

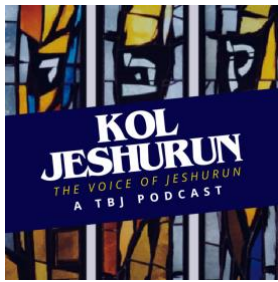
Episode 4: Leadership in Times of Crisis

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:00:00] Welcome to Kol Jeshurun, a podcast from Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a vibrant and flourishing, reform Jewish community in Short Hills, New Jersey.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:00:11] Welcome. I am Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz, Kol Jeshurun is where you can come to engage with teachings of relevant wisdom and music. You will hear from our clergy, staff and guest speakers who will help bring meaning into a world that so badly needs it.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:00:29] If you would like to learn more about our congregation, please visit us, TBJ.org.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:00:39] Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to Kol Jeshurun, our new podcast, and this is a really special week for me. I'm Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz. I'm here with four of our extraordinary leaders, those who have served as president of our congregation, specifically because this week is Parshat Yitro, the portion where Moses is father in law, shows up almost out of the blue and really saves the the nature, the trajectory of the Jewish people by advising Moses to make decisions in a way that really changes not only the future of the Jewish people, but also the future of decision making in many respects resembles the progenitor of what our judicial system is today. We've asked for presidents to come be with us in our podcast today, who specifically have served the congregation during unexpected crisis. And if it were not for their leadership, we would not be who we are, where we are today as a congregation. So starting with Charlie Dreifus, who was president from 1988 through 1990, followed by Richard Zucker, who was president from 2001 through 2002, Maureen Spivack, who was president from 2011 through 2014, and Craig Parker, who has been president from 2019 until now. Welcome to the four of you. Really a pleasure to have you and has always been a privilege to be your partner. I've asked the four of you to come today because each of you, as I said earlier, serve the congregation during acute crisis.



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Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:02:07] Charlie, for anyone who knows our congregation, they know the extraordinary roof. Well, during your presidency, I will say not because of you, but during your presidency. The roof was in real trouble. And a roof like ours doesn't cost \$100. It really costs a lot of money.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:02:23] Richard, you were president when 9/11 happened, one of the days that are indelibly marked our nation's spirit, and obviously very much so for those of us who lived in the Northeast.

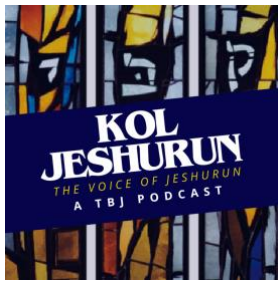
Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:02:34] Maureen, you were vice president of finance during the crash of '08 and sat in a room with the president, Eric Sellinger and myself as we took out our scalpels and were cutting the budget, not knowing if we were going to have to put beds in the social hall to bring people in. And your own presidency, how to deal with how to retool our budget, how to raise money and how to refurbish our synagogue.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:02:58] And Craig, of course, you never expected to become president during the first pandemics since 1918. Of course, racial uprisings in a divided country that none of us could ever imagine.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:03:09] So, you know, Charlie, I'll begin with you, since you're the president who served first. So, Charlie, did you ever imagine that you would actually be a type of president in your life?

Charlie Dreifus: [00:03:18] Not really. I was raised in a conservative synagogue, so I wasn't really involved and it was just run. And specifically Rabbi Green, who pulled me in early on. We joined in '78 and by '88, I was president. So, no, I didn't ever think I would be.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:03:46] Rabbi Gewirtz: So why did you do it?



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Charlie Dreifus: [00:03:48] By that time, Madeline of course, was involved, our daughters were involved. We were regular Friday night participants. I started serving on the board, worked my way up, as we all do, and really got an appreciation for the people in the community.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:04:09] Rabbi Gewirtz: Richard Zucker, you were the son-in-law of my predecessor by two Rabbi Pilchick who, anyone who's listening who was a congregant of Rabbi Pilchick, thought that he was the voice of God himself.

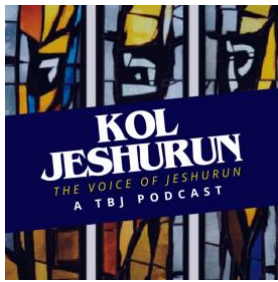
Richard Zucker: [00:04:25] Richard: Are you suggesting he wasn't?

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:04:29] Rabbi Gewirtz: (Laughter) - I'm not suggesting nothing of the of the type at all. But you even though you married into the royal family, if you will, did you imagine you would take that place of leadership?

Richard Zucker: [00:04:41] Absolutely not. I remember serving with Charlie during his presidency. I was a vice president from 1988 to 1992 for those 4 years. And you know, and I sort of stepped out of my shoes from what I was, I tended to be more a follower than a leader. As I look back on my life, I mean there were certainly leadership activities that I was engaged in, but I did it. I ran, and my life. Then it just totally changed.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:05:18] Maureen, you told me in ways that I'm not even sure if you remember telling me, but it's always touched me that many ways, you were raised to be committed to service in the world. And if I remember correctly, your service originally was to the township and I know you never imagined becoming president of the synagogue. How did that happen to you?

Maureen Spivack: [00:05:39] Exactly. I've always lived my life to the fullest. I believe every day you have delivered to the fullest. And I would spend my day in my professional life working with a very secular health care organization. And then I would come home to Short Hills. And I was the chairperson of the Citizens Budget Advisory



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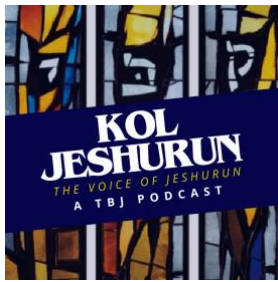
Committee, which is the fiscal oversight for Millburn Township. And that was great. But what was missing? I love service, but what was missing is I never felt like I had a Jewish community. We we were members of the temple. We had a small child. But I was away and I touched the shoulder of Rabbi Groffman at the time. And I said to him, I really want to feel a Jewish community. I have all the service that I want to give. And I'm kind of tired of giving it without feeling something back that would give me something a little bit more. And he said, great and literally 7 years later, I was president.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:06:58] 7 years after that moment?

Maureen Spivack: [00:07:01] 7 Years after I tapped his shoulder to say I wanted to get involved.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:07:05] I moved because those were not easy years that Eric had when you were basically next in line. And and the fact that you still continue to commit to the presidency after we had such a rough three years, a very good three years, but a very tough time is extraordinary. Craig, I could see in my mind installing you with your mom and your dad, your dad, his memory should be for blessing, obviously. But I'm watching you. And I said what was going on? You said they're looking. They're thinking, how did this kid become the president of a synagogue? So I'm guessing you also didn't imagine becoming president of a synagogue. So tell us.

Craig Parker: [00:07:45] No, not at all. I mean, growing up I was the typical kid whoo, you know, didn't want to go to Hebrew school, was dragged to services on the holidays. And it wasn't something I ever saw myself doing or aspiring to. But then, as Charlie said, you start to get involved and, you know, they pull you in. So it started with playing softball with the Brotherhood on Sunday mornings. That was it. That was my only involvement. And then from there, you know, you get involved with the Brotherhood, you become president of the Brotherhood. And then, you know, now I'm on the board. And even throughout my tenure on the board, I still never thought, I never aspired to be president. But our former executive director always used to tell me all the time, you're



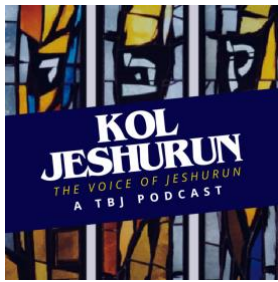
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going to be president of the temple one day. And I told her she was crazy. And then we had... I don't remember.. it wasn't the opening night gala. It was the gala, I think, that followed it, where the past presidents were honored. And I just remember standing there watching on the screen as all the past presidents were honored, many of whom I knew, many of whom I had worked under being on the board and whatnot. And I just started to think what a special group of people that was and how honored it would be to come back 20 years, 30 years, 40 years and be part of that next group. And that's really when I just started thinking about it. But even then, I didn't really say anything or do anything until you came to me and Richard came to me and we started to have that discussion. And then, of course, once I agreed, I sent out an email and said, guess what? I'm going to be the next president of the desperate. And she said, I told you so.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:09:26] Well, that's what happens with the likes of Alice Lutwack. Rabbi Barry Green, once they tap you, it's almost impossible to turn around. So it's funny when you tap the rabbi, the rabbi sometimes taps people.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:09:40] One of the most cherished relationships I've had is with each of you, even the two of you who were not presidents during my time, have served as very, very important advisers to me in different ways. And of course, Maureen, we had three years together and crisis a year and a half into it.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:09:59] And, you know, Jethro changed the trajectory of the Jewish people by giving Moses advice that really changed the course of Jewish history. One could argue and I would say that every president with whom I've worked has given me at least, but it's much more than one, but have been pivotal moments where you have advice in your rabbis in ways that change the rabbi and change the congregation. Can each of you reflect on a piece of advice that you gave to the Senior Rabbi at the time that you think was incredibly important and impactful? Maureen, let's start with you.

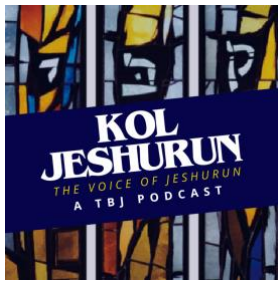


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Maureen Spivack: [00:10:36] Well, you know, Matt, I thought a lot about this, and I'm not sure it's advice, but rather, I think I brought a different perspective in that I was the vice president of finance during a financial recession. And we had to instill a structure that never before really existed. And we also were a size that we never were before. We had grown past being kind of a small community temple. Our scope, our reach was much broader. Our size was larger in terms of revenue and families. So I think that when I look back at our our time together, my perspective, it was two things: Recovering from the financial crisis, but then really implementing the long range plan. So when you put all those things together, the perspective I think that I brought was one of more: what does it really mean to be a fiduciary of this temple? And everything we talked about sustainability, and we talked about it in terms of financial, spiritual, physical sustainability. But that with that came a responsibility that everyone needed to take on. So when I think about that time, I think about how we were really changing what we expected of of our governance, of our board, and to put in best practices. Which I think today we set with a 20 member board that is incredibly strong and diverse because of, I think, the perspectives that I brought at that time.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:12:47] Beautiful. Every Friday was our hour and which always was most important to me. There first was really forty five minutes because the first 15 minutes we always spent just checking in on each other's families, which meant a great deal to me. But I remember you used to have the fiduciary. You used to say to me, we're not a mom and pop shop and we have to actually put practices into place that are going to set ourselves up for many years past the time that we're here. And I actually think where we're looking at it and that that shows a lot of it shows a lot during this conversation. I think a lot of those practices are actually in place now that during this current crisis, it wasn't like we had to redo all of that again. We have had to do a lot of digging but there were a lot of practices in place early. How about you [Charlie] with Rabbi Green?

Charlie Dreifus: [00:13:35] Well, in many ways, Rabbi Green didn't have any siblings. I didn't have any siblings. And he sort of became my older brother.



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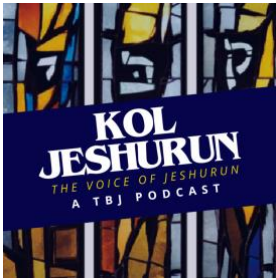
Charlie Dreifus: [00:13:46] We were really close. And it was two ways. I, you know, I was president when I was relatively young. And, you know, he had a lot more experience and I often sought him out. But in terms of what I think I provided Barry the most help with was feedback from the congregation. I always postured myself.

Charlie Dreifus: [00:14:24] People knew of my relationship with Barry, but they also knew that they could come with me with concerns about the temple, including any concerns about Barry, for that matter. And we had I think the temple, and I and Barry all benefited by that conduit that existed because of that.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:14:41] You know, every president, I can't think of one that hasn't been, has been incredibly sensitive, protective on the one hand of me, but also tells me the truth. And and I don't mean, you know, a sermon gets a million reaction. So to say "my group loved it" doesn't mean anything because a whole other group might have hated it.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:15:13] But telling you the truth about yourself, your leadership and what's demanded of you, Richard Mandel, who's who's not on this call, we could have had everyone on there, was saying to me something along the lines of "stagnancy has never worked well for me." And and, you know, and I at first thought, you know, how offensive.... And he said, I want to see I want to see palpable measures of growth all the time. And, you know, and within a couple of weeks, I was like, wow, that fire being lit under our spiritual bottom was really good for us. And so telling the truth is important. Richard, how about you?

Richard Zucker: [00:15:46] I really echo much of what Charlie said. I can't recall being in that position where I was giving advice to Barry, but he was very helpful to me. And I think between him and Marshall, Marshall Sherman, they were just so supportive of me. And we all all three of us were concerned with Jeshurun. And that's what was important to all three of us. And I think it showed on September 11th, I was I was trying a case in



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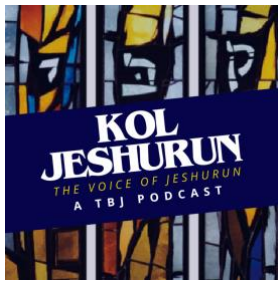
New Brunswick. I rushed up to the temple. I didn't go home. I came directly to the temple because I knew there were kids here. And within 24 hours, especially with Marshall's help of former president Fred Smith, I remember also with, with our help, we got on the telephone and we called on the telephone every single member and arranged for there to be a membership service. September 11 type, if I'm not mistaken, was a Tuesday. I think it was on a Thursday that we got everybody there. It was healing not only the synagogue itself, but also a healing service for for what had happened two days earlier.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:17:04] I like what you said about one of the best things about our presidents and all of you show me this. In fact, everyone knows that nothing is also beneath you. Just because you've risen to the highest levels of leadership doesn't mean you can't do the old fashioned work of getting on the phone and calling every member. And I have found that. I mean, also the jobs that you've all taken on now, and I've always said this about being the Senior Rabbi, I am always available to cut apples for a solution. If you need an extra hand and you've all taught that and model that, that's a beautiful story about bringing healing to the community by then hearing the president's voice on the phone. It's an extraordinary lesson for all of us, Craig. I mean, we're right in the middle of it. But what was one perspective would you bring in terms of advice you've helped bring to me clergy leadership now?

Craig Parker: [00:17:49] I think its what Maureen said, I don't think it's specifically advice I've given you. I mean, you've certainly given me far more than than I've given you.

Craig Parker: [00:17:59] I think part of the job of the president is providing the senior rabbi with certain assurances that things are being taken care of so that you can sleep easier at night, even though you have all your crises that pop up during the day.

Craig Parker: [00:18:17] But at least you know that the ones that you can't directly handle are being handled competently.

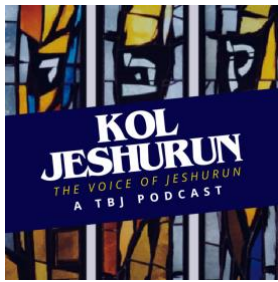


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Craig Parker: [00:18:23] And if it's something that I can't handle, I know that there are 24 other board members and past presidents and people that I can rely upon who are beyond generous with their time when when they need to be, who can help do whatever needs to be done or give whatever answers need to be given so that you can have the assurance that everything is being taken care of appropriately and that if things run the way they're supposed to run, even during a time of crisis, that does make your life easier and that opens you up to being able to do what you do best.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:19:00] So each of you, Richard, you spoke to this, I want to turn to the other three of you in terms of the crises you faced and what you felt like you did by way of response and how and why you responded that way. And then we'll do a little bit of follow up. But, Maureen, tell us about the crash of '08, the asbestos, the change of personnel. You had a lot of moving pieces. A lot. A lot, a lot of money on, not that money counts most, but we really could have fallen apart financially, you know, in any crisis.

Maureen Spivack: [00:19:33] We surrounded ourselves with really right bright people with the skills and expertise to deal with a specific problem that we had to deal with. To me, leadership is about surrounding yourself with the right skills and experience for the job that needs to get done and breaking things apart in manageable pieces so that everybody can cope with it and and only deal with what we have to deal with today. It's also rising to the occasion to do things right. So while there were a lot of difficult choices and a lot of difficult decisions, we always said even with the asbestos, the right thing is to deal with it now and deal with all of it. So if that meant we had to delay the project and it did for one year so that we could do it, we were going to do it right because it was the right thing to do. We were going to find the money. We were going to pay for it and do it. So I guess my own ethics and integrity do the right thing. Surround yourself with the right people. Break the problem down and you could solve anything. And I I found that over and over again.



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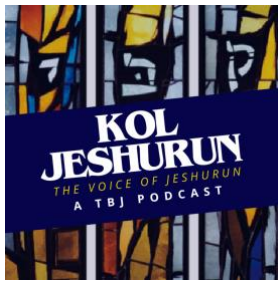
Charlie Dreifus: [00:20:54] At TBJ, so it's interesting during my reign and I use that term because rain came in our auditorium. I didn't know it at the time, but I was similar to what you Rabbi Matt said, my own rabbi in residence here, Madeline, told me that the Torah portion is Yitro. And I thought about, you know, that it takes a village. The Torah portion basically says the community should use the resources. You know, this is how are you going to get it done. And you had said something before that about old fashioned work. Nothing is beneath us. Literally, the board and the rabbi, we went we were all in our auditorium with buckets

Richard Zucker: [00:21:57] Garbage cans, catching the water!

Charlie Dreifus: [00:21:59] Right, catching the water. And similarly, also, as Richard mentioned, Richard was vice president and all of the environmental things we did with the state Richard handled. I mean, I was relieved of all of that work because Richard did such a fabulous legal job and all of that stuff, you know, and Marshall Sherman and all the other past presidents and board members at the time, I delegated to Bob Rosenberg, who succeeded me as president a lot of work also. And we, I benefited by incorporating the the notion of it takes a village.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:22:51] Craig, you've you've had, you know, in many states like Maureen, like..just that I don't think there's been a moment where you have not been president during crisis. Maybe you had three or four months before it happened. So, Craig, how about you? It's just been a really heck of an 18 months for you.

Craig Parker: [00:23:08] You know, I think and again, I'll echo what Maureen said. I mean, it's and Charlie, too. I mean, it's relying on the people who are around you. And then in the end, you know, I think we still have to remember, and it's not always easy at times, is that we're not running a corporation. It's you know, we still have to look at things in a fiduciary way. Don't get me wrong, we still have to be very careful and very conservative about our finances. But yet, you know, we're still a different type of an entity. You know, I think that's part of it is relying on the experts, but also understanding who we are and what our decisions mean, even if they're not necessarily the decisions that we otherwise would want to make.



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Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:23:54] We don't have a lot of time left. I want to say these are not easy questions to answer quickly. I want to ask you, what do you miss about being president and has it or did it impact your Jewish life?

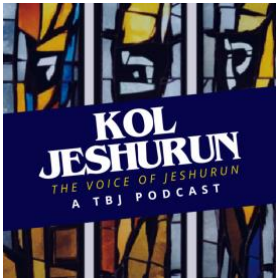
Richard Zucker: [00:24:07] One of the things that I missed is that I had created having meetings with the president every Sunday morning or maybe every other Sunday morning in Ellis auditorium. And I sort of missed that. It would be the opportunity for the membership to come and air their grievances, if that's what they want to talk about, whatever they want to talk about. And it was totally off the record, but it was something I sort of missed that because it enabled me to meet other members of the congregation, many of whom I did not know. And that's what I sort of miss

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:24:51] Maureen, what do you miss and how that impact on your spiritual life?

Maureen Spivack: [00:24:55] Well, I truthfully, I was the president for three years. I loved every minute of it. But what I miss is my weekly calls with the rabbi. I loved it - our first 15 minutes. I looked at it as our heart to heart time and then we got into the TBJ business time. Overall, it created and strengthened my Jewish community, which I really didn't have. And so it's has given me a richness in my life, which is beyond words.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:25:28] Charlie.

Charlie Dreifus: [00:25:29] Well, I know very specifically what I miss during those times when we were dealing with all of the work that involved Alice and the ancillary effect that I started working from home on Fridays, but I had meetings every Friday morning at Temple to review what was going on. And, you know, I had a whole bunch of documents and there was a lot of expenses and the issue of funding it, the assessment and so forth. But I got payback and the payback was I visited each classroom, well, some of the kids and this was, you know, on Shabbat and they did, you know, they are they came up and sat in our hallway and they were singing and that just was so uplifting.



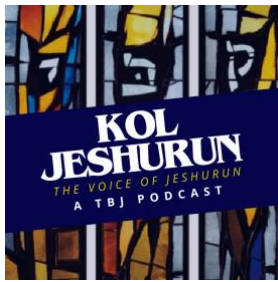
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Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:26:35] In all the years I've known you and we've talked a lot. I'd never heard that story. That's a beautiful, beautiful story. And I always say, by the way, that when in doubt, if I'm having a bad day, I just walk down the early childhood center hallway and you get a completely different perspective. Craig..?

Craig Parker: [00:26:50] I mean, it's an honor. You're serving your community in ways that you otherwise can't, even being on the board. It's not the same being vice president of this or that. I mean, it's still not the same. Obviously, I can't be a rabbi and I can't sing. But to be president is it's the culmination of (and not the end) but it's the culmination of service on the board. And it's an honor to be of service to my community in this way in any way I can.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:27:17] Beautifully said. Folks who are listening out there, and I am not saying this because these four or any other presidents of the congregation need more kudos or thanks, but the hours that are put in by a president of a congregation, especially of our size, are ours that no one out there knows about. And you should know that the kind of devotion and dedication, integrity, love, honesty, ethics and values are just extraordinary. And what I've learned from you is that, like me, when I'm in a supermarket, you're never just out buying a box of Cheerios because any and every time someone will stop you and generally they're really respectful. But every once in a while, they lodge really serious complaint about what's going on.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:28:09] People at home, this is a podcast we're all on Zoom together, so I could see the smiles of all four of you continue to bring that smile and that enthusiasm and that love all of the time. And that really is the common thread between the presidents. I remember that night clearly when we honored our presidents. You look up there and you say that is a very special group of people who have to come with a huge amount of qualities and skills to be able to be president, but also people who really cherish it. So to Maureen Spivak, to Charlie Dreyfus, to Richard Zucker, to Craig Parker, I would say your four names in the name of all of our presidents.



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Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:28:44] Those who are a living, and those who are not, we express on behalf of the congregation, on behalf of your clergy partners, such gratitude to you for devoting time when I know each of you have a huge amount of things professionally and personally grabbing at you and you never say no ever. Just like you didn't say no for this. And that service, to get a little melodramatic here, but that service, I think, will be felt at your time when you, at 120 years old, meet our maker and there'll be an extra sense of gratitude for what you've done for us.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:29:15] So thank you on behalf of the Congregation of Clergy and of staff, because it means a lot to us. Ladies and gentlemen, we really appreciate you continue to listen to our podcast. Make sure when you see the four of these folks that you give them an extra if you can't give them a hug, but you give them a virtual elbow for right now, these folks will be carrying Torahs up that aisle, God willing, this coming September for Yom Kippur, which represents our leadership for now, 174 will be next year, which means, by the way, be careful because you don't know who's going to be asked to chair our 175th. Signing off from Maplewood in Short Hills and New York City and Springfield. Thank you very much. And have a great evening, everyone.

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz: [00:30:03] Thank you for listening to this edition of Kol Jeshurun. If you would like to learn more, visit our website at tbj.org And follow us on social media for updates on all our upcoming opportunities for engagement. We really hope to see you soon.