As the book of Genesis draws to a close, we see an image of Jacob on his deathbed blessing his sons. “Blessing” may seem like a generous assessment of Jacob’s statements: He notes not just the finest qualities of each son, those characteristics that merit praise, but also those areas that need improvement. It strikes me that this might be the truest expression of blessing: not unconditional praise but a candid assessment of who each son is and what his potential may be.

I would like to offer the type of blessing that Jacob gave his sons: a celebration of the finest qualities of this community, an acknowledgement of what is still in process and an appraisal of what the future might hold for us. But I won’t wait until the end. Rather today, almost exactly the midpoint of my tenure as interim rabbi, I will share observations of my term so far. This will be my state of the union.

I was hired for this exact moment of transition in our congregational life. I’m here to observe and guide as TI redefines itself and prepares for the next chapter. Our tradition teaches us the importance in this process of self-definition of heshbon hanefesh, intense self-reflection. After all, the first step in determining where we want to be is assessing where we are starting from. So let me begin by saying I believe this communal heshbon hanefesh, this self-evaluating is most assuredly working for us.
I want to share examples of that self-reflection and where it leads us. Turns out I have 11 examples to share, which on the one hand is not quite as many as the sons Jacob blessed, but on the other hand: Make yourself comfortable.

1) Last year’s rabbinic search committee yielded no candidates. In part this was a function of the COVID lockdown. But it was not just that. So this year the committee has redefined procedures and busted itself open to include in -- and demand from -- every single member meaningful participation in each step of identifying and eventually hiring a new rabbi. I’ve sat in a few meetings and spoken with several committee members, all of whom report that these meetings are much more effective this year. The result? A number of wise, compassionate, talented rabbis interested in becoming our next senior rabbi.

2) Last spring a crisis erupted over the issue of congregational stance on supporting Israel. It was confounded by questions of transparency and determining exactly who speaks for the congregation when articulating a public statement. It was a messy confluence and I know it still carries
a sting. That same complex of issues resurfaced this fall. This time, though, rather than a crisis we reached a point in which the voices representing different positions said, “Let’s pause. Let’s process this publicly and see how we can represent the broadest swath of our population. Let’s not allow this to become personal.” This willingness to slow down and listen thoughtfully may be the result of a concentrated effort to learn to air and resolve our differences through an impressive series of speakers—the Eilu v’Eilu series, the Better Together guided discussions and the Beyond Dispute classes, and I hope you share my gratitude to Rabbi Silverman for the energy and wisdom that brought all this programming. Israel will be a complicated topic for us to negotiate as a congregation. But we have begun building a model to guide how we grapple with complicated topics, and we can take pride in that accomplishment.

3) Our Shabbat morning youth programming had fallen into a black hole, with no lay or professional ownership. Until Alyssa Ugent stepped up to lead mini minyan for kindergarten through 3rd grade. Alyssa is a kid. What does she know about leading a minyan for littler kids? Enough, apparently. Enough to prepare a program that she leads twice a month.
Enough to seek guidance from an expert in early childhood education, our own Maureen Mintz. Enough to make parsha inspired snacks every session. And enough to somehow get these very young children excited to learn Ashrei. Here’s my advice about mini minyan: Tell your friends.

4) Tot Shabbat for preschoolers had also disappeared. When Becca Katzman saw what Alyssa started in mini minyan, she too stepped up as interim leader of Tot Shabbat. Hoping to rally support for Becca, I wrote one email to lay and professional leadership. Within a week I was politely demoted from the spontaneously formed leadership group of Becca, Noah Hershey and Rabbi Silverman. I’m now just one of several lay and professional leaders — and there are many such leaders — supporting this team — a team which has already increased both the number of families participating and the frequency with which those families meet. One email. Parents running this program is a stop-gap measure to be sure. But members of the executive board are now on record for wanting to designate lay leadership and hire a professional for next year. [We had eleven kids last week.] Tell your friends about that one, too.
5) Like most religious schools during COVID, TIRS struggled last year. Dr. Ella Levy, our new religious school director is in Israel this week, mourning the loss of her mother. We send her our condolences, and in her absence I would like to share a few of her accomplishments in the religious school. Numbers are up from last year: All kinds of numbers: enrollment in school, Hebrew reading scores and participation in a range of programming. Ulpan Kef is an optional program on Monday afternoons. We started with a respectable group of students enrolled, but then the unexpected happened: Other students heard it was so good that they asked to join. Let me say that again: We have kids who asked to join an optional Hebrew school program. The outlook for TIRS? We have room to grow so definitely tell your friends.

6) There was a level of anxiety about finding a new executive director last year. Now all I have to say is the name Karen Nahary and the response is a guaranteed smile. I am happy to report that TI professional staff, led by Karen, work together with great camaraderie and satisfaction. And we hear nothing but appreciation for the can-do, upbeat attitude Karen expresses to anyone who contacts the office.
That was six. The next are not institutional changes so much as things that have always been good but we might not always see.

Every weekday morning beginning at about 6:45, my phone starts buzzing: I have no idea how I got included in the whatsapp group for TI weekday minyan. I don’t live in the neighborhood and can’t be here in time to help make the minyan. I briefly considered leaving the group. But the truth is I love reading the messages – in rapid fire: *Only two of us here. Still need six. Two are on the way. Be there in 3 minutes. And then... thanks everyone, we got a minyan.* If you think every congregation provides a minyan twice a day, let me remind you how special it is. And if you think that minyan spontaneously appears, let me remind you of the effort entailed. And let me invite you to support the minyan whenever you are able. (More on that later)

Here’s a little story. It’s not a big thing, but it illustrates who we are. On Sunday of Sukkot, the day before Hoshana Raba I got an email that the aravot had not arrived. (That’s a lot of Hebrew words that might not be familiar. Briefly: Hoshana Raba is the last day of Sukkot on which we wave the 4 species. Generally by this time in the holiday the aravot, the willow branches are pretty shvach, and we
need a lot of them because on Hoshana Raba we beat them into the ground. Seriously, it’s even more fun than it sounds.) Karen had ordered a supply to restock our aravot that was never delivered. Here it was Sunday afternoon and we needed those aravot by 6:45 Monday morning. Someone was going to have to spend Sunday afternoon schlepping to Brookline so we could have plenty of willow branches by 6:45 the next morning. We had a huge crowd here at the Sukkah party so I told myself, “I’ll walk through the crowd, and the first people I ask will go.” The first people I asked were Noah Horowitz & Mindy Goldstien. Did I mention it was a spectacular sunny day in late September? It was such a beautiful day, we knew there weren’t going to be many more days so spectacular and Noah and Mindy were planning to go for a long walk to enjoy the sunshine. But, Noah said, we could just as easily drive to Brookline. And no, you don’t need to thank me. That’s what you do for your community. The FIRST people I asked. You might counter, “well sure, but you knew to ask Noah and Mindy”, and you’d be right – I totally hedged my bet by starting with them. But here’s the thing: afterwards a number of people said to me, “you could have asked me. I would have gone.” That’s who we are in this community.

We have a beautiful sanctuary, but I actually have a new favorite piece of the property. The parking lot: The parking lot is where we gather for
Kiddush after services. It’s where we put up a tent on Rosh Hashana. That tent housed our Family services, chavurah service, healing service, drumming service and panel of past presidents. The parking lot was the site of epic dancing on Simhat Torah. Most recently our parking lot was transformed into the locus of unique celebration: a carnival to accompany the vaccine clinic we provided for children ages 5-12. The food, the vendors, the pie throwing station. If you weren’t here to see it in person, you can catch a clip from channel 5news from the TI website. But for all the joy and fun of the carnival, it was just the icing on the cake: We provided COVID vaccines to almost 150 children. That, my friends, is worth celebrating. In fact the parking lot as party venue was so immensely successful that we reprised it only a few weeks later for a Chanukah party that drew hundreds – mostly families with young children.

We are blessed with an extraordinary Hesed committee. you may think doesn’t every congregation have a Hesed committee? But they are not all like ours – weekly check-ins with clergy, network of caring and checking in with congregants in need as well as an elaborate welcome gift to every new member family. And no other congregation has Paul Davidson, a one-man welcome team to anyone who crosses our doorway.
I am proud to offer the antidote to a case of the blues. Really, if you find yourself a little sad or low energy, I have just the cure for you. Stop by the building at about 10:00 on a Monday morning and you can see and hear the children of Hertz nursery school in their Israeli dance sessions with Pazit, our dance instructor.

You’re welcome.

Under the gentle guidance of Leisa Glass Hertz enrollment has ballooned to 52 lucky students and the very building is warmed by their presence. These are just a few examples. I could give you 50 more large and small acts that would make you so proud to be part of this community.

True blessing includes not just praise but acknowledgement of what needs improving, steps we can take to reach our potential more fully.

We still have members who feel disaffected, left out, unheard. I commend the newly reborn inclusion committee for their work addressing how we invite in members who have felt left out. We need to spend even more effort on engaging the disengaged. We’re still figuring it out. We need more hands. Join with me and Rabbi Silverman as we actively reach out and ask, what can we do to make you feel more welcome? And a gentle reminder, it begins with hello to anyone you see on these premises, even to, especially to someone you don’t know.
We still have two open positions on the executive committee and leadership openings at every level. If you have energy or ideas or a willing heart and a few free hours please be in touch with me, Rabbi Silverman or Neil Aronson. You may feel: I’m not a leader, I don’t have the time, I don’t know how to do this... so let me assure you: You can make a lasting difference for your family, the congregation, the town of Sharon and the Jewish people. Sounds outlandish doesn’t it? Do you find satisfaction in this place? Have you found learning and joy and community here? It’s because someone else built and sustained it with their time and energy. It did not happen by accident. Leadership will draw on your talents and reveal skills you never knew you have. If you have the slightest glimmer of maybe I could pitch in ....But then you shut it down... please come and talk to me or to Rabbi Silverman or to Neil. No obligation, Let’s just talk about it.

One of our greatest challenges comes to us courtesy of Zoom. We gave thanks for zoom in the early days of the pandemic (once we all figured out how to unmute ourselves). But actually things became more, not less complicated when numbers of infections and hospitalizations went down and gathering in person became an option again.
So let me begin by stating that I believe it was a sound halachik decision to incorporate zoom in the early months of the pandemic. I believe that even though it did not serve all members of the community. I want to acknowledge the pain of the congregants who do not use electronics on Shabbat and Yom Tov and for months had no access to t’fila b’tzibur – communal prayer. I want to acknowledge that for some of our friends the very presence of a computer in our sanctuary, transmitting sound and image on Shabbat is a desecration. Yet our community at large was relieved to be able to not only stream, but actively participate in services remotely.

Similarly, I believe the decision last spring to transition from allowing interactive use of zoom to using it only to stream was halachikly sound. Short of emergent crises, my role is to maintain current halachik standards.

But halacha is not the only factor we consider when forming policy, is it?

I want to acknowledge the pain our zoom policy engenders among some members of our community—the ones who told us, “I want to count in the minyan even if I can’t be in shul. I want my Kaddish heard and I don’t want to be left out.” I understand that. We will work with you to create options for t’fila b’tzibur – prayer with a community. We are hearty New Englanders and are not afraid to
bundle up and gather in your yard or on your porch for the 15 minutes it takes for a daily ma’ariv minyan so you can recite Kaddish. On weekdays, we can unmute after minyan so you can say hello to one another. We will innovate and pivot and explore any option to meet your needs. We will be flexible and we will be compassionate. But sometimes we will simply not meet those needs and I hear your disappointment. In the best interests of the community now and in the future, we are optimizing for in person congregational life.

On the Shabbatot that I am not here at TI I still go to services (not that you were asking). Here’s what Shabbat services are like at a Conservative shul that optimizes equally for in person and remote participation: The sanctuary that previously held 80-100 on a Shabbat morning had 12-15. The rabbi sometimes addresses the congregants in the sanctuary but is committed to engaging equally with the zoom attendees so we never really feel we have his full attention. We hear some of the Torah readings from peoples’ homes, which engages zoom participants but creates a sensation of disembodied voices floating through the sanctuary. The energy in the building is so low as to be depressing, which in turn means that even fewer congregants are motivated to attend in person. {Some people attend remotely because of serious health risk. But others zoom Shabbat
services because it has become very easy to attend from home, without worrying about the weather or the niceties required for in-person engagement. Like shoes.

The experience has become so lifeless that the congregation recently resolved to return to prioritizing in-person services. Zoom participation will end in January as the congregation returns to zoom as streaming only. For the time being – and with bated breath – Kiddush returned after services and seemingly overnight attendance expanded 4 or 5fold. As the congregation’s president describes, “The beating heart of congregational life is in-person gathering and I want to protect that beating heart.”

I also want to protect that beating heart. I want to build for the day when we can all congregate in person. Meeting virtually has saved our ability to gather, but it is a poor poor second and I want to ensure that our default will always be praying celebrating, congregating in person. Let me emphasize that in the meantime this places an extra burden on those of us who are able to come in person: Our friends who are on zoom are counting on us to make a minyan so they can say Kaddish.

I have lots more that I could say about this, about why I feel so strongly that as long as we are able we should prioritize in person services, but the hour is late and I want to close with blessing. But if you want to talk about this more, and I
know some of you do, I invite you one on one or in a group setting to process this with me and Neil and Rabbi Silverman. I will hear you and I will consider your frustrations and your suggestions.

It’s almost lunch time and I want to return to blessing. If nothing else I hope you hear that I am honored and pleased to be part of this community. I praise this community for the willingness to do heshbon hanefesh, for the willingness to reflect and learn and grow. I praise the community for its kindheartedness and for its joyful commitment to study and to prayer. I commend you for that wall of diaper boxes and for the dedicated effort to include all who would join.

I offer blessings of patience and compassion as you engage with new rabbinic leadership, and with courage as you add your efforts to lay leadership. And I offer the blessing of wisdom to see the goodness and righteousness already surrounding you every day.

Conclude with a story I shared at a meeting many months ago:

Three workers are employed cutting blocks of stone. When asked what they are doing, one says, “Cutting stone,” the second says, “Earning a living,” and the third says, “Building a palace.”
My friends, we are building a palace. In the long meetings and the flurry of whatsapp messages, in the loving back and forth of where and how we meet, we are building a place of compassion and prayer and study and support. We are building a palace of holiness.