

SPEECH - ANNUAL MEETING 2018

Welcome to the 2018 Annual Meeting of Congregation Beth Yeshurun. I am so happy to see all of you here. The theme of our Annual Meeting this year is "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek – Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!*" What an appropriate theme for this year of challenge! We have all been called to channel our inner strength to move past what has been an unbelievable few months for our congregants and our synagogue.

Hurricane Harvey brought devastation to our synagogue and the entire Jewish community. But, we have bounced back! It will take years for many of us to return to our pre-Harvey life but we are all moving forward in our personal and synagogue lives. Our school wing has been rebuilt and all of our Day School and Religious School children are back in the building. The wing we are sitting in was completed and back in use on January 5. We are still waiting for furniture and some of the finishing touches, but we are home! We are currently renovating our meeting rooms and administrative and clergy offices and hope they will be completed by May. We are also making some changes to the Barg Sanctuary and Pulaski Rauch Auditorium but plan to have everything ready to celebrate the High Holy Days in our home!

The expense of rebuilding our synagogue has been a concern for all of us. We have been so lucky to have the team of Bruce Stein and Jennifer Sutton leading the charge to raise the necessary funds to renew and restore our building. The response has been amazing! All of you have stepped up to contribute to the Harvey Recovery Fund. Of course, we haven't yet reached our goal so there's still time for you to participate.

I must acknowledge some of those whose help was instrumental for our Harvey recovery:

- Brith Shalom for being our home away from home and allowing us to join them in prayer while we were displaced. Rabbi Teller, Larry Estes, and Stephen Rubin and their entire congregation went out of their way to welcome us.
- Beth Israel for welcoming our preschool and religious school children and providing an environment for them to feel comfortable.
- Emery Weiner for hosting our elementary school students. Our children were so excited to be on your campus and are still talking about the great lunches!
- Emanu El for hosting several of our b'nai mitzvahs.
- Lakewood Church and Pastor Osteen for providing us with an amazing venue for our High Holy Day services. Pastor Osteen and his staff were so gracious and made us feel so welcome. Special thanks to Denis Braham for his assistance!
- Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles for providing us with their extra seats which will be used in the Freedman-Levit Sanctuary until ours arrive in late summer.
- Jewish Federation of Greater Houston for their ongoing support. They provided the transportation for our congregants to get to Lakewood. It was definitely a challenge to shuttle over 5,000 congregants from our parking lot on Frankway but it worked! They have also been very generous with their financial support, providing us with funding for lost revenue and some of the expense of our building renovation.
- The State of Israel sent \$1 million to Houston to assist in Harvey recovery. We are the recipient of \$125,000 to help rebuild the J.B>Greenfield Chapel.

- And finally, all of you. Without your help, we would not have been able to return to our beautiful building as quickly as we have. Several of our members rushed to the synagogue during the storm to carry our torahs to safety. Other congregants flocked to the building immediately after the storm to pack boxes and move our items out of harm's way. Everyone stepped up to help.

After our first service back in the synagogue on January 5th, my sister Susan commented that she was reminded of the famous line in "The Wizard of Oz" – there's no place like home!! In "The Wizard of Oz", a cyclone takes Dorothy and her dog away from their home in Kansas. Last August in Houston, a hurricane took many of us from our homes as well as our beloved synagogue. In "The Wizard of Oz", there is Glenda the good witch and the wicked witch of the west. Fortunately for most of us, we have seen only the good in our congregants and community. We had people and congregations throughout the country helping us to return home. For almost five months our clergy, staff, congregants and students have been dispersed across Houston – our High Holy Days at Lakewood Church; our clergy operating out of their homes; our staff working in temporary offices on Augusta Drive; our congregants attending services at Brith Shalom or various other locations; and our students at Beth Israel and Emery Weiner. While we appreciate everything that they have done for us, there really is no place like home! At least we didn't have to deal with flying monkeys!!

Although it's been a challenge, life has continued here at Beth Yeshurun. Through the herculean efforts of many in this room, we still had a year full of meaningful programming and

events. Copies of committee reports are distributed at the Annual Meeting and are posted on our website so there's no need for me to go through all of their deliberations and accomplishments. But I would like to share some of the highlights of the last year with you.

Religious Services:

- Shabbat Shelanu was created to be a more intimate service designed to keep everyone engaged and involved, and is still a work in process.
- Carlebach Style Friday Night Services have attracted a loyal following.
- Shabbat in the Park continues to be a favorite among young families and routinely attracts a large crowd.
- Our annual Night of Learning to celebrate Shavuot was fabulous! Our clergy captivated the audience with little known facts spoke about the Amazing Kings of Israel – Saul, David, Solomon and Josiah.

We've had a long list fantastic speakers and performances as well:

- 100 Jewish Men had a great list of guest speakers as usual
- The Jewish Learning Project held successful lunch and learns, weekly Torah study, and Sunday morning learning sessions. Of particular note was the recent 3-part series entitled Jewish Christian Dialogue with Rabbi Morgen and Professor Matthias Henze.
- Other fantastic programs included Rabbi David Golinkin, scholar-in-residence; Professor Stephen Berk, history professor at Union College, and Rustem Hayroudinoff, world-renowned pianist. Even our own Ed Gardner, a long-time Beth Yeshurun member and

CPA, held a special seminar “Hurricane Harvey and Your Taxes” to help our congregants make sense of some of the post-Harvey challenges.

Other Programs:

- We offered so many fabulous family programs this year. At the “Big Bread Burn” in April, we shared the last taste of *hametz* before Passover. A highlight was throwing our bread on the fire while the Bellaire Fire Department stood by. Our Purim Carnival was fabulous – probably the best one yet! In July, we shared “Sunday Funday” to celebrate National Anti-Boredom Month with games and snacks. Even after Harvey, we rejoiced in the sukkah courtyard and celebrated Sukkot with “Pizza in the Hut” and Chanukah with “Mascots and Menorahs.” Both events drew huge crowds eager to be back in our home!! Another fun program was Pajama Havdalah. The kids - and some of the adults - wore their pajamas as they joined in prayer to celebrate the end of Shabbat. Even Rabbis Fort and Sholklapper wore their pajamas!!
- Our young adult programming took a giant leap forward under the leadership of Rabbi Sarah Fort and Riana Sherman. In October, “Sushi in the Sukkah” received rave reviews from our younger members and guests. The success continued with “Vodka and Latkes” to celebrate Chanukah. More recently, Rabbis Fort and Sholklapper hosted a Shakshuka Project for young professionals in their home. What a wonderful idea!!
- Sisterhood had a wonderful year! They had several challah bakes during the year which attracted adults and children – everyone had fun and it was great to watch the intergenerational teams kneading dough together! But most of the kudos go to our

Sisterhood for their efforts to assist our congregants after Harvey. Soon after the flood waters receded, they sponsored a Sisterhood Spaghetti Dinner for a flood victims and their families. They also prepared and distributed over 200 Shabbat boxes with challah, wine and gift cards to our affected families with the able assistance of staff members, Riana Sherman, Ashley Mills, and Mindi Stern and a cast of volunteers!

Religious School

- Our annual Israel-a-Palooza celebration of Israel attracted over 275 students, siblings, parents, and grandparents. This year's theme was Faces of Israel to celebrate those people who make Israel so special. Many thanks to Joyce and Arthur Dauber for sponsoring this annual family celebration!

When I was installed for my second term, I acknowledged that we were at a crossroads – that the role of the synagogue was changing, that the younger generation were not as engaged, that the empty nesters were drifting away from the shul and that synagogue members want a “bigger bang for their bucks.” We began a Strategic Planning Initiative to address those concerns and organized several subcommittees to review our current programs and practices with the hope that we would be able to share the recommendations with you tonight. Little did we know how our priorities would shift dramatically and that we would spend the last five months of my presidency just trying to stay afloat!!

While I am the first to admit that Harvey isn't yet fully behind us, I wanted to take this opportunity to now talk about the future. Many of our lives have been so consumed by the storm for the last 5 months, sometimes it can be hard to look forward, but I strongly believe

that the future of this synagogue is as bright as it's ever been. Collectively everyone in this room has made tremendous progress towards positioning Beth Yeshurun for growth and prosperity for years to come.

Before Harvey brought chaos into our community, we brought several creative, energetic professionals onto our staff to focus on the recruitment and retention of members. We were so lucky to bring them on board prior to Harvey because they have been invaluable to our recovery effort:

- Rabbi Sarah Fort joined us on July 1 and has been busy since the day she arrived! As Assistant Rabbi, she handles the full range of worship, pastoral and life-cycle responsibilities with a special emphasis on the engagement of our young adults and families. She and her husband, Rabbi Ariel Shoklapper, were welcomed into the Beth Yeshurun community and have already initiated several programs with our young adults and families.
- Riana Sherman moved into the Program Director position this past summer. Riana was no stranger to Beth Yeshurun – she previously worked at the Beth Yeshurun Day School for 9 years, first as a teacher and then as the Early Childhood Principal. She is very energetic and has developed some fabulous programs during her short time here. Even before we moved back into the building, she coordinated several programs in our Sukkah courtyard.
- Sarah Goldberg was hired as Youth Programming Coordinator to engage our congregational youth in creative Judaic and social programming designed just for

them. She also serves as a Field Engagement Associate for the Southwest Region of United Synagogue Youth, supporting local chapters and regional programming.

- Ashley Mills joined us as Marketing and Communications Manager. She works closely with Riana and has assumed responsibility for all of the synagogue marketing and communications including The Message, Happenings, and social media. She's looking forward to adding her creative touch to our messaging!
- and last but certainly not least, we're in the process of a successful transition from our wonderful, incredible spiritual leader and rabbi for the last two decades, Rabbi David Rosen, to our beloved Rabbi Strauss who will be stepping into the Senior Rabbi role this summer. We are anxiously awaiting the opportunity to celebrate Rabbi Rosen's immeasurable contributions to this synagogue and the broader Houston Jewish community at Sunday in the Park with David on March 4 and the Cantata in his honor at Hobby Center on May 23!

We all share a passion for Beth Yeshurun and a hope that our synagogue thrives and becomes "home" to our children and grandchildren. The commitment of our community to rebuild and restore shows the important role that the synagogue plays in the lives of our members at every age and every stage of their lives. The yellow brick road isn't straight. It has obstacles and detours. But, the challenges teach you to be resourceful and deal with problems as they arise.

So, what have we learned?

1. Never give up - Dorothy never stopped trying to get home

2. Good friends come in unlikely places and sometimes unlikely people turn out to be best friends.
3. Never stop dreaming - the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.
4. When someone needs help, do your best to give it
5. There really is no place like home.

As I end my term as President, I must offer my sincere appreciation to all of those who have supported me and the synagogue over the last two years.

Thank you to the Board of Trustees and the Executive Committee for their outstanding dedication and commitment of time and skills. Thank you to our clergy and staff whose hard work, commitment, and caring makes Beth Yeshurun such a special place. Thank you to our donors who have been so generous in support of the synagogue. And thank you to all of our committee chairs and volunteers. Without you, the synagogue would not be able to function.

My special thanks to Andy Burger, my “shul husband”, for your support and friendship over the past two years. I am so excited to turn the reins over to you to continue the work that we have started. I know you will be a fabulous President!!

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Joe, and my family for their support and encouragement. You have all been so understanding of my commitment to the synagogue which has often taken me away from time with you.

And a special thank you to my sons and daughters-in-law for planning this wonderful event!

Thank you!