

These Are a Few of My Favorite... Columns



One of my themes for this year will be "A Few of My Favorite...". Many congregants are studying with me as I review some of my favorite teachings and lessons. In each issue of the Newsletter, I am reprising some of my favorite Perspective columns from the last thirty-five years.

This issue's column originally appeared in 1983, and was repeated in a couple of issues after that. In 2004, I published it again after a chance conversation I had over the phone. I had called a local office to speak to someone. The person

who answered asked me my name, and before she transferred my call said to me: "By the way, I have a daughter who will soon be bat mitzvah, in another synagogue, and she is very nervous. One of my friends gave me an article that you wrote, I don't know where it appeared, entitled "What If I Make a Mistake?" I just want to tell you how much it meant to me and how it put my mind at ease."

I was touched that this article was still making the rounds and bringing reassurance to current b'nai mitzvah and their families. It is definitely one of my favorites.

What If I Make a Mistake?

When I meet with youngsters who are about to be Bar or Bat Mitzvah, I ask them how they feel. Invariably, they tell me that they are excited and nervous. "What are you nervous about?" I ask. They respond, "Well, all those people! What if I make a mistake? I am afraid I won't do it perfectly!"

As I sit talking to these wonderful, bright, spirited youngsters, I ask myself, who told them that they have to do it perfectly? Who instilled in them the idea that they cannot make a mistake? What kind of life are they being prepared for when the expectation of perfection is laid upon them?

If a young person is to grow into a mature adult, he or she must know that it is permissible to try and to fail. The ability to fail at an endeavor and not to be crushed by it is a prerequisite for growth and real achievement.

Once in a while, a youngster does flub it on the bima; he or she loses the place, forgets the melody, freezes in front of hundreds of people, or is overcome by nervous laughter. Invariably, they compose themselves, sometimes with the help of the cantor or rabbi, and they go on.

I often think these are the lucky ones. For they learn an important lesson about the ability to go on in spite of errors and setbacks — that they don't have to be perfect. Human perfection is illusory. The quest for perfection leads some to lifelong unhappiness and blunted achievement.

Let's teach our children differently. Let's teach them that being an adult does not mean getting it perfect, but rather developing the confidence to risk without the fear of failure and to go on to new achievement.

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