



## The Seven “Commandments” of Egon Mayer

by Rabbi Joy Levitt

***Speech to the JOI Conference for Jewish Professionals Serving the Unaffiliated, June 9, 2004, Boston, MA***

When Egon Mayer died in January of this year at the age of 59, the world lost one of its finest minds and gentlest souls. Those of us who were privileged to know Egon and to be counted among his many, many friends, lost a cherished colleague and loyal partner in the work of creating a more honest, more open, and more vibrant Jewish community and world. Egon was first my friend and then my congregant, and *havurah* member, and then again my friend, and always, always my teacher.

When I was a congregational rabbi, I used to write sermons and *divrei Torah* with Egon as my silent critic. I would imagine him sitting in the congregation and try very hard to write something that he would think was worthy of hearing. Perhaps it was an unreasonably high standard to set for myself. And of course I often wasn't entirely sure what he thought of what I said because he tried hard to say something nice, though I believe nothing that he didn't feel was true. And I know that I was smarter, wiser, and more willing to take chances because I knew Egon was listening to me.

The last thing he taught us, of course, was how to die. Diagnosed with an incurable cancer just months before it would take his life, Egon lived his last months show-

ing us how to live every minute until you no longer can, how to be generous in the face of a reality that is only cruel, how to be loving in the face of a disease that robs you of hope, how to be courageous when there is no reason to be, how to be accepting of the truth when, quite simply, the truth stinks. He taught us how to be a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, and a colleague even when all those roles are compromised. He taught us how to maintain one's dignity above all.

But this morning I don't want to talk about the lessons Egon taught us about dying so much as the lessons he taught us about living. Because, in the end, his legacy is all about how we ought to live, what choices we ought to make, and what world we ought to be creating for our children and their children. While it is impossible to sum up every wise teaching Egon imparted during his all-too-short life, I have organized my thoughts here into “The Seven Commandments of Egon Mayer.”

Were he to hear this, he would be amused, I know, by the religious connotations that such a list evokes—that's why I chose only seven rather than ten. I'm also sure that he would resist the notion that anything he said was worthy of being called a commandment. Nevertheless, I do this with full knowledge of his bemusement because I do believe that we protect his legacy by living these truths as though they were indeed commandments. And not only is it his legacy we protect, but also, and more importantly, the community that all of us in this room so passionately seek to strengthen.



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COMMANDMENT

I

First and perhaps foremost: **FACE THE TRUTH.** Egon believed fervently in the power of data and research and knowledge. He was never afraid to know. He would say, when asked, "I have only one boss and that's the truth." He had confidence in the science of knowing and in the technologies that enable us to know but most importantly he simply had no patience for intentional

ignorance. He believed that what you didn't know could in fact hurt you. Egon studied issues facing our community that were troubling to large segments of the community. Indeed, they were on occasion troubling to Egon as well. But he never let fear of what was or might be prevent him from finding out.

As our world gets more and more complex and the questions become even more confusing, we need to always be willing

to learn the truth even when we may not like it. Notwithstanding the difficulties in discovering the truth, as recent efforts have demonstrated all too painfully for our community, we must still remain committed to increasing the accuracy of our data and maintaining our conviction to understanding who we are and what we do and why we do it. In the end, this may be more an issue of resources than resistance. Getting our agencies to dedicate the necessary funds to find out what we don't know and need to know is a constant struggle, particularly in the face of all the other demands on our budgets. Even more costly than research, however, are the mistakes we make when our data is bad and our assumptions are wrong. Face the truth.

COMMANDMENT

II

**TELL THE TRUTH.** Once you have the data, regardless of what it says, you have to tell people what it is. There simply is no substitute for full and honest disclosure. I am sure that there were times in Egon's career that he would have been more popular had he not told the truth. It was not an option for Egon and it cannot be an option for us. Transparency is not a particularly strong suit in the Jewish community and that's not a good thing. We

need to have more faith in our ability to deal with the realities we see and more trust that the community will be stronger when information is shared broadly.

Egon was an early and big believer of that most democratic form of knowing—the Internet. He understood its power before most of us knew what it was, and I believe one of the most important elements for him about the Internet was that it could bring information to huge numbers of people without bias. Tell the truth.

COMMANDMENT

III

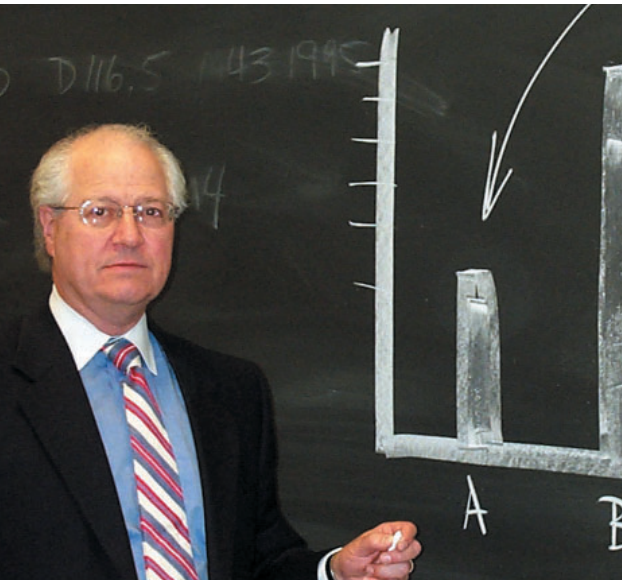
**IF YOU WANT TO KNOW, ASK.** Egon was a sociologist by training and he placed a very high value in asking people for information. I remember once struggling with some major decision in the congregation. I called Egon for his opinion and after about ten minutes while he patiently listened to all my issues and concerns, he said, quite simply, "Have you asked the congregation how it feels about this?" I felt like an idiot—it was the most obvious thing in the world to do—and yet it hadn't occurred to me. I don't think that's an accident. I think we professionals are accustomed, even trained, to believe that we know what's best for people. When we're not sure, when we have our own questions or doubts, we know where to turn—to other professionals who might know more than we do. I was fortunate to have been trained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College where there is an ideological commitment to a deep respect for congregants and what they know and what they need, but I have to constantly remind myself of this truth, especially in the work I do now.

As the person responsible for the program at the new JCC in Manhattan—for its athletics, arts and culture, Jewish learning, nursery school, children and teen programs, adult programs, outreach, support, and volunteerism, I depend heavily on a wonderful professional team that creates hundred of programs each year reaching thousands of people. But just because we think something is a good idea doesn't make it so. And there is nothing so sobering as talking ourselves into something we think is terrific, without getting the relevant data from the users themselves, only to learn the hard way—through no one showing up—that we were entirely wrong in our assumptions. If you want to know, ask.

COMMANDMENT

IV

**RESPECT THE COMMUNITY YOU ARE SERVING.** The reason that Egon was so good at what he did was not only that he was an impeccable scientist and researcher. He had a deep respect for the people he



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was studying. He believed that interfaith couples are genuinely struggling to understand their choices and he wanted to help them. And he wanted the Jewish community—and particularly those of us who do outreach work—to respect and to understand interfaith couples and help them figure out their lives. And he believed that all of this respect and understanding would lead to a stronger, wiser community.

We live in a time when the gap between Jewish professionals and the people we serve is growing wider and wider. I haven't studied this, and Egon would be the first to tell me not to make assumptions based solely on my own impressions, but nevertheless I believe this to be true through my own work. My staff is filled with young adults who went to day schools, Jewish summer camps, and Israel experience trips. They know what to do in a synagogue, what to say when someone announces an upcoming marriage. They know what to do at a *shiva* house and what to serve at a Shabbat meal. They know how to light candles and the words to *siman tov u'mazal tov*. In short, they know the drill, the code that identifies you as an insider in the Jewish community. They are working for people who don't know any of these things. They are serving Jews who have no formal Jewish education and non-Jews who are in Jewish families. They are serving a population that is coming to a JCC for a multitude of reasons, including convenience, quality programs, and yes, because it is a gateway into Jewish life that is relatively non-threatening and inclusive.

I recently taught a section of a ten-week class we offer for expectant parents. In addition to a session on nutrition and one on meditation during pregnancy, and how to choose the right stroller, we have two sessions of creating your Jewish life with your new family. The first session deals with *brit milah* and baby naming, while the second session deals with the issue of creating a Jewish home. I relearned two incredibly important lessons facilitating these two sessions. At the beginning of the first class, people went around the room and introduced themselves. There were ten couples and a few individuals in the class—about twenty-three people in all. What became clear from the outset was how diverse the group was. There were two moms in the room who had chosen to have babies outside of marriage. There was a lesbian couple. There were at least three couples in the room who identified themselves as intermarried. My language immediately adjusted to be respectful of this diversity. I didn't use the word husband or wife for the rest of the session and I qualified the word partner with "If you have one" every time I spoke about relationship. I translated every single Hebrew word, even if I was pretty sure people knew it because in fact lots of people do not know these words and assuming they do only makes them feel more like outsiders.

I am quite sure you who do this work know all of this. But it remains important to iterate it because our tendency to slip into the familiar is so strong. I like using Hebrew words. I love the feeling of community that is created in a homogeneous setting where everyone is familiar with tribal norms. But that's no longer the reality in most of the communities we serve and we do a disservice to those who we are seeking to bring close by creating more barriers to their entrance.

At the second class, I was encouraging people to check out the local synagogues on a Friday night or Shabbat morning. On the Upper West Side of Manhattan there are 17 synagogues and any number of minyanim and many of them are in fact quite nice places with friendly families so I had no hesitation suggesting that people go and see where they might feel comfortable. No one in the room was affiliated, which isn't that surprising. The affiliation rate in Manhattan is somewhere around 30% and skews toward families with elementary school children who are studying for bar/bat mitzvah. One woman in the class raised her hand and remarked that she hadn't known that you could walk into a synagogue if you weren't a member. She was an investment banker. She was Jewish. She lived in Manhattan and she didn't know this. Even more surprising were the nods around the room, indicating that most of the people sitting there didn't know this either.

Now, the important thing about all of this is not what these expectant parents knew or didn't know. It's that they wanted to know. It's that at the end of a long day at work, half of them pregnant and exhausted, they had voluntarily paid money to come to a Jewish Community Center so that they could think through how to make Judaism and Jewish community part of their lives. When we focus on what people don't know or aren't sure of, when we convey, however unintentionally, our disdain or amazement at their ignorance or confusion, when we fail to respect and admire their journey regardless of where it takes them, we stop being outreach workers and we stop doing our job. The community is not strengthened by our judgments; it is actually weakened. Respect the community you are serving.

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COMMANDMENT

V

**BELIEVE IN YOURSELF AND YOUR WORK.** Egon had more friends than anyone I know in Jewish institutional life and they were, as a group, more diverse than your

average crowd. He also had more enemies than many Jewish professionals I know. He used to talk about them with a combination of amusement, anger, and some amount of pain. It's not easy to take the kinds of risks he took, get the kind of publicity he got, and get continually lambasted in the press for your positions. And though mostly he made a joke of it, I know it was hard for him. But it never, ever stopped him, nor did it ever make him second-guess his positions.



“And for all of us who work too hard for too little reward and too much abuse, it is always important to remind one another that we do this because we love the Jewish people and all it represents and tries to represent.”

You simply can't do anything hard without taking some heat. No one should be in the change business—and that's mostly what business we're in—unless your skin is pretty thick. But you got here because you believe in what you're doing, because you've studied the research and talked to all kinds of people, and in your gut you know that strengthening Jewish life means opening the doors and windows to the fresh air of new ideas, new people, new ways of doing and of being. Believe in yourself and your work.

COMMANDMENT

VI

**FEAR NOT THE OUTSIDE WORLD; IN FACT, EMBRACE IT.** Egon was born in Switzerland and grew up in Hungary. Democracy was for him a privilege that he never took for granted. Though clearly he understood that the deal with America was that openness can lead to assimilation, he not only accepted that deal but actually welcomed it. Because he believed so deeply in the power of both Jewish life and American society, he had confidence that Judaism would flourish, albeit in new and unpredictable ways, in an open society. He had little tolerance for glorifying the eastern European way of life—he had lived it and there wasn't much glory in it for him. Mostly, he saw the potential in America for new and interesting Judaisms to grow and thrive.

That's why he wanted Judaism on TV, in the mall, in the public libraries. And he knew it wasn't such an original idea. The rabbis read Torah in the marketplace on Mondays and Thursdays because that's when people went shopping. Bring the word to the people—don't wait for people to come to the word.

That's why he was so compelled by ideas like creating a sukkah at Home Depot. He knew that more Jews go to Home Depot than go to shul and he found it unnecessary to be judgmental about that. And he knew that building a sukkah was enormously satisfying and brought deep connections to Jewish life. What better way to give people access to both the concept and materials for building a sukkah than by getting Home Depot—the original do-it-yourself, quintessential American institution—to create a model Sukkah and provide the materials to build it yourself.

We live in a wonderful country. With all its challenges, it remains one of the best chances we have to grow a Judaism that combines the values of an ancient people with the opportunities of a new and free land. We live in a time when confidence is not only possible but a requirement. Fear not the outside world; in fact, embrace it.

COMMANDMENT

VII

And finally, **LOVE THE JEWISH PEOPLE.** This turns out not to be as easy as it sounds. But honoring Egon's memory means loving our people even when we are difficult, even impossible. With all his impatience for *norishkeit* and his intolerance of arrogance and his rage at the stupidity of a community that sometimes seems to do its best to do its worst, Egon remained a loyal son of Israel, a lover of the Jewish people. And for all of us who work too hard for too little reward and too much abuse, it is always important to remind one another that we do this because we love the Jewish people and all it represents and tries to represent.

One of Egon's colleagues, Dr. Rela Mintz Geffen, ended her beautiful eulogy at Egon's funeral with the following teaching from *Pirkey Avot*:

*“Whoever engages in the study of Torah for its own sake achieves a host of merits; people benefit from his counsel and skill, his understanding and strength. He becomes a flowing fountain, a never-failing stream; he becomes modest and patient, forgiving of insults. He is called: beloved friend, lover of God, lover of humanity, a joy to God, a joy to humanity.” Egon Mayer was truly a beloved friend. May his memory be a blessing to us all.*