

# The Pulpit is the Great Lab

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*dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Max Arzt ל"ת*

I was a rabbinical student at JTS for four years in the mid-70s and although I was only 24 when I was ordained, I still wasn't the youngest person to be ordained in 1978—that distinction went to the late Bob Addison, *yehi zikhro varukh*, with whom I shared a High Holiday pulpit in Waycross, Georgia, for several years.

In those days, Rabbinical School wasn't so much a training institute for working rabbis as much as it was a kind of institutional turnstile through which a few lucky men were permitted to pass every year on their way from the exoteric Jewish world—the world of shiny black *yarmulkes*, potato *latkes* and *shabbos* candles we mostly all knew and felt at home in—into the domain of Jewish esoterica—the world of perforated flowerpots and single-egress courtyards, the secret world in which people worried about the number of handbreadths that separated the walls of their *sukkot* from the ground and how, precisely, it might be permissible to dispose of the dung of the *shor hanisqal* without contravening the prohibition of deriving any benefit from the forbidden feces. Until our final year of study, in fact, no mention at all was made in any of our courses of the actual career upon which most of us were about to embark. Indeed, even with a semester (or was it two?) of practical rabbinics behind us, most of us—myself most certainly included—were ordained without the slightest idea how to execute a *get* or *kasher* an industrial kitchen or build a kosher *mikveh*. I still marvel at how well the daily exigencies of life in the pulpit were kept from us...and wonder if it was all part of some complex plot to keep the horrible reality of congregational

life from us or if things were as they were simply because it never occurred to anyone at the Seminary to take pulpit work at all seriously.

The basic message in those days was that working with *amchah* was for rabbis who didn't have the brains or the creativity to make it in academics. I succumbed to that kind of thinking for a while—I earned a Ph.D. in ancient Judaism, won a post-doc at the Hebrew University, took a teaching position in the Institute of Jewish Studies attached to the University of Heidelberg—but my heart remained where it had been all along: in the congregational rabbinate. And then, eight years after I was ordained, I took the leap, left academics and signed on as the rabbi of a tiny pulpit in a community located, of all places, on an island in the Fraser River in Canada's westernmost province.

Over the years, I have had any number of opportunities to leave congregational life behind. Just this spring, in fact, I had the opportunity to take a job working for a major Jewish organization based in New York. It was an attractive offer in every way...except that, in the end, I found myself unable to make the decision to leave my life in the pulpit. It is maddening on a daily basis. It borders, at least sometimes, on being insufferable. Some of the situations that a rabbi has to attempt to unravel are so peculiar that it beggars the imagination. But, in the end, I have come to think of the congregation as the great laboratory...and, in the end, the lab is where scientists who take their science seriously belong. Teaching undergraduates about Judaism—my other great career option—is certainly a noble task, and an essential one, but the nature of the academy is such that ideas, or at least religious ones, can only be described and, occasionally, debated in the classroom, never really tested in the only way that truly counts: by applying them to the spiritual lives of real Jewish people and seeing if they do or don't fly. In the end, rabbis who write about God fall into two categories: those who derive their information from other rabbis' books and those who derive theirs from midnight calls they take from teenagers facing first bouts of chemotherapy

in the morning and who suddenly find themselves unable to settle down in their hospital rooms before asking why, if God is just and good, their innocent lives are suddenly on the line. I've read lots of books...but I've also taken those phone calls—and plenty of them—and, at least in my own experience, there's no comparison between the two in terms of their usefulness as spurs to honest theological speculation. As Pinchas of Koretz is reported to have said of the *Zohar*, my life in the pulpit is what has made me into a Jew.

I've written six books over the last decades: three books of essays and three novels. All of them, I think, are infused with the experiences I have had over the years as a congregational rabbi. I actually have read the whole *Moreh Nevukhim*—although, to tell the truth, it left me more perplexed than ever—but, in the end, the endless source of spiritual, intellectual and emotional inspiration in my life is the experience of endlessly testing Jewish ideas and rituals in the great laboratory—not by doping out how they could conceivably work or by studying how they once may have worked, but by seeing whether or not they actually do work in the actual lives of actual people striving to be Jews. That, more than anything, is the source of my creativity and, although I have occasionally thought of taking my career in other directions, I can't imagine working in any more satisfying context than the pulpit. My congregation is filled with lawyers and dentists who would choose differently if they could start their career paths over again, but I think of my choice of the rabbinate as a career as the great blessing of my life...and, for all it makes me crazy and occasionally drives me to despair, I have come to think of my specific decision to opt for a life in the pulpit as a blessing as well. I have no regrets....