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## A Coda

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Typically, when I knew that I would be speaking at our Shabbat morning service here at B'nai Israel, I would sit down on Friday afternoon in my office – positioned at a beautiful English antique table which originally belonged to my father and hope fervently that the literary muse would quickly stop by and inspire me. Usually, I was fortunate – and in my old-fashioned long-hand style, I would begin to write.

Over the years, I have given hundreds and hundreds of sermons. Many of them – particularly those intended for Shabbat – would begin with a verse or idea derived from the Parasha, the Torah text of that particular week. But today is different for all the obvious reasons, as I anticipate my retirement now on the immediate horizon. Those of you who are veteran attendees at B'nai Israel and have heard me regularly are certainly familiar with the themes that are close to my heart – because in various forms, I have returned to them over and over during the course of almost a generation.

On this Shabbat, I therefore want to share with you a summation of some of the core beliefs and passions that have animated my rabbinate. These thoughts are not presented in any order of priority – nor are they all-inclusive of everything that is precious to me – but in some measure, they are a distillation of “Jonathan Schnitzer 101.”

I believe in the Synagogue as the most important address of contemporary Jewish life. Rabbi Simon Greenberg, a distinguished Conservative rabbi of an earlier generation, put it aptly in noting: “Because of its unique characteristics, the Synagogue is the only institution that has the power within it to transform a community of Jews into a Jewish community.” In the diverse, do-it-yourself Jewish landscape of 2017, the challenge of the contemporary Synagogue is to galvanize the energy of Jews in new and creative ways – so that the classic mandate of a Synagogue as a House of Study, a House of Prayer and House of Communal Assemblage remains both compelling and attractive.

I believe in Conservative Judaism – which is getting a bad rap these days, in part because it is “in the middle” and has lost some of its headwind to other alternative, competing ideologies. Its message though – with more than a nod to tradition and yet an openness to change – is still the best answer for those who strive to find a balance between affirmative Jewish observance and the realities of the secular society all around us.

Precisely because of our frenzied, stressful daily pace and our near-addiction to technology, I believe that Shabbat offers a critical antidote, a pause, a supremely helpful gift of weekly reinvigoration.

I believe in the rhythm of our Jewish calendar: the solemnity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the joy and back-to-nature style of Sukkot, the power of Passover with its motif of freedom for all God's children, the call of Shavuot to stand at least metaphorically at Sinai. Add Hanukkah, TuB'Shvat, Purim, Yom HaShoah, Yom Haatzmaut and Tisha B'Av. Our calendar sharpens time – making it distinctive, meaningful and often joyous.

I believe in the life-cycle moments of Judaism that frame the major “passages” and transitions of our human journey. They connect us with our history, culture and faith and with each other as part of the totality of our Jewish people. In happiness and in sadness, we are never alone.

I believe in the Mitzvot – the commandments which concretize the values of our Jewish heritage into tangible, specific actions. When we visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, open our homes to the newcomer, support the many worthy causes “out there” that sustain our community and give dignity to the beleaguered, we make the ideals of Judaism come alive through us.

I believe in Torah – yes, in the more narrow sense of the public reading of a scroll to which we return year after year because it is eternal and because as we change, we extract new interpretations and insights from it . . . and yes, Torah in the broader sense of the amalgam of all the texts that have shaped the Jewish experience over the millennia.

I believe in Talmud Torah – a commitment to serious Jewish education for children and adults – as the indispensable key to strengthening Jewish identity.

I believe in Tikun Olam – improving our world – tackling the problems that beset us – climbing the steep hills of civil rights, racism, poverty, immigration – and becoming God’s partners as we struggle up those paths together.

I believe that we have the ability to change, grow and maximize our human potential – to craft a life of consequence – but that we have to do so with intentionality.

I believe in inclusion – and that our Synagogue and our Jewish institutions must be as warm, embracing and generous-in-spirit as possible. I still eagerly await the opportunity to officiate at my first gay wedding ceremony.

I believe in God – my definition of God – whom I find through study, prayer, the grandeur of nature and perhaps, above all, through relationships. When two people are really together, looking at each other’s faces, hearing each other’s words, helping each other, God is there as well.

I believe in Zionism – that right of our Jewish people to have a homeland that is uniquely ours – safe from persecution and threats – where Jews can thrive in every realm. On so many levels, the State of Israel fulfills those dreams, but I also believe that while Israel must certainly be secure, the status quo – i.e. Israel’s control over millions of Palestinians – has become morally tenuous and cannot be sustained indefinitely.

I believe that there are a few pivotal verses from the Torah – among my favorites – that can move us ever-forward – lifting us when we are tired, discouraged and frustrated and reminding of the destiny to which we must aspire: What are they:

“B’reisheet bara Elohim – In the beginning, God”	(Genesis 1:1)
“Shalach et ami – Let people go”	(Exodus 5:1)
“K’doshim tihyu – You shall be holy” and	(Leviticus 9:2)
“U’vacharta b’chayim – Choose life.”	(Deuteronomy 30:19)

When Beethoven wrote his last quartet, he apparently agonized over the final movement. Over the first few notes of that final movement, he wrote the phrase: “Muss es sein? . . . Must it be?” And then over the next few notes of a forceful allegro, he wrote the phrase: “Es muss sein – It must be” . . . My interpretation: There must be a moment for everything. . . even the last words of a last sermon.

“Rabbi” means “teacher.” Thank you for the privilege which has been mine in being your teacher – and for the many opportunities I have had to communicate my love for Judaism with all of you.

God bless you!