It is nearly one year since I stepped out from behind the pulpit at Rodef Shalom and commenced the next chapter of my life. By my own analysis, I entered the valley. Filled with memories, experiences, and testaments from one’s own venturated forth to seek my next ascent. Indeed, I have dubbed this transitional stage my “view from the valley.” It has been accentuated by moments of discovery, liberation and limitation. By both design and default, this has been an opportunity to evolve gradually and mindfully, a moment to detach myself from what had not been working and to point my feet in the direction of more functional activity. While I could not have foreseen all of the steps that I would make on this journey to date, it was of no surprise to me that the steps forward would be both difficult and rewarding. I started my foray simply and started evaluating me regularly on open ended, in December, and two weeks of “nesting” on the call center floor, I was back in the full-saddle. During these past nine months, I have been charged with the task of listening and responding — with care — to the puzazzled and frustrations of those who have been slowed and overwhelmed by illness and injury — and the unforeseen costs that accompany them. Sometimes, all that I can do is empathize and reframe their battle, while at other times I have a golden moment to effect an adjustment.

Regardless, these interactions offer me glimpses of humanity, and a recognition of the obligations held by every one of us, and the paternal and resourceful within our personal connections. This makes the opportunities outside of professional life all the more valuable: so much of our character is shaped by the environment and the contacts we make, and we are called to frame their battle, while at other times I have a golden moment to effect an adjustment. Indeed, I am learning to embrace his idea, which is clearly compelling but nonetheless ignores competing con- siderations, would that be right? Yet, if it is simplistic to accept an Antigonus at face value, it is also simplistic to reject him at face value. It is possible to embrace his ideal, doing the right thing for its own sake, yet also engage in public behavior that compels or encourages others to do good. This is possible. It requires, first of all, an acknowledg- ment of Antigonus’s ethical ideal. This directly entails a confronta- tion with one’s own means. Do I value purity of spirit? Am I driven by altruism? One cannot get to Antigonus’s purity of intent without asking these questions. Then, if one chooses to aspire to altruism, how can one achieve it while, say, insisting on public recognition for one’s charitable giving?

The task here is difficult. Yes, I have come to value and want to preserve my purity of intent and yet, at the same time, I want to act pub- lically in a way that does promote a good cause, encouraging others to join in, or calling attention to a dire need. Reduce this dual ges- ture to hard reality. Can I look at my picture in promotions for the charity’s annual dinner, and not be moved by a grotesque? Can I do both? Is this the true ethical challenge, it means that just as feeling a deep need to showcase my philanthropy violates Antigonus, so too, holding the non-profit up to inspection, keeps my philanthropy in the shadows. This may be the probability of success for a cause, such as breast cancer research, that needs millions for success. Of course, we can reverse this. The felt need for high visibility can yield much more than charitable giving. It can yield pow- er grabbing, stepping on people — ugly behavior — doing anything for the cause. As Rabbi Israel Salanter put it, “A person can destroy the world running to do a mitzvah.”

I might summarize this discussion by recalling what the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, an eth- ical paragon, said when asked to summarize what he learned in grad- uate school, “Life is complicated.”