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Master Of The Sermon

Alan H. Feiler *Managing Editor*

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On a wall in his tastefully decorated office at Beth Tfiloh, Rabbi Mitchell G. Wohlberg keeps a large color portrait of himself, standing in the center of the Pikesville synagogue's main sanctuary. In the photograph, the rabbi wears a smile that is both dignified and inviting. Directly above his head is a circle of yellow lights, looking almost like a halo of sorts. The picture creates the impression that the rabbi is always with the *amchah*, the people, and yet at the same time anointed for a divine plan.



Rabbi Wohlberg: speaking heart to heart. (Photo Kyle Bergner)

It's an impression with which Rabbi Wohlberg, Beth Tfiloh's spiritual leader for the past 22 years, would likely not take issue. In Baltimore's Jewish community, he is generally considered the finest orator around, blessed with the ability of placing Judaism's wealth of insight and wisdom into a modern context while gifted with a preacher's timing and skill to connect viscerally with his listeners' innermost thoughts, concerns and dreams.

"My subject matters touch everybody," he says. "I'm looking for things people are talking about, that everyone can relate to. ... Look, I don't think that highly of myself that people have nothing else to do but hear or read Wohlberg. I just happen to be one of the better [speakers] at Beth Tfiloh."

But few would dispute that Rabbi Wohlberg is the area's hottest ticket

during the High Holiday season, with his sermons receiving standing-room-only attendance. That includes many non-congregants, from all streams of Judaism, who manage to drop by Beth Tfiloh to hear the rabbi's talks.

Like the late Dr. Louis L. Kaplan — whose well-known annual Yom Kippur sermons at Beth Am in the 1970s, '80s and '90s drew hundreds of listeners to the Reservoir Hill congregation — Rabbi Wohlberg is viewed by many locals as the premier Jewish spokesman of his generation.

But unlike Dr. Kaplan, an acclaimed Jewish educator and thinker who served as Baltimore Hebrew University's first president, Rabbi Wohlberg strives to appeal to his congregants' hearts rather than their minds. In fact, his emotional wallop is so strong that some congregants — sometimes tearfully, and sometimes laughing — allude in conversation to portions of his sermons long after the conclusion of the High Holidays. Some even snag copies of the sermons off Beth Tfiloh's Web site and e-mail them to family and friends across the globe.

"When people come to synagogue, they should leave with a message to make them better Jews and human beings," Rabbi Wohlberg says. "The academic is more for a classroom than a sermon. I'm aiming my sermon at the widest and broadest range of audience members."

The rabbi says he tries "not speaking above or down to the people but *to* them, heart to heart, sharing with them the same issues they're confronting. The synagogue is a living room where we live out life. So I just try to feel we're in my living room, just talking."

A great sermon, according to Rabbi Wohlberg, requires four things: 1) a hook to draw in the listener; 2) a contemporary issue on congregants' minds; 3) a Torah theme to bring Judaism into the picture; and 4) a beginning, middle and end.

"There has to be a structure," he says. "You have to know where you're going. And always remember the Boy Scout motto: be prepared. I owe that to my congregants."

The latter means getting up at 3:30 a.m. sporadically through the year — and daily during the summer months — to leaf through the New York Times, the Internet and the Torah for items and themes to address during the High Holiday season, particularly for the Yom Kippur sermon prior to *Yizkor*, the memorial service for the departed. There's also the annual July beach vacation with his three brothers, all rabbis, to play "intellectual ping-pong" for their upcoming sermons.

"I work on it," Rabbi Wohlberg says of the sermon process. "For me, it's no pain, no gain. I have to do a lot of research and endless reading. And then I write it and write it and write it, until I feel it's right. Some sermons I'm satisfied with the minute I write them, some I'm never

satisfied with."

The items mentioned in Rabbi Wohlberg's sermons — from Israel's political woes to biblical anecdotes to current events to personal experiences of himself and his congregants (with their permission) — must always have an interconnectedness, he says.

And most importantly, "I always try to give a Jewish perspective because I want [congregants] to see that Judaism speaks to them on everything in life," the rabbi says. "A rabbi's office is a window to the world, and the problems people bring to this office are universal. They can be the same problems that Abraham and Sarah had. My job is to make the Torah speak to the congregation."

Another key ingredient: humor. "It allows everyone to be more at ease," he says, "and it allows me to be myself and not take myself more seriously than I have to."

While congregants often heap praise on him because of his oratory skills, Rabbi Wohlberg says he counts on his family to keep his ego in check. He also notes that he never forgets that there are other fine speakers among Baltimore's rabbinate.

"It's only because I'm willing to wake up earlier, work on it harder and put more of myself into it," he says of his reputation as a sermonizer. "Every rabbi has their strengths and weaknesses. This is one of the things I do well. And it feels good to make a difference in people's lives."

Rabbi Wohlberg admits that speaking for an hour and inspiring congregants, particularly on a day on which audience members are fasting, is quite a challenge. "It's a long time, and maybe I'm stretching my luck," he says. "But if you can watch a TV rerun for an hour, and it's still interesting, then I as a rabbi am challenged to do the same."

Rather than Moses the lawgiver, Rabbi Wohlberg identifies most with Aaron, who transmitted God's word to the children of Israel. "I want to tell people how good they are," he says, "but we all could be a little bit better. I try not to antagonize. There's so much pain in the world. People don't come to synagogue for more pain. I want to challenge, I want to comfort."

With the advent of the Information Age, Rabbi Wohlberg's sermons have acquired an audience far larger than the estimated 2,000 people who cram into Beth Tfiloh's sanctuary during the holidays. As a result, he's heard from such celebrities as Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and actress Camryn Manheim, and as far away as a cyber-café in Gibraltar, about his sermons.

But the rabbi admits he's still not completely comfortable with his words leaving the building. "I want people to understand the context of what I'm saying," he says. "I'm stressing the personal, and reading it

thousands of miles away makes it impersonal. I write the way I speak, and I just don't feel [the sermons] read the way they sound.

"And besides," Rabbi Wohlberg says with a laugh, "you lose my New York accent."

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