

***Honoring our Past; Building Our Future***  
Congregation Habonim – 5778  
Rabbi Lisa Gelber

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
MOTHER OF EXILES. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

This sonnet, crafted by Emma Lazarus in 1883 was used to raise money for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. *The New Colossus* has been sitting on my heart and mind these past months as I have begun to learn the history and meet the people of Congregation Habonim.

Susan Grant, member of our Executive Committee and part of the search committee who brought me into the community here at Habonim writes, *Congregation Habonim was founded in New York City on November 9, 1939, one year to the day after the beginning of the end for Europe's Jewish population, Kristallnacht. Rabbi Hugo Hahn of Essen, Germany, and a number of other German refugees wanted and needed a Jewish home where they could pray together with the liturgy of their origins, learn together in the best traditions of the German-Jewish thinkers and teachers, and provide a welcoming setting for adults and young people who had left everything and often everyone they knew.*

Refuge is at the heart of this community. Safety of place, of mind, of body and spirit. Precisely what a synagogue home is to be - a *Beit Knesset*, a place of community and gathering - a *Beit Midrash*, a space of learning and inquiry - and a *Beit Tefillah* - a home for building connection to the Eternal One through song, reflection and prayer.

The synagogue quickly seeded connections that grew in generations and continue unto this day. Dail Stolow, one of this year's Congregation Habonim Gala honorees, unearthed an important letter to the congregation from a Rabbi named Manfred Swarsensky. As Dail shared, Rabbi Swarsensky's Berlin synagogue was destroyed on Kristallnacht, after which he was sent to Sachsenhausen. He arrived in the United States in late 1939. Rabbi Swarsensky had multiple connections to our congregation of origin.

On his arrival in the US, he officiated at the wedding of a young German Jewish couple, Ilse and Harry Winkler, among the original members of Congregation Habonim. Later in life they became known as parents of the Fonz - Henry Winkler - who celebrated Bar Mitzvah at Habonim.

Swarsensky's correspondence, housed in the Leo Baeck Institute, contains letters to and from Hansi Pollack, former congregant of his from Berlin and an early President of Congregation Habonim's Sisterhood.

Finally, Norbert Fruehauf, Dail's husband and Gala honoree and Joanie Halev, life partner of our Cantor Bruce taught in the Hebrew School at Rabbi Swarsensky's Madison, Wisconsin shul when they were students at the University.

In March of 1952, Rabbi Swarsensky penned a letter to Hugo Hahn which reads, in abbreviated form,

*I was delighted to learn that this coming Sunday Congregation Habonim will break ground for its own Temple and Community Center. The fact that men and women of our background and experience are building Temples in this fine and fair land of ours, is by itself testimony to the indomitable and inexhaustible vitality of our age-old faith. tested again and again in the crucible of time. ... It is good that Jews build Temples of Worship...In these turbulent days of the Mid-Twentieth Century when the physical and emotional disturbances in human society threaten to throw all of us into an abyss of fear, fatigue and futility, the Temples built to the glory of the divine Architect and to the service of His children stand unshaken like the everlasting hills beckoning the weary wanderer with the glad assurance of Faith and Hope.*

*The modern Jew needs more than ever a peace and quiet amidst the rising fever and tumult of the world, a respite from the clamorous demands of his own material interests, a timeless sanctuary where he can lose himself in order to find himself, a powerhouse where spirit is realized and energized that he may go out into the world to fight the good fight of the Lord against the evils that perennially frustrate human life and turn the good earth into a vial of tears.*

This is the core from which this congregation emerged and blossomed; testimony to the indomitable and inexhaustible vitality of our age-old faith - that men and women of Swarsenskys and Hahns and Fruehaufs and Winklers and Pollacks and Mendels and Bergmanns and so many others among us who have struggled and risked and survived to build and plant and grow and imagine.

It is this commitment to place and community and history and heritage and renewed energy to combat the evils that turn the good earth into a vial of tears that is the antidote to the state of our world as we begin 5778 and move into the final months of 2017. Astonishingly, the language of physical and emotional disturbances in human society (that) threaten to throw all of us into an abyss of fear, fatigue and futility is the language of our time, not just those times. Our time, when racism and antisemitism and misogyny loom large and permeate our world. Gd's earth has become host to public gatherings of white supremacists carrying torches. And while a NYC police officer remarked to me in the wake of Charlottesville that they were only tiki torches - the kind used for decoration at restaurants and resorts - fire poles in such settings are not for ambiance.

On the 14th of Elul, just shy of the full moon that would slowly wane until we welcomed Rosh Hashanah, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was rescinded. DACA paved the way for young people to strive and achieve and fulfill the dreams for which their families risked -- everything - in coming to the U.S. DACA offered 800,000 people brought to

our land, the *golden medinah*, the opportunity to build a life, to support, in loyalty, the country they called their own. It provided the place and tools for building, planting, seeding and growing - not just for their sake, but for ours.

In the hours after the announcement to rescind DACA, Professor Susannah Heschel wrote, *In March of 1938, Poland passed a law that would withdraw the citizenship of Poles who had been living outside the country for five or more years. The Nazi Reich arrested and expelled Polish Jews in late October, including my father, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was living in Frankfurt at the time. The Jews were held in a no man's land between Germany and Poland in terrible conditions. I remember that vividly when I think of the US expelling human beings, people who have built a life for themselves in this country, who are enhancing our country with their presence. Raise your voices, Jews! The revocation of DACA cannot be permitted and the immigration rulings of the past months must be repealed.*

As Jews, individually and as a community, we are called to make a difference, to remember what we stand for in the face of adversity. To be *or l'goyim*, a light to the darkening world around us. Elie Wiesel taught, *better to light a candle than curse the darkness*. Gathering today, being together, committing to building for today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow can make a difference. It must.

Yehudah Amichai writes, *When a man dies, they say of him, 'He was gathered unto his ancestors.' As long as he is alive, his ancestors are gathered within him. Each and every cell of his body and soul is an emissary of one of these countless ancestors from the beginning of all the generations.* In every moment, we are part of something larger, a narrative family that reaches back through the ages. So we must hold our past in our hands and carry our story *l'dor va'dor*. We must remember those who came before, those who paved the way and laid the foundation, whose struggles provide strength and resolve to continue their work of making Gd's world holy and whole once again.

In memory there is blessing. In remembering, there may be healing. Let us remember now all those we carry with us, those who carried us as we now carry them. Yizkor.