

YOM KIPPUR APPEAL 5782 (2021)

Gut Yontif and good morning.

I am Herb Finn and as President of Beth Judea, I have the honor of addressing you this morning. We all know the general purpose of my address is to emphasize the importance of supporting Beth Judea – a subject upon which we can hopefully all agree. Yet, despite this agreement, it is a daunting task. I am confident that we are up to the challenge.

Someone recently asked whether I ever imagined that planning for this year's High Holidays would be more challenging than last year. Without pause, I responded "no." In hindsight, last year was easier because there was certainty in the situation. We knew services were going to be remote -- with nobody in attendance in the sanctuary. A significant part of the services was pre-recorded. While there were hiccups along the way, the biggest challenge was to make an entirely remote services accessible, fulfilling and meaningful for us all. I believe we succeeded.

While nobody could have anticipated the Covid pandemic and our need to have completely remote services last year, few of us anticipated that we would remain in the grasp of the pandemic more than a year later. I know I didn't. Yet, here we are. If you've read the September Word and followed our emails, you know that this year's High Holiday plans went through many iterations as conditions and government requirements changed. Regardless of the plan being considered, the challenge was to have some form of in-person service in our sanctuary.

During these High Holidays many other synagogues in our area remain completely remote. In contrast, we held true to our promises and conducted services in a multi-access format, with significant in-person participation. And while the services may not

have been as polished as pre-pandemic, they were at least more familiar and hopefully comforting coming live from the sanctuary. During the two days of Rosh Hashana, we estimate that almost 300 people were in attendance in the Sanctuary, with another 450 families attending remotely from around the country. I anticipate those numbers will be larger for Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur.

While it was and remains important to be back in the sanctuary, it is equally important for us to remember that Beth Judea is more than a building. It is more than this location. It is a relationship that exists amongst all of us whether in-person or remote. It is a community that supports each other -- even if we don't know we need it. When we hear Rabbi Zimbalist's common refrain asking if there is anything "he, Cantor Bat-Sarah, the Staff or Board of Directors can do for you, to let us know," he is making a sincere offer to all of us, on behalf of all of us.

Beth Judea's desire and ability to attend to our members' needs is what, in my opinion, distinguishes us from many other synagogues in the area. I've felt this during these High Holidays – having support for a need that I didn't anticipate. This is my first High Holidays without any parents – with my Mom passing last February. The compassion and support I received from Beth Judea was heartwarming compared to my prior experience elsewhere.

My Dad passed over 30 years ago from pancreatic cancer – a disease that is usually fatal within a year of diagnosis. My Dad's was no different. Despite a yearlong spiral of continuous decline, there was little support for me. Indeed, I vividly remember that first Rosh Hashana after my Dad's passing. Although it had been 10 months, it was still fresh. I was sitting in synagogue with my mother and wife to be. There was no pandemic. The sanctuary was filled with probably 1000 people in what we would recognize as a typical Rosh Hashana service. My family had been members at that Shul for years. These were people I knew since before my bar mitzvah.

The Rabbi was no stranger having spent two weeks in Israel with him years earlier. Yet, I was finding no comfort in the service. Rather, I was mostly frustrated and upset. After only 45 minutes, I just couldn't sit there anymore. I abruptly left and walked the 3 miles home, suit and all, as my mother and Lori stayed in services.

Fast forward 30 years - February 2019. I brought my Mom to an assisted living facility less than a mile from here so that we could be close and visit often. Then, the pandemic happened and the spiral of decline began. No vaccines were yet available making visitation out of the question. The seclusion in the facility hastened her dementia and made telephone or video calls difficult at best. My Mom passed last February, alone in the hospital. The hospital wouldn't let me visit despite knowing it was probably her last night. There was a funeral – immediate family only. There was no real Shiva -- Covid.

So, here I am at High Holiday services at Beth Judea about 7 months since her passing. There are a couple hundred people in the Sanctuary and at least that many watching the Livestream. It is not what we consider a typical service. History tells me I should be angry and frustrated, right? Yet, I'm having an entirely different experience. There is no anger or frustration. Beth Judea, our services, our clergy and all of you provide the comfort that can and should be brought by holiday services.

Yes, there are differences between the two experiences. I'm 30 years older. The passage of time tends to soften anger and frustration. My wife and kids are around to ease the hurt. But importantly, for this discussion, Beth Judea is there. I've heard similar stories of when Beth Judea supports our members. I'm sure that we all have – which is why we value Beth Judea and stay committed.

And while our foundation is strong, it is not invincible. As Rabbi Zimbalist recounted during Rosh Hashana, we as a Jewish community are faced with many challenges. Conservative Judaism is struggling, with less than 10% identifying with the Movement. The average age of a Conservative Jew is 62. Beth Judea reflects these facts. Merely looking around the community, we can see the changing demographics of our area and the effect on CBJ. More than 55% of Beth Judea's members are over 60, while less than 10% are under 40-years old.

This year, our membership attrition rate has been unusually high. The reasons behind our decline in membership reveal some sobering trends that are simply beyond our control. Of the 34 member units that left Beth Judea this past year – 5 moved out of state, 6 are no longer in the local area, 3 are in full-time care facilities due to declining health, and 5 have passed away. That means that over half of our total membership loss is due to relocation, illness, or death. And while the loss is explainable, it still represents approximately \$75K in revenue that we will not receive this year. Further, due to the pandemic we will not meet our revenue projections on reserved seats or reserved parking during these High Holidays. How much is yet to be seen, but it is safe to say that it is not insignificant to our budget. As we try to run a balanced budget, these shortfalls will likely cause us to re-evaluate our programs.

As I write this, I realize I sound like Chicken Little. Let me reassure you that the sky is not falling. While concerning, it is far from all doom and gloom at Beth Judea. To the contrary, it is a time of opportunity – as people in the community look for new, safe and connective outlets. With the arrival of Cantor Bat-Sarah, we have completed our Clergy team – a team that is eager to meet the community and expand our reach both geographically and demographically. We intend to pay particular attention to recruiting families with younger children engaging them where they are. You

may have noticed all the events over the summer directed to “tots” occurring both at our building and closer to their homes. That was not mere happenstance.

Moreover, Beth Judea’s handling of Covid during the last 18 months has caught the attention of these younger families. While we all want to be in safe environments, it is especially important to families with younger children who do not have the safety of vaccination. To help address this concern, Beth Judea has upgraded its air handling system, installing hospital-grade Merv13 air filters. Accordingly, while our general membership numbers may have declined, the number of kids in our school has remained relatively steady. We have approximately 90 kids in the school, with about 1/3 of them in pre-Aleph level. Moreover, we have acquired 18 new members this year -- not counting the free memberships that we give to couples married by our clergy.

We are also taking this opportunity to transform Beth Judea into a destination for a more inclusive membership. Our Shabbat services have been a success in incorporating Zoom to become, not only multi-access with in-person and remote participation, but also geographically limitless with access capable from across the country. Our twice daily minyans on Zoom are also well received. It is marvelous that we rarely fail to have a minyan on Zoom. The same could not be said pre-Covid, when minyan was only in-person at the Shul.

With the help of a generous donation, we will soon begin modernizing the kitchen. As we remodel the kitchen, we will also incorporate an additional family/handicapped accessible bathroom. Similarly, we have re-surfaced the parking lot and transformed the upper lot into dedicated handicap accessible parking. I know that you noticed our enhanced Memorial Garden across from the Sanctuary’s Main Doors – again something made possible by a generous donation.

The surveys most of you participated in provide further insight to what our members and prospective members may want from Beth Judea. Some suggested a return to traditional Kiddush on Shabbat. Others suggested a social or coffee area for kibbitzing while the kids are in school. Still others suggested a small Wi-Fi or computer center somewhere in the building. We fully intend to work towards those suggestions, as soon as Covid and safety permit.

I can go on with all the *great things that are happening at Beth Judea*, but I've gone on too long already. So, let me get to what I'm here to ask of you.

The first request is easy. **Stay connected.** Stay connected with Beth Judea and each other. If there is something you like, tell your friends and let us know. If there is something you don't like, let us know. If there is something that has happened in your life and you think we should know, please tell us. We truly want to hear it all.

The second request isn't that hard either. **Participate.** Participate when and where you can. Beth Judea's calendar is full of committees, meetings and events. Most of them are multi-access and do not require in-person attendance. Find one that interests you and attend. Can't find one that interests you, help us create one. Odds are, it interests more than just you. To assist you in let us know you're interested in participating, we have passed out Spiritual Pledge Cards, which you may use if you like.

The last request is, you guessed it... **Donate.** Earlier I detailed some of the areas where we've surely lost revenue this year. Most of those are outside our collective control, but your willingness to donate is not. So, I ask you to please continue your generosity. No pledge is too small and all are meaningful. If you can, please increase your Yom Kippur gift from last year. Your continued support will help ensure that Beth Judea will continue to meet the

diverse needs of our congregation and provide the best services, programs, and events for our membership.

Those of you here in the Sanctuary have received our traditional Pledge Cards and envelopes. Please take a moment and make a pledge – returning the envelopes as a Board Member passes through the Sanctuary. Those of you Livestreaming should be receiving Pledge Cards in the mail within the next week. These can be dropped off at CBJ or returned by mail.

Regardless of location, we also have a new on-line method of donating through the Beth Judea website. If you go to our main website located at BETHJUDEA.ORG, there will be link below the streaming area for Yom Kippur Appeal donations. Please follow the link and instructions towards making a donation.

Again, no pledge is too small and all are meaningful.

Thank you for listening and for your ongoing support of Beth Judea. On behalf of myself and my family, I wish you a sweet, happy (and most importantly) healthy New Year. May we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.