

*D'var Torah*  
*Kol Nidrei 2019/5780*  
Rabbi Steven Folberg  
Congregation Beth Israel, Austin, Texas  
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Dear Friends,

In the foyer outside our Sanctuary, the walls are covered in pictures of our Confirmation classes, going all the way back into the early 1900s. One class picture features a smiling, sixteen-year-old girl, who was in the first Confirmation class I ever taught here, the class of 1992. Fast forward twenty-seven years to a year or so ago, when I got to be present at the bar mitzvah celebration of that smiling Confirmation student's *son*. And, God willing, in a couple of years, he will take *his* place in our star-studded Gallery of Confirmation Classes.

As a result of all this, our Confirmation class curriculum now includes an annual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary foyer with my students. I show them photos of the sixteen-year-olds standing on the bimah of our old, original sanctuary on San Jacinto St. back in the 1940s. And, of course, we pause to admire the photo of that class of 1992 Confirmation student, and I tell them about her son becoming a bar mitzvah here, and use it to illustrate the meaning of that word that you and I spoke about on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. "You see? This is what we mean when we talk about *berit*, or Covenant," I tell them over-didactically. "Being a Jew means being part of a loving, relationship with God and with the Jewish people, a loving

commitment to learning, a commitment to compassion and to justice that stretches over time. It connects your life to the lives of others, including people who came before you and people who will come along after you. Someday, you, too, may be the parent of a child who becomes a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah at Congregation Beth Israel, and you will bring your own child here, and show them your Confirmation class picture, and you will say, "That's me, your Mommy, when I was sixteen years old," and, depending upon their age, they might say either, "That's *you*, Mommy?", or else "Oh my *God*, Mom, you've showed me that picture *so many* times."

While the Confirmation students are looking at the various pictures and making fun of the shoe styles and hairstyles that were in vogue among the tenth graders in any given year, I will walk from picture to picture, starting with the class of 1992, watching my hairline recede from picture to picture, and marveling that next year, in 2021, I'll be standing there with my 30<sup>th</sup> Congregation Beth Israel Confirmation class. How is that possible?

Let me tell you a story. Behind my desk hangs a diploma in a gold frame. It's from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the seminary that trains Rabbis, Cantors, Educators, academics and Jewish Communal professionals for our Reform movement. I received that diploma in New York, a little over nine years ago, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of my class, the

Rabbinic School class of 1985. It reads "Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*."

"*Honoris causa*" is Latin for "honorary," which in plain English means, "don't be too impressed." As a matter of fact, a joke among my seminary classmates was that the Doctor of Divinity degree, abbreviated DD, stands for "didn't die:" merely survive twenty-five years in the rabbinate, and you receive your "DD."

Sarcastic jokes aside, going back to New York to receive that honorary degree and seeing so many old friends and classmates was beautiful, and gave that diploma a deeper meaning. Over a buffet luncheon, we caught up on our lives and our families, shared inside jokes about our school days, and filled each other in on where our careers had taken us. In many ways, it wasn't that much different than any academic reunion.

Except that, before the actual commencement exercises, we gathered for a *pre*-commencement ceremony. My classmates and I were invited to sit in a circle, on folding chairs, right in front of the Holy Ark, on the towering, polished marble bimah of Temple Emanuel on New York's Upper East Side.

Raise your hand if you've ever visited Temple Emanuel On Fifth Avenue in Manhattan... If you haven't, and to help you picture what this event was like, the main sanctuary at Manhattan's Temple Emanuel, with its art deco lobby, aircraft hangar dimensions and Tiffany stained glass windows, is no less than a Jewish cathedral. The ceilings are over 100 feet high and the polished wooden pews of the

main sanctuary seat 2500. It's a humbling and awe-inspiring setting and was thus a perfect place to consider the first quarter-century of our rabbinic lives.

As we took our places at the foot of the stairs leading up to that large, glittering ark (which is designed to look like an open Torah scroll and is covered in gold leaf and mosaic tiles) my first thought was, "Hey, even 25 years later, *we all look pretty good* – an embarrassingly shallow reaction to those sacred surroundings, but it's *Kol Nidrei* so I have to be honest.

That thought was soon forgotten as, for the next hour or so, Rabbi David Ellenson, President of the seminary back then, led us through a group reflection on the first quarter-century of our rabbinic service.

We worked our way around the circle, and when it was my turn, I told my old friends that it had taken me ten years in congregational life to begin to feel authentic and at home in the role of Rabbi, so that when someone walked toward me and said, "Rabbi..." I *didn't* look around to see who they were talking to.

I also shared that a more significant milestone, totally unexpected, that occurred much later. I'd been in Austin about twenty years, and I was having a conversation with a former bat mitzvah student who had approached me about conducting her wedding. "I've always imagined that you would officiate at *my* wedding, Rabbi Folberg," she smiled. "After all, *you're the rabbi I grew up with.*"

"Wait, what?" I thought. "I *am*?"

No one had ever said that to me before – "you're the Rabbi I grew up with" – nor had I ever *thought of myself* that way. But in the years that have followed, I've been approached by more and more "CBI kids" asking their childhood rabbi to conduct their weddings and name their babies. It's one of the most meaningful and beautiful blessings of having the rare good fortune to serve the same congregation for nearly 3 decades.

Consider, for example, Max, the handsome young fellow who did such a magnificent job sounding the shofar in our sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah last week. Max was eight days old the first time he and I met, for reasons that you can probably figure out on your own, at an occasion that, fortunately, I'm sure he doesn't remember. Much later, he was also a bar mitzvah student, a Confirmation student and a Post Confirmation student at CBI. And a few weeks ago, I officiated at his wedding to his beloved Caitlin.

How's it feel to be designated "the Rabbi I grew up with"? It reminds me of something that my mother, of blessed memory, used to like to say when Sandra, Shira and I would visit her in the memory care unit where she spent the last few years of her life. On a good day (and those of you who have lost loved ones to Alzheimer's know what I mean by "a good day") she would look at the three of us, turn to my father and exclaim, "Babe (as she called him)'s! This is the icing on the cake!" Or, at other times, again, looking at my father, "Look what we

accomplished together. You couldn't buy it for money!" Even deep into her dementia, she hadn't lost the capacity for gratitude. And these days, I am very much in touch with how grateful I am to be the Senior Rabbi of CBI; grateful, indeed, for those things you can't buy for money.

I'm not only talking about the opportunities to share in the overtly happy events, the weddings and baby naming's, the conversion ceremonies and bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, but also the preciousness of shared moments of grief and loss. I remember officiating at a funeral a few years ago, graveside at the Temple's newest cemetery, up in Pflugerville. There we stood: a husband and his adult children and *their* spouses and children, grieving the death from cancer – fought tooth and nail – of their extraordinary, professionally accomplished, bighearted, force-of-nature wife and mother. I could have filled a large, Excel spreadsheet with all the lifecycle events that we had shared together. But at that moment, watching the tears trickle down their cheeks, I was struck by something that no mere listing of the significant events we had shared could encompass: I realized *how much we cared about each other*, and how much of a bond we had established over the years.

The spiritual rewards of serving the same community for so many years are not about happiness, per se. Rather, they are the lived experience of what we talked about on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. Truly great synagogues – and I believe that

ours is one of them – **embody** *berit*: covenant, connection, relationship, community, and also *hesed*, the actions you take on behalf of someone you love. What makes Congregation Beth Israel so sacred – to me, and, I know, to so many of you – is that, whether or not we use the words *berit* or *hesed* in a given moment – this has grown into a community where people feel safe, known, valued and loved. And as both my mother and father would have said, in Yiddish, “*ayn klaynigkeit*,” “that’s no small thing.”

It’s no accident that the foyer of our sanctuary is named after Walter Cohen, of blessed memory. A lifelong bachelor and a jewelry salesman of modest means, in his retirement years Walter was the perennial volunteer greeter at nearly every service. He set an amazing example for all of us by showering everybody who walked through the doors of CBI with *hesed*: nonjudgmental love and acceptance. Whatever your age, whatever the color of your skin, Jewish or not, gay or straight, dressed conventionally or flaunting piercings and tattoos, Walter was overjoyed to see you. Like a happy puppy retrieving a favorite toy, Walter would drag newcomers up to the bimah after every service to meet the rabbis. “Rabbi, these are the Shapiro’s. They just moved here from Minnesota!” Walter also sat through the Living a Jewish Life class at least 15 years in a row, maybe more, because he wanted to get to know all the conversion students and others who pass through that class. “How do you sit through this class over and over, year after year, Walter” I

would ask him. “Oh, Rabbi, the people are so nice, and I always learn something new.”

We named the Sanctuary Foyer in honor of Walter because it was a way to remind us of his covenantal lovingkindness, his *hesed*, and to ensure that his example, his legacy, became part of the DNA of this synagogue. And you know what? It did, to a degree I could not have imagined while Walter was still alive.

The degree to which CBI is “powered by *hesed*” (which, come to think of it, should be our new Temple slogan) really hit me when my mother passed away in 2015, and for the first time I found myself on the *receiving end* of *your hesed*. We held a few nights of *Shiva minyanim* in the chapel. Night after night, the chapel was packed, different people each night, your silent presence so powerfully loving that I can’t describe it. And then, in the winter of 2018, when my family was going through a crisis, the staff and volunteer leadership of the Temple pushed me out the door, told me to go take care of my family, and for 10 challenging weeks kept things going in my absence.

Giving lip service to Jewish values like *hesed* is easy. Living those values in the day-to-day operations of a busy congregation, treating clergy and other staff members with dignity and kindness, is much more challenging, and, sadly, is not a given in every synagogue. Believe me, based upon the stories I have heard from colleagues in other places whose communities have failed to treat them like human

beings, I don't take "the Walter Cohen factor" at CBI for granted. Not every Rabbi is lucky enough to have a member of their congregation walk up to them when they first return from 10 weeks of family medical leave and say, "Rabbi, when we needed you, you were there for us. And now we get to do the *mitzvah* of being there for you." If that's not *hesed* and *berit*, lovingkindness and covenant, then what is?

The thing is, this committed *hesed* that we show each other gives us the capacity to share that lovingkindness with others, because we are to love our neighbors *as we love ourselves*. Only by loving each other can we develop the capacity to love others.

Here's what I often say right before the conclusion of one of those "former student weddings," when I pause before the breaking of the glass. Why do we engage in that act of celebratory shattering at that moment, especially since it traditionally represents the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a tragic event in Jewish history? As a prelude to the wedding feasting, dancing and revelry to follow, we shatter that glass to remind ourselves that the wedding celebration takes place in the midst of a larger world that is shattered and radically unredeemed, a world still mired in injustice and suffering. We do this not to diminish the joy of the moment, but to remind the couple that the love that they have for each other can radiate

beyond their home as they engage in the work of *Tikkun Olam*, mending what is shattered in the world.

Congregation Beth Israel has a long history of doing *Tikkun Olam* beyond the walls of our sanctuary: we shelter the homeless, fed the hungry, bring comfort and support to the sick, strengthen ties of interfaith friendship and cooperation in Austin and for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

But now we face a kind of shattering that I never dreamed I would witness in my lifetime.

Because of this shattering, there are security keypads outside all our doors.

Because of this shattering, there is no external signage on the street-facing walls of our Shirley Barish Learning Center, nothing that would identify this campus as a synagogue or Jewish institution.

Because of this shattering, we must hire security professionals to check handbags and backpacks on holy days like this.

And while we are blessed to have the presence of Travis County Sheriff's Deputies to help keep us safe, and while they have become our good friends with whom we are on a first name basis, saying the following words as I greet one of these officers on my way home from Shabbat services has become a personal ritual: "Thank you, officer, for helping us, although I wish we didn't need this kind of help." And they will respond saying, "I know what you mean, Rabbi, but it's the world we live in."

I don't have to tell you why these measures are necessary. You know what happened at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. You know what happened at the Chabad synagogue in Poway, California. You know what happened at the notorious neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. And maybe you know a middle school or high school student in AISD who's been bullied for being a Jew. Never did I think I would be speaking to our Confirmation kids about anti-Semitism in the present tense. It would always be in terms of Nazi Germany or pogroms in the Ukraine in the 1500s. But homegrown, 21<sup>st</sup> century, violent and sometimes lethal American anti-Semitism in this day and age? Unimaginable. By this I mean both the crude, nationalist anti-Semitism of the far right, and the more sophisticated but no less hateful anti-Semitism of the far left. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin recently said to me, "When American Jews looked at anti-Semitism, we thought that America was immune, that we were going to get a pass. But anti-Semitism never completely vanishes. It's like a virus that goes dormant in the body, but, given the right conditions, resurfaces."

My friends, this isn't a sermon about anti-Semitism! Indeed, anti-Semitism is the last thing I want to talk about tonight, and it has never been at the center of my Jewish identity. But, like the glass shattered at the end of a joyful wedding, every beautiful, sacred, learned, justice-pursuing facet of our synagogue exists within a larger world that is increasingly shattered, hostile not only to Jewish values, but to

Judaism and to us, the Jewish people. Escalating hatred of Jews is part of the shattering of our time, and we dare not pretend that it isn't real.

I know that many of you are engaged the work of pushing back against ugliness and hatred through your political activism, through donations to organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center, and through volunteering with other organizations that can make a difference. Will you consider supporting and strengthening this congregation on the same level, and in the same way, that you support those causes that are most important to you? In the name of our covenant of loving kindness, in support of everything that we have shared and built over the years, that is what I'm asking you to do tonight.

Let me again quote Rabbi Salkin: "You want to respond to Jew hatred? How about some Jew love? Love Shabbat. Love the festivals. Love Jewish culture – Jewish books, Jewish movies, Jewish music. Love your Jewish kids and grandchildren and teach them how to love Judaism as well. No one with a gun can take that away from us. Stand up for Judaism and its teachings. Every single adult and young person who studies with us can do that. Stand for Judaism and its values: justice, compassion, sanctity, celebration. God did not put us on this planet because God needed a people with an appetite for salty foods. God did not need Jewish comedians. God did not even need Jewish Nobel Prize winners. God needed and needs us to transform the world. Stand out. Be different. Relish that difference.

One more thing to stand for...

Jewish institutions, like the synagogue, JCCs, Jewish schools.

Double down. Lean in. Live your Judaism — yes, at home, but in public as well.

Support those institutions with added vigor and generosity. God is not done with us yet.”

I'd like to conclude with this prayer:

Dear God, let us all find ways in the coming year to be good Jewish ancestors. Let us make it possible for this sacred community to carry our covenant of love, learning, justice and kindness into the next generation, ensuring that Confirmation class pictures, resplendent with the faces of future, smiling 16-year-olds not yet born, will forever fill the walls of this building, as far as the eye can see.

Amen.