

GUEST ESSAY

As a Rabbi, I've Had a Privileged View of the Human Condition

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By David Wolpe

Rabbi Wolpe is the Max Webb emeritus rabbi of Sinai Temple and will be a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School in the fall.

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For over a quarter century now, I have listened to people's stories, sat by their bedsides as life slipped away, buried their parents, spouses and sometimes their children. Marriages have ended in my office, as have engagements.

I have watched families as they say cruel, cutting things to one another or, just as devastating, refuse to say anything at all. I have seen the iron claw of grief scrape out the insides of mourners, grip their windpipes, blind their eyes so that they cannot accept the mercy of people or of God.

After 26 years in the rabbinate, as I approach retirement, I have come to several realizations. All of us are wounded and broken in one way or another; those who do not recognize it in themselves or in others are more likely to cause damage than those who realize and try to rise through the brokenness.

This is what binds together a faith community. No religious tradition, certainly not my own, looks at an individual and says: "There. You are perfect." It is humility and sadness and striving that raises us, doing good that proves the tractability of the world and its openness to improvement, and faith that allows us to continue through the shared valleys.

I have had a privileged view of the human condition, and the essential place of religion on that hard road. Sometimes it seems, for those outside of faith communities, that religion is simply about a set of beliefs to which one assents. But I know that from the inside it is about relationships and shared vision. Where else do people sing together week after week? Where else does the past come alive to remind us how much has been learned before the sliver of time we are granted in this world?

I know the percentage of those who not only call themselves religious but also find themselves in religious communities declines each year. The cost of this ebbing of social cohesion is multifaceted. At the most basic, it tears away at the social fabric. Many charities rely solely on religious institutions. People in churches and synagogues and mosques reliably contribute more to charities — religious and nonreligious — than their secular counterparts do. The disunity that plagues us in each political cycle is also partly because of a loss of shared moral purpose which people once found each week in the pews.

Keeping a congregation together has never been easy, and mine has become increasingly politically divided in an ever more polarizing era. Two practices have enabled us to stay together. Over the years I have encouraged people to learn about each other's lives before they explore each other's politics. When you share the struggles of raising children and navigating life, when you attend meetings and pack lunches together, when you are on the same softball team and sit near each other in synagogue, you don't start each conversation with how the other party's candidate is a scoundrel.

The second is listening. We, who do not know ourselves, believe we understand others. We must always be reminded that each person is a world, and that the caricatures we see of others on social media and in the news are just that — a small slice of the vastness within each human being.

Still, as the poet John Masefield wrote, "I have seen flowers come in stony places." I have witnessed parents who have buried children and believe life offers them nothing, that the world will forever be hollow, only to have another parent who has endured the same loss reach out to them and in shared grief find a new purpose, together. I have seen beautiful acts of comfort and of love. I have seen families receive meals for weeks, and in one case for years, after a loss. I have seen one child pick another up on the sports field and I have seen couples find their way back to one another after estrangements. I have watched parents choose love over rejection when the child is not who the parent expected or dreamed, and seen children forgive parents when they are not who the child needed or wished.

I am not leaving the pulpit without concerns. There are issues that have arisen in these years that I could not have anticipated when I began at the synagogue. The explosion of hatred and antisemitism throughout the world has been alarming. The debasing of discourse about Israel, the way it has been slandered everywhere from campus to Congress, is painful and at times frightening. The struggles over Covid policies and two years of separations introduced a new set of tensions and exacerbated loneliness.

Yet when I think back on the years I have been in the rabbinate, questions and controversies are not what endure. Instead I keep a mental slide show of poignancies, captured like Polaroids: The moment an autistic child bashfully presented me with a drawing. Teaching parents how to place their hands on their children to bless them on Friday night. The moment a dying man whom I had known well took my hand and thanked me, telling me he would not see me again in this world. The day I pronounced a blessing alone in a cemetery with a tiny coffin bearing twins, less than a week old, whose family could not bear to see them placed into the unforgiving ground.

Those are the outward-facing experiences. In 2003 I had a grand mal seizure when speaking at the opening of the Hillel at my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. I was flown back to Los Angeles, where I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I shall never forget standing in front of my congregation a few days before my brain surgery asking for their patience and their prayers.

I still believe the synagogue is a refuge for the bereaved and provides a road map for the seeker. I have been moved by how powerful the teachings of tradition prove to be in people's lives, helping them sort out grievances from griefs, focusing on what matters, giving poignancy to celebrations. The stories of the Torah, read year after year, wear grooves in our souls, so that patterns of life that might escape us become clear. Sibling rivalries and their costs are clear in the story of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The consequences of kindness emanate from the book of Ruth. We share unanswerable questions with Job and passion with the Song of Songs. The Torah acts as a spur and a salve.

Religion may be on the decline in this country and in the West, but if you wish to see the full panoply of a human life, moments of ecstatic joy and deepest sorrow, the summit of hopes and the connections of community, they exist concentrated in one place: your local house of worship.

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