a kippah or a tallis. I don’t have to keep kosher. I don’t have to pray three times a day. We did get rid of the ritual law.” Ah, not so fast, because this is where the secret is revealed. The ritual law always has been, still is, and always will be in full force, if it elevates you in your relationship with God.

Let me give you an example. I grew up in a household that observed kosher laws vestigially at best. We never had cheeseburgers; in fact, I never had a cheeseburger until I went to college. We never had milk with dinner; it was always juice or water. But oh how I loved those Shake ‘N Bake™ pork chops with the fat on the edges all crispy golden brown and delicious! For birthdays, we always went to Howard Johnson for the fried clams and the free birthday sundae. Yum! But as I began to think about my Judaism, well before I even thought about becoming a rabbi, I decided to eliminate pork and shellfish from my diet, those foods that are by definition treif. It wasn’t easy – I do so love bacon – but it also made me feel closer to God and the Jewish People. And so, it’s no longer optional for me – pork and shellfish are forbidden.

The object is, I define my Judaism by what I believe and feel based on my informed, conscious choice rather than saying I’m not Orthodox, so I don’t have to do that. That is, I define my Judaism from the positive rather than the negative. I say to myself, these rituals and practices make me feel closer to God and therefore, I must do them. Not every ritual or practice does make me feel closer to God and then I am free to abandon that practice. When I first went to Israel for rabbinic school, I began to wear a kippah

full time. But after the second time that I wore it into the shower, I said to myself, “I’m not even conscious that the kippah is on my head, much less feeling closer to God because of it.” And so, I do wear a kippah when I pray because that does make me feel closer to God; the rest of the time, I don’t have to.

Think of what we lose when we define ourselves from the negative rather than the positive. I could have said, “I’m Reform, I don’t have to think about keeping kosher.” But because I did think about keeping kosher, even to the limited extent of not eating pork or shellfish, I have felt closer to God. We need to focus positively on what our relationship to God is and what we can do to deepen it and make it more meaningful. I feel closer to God knowing that all human beings, male and female are created in God’s image. Therefore, we pray together without segregated seating. I feel closer to God when I partner with God in helping to perfect this world. Therefore, I engage in acts of Social Justice. I feel closer to God when I am conscious of God’s omni-presence. Therefore, I put mezuzot on all of my doorposts. We lead more meaningful lives when we focus on the positive, what we do have, rather than on the negative, what we don’t have.

Unfortunately for us, it’s not so easy to always focus positively on what we have rather than negatively on what we lack. After all, marketers understand that they will only sell that which people desire, or at least think they desire. Therefore, marketers promote desire, desire for those things we don’t already have. When we desire that which we do not have we become dissatisfied and the only way to relieve our dissatisfaction, to satisfy our desires, is of course to buy their product. I’m more guilty than most – at least when I walk into Williams-Sonoma. They have some very fine products at Williams-Sonoma, which is why I shop there, but a good 40% of their products are truly not necessary. Yet, I’m like a moth to a flame who just can’t control himself even though he knows that immolation is imminent. I swear to you, it’s like the cook’s crack house. Oooo... Look at that asparagus pot. It’s tall and thin so you can simmer the lower stems while the upper parts gently steam. Let’s ignore the fact that I’ve been able to prepare asparagus completely satisfactorily for years. Let’s ignore the fact that it’s a pretty useless pot for anything but asparagus. Let’s ignore the fact, that I just

don't have room for any more pots in my kitchen. I want it or at least think I do. Actually, I already have a lovely sauté pan that does the trick quite well. I don't mean to dog on Williams-Sonoma because it could have been the hardware store with all those really cool specialized tools. Or the shoe store or the electronics store or the auto-dealer, etc. etc. etc... The point is, we can have unlimited desires for things we think we need. Yet when we focus on what we don't have, we become dissatisfied with what we do have. The Sages in Pirkei Avot knew 1900 years ago when the Mishnah was compiled that we need to focus positively on that which we already have. "Ayze hoo ashir?" they asked. Who is wealthy? "Hasameach b'chelko." The one who is happy with what they have.

When we focus on what we lack, we become dissatisfied and this is especially true when we are dissatisfied with our emotional connections, with our relationships. Every human being has a multitude of emotional needs and the combination of needs is different for every one of us based on our genetics, our upbringing, and the history of our lives. But wait, there's more. Our needs change over time as our bodies change physically and as we react to the events in our lives. And if you call right now, I'll even throw in the fact that we aren't even conscious of all our emotional needs. All of our emotional needs are different, they change over time and we're not even aware of all of them. Do you wonder why many people are dissatisfied with their emotional lives, with their relationships? It's a wonder that so many of us are satisfied. It's not a question of those lucky few of us who have all of our emotional needs fulfilled, if those theoretical people even exist. Rather, it is the focus once again on what we do have, rather than what we don't have. In all of the couple's counseling that I have conducted, one thing that I have learned is that even the most loving couple has disagreements within their relationship. Further, so many of us don't even have that loving partner in our lives, either because we have not yet met them or we have lost them. If we focus on the imperfections in our relationships, the needs that are not met, we will be dissatisfied. Rather, we need to recognize those areas of our relationships that are fulfilling and take joy from them.

Two caveats: first, recognizing that no single relationship will satisfy all of our needs does not imply that we should not seek to fulfill all our needs within moral boundaries. For example: one partner loves to hike while the other prefers to sit by the pool. The partner who loves to hike can easily join a hiking club and satisfy their need for the great outdoors outside of their relationship. Second, focusing on the positive aspects of our relationships does not, in any way, excuse highly negative aspects. We cannot focus on the positive aspects of our relationship to excuse a partner who is physically or emotionally abusive. We do have to weigh and balance if our relationship has more positives than negatives, but I cannot think of any situation where physical or emotional abuse is outweighed. And we should never ignore abusive behavior by focusing on the positives.

I think it's hardest to focus on what we have rather than on what we lack when what we lack is good health. It took my father almost four years to die and it wasn't easy. When I was a kid my father had a kidney removed because it was cancerous. He was monitored for five years and when there was no recurrence, he was declared cancer free. A number of years later, my niece Flora was born and my mother didn't want my father to visit her with this persistent cough my father had. He went to the doctor and found out that his kidney cancer had metastasized to his lungs after more than a decade lying in wait. It spread over those next few years: through his lungs, his organs, into his brain. In the last few months when I would come home from work to take care of him and give my mother a respite, we would talk. "Benjie," he said to me one time, "I wish I had died years ago." "But Dad, if you had died years ago you wouldn't have known that I graduated from college. You wouldn't have gotten to know Flora. You wouldn't have had that time." "It isn't worth it, Benjie. I can't even breath without the pain." I didn't have an answer. I don't have an answer. Maybe I shouldn't focus on the answers I don't have. None of us are going to have our health forever. None of us get out of this world alive. What I do know is that when I focus on my own personal physical ailments, ailments that prevent me from doing all the things that I would like to do, I'm not happy. But when I focus on those things that I am still capable of, when I focus on

the health I still enjoy, even if it is not perfect health, I'm satisfied. In fact, I'm more than satisfied, I'm grateful.

We can define our lives by what we don't have or by what we do have. Desire focuses on that which we don't have, but satisfaction comes from what we do have. And gratitude – that most mature of emotions – is the recognition and appreciation of all that we do have in our lives. I no longer think that I'll be able to achieve the material wealth that I had once hoped for and expected. But I am grateful for the bounty that I do enjoy and take great satisfaction even in my diminished expectations. I have not yet been blessed by meeting the one person with whom I could build a life together and maybe I never will. But I am grateful for all the people who are in my life, making my life all the richer for them being there. My health is not perfect and certainly is not what it was when I was young. Yet, I am grateful for whatever good health I do enjoy for the time being. I am grateful, I am thankful and I take satisfaction in all the blessings that are in my life.

*Kol haneshema t'hallel yah. All my soul shall praise you, God. Halleluyah.*