



Encomium for Franklin Sherman, *Shevet Achim* Award Recipient
Council of Centers for Jewish-Christian Relations
27 October 2010

[This tribute is to be read at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA, at the annual meeting of the CCJR, following a tribute offered in absentia by Judith Banki.]

Judy, we miss you, too! What a delightful encomium from Frank's long-time colleague and friend – and how well we can hear her voice in its cadences and phrasing. She has mentioned so many of the contributions for which we recognize Frank this year with the *Shevet Achim* award, and has also limned the character and personality that have been such vital aspects of Frank's leadership in Christian-Jewish relations.

Certainly not least in his accomplishments is the steadfast and nearly single-handed cultivation of the fellowship that was the precursor of the CCJR itself. Through more than a decade of the National Workshops on Jewish-Christian Relations (*zikhronam livrakha!*), in each host city Frank managed to convene a gathering of those who led various centers and institutes devoted to this field. Thus the formal organization of CCJR in 2002 was greatly facilitated by personal relationships and a history of contact that owed much to his initiative. This is a testimony to his modesty and to his clear-eyed sense of the importance and scope of the task we all faced. For Frank, our encounters at those national workshops were not occasions for competition, suspicion, or stealing whatever good ideas we could from others (okay – so a few good ideas were stolen!), but they were an opportunity to strengthen and encourage one another, just as our ongoing gatherings at the CCJR continue to be.

I can add to that my own testimony to Frank's humility as a leader, based on my experience as his successor at the IJCU at Muhlenberg College. Those who have ever followed strong, effective leadership know the dread of having a King David figure lurking in the shadows as we take up our new responsibilities. You know the type: the one who could do no wrong, especially if he or she was a founding figure, who was beloved and honored and respected beyond all possible human deserving. Well, Frank may actually have deserved it all, but still – there he was! And hardly lurking in the shadows – he still lived just four blocks from the college campus and was well-known in the community. Although several years had passed since he had retired, and the intervening director was not in Allentown, Frank was there at my interview and Frank was there when I arrived. We had known one another for nearly a decade and were congenial colleagues, but still – there he was!

Whatever anxieties may have accompanied that presence never had a chance to congeal into fear or distress, as Frank made two things plain from the outset. First, he had no designs on directing me as the new director; and second, he had never stopped working on behalf of the IJCU! Every step he took was behind the scenes, leaving the path clear for my leadership to find its own expression. And every step he took promoted the well-being and advancement of the Institute. When Judy mentions the many significant moments and documents in which Frank had a hand, I realize that at every one of them since 1999, I was also present by his invitation and graciousness, well before my own credentials might have gained me such privilege. My first word of accolade this evening must therefore be personal: Frank, thank you for the support, encouragement, and partnership that you have offered me from the very outset of my efforts to honor and extend the work you so nobly began.

Judy said we may not be able to explain what inspired the commitments that led Frank to such exemplary service, but Frank himself offers us a number of indications. In his autobiographical essay in John Merkle's book, *Faith Transformed*, he suggests a number of significant influences. His upbringing in Allentown – of all places! – with an interfaith youth movement, an inspiring Lutheran pastor, and a cohort of capable Jewish peers, all of which made engagement with Jews and the inside of a Jewish Community Center both familiar and comfortable.

Then there were the Jewish colleagues of his professional life – too many to mention, but three to note. The magisterial figure of Abraham Joshua Heschel became a personal friend and an encouraging mentor. Frank speaks of Heschel ministering to him through his articulation of the experience of God, which made it, in Heschel's words, "a joy to be a Jew." A teaching partnership with Hayim Goren Perelmuter in Chicago included introductory Shabbat experiences for Frank's seminary students and advanced seminars on a range of issues in Christian-Jewish Dialogue. And his study of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* brought Frank to a deeper appreciation of Jewish fidelity to covenantal life in the face of debilitating and enervating challenges. Rosenzweig also showed him a theological acumen deserving the highest respect, as he worked out his formulation of the star with its fire and its rays, symbolizing the need for Judaism and Christianity together to represent the fullness of God's purpose. Here was a generosity of spirit, too, that was exemplary for everyone in the dialogue.

With these influences and others, Frank became the formidable thinker and impressive leader that we know today. The adjectives that come to mind when I think of his working style are gracious and tenacious. Rarely have I worked with anyone who so completely embodies the graciousness that he teaches as a paramount godly virtue – opening questions with

gentleness, guiding inquiry with suggestion and Socratic sagacity, welcoming insights with openness and patent appreciation. And to that grace is joined an intellectual rigor that demands excellence – first and foremost of itself, and then encouraging and eliciting it from others. To work with Frank is always to be lifted to levels of thought and effort we didn't know possible – and perhaps without him, they are not.

It is not at all clear that the Lutheran church would have risen to two of its finest moments without his leadership. As the young editor of Volume 47 of Luther's Works, Frank faced the task of introducing the shocking diatribe of Martin Luther's later years, "On the Jews and Their Lies." He set it forth unflinchingly as a crude excrescence of Luther at his worst, Luther betraying his best theology by a relapse into the triumphalist hermeneutics that he deplored.

That same insight resonated loudly two decades later, when the church rejected Luther's violent anti-Jewish invective and deplored its place in contemporary antisemitic hatred. It was Luther who taught the church to face human failings squarely, "bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths." With that realization, one could do what Carter Lindberg called "overcoming Luther by Luther," as the church grieved its own complicity in the shame of antisemitism and acknowledged the tragic truth of Luther's hand in promoting it. Has there ever been a church that formally and publicly renounced a teaching of its eponymous theologian? Could one imagine doing so without consummate grace and dauntless tenacity?

Even these qualities are gifts that Frank would like say he learned, at least in part, from Jews and Judaism. From his earliest experiences in Allentown through his acquaintance with some of Judaism's finest thinkers and best teachers, he has appreciated the keen dialectical method and deep spirituality that he encountered there. These built in him a respect for

Judaism that begins with appreciating its contributions to the human and religious enterprise. Such respect then only deepens the tragedy we feel in considering the fate of those many Jews who have been forced to sanctify God's name in the most terrible ways possible. Yet even in that tragedy, without minimizing its suffering, there is a graceful and tenacious faithfulness that stands as a model for Christians and for all people.

Torah and action – action and Torah: the debate about their relationship resounds through the Talmud and Jewish history. Neither is complete without the other, and Frank has modeled the dialectic masterfully in his career. Not only does his scholarship edify us uncommonly, but when the opportunity came, he seized on a path that brought his career to its culmination – and his first retirement – by helping to found an Institute devoted to the implementing Jewish-Christian understanding in a local context. In 1974 he quoted Marx' final thesis on Feuerbach, to the effect that "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world; the point, however, is to *change* it"; in 1989 Frank turned his life toward that task with full devotion and, once again, admirable humility.

One final thought, prompted by a theme that stretches from that seminal 1974 article, "Speaking of God after Auschwitz," to his autobiographical essay in 2003, to what I know to be true of his days even now in 2010. In the early work, which closes the Opsahl and Tanenbaum collection, Frank made it clear that his essay, as he called it, was only a prolegomenon to a prodigious task: "Let us as Jews and Christians dedicate ourselves to joint participation in that ongoing task." And three decades later, he also closed his retrospective essay with an overture: "the agenda remains open, and the task goes on." Today, nearly a decade after that, he continues to write and edit, to teach and advise.

Frank's fascination with language is a mental discipline just as his multiple weekly tennis outings are a physical discipline, dedicated to

extending his own capacities to pursue the agenda for as long as possible. Thoroughly dialectical and dialogical in his method, he also has found consummate partnership with his beloved Joan, of blessed memory, and with his wife of these latter years, Lorie; both have been crucial supports and interlocutors in Frank's working process.

Were we able to make any gift with the *Shevet Achim* award, Frank, I daresay we would give you the gift of longevity. We would gladly see you pursue the agenda and continue to guide us in our pursuit of it, for as many years as it has been since you first spoke of the ongoing task. Perhaps with all of the resources you have so prudently nurtured, and with the divine grace that has been the sustenance and hallmark of your life, you will achieve even this, to fulfill our wish for your longevity – even to 120!

Into whatever future will come, Frank, you will carry the acclamation of a community that is grateful always to dwell together with you in our shared calling. Thank you – and congratulations!

Peter A. Pettit
Allentown PA