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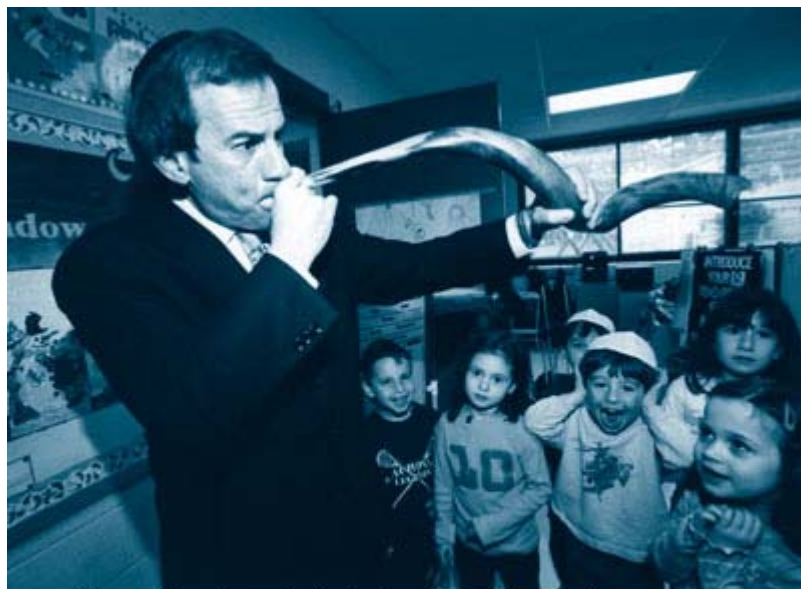
Cover Story

Leader In His Field

Phil Jacobs

MAY 16, 2003

A conversation with Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg on his 25 years at Beth Tfiloh.



Rabbi Wohlberg blows the shofar for Beth Tfiloh pre-kindergarten students (left to right) Eli Frank, Maris Becker, Ryan Sweren (partially visible), David Saiontz, Golan Klotzman and Aviva Lucas.

They are there to hear Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. Some will tell you that the *Musaf* (additional) service was quite inspiring. Others might say that the *kiddush* was lovely.

But when Rabbi Wohlberg comes to the *bimah* on Shabbat and during the holidays, the faces on the photographs in the boardrooms listen, the names on the memorial plaques listen. And the people who are fortunate to be sitting in Beth Tfiloh Congregation's roomy sanctuary may profess divisions over some things, but to the rabbi and his message, they are undivided.

Rabbi Wohlberg invites you in. The "in" we're talking about here is

search

Current

Archive

search

more than the front door. It's to his life. Few people sit and cannot relate his message to their own lives.

There was the Yom Kippur sermon in 1985 when the rabbi, in tears, told of an argument that led him and a relative to stop talking ... for years. He pleaded with his congregants to not repeat his error, to call a relative and renew relationships. The pain was pervasive that morning.

Then, there was the most recent Yom Kippur when he talked of his year-old granddaughter, Ella, the new love of his life. That day, there were still tears, but they were of joy.

Beth Tfiloh congregants know well to bring along their *siddurim*, *chumashim* and plenty of Kleenex. And they come to hear Rabbi Wohlberg because they need someone to help them sort through ... two planes ripping through the World Trade Center towers a bomb killing Holocaust survivors attending a *seder* in Israel ... European anti-Semitism. And when times are just a bit more calm, the Torah portion.

Let's not think for a minute, though, that all of this is about the struggles we've seen of late, especially for Jews.

It's Rabbi Wohlberg's 25th anniversary at Beth Tfiloh. He is clearly the "buzz" at Beth Tfiloh. It's been that way since the day he showed up in a gorilla outfit for his first Purim at the *shul*. It has not stopped for a second. The message then, as it is now, is that Judaism can be fun, that *inviting* Judaism doesn't have to be *angst* Judaism.

The following is a conversation with the 58-year-old spiritual leader of Beth Tfiloh. There is no particular order to it, and no one else was interviewed. It's thoughts coming from about three hours of discussions.

To "*get*" Rabbi Wohlberg, one can start at the front door of his synagogue office. There, mounted next to his nameplate, are photos of his son Jonathan with fiancé Melissa, and one of his granddaughter, Ella.

Define Beth Tfiloh

"Beth Tfiloh is a home wide-open to all Jews, irrespective of their background or commitment level," he said. "We are rooted in tradition but open to modernity. We're trying to reach as many Jewish souls as we can, one by one."

OK, but he delivers it like a company mission statement, something we'd read on a Beth Tfiloh brochure. Nothing wrong with that, but ...

Define it again

"A child is with her mother, driving to Giant with the radio blaring. OK, it's Sukkot. The child asks her mother to turn the radio off, because it's a Jewish holiday."

Another definition

"Beth Tfiloh is a student at Yeshiva University [Orthodox], and at JTS [the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary] and HUC [the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College], all getting rabbinical ordination. Beth Tfiloh takes pride in the achievements of all three."

Rabbi Wohlberg says that Beth Tfiloh is "constitutionally modern Orthodox." But to make that definition even more clear, he says that the shul is a bridge between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox. Indeed, he serves on both local rabbinical boards, the Orthodox *Vaad HaRabonim* and the Baltimore Board of Rabbis. It is acceptable to be a member of both, he says, but it is still difficult to have one foot in each because at times it can make you suspect in both.

That example was made clear to him when he made the decision to allow his shul to show a screening of the controversial movie "Trembling Before G-d," a film showing the lives of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews.

"It's impossible to be all things to all Jews," he says, "but it's possible to be acceptable of all Jews. Beth Tfiloh is here to perpetuate Orthodox Judaism, but it is rooted in a kinder, gentler Orthodoxy. It's a non-judgmental Orthodoxy. How people get here is not the issue, where they are going is the only concern."



Rabbi Wohlberg finds time to schmooze with some of Beth Tfiloh Community Day School students.

When he came to Beth Tfiloh in 1978, there were 630 member families. That number now is 1,250.

In a town where the word "Orthodoxy" conjures a more *Haredi* influence, the Yeshiva University-ordained rabbi says, "We're big enough and strong enough and we don't have to look over our shoulders to worry about what others think."

When Rabbi Wohlberg came here from his pulpit in Washington, D.C., he came after Rabbi Dr. Samuel Rosenblatt. It was a time when the names of rabbinical leadership in Baltimore included Rabbis Ruderman, Rosenblatt and Agus.

"There was a lot of marble, and a lot of children when I got here," he says. "There was a grandeur to the edifice and an excitement to the institution. A great rabbi had retired and had become rabbi emeritus. My father had been a rabbi emeritus, so I was sensitive to an older rabbi, and I didn't care if he walked in front of me. Beth Tfiloh didn't need a father figure. They had one. They needed a son who wanted to be part of the family.

"And," he continues, "I was about acceptance and validation. I wanted a joyous approach to Judaism, whether they knew they wanted it or not."

There was a resistance at first, he says. Rabbi Wohlberg was 33 at the time, and wanted a freer, more open attitude toward Judaism. The congregation was still steeped, like most main-line American congregations, in post-Holocaust era feelings.

So the mantra that "It's good to be a Jew" rather than "It's hard to be a Jew" wasn't an overnight success. It just wasn't heard that much back then.

Change

"Synagogues thought they wanted replication of previous years," he says. "But they really didn't. They couldn't. Synagogues weren't child-friendly. We lost an entire generation of Jews because of that. We didn't educate children and their parents. We didn't give them a reason to believe Judaism could feel good.

"Also, humor was not considered an asset for a rabbi. The image had to be austere and serious."



The rabbi constantly makes changes to his sermons. Usually, those changes come about at 3 or 4 in the morning.

Random quotes

On the Owings Mills Jewish Community Center opening on Shabbat sometime in the future:

"I think a case can be made for it. I can understand why people feel it should be open."

Orthodox vs. Conservative vs. Reform vs. Reconstructionist

"Each branch feels that they have a monopoly on wisdom. Nobody likes a know-it-all. Each branch comes across that way."

On Orthodoxy

"The two greatest challenges to Orthodoxy are the role of women and the relationship between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox community. Attempting to say there is no problem just makes the problems worse."

The sermons

The words hit him usually in the hours of the morning when most of us are still asleep. During the recent war in Iraq, he'd get up at 3 or 4 in the morning to read online newspaper editions of The New York Times, The Sun, Ha'aretz and the Jerusalem Post.

He'd then check all-news television. There was time on the Stairmaster, time to *daven*. And then, sometimes grocery shopping.

Yes, Rabbi Wohlberg does the shopping early in the morning for his family if not only because his family needs food but also for the mindless therapy shopping can sometimes provide.

He has difficulty reading the sermons out loud, feeling they lose something in transition. He'll go over the sermons seven or eight times a week, dictating them into a dictation machine.

He jokes that he sounds like a "cheap imitation of Walter Cronkite. But I can't sound like a [Rabbi] Ahron Soloveichik or Moshe Feinstein," two of his rabbinical heroes.

An underlying message that links his sermons? "Yes," he said, "It's important for Jews to try their own religion."

And that means? "We American Jews are free to do what we want. Anti-Semites aren't the non-Jews marrying our children.

"This was the mistake of the spies in Israel. We allow ourselves as Jews to think of the negative. But in our lifetimes has been the rebirth of Israel, the freedom of the Soviet Jewry, the Vatican's new approach to accepting Jews as partners of faith. We're part of a generation of Jews that is a gift from God. I could have been living in the 1800s in Vilna. I wouldn't have too much to talk about.

"There's an angst in Judaism," he says. "Think of the successful organizations of our time, the ADL, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Meanwhile, day schools are begging for money. Anti-Semitism, it's guaranteed. Jews are not guaranteed. I can't change the anti-Semites, but maybe I can have an effect on Jews.

"One of my greatest failures as a rabbi is the number of congregational families who have family members married to non-Jews," he said. "I was, and am, a forceful spokesman against intermarriage. Believe me, it won me no popularity contests. I had to address young adults in a forceful way. And hopefully, the pendulum will swing in another direction by doing more education. We've got to be a place not only of prayer but of education and of joy and spirit."

Rabbi Wohlberg says that sometimes he feels he would have made a great Chasidic rabbi. But then he jokes that he leaves that up to Rabbi Menachem Goldberger, the Chasidic spiritual leader of Congregation Tiferes Yisroel.

Part of that spiritual place he sees as the Beth Tfiloh Community Day School. When he arrived, the school had about 300 children attending grades kindergarten through eighth. Now, it has 1,000 students with more than 300 in its high school.

"I knew I wanted to make the school available to as many children as possible," he says. "But the day school was seen back then as a parochial school, something only Orthodox people did. Our challenge was to make it fashionable, attractive, and to make parents realize that there was a gaping hole in this community. I think we were the only major Jewish community without a Jewish community high

school."

Getting a bit more personal

Rabbi Wohlberg looks outside into the courtyard from his office. His computer recycles behind him with an Internet news service, and a cell phone goes off from time to time.



Rabbi Wohlberg reads through a summer book with Seth Sholk.

It's his wife, Sherry, then his son Andrew or his son

Jonathan. He closes each call with "Everything OK, I love you."

He keeps looking outside because the cool April day is getting a little overcast. There are important afternoon plans. He and Ella are going to the zoo. And he'd rather be there with her already.

He says he'll sign a new contract with Beth Tfiloh soon that "will keep me here for a while."

He doesn't know what he'd do next, if he wasn't the rabbi. He ponders doing more reading, taking art and music lessons.

"I am in the most comfortable comfort zone ever since I've been in the rabbinate. I know what I want, and I can say what I mean. And most everything I learned came from my wife and a therapist.

"What I have learned ...?"

"You are not who everybody says you are. And you are better than you used to be."

He repeats it. It seems to be a reminder that he keeps on his mental file to keep things in perspective.

"I'm assured an important role in my family when I'm in charge of the shopping and taking out the garbage," he says. "I do both religiously. These are some of the things I do when I'm not Rabbi Wohlberg. Because the best thing about being Rabbi Wohlberg is that everyone knows you. The worst thing about being Rabbi Wohlberg is that everyone knows you."

He doesn't rent videos. He hasn't been to the movies in Baltimore in more than five years. He doesn't want to give up the 2 1/2 hours. Plus, he says, "Do I need to go to the movies to see real-life drama? I see it every day."

He's an information addict, reading newspapers, magazines and getting into Internet search engines. He rarely picks up fiction.

His closest friends are his wife and children and Ella.

"What being a grandfather has done has brought to the surface questions I have on the role of women in the Orthodox tradition. I look at Ella and I wonder already, 'What will be her role one day?' I have two sons. I have two brothers. My wife has three brothers. Ella is really our first girl."

And he says that in a sense, he's making up for what he sees as lost time.

"I didn't spend enough time with my children," he says. "When I realized it, that's when things changed. And obviously we did something right. Both of my sons live within walking distance of our home."

His favorites

Favorite Book: "Exodus," by Leon Uris, because "it taught me about a love for Israel"

Favorite Movie: "The Godfather II"

Favorite Music: Classic Rock

Favorite Musical Artist:

Bruce Springsteen

Favorite Song: "Born To Run"

Favorite Biblical References: Stories of Joseph, Adam and Eve and the Exodus

What he thinks his critics say

"They don't say it to my face, but they criticize me for not attending services every day, which is true.

"My critics say that I cater only to the wealthy. But the truth is I cater to my best customers. You come to shul regularly, and you're one of my best customers. But again, nobody seems to criticize me to my face."

Lowest moment

"Living through the time in the late '80s when the Jewish Times reported publicly on our school's differences with [former] high school principal Peter Abelow."

How does he handle the public perception of a rivalry between Beth Tfiloh and Chizuk Amuno?

"Beth Tfiloh and Chizuk Amuno are in many ways catering to similar



Rabbi Wohlberg shares a laugh with Zipora Schorr, Beth Tfiloh's Community Day School's director of education.

populations," he says. "We couldn't agree on how to make a high school work that would benefit both of us. But one thing is for sure, I have the utmost respect for Rabbi [Joel] Zaiman, and I don't say that of every rabbi."

Highest moment

"No question, being a grandfather."

Sum up these 25 years

"These years have absolutely taught me who I am. They've told me that there will always be a Jewish religion, a Jewish people. And always, our enemies will say we will one day disappear. What I've learned is that those who predict our disappearance will probably disappear before we do.

"I believe we are God's chosen people. We were created to spread the light onto the world. And it's God who has kindled that light."

Personal summing up

"I'm not going to tell you that I've never had aggravating days here," he says. "But by and large, I have had 25 very fine, rewarding years. Very few rabbis and their congregations meet the needs of one another. But there's no other synagogue I'd rather be the rabbi of."

Maria Kokkinis

Photographer

Facts About Rabbi Wohlberg

- Born in Borough Park, N.Y.
- Married to Sherry Kwestel Wohlberg. Two sons are Andrew and Jonathan Wohlberg. Granddaughter is Ella Chaya Wohlberg
- Received his rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University
- 25 years as rabbi of Beth Tfiloh Congregation and dean of Beth Tfiloh Community School
- Responsible for creation of Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community High School as the first co-educational Jewish high school in Baltimore
- Recipient of the Humanitarian Award from the Louis Z. Brandeis



The rabbi checks out the photos dear to him on the front door of his office.

District of the Zionist Organization of America

- Recipient of the Fellowship Award from Bar-Ilan University, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Shaarei Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem
- Recipient of the Golden Shofar Award from the State of Israel Bonds, for Beth Tfiloh Congregation having sold the most Israel Bonds of any synagogue worldwide. This is a direct result of Rabbi Wohlberg's zealous advocacy for Israel throughout the year and especially his moving High Holy Day Israel Bond appeal.
- Honored by the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation of America.
- Presented with the "Rabbinical Award" by the UJA Federations of North America at the General Assembly held in Jerusalem.
- At the annual community-wide Adult Education Institute, Rabbi Wohlberg's class always has the largest attendance by far.
- In addition to his advocacy for Israel, a common theme of Rabbi Wohlberg's sermons is the importance of family, and reconciliation between spouses, in-laws, parents and children, and siblings. This is particularly evident in the rabbi's Yizkor sermons, such as "It's Never Too Late" and "Fuhgeddaboutit."
- Rabbi Wohlberg will be honored for his 25 years of service to Beth Tfiloh at a special tribute and gala fund-raiser, SPOTLIGHT 2003, on Tuesday, June 3, starring world-renowned violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman. Tickets are available by calling the Beth Tfiloh Development Office at 410-653-7284.

Excerpt from Yizkor Sermon September 16, 2002

*From grandchildren we do something that we do not do in regard to anyone else in our lives. You know what we do? We kvell!
Translation? There is no translation, because there is no feeling like it. Let me tell you why we love our grandchildren. I think it's because they give us something that no one else in this world has given us, or ever will; not our parents, not our spouses and not our children. Our grandchildren give us their unconditional love. And that's so important to have as we grow older. As we get older everybody seems to tell us what's wrong with us. It is our grandchildren who remind us that there are lots of things that are right about us. Every grandchild sitting here today should know how much a phone call to their grandparents means to them. Most of the people living in my mother's condo are elderly. She tells me of their loneliness; how some of them rejoice when the phone rings — even if it's a wrong number — it's a welcome relief. So, grandchildren, listen to me: I know you are busy, very busy, but call your grandparents often — very often. That call is a shot of adrenaline — it makes their day and it may be the topic of conversation for days. And it has special*

meaning because it comes with unconditional love.

At the same time, that's the very same gift we can give to our grandchildren. We can give them our unconditional love. Parents have to set the rules and parents have to be the authority. But grandparents don't have to do that. In a cutthroat, rat race world, in a world with so many demands and expectations almost from birth, there has to be someone who is always there to tell the child, "I love you. You're special. You're the greatest." Everybody needs to hear these words sometimes and who is better qualified to say them than a grandparent? And you never know the profound impact these words can have.

**Excerpt from Yizkor Sermon
September 17, 2001**

Much has been written these past two weeks about "survivor's guilt." Amidst the joy and exhilaration expressed by those who were fortunate enough to have survived the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, there is also a feeling amongst many



Rabbi Wohlberg: a proponent of "inviting" Judaism instead of "angst" Judaism.

of these survivors of guilt. While it has been noted that these feelings are common among survivors of the Holocaust and of earthquakes and natural disasters and war and terrorism, from the window of my office I've seen that these feelings are also common amongst survivors of the natural assaults that life inevitably brings. Whether it be the death of a loved one, the breakup of a marriage, business reversals, family conflicts or even amongst successful people ...there are a lot of people who are never satisfied with themselves, who are always trying to live up to the expectations of others, and no matter what these people have done or haven't done, they are always haunted by a sense of their own shortcomings.

I see a lot of people who are like this; on the outside they are strong and successful, but on the inside they feel hollow and empty; never able to forgive themselves for not living up to their expectations of themselves or what others expected of them...always looking back on their failures and flaws. And let me tell you who some of those people are. They're the person you're living with. They are a lot of American homes where the husband thinks he's married to a woman — a strong willed, independent, career woman, when in reality, he's married to a little girl who has her fears of insecurity and inadequacies, who desperately needs some emotional understanding and sensitivity from her husband. And there are homes with wives who think they are married to a man — a real macho man...rugged, know-it-all, high pressured business man — who is really a little boy who worries if anybody really cares about what he does and who he is. We are taught and implored to expect so much of ourselves. One

wrong move, one wrong turn, one wrong decision, one wrong step...and our confidence is shattered, our self-image diminished. All because we can't forgive ourselves and just say "Fugaddaboutit! (Forget about it).

Excerpt from Yizkor Sermon September 16, 2002

There is an even greater challenge that some of us as parents confront today that my mother's generation did not have to confront in the same way. If it's challenging today to raise a child, an even greater challenge is when one loses a child. I talk of this subject with great difficulty because I know there are many sitting here today who have lost a child. But that's why I have to talk about it. Upon entering the rabbinate, it took me a while to get over the pain I felt every time I officiated when children buried their parents. I was young and carefree, and being surrounded by so much grief and sorrow and tears was very hard for me to get used to. But as a rabbi, you have to get used to it. And with time, you do. Now I've been a rabbi for more than 35 years; nearly 25 as yours. And I still can't "get used to" the intense grief and pain I feel when I officiate when parents bury a child. And for some reason, I find myself doing it more and more. I've been at seven funerals in the past year where a parent buried a child. And I'm having difficulty dealing with it. And my difficulty pales in comparison to what the parents have to deal with. For them, the pain never fully goes away.

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