At the Gates — בשערורים

With some trepidation, I accepted the honor of co-editing this themed issue of the CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly. I thank Journal Editor Elaine Rose Glickman and CCAR Chief Strategy Officer and Journal Managing Editor Hara Person for their trust in me.

I have taken great joy in reaching out to my colleagues and inviting them to share their wisdom in this forum. So many responded that we were able to expand a symposium on “Politics and the Rabbinate” into a full theme issue.

“Politics and the Rabbinate” serves as a complement to the CCAR Press’s recent publication Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority, so ably edited by Seth Limmer and Jonah Pesner. While their book features the latest understandings of current issues in social justice, our hope is to share the practical wisdom of current colleagues and historical forebears on how to act on these issues in our communities, organizations, and congregations, with all the challenges that brings.

We turned to Seth Limmer for an introduction to our issue as well. Historically, we felt the need to begin with Stephen S. Wise. The question that has always fascinated me is why his plutocrat congregants returned each week to be harangued in an hour-long sermon. Mark Raider—a leading scholar and the author of a forthcoming book on Rabbi Wise—provides insight into Rabbi Wise and how he viewed his rabbinic bully pulpit. The Rabbi Aaron D. Panken Assistant Professor of Jewish History at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, Jennifer Grayson, next takes us back to the rabbis of the early Islamic period, and how they found themselves moving between ally and opposition to the early caliphs. Judith Schindler (herself the co-author with Judy Seldin-Cohen of Recharging Judaism:

RABBI JOEL N. ABRAHAM (NY98) is proud to serve on the CCAR Journal Editorial Committee. He is the co-editor of the Mishkan T’filah: Journal Edition with his wife, Michelle Shapiro Abraham. A former co-chair of Reform Jewish Voice of New Jersey, he is active in interfaith social justice work, with a focus on racial (in) equity. He has been the rabbi of Temple Sholom in Plainfield/Fanwood/Scotch Plains since 1999.
How Civic Engagement Is Good for Synagogues, Jews, and America) lifts up the example of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. While we may be more familiar with his pioneering of the Catholic–Jewish detente that led to Vatican II, Judith shows us his deep and long-lasting engagement with Black–Jewish relationship, his influence in the civil rights era, and his prescient understanding of where we find ourselves today.

In conversations carried on at the Religious Action Center’s Rabbinic Moral Leadership Gathering in Chicago last fall, and ongoing discussions with colleagues, the issues of how to manage partisan political divisions within our communities and congregations rose to the fore. Enough articles emerged on this subject that we have, perhaps, a symposium of its own, exploring the different ways in which our colleagues have engaged this challenge. Matthew D. Gewirtz makes a case for a rabbinate serving the “Radical Middle,” while Ilana G. Baden shares the Fox News Chavurah that she created in her congregation, and Rick Kellner and his congener Professor Don Sylvan recount their process in conversations about Israel. Each of these articles provides not only experience and insight, but also sample letters, e-mails, and lesson plans. We are also privileged to have Daniel Reiser review Pardes Institute’s Mahloket Matters curriculum, the latest tool in their impressive mission to help congregations foster meaningful conversation despite disagreement.

We knew that we would benefit from hearing the voice of a colleague who found themselves in political dissent from the right, and we are happy to include A. Brian Stoller’s piece on the dangers of monopoliticism. Finally, we share an article by gifted darshan and immediate past CCAR President David Stern, which was originally delivered at the Rabbinic Moral Leadership Gathering in Chicago. (Seth Limmer kicked me halfway through the talk and told me I had to include it in this symposium. No sooner had David sat down than we corralled him. It’s not like he was very busy . . . .)

After speaking with Andi Berlin about what drove her to see firsthand the immigrant detention center in Homestead, Florida, Elaine persuaded her to share her “report from the field.” Robert Nosanchuk and Josh Caruso present the ideas and mechanics of their powerful partnership in Cleveland, as inheritors of the prophetic mantle of the Fairmount Temple, and Meir Lakein and Jeannie Appleman, gurus of community organizing from JOIN
for Justice, reflect on decades of teaching clergy how to organize. We also have a challenge to our reliance on the traditional texts of Judaism posed by David Aaron, which includes two beautiful modern texts I commend to your reading. Finally, we offer a word from our beloved honorary member, Al Vorspan, z”l, through an article he co-authored with Marla J. Feldman, which she has updated, along with a “What would Al do?” coda. We are grateful that Marla was able to share this gift with us.

What would our Journal be without colleagues sharing their insight through book reviews and the language of poetry? Edwin Goldberg, Barry H. Block, David Ellenson, Marc Saperstein, and Israel Zoberman bring to our attention outstanding works of practical and pastoral guidance, biography, sermons, and reflection that fit our theme of “Politics and the Rabbinate,” while Professor Tony Barnstone makes his Journal debut with three poems that combine the political with the literary. Also publishing their first poems in the Journal are Jonathan Garfinkel, Lawrence Mark Lesser, and Kim Roberts; and Roger Nash, Charles van Heck, and Brandon Marlon have returned to our pages. Finally, Elliot B. Gertel shares his review of the wisdom of our colleague Jack Riemer; David J. Zucker discusses the final volume of the Jewish Publication Society’s Miqra’ot Gedolot translation, and Israel Zoberman lifts up two classic books by the late Amos Oz.

Still out there, as yet incomplete, are articles on where young adults engage, glimpses into a feminist Zionist perspective, and other papers that narrate the experiences, scholarship, and best practices of our colleagues. We hope to receive and include such work in succeeding issues.

Thank you again to the staff of the CCAR Journal for their help and, most especially, to Elaine for the opportunity to grow the relationship we began so long ago at our kibbutz on Echad HaGidem. Perhaps it will even survive this experience. I have been privileged to work with her. She imagines so much for this publication, and I am glad to provide even a little help (and much aggravation) as she seeks to lift up the voices of our colleagues (especially the non-males) to the benefit of us all. Kol hakavod.

Joel N. Abraham