It is quite eerie to stand here in an empty sanctuary, staring at a camera rather than looking at you. There was a famous soccer player in the Netherlands who said: “Elk nadeel heeft zijn voordeel.” Or, in English, “every disadvantage has its advantage.”

I am not referring here to the advantage that the Rabbi’s sermons or the President’s remarks are shorter than usual.

I am referring to the advantage that driven by our inability to be together, the creative juices of so many have resulted in what I hope you will agree to be amazing, diverse, high quality and inspirational High Holidays programming.

Therefore, I want to start by recognizing those who have been instrumental in putting this together:

* The Rabbi and Cantor for their leadership, wisdom, tireless efforts, creativity, and desire to make these days special for everyone. Of course supported by the other professional staff;
* Ritual Chair Elaine Braun-Keller for her support of the clergy, preparing the machzor, recordings of torah and haftarah readings, and so much more;
* Heidi Lovitz, together with the teachers, for developing a wonderful childrens program;
* Judy Kramer and the amazing Choir and instrumentalists for making sure the beautiful voices and sounds continue to be heard. You outdid yourselves;
* Danny Marder for finding the production company and coordinating and supporting the production of the services;
* George Morton for helping with recordings, technology and being the ultimate utility man throughout the process;
* Maida Fund, Lauren Solomon and Rick Green for truly amazing internal and external communications and publicity;
* And last, but most certainly not least, Jaymi and Joe Formaggio. The efforts you put in to coordinate everything, keeping everyone on point and on the same page, recruiting volunteers, building spreadsheets, and much more was nothing short of herculean.

There are many more who contributed so much to these holidays and deserve my thank you and your recognition – keep an eye on your email. Without our dedicated staff and phenomenal volunteers, we would not have been able to pull this off.

We are truly living in unprecedented times. Not only are we dealing with a pandemic, which in and of itself would be difficult enough, we are also living in a world which is full of divisiveness, misinformation, injustices, and often times, just plain nastiness. So, how do you stay optimistic?

* Well, I stay optimistic because of what I have witnessed over the past months and referred to above: the dedication, efforts and collaboration of so many which culminated in these beautiful services;
* I stay optimistic, as I see how the community stepped up to support each other during this pandemic by providing comfort to each other and raising money for the Acton Food Pantry and our community;
* I stay optimistic seeing the Chesed committee and the community at large reach out and support our fellow members who experience pain or are going through a difficult time;
* I stay optimistic witnessing our members respond to social and racial injustices.
* I stay optimistic seeing how the perseverance of the solar team resulted in the largest solar installation in Massachusetts for a faith based organization;
* And, I stay optimistic that with the Rabbi, Cantor and Beth Goldstein, together with Susan Perry and Ezra and Lori, we have the leadership onboard to continue to build our future.

It is not just words – it is action. This is why, as I talked about last year, CBE Matters - together we help make our community a better place.

We made progress this past year with our five *Amudim*:

* The Communal Jewish Values Amud completed the “values wheel,” a tool which can help with making a Jewish Choice, the theme of the Rabbi’s sermons during the Holidays;
* The Membership Engagement Amud completed seven focus group meetings giving us valuable feedback which we will turn into actions. Here we also focused on inclusiveness; how do we make sure that everyone, new members and existing members feel that CBE is a welcoming place for everyone. If you have any ideas right now about programming you would like to see, write it down in the chat. If you have them later, email me, any member of the board or the professional staff;
* Within the Governance Amud, the Constitution and Bylaws Amendment committee has been meeting regularly. You will see the results of this in 2021;
* The Volunteer Engagement Amud created a database of volunteers and their specific skills. I just checked with our IT team – I am happy to report we still have room in the database for additional volunteers…..sign up!

The five *Amudim* are the areas we believe are critical to shaping our future. There is not solely one reason why CBE matters, there are so many different reasons to so many of you. The Board and professional staff will continue to focus on supporting what is important: commitments to Torah, service, acts of loving kindness, education and continuous learning for young and old, social justice and building and sustaining community, and so much more.

We started the Jewish calendar year off with our 50th anniversary Gala, which was a great multi-generational celebration. We were so fortunate that we were still able to enjoy the Shpiel. But, everything changed on March 14th when we held our last events in the sanctuary and put the Covid-19 Task Force together. (Thank you to all members who have been so diligently contributing since the first meeting in March.)

Turning 50 hasn’t been a great experience for CBE…. Rather than thinking about the future, we now had to first think about ‘today,’ about the immediate needs to get through this pandemic.

* How do we pivot from in person to remote? As I wrote many times in the Star, I was really impressed how the Rabbi and all professional staff achieved this so quickly and effectively.
* How do we deal with the loss of income of the ELC and manage our finances? We applied for and received a forgivable loan under the Cares Act.
* How do we keep everyone safe while still continuing with programming? I know this has been difficult at times. If we upset you, I ask for your forgiveness and hope you can appreciate that all decisions we made were out of love and care for the safety of everyone.
* How do we re-open the ELC, which is so important to the viability and success of CBE and critical to the families enrolled? I want to thank Susan Perry, the ELC director, and Les Kramer, the professional volunteer, for the yeoman work they do to make this program so successful and keep everyone safe.

But no matter the obstacles, CBE and its members have continued to pray and build community together. Now, more than ever, we need this community, where the total is greater than the sum of the parts, and where even when we are apart, we are together.

But, as you know, running a full-service Jewish community is expensive. Our dues and fees do not cover all of our costs, which are even greater now due to the pandemic. In addition, now, as unfortunately too many of our fellow congregants have been (financially) impacted by the pandemic, our income will be down. We rely on the generosity of all who can to balance our budget and to offset the impacts of the pandemic.

The High Holiday Appeal is a critical source of income for us, without which we really cannot be the same community. We have set a very aggressive goal to raise $100,000 this year. I know we can achieve this. Achieving this target relies as much on the smaller gifts as it does on the larger gifts. Importantly, and I want to stress this, it relies on everyone’s participation – 100%, no matter the size of the gift.

During this year’s campaign, you will be hearing from fellow members about what CBE means to them personally. I hope you feel the same and I invite you to take time to think back on what this community has given to you over the past years, how it has helped you live your values, and what your hopes are for the future. Collectively, our response to the High Holiday Appeal is a reflection of how important the CBE community is to us. If you agree that this place matters…I ask that you invest in its future, not only financially but also through volunteering and helping to make CBE the most welcoming and inclusive community it can be.

In the, somewhat modified, words of David Ortiz – “this is your community, your Shul.”

I pray that next year we will all be physically together again in this beautiful sanctuary. On behalf of Amy, our children, Nicole and Aryn, and the entire Board of Directors, I wish everyone *shana tova umetukah*, a happy, healthy and sweet New Year. May all your choices this year be good choices, and may we all be sealed for a good year in the Book of Life — “g’mar chatima tova.”