

1990 — 27th Annual Hyman and Emma Levine Memorial Lecture at the University of Judaism

Speaker #1: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

The Jewish people are often called the people of the book because of our love of books and study. And at the University of Judaism, we have an extraordinary scholarly resource that you should all know about. I'm talking about the Jack M. and Bell Ostrow Library.

The Ostrow Library is one of the nation's foremost libraries of Judaica. Our 100,000 volume collection ranges from biblical literature to contemporary Israeli novelists, from philosophy to humor, from history to contemporary issues. And thanks to generous gifts from many private collections, we also have numerous rare and limited editions of scholarly Judaica works, including the wonderful Maslan Bible Collection, which contains Bibles from many centuries and from many countries.

The Library's periodical collection includes major Jewish journals and magazines from communities throughout the nation and the world. And for those doing contemporary research, the documentation center with over 1 million items contains news clippings on thousands of subjects of Jewish interest and concern. The library is open Sunday through Friday. You are all invited to come and sit and read in the spacious reading room and to check out books on loan. The Ostrow Library is an important research resource for historians, writers, theologians, and of course our own students. Stop by sometime and check out the Ostrow Library. You'll find a place where the Jewish love affair with books is vibrantly alive, and you are welcome.

...from this evening with the formal presentation by Rabbi Wolpe and following his remarks, he will engage in an interesting dialogue with our discussant, the Reverend Peter Pettit, pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in Riverside, and a former Finkelstein fellow at the University of Judaism. Following the dialogue between Rabbi Wolpe and Pastor Pettit, we will entertain questions from the floor, and you're asked, if you have any questions, to come to those microphones which are in the aisles. As the courtesy to our program participants and to the rest of the audience, we ask that you please remain in your seats until the end of the program. Following the lecture copies of Rabbi Wolpe's book, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts* will be available for purchase and Rabbi Wolpe will be happy to sign the book for you.

Tonight's lecture is the 27th Annual Hyman and Emma Levine Memorial lecture. Emma and Hyman Levine were dedicated to Judaism and to education, and thus were attracted to the University of Judaism early in its development. Their interest in the University resulted in this annual lecture, endowed originally by Emma in memory of her husband. After her death, the family felt the lectures should memorialize both of them. The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Emma and Hyman Levine have continued this tradition and we certainly are grateful to the Levine family for their ongoing support. Mr. Sid Levine and Ms. Shirley Levine are here tonight and we're grateful to them also and to their entire family for their continued support.

Our lecturer this evening is director of the Ostrow Library and lecturer and modern Jewish thought at the University of Judaism. You'd be interested to know that he will also be lecturing for the Department of Continuing Education at the University on spiritual values of Judaism and mysticism. In the next semester, it's my privilege to present a truly gifted, learned, and sensitive teacher and a writer who

provides fresh and penetrating insights into the human and spiritual yearnings and perplexities of the modern Jew. Happy to present Rabbi David Wolpe.

Rabbi David Wolpe: Thank you very much. The story is told, no doubt apocryphal, no doubt it's not literally true, that when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and they were packing up to leave, Adam turned to his wife and said, "My dear, we live in an age of transition." And that story is after all symbolic of what is more profoundly true for us than it was for Adam and Eve. We live in an age when the pace of history has quickened so that more changes in a decade than used to change in a millennium. You turn around and the fundamental institutions, the fundamental technology of our lives is different.

And so what we all want to know, what we all seek and search for are eternal truths, things that don't change about us, things that we can hang on to that will not shift and slip from under our feet, whether we are eating an apple in Eden or nibbling on sushi in Santa Monica.

Now, the title of this lecture has in it "Breaking Through to Joy and Happiness." I need to say that now that we have reeled you in with seductive promises of happiness, that's not really going to be my major topic because what I'm really going to talk about is growth, and I'm going to do that because growth is a deeper and more urgent question. There is no reliable formula to make someone happy, except living as deeply and as richly as one can. And so together we're going to search for clues and keys in the Jewish tradition to learn how to grow, because in the most famous speech ever given, in the funeral oration that Pericles gave to the people of Athens, the statesman and orator said to the Greek people that happiness requires freedom and freedom requires courage. And we might add that courage requires growth.

So how do we grow? We know that in the inception of the Jewish people, when God comes to Abraham to initiate the mission of the Jews in the world, what does he say to him? He doesn't say, "I'm going to make you happy." He says, "I will make you a blessing." Now, having been made a blessing, was Abraham happy? Maybe, maybe not. After all, Abraham had plenty of tsuris. Abraham didn't have it so good. He had trouble with his wife. He certainly had trouble with his children. And so we can't tell, but we know that wasn't the promise.

And we know something else, which is in looking at Abraham, in looking at ourselves, we have a special advantage because we don't only study people, we are people. And that's true of no other subject. You can't learn physics by looking inside yourself, and there's no way to understand architecture by introspection, but you can search your soul and find out something about human nature.

And what I want to do with you this evening is to search our souls together, and to find out what we can find out. What I want to argue, what I want to present is that all spiritual growth in human life happens along one pattern and the pattern consists of three stages. And together we are going to march through these stages one by one, until we come to the end, and I hope that we will come out at a different place than we entered.

And the first stage with which I want to begin is a difficult one, and I don't want to argue to you that I have accomplished it. It's not that I'm talking about these three stages because I stand before you as a

perfected person. But I once had a teacher of Jewish mysticism who began the class by saying, “Look, I want you to know I'm going to teach you about mysticism, but I'm not a mystic.” He said, “However, you need not be a triangle to teach geometry.” So my assumption is you don't have to be perfect to be able to talk about the ways that people grow. Because I have glimpsed these things. I've seen them in others, I've read about them, I've studied them. And after all in the Jewish tradition, “*devarim shebalev einam devarim*,” words that stay only inside of you, that remain in your heart, that are never shared—wisdom that isn't brought forth and given to someone else—doesn't count. So let's examine together.

The first stage of growth is becoming who you are. And in this stage you strip away all the accretions, all the distortions, all the misdirections of yourself, and you find the real me, the irreducible you. And perhaps the most profound example of this is found in the Bible. God comes to Moses and he sends him on a mission and Moses doesn't want to go, and they argue, and finally Moses says to God, “Look, you want me to on this mission. When I go to the children of Israel, they're going to say to me, who sent you? So what shall I say?” God says, “When they ask you who sent you, say, ‘*ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*,’ ‘I am that I am.’” Now, there are a couple of interesting points about this. The first is that Moses asks so that he can then tell the children of Israel, but he never repeats that name to the children of Israel. He goes to them and he never tells them “I am that I am sent me.” Perhaps understandably so.

He's asking not for the children of Israel but for himself. He wants to know: if I'm going to go through this terrible trial, who are you? But there is another point, the point that your laughter indicated, which is, what does this name mean? David Steinberg used to do biblical routines, and one of the routines that he did on this, it was a record that had comedy routines of various scenes in the Bible. One of them was God comes to Moses and Moses says, “Whom shall I say sent me?” God says, “I am that I am.” And Moses says, “Thanks for clearing that up.”

I mean, what does it mean? I am that I am? It means something very profound because as you may know, biblical Hebrew doesn't have a present tense. So when you say, what are you really saying? “I will be what I will be.” So there are two translations to God's name. “I am what I am” and “I will be what I will be.” And what God is teaching Moses is that to be God is to be completely realized to be what you are. So much so that what God is today, God will be next week and next month and next year. Moses may not know that because Moses will grow and will change, but God will be the same.

We're in Los Angeles, so I guess we should say God is self-actualized. That's what God is. He is completely God. She is completely God, right? Whatever God is, it's completely realized, which teaches Moses at the outset of his journey, what the ideal is. Moses the ideal is to become completely Moses.

Now, of course, Moses will never do it because Moses isn't perfect. We are people. But that's part of the message too. You see, Moses doesn't have to be perfect because there's a God. We don't have to be perfect. The job description is already filled. We are allowed to be flawed, and that's what God was teaching him as well.

So at the outset, God says to human beings, be who you are, fully yourselves. Now, you may not think that that's the message of the tradition. You may have it in your mind that what God really wants is for us to be yielding and compliant and submissive. But you know, the most common verse that is put above

arks in temples, for generations, is: “*Da lifnei mi atah omed*,” “know before whom you stand.” And the key word in that sentence is “stand.” Not before whom you kneel, not before whom you lie, prostrate with your face on the ground—God wants you to stand up. That's why during the *Amidah*, the central prayer of the Jewish service, when you say *baruch*, you bend the knee. When you say *atah*, you bow down. But when you say God's name, what do you do? You stand up. You don't say God's name bent down, Stand up. Be who you are. That's how we can have a relationship.

When God comes to the prophet Ezekiel in the Bible and he begins Ezekiel's prophecy, what does God say to him? “*Ben adam*,” son of man, “*amod al raglecha ve-adaber otach*,” stand on your own two feet and then I will speak to you again. And so Ezekiel says, “The spirit of God entered into me and it set me on my feet, and then I could hear.” As long as Ezekiel was kneeled down, was prostrate, he couldn't hear God, but the spirit of God set him on his feet.

And it's not a question of egotism, it's a question of truth. I don't know whether you've ever seen the scene, but it's a perfect illustration from the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail. You reach for illustrations wherever you can get. There's this wonderful scene where the knights who are searching for the holy grail are walking in a field and God comes out of the sky and immediately they all fall to their knees. And God says to them, stop groveling. Why are people always groveling? Right? Well, now you know that Monty Python got it from us.

This is part of the three stages of every great idea. You're probably familiar with these three stages. The first stage is that idea isn't Jewish. The second stage is we may be able to reconcile that with Judaism. And the third stage is, ah, we had it first. So this one we had first.

And the idea is that God wants people to be people to be people. To be full. Because after all, if what you experience in the world doesn't move through you, doesn't touch you, doesn't get refracted through the prism of the self, then it doesn't matter. You can stand under aah under a wedding canopy and say a thousand times, “*Harei at mekudeshet*,” “Behold you are betrothed,” but until you say the word “*li*,” to me, there's no betrothing, because if it doesn't touch you, if it doesn't change you, it doesn't change anything.

The opposite, the Jewish tradition teaches, of being fully you is not humility. It is falsehood and distortion. And that's why when the tragic figure in the Bible, King Saul loses his kingship. We know that there are several incidents that lose the kingship for him, but only one principle. Samuel sums it up. He tells Saul why he lost the kingship. He comes to him and he says to him, Saul, “*Im katon atah be-einecha*,” are you insignificant in your own eyes? Don't you matter to yourself? “*Rosh shivtei Yisrael atah*,” You are the king of Israel. “*Veyishlachach atah bedarecha*,” and God has sent you on a journey.

What is Samuel teaching? Every journey needs a hero, and every life is a journey. So you have to be the hero and it is a sin to be insignificant to yourself. But we are afraid of that. And so we make other people heroes. We worship this one's ability and that one's talents and this one's looks. And we don't think that all that wizardry and grace and charisma and that wonder that is inside all the people we see around us is inside our own soul.

So let me tell you about a hero of mine. And this man is a hero of mine because he spoke two words. His name was Rabbi Joseph, and you can find him in the Talmud and in particular at the end of the Tractate called Sota. At that time, the world was desolate. The temple had been destroyed. So many scholars of the Jewish tradition had been tortured and slaughtered. And there is a litany of everyone who had died and everything that was lost. And so you read in Sota as follows:

When Rabbi Meir died, storytellers ceased. When Rabbi Yossei Katonta died, there were no more pious men. When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai died, the luster of wisdom ended. When Rabbi Gamliel died, purity perished. And when Rebbe died, humility was no more. And then when this litany is over, Rabbi Joseph stands up and he says, "Don't teach that humility is no more, "*De-ika ana,*" for I am here.

Now at first blush, this is ludicrous, right? "Don't say there are no more humble people because here I am!" But I think he was saying something terribly important. He's saying, don't assume that all the virtue and all the goodness and all the valor and all the power in the world resides with somebody else living or dead. It's inside of you. Don't say you can't be modest and you can't be pious and you can't be good and you can't be strong. You can. You just have to believe it.

So you are allowed to stand up and say, you know what? Inside of me are all these abilities as well. "*Ika ana,*" I'm here too, and I'm not willing to sublimate and repress and ignore all that's inside of me so that someone else can be the hero.

Now we understand why we do it. It's because parts of us seem so unappealing. They seem at times such perfect candidates for concealment that we rush to cloak and cover ourselves. We duck behind the cover of casual conversation, behind the facade of professionalism and of distance. We faint and bob, we weave like boxers so no one can get a beat on us. Because if somebody gets a fix on you, that's how you get hit.

I remember not too long ago walking out of the play the Phantom of the Opera, and I thought, what is so powerful about this play? And I realized it was because I felt like the phantom, because we all feel like the phantom, because I felt like there were parts of me that were ugly and that I needed to hide behind a mask. And there was this smooth visage, you couldn't tell what he looked like. And we all wear the masks and we all hide behind them. And we all feel that nobody had better see beneath it because inside there is such ugliness. We learn to wear them young, as children.

But it is part of the task of being a person to tear off the mask, to discover that beneath the mask is beauty. And even more important than that, beneath the mask is truth. And part of doing that is learning to say, "*Ika ana,*" I'm here. I matter. The Belzer Rebbe said, you know, the Jewish people have endured a lot of exiles, but if all the exiles endured by the Jewish people, the most terrible and the most serious is when a Jew is exiled from his or her own soul.

So draw yourself up to full height. And remember that although the maxim in the ancient world, the maximum of Socrates and the Delphic Oracle was "know thyself," in our tradition and in our world, it is important not only to know thyself, but to be thyself.

Now, I could end there and some schools of psychology and some schools of wisdom would say, you should end there. There are probably many schools of wisdom that would tell me to end there. But in the Jewish tradition, if that's all you have to say, if you finish there, then you are either a self-deceiver or a fool. Because this is only the beginning of constructing a character. We have now constructed someone who stands full and complete before the world. A realized human being, someone who dresses well, knows how to order in French restaurants, probably knows how to program their VCR. I mean somebody who really... someone of ability and character. And now when the spine is straight and the vision clear, now when confidence spills over the sides of character, now we must be broken. Because to paraphrase a Hasidic proverb, one who is never broken, will never be complete. The pride of self is the first step. And the more fully it has been put in place, the more thoroughly it must be broken.

And that's why I said before that you stand up when you say God's name during the *Amidah*, during the *Shemoneh Esrei*. But there is one person who is not supposed to stand up, who is supposed to remain bowed down throughout the entire prayer. And that's the high priest, because the tradition teaches the higher up you are, the further down you have to learn to be. And that's part of the reality of sin.

Has it ever struck you that each year on Yom Kippur, as we come together in this place to confess our sins, that as we say, the confessional of Jewish sin, that it is alphabetical? Why do you confess we don't sin alphabetically? Why should we confess alphabetically? It's a good question. It's a good question because I have an answer. I wouldn't have asked it if I didn't have an answer. My answer comes to me from Rabbi Yitzchak. He says, why do you confess alphabetically? Because... I'll wait. Now we answer. Because he says there is after all, no end to human sin. And sooner or later you're going to go home. But there is an end to the alphabet. So when you get to the last letter, it's over. Doesn't mean you won't sin anymore, but you're done.

Now, what's his point? The point is, and although it's funny, it is not trivial. The point is because we matter so much, because we're so important, we are capable of such endless wrong. The reason we can sin so much is because we are so important. Because we are so gifted with reason and soul and conscience.

It is a repetition of the oldest and probably the best Yom Kipper joke of all, which is the one about the three scholars that are standing up in front of the synagogue, and, as they are want to do, beating their breasts, crying. And each one is screaming out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing." And a little tailor walks in the back of the synagogue and he sees the scholars beating their breasts and crying out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing." He figures this is how it's done. So he starts to beat his breast and he says, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing." And at the front of the synagogue, one of the scholars nudges the other one and says, "Look, who thinks he's nothing."

The point is that you cannot think you are nothing unless you really believe you are something. And so all this business about sin, and I did such terrible things, masks a legitimate and important pride in what we are. And we find that in the Jewish tradition, people are made by being broken. People are elevated by their failings. Look at Moses. Moses is called by the tradition, by the Torah, the most humble man on earth. But when we first meet Moses, he is anything but humble. He sees an Egyptian taskmaster hitting a slave. What does he do? He kills him. He runs off to Midyan and he sees some people, some shepherds who are harassing women by a well. And he chases them off. He's proud and he's powerful. But then he

ends up far from home, away from his land and away from his family. And he says, "*Ger hayiti be-eretz nachriya*," I have been a stranger in a strange land.

And you know what the rabbis say about that verse? They say, every prophet is a stranger. Why? Because to be a prophet is to feel the pain of this world to be broken by it. After all, the prophets were powerful people. They were people of ability and character. They didn't have to go headfirst into the throngs of Israel and suffer that pain. But they knew that the world can lacerate the spirit. That it can whipsaw the soul. And you have a choice. You can duck under the pain, and then you'll never be a prophet, or you can embrace the pain. You can be broken by it. You can admit your own helplessness. You can be a *ger*, a stranger. And then you can be a hero.

After all, Jeremiah was bound in chains by his own people. He was abused. He was a prophet. And it happens on a different level to all of us.