

Good evening Rabbi Diamond, Dr. Mack, honorable members of our Board of Trustees and committees, Cantor Mendelson, congregants, friends and family, strangers and guests. My name is Brandon Melendez, I am a congregant here at B'nai Sholom Beth David, and a Jewish Learning Center parent and board member with two children, Jeremy and Ayla, in the Hebrew school. My wife, Samantha Berman-Melendez, is on the Board of Trustees, and we are both on a variety of committees here. We're residents of Rockville Centre and unabashedly proud of our Jewish heritage, where ever we are and whomever we are with.

It is my great honor to speak with you all today on behalf of B'nai Sholom Beth David about a simple, powerful, and profound concept: Community. Community is a fundamental part of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people.

We were a community gone into Egypt in Genesis, made many in oppression there in Exodus, strengthened and bonded in battle in the tales from Joshua and Judges, a mighty Kingdom in First and Second Samuel, and a community shattered, splintered, and ever connected in the diaspora for thousands of years since. We pray in communities of no less than 10 where ever we can and create places of not just worship but celebration, unity, and togetherness in the synagogues where our communities congregate.

The synagogue is more than a building, or a lofty seeming religious corporation. It is the corpus of a culture and faith which has persisted, preserved, and persevered against prosecution, persecution, and provocation since its very inception. As members of the synagogue we are the living blood and organs of that body; in our services, committees, and communal efforts we are giving life to the traditions in following the sacred laws of our people. The sustenance of the body comes from not just the generous donation of time, but also from the generous donation of funds which come from our community.

Throughout the year our congregants pay dues, buy tickets to events and fundraisers, purchase gifts in the synagogue store and offer their precious time to help keep our synagogue lights on, heat rising, and staff paid. The most impactful of these throughout the year is this appeal, the Kol Nidre appeal for pledges of your dollars to keep our community thriving. These donations are not money used to stuff the coffers, pad the walls, or boost the mattresses here at B'nai Sholom Beth David, but are in fact funds used to pay in part or in whole for lovely services like the one we are enjoying tonight, our wonderful rabbi, our soulful cantor, the upkeep of our holy Torah and other religious regalia, and the best investment of all, the next generation in our Jewish Learning Center.

As a Jewish School Board member, parent, and a professional teacher I can tell you that the old proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is doubly true when that child is being raised in the rich and deep culture of the Jewish people. If for nothing else, a Kol Nidre pledge is an investment in the furtherance of the Jewish identity well into the future. This is an identity that within the life times of a precious few here tonight, and certainly within the lifetime of many of our parents and grandparents was on the genocidal precipice of being snuffed out for all eternity not that long ago.

Prior to the Shoah, what we commonly call the Holocaust, many of our spiritual community members, our family members, those who might have been our friends and guests even tonight, lost sight of that identity and abandoned it as true north in favor of a well-intentioned nationalism. That nationalism made them the first targets of hatred when the historic otherization of our people came violently knocking on our doors and through our storefront windows with a Swastika strapped to its arm. National pride is important, even in our faith, but we must never feel so comfortable where ever we are that we forget we are always and ever others in the midst of our friends and neighbors outside of the Jewish community. And that our Jewish community must be maintained through commitment, love, trust, and mutual support.

For us as Jewish people, we pray for peace and prosperity, we work hard to build those around us. We learn, we teach, we serve, and we provide, we strive for equality, equity, and freedom—indeed the very heart and spirit of the country we live and love in today—but we must always remember as American Jews, we are Jews nonetheless. Our culture, traditions, and identity must prevail in our hearts in order to prevail in the world. We are no less citizens of the United States to be Jewish Americans any less than any other community—our success in this is no more evident than in the wall of young faces whose names are given in remembrance of our loved ones displayed in the hall, lest those memories become less than ghosts in the wind. Yet, this success is fragile and tentative. It is easy to get lost in such an accepting and tolerant secular culture. Our identity here is complex and nuanced and, Baruch Hashem, we've been graced to live in a country where such plurality and cosmopolitanism is not only tolerated but essential. But we are not American Jews, we are Jewish Americans.

Today the climate of otherization is not *as* focused on us, but elsewhere, against our cousins through Esau, or our neighbors to the South of the Border and luckily by a loud and bigoted few rather than a complacent and participatory many. Though they come not with a Swastika on their arm but with a Tiki Torch in their hand, we must recognize the real and present danger nonetheless. Jewish history shows us as well as current events, where there is bigotry with a clenched fist, anti-Semitism is never far behind.

And while the impetus is on us to speak out against injustice, so that the phrase “Never again” rings true for all oppression and not just our own we must also invest in our own Jewish Identities and its protection and nurturing in our Jewish community without hesitation. For in this instance hesitation is the father of delinquency of our moral and ethical responsibilities. The Jewish Community and its home in the synagogue are not just places we return to, like salmon upstream, for births and deaths, but a place for our lives. I will leave you with a quote from Hillel the Elder to ponder about the importance of ourselves, our community, and our duty to the past, present, and future of our people on your pending Kol Nidre pledge.

From Ethics of The Fathers Chapter 1 Verse 14- “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?”

Gemar chatimah tovah and an easy fast to you all.