

## **Reflections, August 2025**

### **Howard Rock**

Sixty years ago when I graduated from Brandeis, I was planning to be a rabbi. But that was the 60s and it never happened. After a long journey I ended up at NYU studying history and became a history professor, a career I enjoyed very much. After moving to North Carolina, I joined the Brevard Jewish community and soon wanted to be part of its leadership. I became vice president and, with the sudden resignation of the president some nine years ago, I became president.

I had been the chair of the faculty Senate at my university; I took what was a position of little importance and made it into a significant office in the University. When I became President of the BJC, I thought I would see if I could, in conjunction with Norm and Marvin, similarly enhance the role of President. The first thing I wanted to do was to purchase the new Shabbat and high holiday prayer books that the Reform Movement had released. Acquiring these radically improved books enhanced our services with compelling readings and prayers that spoke to our generation. Many visitors have commented on how much they like admired our prayer books. My first controversy was whether to purchase new books for the high holidays; after long discussions we went forward with it, helped by Marvin and Norm, and I think everybody here knows how valuable they have been.

Since I was a college student, I have cherished the life of the mind and studying the art of politics. I wanted to see if I could incorporate these two areas into our services. We've had two mayors of Brevard speak to us. We have listened to the pastors and ministers of the Christian congregations who share many of our ideals. That has been an important experience for them and for us. Important rabbinical figures and professors of Jewish studies have shared their wisdom with us. After Ken died, we established the Ken Wallston Memorial lecture. So far we have had four remarkable talks ranging from explorations of the Bible to the Holocaust.

Two years ago we established, with the help of Bruce Rogow and Sam Tenenbaum, our lecture series entitled explorations in Jewish life and history. We brought in five speakers our first year and two this year with one to come; all have spoken before audiences often numbering more than 100, something we never dreamed of. Last week, Prof. Craig Perry spoke on a seemingly esoteric topic, Jewish life in the medieval Egypt, so we only put out 80 chairs and then at the last minute had to add two extra rows. We revealed the strong desire for intellectual stimulation in our community. This year our partner churches joined us with three of their own lectures that were equally well received. I am cochair of their committee for next year. It's very significant that our audiences for our talks have been 70 or 80% non-Jewish. That is a wonderful achievement at interfaith relations.

One other thing I'd like to mention is our response to the dark days of Covid. In April 2020, using new software called zoom, we returned to weekly Shabbat services. Each Friday became a special moment. Vance with his piano supplied us with new liturgy, Norm displayed his talent as a Hazan, and I fulfilled some of my childhood dreams of being a rabbi by leading services, and every member of our congregation took a turn at giving a talk, some gave more than one. Nobody who was there will ever

forget the remarkable fellowship and community we created. It helped us get through two very difficult years.

I know over the last nine years that I have, one way or another, stepped on toes. In the spirit of the coming holidays, I ask forgiveness for any time I didn't recognize the efforts that a member put in or anything else that caused distress. You must know that I deeply value what all of us here have done over the years. Whatever has been accomplished, it's been the effort of all of us, each in his or her own way. Many congregations are driven by divisive politics but over our 25 years with only a few exceptions, we have avoided that. That is an accomplishment.

I am thrilled that Marci, Marilyn and Vance have agreed to step forward in a leadership role together with our new Board. They have valuable knowledge of Jewish liturgy, practice and organization. They are going to take us to even greater horizons.

And of course, Norm continues going strong. None of us would be here without him. Even today, 25 years later, he remains critical to our well-being. Despite my name, he is our Rock. There are no words to fully express the appreciation each of us feel towards him and what he has achieved. We pray that he will remain active as our spiritual leader for many more years.

Someone who is not here is Marvin Barg. His loss continues to resonate. Let me recall two memories. After we purchased our new high holiday books, the two of us spent hours at the library turning those books into frameworks for our services. What readings to use, what prayers to include. It was a wonderful, shared experience. The second is how the two of us revived the Torah study group. We met every Saturday at Quotations in those days. I remember one day when only the two of us showed up and we had a great session. Today, of course, it is going strong.

Finally, I want to thank the two vice presidents who worked with me. Henry and I would meet for lunch every week or so and talk about many things, often about what was going on in the BJC. His technical and organizational skills were of great help. Jerry, my vice president the past two years, has offered me wise and important counsel, and like Henry he has been active in all sorts of ways including organizing this dinner for the past six years and leading our nominating committee. I'm grateful to both.

As for me, I intend to continue to bring us new speakers, lead services if asked and facilitate our Torah study. I will help whenever I can, but mostly I look forward to observing and admiring what our new leadership will accomplish.

Being president of the BJC has been a tremendous privilege that has deeply enriched my life. I will treasure it as long as I live.

Thank you.