



## Letter From Our Rabbi

### Renaissance, Renewal And Two Women Of Valor

May 2011

Dear Haverim,

Every year, for almost two decades, our family has gone to the Renaissance (5-day) Weekend in South Carolina. First, in Hilton Head, and, for the last decade, in Charleston, Renaissance brings together political figures (most famously, the Clintons), Nobel Prize winners, academicians, CEOs, writers, artists and a few clergy to engage in a cross disciplinary “Think Tank” analysis of the issues – political, economic, cultural and psychological – of the day.

Renaissance is where Chelsea Clinton met Marc Mezvinsky and where I have met and befriended so many of the speakers whom I have been privileged to bring to University Synagogue. (Even more, when I couldn’t bring them physically to our congregation, I’ve had the opportunity to share their ideas with you.) My Renaissance memories stretch way back – from watching my children play football on the beach with President Clinton and Barbra Streisand “lending” my son, Michael, some money to buy candy to more recent ones, such as listening to Rep. Gabby Giffords speak eight days before her attempted assassination!

Since that awful day in Tucson – a “perfect” storm of mental illness, lax gun laws and harsh political rhetoric – everyone who knows Gabby has been talking about her, comforting her family, hanging on every bit of positive news about her gradual recovery and living in a state of shock. No one “deserves” to be attacked, of course, but who would even think of visiting pain or death on such a soft spoken, politically moderate and decent mensch like Gabby!

I remember hearing her and her loving husband, Mark, speak about their Jewish wedding. Many of you have read her description of the necessity of her family’s name change because of anti-Semitism in Arizona less than a century ago, as well as her eloquent words about her trip to Israel.

Gabby really is an “eishet chayil” – a woman of valor – as the Book of Proverbs tells us, a person of zisskeit (sweetness) and menschlichkeit.

So, too, was the Jewish woman who died, from H1N1, one day after Gabby was shot – Debbie Friedman. Singer/songwriter extraordinaire, Debbie lived her last years in Orange County, but she truly was a citizen of the Jewish world. At summer camps, in schools and in synagogues, Debbie transformed Jewish music from frequently being in a solemn minor key to a joyous array of very singable and memorable pop sounds. She made liturgy come alive as she introduced so many people – young and old – to exciting Jewish words, ideas and texts. Music truly carries culture and Debbie carried our culture far and wide, outside and inside of us. Just think of all of the liberal synagogues that sing her prayer for healing, “Mi Shebeirach” or her “Oseh Shalom.” As Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary said in a recent letter about Debbie: “a great talent, a great source of inspiration and a great loss...an exceptional light in the world, one that will linger to brighten and heal our souls, for many, many generations to come.”

Back to Renaissance. Charleston is a lovely colonial city, but the ghosts of slavery and bigotry still linger. A week before we arrived, a “Secession Gala” was held to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of South Carolina’s secession from the Union. Who are these misguided souls who refuse to acknowledge that their ancestors were responsible for the horrors of slavery and the war that killed 620,000 Americans! We are still, as a country, living with the dreadful consequences of that time, reflected in both the cathartic excitement at President Obama’s victory and the racist anger at him (“Give us back our country!”). Lest one thinks that the Secession Gala was an aberration, many South Carolina political figures, including the State Senate Majority Leader, appeared at the Gala in Confederate uniforms.

Renaissance is held in South Carolina, but it’s not “of” South Carolina. In fact, there are few locals and most of the attendees come from the Boston to Washington, D.C. corridor or California. About 25% are Jewish and another large percentage are evangelical Christians – conservative in religion, but moderate in politics. A significant minority of attendees are politically conservative, delighting in challenging those more liberal and bringing “common sense” to them.

There were close to 500 sessions – individual lectures, workshops and panel discussions – on a variety of topics from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. each day. Each attendee speaks on at least one panel. Veteran participants, like our family, spoke at five or more panels each, including a Shabbat service and an interfaith service. (Where else, but Renaissance, would a rabbi be the leader of the interfaith service!)

To give you a sense of the dramatic diversity of Renaissance, topics included innovation and ingenuity, restoring the American dream, energy and the environment, words to live by, multiple intelligences, the wisdom of history, flashes of genius, an upbeat view of the economy, Athens and Sparta, social entrepreneurship, advice to the President, a history of freedom, Wikileaks, medicine, Islam, bucket lists, philanthropy, race, the arts, predicting 2040, a concert piano master class and a comedy club. Among the highlights, Joe Wilson and Valerie Plame described how they became “fair game” and NPR’s Scott Simon, CNN’s Myron Kandel and Roland Martin, and political analyst Norm Ornstein (a three time speaker at University Synagogue) analyzed political issues and the economy. Dr. Ruth discussed sex, of course, and Kevin Bleyer, the head writer for The Daily Show, contributed humor throughout the conference.

Next month, I’ll share some of the ideas and insights that I learned at Renaissance. Only in America!

B’shalom,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Arnie Rachlis".

Rabbi Arnold Rachlis