

In Response

There is an old saying: "This is the day I hoped for. For this day I prayed." It was usually said on a special occasion in one's life. For me, today's event is that occasion.

I'm overwhelmed by the steering committee, by the host committee, by the affection. I'm overwhelmed by the number of you who are here.

Those of you who've been with me in this long, long journey know by now that I am driven by the engine I call "God." My forays into the various religions of the world and into the insights of depth psychology have strengthened my belief that there are no accidents in life. Everything is connected to something else. DNA has taught us that. And my life has taught me that.

As Jews, we say the most significant moments of our life are fall into the category of "Bashert." No one really knows what that word means. I usually translate it as something that was either intended or directed or came about because it was the only way things could work out. When I think of Bashert, I always think of a "power that makes for salvation." My seminary professor, Dr. Mordecai Kaplan, taught me that. He said God is the power that makes for salvation.

Now, salvation can be more than one thing. And God, also known as "Hashem", expresses himself or becomes known to us in more than one way. Hashem, I think in fact I believe, was the power that brought me here. I had wandered, after completing my studies at Jewish Theological Seminary, for ten years prior to coming to Portland. When I arrived, I knew that I would stay.

The magic that is Maine cannot be ignored. Its forests, its lakes, its trees, its history speak of an enchanted land—a place on earth that holds tightly to its sense of love and connection, one person to another.

Maine has never been a heavily populated state. It is a place where one always considers the other. It's expressed in all the places I've known in Maine. It's expressed in Temple Beth El, Etz Chaim Synagogue, OLLI and at the various universities and churches of this wonderful state of ours. Wherever you go, wherever you stand, wherever you have the freedom to breathe, to think, to meditate, you sense the specialness that is Maine.

A few years ago I concluded there is a need for a place where people can feel at ease and at home without worrying about boundaries. It's true for the Jewish community; it's true for all entities in Maine. A place where Jews, non-Jews, no matter what their stripe may be, no matter what their descent may be, are welcome and free to attend. I look around in the non-Jewish world; I see the same thing happening. More and more established institutions are behaving as if they are places without boundaries. What does the concept mean? Simple; we are welcoming all souls and saying: announce for yourself what kind of soul you see yourself to be. You will be welcome, always welcome.

We have a Hebrew phrase: "Shalom, shalom, larachok v'lakrov." Welcome to you who are near to us and welcome to you who are from afar.

My roots in Maine will forever continue. I'm attempting to arrange for my return to Maine at least two months a year, one of them being the month of the holy days. I love this state. I adore this state. My wives have been laid to rest in this state. My first wife's relatives lie in the Smith Street Cemetery. Daily, weekly, I find people who are related to me.

Interestingly enough, Etz Chaim Synagogue on Congress Street, was a memorial for the late rabbi, Chayim Shochet. I had occasion to speak to some of his relatives. They told me of his origins. He came from a little town near Riga, as did my father of blessed memory. The connections are many; the ties of ahav-linkage-are endless.

I wish you well. I encourage all of you to continue on your own journey trying to find the core of your life and the message that you are destined to bring to your world. May Hashem, God himself, be with you and your children and descendants forever.

Amen.

Rabbi Harry Sky