

Kol Nidre 5770/2009
The Most Important Moment In Jewish History
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A rabbi asks his students, "What is the most important moment in all of Jewish history?" And they respond by giving all of the answers you might expect: one says, "*yetziat mitzrayim* – the exodus from Egypt," no said a second student, it is *har Sinai* – the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. A third offered *briat haolom*, the creation of the universe, and yet another student suggested the founding of the Modern State of Israel. Patiently the rabbi listened and shook his head after each suggestion, finally their ideas exhausted the students looked to their rabbi and said: "so what is the most important moment in all of Jewish history? "Right Now," answered the rabbi. Right now – for none of those other moments, no matter how great or significant – none of that matters if this moment does not bring those moments to bear – if you are not here to speak of them, if you are not here to remember them, if you are not here to actualize them. *This* is the most important moment in all of Jewish history and *you* are the one to bring it to bear.

I think this rabbi was teaching his students a most important lesson. One of the greatest mistakes that Jewish leaders make, one that I struggle against constantly– is the belief that we are the object and you are the subject of the Jewish enterprise, of Jewish history. What I mean is that all too frequently there is a tendency to believe that I, the rabbi am the keeper of Judaism. We who work in synagogues and Federations and throughout the Jewish world – we have the sacred product and our challenge is how to get you to appreciate it, study it, observe it, and perpetuate it. What the rabbi in my opening story was trying to teach his students is that the truth is just the opposite – *you* are the object of Jewish history. You are *not* a player in my drama, our drama – I am a player in yours!

You are what all of this is about – and at best *my* job is to hold a mirror up in the hope that you will remember, embrace, appreciate and accept your key role in the 4000 year drama that is Jewish history.

And that is why I believe the synagogue is the most important institution in the continuity of Jewish life and Jewish history. Because the synagogue is the home of the Jewish people even more than it is the home of Judaism. Of course there are other critical institutions to the welfare of Jewish life – Day Schools, The Jewish Theological Seminary, camps like Ramah, programs like Wheels and Israel Pilgrimage and Birthright – these are critical places and programs that preserve Jewish learning and without learned and knowledgeable Jews, Judaism cannot survive. Federation, Israel Bonds, these are vital institutions that organize and raise funds to do the important work of nourishing and nurturing Jews and Jewish communal life – without them there would be no future for the things we hold dear – but the synagogue is the address of the Jewish people. When Federation needs to speak to Jews – they turn to us; when the Seminary, and Bonds and any other worthwhile cause seeks the support of the people, they ask us to help – because they know that the synagogue is the only place in contemporary life where Jews are dependably and consistently found. Even anti-Semites know that when they want to spread their hatred they paint their swastikas on the walls of a synagogue. They know they can offend the greatest number of Jews by desecrating a shul. Just look around you – where else can Jews be found in significant numbers the way they are today, anywhere else but here. On Thursday there was a rally outside the UN against

Mahmoud Ahmadinijad, the president of Iran – when organizers wanted to get the word out – they asked me to announce it in shul on Rosh Hashanah – they knew we could reach you here.

Jews love to tell me how proud they are of the intellectual accomplishments that Jews have made to this country and to the world – from Nobel Prize winners to business innovators – we revel in our achievement that is so out of proportion to our miniscule numbers. Where does that love of learning; that inquisitiveness and inventiveness come from? Is there some special nutrient that can be uniquely found in the breast milk of Jewish mothers; some gene that resides in our unique Jewish lineage? Of course not – it is a passion for learning that has been nurtured by synagogues like this one, generation after generation.

And we take pride that one can walk into almost any hospital, museum and university in American and see Jewish names prominently displayed. Where does this generosity come from? “I learned to give from my parents” said one of our members, a prominent philanthropist. “Of course you did,” I replied – “but where did they learn it from?”

I honestly believe that there is a direct correlation between Jewish identity and Jewish generosity. And the farther we travel from that identity, the more remote we are from this place, from Jewish knowledge and observance and commitment – the more we begin to look like the population in general, the less exceptional we become in the way we learn, the way we live and the way we give.

Now, please don't misrepresent what I am saying – I am not saying you have to be Jewish, or you have to be Jewishly involved to be good, to be generous or to be smart. But I am saying that synagogues promote Jewish learning and Jewish living and that in turn promotes Jewish values which by and large has promoted the kinds of Jews that over all has made us very

And don't start giving me the long list of *frumme yidden*, the so called “good Jews” who lie and cheat and steal and worse – I know that Jewish involvement is no guarantee of *mentschlichkeit* – I wish it were – I am just saying the numbers speak for themselves. As a people we are pretty remarkable and I believe that we are remarkable because of Jewish values that have been preserved and promoted by the things we do here – in the synagogue.

So, if you believe, as I do, that this place matters; that the welfare of the future of our people depends on the success of synagogues like ours around the world – than you should share my deep concern over the very significant challenges that confront the contemporary synagogue.

The current economic meltdown is only bringing to the fore forces that have been at work for some time now. I am part of a growing number of rabbis and communal leaders who are beginning to wonder out loud if the business model that has sustained the synagogue for the last 100 years is viable for the next 100 or even for the next 10 years. We do not suffer from want of people. Our programs are not suffering from want of interest. The challenge is that as synagogues get more and more expensive there are fewer and fewer people who are willing to pay what we are asking them to pay to be part of our synagogue communities.

Allow me a few examples to highlight our dilemma.

There are many people here today who will tell you that they think this synagogue is a bargain. They are here frequently to study and to participate, their children may be educated in our Religious School or Early Childhood Center, they come on Shabbat and holidays and they will tell you – they get so much more than their money's worth from their donation. But, I also know that there are others here who come less often, and wonder why they should have to pay so much just to: – you fill in the blank: pray with us on the High Holy Days, have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah for their child. And some of these Jews are making the calculation that as much as they would *like* to be here they can do without the synagogue experience on the High Holy Days for *that* kind of expense.

We could just throw open the doors on the High Holy Days (as we do every other day of the year) and say – let all who are hungry come and eat. There is probably no idea that causes more cynicism in Jewish life to the unaffiliated Jew than the notion that he has to pay to pray. I love the righteous indignation we get from those who would come to our door on Kol Nidre and say, "I am a Jew, I wish to join you in prayer and you will bar me because I did not pay? You call this a synagogue?" So I will open my doors to all who want to come and pray and then after the High Holy Days, after they are gone, who pays our bills? Who pays the electricity and the mortgage and our salaries? So we ask them to help, and we ask them to pay their fair share – and they tell us – they do not think they should have to pay to pray. But someone has to pay, or there will be no place for anyone to pray, to learn, to experience the beauty of Jewish living.

I'll give you another example. I received a telephone call recently from a bereft husband whose wife had just died – could I come over? Could I help him in his time of need? Could I do the funeral? What rabbi would not respond to such an appeal? What rabbi would not be ready to help out? But the man was not a member of our synagogue. He had been, but he dropped out several years ago. He spends winters down in Florida and his kids are grown and well he just did not think it was worth the money any more. A mother calls and says they would like me to marry their daughter – her daughter grew up here, loves me and will consider no one else. But here too the family hasn't been members for a number of years. After the kids went off to college they dropped their membership – but now that they want a rabbi, now that they need a rabbi – this is their shul and I am their rabbi. But I am here to take their calls only because you continue to pay your dues and support this shul. So what should I say to these people? How can I say no? And yet if more and more people think that they can have a rabbi when they need one and have a shul when they need one and do nothing to maintain the shul when we need them – than we cannot survive.

The good news is that there are so many who want what we are offering. As impressive as is the sight of thousands of Jews praying together on these sacred days, if we opened our doors to all who wanted to enter—there are thousands more that would love to be here- where would we put them. There is a rabbi nearby who sends out free High Holy Day tickets to the community and someone said to me, "that is so beautiful wouldn't it be nice if we did that..." To which I responded, "it is indeed beautiful – but he can send out thousands of tickets, secure in the knowledge that very few will come because most people aren't particularly interested in the kind of Judaism that he is offering but he knows that many will be impressed by his kindness. If I sent out thousands of tickets – most of them would come because they love what we are doing here – and where would we put them?"

On any Shabbat we have somewhere from 300 – 600 or more people *davening* with us. Where does that happen these days? How many shuls have created the unique, warm and welcoming environment that we have? But we are able to do this and so much more because of you, because of your involvement and because of your financial commitment. But if the current trend continues synagogues are in danger of pricing themselves beyond the reach of all but the most committed and there may not be enough of the most committed to support the maintenance and extensive programmatic offerings of synagogues like ours. It is a challenge we can no longer ignore.

The economic crisis has only exacerbated our dilemma. One of the secrets to our financial success here at Temple Beth Sholom was that we had developed alternative streams of funding that were not dues dependent. We have a successful day camp, a successful Early Childhood program, we have an exclusive caterer that not only provides a wonderful service to our members but also has been an important source of income for the shul. And this year all of those external sources of funding were deeply affected by the downturn in the economy and in turn they could not contribute to our budget in the way we had expected them to.

And the result is that we, and synagogues like ours all over the country, are at a crossroads.

And if we don't come up with some answers, nothing less than the future of the American synagogue is at stake.

The good news is that we are in an enviable position as opposed to many other synagogues. We have the membership, the leadership, and the commitment to meet this challenge. Any businessperson will tell you the time to confront a challenge is before it is a full-blown crisis. And that is precisely what we are doing.

So here is the plan.

First of all, I want you to know, we are going to continue to do what we do best. Our programs, our schools, our Shabbat and holiday services, our rabbinic services and educational offerings – these will continue at the highest levels of excellence to which you have become accustomed.

Second, we have reduced our operating budget and will continue to reduce it in any responsible way that we can. We are employing every creative cost cutting effort we can that does not impact on the fundamental quality of what we do.

Precisely at the time when we need *more* financial help, some of our members are feeling the same economic pressures we are and can do less. I have had more calls this year from families in distress than ever before. Some are struggling to maintain their financial commitments to the shul, some are asking us for financial help to make ends meet. I have spent thousands of dollars from my rabbi's fund to help members keep the electric from being shut off, to help make a mortgage payment, to assist families with medical bills, to make sure a child can still go to camp or religious school. Because of you, I have had the money to help.

As Rosh Hashanah was approaching we realized we were not hearing from some of our long time members and we were concerned it had to do with money. We called as many as we could and tried to work out whatever was necessary to keep them as members. To those we

could not reach we decided right before Rosh Hashanah to Fed Ex them their tickets including a letter which stated: "Maybe we haven't heard from you because you have had to make financial calculations for this year that you have not had to make before. We understand that this year has confronted many people with unusual pressures.... You have been there for us so often; we want to be there for you. We know that some people are not comfortable asking the synagogue for anything and would rather take a pass on the year than ask for any considerations. While we understand, we do not agree. We believe your continued participation, as a valued member of our congregation is more important than any other consideration. We need each other now more than ever." And we included their tickets and expressed our hope we would see them on the holidays. A woman came up to me on Rosh Hashanah, practically in tears, and just said, "thank you."

We will do whatever we can to maintain our relationships with all of you who have known the value of involvement in this great Temple. We will open conversations with you and try and think outside the box, to develop new forms of identification, new ways to contribute – there are hundreds and even thousands of people in our community who consider themselves beneficiaries of our Temple Beth Sholom – we have to figure out meaningful ways for them to help contribute to her maintenance as well.

Over the next few months and years we need your help as we explore new models of how to support a synagogue. We need to think creatively and dynamically to open our doors to all who are hungry for Jewish learning and Jewish living. We need your ideas and we need your input. Some of you have already participated in informal conversations on this subject - we will be reaching out to many more of you for your ideas in the months to come and know, that we are joining with some of the most creative minds in synagogue life and Jewish communal life and the business world – as we explore these brave new frontiers. UJA/Federation is funding a major initiative called Synergy of which I am proud to play a leadership role, which will be exploring these issues. You are going to laugh at me – but imagine if we had an endowment fund of 10 million dollars that could enable us to cut our dues in half, imagine if we could endow our religious school so we could offer Jewish education for free. In the months to come, I am going to ask you not to laugh at me but join with me and see if we can make these dreams come true.

The American synagogue is going to have to reinvent itself; or at the very least reinvent the way we fund ourselves.

But that is for tomorrow; today I ask two things of you.

First I ask for your patience and understanding. Don't be angry with us as we explore and experiment with new ideas. "Can you believe they wanted to sell reserved seats for the High Holy Days?" "Can you believe after all these years they are having an appeal at Kol Nidre?" Please be kind and understand that we are trying to find ways to make up for the unexpected losses of this economic downturn. We have cut our budget to the bone; we have lost hundreds of thousands of dollars of income due to people pulling back on their own spending and as more people ask for significant reductions in their commitments to the shul – we are forced to try things we haven't had to try – please don't be angry with us. "All I hear from the shul these days is money this, money that – it is all about money – this is not the Beth Sholom I remember..." First of all that is *not* all you hear from us – you are hearing from us the same Shabbat and holiday services, the same courses and programs, the same conversations and

explorations that you always have heard from us. In fact, take a close look at the booklets in front of you and you will see that we are expanding our programs and strengthening our learning – even as we tighten our belts. All of us who are so proud to work for this great shul are doing more and getting paid less and our commitment to making this the finest synagogue in the country has not wavered one bit. But, you are correct that we have to talk about money with you in ways we have not had to before. “I came to shul on Kol Nidre for a spiritual experience and I heard about budgets and deficits” – please don’t be angry – there was a lot of spiritual experiences before this sermon and there will be a lot more after it – but we do need these few moments to make sure you understand it is not just money we are speaking to you about – it is our future, our viability and our vitality that is at stake – *ayn kemach, ayn torah...* without physical sustenance there will be no spiritual torah.

We need your help. There are many who are going to give a little less to us this year and that’s ok – we understand and we value our relationship as much as ever, more than ever. There are some who are going to give a lot less this year and that too is ok – we are so glad that we can be here for you as you meet the struggles and challenges of your life. We do need each other now more than ever. But the result of this reality is that we are going to need many of you to do a little more for us this year and some of you to do a lot more to balance things out.

We have created a list that we have titled: “How You Can Help – 10 Opportunities To Make A Difference” – This list will be available after my sermon and in the lobby and we will be mailing it out after the holidays. Here is what it contains:

50 people have come to me during this past year to ask for financial help. At an average of \$1000 each. We need \$50,000 to make up that shortfall. Are you willing to sponsor a subsidy at \$1000 or help with \$500, or \$250?

We have many families that pay below our fare share – and we understand, but that creates a shortfall of approximately \$100,000

Are you willing to sponsor a subsidy at \$1000 or help with \$500, or \$250?

We gave out 20 tickets for High Holiday services to people who could not afford them. We need \$5,000 to cover these tickets.

Are you willing to sponsor one or a number of tickets at a cost of \$250 per person?

We have a Tikvah program in our Religious School that provides education for our differently-abled children. It costs us \$915 per child in this program.

Are you willing to sponsor one or a number of children, or make a contribution of \$100, \$200, \$300, \$400 or \$500 toward helping a student?

We offer educational specialists to add to the diversity and enrichment of our Religious School programming. Programs such as Art, Music and the Library cost us \$18,000 a year.

Are you willing to sponsor the art, music, or library program at \$18,000 or contribute \$100, \$200, \$300, \$400 or \$500 as a subsidy?

In the restructuring of our Religious School we created a Shabbat Family Study where parents and children come together once a month to learn as a family. The program has created meaningful connections and new community in our membership. The cost of each Shabbat Family Study is \$1500. Are you willing to sponsor a Shabbat Family Study for one month?

We live in a day and age where security expenses are more costly than ever. Ensuring the safety of our families is our first priority. A new security system with cameras, door phones, and management software will cost \$60,000. Are you willing to sponsor \$500, \$1000, \$5000, \$10,000 toward the cost of our security?

We offer weekly lunch, discussion and activities for our retirees. This program costs us \$2000 annually. Are you willing to sponsor the D.A.R.E. group for a month or several months at a cost of \$200 per month or for the year?

Machon Beth Sholom is our award winning Hebrew High School. Each week we bring our post-b'nai mitzvah students together to advance their Jewish study and foster life-long Jewish learning. Annual tuition for an MBS student is \$1400. We have students who want to attend but can't afford to. Are you willing to sponsor a student or students or contribute \$100, \$200, \$300, \$400 or \$500 as a subsidy?

We offer numerous adult education courses at TBS - Weekly Torah Study, Adult Bat Mitzvah, our Morei Derech Initiative, the Walking With Life series some of these we offer at no cost, for others we charge a fee. The cost for adult education programs is \$50,000. Are you willing to sponsor \$360, \$540, \$1800, or \$3600 toward the cost of adult education?

Your tickets have tabs on them, obviously we couldn't fit all these sponsorship opportunities on your ticket – but these sheets are available from the ushers after the sermon or in the lobby and we will be mailing it out to you after the holiday – for now please make a commitment, we need to know now that we will have your support – we will call after the holidays and discuss which of these sponsorships you want to be associated with.

Am I implying that if this appeal is not successful that some of these vital programs are at risk? I don't even want to go there. I have complete confidence in you and in your willingness to help.

Let me end by teaching you a little torah – I want to teach torah, that's what I do best. I want to teach you one of the strangest mitzvot in all of Judaism – and take it from me – this is from a religion that knows from some strange mitzvot. It is found in Deuteronomy 24:19: "When you reap your harvest in the field and you forget a bundle, or a sheaf in the field, you shall not turn back to retrieve it, it shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow..."

The mitzvah is called in Hebrew, "*shichicha*"; namely "the mitzvah of that which is forgotten." Now at first blush it does not seem so strange. It is a provision after all to add food staples to those who live below the poverty line, who can't support themselves: the stranger, the orphan, the widow. Not at all surprising given the torah's bias toward the down trodden. And we at

Beth Sholom are sponsoring a special program to highlight this mitzvah – on Sunday November 1st we will be departing from our shul around 9 AM and traveling to the Golden Earthworm Farm in Jamesport, NY, out on the North Fork, to glean. We will harvest the leftover crops in the field and donate them to Long Island Harvest to be distributed to soup kitchens all over Long Island. I hope you will join us with your family – it will be a most memorable experience and a wonderful way to learn about the important mitzvah of *shichicha*.

So what is it that makes this mitzvah so strange? All other mitzvot are dependant on remembering. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,” or “remember that you were slaves to pharaoh”; all the other mitzvot depend on conscious intention. This mitzvah of *shichicha* is exactly the opposite. To fulfill this mitzvah requires that we engage in the act of forgetting. All other mitzvot require us to focus; you can’t do this mitzvah if you are focused. If you get up in the morning and say, “I am going to perform the mitzvah of forgetting today...” you are engaging in an oxymoron, an inherent contradiction. If you remember to do the mitzvah, then by definition you are not doing it.

Here is how one rabbi solves this paradox. He suggests that it takes a certain kind of person to perform the mitzvah of *shichicha* – of forgetting. Someone who is completely wrapped up in his or her material life can’t do it. Someone who is entirely concerned with his or her material well being – someone to whom making money and accumulating material goods is of ultimate and absolute importance will never be able to observe this mitzvah because such a person will never, NEVER forget a bundle or a sheaf of goods in the field. Not a chance. That person is going to be assiduous in making certain that every single bundle is brought to the storehouse to sell in the market place.

So what kind of person can observe it? Someone who is not obsessed with wealth and the acquisition of material things. What this mitzvah is really saying is: Don’t be so wrapped up in your financial affairs that you remember everything that is yours and forget about others for if you do, this is one mitzvah you will never be able to perform. Thou shalt not be obsessed with acquiring things for yourself.

The mitzvah of *shichicha* assumes a community of people who are not so obsessed with their own success that they are impervious to the needs of those less fortunate. The mitzvah of *shichicha* is the counter voice to galloping materialism and the disease of affluenza.

This synagogue, like the mitzvah of *shichicha*, is based on a community of people who are not so obsessed with their own success that they are impervious to the needs of those less fortunate. This synagogue, like the mitzvah of *shichicha*, is the counter voice to galloping materialism and the disease of affluenza.

We ask for your help so we can continue our important and sacred work.

What is the most important moment in Jewish history? This one – for only you can do what needs to be done – only you can preserve our sacred past and only you can ensure a vibrant future.

This is your moment, and this is your synagogue and you, not Abraham, not Moses, not Akiba -- you are the key to Jewish survival.