

Monastery Wisdom

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

After more than 15 years as a pulpit Rabbi perhaps the wisest comment I have seen about synagogue life comes from a monastery. In her lovely memoir, *Cloister Walk* about her time in a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota, Kathleen Norris writes:

One monk, asked about diversity in his small community, said that there were people who can meditate all day and others who can't sit still for five minutes; monks who are scholars and those who are semiliterate; chatterboxes and those who emulate Calvin Coolidge with regard to speech. 'But,' he said, 'our biggest problem is that each man here had a mother who fried potatoes in a different way.'

Synagogue struggles are rarely about great issues. But the color of the chairs sparks the administrative equivalent of war: maneuvers, allies and arguments marshaled against green, or brown.

I used to despair of this but now I am cheered by it. Small matters loom large because people who join the same community tend to share fundamental orientations to life. Everyone on the board is committed to the synagogue, to Jewish life, to volunteering, to values. Fried potatoes may stir the pot. In the end however, we sit in the same place because we stand together.