

**Rosh HaShana Morning 5784
Rabbi Peter W. Stein
Temple B'rith Kodesh**

***Re'eh ze chadash, hi kvar haya...*
See this, it is new! It has already been!
(Ecclesiastes 1:10)**

Imagine if you will, that we were able to build a time machine and travel to the year 1848. We would meet the first Jews who had settled in Rochester: Joseph Katz, Meyer Greentree, Joseph and Gabriel Wile, Asher Beir, and Elias Ettenheimer. They had come in the 1830s, primarily from Germany.

In that moment, 175 years ago, a group came together to form Temple B'rith Kodesh.

If we were able to sit down with them, they would tell us that the city was a haven for the free practice of Judaism, perhaps more than any other place in the country.

They would tell us that one year earlier, in 1847, a man named Frederick Douglas had arrived in Rochester, and that the city had an expansive view of the social justice aspects of religion: that it was an act of faith to join in fighting against slavery, fighting for women's rights, and more.

And, if we were sitting with those first Jews to live in our city, they would brag, I am sure, about the growth of Bertha Altman, the first Jewish child born in Rochester, just three years earlier, in 1845.

I begin my remarks this morning with this flight of fancy, this imagined visit with our founders, because we are marking a milestone anniversary this year. It is important to celebrate, as we did in style at the 175th anniversary gala in June and as we will by hosting our national president Rabbi Rick Jacobs in just a few weeks.

However, I want to emphasize my perspective on anniversaries, especially as we gather on this Rosh HaShana day.

Anniversaries are best observed not as memorials to the past but rather as platforms to focus on the future.

Let me repeat that: anniversaries are best observed not as memorials to the past but rather as platforms to focus on the future.

Put differently, while it is important that we remember and honor the generations that have created and built our temple family, my hope on this Rosh HaShana day is that we will place our attention not on our ancestors but on our descendants. I want us to think not about our ancestors, but about what kind of ancestors we want to be for the future generations of TBK, Rochester, and the American Jewish community.

And we have the foundation for that in what we know from the first Jewish Rochesterians.

We need to work for the free and safe practice of religion, especially in this time when antisemitism is rising in every part of our country.

We need to embrace the centrality of the social justice mission of Judaism and religion in general...to work for justice, security, dignity, and equality for every person in our community.

And, we need to celebrate the children of our community, providing them with every resource and every opportunity to thrive and become the next generation of proud and active Jews.

This juxtaposition of past and future can be illustrated by our sacred texts.

First, there is a rather elegant and quixotic example from the tradition of gematria and chronograms. Gematria is the custom where numerical values are attached to the letters as a way of finding layers of interpretation. The custom of chronograms is to use a biblical verse or phrase as a statement for the year.

There is a verse in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 1 Verse 10...*Re'eh ze chadash, hi kvar haya*...See this, it is new! It has already been!

The numerical value of those words, derived by adding up each letter, is 784...exactly where we are at in the calendar, beginning the year 5784.

This is a year, our 175th anniversary, when we can stand on the foundation of what has already been and focus on what is new, and what is yet to come.

A second text I offer comes from our prayer book. There is a tradition as we complete the Torah reading and return the scroll to the ark, to recite the prayer *Hashiveinu Adonai, elecha, venashuva...Chadesh Aleinu k'kedem*. Return us to You, God, and we will return. Renew our days as of old.

Just as we read Torah over and over, always rolling it forward, never saying we are done, and always searching for new insights, our task in this anniversary year is to put our energies into renewal...not to go back to the good old days, but to learn from the previous generations.

And that is what we learned from our time-traveling experience: our founders urge us to ensure there is freedom, safety, and equality, and that our children are our first and most important commitment.

Antisemitism is best answered, I believe, in three ways: we need to invest in security, we need to build relationships across lines of difference, and once in relationship, we need to ensure that there is education and understanding about both Jewish history and the realities of today's Jewish practice.

I thank you for your generous support of Roc Strong and of the temple's security fund.

We are building more and more connections with churches and other faith groups. We are reaching out across the city's religious landscape. And those connections are about building greater understanding of Judaism as an antidote to antisemitism.

We honor Douglas's expansive view of the social justice mission of religion in many ways. We have continued our historic commitments and we continue to create new opportunities to make a difference. We are feeding the hungry, housing those who lack a secure home, and supporting the children in the city schools and in the poor city neighborhoods. And, as one of our newest efforts, partnering with the Religious Action Center of New York, we are seeking to address climate change. Join us during Sukkot for a Social Action in the Sukkah night to learn more.

The safe practice of Judaism, a commitment to social justice, and a focus on our children.

At this juncture, as we begin our next 175 years, I am proud of the commitments we have made to the children of the congregation and the generations that will follow them.

Thanks to the generosity of so many of you, we are working to sustain our commitment to religious school as a part of the congregation with no financial barrier and a commitment to inclusion. Our school is a place where every family is welcome. Our school is a place where we create excellence in academics, social opportunities, ritual activities, and social justice concerns. Our school is a place where every child flourishes on the path that is uniquely right for them.

I want to offer one final text this morning.

In the Talmud, there is an extended discussion at the end of the tractate Brachot (Blessings), about peace as the ultimate goal of Torah study.

“Rabbi Elazar said Rabbi Chanina said: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it is said in Isaiah 54:13 ‘And all your children shall be taught of God, and great shall be the peace of your children.’”

The Hebrew word at the beginning of that verse is *banayich*...All your *banayich* shall be taught of God...

And so the commentary urges us: do not read it as *banayich*, children, but as *bonayich*, builders.

It's a common device, to play with the vowels in the unvocalized Hebrew text to craft an interpretation or lesson. In this case, the text is urging us to remember: our children are our builders. This generation of students will learn and then become the builders of the next generation. If we do right by this generation, then they will go on to increase the peace, freedom, and justice in the world.

And this is why I say today, as I began: anniversaries are best observed not as memorials to the past but rather as platforms to focus on the future. We commissioned new music for this morning's service and for Shabbat Bereshit with Rabbi Jacobs because this is a momentous occasion and a cause for celebration...but we didn't attempt to sing the music that was used in 1848. Even as we studied our history this year, we haven't tried to repeat it. Rather, my prayer for this new year is that we have put ourselves in position to enter into a time of renewal. Let this year be a time where we not only remember what has been but we celebrate what is new...and what is yet to be.

When we place the Torah in the ark, we recite *chadesh aleinu k'kedem*. I will close by offering a figurative translation of that prayer: Eternal God, let us be renewed on the foundation of our past. Let us go from strength to strength, forging a path to a strong and bright future. Eternal God, may the next 175 years be filled with abundant blessings.

Shana tova!