

# Retirement Remarks

Rabbi Steven Kushner | April 28, 2018

Thank you.

I need to say from the very outset – Thank You. Especially to all of you wearing formal wear. Tuxedos. Black Ties.

Which reminds me of a movie. “Start the Revolution Without Me” with Gene Wilder and Donald Sutherland. There’s an evening ball where King Louis XVI (played by the great Hugh Griffith) descends the grand staircase dressed as a giant chicken, while everyone else is dressed normally. He looks around and then turns to his wife, Marie Antoinette, and says, “I thought it was a costume ball.”

So a profound and heartfelt “Thank You” for not making me the only one dressed like a head waiter.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank those who have been so instrumental in making this year, and this weekend in particular, such a memorable one in my life. I am particularly indebted to Miriam Chilton and Jodi Nussbaum for all their organizational efforts, to Nina Tucker and Marge Grayson for managing the details of this dinner and its Ad Journal, to Steph and Mark Lurie for offering to arrange that Manhattan dinner cruise on June 2, to Barbara Friedman and Raphaela Neihausen (and Nina, again) for the wonderful Kushner Film Festival back in the fall (which would have made my mother so proud seeing my name up in lights on the Clairidge Theatre’s marquee), and a very special thanks to David Katowitz for bringing to Ner Tamid dear and distinguished teachers throughout this year, especially my very dear friend Rabbi Norman Cohen this weekend). All in my honor. This has been a remarkable year for me.

Please know – you have succeeded. I feel the *kavod*, literally the “weight” of your respect and especially your affection. This is not just another night for me. This is not just another big Temple event. For all the glitz and glamour of this Gala, this evening stands out and apart from the more than 13,800 evenings I have spent as the Rabbi of Temple Ner Tamid. This night is different from all those other nights. *How* is this night different from all those other nights? Because *you* are here. I will hold this evening in my heart for the rest of my life.

It is a far cry from my first night at Ner Tamid in April of 1980.

My interview was on a Sunday night. I entered the building through the kitchen door where a bunch of guys from the Brotherhood were cooking hot dogs, after which I was ushered into the social hall and sanctuary which was filled with 200 people smoking cigarettes. And then someone yelled out, “Bingo!”

I seriously wondered if this was the right place for me?

But when I was ushered downstairs (into what is now the Youth Lounge) for my interview, I had a very different take. Because it was there that I met the real “Ner Tamid” to be. It was

there that I first came to meet my dear friends Kent Roth and Hal Ziman (of blessed memory). It was there that I came to realize a truth I had known all along – a synagogue is more than the externals of property and programs; it's more than size and what so many rabbis mistakenly think of as “substance”. A synagogue is what its name implies – *synagoga*, the Greek word for *Beit Kneset* – a place of gathering, a House of Assembly. Not a community centre but the center of a community; a sacred portal where people enter to discover themselves; a *ma'ayan*, a wellspring from which to draw upon the sustaining waters of our tradition. And the key is that it is a place where we do this – by design as well as out of necessity – together.

The physical surroundings that night were underwhelming. But the people I met immediately touched my soul. These were good people. And unpretentious. They had no illusions. They were just a bunch of Jews who were desperately trying to save their community. They put aside their institutional and ideological identities. They were willing to walk away from a building they had known for over half a century. They were willing to pray with somebody else's prayerbook. They were willing to let some thirty-year-old kid who thought he was a lot more mature than he really was stand up on their *bimah* and make out like he knew what he was talking about. They were willing to let him be their Rabbi.

And here we are now 38 years later. And while you may be honoring me tonight, we are all here to celebrate Temple Ner Tamid. And that includes the remarkable cadre of individuals who work in your service:

- Rabbi Emeritus Stanley Skolnik (Stan, you'll need to move over and make room for another “Emeritus”);
- my amazing and gifted *bimah* partner these past 10 years, Hazzan Meredith Greenberg;
- Cantorial Assistant Ronni Pressman (among the best decisions I ever made was the day I called you up to ask you to join our staff);
- Iris Schwartz, our Director of Education (for all the good things we celebrate about Ner Tamid, make no mistake about the import of the quality of our education as integral to the health of this synagogue);
- and how fortunate we are to welcome this past year Wendy Blum, our Director of Shoresh;
- and Michele Lainof, our Youth Advisor (with whom our prayers for a *refuah Shleimah* are most fervent);
- Karen Frank, our Congregational Nurse (whom I have known since the Johnson Administration when we were in MSTY together);
- Peri Smilow, our incredibly talented B'yachad Service Coordinator;
- and Ed Alstrom, the guy who keeps us in key.

It may sound trite, but know that for each and every one of us it is a privilege to be in sacred partnership, to do everything in our power to bring the riches of our tradition to you and your children. And none of this would be possible without the tireless efforts of Dan Remuszka and

Dave Redmond and Patrick Good and Irene Gill and Maribel Leon and especially Laurie Schifano.

We've come a long way from two part-time secretaries, a part-time custodian, a part-time Religious School Principal and a student Cantor. Look at us now. Temple Ner Tamid is awash with some of the most gifted and dedicated professionals.

And now to this list we welcome Rabbi Marc Katz. Among my greatest sources of joy is knowing that I have helped to create a pulpit that would be attractive to a colleague of the caliber of Rabbi Katz. Ner Tamid will only be increasing its treasure of wisdom and rabbinic leadership.

But when all is said and done, my sense is that what makes this congregation the extraordinary community it is today, is what attracted me to it in the spring of 1980 – and that is you. The greatest blessing I have received over these 38 years is having you in my life. And you allowing me to be in yours. There are so many of you I wish I could acknowledge. But I won't – for fear of leaving just one of you out.

Nevertheless, I feel obliged to honor the names of those with whom I have partnered in the leadership of this congregation. The Presidents of Temple Ner Tamid:

Emil Weiss ל"ר  
Jerry Stein  
Harvey Morginstin  
Stan Jackson  
Herb Bilus ל"ר  
Charlie Glucoft ל"ר  
Lanny Katz  
Sharon Rosen  
Marge Grayson  
Bob Adler  
Nina Tucker  
Steph Lurie  
Jordan Solomon  
Andi Robik  
Ken Cohen

Each has brought to us something unique, but what they all share in common is that – without exception – they saw their role exclusively within the context of serving you. It was never about them. It was never about ego or power. It was always about Temple Ner Tamid. No rabbi has had it as good as have I.

And last, but certainly not least, are those seated at my table. My beloved Leana. The support and wisdom and love you have offered me these past ten years have sustained me. I pray that I will be for you what you have been for me as you now assume your new pulpit as the Rabbi of Temple Beth El of Jersey City. My brother Larry. You are my role-model, the measure to which I have and continue to aspire. I am not here were it not for you. Mom and Dad would be so proud of us. And to my daughters Aviva and Hannah. We toss around the word "pride" so much that it loses its meaning, but know that that the *kvelling* I feel for you is surpassed only by my love. Hannah, little do these people know that my expertise in film

comes from you. I am so proud of you and the life you are making for yourself. You will always be my inspiration. And Aviva, my soon-to-be attorney-at-law (and mother of my first grandchild), words cannot suffice to express how much a source of *nachas* you are for me. You will bring greatness to our world, of this I am convinced. For both of you – who were named and called to Torah on the *bimah* of Temple Ner Tamid – know that that place will always be your home. The faces may change over time, you might even have to introduce yourselves. But Ner Tamid and its community have left a mark on you which will be with you for the rest of your lives.

And it's the same for me.

I can't begin to tell you how much your presence here this evening, indeed throughout this weekend, means to me. Your words, your embraces, the tears in your eyes overwhelm me.

But I want to conclude by sharing with you the words of two of our students. In the past week two kids, one with whom I'm preparing for Bar Mitzvah and the other who is coming up for her Bat Mitzvah but whom I don't even really know, said to me the same exact thing: "Rabbi, I will miss you." Just blew me away.

As a rabbi, more than anything else, you want to know you've made a difference in someone's life. And I know that I have made a difference. But when a kid comes up to you and opens himself up to say he will miss you, which – at least for me – is a deeply personal and perhaps even courageously intimate thing to say, it takes me aback. Such encounters, such personal sharing are genuinely sacred moments. Even more, they are at the very core of the meaning of life. It doesn't get any better than this.

Tonight I am here to tell you that *you* have made a difference in *my* life. Your love and friendship, your compassion and understanding, your willingness to share this path with me has been a gift the likes of which I never could have dreamed.

I get Lou Gehrig. ("Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.")

I am eternally grateful for the path that has brought me to you. It is the greatest honor of my life. This is the essence of blessing. *Kosi revaya* – my cup overflows.

God bless you.