

Installation of Rabbi Gary Perras
Remarks of Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger
at Congregation Ahavath Sholom
November 6, 2010

I am truly honored by the invitation to “install” Rabbi Perras this morning. Beth-El and Ahavath Sholom have shared scholars-in-residence, Religious School programs, and holiday programs. We Jews need one another, and the rabbinate in particular is a fairly small “club.” What unites as one people covenanted with one God counts for far more than what divides us. Still, I dare say this is the first time in this city that the rabbi of one congregation has been invited to install a rabbi in the other. I thank you for the honor.

The story is told of father and son, both rabbis. The father served the synagogue for a couple of generations, offering blessings at weddings and words of comfort at funerals, counseling, comforting, nudging, becoming beloved. So when he retired, the congregation called the son to be their rabbi. At first all was wonderful. But then the new rabbi changed something in the service. And then he initiated a couple of programs here, and dropped a program there. Truth be told, he was stepping on some toes. And maybe he did not hear about a hospital call to be made, or was too busy with a funeral to get there. The President of the congregation scolded the new rabbi: “You certainly aren’t like your father!” The new rabbi pondered a moment, and answered, “Of course I am! As my father thought for himself and did what he thought best, so he taught me to think for myself and do what I think best!”

In *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov, Studies in Hasidism*, Abraham Joshua Heschel tells how traditional authorities were aghast at changes being made by the mystical Hasidim. “That is not the way we have always done it!” they insisted. Reb Nachman of Kosow kept quoting the phrase from the Torah, *Al tifnu el ha’avot*, “Pay no heed to the fathers! ... did [your father] bring the Messiah?...” Heschel himself adds, “Only Lot’s wife looked backward!” More delicious yet, Heschel explains the rebbe’s use of the Torah text. You know there are no vowels in the Torah, so texts can sometimes be read in more than one way. The passage in Leviticus 19:31, as normally read, says “do not turn to Ovot—ghosts,” not “do not pay attention to Avot—fathers.” I would add: is that so different? We should be proud of our traditions, as a Jewish people and as individual congregations, too. But the ghosts of the past must not be given a veto power over the needs of the present. (*Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 133)

What we expect of our rabbis is that they—we—know Torah in order to teach, and to answer the difficult questions that life always throws at us. But life is too complex for this to be just a matter of memorizing, or looking up, a set of answers. Torah has to be applied anew to each situation, and we rabbis are called to do that with sensitivity and compassion. Sometimes an answer has to be “no.” But even that can be said lovingly.

Every rabbi worth his or her salt tries to do that. And every congregant expects from the rabbi not only knowledge, but wisdom. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes not. Like every mortal, we have our good and bad days, and our areas of greater or lesser competence.

You will recall the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and her friends finally get to the Wizard and, as he is thundering at them, and smoke and fire billow before them, Toto, the dog, wanders around, starts barking, and pulls aside the curtain, revealing an ordinary guy behind. He then thunders, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” But of course it is too late. Behind the rabbinic *tallit*, the storied learning and wisdom, is always a mere mortal. Not a single one of us will ever get everything right. But that is alright, or should be. Perfection is for God. What we want and need in a rabbi is someone who, on the one hand, cares about God and Torah, and, on the other hand, cares about us.

I suggest that my new friend, Gary Perras, has the knowledge of Torah, and the track record, and personality, to care about you, and get along with others—in the Jewish community and beyond. Indeed, let me offer a Jewish spin to the cinematic quotation. In place of, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” I suggest: “Pay careful attention to the *mensch* behind the *tallis*.”

The view from across the street, if I may be so bold, is that there is plenty of room, and ample need, for two active, healthy congregations in Fort Worth. We are one people, but there are different styles of worship, and different takes on *halachah*. Apathy, not one another, is the threat we Jews face in the modern world. Rabbis and congregations succeed, each one, when rabbi and laity work together, aware of our shared human frailty but determined to serve God, the Jewish people, and the world.

Congregants: Your founders chose a noble name, Ahavath Sholom, “love of peace.” Live it. Support your rabbi and let him support you.

My dear colleague (please come forward): This is a nice, very livable city, and a Jewish community richly blessed with fine, caring people. I install you with this prayer from the Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi’s Manual:

Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, Source of all blessing, we pray that Rabbi Gary Perras shall lead Ahavath Sholom with the blessing of Your spirit. Grant him a wise heart, candor in speech, the courage to act decisively, and the strength to respond to every challenge with dignity. Give him a full measure of Your compassion that he may be the instrument of Your ancient promise:
V'natati lachem ro'im k'libi, v'ra-oo etchem dei'ah v'haskeil. (Jeremiah 3:15)

“I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who shall nurture you with knowledge and understanding.” And let us say: Amen.