

**Ordination Sermon**  
**By Rabbi Samuel E. Karff**  
**At The Plum Street**  
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Shabbat Shalom. I can think of no greater privilege than to address this ordination class, and to do so on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my own ordination in this place. And how sweet it is that a former student, Evan Moffic, is a member of this class. I am truly grateful to President Ellenson and to the class for extending me this privilege.

Dear Colleagues, one of the truths I learned early in my rabbinate is that you and I are cast as defenders of the faith. Over the years I have encountered those unable to embrace my faith. But in many such conversations I discovered they wanted me to stand my ground. They needed someone against whose strong affirmation they could press their doubt. And many of those “soft skeptics” I have encountered wished they could give themselves permission to believe.

If we are cast as defenders of the faith, what faith are we called to defend? In this week’s torah portion God says to the Israelites: *Im b’chukotai taylechu...* “If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments, I will grant you rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit... But if You do not obey me and do not observe all these commandments...you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you...”

This view is echoed in other books of the Bible. Psalm 1: “For the Lord cherishes the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed” And the same theme is expressed in Psalm 92, designated for reading on Shabbat. “Surely, your enemies O Lord, surely your enemies perish, all evildoers are scattered” but “The righteous bloom like the date palm”

The message is clear: There is an order of life that cannot be violated with impunity. No artist in our time has more cynically and often humorously debunked this message than Woody Allen. In “*Match Point*”, his latest movie, amorality, randomness, and meaninglessness are the last word. An ambitious, ruthless young man gets away with a grisly murder. Woody Allen’s message is that there is no “ordering moral principle in the universe.” God is dead or permanently absent.

Of course, such nay saying did not begin with Woody Allen. The Biblical message has been challenged from within the circle of faith itself. Jeremiah accused God of being like “a spring that fails, like waters that cannot be relied on”. Job eloquently declared that his suffering was undeserved and God did not contradict him. And Rabbi Yannai lamented: “It is beyond our power to understand either the suffering of the righteous or the prosperity of the wicked.”

In truth, even for those of us who stake our lives on the belief in God as Creator, as ultimate Source of the way we are intended to live, and as a redeeming Presence in our lives and in history--even we must declare that there is a believer and unbeliever in each of us, because *Adonai* is an invisible, elusive Presence who cannot be summoned at will. God is hidden as well as revealed. And life seems at times so unfair.

But there is a great difference between experiencing moments of doubt within a life committed to faith and making disbelief a way of life. By choosing to be rabbis in Israel, you have chosen to take sides. You have chosen to affirm transcendent meaning against the threat of meaninglessness.

The fact is life as we experience it is a mixed bag. There are times when good things do happen to good people. We say "this thing couldn't have happened to a nicer guy." There are stories in life which do have a happy ending. There are times when bad guys do finish last. We see evidence of greed leading to a person's shame and undoing. We see instances when honesty and integrity begets trust, which results in great success for an enterprise and its partners.

But often enough these verses in *tanakh*, which speak so literally and concretely of virtue rewarded and vice penalized, do not correspond to our ordinary experience. The biblical writers of these words and those Jews who embraced them were surely aware of the disconnect. So what's going on here?

Bible scholar James Kugel compares these stark biblical assertions of a moral order in life to the old classic movie cartoon with one repetitive theme: the wicked cat pursued the righteous little mouse and the mouse always escaped the cat's clutches. We know this does not always happen in life outside the movie theater. But the audience, especially the kids, cheered wildly.

Professor Kugel contends that those statements in our torah, like the movie cartoon, should not be dismissed as wishful fantasy. They should be understood as a different kind of realism, which perceives the world through the eye of faith. Sometime we believe because of what we experience in ordinary life and sometimes we believe in spite of what we experience. Faith is the vision and perception of a spiritual reality at the core of life. The subtext of those biblical statements is 2-fold: We are not alone. We are children of *Adonai*, the Maker of heaven and earth. And, there is a way of life we must live if we are to fulfill God's intention for us and if we are to discover the deepest meaning of our lives.

Martin Buber recalled a time in his earlier life when a troubled young man came to see him. Buber treated the young man graciously and shared with him some thoughts and feelings, but, as Buber later sadly realized, he had not been fully present in spirit. He did not discern the underlying question the young man was asking. He found

subsequently that the young man had taken his own life. Reflecting on this event, Buber wrote: “What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a person? Surely a presence by which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning.”

Colleagues, our people may come to you in times of trouble, because they know you have committed your life to that deeper spiritual perspective on the world. They need your help to recover the sense that “nevertheless there is meaning”

A woman came to see me, devastated after she learned her husband whom she trusted has been involved in a longstanding affair; a brilliant young medical resident whom I had Bar Mitzvahed and Confirmed years earlier, asked me to visit (He was now in remission and rehab after surgery and chemo to battle a malignant tumor in his brain). At such times, you and I may feel so impotent. Yet you will often discover that, while you cannot answer the unanswerable questions and cannot remove all their pain, you may be a healer of their spirit and help them recover the will to live and to hope. This is possible not only because of your endowments as a counselor, but because of the sacred message and vision to which you bear witness—a message and vision they yearn to reclaim.

One of your most precious experiences as a rabbi will be the times when you hear variations of the following: “I couldn’t have gotten through this without your presence and counsel,” or “You will never know how much your words meant at that time in my life.” Or, “The meaning you gave that text made Judaism speak to my life as it never did before.”

Our sages had a term for such moments. They said, *l’chach notzarta*—for such a moment as this were you created. Or, by extension, for such a moment as this were you ordained.

Part of your mission is to help your people discover the significance of such moments in their own lives and to label them. When a person tells you, “Rabbi, I love my volunteer work at the hospital. I do it not for the patients but for myself. It makes me feel so good”--- you might suggest “the reason you feel so good is that you were put on earth to do such acts.”

Thanks to the teaching of today’s rabbis, our people are beginning to use the religious term *tikkun olam* for acts of social justice. They are being taught to perceive such acts as our way of helping to repair the brokenness in that tiny corner of God’s world entrusted to our care.

Colleagues, the torah does speak of a stark choice: If Israel is faithful to the covenant their food will be plentiful and their enemies vanquished, if not they will reap a bitter harvest of famine and defeat. This proposition is no more literally true than the cartoon which depicts the little mouse consistently escaping from the rapacious cat. But

we should read this passage and others like it as an invitation to perceive the world out of the depths of our souls. There is indeed an order of life that must be observed if we are to fulfill the deepest meaning of our lives.

I'll never forget an encounter with a congregant after one Yom Kippur--that season to be in touch with our deepest selves and to see our life as it is in relation to the way we are intended to live. I don't remember my sermon that day but I remember what it evoked in him. This middle aged man was bemoaning to me that he had played according to the rules. He did not cut corners in his business. He even stayed away from deals which, while they were not illegal, did not pass the smell test. But he now found himself envious and resentful of others he knew who were far less scrupulous and also far more financially successful than he.

This man's complaint reminded me of a text from *Jeremiah's Confessions*. The prophet bitterly laments the cost of responding to God's call. Instead of praise and peace, loyalty to God has brought him reproach and loneliness. The prophet chastises God for not living up to his press releases.

But this remarkable text also contains an answer Jeremiah hears from within his soul. (I use the translation of Sheldon Blank, my beloved Bible professor at this seminary). God says to Jeremiah: "You may be my spokesman only if you distinguish the worthy from the base." Speaking of the people who lived unjustly and seemed to prosper, God says to Jeremiah: "Let them be drawn to you, not you to them." I reminded that man of those words.

One of the most difficult and yet privileged parts of being a rabbi is to be asked to speak at a person's funeral. Even when I knew the person well, I would always assemble the family and encourage them to reflect on the person's life as they knew him or her. Your purpose as rabbis at such a service is to be as kind as you can without violating the truth. Your challenge is to affirm the significance and goodness of a life. Sometimes that task is not easy. But this is implicit in all the family has said or wished they could say: There is a way of life we are intended to live; none of us is a perfect model, but some are considerably closer to fulfilling that intention than others. Closure is so much easier when a family and those assembled at the funeral can honestly confirm the goodness and meaning of that human life.

In Saul Bellow's novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Sammler who is a holocaust survivor, stands at the grave of his nephew and benefactor Elya Gruner and recites this version of the *El Malah Rachamim* prayer: "Remember God, the soul of Elya Gruner...At his best this man was aware that he must meet, and he did meet...the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his heart, each man knows. As I know mine...for that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, we know, we know..."

Dear Colleagues, yours will be the privilege to help your people remember that contract—that covenant—which, at the deepest level of our being, we know is the standard by which we must judge the meaning of our lives. May you fulfill your sacred vocation with integrity and love. May you be a blessing to all who are touched by your lives and your teaching. *Ken yehi ratzon...*