

Kol Nidre 5777

The Character of Concord

A Sermon Delivered by

Rabbi Daniel J. Fellman

Temple Concord

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L'shana Tova.

Thank you.

Just up the block and around the corner sits a great boutique hotel—the Skylar. I have never stayed at that hotel, but have good friends who have, and all report that it is classy, elegant, and filled with character.

Those of you who have been in Syracuse for 20 or 30 years might remember that building as the home of the Salt City Theatre. And those of you who have been here for 40 or more years will remember that the building was built as Temple Adath Yeshurun, and was a synagogue for decades until that congregation moved east to Kimber road in the early 1970s.

But tonight, the building around the corner, once a synagogue and now a hotel, stands as not just a great example of a creative re-use of a building but as a warning flag to all of us here. The space we are sitting in could someday be a hotel too—and that may not be the worst thing in the world. That's not the warning I see tonight. No, the warning does not involve where we or this building will be in five, ten, twenty years. The warning instead involves who we are right now, and how we interact with this space and this community.

When one walks into the Hotel Skylar, one receives a warm greeting, one is asked for a credit card, given a key, and then it's off to a room, thinking and worrying only about oneself. One might exchange pleasantries with another, but that's it. In a hotel we don't worry about the place or the other people, because they are not our problem. We have our own room, our own little world, and that's it. We have no responsibilities—we are free to be on our own. The place isn't ours—it doesn't belong to us. We are not responsible. We use it and then move on. That's it. At that hotel we use the room as we wish, and when we are done we return the key, pay the bill, and check out.

I fear that for too many of us in this congregation, and in our greater Jewish community, the synagogue has in fact already become a hotel. For too many, we have ceased to be a home, a place where we dwell and share and care and pray and work and celebrate and connect. We have become, for far too many I fear, no longer a community but instead just a place to have certain needs met. We are viewed as a fee-for-service enterprise, and the others whom we happen to encounter are not family members but fellow consumers.

The synagogue was never imagined or designed to be like a hotel where one could check in or check out. Early synagogues were created to provide a meeting place, a way to bring the sacred into everyday life. Initially the synagogue was meant as a local substitute for the holy Temple in Jerusalem, and over time it became the center of the community, the place where Jews would gather. The synagogue reflected the people's hopes and dreams. And to the extent that we collectively share guilt for our current state of affairs, we must collectively acknowledge our roles and do the work to change our ways.

The character of our Synagogue reflects the history of our congregation. Originally ours was a place for a small number of Jewish peddlers to meet and connect. In time it became a house of worship, a place of gathering. The congregation grew, built buildings, and as it grew it enjoyed a strong connection with the Reform movement, welcoming the great Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of our movement, to the dedication of an earlier building.

Today many of those traits are still visible, even as we embrace a new year and a new world. Temple Concord has changed as its members have changed, and tonight, the character of Concord calls us to embrace change once again. Four values—community, change, welcoming, and doing define the character of our beloved Society of Concord, this Kneset Shalom. In exploring each of these traits, we can celebrate who we are, who we have been, and who we wish to be in the coming years.

One of the core principles long visible at Temple Concord involves a sense of community. When those merchants first gathered in the back of a shop to worship, they recognized that we Jews simply cannot exist alone. We need each other, and together we make ourselves and our world better. The value of community remains a trademark element of the character of Temple Concord

In our prayers tonight and every night, we pray as one body, one congregation. Whether in song or spoken word, in Hebrew or English, with musical instruments or in silence, our prayers unite us. Just moments ago we acknowledged our shortcomings in the vidui prayers, and we did so in the plural, recognizing our connections with each other. Our prayers asked God not to help me, but rather to help us. This notion of sharing, of a connected past present and future, of being linked in our highest moments and in our lowest, remains the defining character not just of the Jew in general, but of our congregation and our community.

In wonderful words penned more than 65 years ago, Rabbi Milton Steinberg delivered a sermon on the sin of societies. He writes that when we collectively repent, we acknowledge two truths: all of us are guilty and none of us are guilty.

But how is this possible? How can we all be guilty and none of us guilty?

The answer lies in the power of community. When we come together, we are all responsible for everything—the highs and the lows. Steinberg recognizes that when we come together we have the power to reach greatness or to sink to the lowest of levels. The secret lies in the connections and relationships we develop with each other. We in this congregation have spent the past 177 years trying to help everyone elevate. We have not always been successful, but our goal has remained clear. We have worked hard, trying to help each of us individually and all of us collectively make our world more whole.

A second core value of Concord's character has been an embrace of change. From that early decision to affiliate with the Reform movement until today, we have wrestled with tradition and change, always seeking a balance between honoring our past while remaining not just relevant but pushing the envelope to make ours a congregation willing to experiment and try new things.

This willingness to embrace change can be viewed in our Temple's history. When Dr. Adolph Guttman arrived in 1883, our congregation welcomed a bright scholar from Germany to lead us. He instituted many changes—including establishing a men's group which became the Brotherhood, establishing a Jewish student group at Syracuse which became the forerunner of Hillel, and urged the members of our congregation to embrace American life in every way.

He saw that the Temple needed to change to better meet the needs of the members, and he shepherded the Temple through the building of this sanctuary and an amplified embracing of the new opportunities available to Jews at the beginning of the 20th century.

When Dr. Guttman retired in 1919, he was succeeded by Rabbi Benjamin Freidman, who spent 50 years leading our congregation, gently cajoling us to grow and change. It was Rabbi Friedman who saw the need to create equality among members, welcoming women to leadership roles within the Temple. He embraced the practice of Bnai Mitzvah, a celebration rejected by earlier Reform leaders. Rabbi Friedman saw that Temple Concord had to be a dynamic congregation, constantly changing and growing. And when he retired in 1969, Rabbi Ted Levy continued to embrace change as a hallmark of our congregation.

Rabbi Levy urged us to see our connections to others as he became a leading force in the Civil Rights movement. And after him Rabbi Ezring continued the embrace of change by reaching out to younger families, helping them feel more connected.

So tonight, let us look around and consider—have we become too static, or are we continuing to embrace the dynamism of Temple Concord's history? Eight years ago I stood with you for the first time. Together we dreamed of what could be, of how we could make Concord better. We have grown in many ways—creating educational programs for children and adults, making our Temple an open place where all can come to learn and explore and grow.

Our opportunities for learning have exploded over the last eight years, with on average, 4, 5, or 6 classes or programs for adult education are available free of charge every week. Our music offerings continue to grow with bands, choirs, special musical performances and musical Shabbat services which are the envy of congregations nationwide. Our religious school has grown, our classes trying new things, our children exploring and connecting like never before.

We have created strong bonds with the other congregations in our community, sharing in learning and growth with all of the other synagogues. And we have created a travel program, offering trips to Israel—see the cantor for more information on her upcoming trip, Cuba, and next year, Eastern Europe. So grow and change we have. But much more awaits.

This embrace of change led the leaders of our congregation to create the Generations Campaign for our Temple. After diligent research and many meetings, we concluded that we needed to more fully embrace the Temple's legacy of change. So we embarked on a study which showed that our members care about this community and this building, and were willing to give significantly to help make change happen. We sifted through the varying needs of our congregation and crafted a plan—we would aim to raise 3.5 Million dollars, with the first 2.5 million earmarked for our endowment to insure the long term viability of our congregation, and the remaining 1 million dollars earmarked for changes and upgrades for our building.

Five building priorities were chosen—accessibility, bathrooms, classrooms, a roof on the school wing, and updating our social hall. Tonight, I am happy to report that we have raised nearly 2 million dollars. So our commitment to the endowment and our future is nearly in hand. But the remaining funds—those for updating our building—still need to be raised. Tonight let me paint a picture of what we plan to bring to fruition.

Imagine state-of-the-art classrooms with updated floors, walls and ceilings, capable of bringing modern technology to our students. Imagine clean modern bathrooms, with space for those with physical challenges. Imagine a social hall with updated lighting, carpets, and drapes— a room with the dignity to host a wedding reception or any joyous celebration. And imagine a Bimah with enough room for our children, a Bimah that brings the service closer to you, a Bimah that can welcome one in a wheelchair, a Bimah with the dignity and beauty of this space but with the functionality we desire and need in 2016.

While our classes and programs have grown, our building has grown tired. As we have welcomed more into this sacred space, we have become more aware than ever of its shortcomings. We have lived well in this house, but now the time has come to consider whether our current culture demands change. I believe it does.

We at Temple Concord have always prided ourselves on being an open and welcoming community. In fact, we inscribed in stone on our building that this shall be a place of prayer for all people but take a god look at the Bimah upon which I am standing right now. This Bimah does not welcome all. It welcomes only those who are able to climb the five steps up to it. Even more, the Bimah is small, allowing only a few to be in this sacred space at any given time. This Bimah no longer fits our culture.

Our classrooms, filling with more students than we have seen in at least a decade, having grown ten, twenty, thirty per cent a year for each of the past four years, are no longer the inviting modern spaces we wish for our children. Our bathrooms are hardly welcoming, our social hall cries from benign neglect.

While our building lacks that welcoming feeling, we as a people, a congregation, are living the biblical image of Abraham, opening the walls of his tent, welcoming the stranger who

passes by. But even Abraham needed to make sure his tent was in good working order! If we want to be fully like Abraham, we have work to do!

Today we are welcoming more people from more diverse backgrounds than ever before. At its peak our congregation numbered nearly 800 families in 1990. Six or seven years ago we had dropped to 340 families. Since then, we have grown, today standing at about 420 families—a net gain of 90 families when the demographics in Syracuse, in the Syracuse Jewish community, and in the national Jewish community have faltered. Our Temple is on the rise.

We are more inclusive of interfaith and multi-faith families than ever before. We are more welcoming to homosexuals and transgender people than ever before. We are more welcoming to the stranger and the native than ever before. And we are doing so with a program more like that of a congregation double or triple our size. And we are doing it with a fraction of the budget of even comparably sized synagogues.

Tonight, though, we sit at a crossroads. Our character of community, of change and of welcoming all cry out. Our values compel action. Acting on our beliefs has long been a noble character trait of this congregation. From sending soldiers to fight for the Union in the Civil War to opening a food pantry to feed the hungry in our midst, we have always been a congregation of action. We have followed the biblical dictum—*Na'aseh v'Nishmah*—we will do and we will listen—from the very beginning right up to today.

Our words on these Holy Days matter only if they are followed with actions. If we simply come to this place, say the words, intone the melodies and then walk out, we have missed the main message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our prayers compel us to act, to consider who we have been and who we want to be, and then to go do the hard work to make those new dreams a reality. The prayers are not an end in and of themselves. Their value lies in their ability to foster action.

For a century and three quarters, the people of Temple Concord have lived by a creed informed by collectivism, change, welcoming, and action. We have believed that we are enriched when we come together, that dynamism always beats stasis, that welcoming another is a sacred act, that doing for others is how we put our prayers into action.

Something like 20 per cent of our congregation's members have given to the Generations campaign. Some made gifts of their own volition, others were asked. In the coming weeks you will be asked to make a commitment, and I hope you will join me in answering with an affirming YES.

Our core values have defined us, and now the time has come for us to make a choice for the future. One of the prayers in our regular Shabbat prayer book notes that we stand at a moment of change, and asks will we cross over and move ahead, or go backwards. The Israelites faced such a test at the shores of the sea, and again as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Tonight we are called to make that choice again. Join us, and together we will create our own Promised Land, right here on the corner of University and Madison. *L'shana Tova.*