

FAREWELL SHABBAT SERMON

June 26, 2010

Rabbi Elan Adler

Several months ago, this morning seemed very far off. When the letter to the congregation announcing my leaving went out after the High Holidays, it felt like there would be such a long time before my last Shabbos here. I knew I would have to say goodbye sometime, and this weekend has come, and this is the time.

I remember when the great puppeteer Jim Henson passed away. The genius and the voice behind the greatest Sesame Street characters died, and in tribute to him, one of the networks on the evening news played a clip from the Muppet movie called, "The Muppets take Manhattan." The Muppets were ready to leave one of the greatest adventures of their lives- life in the big city, the huge skyscrapers, Broadway- and they sang a farewell song to Manhattan called, "It's time for saying goodbye." The network I was watching took that clip, and played it as a fitting honor for Jim Henson, while panning the faces of each of the muppets. It was then, and it is indeed now, time for saying goodbye.

It didn't take me long to write there first two paragraphs of this farewell message. I lifted it word for word from my farewell message to Beth Tfiloh nine and a half years ago. But I must confess, as hard as that was in December of 2000, it was a piece of cake compared to today. Then, it was seven-plus years, and today it is nearly a decade. Then, I was an associate Rabbi, and today, I'm the senior Rabbi. Then, I was moving to a new congregation two miles away, and today, I'm a few days away from a new life and a new home nearly 6,000 miles away with my dear wife Rivkah and our daughter Shani, to join our other daughter Ariella, who made aliyah this past September.

I feel as though I, and we, have been saying goodbye for months. As time has gone by since my announcement, there hasn't been a day without people calling, or writing, or emailing, or telling me how much they will miss me, how sorry they are to see me go, and I appreciate that more than you can imagine. I appreciate the beautiful Banquet in May and the Sisterhood donor in June, both in my honor.

Over the past several months, I have been mindful of how time passed and how many "lasts" there have been- our last High Holidays together, my last Chanukah, my last Purim and Pesach, my last Yizkor, my last Cozy conversation, my last News and Shmooze and Lunch and Learn, my last Chumash Class, my last Bar or Bat Mitzvah, my last funeral and unveiling, my last hospital visit, my last conversion, my last baby naming, my last full week of morning minyans with the minyanniaries...there have been so many "lasts", and this, my friends, is the last of the lasts, my last Shabbos with you as your Rabbi.

I can't tell you what a privilege and honor, joy and delight it has been to be the Rabbi of Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah. My first congregation was in Stamford, CT, an 800 family congregation where I served as an assistant Rabbi, and then I served Beth Tfiloh as associate Rabbi, a 1300-family congregation. When I was invited to come to Moses Montefiore, at that time with about 160 families, it felt like I was going to be running a workshop.

One hundred sixty families? How cute, how adorable, where do you pinch this congregation? Not only that, how do you find this congregation? I had no clue how to get here. But then I met with Sam Stone, Allan Diener and Bob Meyerson, and with my Rebetzin Rivkah at my side, we listened to their passion about the synagogue, how much it was a part of their lives for all of their lives, and I knew this was the right place to be when they had to wipe their moist eyes after talking about what this shul meant to them and their families.

This is simply an incredible loving and warm congregation, not a cathedral shul, not a wealthy shul- in fact, we're often listed in the UNFORTUNATE 500- but a shul with a heart and soul that makes first timers who have never been to an orthodox shul before tell me during the Kiddush, "I loved being here, what a congregation you have! I felt welcome and embraced from the first moment I walked in."

And so did I, my dear friends, so did I.

Many years ago, prior to becoming a Rabbi, I visited a mega shul in Memphis that was no longer being used because the neighborhood was changing. We were let in the building through the kitchen, and I saw a sign

on the fridge with the words, "The Rabbi must have diet Coke in the fridge at all time." When no one was looking, I thought I would take a peek in the fridge to see how influential the sign was....and there they were, six pack after six pack of diet coke. I thought of the line from Mel Brooks' History of the World Part I, "it's good to be the king."

That's how I have felt every day here at Moses Montefiore, people extending themselves to me with kindness and concern, with compassion and understanding.....every Shabbos, coffee on the bimah courtesy of Marilyn and Sandy....a special plate of Kiddush goodies and diet coke from the kitchen....people asking my opinion on this or that...people asking about my parents' health....how's my family.....how's my leg....how's my nose....sugar-free products at the Kiddush and various meetings.....allowing me to have the last word on various matters.....you have treated me with respect and deference that makes me feel like a king, even when you may have disagreed or felt that I didn't represent what you were thinking or feeling.

A lot of people have asked me, "So, Rabbi, are you excited?" and the answer comes from the recent movie title, "It's Complicated."

I have such mixed feelings. On the one hand, as someone born in Israel, I will be going back home after almost 50 years, something I would have never imagined. When my parents left Hungary after the Holocaust, they boarded a ship to live in Israel in 1948, the year Israel was established, and they arrived in Israel on July 9th of that year. 62 years later, we will be arriving by plane on July 7th, almost exactly the same date. We will be reunited with our daughter Ariella, who made aliyah last year but who has been studying and living in Israel now for the past nearly two years. Considering how painful it was to part with her, you can imagine how emotional that reunion will be. There is so much to go to in Israel- God's Holy Land, a country where Jews are the majority, a Jewish land that celebrates Shabbat and holidays together, many friends who have made aliyah, the Torah and the people and the air and spirituality of Eretz Yisrael, falafel, shwarma...there is so much to go to in Israel. So yes, I'm excited, extremely excited, and yet.....

There is so much I'm leaving behind- a career, a community where I met and married my precious Rivkah and became the Abba to Ariella and Shani, dear parents and family in Providence, dear friends outside the

congregation...and of course, all of you, you who have been my synagogue family for almost 10 years. I will miss my bimah buddies, who not only lead the services and give out the honors, but whose smiles and banter and hugs make a good day great. I will miss the greeters and the paginators, the Torah and haftarah chanters, the curtain pullers, the hagbahs and gelilahs, the Torah carriers, the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and blessing the children, children who stand reverently and quietly as well as the children who wait for the exact moment of the blessing to wave to their parents or do calisthenics and scratch every itch imaginable. I will miss the High Holiday davening with the Cantor and the Choir. I will miss being in this beautiful and holy sanctuary. I will miss being with the minyannaires every morning.

But I think what I will miss most of all, is walking with the Torah, and coming around to greet and be greeted by each and every one of you, a warm handshake and a smile, perhaps a kiss, a hug or just a meeting of the eyes if you're too far in- in those few moments of contact, we share so much of what makes this place so special and so unique. When it takes a long time for the Rabbi to walk through the congregation, that's a good sign. It means there's a lot of love in this place, and I will miss that more than you can imagine.

MMAE may lack the funds that other synagogues have, but we have more than our share of genuine good people who run this place with care and concern and expertise in many areas. Being a leader of a congregation can often be a thankless job.

A mechanic was removing a cylinder head from the motor of a Harley motorcycle when he spotted a well-known heart surgeon in his shop. The surgeon was there, waiting for the service manager to come and take a look at his bike.

The mechanic shouted across the garage, "Hey, Doc, can I ask you a question?" The surgeon a bit surprised, walked over to the mechanic working on the motorcycle. The mechanic straightened up, wiped his hands on a rag and asked, "So Doc, look at this engine. I open its heart, take valves out, fix 'em, put 'em back in, and when I finish, it works just like new. So how come I get such a small salary and you get the really big bucks, when you and I are doing basically the same work?"

The surgeon paused, smiled and leaned over, and whispered to the mechanic... "Try doing it with the engine running."

The daily running of an enterprise that people rely on every day, makes our people extremely special and I appreciate working as a team with them- Brenda, Renee, Zalman and William, Jeff and Bob, Marlene and Dottie, Henry and Len, Lynda and Larry, Steve, Larry, Alan and Sheila, our Executive Committee and Board of Directors, our committee chairs and committee members- all of these outstanding staff and leadership of our shul are doing their work with the engine running, and I appreciate how much they do and how well and enthusiastically they do it. I will miss working with them.

A lot of people have asked me, what will you be doing in Israel?

Well, I thought of being a Rabbi of a shul, but there aren't enough Jews where we're going. I think of myself as a good problem solver, and had they asked me, I have the perfect solution for stopping the gushing oil in the gulf- I would blast matza into that gusher- it stops everything for 8 days, it would do the trick. If that wouldn't work, I would put Helen Thomas in the opening, and see what happens.

What will I be doing? I don't exactly know just yet. But I can tell you that I have every faith, without a shadow of a doubt, that God has something very special waiting for me. In the meantime, we have all the money we need, except if we have to buy something.

There are some things that have made me feel very emotional over the past few weeks- taking down all the pictures in my office and packing all the books and chachkes, being at my last meeting of the monthly Maryland Human Relations Commission, doing the last lifecycle events, teaching the last classes, seeing some people for the last time as they leave for vacation....

I particularly found it hard to leave the many binders on the shelves in the office, binders with eulogies, and Bnei Mitzvah speeches and notes, and wedding charges, and baby namings and conversion papers. Each entry in these dozen binders represent hours and hours of preparation, time and effort to make each person's life cycle event as meaningful and as spiritual

as possible. It has been a special privilege to shepherd families through the highs and lows of their lives, and to receive so much appreciation from each one of them. The largest folders I put in a box are filled with thank you notes from you, and each is a reminder of those special connections we've had that can never be erased or forgotten.

American Rabbis who make aliyah are few and far between. One such Rabbi from New York, made aliyah nearly 30 years ago with six families from his congregation. He is now the chief Rabbi of Efrat, with nearly 10,000 people. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin said something several years ago, in the middle of the intifada during which over a thousand Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks. It was a time when individuals and groups were canceling their visits to Israel and the streets and hotels were all but empty. Rabbi Riskin said,

"If Israel is your Disneyland, then come only when the sun is shining. But if Israel is your Motherland, then come when your mother needs you."

We are going to Israel because our motherland needs us. Especially now, when there is no intifada and no terrorism to speak of, thank God, but there is something even more dire and urgent that draws us home. There is something happening in the world that is hard to ignore, and the prophet Bilaam said it today in the Torah reading. Bilaam is paid to use his power of speech and influence to curse the Jewish nation, but he ends up saying words that amount to a blessing, and three different times the King of Moav waits to hear the curses, and three times he's disappointed by hearing blessings. One of those blessings is "hayn am levadad yishkon," which means, the Jewish people shall stand unique among the nations, exceptional and distinctive.

That is certainly a blessing, to be so regarded. But we know that the word "levadad" also has another meaning, and that is, alone. Hayn am levadad yishkon also means, they are a nation that dwells alone, and the verse continues, and it will not be reckoned among the nations. This is what the prophet Bilaam predicted, that the Jewish people will dwell in solitude, and they won't be counted among the nations.

Today, Israel is becoming increasingly more isolated in the world, more singled out for disproportionate criticism and vilification. The campaign to delegitimize Israel, to demonize her and eventually destroy her, is gaining strength every day. And I'm worried because it seems that more and more Jewish people speak against Israel, feeling they have legitimate concerns and questions about how Israel conducts its affairs. After you get passed the gorgeous cover picture of this week's Jewish Times, look at the letters to the editor, and see how American Jews justify their anger at Israel in the name of diversity of opinion and plurality of thought. They say that if thousands of Israelis march in the streets against Israeli action regarding Palestinians and humanitarian flotillas, then so can they.

In normal times, I would agree that this kind of discourse may be healthy.

But today, when Israel has become the punching bag of the world, in a world that doesn't understand its daily existential challenges or appreciate the fact that its back is against the wall practically all of the time, in a time when countries and governments jump on Israel like bullies in a schoolyard, it is no time for Jews to be vocal about their doubts and misgivings, as it only gives further legitimacy to our detractors. To join that chorus is like handing the sword to the executioner in our day. I would encourage people with strong negative feelings about Israel to keep it in the family, and to channel it in a way that makes their voice and opinion heard.

So we are going, because of many reasons, but certainly because Israel needs us, and needs more and more Jews to come and be a part of the Jewish cause of our time. Our motherland needs us, and we are privileged and proud to go, even while we feel sad leaving our families and friends, community and especially MMAE.

So I thank our President Jeff Forman and our Chairman of the Board Bob Meyerson for their leadership and energy and endless hours of involvement and their personal friendship and many kindnesses over the years.

I would like to thank my dear wife Rivkah and daughter Shani, and Ariella in Israel, for their incredible and steadfast support of all that I do and for all the family time that is replaced by the many obligations and responsibilities of a synagogue Rabbi and community leader. They have been patient and kind, knowing that sometimes their time took a back seat

to shul or communal matters. A Rabbi's family, almost more than the Rabbi himself, deserve the accolades and thanks for what a congregation and community reap from the clergy of our community.

Which brings me to my final acknowledgement, and that is to my dear and new friend, Rabbi Shapiro, with whom I've only worked for a few short weeks, and I can already tell how much I will miss him. There is no question in my mind, and I think I speak for everyone who has met him, that if I was the right Rabbi for MMAE nine and a half years ago, Rabbi Shapiro is exactly the right Rabbi for MMAE at this time. You have what it takes to be a great Rabbi- knowledge, compassion, energy, care for others, passion, integrity, good humor, love of people, and you are a mench. I wish you and Helene and Lila and Avi much success, and please know that I am here for you, from a distance, and am interested in your future and the future of the synagogue. I know how much you will be loved and appreciated, as I see the seeds of it already in just a short time.

Forty-nine years ago, on February 21st, 1961, our family left Israel when I was 6 and a half years old, right in the middle of first grade. A few days before, on my last day of school, the class had a party for me, a farewell party, and I have the pictures to prove it. I couldn't have known then what was really happening, that life as I knew it was going to drastically change.

What I hold in my hand, is a packet of messages given to me by those classmates, all written in Hebrew, wishing me well. Besides the names, they all have the same messages, taken off the blackboard: L'Elan, derech tzlaycha, to Elan, a successful journey. Who could have imagined that 49 years later, those same letters now wish me the same thing, only in reverse? The "be well" of 49 years ago, is the "welcome home" 49 years later. Each letter also ends with the same Hebrew word, not Shalom, but "Lhitraot," which means, see you soon.

And with that I close today, not Shalom, but L'Hitraot, see you soon, God willing, in good health, happiness, and with peace in Israel.