

## Remarks in Honor of Ten Years at B'nai Israel

Rabbi Michael Safra

Thank you. I am overwhelmed by your presence this morning and also by the calls and notes I've received over the past few days. I'm really trying not to let all this get to my head. It is a privilege to be a part of B'nai Israel; and as I've said before, but ten years is not such a big deal.

Among my incredible colleagues in the clergy: Cantor Josh has been here 12 years. Rabbi Schnitzer has served this congregation for over 23 years, and he was preceded by Rabbi Simon for over 25 years, and Rabbi Segal for close to 50 years. Thankfully, as the staff "newbie", Cantor Wolpert has been able to bear some of the hazing in my place. There are members of this congregation who have been here for 50, 60, or even 70 years. So ten is really childhood, which is why they promised a Kiddush of birthday cake, ice cream, and pony rides for everyone.

I do want to say thank you to a few people:

- To the committee and volunteers who are responsible for today and are listed in the program. I consider Saturday morning the most special time of the week, so it is wonderful to be together on such a cold, otherwise quiet morning, for worship and celebration.
- Danny Weiss, Larry Trope, Wendy Schloss, Miguel, Ken, Octavio and our staff who put so much into today – as if they had nothing else to do.
- Thank you Sol and Lois and Jonathan. I truly enjoy working with you. I hope one day to meet that guy you were talking about; he sounds really nice. I do want to acknowledge a tinge of sadness this Shabbat because I see what should be Murray Gottlieb's seat. So many of us have been recipients at one time or another of comfort, support or kindness from Beverly Schnitzer; and now in her time of mourning, we must offer our own words of comfort to Beverly and Jonathan, **הַמִּקּוּם יִנַּחֵם אֶתְכֶם**, May God comfort you among all the mourners of our people.
- There are other people to thank, and that will come.

What can I say? This morning, Parashat Shemot introduced us to Moshe Rabeinu – Moses Our Rabbi. Nahum Sarna, in his commentary, points out that the Torah actually tells us remarkably little about Moses's childhood. Presumably he was educated in the palace, he probably made a name for himself, and may or may not have stuck out as a Hebrew in an Egyptian environment, but the Torah doesn't tell us that. We learn only three things: He floated in the basket, he beat the taskmaster, and he ran away to Midian and got married.

It would be remarkably arrogant to compare myself to Moses, who is himself described as *anav me'od*, exceedingly humble. But I will share three vignettes from my "childhood" years at B'nai Israel.

So first: Even before I officially started working here, Rabbi Schnitzer pulled me aside and said, "Oh by the way. There's one project you're going to have to work on right away. There is a group that has been studying for two years for an adult bat mitzvah and their celebration is coming up on the first day of Sukkot. You are going to have to prepare them." It turned out that this was perfect because the first few weeks in a new place can be overwhelming or as you try to adjust. But I had a project. And those 22 ladies were quite capable and they made themselves and their families and the congregation very proud.

It was special also because the adult b'nai mitzvah program represents the best of what B'nai Israel is all about. It's about access. Too many Jews, whether they were denied access because of their gender, or they weren't born as Jews, or they just didn't take religious school as seriously as perhaps they should have - too many feel uncomfortable with the traditions of the synagogue. And that program offers an opportunity to engage, to learn, to ask questions, and then to chant from the bima as an affirmation that they really belong.

Adult b'nai mitzvah is part of a larger program where the topics and time commitments vary, but the basic goal is to offer the opportunity to take hold of Torah, to learn at the appropriate level, and to be enriched by our precious heritage. I love teaching Torah, preaching from this *bima*, continuing what I call the ongoing Jewish conversation. And I look forward to myriad new opportunities for study with each of you.

My second vignette is an adult education committee meeting a few years back. By the way, evening meetings are NOT my favorite part of the rabbinate. I sometimes have to remind myself of something wise my father once said: "Every job has its drawbacks; that's why they call it work". Meetings are high on the drawbacks list - but they're important.

The committee wanted to do a program for Shavuot that I really didn't want to do. After some discussion, I realized that my opposition was that skits weren't in my skill set - everybody's good at some things and I knew that I couldn't "deliver" the kind of program they wanted. And so I told them that. I said it was fine if they wanted to do this, but they needed to take ownership in order for it to succeed. And they did. Those of you who have attended the Tikkun Leyl Shavuot know it is lovely.

The point is that my success depends on so many other people. I am only one person and we have come to expect so much. I have been fortunate to work with wonderful committees and committee chairs - from Adult Education, LIFE Lecture, Israel Affairs, Social Action, Caring Committee, Membership, 20s and 30s, Mitzvah Day, Inclusion Committee, Ritual Committee, Morning Minyan... and of course the Board of Governors. I have such respect for Lois Alperstein, the five other presidents I've served with, the vice presidents and committee, INCLUDING the budget committee, who VOLUNTARILY bear the responsibility of keeping this place open and operational.

And of course the staff, particularly the Education staff, which is responsible for so much and rarely hears the praise they deserve. Louis Nagel and Fran Zavin, Naomi Sandberg, Sharon Safra (I'll say

more about her later), Melissa Schwartz, Karen Gerton, Nancy Goldberg, Jill Gendelman, and Daniel Levy. I see what you do to make B'nai Israel what it is and I appreciate the opportunities to work collaboratively, offer advice, or teach in your schools. I must acknowledge my assistant Elizabeth Bono and everyone else who works upstairs and downstairs. There are more people I should mention but you get the point that my ten years is not really about me.

Finally, the third vignette is three episodes rolled into one. All three of my children were born in Maryland, and your response – attending the bris and baby namings, gifts, meals – was overwhelming. For the past ten years, I have felt privileged to be invited into your lives for so many important occasions – many happy and some exceedingly difficult. And perhaps even more gratifying, we have cherished the opportunities to invite you into our lives.

Much of the rabbinic amounts to inviting you into my family – asking you to come on a Shabbaton to celebrate Shabbat with us, inviting you into our home for a meal (often, but of course never often enough), living Judaism and putting it out there, hopefully as a model to follow.

That's another part of the job that I can't do alone. For over 9 years, we have benefitted from Sharon's remarkable talents as family education director. But she also serves as a committed partner in my endeavor. It is not always easy ... really, it's not easy ... (I already mentioned the burden of evenings out) but she believes in our sacred work and she does it and she deserves credit.

And my kids too. Rebecca, Ethan, and Gila love the synagogue. They love coming to school here and playing in the gaga pit; and they at least tell me they love being the rabbi's kid. I thank you for making them feel that way and I thank them for being such wonderful children.

I am grateful that so many members of my larger family are able to be here from near and far, to allow me to share my wonderful family with all of you.

So those are my three stories, and they can be summarized by another lesson Moses eventually learned from his own father-in-law: The sacred task of sharing Torah cannot be done alone. Thank you to all who have joined me in this *avodat kodesh*, our sacred work. This is your celebration. May we continue the journey together for the sake of God, Torah, and the future of the Jewish people. Shabbat Shalom.