

Rosh Hashana Address 2014/5775
Rich & Craig

Shana tova.

As we head down the backstretch and into the final turn of our presidency, we want, at risk of solipsism, to take a few moments to reflect on what the experience has meant to us, and in so doing to highlight some of what we think Bnai Keshet means for us all.

First, we've survived it. We're still speaking to each other, and Elliot is speaking to us both. We didn't really know each other all that well when we set out on this joint journey, so this was not a foregone conclusion and we're grateful for it.

It has been deeply rewarding to be able to serve as co-presidents. It has also been time-consuming and occasionally hard. But the rewards have outweighed the costs by many orders of magnitude. We have deepened our connections with innumerable members of the community and with our tradition – and in the bargain have gotten a few things done before we pass the baton. The passing of batons is entirely right for the life of a shul, and our successors Liz Lipner and Marty Fellner, those who will take up executive roles with them, and the team they'll build will assuredly do very good work. But we are not limping to our finish line. To the contrary, we feel energized by the experience. It is – not to worry Phoebe, Sharon, Elliott, Stuart – just a turn of phrase, but we would do it again in a heartbeat.

We are grateful to those who put up with us and the ways we took up this role. We are a demanding duo – perhaps one of us more than the other – and as we approach Yom Kippur we ask forgiveness from the dozens of people we've rubbed the wrong way. We've tried our best, in good faith, to do right by the congregation – but sometimes best efforts are not enough. For the rest, we've relied on your grace and will continue to do so.

The need for grace was perhaps made most clear at a Shabbat dinner at the shul last December, as I was attempting, badly, to manage the behavior of a gaggle of boys, including my son Cal, at the next table. At one point, Carol Schlitt and Alan Morley's son Elliott turned and asked me, without a tinge of sarcasm, "Are you a monster?"

We were reminded in this year – our 36th, double *chai* – of the remarkable history that led us to this moment in our shared story. Many newer members – including, not long ago, us – are not aware of much of this, but suffice it to say that our founding members and those who closely following them sacrificed mightily to bring Bnai Keshet this far. In connection with our building, just by way of example, they took out second mortgages, personally co-signed financial notes, and defended our interests in a NIMBY battle encompassing 26 zoning board hearings, appeals to both the New Jersey and United States Supreme Courts, and some public comments about our community not fit for repetition on Rosh Hashana. This is not ancient history. The people who did all of this are seated beside you. Ask them about it, and thank them. We certainly do.

We could spend the next hour thanking all those who have helped BK to live out its values over the past year. We won't, but there are two groups we cannot *not* acknowledge publicly, so they'll have to stand in for all the others:

First, the board of trustees, who've taken this journey with us (please come forward as you hear your name, and we're aware that some people are elsewhere with family):

- Lori Becker, Chair, Hesed Committee
- Bruce Cohen, Co-Chair, Chevre Chinuch (education committee)
- Roberta Elliott, Chair, Adult Education
- Marian Golan, VP, Communications
- Aya Izraely-Levi, Chair, Moadon Israeli
- Ruth Lowenkron, VP, Education
- Cheryl Marshall-Petricoff, VP, Membership & Community Engagement
- Betty Murphy, Immediate Past Co-President and leader of too much else to mention
- Sharon Pollack, VP, Development
- Richard Polton, VP, Finance during the first part of our term
- Barbara Reisman, Immediate Past Co-President and also leader of too much else to mention
- Charles Rosen, VP, Development during the first part of our term
- Yael Silverberg-Urian, VP, Tikkun Olam
- Jordan Sklar, VP, Religious Life
- Harvey Susswein, VP, Finance

Teddy Roosevelt once observed that life's greatest gift is the opportunity to work hard at work worth doing. The people standing here have received a large gift and have responded remarkably, and since we cannot possibly thank them enough these tokens will have to suffice.

Even as we thank and acknowledge all of the shul's lay leadership – and through them, we hope, the countless others who serve BK at the “sub-cabinet” level – we want to single someone out. Lori Becker, please step forward. Many of you may not know Lori, who's the definition of self-effacing. But she is one of the people who make us who we are. Lori chairs the Hesed Committee, the wonderful group of congregants who step up to assist congregants in need, bringing meals, checking in, providing transportation, sometimes just listening respectfully. Often, the need for assistance arises unexpectedly. Lori never – *never* – misses. No matter the day, no matter the hour, no matter the request, she mobilizes and makes it happen. And Lori is no lady who lunches. She has a demanding job and last year hosted a bar mitzvah – indeed a double, as *both* her twin sons insisted on participating in the *simcha*. Lori did not take on this role when we began two years ago; she already had it. When we had the temerity to ask whether she would consider continuing, initially we weren't clear and Lori thought we were asking her not only to remain on the board and as Chair of Hesed but also to assume an executive board position requiring even more meetings. Amazingly, she was considering it. Being there for each other is what a community does. In large measure, it is what a community *is*. Lori operationalizes this ideal for us. Borrowing from another tradition, we tonight propose a new ethical precept: next time you face a fork in life's road and are wondering which way to go, just ask yourself this: “What Would Lori Do?” Lori, for everything you do for us all, *yasher koach* and *toda raba*.

Next, our remarkable staff, who work with diligence, efficiency, dedication, sensitivity, and love to make everything at BK happen:

- Debbie Hall, our jack of all trades
- Nadia Christensen, our Assistant Director of Operations
- Stuart Brown, our Director of Operations
- Rabbi Ariann Weitzman, our Assistant Rabbi and Director of Congregational Learning, and
- Rabbi Elliott Tepperman, our Head Rabbi.

A word more about our rabbis: Part of our responsibility during our term – and not the part we most relished – was negotiating (in Rabbi Elliott’s case, with the assistance of a talented task force) new contracts with both our rabbis. They say no man is a hero to his valet. Now we may not have functioned exactly as their valets – perhaps to the rabbis’ dismay – but suffice it to say that there’s nothing like a contractual process to get the lay leadership *way* up into the business of a rabbi. We’re here to report that from that perspective the view is exactly the same as the one we all witness every day: our spiritual leaders live their values, and are *mensch*s, in all aspects of their lives. To work closely with them is continually to be inspired by them, and to become even more grateful that they have chosen to spend a significant portion of their professional and personal journeys with us all.

Now, to the business of keeping the lights on. Last year, we initiated Bnai Keshet’s annual campaign: Living Our Values, so called because so many things about BK – our sliding dues schedule, our ability to serve Bet Midrash students with special needs, the fact that none of you needed a ticket to enter today, and so much more – would not be possible without resources to support them. Here’s the reality, in a nutshell: our budget, which is both lean and efficiently managed by our professional and lay leadership, includes an annual shortfall, after dues and tuition, in the neighborhood of \$100K. To fill this hole, we rely on contributions. Andrew Gelman and Andy Schmeltz, with invaluable counsel from Luis Shushinski, have assumed the leadership of the LOV 5775 campaign, and we thank them profusely. You will be hearing from them or a member of their team in the October-November timeframe. There’s no *deus ex machina*. There’s only you and us. Every one of us should participate, in an amount that’s a slightly uncomfortable stretch. Of course, what this means for each of us will vary, but the principle should apply equally. BK can only survive and thrive if we all conceptualize our relationship with the congregation as covenantal, not transactional. We say this knowing that for some, particularly those with several children in the Bet Midrash, your support for the shul through dues and tuition is already substantial. We are mindful of and grateful for this. But if you can do a bit more, please try to do so. As it happens, this is Rabbi Elliott’s 13th year with us. Let’s make our LOV 5775 campaign our bar mitzvah gift to him, so we can continue living our values for years to come.

One of our principle values is being there for each other. For BK to be able to do this, we must bring our real selves, and we hope everyone here feels, or over time will come to feel, comfortable doing so. Bring your best self when you can, of course, but when you can’t, come as you are. Life is hard, and we’re a shul not an Up With People rally. Bring your angry self, your overwhelmed self, your laid-off self, your addicted self. Come with your illnesses, physical or mental, and your behavioral quirks. As the Guitar Man of Central Park puts it in encouraging everyone to sing along: “Don’t worry; it’s just us.” When you bring your real self – when you

make yourself vulnerable – you do a great service to the community. We will do our best to meet you where you are, with dignity and honor. We will, being a human institution, inevitably fail. But our efforts will likely be better than nothing for you, and they will help us to learn and to fail just a bit less for those who come behind you. Providing BK that opportunity is a *mitzvah*.

Communities are much more than the sum of their parts, but our parts are, if we do say so ourselves, pretty impressive. Hang around BK for awhile and here's some of what you'll experience – a BK pastiche, if you will, as we reflect on the past two years:

- Elliott will move you toward your better self with inspiration, not admonishment, or deliver a deeply respectful and courageous sermon.
- Ariann will present a thought-provoking teaching with impressive scholarly depth.
- Zach will tell a joke, then teach some Musar.
- The Grumpy Old Guys, plus Roberta, will study some Talmud.
- Someone will kvetch about something, but usually lovingly.
- Marty Golan will read a poem.
- Marty Fogel will play a tune or lead a teaching.
- Beth and Melissa will lead a chant.
- Daniel will call a bnai mitzvah to the Torah with immoderate enthusiasm.
- A bnai mitzvah will present a thoughtful d'var and lead an engaging discussion.
- Someone will disagree with you about something that matters to you, but in a way that respects your humanity and invites genuine dialogue.
- Elliott will wear something for Purim even more outrageous than last year.
- The Roabsters will delicately balance vitriol and good fun.
- A congregant will reach out with a quiet kindness to someone in need.
- A community of teens will rally behind a child whose parent is ill.
- There will be great “outdoor Judaism”: in the sukkah, around a fire pit, in a makeshift mikvah.
- There will be another wonderful retreat at Camp JRF.
- The homeless will be fed and housed.
- Luis will call out, “Page three!”

Over time, as more and more of these things wash over you, they will somehow come together in your unconscious and help you to believe, really and truly and notwithstanding life's inevitable tragic side, that “Everything's gonna be alright, everything's gonna be alright.” Call it the mysterious alchemy of tradition and community. Call it a miracle. Call it what you will. We call it Bnai Keshet, and we can't imagine life without it.

Recently, our chevra kadisha again had occasion to provide succor to another family from the community. While we mourn the necessity, we are grateful beyond measure for their work.

We recall with respect and love those whom we have lost since last we gathered here:

From the shul's extended family:

- Robert S. Atkins, father of Jennifer Atkins
- Rose Berlant, grandmother of Yifat Susskind
- John Richard Folsom, father of Jean Folsom
- Robert M. Glassman, father of Andrew Glassman
- Elaine Gonsalves, mother of Rennie Gonsalves
- A. Stuart Hanellin, father of Lisa Jane Goldsmith
- Robert Irwin Jacobson, father of Marion Jacobson
- Aaron Itkin, father of Amy Itkin
- Harry Jagoda, father of Betty Jagoda Murphy
- Sandy Kligman, mother of Elissa Siegel
- Ruth Lesly, mother of Mark Lesly
- Judith Levine, mother of Janis Orlofsky
- Milton L. Levine, father of Arthur Levine Ferrante
- Edith Naaman, mother of Gil Naaman
- Charmian Sproule Reading, mother of Janet Chaplan Pew
- Selma Schulman, mother of Carol Lewkowicz
- Mildred M Sigismund, grandmother of Shira Gertz
- Mickey Simon, mother of Randi Simon
- Bernard Storch, father of Elliott Storch
- Felicita Velez, mother of Julio Velez

And from our immediate family:

- Dorothy Sheps, wife of Walter, mother of Sam, mother-in-law of Cindy, and grandmother of Ari
- And our hearts go out particularly to Paul Shatz, Loren, Sam and Tess, who this week lost their wife and mother Randi Simon.

May our community continue to be a source of support for all who need it.

We close with this wish for the new year:

Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalom

May the one who creates harmony above make peace

Aleynu ve'al kol yisra'el

For us and for all Israel

Ve'al kol yoshvey tevel

And for all who dwell on earth

Ve'imru: Amen.