

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

I was honored to be one of the two people Cantor Rachel chose to deliver a charge at her Cantorial graduation this past May 22.

You might be surprised, or not, to learn that I received precise instructions from the leadership of JTS on what was expected from me. The main instruction was only one: no more than 80 words.

The instruction reminded me of a well-known joke:

After services one Shabbat, Rabbi Cohen is approached by Larry Levy, the famous TV producer. "Rabbi Cohen, that sermon was amazing! I want to put you on my talk show on national TV."

"Oh my, I'm so flattered," says the rabbi. "That would be wonderful!"

"Here's the thing, Rabbi. TV audience attention spans are much smaller. You can't do a 25 minute sermon on TV."

"Oh, I see. Well, I could take away the opening anecdote about my trip to Brazil. That would chop it down by a few minutes – bring it down to 18 or 19 minutes."

"Yeah, Rabbi, that's still too long."

"Instead of five examples of the teaching, I could do it with three. That would make it twelve minutes."

"Now we're cookin', Rabbi, but it's got to be shorter than that."

"Well, really I just need one strong example. Beginning, middle, end, with a nice takeaway. I could do the whole sermon in five minutes flat."

"So, Rabbi, why didn't you?"

The truth is that when forced to condense our elaborate thoughts into 2 minutes or 80 words (closer to 1 minute), we are able to do it. Although it was challenging, I was able to come up with exactly 80 words, which I shared with Cantor Rachel on the day of her ordination, and now I would like to share them with you. This is what I said (feel free to count the words).

Dear Cantor Rachel,

I wish someone had shared with me on my ordination day, the words I am about to share with you.

We are all on a journey. The best way I can think about this journey is between where we are and where we ought to be.

May HaShem bless you with a meaningful journey. May you find good fellow travelers along the way, and may you arrive at your own Promised Land, the one waiting for you.

Now, the reason I am sharing these words with you, in my newsletter message, has to do less with Cantor Rachel (she heard the words already), and more with each of you, with each of us.

The truth is that knowingly or unknowingly, we are all in a similar journey, albeit tailored for each of us. The journey always bridges two points: where we are and where we ought to be. Sometimes we move one step forward and two steps backwards. Sometimes it seems we are not moving at all.

The reason I chose this short message to share with Cantor Rachel – and with you – is, as I said in the message, because I wish someone had shared this simple truth with me. Perhaps my journey would have been a different one, or perhaps it would have been more purposeful.

The good news for me, for Cantor Rachel, and for all of us, is that it is never too late. All we need to do is to be mindful of where we are standing in our spiritual, intellectual, and moral journey, and to ponder where we ought to be. Once we have the two points, it is a matter of setting small, achievable goals. and to start traveling the distance.

With God's help, not only Cantor Rachel, but each of us, will make it to the Promised Land, which is waiting for us at the end of the journey.

Rabbi Manes Kogan