

Seudah Shlishit in Honor of Our Chattanim
Speech by Arthur Degen

I would like to give thanks to Hashem who has brought Susan and me to this day in good health. For a Katan there has to be a Kallah and Susan has been my Kallah for 49 years. She has been my best friend and partner and of course my most severe critic- but I learned many years ago that comes with the territory.

My sincere thanks to our Rabbis and officers who have selected me for this auspicious honor. We have a young, dynamic and energetic president with youthful co-officers. To all my family, friends and members of the Jewish Center family who have come here to honor me my heartfelt thanks.

At this point I would like to congratulate my co-honorees, Rabbis Joe Schwartz and Jordan Rosenberg. They have enhanced my stature by my being included with them.

49 years ago this very October I came to The Jewish Center for the first time. When I married Susan I was not a shul goer. There used to be an ad which stated every chicken isn't born kosher. Well every Jew isn't born Orthodox and I was in that category. Susan suggested that we should try different shuls on various Shabbatot and see which one I might like. There are two people who are mainly responsible for me being Orthodox- Rabbi Lamm and Susan. Rabbi Lamm showed me that Orthodoxy and intellectualism can co-exist. Susan created a Mishkan Meat in our home. My sainted grandmother had instilled in me the spark of a Jew-Pintela Yid. My beloved parents taught me the meaning of tzedakah and helping the Jewish community.

I have been a Katan 3 times: once when I got married, the second time was 36 years ago when I was Katan Bereshit and now as Katan Torah. 36 years ago I was the young kid on the bimah and today I am the old man. Perhaps twice Chai signifies something special in life for Susan and me.

When I entered the Jewish Center for the first time I felt as if I had intruded upon a state funeral: the mourning suits, the top hats, the intense silence and the absence of children. I often wonder what the founding fathers of the J.C. would say about the children of Rabbis being on the Bimah with their fathers. Josh Lamm, Rabbi Lamm's oldest son was probably on the Bimah for the first time at his Bar Mitzvah or maybe they allowed him for Kol Haniarim on Simchat Torah morning. We have come a long way! All for the better.

I was so impressed by Rabbi Lamm's sermon and the service that I came back the following week and sat in the same seat where I sat the previous week- big mistake.

Even though the row wasn't full I received a tap on my back from a distinguished gentleman informing me that I couldn't sit in this row because it was the Krulawich pew. And I thought family pews were only found in churches! I later found out that the man was Max Stern. Some things never change! I went back several rows and have been in Row J ever since. Since Bennett's departure for the suburbs I have been joined by Nathan Low and Seth Jonas- two young men who have become special friends.

When we joined the Center we received a letter signed by the Chairman of the Board for life-William Feinberg. He welcomed us and said that we were now entitled to all the privileges of membership- almost as if we had joined some very exclusive club! On the heels of this letter we received a note from Rabbi Jung's secretary that he and Mrs. Jung would like to visit us in our apartment on a specific evening(I think we got a few choices)for dessert which should be purchased at Sterns (a kosher bakery in the neighborhood). We were nervous about the visit but found both to be unbelievable conversationalists. Mrs. Jung however also inspected the china, flatware and linen and inquired as to their provenance. Thank heavens we passed muster!

A few months later Rabbi Lamm called and asked me to be on a panel at a Seudah Shlishit with another new member: Joe Kaplan. Until his untimely demise six years ago Joe remained a very good friend. The subject of the panel was an article in Look magazine entitled The Vanishing American Jew. By 1971 Look had vanished but we are still here today to tell a different story. The next time I heard from Rabbi Lamm he asked Susan and me to chair the Young Couples Club. We really were once a young couple! In time we met many other couples from different age groups who befriended us. One person that I met who became my mentor and guided me on the leadership track was Marty Schwarzschild. My first position was as liaison between the Jewish Center Nursery School (yes we had one) and the Board. In 1977 I was elected to the Administrative Committee and in 1980 I was elected secretary. At this time Max Stern spoke to me about the history of the J.C. and what was expected of me as an officer. I often wondered if he realized that I was the same young man whom he had asked to vacate a seat. I then went on to become vice president and in 1990 became President. That was a great partnership between Rabbi Schacter, Rabbi Wietschner, as executive director and myself. I was recently with Rabbi Schacter and I told him that I found the 6 years of my Presidency to be one of the most creative periods of my life. He said that we took this shul from a momma and poppa store of barely 180 members and grew it into a Fortune 500 establishment with a membership in excess of 500 units. We had to create a second minyan on Shabbat because the sanctuary couldn't hold such a large amount of people. Two of the biggest complaints were the lack of seats and the number of people at the kiddush after services. In the old days we didn't even have a kiddish! My grandmother would have called that "Goldener Tsuris". Four years ago this past May Marty called me from his retirement home in Florida telling me what he didn't like about certain things at the Center and what to do about them. I said Marty I haven't been President for 14 years. I have had four successors and we're getting ready for a

fifth. He told me that he was depending on me. Unfortunately he died 2 weeks later. He always felt that he was my mentor and sometimes relationships just don't change.

May I add that the brilliance of the Rabbanim who have graced the pulpit of the Jewish Center: Rabbis Jung, Lamm, Bernstein, Schacter, Berman and Levine is unmatched in any other synagogue. And today we are enhanced with the young stars Rabbis Zirkind, Fridman and Lamm.

Susan and my greatest joy was seeing our children grow up in the shul. They developed into leaders at the Jewish Center and then used their talents in other communities. Bennett was on the Administrative Committee, was chief Gabbai for 8 years and was a Katan twice. Michelle was an editor of the Jewish Center cookbook. They went on to become leaders in their synagogue in West Orange, New Jersey. Bennett is now an officer of the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy and the Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School. Meryl was on the Administrative Committee, became Secretary of the J.C. and was honored at a Jewish Center Dinner. She is now a Board Member of the West Side Sephardic Synagogue. Albert was a founder of this institution and instrumental in building it into a presence on the Upper West Side. We are very proud of all our children. However our supreme joy is our 7 grandchildren- Joshua, Eliana, Alexandra, Emma, Noam, Ayden and Nili. The 6 oldest all attend Jewish Day Schools and when Nili, the youngest, is 3 she will join her brothers and cousins in a similar environment. In effect our children presented us with a living menorah- 7 branches who will, please G-d, carry on the traditions of their parents and grandparents for endless generations. We are truly blessed. Thank you all for this great run. Shabbat Shalom
