

Kol Nidrei Speech 5778

Birshut HaRav, members of the board, dear friends,

It is an honor and a privilege to stand before you this evening, to deliver the traditional Kol Nidrei appeal. I am humbled to be included among the past presidents who are here tonight, Davi Kutner, Josh Wallenstein, David Price, Barry Zisholtz, Jay Cinnamon, Seth Jutan, and Yehuda Duwell, all of whom have devoted countless hours of their lives to our shul, and who continue to offer advice and guidance, so the Young Israel of Toco Hills can continue to thrive. The success of our shul today, is in no doubt due to their efforts, and for that we are eternally grateful.

I'd like to thank members of the Board and all committee heads who have volunteered countless hours throughout the past year to ensure our shul is the best it can be. We also owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to our CFO, Dave Katzman, who ensures day in and day out that this institution remains financially strong, while making sure everything is done in the most fiscally responsible way.

And finally, I would like to thank Rabbi Starr for his leadership and guidance of not just our community, but also for me personally as I've had the opportunity to learn so much from you since I took over this position of President. Your vision of our shul and of this community, and especially your vision of Modern Orthodoxy in Atlanta is the guiding light by which I try to run the shul, so on behalf of all of us, we thank you for your inspiration and continued guidance.

And now *really* finally, on behalf of everyone on the board and on committees, I need to thank all the spouses and family members, especially my own, for allowing each of us to give our time to the shul. Often times when someone chooses to be a volunteer, it's because someone else in the home lets that happen. So for that, we are all eternally grateful.

I believe there are 3 primary experiences in a Jew's life that are critical to shaping him or her into the person they ultimately become. I believe 3 specific things are at the core of forming our Jewish foundations. The first, is the **home**. In the Jewish home, we observe the practices of our parents and grandparents, their customs, and value systems, shabbat, holidays, and more. Without realizing it, we obtain kernels of Jewish values, practices, and family traditions, that become planted somewhere deep inside of us. The experience of the Jewish home is a critical piece of the development of our Jewish selves.

The second experience, I believe, critical to shaping our Jewish lives is **school**. If you were fortunate enough to go to a Jewish Day school, or an afternoon Jewish school, or Sunday school, then you understand the lessons learned in Jewish school certainly have an influence on the Jewish person you became. The basic skills necessary for living an enriched Jewish life, such as reading hebrew, learning prayers, learning torah, learning about the holidays, Jewish songs, and more, are all learned at school. These skills are critical for ensuring a life of Jewish commitment, which is why we spend so much of our resources supporting them, and we should continue to do so.

Now, the 3rd experience we have that plays an *equally important part* in shaping us Jewishly, is.....the **shul**. That's right, the Shul. And by shul, I mean both the day-to-day activities that happen in the shul, and the community which forms around the shul. Whether it's the shul of our youth, or the shul of our adult years, the shul we belong to has lasting affects on who we are today and the kind of *Jewish person* we will become.

Let me explain by reflecting on some of my own experiences from my shul growing up. First example... my shul growing up, like our shul here, had many generations of congregants. Many children, many people in their 50s and 60's, and many *wiser, more experienced* people too. Growing up, we knew the older demographic, and they knew us. This kind of informal interaction with another generation is not something you get at home or in school, and it's a valuable experience in community and in kavod habriot.

Another example... in my shul, there were many people who were role models that we were exposed to. There were doctors who quietly offered services to those who could not afford it, there were people who gave torah classes, there were social activists, Israel activists, and people who started wonderful organizations. Being around so many of these role models week-in and week-out will rub off on an individual and leave lasting impacts.

Also, in my shul, there were wonderful tunes in the tefillah, tunes that still move me to this day. And in my shul, there was a youth minyan, where boys could practice being chazzan, and reading torah, and the girls would give d'verei torah between the aliyot. These experiences from

the shul were all little particles of Religious Judaism that rubbed off on me, helping to mold me into a well rounded (I think:) Jewish, observant, community-minded person.

Now my example was specifically my experience as a child and a teenager. But this concept of watching others in a community, and learning from others, is not just for children. Anyone can observe and be inspired by what goes on in a community. Members of a community will inevitably rub off on other members of that community, no matter how old they are. Shul is a place where we can be inspired by our peers.

Now, I've been in many shuls over the years, and I can say something with absolute certainty: I've **never** been part of a community like the Young Israel of Toco Hills. The opportunities to soak up little gems of inspiration and Jewish experience are more present in our shul than I've seen anywhere else. Let me give you some examples:

- There is so much **chessed** happening in our shul: On Channukah, there are visits to the elderly; on Thanksgiving we are feeding the firefighters; on Purim there's a toy drive; on Pesach a food drive; Shavuot, a clothing drive; and guess what? Our children notice that.
- There is an Atlanta-based organization called Yad L'Yad, which provides food for those who can't afford it. Did you know that Yad L'Yad uses **our** social hall to facilitate their distribution of food? We who walk by and see it get inspired by it.

- **Also....**In our shul we have *many* individuals who are role models for us. There are woman torah scholars; male torah scholars; people who started organizations; a group of individuals every shabbat morning studying b'chavrutah; we have women who teach other women how to read torah; there is a doctor who leiyns the torah every single week at mincha and Mondays and Thursdays; **and** we have a beloved gabbai who thinks through every last detail of how to show kavod to an individual when honoring them with wrapping the torah;
- There is so much **learning** happening here; there is a daily daf yomi shiur in our shul; there is a Pirkei Avot study group; shabbat pre-mincha shiurim; adult learning opportunities; there are parent-child learning programs; and we have multiple opportunities throughout the year to hear top scholars in their fields come as scholar-in-residences to our shul;
- We have Women's Torah & Tefillah and Women's Megillah Readings,
- In our shul, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah can stand in front of the entire congregation at the end of services and give a d'var torah to 300 members of their community. What an unbelievable impact that must have on a child.

- **There's more....**we are a community that **enjoys** to sing during tefillah. Not many shuls do, believe it or not. How inspirational for us to sing as a community, and a what a learning experience for us and our children.
- And speaking of children, did you ever noticed the scene at the Aron Kodesh during anim zemirot on a shabbat morning? We need babysitters up there for all those children who want to kiss the Torah. It's beautiful! **That's** a formative experience!
- **What else?....**We have a full fledged bnei akiva program; we have Shlichim families; and we have bnot sheirut. The amount of hebrew spoken within these 4 walls is more than I've ever seen in any other shul! This is a kibbutz my friends! The Young Israel Kibbutz of Toco Hills!!
- We host the largest Yom Haatzmaut celebration in Atlanta, where more than 500 people gather in Mason Mill Park to celebrate Israel;
- And we too are a community with multiple generations; generations that include young, middle-aged and "wiser and more experienced" individuals.
- Our shul and our Rabbi have a reputation outside our town that's beyond extraordinary. Our Rabbi was approached by 2 competing Rabbinical Schools, each asking him to mentor their rabbinical students. These are 2 schools that often don't see eye-to-eye and

are on two very different sides of the hashkafah spectrum, yet each saw in Rabbi Starr a mentor par excellence, someone who can speak to all people, and love all people. My friends, I don't know if you realize this, but this is actually something of historic significance!! To the best of my knowledge, we are the first shul to have a rabbinic intern from each of these institutions serve simultaneously. And we need to be proud of it. And you know what? We and our children notice.

- We have a Yoetzet Halachah on staff this year who will teach and advise the women of our community on sensitive matters relating to Taharat Hamishpacha. Many modern orthodox shuls in America still are not willing to cross this bridge, but we did. And we and our children notice.
- We have a shul that shouts “**inclusivity**”: Look at the ramps for wheelchair access to the aron kodesh; look at our bima which is centrally located and is easily accessible by men and woman equally; we and our children notice.
- Our community just showed **hachnasat orchim** to 1500 evacuees from Florida. Talk about a formative experience! We and our children notice.
- And finally, our shul is not just a place where random individuals come to pray. It is a place where everyone is treated like family, the Young Israel of Toco Hills Family. It's a place where everybody is treated with respect, and kavod, regardless of how much they

know, or what their age is, or their level of observance. It is a place of warmth, friendliness, and mutual respect. It's a place where we celebrate each other's smachot together, and unfortunately, at times where we mourn each others' losses together. That's what a community is; that's what a community is all about; and that's our Young Israel of Toco Hills community.

And I want to tell you something....these things are not happening in every shul around the country. I promise you. Our shul is a rare breed. Whether we realize it or not, the things happening in this shul and in this community are transforming us, they're molding us, and they're raising us up.

So by now, I hope I've convinced you of the important role our shul plays in supporting our Jewish Foundation. It is the third essential piece of the pie that creates a meaningful wholesome Religious Jewish individual. Along with the Home and School, the Shul really is an equal factor in determining what kind of committed Jewish person we become.

Our congregation is truly a kehilah kedoshah. And it's because of each and every one of you. I've never been more inspired in my life by what I see happening in our shul. And this is why our shul is growing. It's why people want to join our shul. We have 210 member units. We have a large demographic of young professionals, students, and singles. And of course, we have children. Do you know how many children are in our shul? **236**. That's **Two Hundred and Thirty**

Six! We're going to need a bigger Aron Kodesh folks. That's tremendous, and we should be proud. And if you walk into the classrooms on shabbat morning, you'll realize we're starting to have another big problem.....it's called space. But let's leave that for next year's kol nidrei appeal:)

There are so many wonderful things happening in our shul. And I wish I can stand here and say to you "**Take it, it's free!** The beautiful sanctuary, the air conditioning, the lights, the custodial staff, the office staff, the flyers, the babysitting, the shabbat morning groups, the kiddushes, the landscaping, the mortgage on the building, the insurances, the scholar-in-residence programs, the yoetzet halachah.....it's all covered....come enjoy!! It's all free!!" Unfortunately as we all know, what we have here costs money. Yes, we run a very efficient operation. Yet, it still costs hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to operate this beautiful facility and keep the shul running. We have dues, yes, and dues are very important, but dues only cover 50% of our budget.

The balance of the funds comes from donations, specifically through 1 major appeal, and 1 minor appeal. The minor appeal is the Shavuot appeal, about 9 months from now, and we use it to help cover summer costs. But the *major appeal* is this Kol Nidre appeal. The Kol Nidrei appeal covers 25% of the shul's budget. That is a significant amount of money that we rely upon to fund much of our operations. Many shuls have annual dinners, we don't. Many shul's conduct multiple fundraisers throughout the year, we don't. Many shuls auction off honorees for the high

holidays, we don't. Many shul's charge for seats for the high holidays, we don't. We make just one major ask, and it's tonight.

Many of you have already generously pledged, and for that we thank you. But for those who have not yet been reached, pledge cards have been left on your seats.

Please consider the importance of our shul in your lives, not just in how it serves you today, but more importantly in how it will shape your future and the future of your children and grandchildren. Know that if there ever was a cause for which to stretch your tzedakah, our shul is as worthy a cause as any. You don't have to pay your pledge tomorrow. You can take care of it over the course of the year. But we need your pledge tonight. Please, on this holiest of nights, when we're asking G-d to seal us for a good life, a life of health, a life of sustenance and blessing, please consider a significant gift to our shul and help ensure that the gems of Jewish experience, found within these 4 walls, continue to shape us, mold us, and transform us, for many years to come. -G'mar V'chatima Tova.