

Avodah Sh'balev: Work of the Heart

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

Dedicating our Synagogue Building | April 29, 2007

First, let me say how moved I am to share this momentous day with so many people – members, friends, family, colleagues, and leaders of our community.

Bruchim Habayim – welcome, welcome to you all!



There is a point in a Bat or Bar Mitzvah where the family stands before the open ark and the Torah is passed *l'dor v'dor*, from one generation to the next. This ceremony has special meaning for us, because of the Czech Torah we have. Our Torah comes from the town of Strakonice. The Nazi destroyed it during the war and murdered all the Jews who lived there. Almost nothing survived but our Torah. Our Torah is perhaps the only thing that stands between continued life and oblivion for the Jewish community of Strakonice.

This Torah is our namesake. We are called *Shomrei Torah/Guardians of The Torah*, out of respect for this Torah and the legacy it represents. I always feel like the people of Stakonitz are smiling when we pass that Torah... They are saying that “our memories were not taken with our lives, our legacy of life, learning, prayer and hope, was not obliterated...We live on!” Indeed, they live on through us.



How they must be smiling today! Our march into our new home is another kind of passing, *l'dor v'dor* from one generation to the next, from the hollowed ground of Christ Church and the truly wonderful and fruitful relationship of over 30 years, to our own home here at 2600 Bennett Valley Road.

This day was a long time coming, this passing of the Torah from one generation to the next—over 30 years!

This day truly spans the generations, grounded in our past, realized in the present, the embodiment of the promise of the future.

It's worth taking a moment to reflect on these three poles of our temporal existence – to honor the past, recognize the present and envision the future – *l'dor v'dor* – from one generation to the next.

We would not be here today if it were not for a hearty, small band of committed, progressive, Jews that started this congregation some 32 years ago. They struggled in numbers, but not in spirit. Most importantly, they established the warm and welcoming *minhag*/custom that has defined Shomrei Torah up until today.

Many of the founding members are no longer with us, at least on the physical plane, yet they live on in the legacy of this congregation. Their memory is truly a blessing.

There are many to remember. We can't mention everyone now, but I will recall a few of the key people, who helped build the solid foundation we stand on today – Stuart Sobelman, Florence and John Brown, Robert and Claire Harris, & Bob Schact.

And more recently, Evelyn and Dan Winston and Leah Edleson who did not live to see the building but whose generosity in death went a long way to helping our community come alive. One person stands out, a servant of the Jewish community for over 50 years, a rabbi at Shomrei Torah for 7 years, and our rabbi emeritus up until his death last July, Rabbi Michael Robinson...

Michael, we wish you were here physically, your memory, your work, your passion for Judaism, for social justice, for all humanity, lives on in us...

There are many others to remember, old and young, who added to the life of our community and who are no longer with us.

More than a few people standing with us today are feeling the loss of a spouse, a child, a sibling, a loved one.

If you would like to call out a name, please do so now...

We remember all those we've loved and lost. We carry their memory forward with us into our new home.

As we pass the Torah *l'dor v'dor*, we commit ourselves to keeping faith with you who now sleep in the dust, ensuring that the best of what you represent is kept alive in our lives and the life of the congregation here at 2600 Benett Valley Road.

The Present – Our Building Council and Capital Campaign Chairs:

Dianne Smith
Carol Abramson
Garry Goodman
Melissa Kort
Carl McGahan
Jeremy Olsan
Phyllis Rosenfeld
Marlene & Martin Stein
John Weinstein
Reuben Weinzveg
Nancy & Reed Ferrick

In Hebrew there are two primary words for prayer – *tefilah* & *avodah*. *Avodah* originally meant, *work* and it was related to the *work* of the priest in our ancient temple in Jerusalem. Later it evolved into *avodah sh'balev* the *work of the heart* or prayer.

I never experienced a more profound and meaningful form of worship than your tireless work on behalf of your community to secure our future.

This building is the sum total of thousands of volunteer hours given over 8 years– truly astounding!

Through your actions, and the help and, the generosity of countless folks, many of which are here today, you have ensured a future for progressive Jewish life in Sonoma County.

You stand, in the deepest way, in the eternal chain of Jewish Tradition. In fact, this building is a new link forged, in large part, by your tireless efforts.

Our ancestors are smiling, we are grateful, the promise of the future shines before us, in large part, thanks to you.

There are 3 people without whom we would not have our building today. Let's take a moment now to honor them:

Dianne Smith
Marlene and Martin Stein

Dianne, you are our fearless leader. You were the inspiration for the Capital Campaign, the visionary behind the whole push to build our own space. Your leadership and dedication has been exceptional. Through it all, and there was a lot to go through... you held fast to the dream, and you made it happen.

Martin & Marlene – you two have been heavy lifters and stalwart members of the team. Without you, your generosity and your dedication, we would not be here today.

Dianne, Marlene and Martin, in every generation the Jewish people rely on folks like you to step forward to ensure *l'dor v'dor*, that Judaism and the Jewish people will survive and, *b'ezrat hashem/with God's help*, thrive.

Welcome to the ranks of the *g'dolim*, the great ones of our generation!
kol hakavod!

The Future:

It is important to remember that we did not build a building for the sake of a building; we built the building in order to fulfill our mission, to be a center for Progressive Judaism in Sonoma County

What does that mean?

- To be a place that welcomes all kinds of Jews and their families
- To be a center for religion and culture, a place that pushes the boundaries yet is grounded in tradition.
- To be a place of life long learning – to praise God through the use of our minds
- To be a place of caring within the congregational family and outside of it as well.
- To be a place that pursues justice for all
- To be a place that supports the principles of equality, freedom and shalom among all peoples everywhere.

As you can see, we have our work cut out for us. Nevertheless, we have a strong foundation, some of which was passed down to us, much of which we have built together in the last decade or so, the rest of which stands before us, waiting to be grasped, like the two *etzim*, the two handles of the Torah scroll, our *etz chayim hi*, our tree of life, if we take hold of it, *l'dor v'dor*, *from one generation to the next*.

Birkat HaCohanim

May these walls be infused with the Divine Presence & may they be a protection from all that is hateful and harmful, both physically and spiritually.

May the light of Adonai shine upon all who seek sustenance here

& may grace, mercy and loving kindness be ever present.

May God's presence be found in the faces of all who enter here, in the hallowed space between every human encounter.

& may peace be our lasting blessing.