

## THE REBUKE

By Samuel Greengus

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Two figures were standing on a small street gazing at a large yellow brick building-- a young woman and an older man. The young woman asked: "Grandpa, where is the old synagogue that you visited when you were a boy?" The older man answered: "That yellow brick building you are looking at *was the* synagogue; you can tell by the Hebrew writing over the doorway. But what you now see is only a shell, because within the shell is a three story, six-flat apartment building. Look how the third floor units rise above the lines of the original peaked roof with the outlines of the Ten Commandments on the façade." "Oh I see it now" said the young woman. The exterior walls of the old synagogue now contain the modern apartments. How curious! What is the history of this remarkable transformation? Do you know when it ceased to be a house of worship?"

The older man sighed and said: "I can tell you what I know. Many years ago, when I was a boy, I visited that synagogue at least once a year, traveling with my parents who came to visit their parents, i.e., *my* grandparents. The rabbi of that yellow-brick synagogue was *my* grandfather, Rabbi Aaron Kohlberg; Rabbi Kohlberg was my mother's father. Rabbi Kohlberg lived nearby with my grandmother and at that time also with his youngest son, my uncle Zelig Kohlberg. Uncle Zelig was still unmarried and lived at home with his parents. Back then, when we visited, my parents and I stayed with my grandparents; they were still living in the large, old family apartment where my mother and her sister had grown up. My parents and I slept in two of the now unoccupied bedrooms. I remember the apartment as being very old-fashioned, filled with worn rugs, ancient furniture, and dark metal light fixtures. There was but one toilet with a high tank and a pull-chain; and the kitchen refrigerator stood on legs and had a pale yellow color. One of the bedrooms was used for my grandfather Kohlberg's library and study. It held a table and chairs along with several tall bookcases, filled with tall, dark volumes leaning to one side or the other on long, sagging shelves. Grandfather Kohlberg was devoted to his books; he was a rabbinic scholar and was constantly engaged in researching questions on how modern technology and new electric appliances could be accommodated to pre-modern rabbinic laws and practices. He carried this on in addition to more traditional studies, writing notes and commentaries on the Talmud. A collection of his writings was later published in a book under his own name.

Rabbi Kohlberg was a graduate of a famous Lithuanian seminary. He, along with my grandmother and three young children, had come to America to serve as the rabbi of the congregation that built the yellow brick synagogue. The senior members of the congregation were themselves also immigrants; they wanted a rabbi who had scholarly competence in rabbinic literature but who was also able to communicate with them in Yiddish, the language they had originally grown up

with in Eastern Europe. The elders of the congregation did not want to forget what they themselves had learned when they were children. They retained a sentimental attachment to Yiddish language and culture. They thus saw their American synagogue as creating a living link between their past lives and heritage. So grandfather Kohlberg continued to preach and teach in Yiddish.”

The young woman asked: “But did everyone know Yiddish? What about your mother and her siblings? Didn’t they go to public school and learn English? What about the young people?” The older man replied: “Yes, of course they did; they went to public school and eventually to college and beyond. So did all of those immigrants who came to America as children and likewise those who were born here. The young people spoke English primarily; but they understood the Yiddish language that was spoken at home by their immigrant parents and grandparents. Grandfather Kohlberg was a fair linguist, speaking Yiddish, Lithuanian, and of course reading and writing in Hebrew and Aramaic. He in fact also wanted to study English but there was no time for him to go to school. Grandfather Kohlberg managed to learn rudimentary English and could understand a lot; but he spoke fluently only in Yiddish or in a bookish, literary Hebrew. Grandmother Kohlberg spoke only Yiddish and needed to make use of a special service from the telephone company, dialing an operator who helped her put through phone calls. When I visited my grandparents, I spoke English to my parents and to my uncle Zelig, but had to try speaking Yiddish— or what sometimes turned out to be a mixture of Yiddish and English— with my Kohlberg grandparents. I was fortunately able to understand most of the Yiddish that they spoke to me because my parents themselves spoke Yiddish with each other and often as well to me.”

The young woman asked: “Do you have a lot of memories about your grandfather?” The older man said “I do. But because of the language differences, we could only have simple conversations. Mostly I sat and listened to the grownups talk. Grandfather was a warm person. He liked people and was approachable. I remember my grandfather telling a story about a congregant, a woman living alone who came to the apartment to ask him a religious question.” “Was that typical?” asked the young woman. The older man replied: “It was not at all unusual; it was before the internet and the rabbi functioned as a repository and guide to authoritative practices and tradition. The woman came in to grandfather Kohlberg to ask a question relating to her pet dog, who had just died. The woman wanted to know if she was permitted to recite the Kaddish prayer for her pet. My grandfather already knew the answer but he wanted to respect the woman’s piety and her grief. He therefore took out one of the large books from his bookcase and set it on his reading table and pondered the pages; then put it back and took out a different book. After repeating this for a third time, he closed the book and told the woman: ‘I am unable to find any *requirement* to recite Kaddish for a deceased pet; but, on the other hand, I can find no reason why it should be forbidden. So you may, if you wish, recite a Kaddish prayer for your beloved pet.’ When my grandfather told this story to us, he added: ‘you know, when a person comes in to ask the rabbi a religious question, it is a solemn and serious matter. You should never treat it as frivolous. I already knew the answer

but did not want this woman to feel that she had asked a foolish or simple question that I could quickly answer out of hand. So that is why I took the time to look through the books before I gave her *my* answer.” In fact”, said the older man, “this story tells you a great deal about my grandfather Kohlberg’s sensitivity to the feelings of other people less learned than himself. I think he gained these insights in his childhood. His own father, my great-grandfather, was a simple shoemaker in a small Lithuanian town, but a good and caring man, who tried to be helpful to his family and neighbors. Grandfather Kohlberg knew and understood ordinary folks.”

The young woman wondered aloud: “I suppose that the character of his congregation changed as the senior generation died and their children became adults?” “This, sadly, is indeed what happened” said the older man. “By the time I was growing up, many of these younger adults had left the congregation, which, at that time, was located in what was an immigrant neighborhood. The older residents were typically Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe—Poland, Russia, and Lithuania. After the end of WW2, there was a new prosperity in the land; and younger families began moving to more fashionable neighborhoods, and to new developments and suburbs, where individual homes were being built— single-family units with yards and garages. You must have read about this great change. Some of these younger people did not forget the old neighborhood synagogue still being led by Rabbi Kohlberg; they retained fond memories of their youth; Rabbi Kohlberg was liked and respected. Then, too, many of the younger generation had parents and grandparents who were buried in the synagogue cemetery. So they made donations of support. But the actual numbers of congregants who came regularly to services had dwindled to a collection of older men and women who struggled to maintain what had become a shrunken community of past times and memories. When I visited and attended the synagogue, I was often the only child present.”

The young woman said. “Wow, this is a sad story; but how did the synagogue shut down and get to be converted into a six-flat apartment building? Do you know what happened?” “Well,” said the older man; it happened in stages. The first thing that happened was that my grandfather Kohlberg became ill and was spending a great deal of time home in bed or in the hospital. He asked his son, my uncle Zelig, to take over his rabbinic functions. Now Uncle Zelig, you should know, was actually ordained as a rabbi. Zelig had studied for many years in a local seminary before receiving his ordination. Zelig was a smart fellow. But Zelig did not want to take a pulpit. He went on to the university and took a Master’s degree in history before becoming a high school history teacher. Zelig loved American and world history and taught these subjects in the public high schools. When Zelig and I talked, he was always telling me about new books written for young people about the opening of the frontier, the rise of industrialism, and the national political scene. Zelig therefore did not intend to give up his teaching job; but in order to help his father and the synagogue, he got up a bit earlier every morning so that he would be present for the daily, early morning prayer service—and of course, also officiated for Sabbaths and holidays. But,” said the older man,

“My grandfather Kohlberg’s illness—it was the start of trouble. Zelig was keeping the synagogue running; but what was going to happen if grandfather Kohlberg died? Would the synagogue have to close its doors?”

“That must have been so depressing” said the young woman. “But what did you mean by describing it becoming the *start* of trouble?” “Ah,” said the older man. “The trouble started when one of the congregants, a Mr. Kozlovsky, began to talk about the synagogue closing and being sold. Kozlovsky took the position that if this happened, then the proceeds should be divided up among the surviving members of the congregation.” “After all,” he said, “we don’t see more Jews moving into our neighborhood; many of the new neighbors are in fact Spanish-speaking and Catholic. So the synagogue will soon close and be sold. Most of *us* are pensioners and *we* could use these funds to support us in our time of old age and infirmity.” “This Kozlovsky” said the older man, “was a mysterious figure to me. He had only recently moved into the neighborhood and began attending the synagogue. This was almost certainly not an upwardly mobile relocation. Maybe Kozlovsky had suffered some kind of financial reversal or decline. His dress did not suggest that he had been a pauper. I remember that he came to the synagogue wearing a decent dark suit and a proper hat and overcoat. He was also tall and had a loud voice; so people could not help but hear what he was saying. And he kept on saying it.”

The older man continued: “The situation soon became more difficult. Grandfather Kohlberg was not recovering from being sick, so the future of the synagogue was in fact becoming a timely question. Rabbi Kohlberg’s likely demise would also raise a problem for my grandmother, Rabbi Kohlberg’s wife. Kohlberg had been the congregation’s rabbi for almost thirty-five years; he was supposed to get a pension; and his wife—my grandmother—a half pension, if Rabbi Kohlberg died and left her a widow. What would happen if the synagogue was sold and the proceeds were *not* retained in order to fund grandmother’s pension? Would Kozlovsky’s rantings create discord and squabbling over the money among the congregants? There was also the cemetery and how it would be maintained into the future. Our family had to step in. Fortunately my older uncle, who married my mother’s sister, had already taken an interest in his father-in-law’s congregation. My uncle became president of the synagogue board; and my father supported him by making substantial annual donations of funds to the synagogue. The family thus did all it could to help the synagogue continue to operate and *not* be sold. So when my grandfather Kohlberg did not recover and died, my uncle Zelig agreed to stay on as part-time rabbi. The synagogue continued to exist; and the board formally agreed to pay the promised half-pension to my grandmother, so she and uncle Zelig could continue to maintain their residence in the old family apartment.”

“So what happened after this?” asked the young woman. “Well,” the older man replied. “The synagogue continued to operate for a while under this arrangement but, as aging congregants were passing on and no new congregants were moving in, Kozlovsky continued to promote his own plan of selling the synagogue and

dividing up the proceeds among the surviving congregants. Uncle Zelig was very upset about what Kozlovsky was doing. To begin with, Zelig was angry that Kozlovsky had begun to promote this idea of closing the synagogue even before Grandfather Kohlberg had died. Rabbi Kohlberg was a noted rabbi and had left behind a legacy of service; this venerable synagogue was still faithfully serving the community who still lived in the neighborhood. This community included Zelig himself, who had resided there continuously since his childhood, when he, together with his siblings, along with his father and mother, immigrated to America from Lithuania. Zelig was determined to somehow fight back against Kozlovsky and put an end to his ruinous talk.

Uncle Zelig ruminated and came to the idea of launching a counterattack against Kozlovsky from the pulpit. It was going to be soon. My parents and I had come to visit my grandmother for the High Holydays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; and we were planning to stay on for a week or so afterwards in order to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot, which is the Feast of Tabernacles, that followed some five days after Yom Kippur.”

My friends, I think I need to pause in my story here and interject a few words of explanation. You may need to be reminded that this holiday of Sukkot involves two important rituals. One is the setting up of a *sukkah* or “booth” as it is often translated; sometime *sukkah* is also translated as “tabernacle.” Essentially the *sukkah* is a hut or a similarly temporary structure that is erected for this holiday and it gives the holiday its name *Sukkot*, which is the plural of *sukkah*. The erection of these temporary structures—whether we call them “booths” or “tabernacles”— is commanded in the Book of Leviticus where it states:

**Lev. 23:42** You shall live in booths—i.e., in *sukkot*— for seven days; all that are Israelite born shall live in booths,

**Lev. 23:43** so that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Well, not everyone actually lives in a booth today; some still put them up and even take one of their daily meals inside of it, if it doesn’t rain or get too cold. A few even try to sleep in it. For most Jews, however, the *sukkah* is mostly symbolic. But in the ancient land of Israel this is a most pleasant time of year, at the end of summer yet before the autumn rains begin. The *sukkah* there can be enjoyed as a kind of garden house or enclosure, marking the end of the final harvest of summer fruits.

A second Sukkot ritual is mentioned a few verses earlier in connection with celebrating the harvest:

**Lev. 23:40** And ye shall take you on the first day, the fruit of a goodly tree, branches of palm trees, and the branches of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.

The only plants that are specifically named are the palm tree and the willow of the brook. The other two items—“the fruit of a goodly tree and branches of a leafy tree” are not further identified in the Bible. However, in rabbinic writings from early Roman times, we can see how the biblical custom later evolved. The “fruit of the goodly tree” was now the citron or *etrog*; the citron is a citrus fruit related to limes and lemons. The citron retains a sweet aroma even after it is picked and is a bright yellow in color like the lemon but its *taste* is even stronger. For the branches of leafy trees, it was customary to gather three myrtle branches, which were tied together in a bundle along with a single palm-branch or frond, plus two willow branches. The rabbis called this combined bundle of branches a *lulav*, named after the palm-branch, which was the most prominent of the three. Worshippers were supposed to hold the citron along with the bundle of branches or *lulav*. Worshippers stood together and recited various verses from Psalms including “we beseech you, O LORD save us! We beseech you O LORD, give us success! (Psalm 118:25):” This prayer of “save us,” which is *hoshana* in Hebrew was originally one of the prayers asking Heaven that the rains would return and end the dry season in timely fashion so that the agricultural cycle could begin, with wheat and barley seeds again being planted and nurtured for next year’s harvest. This prayer of *hoshana* or in Greek *hosanna*, was accompanied by the waving of the branches contained in the *lulav*. This same custom is, of course also mentioned in the New Testament, and survives in the Christian ritual of Palm Sunday.

But let me now get back to the story, where the older man was continuing to speak to his granddaughter, the young woman, about how his Uncle Zelig was planning his counter-attack against Kozlovsky. “Uncle Zelig” said the older man, “wanted to use his Sukkot sermon to publicly rebuke Kozlovsky for instigating his campaign to close and sell the synagogue and to distribute its proceeds among the surviving members. But Zelig did not want to talk about it so directly. It was after all a religious holiday and the congregation would be expecting a more spiritual message. Then, too, Zelig, like his father, was a very religious man and felt that it would be wrong to embarrass Kozlovsky in so overt and public fashion before the congregation. Yet, at the same time, Kozlovsky himself *needed to know that he was in fact being rebuked*. How to accomplish this? Zelig thought a lot about it and came up with the idea of using an ancient homily that was offered to explain why the Bible chose these plants—the *etrog* or citron, the palm branch, the myrtle, and the willow for this ritual of waving. The ancient rabbis had pondered this same question and came up with various homilies to explain why. “What was the homily that your Uncle Zelig decided to use?” asked the young woman. “I don’t remember learning about any of this in religious school.” “Well,” said the older man, “Since no reasons are given within the Bible, some medieval rabbis, using their intelligence and imagination came up with a sociological homily for choosing the *etrog* or citron, the palm branch, the myrtle, and the willow. Uncle Zelig thought it would also serve his purpose and message.”

The older man continued: “in this homily, the four plants are evaluated or rated for fragrance and taste. Fragrance represented possessing religious learning and

wisdom, while taste represented a record of social responsibility and good deeds. The citron or *etrog* has both rich fragrance and strong taste; these qualities symbolize the union of learning with taking responsibility for others. The citron represents the hoped-for leaders of our religious communities. The palm frond comes from the palm tree, which has taste but no fragrance. The palm represents the average person who may not be learned but nevertheless tries to do the right thing. The myrtle has fragrance but no taste; the myrtle represents persons who have learning but who fail to use it on behalf of their community. And finally, there is the willow, which has neither fragrance nor taste; but despite this lack of learning and caring for others, we still hold this person within our congregations and community since he is part of the family of Israel and must be taken within the fold. It is important for the community to remain united but, at the same time, we must also recognize who possess the qualities worthy of leadership and emulation.”

“My goodness,” said the young woman. “Was this the message? Do you think Mr. Kozlovsky understood that he was being rebuked when he heard this homily?” The older man thought for a moment and then replied, “ You know, I think Kozlovsky *got* the message. Uncle Zelig was looking in his direction when he was describing the absence of qualities in the willow; and I noticed that Kozlovsky left the synagogue immediately after the conclusion of the service and did not stay around for the customary sharing of wine and challah bread afterwards. And after that sermon, I don’t remember hearing much about Kozlovsky’s plan to sell the synagogue and divide the proceeds among the surviving members.”

The young woman remained skeptical. “ From what you tell me, I can’t see how a coarse and greedy man like Kozlovsky would be dissuaded just because of the homily that your uncle Zelig presented in a sermon.” “Well, you may be right” said the older man. “Maybe it had more to do with my uncle being president of the synagogue board and the actions taken by the board and my father to protect grandmother Kohlberg’s pension and maintain the graves of loved ones buried in the cemetery. Maybe Kozlovsky ‘saw the power of the troops mustered against him’ and gave up the fight. But as a young boy, I was inspired by Uncle Zelig’s sermon and his righteous passion. I still remember Uncle Zelig thoroughly rehearsing his sermon; he was intent on having it proclaim the soundness of the synagogue leadership and defend the righteousness of its policies. And, indeed, I still want to believe in the power of the sacred words of Scripture and their capacity to reach into the hearts of men and to move them to reflection and repentance. I held out this hope even for a man like Kozlovsky.”

“So when *did* the synagogue close?” asked the young woman. The older man replied: “It struggled on for a few more years. Uncle Zelig met a lovely woman and got married; grandmother Kohlberg eventually was unable to keep house and live independently. And so the synagogue was sold and became a church. At some point the church must also have closed and sold the building to a developer. I don’t know when this occurred. The old neighborhood has obviously rejuvenated and young people, wanting to live within the city closer to downtown, now live in

the new, now fashionable synagogue apartments. The cemetery, too, still exists on the outskirts of the city; the old synagogue cemetery contains the graves of my grandfather and grandmother Kohlberg, my uncle who was president of the board, my parents, Uncle Zelig, and so many others who were a cherished part of my childhood. I hope you will now also think of them sometimes and tell their stories.” And with this the older man and the young woman walked off together.