



Creating Holy Moments

Lavey Yitzchak Derby

Some years ago, a member of my congregation stopped by to ask me if I would say a special blessing for her son before he got married. I was delighted and explained to her all the customs surrounding an *aufruf*, then noticed that I would be on vacation on the shabbat in question. I told her that although I would be away, we have a highly participatory community and I would arrange for a member of the congregation to say the blessing in my stead. Her response was as pointed as it was immediate: "Rabbi, I don't want a blessing from just anyone; I want it from YOU!" My gentle explanation that rabbis have no special power of blessing, that everyone has the ability to bless another did not impress her. She demanded my presence. In her vehemence she became my teacher.

Richard Hirsh is right to remind us that rabbis aren't different, essentially, from other Jews. This reminder is especially pertinent after an era in which congregations frequently put their rabbis on pedestals; many rabbis not only invited the elevation but also greatly enjoyed the view. Growing up as the son of a rabbi, I was painfully aware that rabbis were different. No one ever called my father by his first name. Even my mother referred to my father as "the rabbi." Seas of people parted for him. Jokes of a certain kind ceased being told when he walked into the room. In my childhood, "set-apart" as a descriptive for rabbis seemed an understatement. I remember deciding that, if I were ever to become a congregational rabbi, I would insist on being called by my first name.

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, following the mystical tradition, notes that before divine energy and holiness can be infused in the world, one needs to create a vessel to receive that holiness. *Hinukh*, education, he says, is the process through which vessels are shaped and prepared

to receive this presence. To educate a person is to create a hollow inner space so that he or she becomes a vessel to receive the divine presence.

The rabbi is both the "*klei*," the vessel that holds the divine presence, and the "*mechanech*," the educator who prepares other people to become the vessels that hold that spirit. I feel most effective in my rabbinic work when I am able to "hold" the experience of the moment for the people I am with. By providing a structure and space for their experience to unfold, and by naming their experience and their emotional, psychological, and spiritual sensation, the rabbi/*klei* elevates the experience into the realm of the palpably sacred. The rabbi does not embody Judaism; rather, she attempts to structure and call attention to the vibrant feelings and dynamics of the moment so that they are experienced as holy.

At the same time the hollower must serve as the hollower. We fail as rabbis if we refuse to make the transition from empowered to empowerer. The obligation of this era is to go beyond our own need for approachability to become the maker of vessels, the one who, through teaching and spiritual modeling, creates an ever-deepening space in those with whom we work, a space filled with Jewish yearning and experience.

We would be mistaken, however, if we enter into this work thinking that we are capable because we own the Torah, that we hold the Truth. Learning to hold the sacred is a spiritual art form that requires work and practice. Hollowing out such a space in others, paradoxically, is best accomplished when we are deeply engaged in the process for ourselves. And so Richard's final statement is apt: rabbis truly become *klei kodesh* not when they see themselves as the repository of Torah, but when they share their own intricate process of hollowing inner space with others, and

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invite them to join in the practice.

Lavey Yitzchak Derby is Rabbi of Congregation Kol Shofar in Tiburon, CA, and a faculty member of the Wexner Heritage Foundation. He is the eighth generation direct descendent of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

Letter from
the Editor

Dear *Sh'ma* Readers,

This Fall we note an important change in *Sh'ma* leadership. Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin has stepped down as Chair of the *Sh'ma* Advisory Group. Nina has long been associated with the journal, and has brought her wisdom to its pages as both an editor and advisor. Especially in the transition as *Sh'ma* moved from CLAL to Jewish Family & Life!, her generous support was key to the journal's success.

Rabbi Neil Gillman, a professor of Jewish Philosophy at The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, will be the new Chair of the Advisory Group. Neil has also had a long association with the journal. He is a frequent contributor and has served on the Editorial Board for several years. I look forward to working with him and bringing his enthusiasm and thoughtfulness into these pages.

Several excellent issues are already slated for this year. Part of our mission is to put on the communal agenda issues vital to synagogue, school, and communal transformation.

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Susan Berrin

Susan Berrin, Editor

שמע
Sh'ma

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