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CBA President's Message to Members The Rabbi's Gift

by Miles Cortez

What is the bar doing about the worsening problems of professionalism, ethics, and civility? As in most other facets of life, people who ask such questions operate from the fundamental misconception that others are not only responsible for the problems, but responsible for finding solutions as well. Actually, the Colorado Bar Association and many local bars are doing plenty to address these issues at the organizational level. Some of our strongest committees devote countless hours to ethics guidance, the development of professionalism standards, the creation of conciliation panels, and the delivery of quality continuing legal education programs on the subject. But the fact remains that real reform and betterment of our professional community ultimately depends on our own individual improvement, leading by example, and the positive peer pressure to conform to the resultant higher standards.

A year ago, I heard Judge Ken Stuart of Arapahoe County read a parable entitled "The Rabbi's Gift." I was struck by the message and prevailed on the good judge to send me a copy. He did so promptly, with the invitation to "use it however you wish in the hope that it may help build respect." Thank you, Ken, and in the fervent hope that the allegorical approach will stimulate the thinker and inspire new leaders, I share it here.

The Parable

A monastery had fallen on hard times. Once the home of a great order, its ranks had been decimated by anti-monastic persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries and the rise of secularism in the 19th century. Only five monks remained in the mother house: the abbot and four others, all past their 70th birthdays. It was a dying order. In the forest surrounding the monastery sat a small hut that occasionally served as a hermitage for a rabbi from a nearby town. The monks had grown intuitive to the point where they could sense when the rabbi occupied his hermitage. On one such occasion, it occurred to the abbot to visit the rabbi in hopes the rabbi might offer advice to help re-invigorate the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot, but when he learned of the purpose of the visit, he could only commiserate with the abbot. "I know how it is. It seems the spirit has gone out of the people. Almost no one comes to my

synagogue anymore." They prayed, read the Torah together, and quietly whispered of subjects deep and holy. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced and expressed joy at their meeting after all the years. But the abbot sighed, "Unfortunately I leave with no advice to save my dying order." "No," the rabbi replied, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can say is that the Messiah is one of you."

When he returned to the monastery, the four monks besieged the abbot with questions about the rabbi's advice. "He couldn't help us, I'm afraid. We shared good fellowship, conversation about our mutual interests and concerns, and prayer. But he offered no advice. He did say, somewhat cryptically as I departed, that the Messiah was one of us. I have no idea what he meant."

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, the old monks pondered the rabbi's unusual remark. The Messiah is one of us? Which one? He must have meant the abbot himself, because he's been our leader for more than a generation. Perhaps Brother Thomas, a holy man and a man of vision. Brother Paul? No, he gets grumpy at times. But, come to think of it, Brother Paul always does the right thing. Brother Philip is too passive, too meek. But wait, he always seems to be there when you need him, a godsend in times of trouble. He couldn't have meant me; I'm so ordinary. But what if the rabbi meant that I was the Messiah! Who can it be?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that, indeed, one of them might be the Messiah. And on the very off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with exemplary respect and dignity, exhibiting newfound qualities of leadership. Soon word spread from the people who occasionally visited the monastery that an aura of remarkable respect now seemed to surround the old monks, radiating out to those who came into contact with them, and permeating the atmosphere of the place. Scarcely knowing why, more people began frequenting the monastery's grounds, playing, having picnics, and praying. Soon they began bringing friends, and the friends brought other friends.

Eventually, younger men visiting the monastery began questioning the monks about their order, and soon thereafter the ranks of the order were being replenished. Within a few years, the order was once again thriving and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, there was a vibrant center of spirituality in the realm.

A Commitment to Improvement

We spend most of our waking hours in professional pursuits. The quality of our lives, at work and after hours, will be markedly enhanced by a professional atmosphere characterized by adherence to high personal standards and respect for our colleagues in bar and bench. Each of us can make a contribution to such an environment. Each of us can raise our level of professionalism and civility a notch or two. We need a commitment to such improvement.