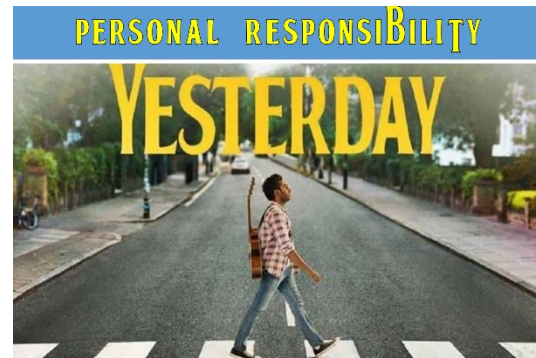


SECTION I: “YESTERDAY”

Start with Niggun: “Yesterday”

Have you seen the **movie**, out this past summer, called **[SING] YESTERDAY**? The concept is, really, **brilliant**: A **struggling musician** named **Jack** wakes up from having been hit by a bus at the very moment that there is some **cosmic worldwide blackout**... As the **world “re-boots”** from that moment, some **critical data** is **lost**, irretrievable... and **among** the data lost is the existence of the **Beatles**, and all their music. As far as the world is concerned, the **Beatles never existed**, their **music is lost**. But because of his accident, Jack, our hero, is **exempt** – Jack (apparently, **JUST Jack**) **remembers the Beatles**, and **all their music**.



So this guy becomes... a **rock star**. He performs **song after original Beatles song** as if they were his own. People just **assume** he has **composed** this beautiful music – each song speaking to a **present-day generation** of people who (*not unlike in the ‘60s*) are feeling a **bit unanchored**, a **bit unsure** whether **society’s promises** for a better future are really meant as **promises for them**.... **Sound familiar?**...

And with his celebrity status, Jack becomes **uniquely responsible** for **keeping the Beatles** in the canon of music history. Now, in this **season of confession**, I’ll lead off by **confessing** that I am a **NERD**... and one of my most charming nerdy qualities is my insistence on seeing *everything* through a Jewish lens. So as I watched this movie, even the trailer, I couldn’t help but **ask myself**: What if it were **JUDAISM** that was suddenly lost – and **only YOU remembered** it all – I mean, to the best of your ability? (*In the movie, Jack struggles with some lyrics too – it’s okay – “Eleanor Rigby” really gives him trouble*)... But **what if YOU** were the **only LINK** to all of Judaism? All the **history**... the **laws**, the **customs**, the **foods**, the incredible **triumphs** and the awful **tragedies** that have shaped us, generation after generation?



My question is: If you were **uniquely responsible** for sustaining Judaism into the next generation, **WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**... It’s just you – no **getting BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS**... Would you step up to the challenge, if it were just you, no one, no rabbi to **WHISPER WORDS OF WISDOM**... – or would you just (sing it with me) **LET IT BE**... [*sing a refrain*]

COULD you do it? **DO YOU NEED ANYBODY?** – What **parts** would you **retain FIRST**? Are there parts that you’d **knowingly leave OUT**? (*I mean, I know this may be sacrilegious to some of you, but you gotta admit, there are a few Beatles songs that we wouldn’t miss – “Revolution 9?” What about “Piggies,” that inspired Charles Manson’s Helter Skelter? Could we leave that one out, knowing the damage it inadvertently was part of?*)

It’s a **lonely thought** – **DOES IT WORRY YOU TO BE ALONE?** ...**ARE YOU SAD BECAUSE YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN?** But tonight, our **sermon** is going to be a **little different**: **[SLOWER?]** It’s **not one sermon**, it’s a **series** of shorter reflections, **spread across** the service, all on the theme of **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**. There is a **Jewish teaching**, “*Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish* – In a situation where there is **no one stepping up** to take responsibility, **try to be that person**.”

The **idea** that **Judaism could disappear** is **not just my nerdy adaptation** of a summer movie. Certainly, **throughout history** there have been plenty of peoples who sought to **help** us toward **extinction** – but even internally, we as Jews almost **obsess** about continuity – so much so that the **historian Szymon Ravidowicz** once called us the “**Ever-Dying People**” – the “**Ever-Dying People**,” meaning that in **every generation**, we **lament** that **THIS** will be the **last**

generation of Jews, the **next generation** will **not pick up** the mantle or the baton... and then the **NEXT generation** **does** pick it up, perhaps in its own way, and then they in turn **worry** that *THEIR* children won't do it, so *they* will be the last generation. Is that **reassuring**? *I don't know...* But when it comes to continuity **WE'RE NOT SO SELF-ASSURED...**

So, I ask you, on this Kol Nidre evening when we look ourselves in the mirror, see ourselves as imperfect, maybe inadequate, but able to change and improve: What if it were ALL... ON... YOU? **"WHAT WOULD YOU DO?..."** Granted, since I'm the one who **PREPARED** this sermon, I've had a head start, more time to think about MY answer to **"WHAT WOULD I DO"** if Jewish continuity were all on me – so I'll start a bit: I'd work really hard to re-create the Jewish Story, the very part that defines who we are but also gets us in trouble – about how we're part family, part nation, part religion, part ethnicity at times, part culture, all food... Oh the foods! I'd DEFINITELY keep matzo balls, brisket, falafel and schawarma... I'm not so sure about ptcha (*you know, jellied calf's feet*)... I'd work hard to keep the way we care about the world around us, and the culture of intellectual curiosity – interpretations, Talmudic questioning... but I'd try only to retain the "two Jews, three opinions" up to the point where we still see ourselves as all Jews, with no one undermining one another, or undercutting the basic Jewish project (*sometimes, we're our own worst enemies...*)

Of course, of the aspects of Judaism I'd be sure to pass on: **THERE ARE PLACES I REMEMBER** – Jerusalem (*if I forget thee, let my right hand wither*)... And **IN MY LIFE** – I'd work hard to re-invigorate Shabbat – ala the great secular cultural Jewish Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'Am's line that "more than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." But also because as our world accelerates, as the balance and distinction between work life and home life gets blurrier, Shabbat is perhaps the best corrective for the inevitable sense of unanchored-ness that so many of us feel.

That's the beginning of my list. But also, like when the great sage Hillel was asked to define Judaism while standing on one foot, yes, he said "that which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor" – but he also said, "zil g'mor – Go and learn it ALL." There is so much in our rich tradition that we'd want to sustain, right? Even if it were all just on us, just our responsibility?

The Talmud tells the story of a debate between Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiyya. Both of them have healthy senses of themselves. Rabbi Hanina claims that HE is superior because he is Jack of Yesterday for all of Judaism. He claims, "If the Torah were forgotten from the Jewish People, I could restore it with my powers of analysis and intellect!"

But Rabbi Hiyya gets him this time, I think: He says, "Puh-leeze! That's nothing... I'm working to ensure that the Torah will not be forgotten by the Jewish People in the first place." Not bad, right? But it seems like such an overwhelming task. We can't do it all – but we must do our part, planting seeds for the future. For Rabbi Hiyya, that's WHAT HE WOULD DO; he takes the long view – planting seeds – both figuratively and literally – the Talmud teaches that Rabbi Hiyya would plant flax seeds, weave nets with the flax, then hunt deer and feed the venison to orphans (*so Jewish, to care in this way*)... then he would prepare parchment from the deer hides, write the five books of the Torah on the parchment, teach five children the five books, one book per child, and teach six other children the six orders of the Mishna, and then he'd say to them: Until I return and come here, read each other the Torah and teach each other the Mishna. Rabbi Hiyya proclaims, THIS is how I act to ensure that the Torah will not be forgotten by the Jewish people.

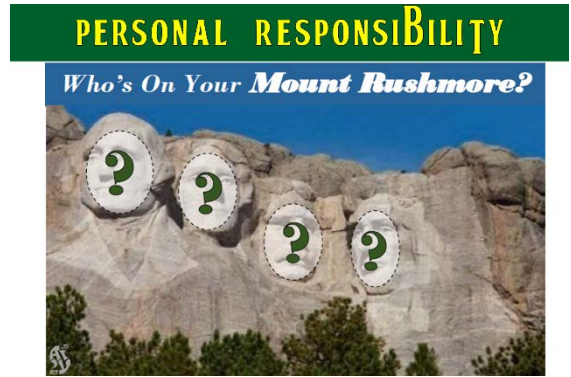
Rabbi Hiyya immediately spreads the task of Jewish continuity. He knows that he cannot do it alone – because Judaism is meant to be lived in community (more on that in the next installment of this sermon-in-series, later in the service). But our first lesson about personal responsibility is that, although we **DON'T CARRY THE WORLD UPON OUR SHOULDERS**... We MUST see ourselves as crucial as Jack in Yesterday, as Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiyya – we must SEE ourselves AS IF we are THAT CRITICAL to the Jewish Endeavor.

But for now, what we need is your voice – because if I left this one out, you'd all call me on it: **NA, NA, NA (HEY JUDE/HEY JEWS)...**

SECTION II: HHH – Who is on YOUR Mt. Rushmore?

When we considered the movie *Yesterday*, we asked, “**WHAT WOULD YOU DO**” – if there were **no one** around to **step up** in a critical moment. How would we **become THAT person**, who **makes the difference** – **absent** everyone else? But **usually**, we are **not alone**. **Usually**, in society, we look to **leaders, role models, exemplars, inspirational difference-makers, influencers**. And so, part of our **theme** tonight causes us to ask: **In whom do we trust? Whom do we entrust** with our **well-being**, our **future**, our **lives**, our **core values**?

This is a **critical question** when it comes to **personal responsibility** – because **doing it ourselves** is **exhausting**, and usually, a **losing** endeavor. We **MUST entrust** at least **part** of our **values** and sense of security and well-being with **someone** who **brings us together**, collectively. This has been the **purpose** of this year’s “**High Holiday Homework**.” Each year, I challenge our community to consider something *before* we enter services on these days – a preparation for this moment. This year, we asked: **Who would put on your Mount Rushmore?** We have samples that you’ve sent in hanging in the lobbies; take a look over the holiday, when you get a chance. (*Don’t worry; if you didn’t do your homework, you can consider it now, and I’d love to year your results in the coming days!*)



The question is significant: The **original Mount Rushmore** features four past US Presidents: **George Washington** – who **built a nation** by fighting *and* by leading *and* by knowing when to step aside... **Thomas Jefferson** – whose **diplomacy** and philosophy of **freedom** and independence defines us still... **Teddy Roosevelt** – whose **charisma** and willingness to break formality and nicety to lead with gusto was shocking to some, refreshing to others... And **Abraham Lincoln** – whose **intellect** and **honesty** was unswerving, and which brought **unity** at our country’s most fractious time.

We have **enshrined** these leaders... And there **could be others** from our history. In a time **nowadays** that feels **increasingly divisive** and **rudderless**, though – I fear that **not enough of our leaders** and **potential leaders** would be **clear picks** to be **raised up** to such heights. Did you know that, somewhere in Virginia, there are the **remains** of a **now-defunct park** with **forty-three presidential bust sculptures decaying** – all on the ground, none lifted to the heights, in terrible, undignified shape. It’s a **sad metaphor** for the challenge of **asking in whom** we might **entrust** our **future** and our **present well-being**. Is the entire notion of leadership, and who would stick their necks out to subject themselves to public critique, who would earn and maintain our trust – is it **all in a state of decay**?

Indeed, one of the **greatest qualifying characteristics** of a **potential leader** is often his or her **lack of desire** to step into that role, to see himself or herself as worthy of the trust that others might place in him or her. **Moses did not want the job** that made **him famous**, and made **us free**. And on a different level, many of the **Adath Israel synagogue presidents** with whom I’ve had the pleasure to work **did not see themselves** in the role – **until we as a community** sought their leadership. Maybe that **humility** is a **prerequisite**...

And yet, **we need those people**. We **need** to be able to **look up**, and see that **someone** has **stepped up** and into the role. There is a **midrash** about **looking up**, like that: **Right after the Exodus** from Egypt, the People of Israel are attacked by the evil nation of **Amalek**. As the battle is raging on in the valley below, God tells Moses to position himself on a **cliff**, overlooking the war. The Torah teaches us that **whenever Moses raised his hands**, up on that cliff, the Israelites prevailed in battle **[SHOW]** – but when he **lowered** them, out of exhaustion, they faced defeat. **So pronounced** was the difference that two people come to hold up Moses’ arms, so that Israel can be victorious. The **midrash asks**: Is it possible that the placement of **Moses’ arms really affected** the outcome of the war? And the answer is: **NO**: But when the **Israelites, exhausted and disheartened, looked up** and saw Moses, with his arms held high, they **looked up**, even **through and past** Moses’ arms – and were **reminded of God**, watching over them. This **raised their spirits**, and it had a clear affect on the outcome of the battle.

Looking up, in this midrash, is **not just a saying**. When we **look up** to someone, it can **inspire** us. When we **physically look up** to the figures on Mount Rushmore (or on our own personal Mounts Rushmore) the **act of turning our head**

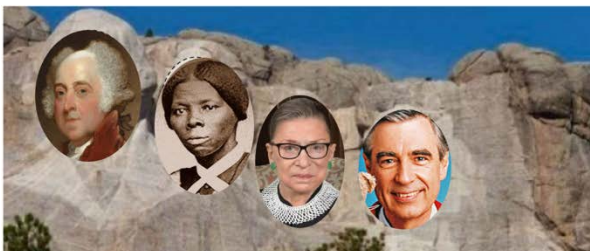
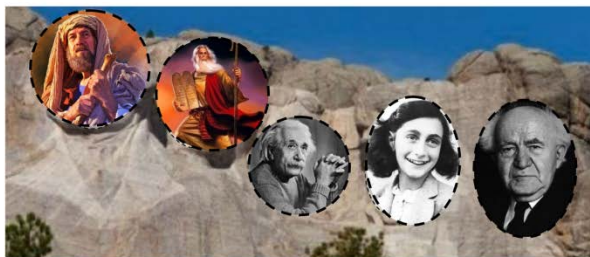
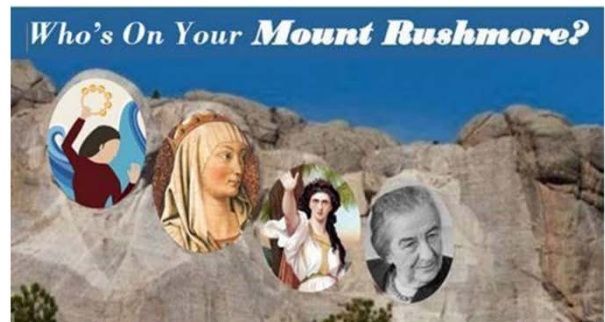
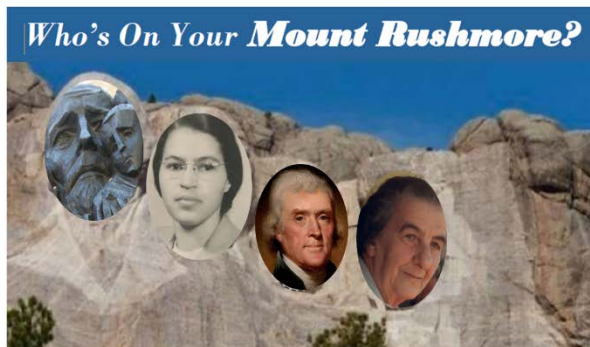
upward has a **psychological effect** that changes our outlook – and can change our outcomes. The **people we entrust** with our community’s safety, well-being, and future inspire **US** to be participants in ensuring that future – **no less than Moses, arms aloft**, reminded the battle-weary Israelites that **if they looked up to Moses**, they could **look even further “UP” to God** – and know that they were **part of something worth fighting for**.

That’s **what we should ask** of our **own Mount Rushmore** figures. And the **responses** thus far from the congregation certainly raise us up in that way: Several people from **Jewish history** made the list: David Ben Gurion, Moses, Golda Meir, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai.... Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. were repeated names, as was Fred Rogers. Several **activists** of all ages... Touchingly, many people listed **relatives**, parents, ancestors, close inspirational friends....

I will tell you **my son shocked me**: We were talking about it, and he **didn’t blink**: Brandon Graham (the Philadelphia Eagle who forced the fumble that mostly secured the Super Bowl Victory)... Matthew Stafford (the Detroit Lions’ quarterback – he was born there and still harbors allegiances)... Joel Embiid... and then, he said, **“And you, Dad.”**

I was not ready for that. But I’ll tell you – he **had the right effect on ME**: It made me **hyper-aware** of the **sacred trust** that is placed **when someone looks up** to you. That level of **responsibility** is **humbling** and **empowering** at the same time, **awe-inspiring** and **terrifying**.

I **pray** that we be **blessed** with **many more than four people** in whose **love, values, and strength of character** we **trust**, enough to **lift them up** to the level of our personal and communal Mount Rushmore. **When we are held up** to such levels, may we **never expect** it, **rarely seek** it, and be **humbled** and **overwhelmed** by the **task** and the **trust** and the **love** that someone is asking of us. And as we now head into the **prayer-poem “Ya’aleh”** – which literally, means to **lift up** – that we *continue* to **look up** our role models – and in the **very act** of **looking up** and **lifting up** – we gain a sense of **Godliness**, of **purpose**, of **hope**, of **confidence** that our **roles** and our **responsibility** can be and **will be fulfilled**. **AMEN**.



SECTION III: A SMALL BUT CRUCIAL LINK (Chains)

A few weeks ago, one night, we were **struggling** with getting a **minyan**. It happens... and it's **one** of the **many things** in Judaism that as your Rabbi, **I can do no better** than any one of you. So here's opening with a **pitch**: Commit to one or two minyan times a week, morning or evening – **help us out, become a regular**, or **mark a milestone** like a yahrzeit or birthday or anniversary (*hey, bring your spouse or partner for the anniversary – double-credit!*)

So now that the “**shameless pitch**” is **over** [*Tap chest*] – we were **short one or two people**. I said to those there that we were going to **start “on faith”** (after all, that *IS my business... faith*)... And I “**stalled**” a moment longer to explain what I call “**minyan math**” – it goes like this: The person who walks in **TENTH** always gets **praised** for “**making the minyan**,” but that's really not the case. **Once** that person walks in, **EVERYONE there makes the minyan**. **Without ANY ONE person**, we would **not** have the minyan. But it's **even fuzzier** than that – because even if an **eleventh**, **twelfth**, or **twentieth** person walks in, **still, EVERYONE makes the minyan**. Your **value** does **not decline, divided** over the total number. That's **not** the way it works. Your **value** in the **minyan** is fixed, no matter what. (*Sorry to say, though, there are no “roll-over minyans” – your presence over the tenth in one minyan cannot count for the next one, sorry...*)

But that “**minyan math**” tells us something about the **value** of a human being in the eyes of Judaism: **Our value is infinite...** and that **value** is **not lost** when we are one among many. **Some of my favorite teachings** in Judaism support this – like the saying that **each blade of grass** on this earth is **assigned an angel** who coaxes and encourages it along, saying “**Grow, Grow...**” – so much the **more so** each human being.... Or **this one**, related to the High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah is considered the **Birthday of the World** – we sing “*Hayom harat Olam*,” **today the world was born**. If that's so, we're **just in infancy** here on Yom Kippur; this is the **night after the bris**. Do you know **what Judaism teaches** your birthday is? For each one of us, the **day you were born** is **the day** that the **Creator, God, decided** that the **world could not exist without you**.

The **world cannot exist without each one of us**. How **empowering**, how **beautiful** is that? And how much **responsibility**, as well? How **crucial each** one of us is.... Each of us, with our **individual talents** and **quirks** and **loves** and **adversities** – the **world cannot exist without each one.... Every person** in this room, every person *not* in this room – **no matter** if we are old or young, healthy or ill (in body, spirit, or mind).... If we have families that have relationships in need of repair... if we are wealthy or struggling financially.... **No matter** whether we are in love with people of the same gender or a different gender identity, or in love with no one at all, someone Jewish or not Jewish, if we feel **embittered** or **hopeful**, if we feel that we are at the core of this community or on the margins, or just beyond the margins peeking in (come on in, **we'll leave the Eternal Light on** for you!)... No matter what, the **world cannot exist without each one** of us.

On a **night** when we are **celebrating, challenging, confronting** our **personal responsibility** to the world around us... when we have **asked ourselves whom we'd entrust** with the responsibility to sustain us, on our **Mount Rushmore...** this part **cannot be lost**: **We are a small but crucial part** of the whole. That's why so many of our prayers on Yom Kippur end with the **suffix –NU** – Asham-NU, Al Cheit she-chata-NU – it is the first-person-plural, **WE** have sinned or erred, **WE seek a repair** in our relationships.... Ki A-NU amecha – **WE**, God are Your People, **WE** are the sheep that You, God, shepherd – **seeing** and counting each sheep under the shepherd's crook, and also **seeing us** as part of an entire flock, as a whole....

That's what it means when I say that **EACH person makes the minyan**, even here tonight. **THAT** is our value – a **small but critical part** of **something much bigger** than what any **ONE** of us could build. That is why **Judaism is meant to be done in community**. And *that* is the **symbolism** of something that, **ten high-holidays ago**, we did here, to **physically demonstrate** what it means to be a **single link**, a **small but critical piece** of something bigger.

Some people here will remember what we built with the **chains**, ten Yom Kippurs ago – but the truth is, the **synagogue has grown** so much since then, that I estimate that **close to half** of this congregation was **not here** on that Yom Kippur. So here's the **story**: I had an **idea**, and I went to **Glenn Unterberger**, of blessed memory – whose **absence we certainly**

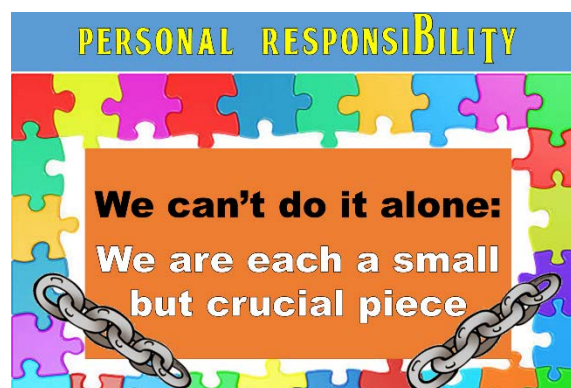
feel this first High Holidays since we lost him... I tried to explain it. One of the things I loved about Glenn was that he was **ready** to **give anything a try** to energize this community. I couldn't explain it, so I said, "Okay, do you think you can **get about ten or so people** (a *minyan*) to the Sanctuary late at night, to see if it'll work?" Glenn gathered some of the troops, here in the Mandell Sanctuary (*the Mandell family has lost members over these years too*)... I had a **drawing** (I still have the **original, here** – would make **Doug Cohen** proud – Doug, of blessed memory, whose yahrzeit it is tonight)... Glenn called **Sally Barsh**, and **Chuck** of blessed memory knew that Sally was going to the shul to be with her "shul-spouse" (as they said)... and several others, some who are tonight stationed around the Mandell Sanctuary right now...

It **didn't work at first**, and **David Oser**, of blessed memory, came up to me and said, "**Rabbi, we gotta get this right, right now**" – and we did. We did this: **CREATE THE STAR FROM CHAINS...**

We demonstrated, by these chains, that **we are linked together** – and that, **without any one** of us, we **could not build this Judaism**. Every one of us has the **responsibility** and the **blessing** of inestimable worth. Tonight, **ten High Holidays later** – some of the points of this Star of David have been **picked up** by **new leadership**, as some of the **original leaders** are **no longer** with us, but are **much higher** even than when we look up to **Moses' arms** or **Mount Rushmore...**

We don't always "**get this right, right now,**" as David Oser said – but we're **striving toward that goal**. And we still **get the people** to come out at all hours, to **build this Judaism**. Because **each one** of us, of **inestimable worth**, is **our own "Jewish Star."** And **together**, we build something **much bigger** than **any one** of us could build on our own. That is **our ULTIMATE personal responsibility**: To see ourselves as a **small but crucial part** of something that **sustains long after us**, something that we **could not build on our own**.

THAT is our **value...** **THAT** is what it means to be **part of a brit**, a **covenantal** relationship – that makes us **proud**, and **joyful**, and **inspired**, and **challenged**. ... And **when we choose** to be a small but singular part of **this People, this destiny, this community** – we are **saying**: **With all its faults** – which we **promise to work on** in the coming year.... With all its **long history**.... With all its **quirks**, and **brilliance**, and **contributions** to the world around us: **I am a member**. I am a **critical part**. I'm "**in.**" This is **ours**. This year, with a strong sense of **membership** and **ownership**, of **engagement, relationship, responsibility** and **love** – this year, may we **proudly re-affirm** this claim: This is **OUR People**. This is **OUR Torah**. This is **OUR faith**. This is **OUR God**. This is **OUR Judaism**. We are **proud to own** it. It is **OURS**. It is, **together, OURS** for the **embracing**.



FINAL PRAYER:

God – *S'lach la-NU, m'chal la-NU, kaper la-NU* – each of these phrases end the same way – *NU, WE*, God, are **not perfect** – but we are **part of something** that is **bigger** than any one of us. We **tap our chests**, to **open our hearts**, so that we are **not closed off** from this collective... so that we **step up** to the **responsibility** of being part of it all.... So that we **look up** to those in whom we **trust** to **bring us together**... So that we **trust** in YOU, God, to help **bring us together**.

Avi-NU Malkei-NU – God, as a **Parent unites** and **founds a family**, as the **right Leader unites** and **founds a People**, You can help us each **see our crucial part** in building this community. As one of **this community's Rabbis**, God, **let me be worthy** of their trust. This is a **sacred gathering** of **good people** – sure, **imperfect** as any other, but **striving** in ways that make us **truly special**.

May the **incredible talents** and **potentials** of *each person* in this room **come together** to build a **strong Jewish future** – one that will be **worthy of Your trust**, God.... A **future** for which our **children** and **grandchildren** and **all future generations** will **look back, look up**.... And then, in turn, **look forward** to an **even brighter future ahead** of them. *Keyn yehi ratzon* – So may it be God's will. And let us say: **AMEN**.

GMAR CHATIMAH TOVAH!

גְּמַר חֲתִימָה טוֹבָה!

**MAY WE BE SEALED FOR
A GOOD YEAR!**