

הרב שעייה גדליה בן ברוך יהודה לייב ודבורה - RABBI CRAIG AXLER

VISION STATEMENT - PLACEMENT 2012

I was mid-way through my clinical internship in Music Therapy when I first realized that I needed to be a rabbi. I found myself with four generations of a family gathered around the hospice bed of their ninety-plus year old matriarch. She was non-responsive, and as I stood beside her with my guitar, I led her family in singing hymns about the faith and expectation that Jesus was waiting for her on the "other side." The woman had lingered near death for several days, holding on until the members of her extended family could gather by her bedside. I then had the privilege of helping this family move through saying goodbye with dignity, emotion and intentionality. We sang this matriarch out of life and into the hereafter, with voices of love and faith. Not my own faith, but a faith that I could support through sacred hymns and remembered melodies that spoke in this very particular moment. As I wandered the streets of Pittsburgh that night, I thought to myself "I think I just helped kill that woman with music!" I did learn the next morning that a few hours after we gathered around her bed she gently slipped out of this life.



This was the moment when I received "the call" to become a rabbi – though I allowed "call waiting" to continue ringing for a few more years while I remained on the phone with a Music Therapy career. Eventually I realized that while the work I was doing as a Music Therapist was immensely gratifying, music alone was not enough.

That is hard for me to say, because music is a tremendous part of who I am. However at some point in my upbringing, Judaism became my language of relationship and meaning. Whether it was living Judaism with my family, leading my synagogue youth group, songleading at Jewish camps, working on a kibbutz, studying as an undergraduate at HUC in Jerusalem – through all of these experiences Judaism became the way I understand the most important parts of life. I did not fully realize this until I stood at that hospice bed, so far away spiritually from everything I knew.

Judaism and being a rabbi is, for me, primarily about what I did that day – creating, supporting and nurturing genuine relationship. My role as a Music Therapist was to use music as the tool to connect this multi-generational family to one another, to their loved one and ultimately to God in this final act of compassion. My role as a rabbi is to use every tool of the Jewish toolbox to help build genuine relationship.

In addition to music, Judaism gives me the tools of ritual, study, community, social justice, and prayer. My "workshop" begins in the synagogue, extends to the home, to neighboring houses of worship and even all the way to Israel. My partners in this work include everyone from the preschool kids I slap high-fives with every Friday as they leave the sanctuary to the amazing lay leaders who give tremendous time and energy on top of their family and professional responsibilities. With these tools and in partnership with others, I am able to craft the genuine relationships for which we all yearn.

Relationship starts at the most intimate level. Recently a couple at whose wedding I had officiated years ago contacted me with an update on their journey. During premarital counseling I helped them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship. At the time, they did not know that the stress of struggling with infertility would frame their lives over the next several years. I was delighted to hear the news that they were within weeks of adopting a baby. Their question to me: Could I help them move

through adoption Jewishly, as I had guided them under the *chuppah*? Together we crafted a specific naming ceremony, selected readings that reflected the struggles leading up to this moment of overflowing joy, and then welcomed the daughter who transformed them from a couple into a family. This is what ritual can do: sanctify and nourish our most important genuine relationships.

While leading a small group in Torah study, I have witnessed the chasm of thousands of years and miles disappear. The words of the Talmud's rabbis or the lines of a biblical character become as real and relevant as the morning's paper. At Beth Or, we created a model we call "Torah to Go." Upon request, I bring a Torah scroll into the home of a member family and they invite friends and neighbors to join us for this special event. The Torah scroll then spends the week in a portable ark in their home, with the family returning it before services the following Shabbat. Often we share a meal together, then study – the composition of a Torah scroll, the way it is written, the weekly portion. In this way, ancient texts come alive, and we, partners in study, form genuine relationships. In one particular case this was especially poignant as my study partners were the 20 Catholic relatives of the family's mother, a Jew by choice. By the time we reconnected to celebrate at her daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I already had a genuine relationship with this extended family, one that was forged through the study of Torah.

This same process happens through prayer. From my earliest memories of songleading as a teenager, I have seen my role in guiding worship as facilitating relationship through prayer that is meaningful, music that is both inspiring and intimate, and services that are participatory. I strive to help others reach towards a genuine relationship with God as seen through our many perspectives. It does not always happen, but when the multiple factors align just right, the result is a transformational experience that defies description in words.

And our relationships as Jews continue halfway around the world to the State of Israel. One of my great joys in the years since ordination is the opportunity to connect members of my congregation with the land and people of Israel through travel, advocacy, education and awareness. This became especially vivid when our Confirmation class students celebrated the Passover *seder* in Jerusalem. As we looked around the hall where we held our *seder*, we saw varied families of Jews each gathered around their own *seder* tables – Moroccans, Ethiopians, survivors of Hitler's Europe. The final words of the *Haggadah* came alive for us: "this year in Jerusalem!" Israel enables genuine and lasting relationships to encompass the entire Jewish people.

These relationships inspire us also to turn outward from Judaism and connect with other religious communities. We may be distanced by questions of creed, religion, history or ideology, but we are all part of a larger fabric in American society which is strengthened by diversity when it is seen through the lens of genuine relationship. While valid and substantive differences may separate us, acknowledging our departures connects us more deeply. I witnessed this when our Social Action chair asked if I thought Beth Or could take on the project of building of a house with Habitat for Humanity. My answer was "Not alone." Together we sat and strategized, ultimately establishing an interfaith coalition to see the project through from start to finish. The result of this project is the tangible home that our friends now live in, but also the intangibles of relationships deepened while clearing the overgrowth of a neglected lot, of joining together with my clergy partners to paint (it's a good thing we're clergy and not housepainters!).

I view being a rabbi as a sacred calling. I also see the opportunity to help shape and guide a community as a way to develop a spiritually nourishing home for my whole family. Together with my wife, Pamela, I embrace the responsibility of raising our children in a community where genuine relationship lies at the heart of all interactions. Being a rabbi enables me to draw upon all of my skills to help build these relationships. While I do this as my profession, I personally want my family to be a part of a community that is more than a synagogue. The genuine relationships I seek to establish turn a synagogue into a spiritual home.