

What was it that made our houses of worship stand out? How can we rekindle that spirit, and reignite the flame of greatness?

I will mention three principles:

### 1. The Spirit of the Spiritual Leader.

Both Rabbi Wise and Reverend Holmes devoted their heart and their soul to the broader community. They were activists. They cared about the world. They understood that to make a difference in society you had to be part of society, in all its pain and messiness.

And since politics is the way society determines policies, and it is policies — collective actions — that determine national character, Reverend Holmes and Rabbi Wise threw themselves into the political arena. They were not politicians. They were not party functionaries. They were moral leaders. They rejected the view that politics has nothing to do with morals, and therefore, religious leaders should butt out. They believed with every fiber of their being that political actions must conform to the principles of justice and to the standards of righteousness.

Both our leaders believed that those who never speak about the social challenges of our times, never speak of the pain of this world, only about the bliss of the next world, condemn themselves to irrelevancy. And even worse, they render religion, itself, impotent:

Wise and Holmes were criticized in their day for their communal activism. They were called “sensationalists,” “showmen,” and “grandstanders.” But they felt obligated, they had no choice but to speak about, and to act upon, the moral challenges of the times. They knew that religion was at its best when it criticized society at its worst.

Rabbi Wise wrote this about his friend, your spiritual leader:

“If I had to single out a man who represents

power — moving and overwhelming — without ever descending to the sensational — I should name the preacher of Community Church. John Haynes Holmes is so transparently sincere that no one but an illiberal bigot or a bigoted illiberal could think of him or name him as sensational. He never stoops to artifice or sensation. He rouses people with the power of his message.”

Reverend Holmes was fearless in voicing his moral gospel.

Rabbi Wise recalled one conversation he had with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during World War II. FDR asked him: “What is the matter with your friend — Holmes?” He was referring to Reverend Holmes’ anti-war speeches. Holmes was a committed pacifist his entire life. Roosevelt asked Wise: “Does [Holmes] not see that we had no other choice without losing our country and without the world losing human freedom?”

Wise responded to the president: “Holmes’s conscience is his highest law. Above all else, he cannot reconcile war with Christianity. Holmes remains opposed to war.”

That is what makes a great and historic religious leader. That their conscience is their highest law. And even though Stephen Wise and John Haynes Holmes disagreed on some issues — for example, Rabbi Wise supported the War effort — nonetheless, Wise remained in awe of Holmes, who never compromised his beliefs and whose conscience was his highest law.

In your search for your permanent minister try to find this kind of person. You will not agree with all their convictions, and if you do it is probably the wrong person. Rather assess the measure of the minister’s convictions — his passion, her character, his integrity, her conscience.

### 2. Building the Institution.

It is not all about the spiritual leader. It is also

about you. What is the measure of your character? Are you also committed?

To say the obvious, Reverend Holmes and Rabbi Wise were committed to institutions. They were not solo artists. Separately and together they established religious and civil rights organizations that exist to this day. They realized that ideas need to be organized to have impact. Values need institutions to fuel their spread. We need good organizations devoted to good religious ideas to inculcate good religious values. This is why there is an urgency to well-functioning churches and synagogues. There can be no social justice without institutions committed to social justice. There can be no knowledge of God without institutions devoted to understanding and teaching about God

For this reason, both John Haynes Holmes and Stephen Wise devoted so much time and so much energy to organizations and institutions. It is why your involvement in the nitty gritty of keeping this church alive, vibrant and well-functioning, is not of mere passing interest. It is essential. There can be no functioning gospel without a functioning church devoted to that gospel.

It is why the Bible devotes a third of the Book of Exodus to the construction of the Tabernacle, the tent sanctuary of the ancient Israelites. The first thing that God told Moses to do after he received the laws on Mount Sinai was to build the Tabernacle. There needed to be an institution, some organized force, to house and embody the ideas of freedom and law. Exodus — a book that is ostensibly devoted to liberation and redemption — spends thirteen of forty chapters describing in minute detail, verse after verse, page after page, chapter after chapter, how to build the sanctuary of the ancient Israelites:

Where precisely to put the clasps and planks,

the bars, the poles and sockets;  
What lamps, and what oil is used for lighting and what for burning;  
How to carve the wood; how to design the precious stones;  
How much ram skin and dolphin skin should be used on the tent covering; what colors...  
And on and on...

Jewish commentators sought to understand why fully one third of the book of Exodus is devoted to the mind-numbing details of building the desert sanctuary. One answer that the Jewish tradition gave is that the details of building an institution make all the difference. Once we have concluded that human beings need tangible institutions to embody values, the difference between a good institution and a bad one, an effective institution and an ineffective one, in all the details: How to organize ourselves. How loving is the attention to detail.

The secret is doing. Jewish commentators counted how many times the work “*asseh*,” — the Hebrew word meaning — “to do” — is mentioned just in the passages describing the construction of the Tabernacle. Our Sages actually counted, and discovered that the Hebrew word — “*asseh*” — to do — is mentioned 248 times. To teach us that good institutions never complete the work. They have to be doing all the time. They have to be creating and developing.

One classic Jewish commentary even portrays God as lamenting the completion of the Tabernacle. Why is God worried? Everything was done in accordance with all the specifications. God should have been pleased, not worried. Jewish Sages explained that now that the people had completed the work, God worried that they would go back to the complaining as before. God worried that once they had spare time on their hand, the people would grumble again about the fleshpots of Egypt, about Moses their leader,