

The beginning of a new Jewish year is a solemn and meaningful occasion for us, a time for self-reckoning, for re-ordering our personal priorities, and for re-affirming our commitment to the ideals and values of our faith. Tonight is a special occasion for me personally as well; it marks the fortieth time that I have conducted High Holiday services from this pulpit. I cherish my long association with Temple Israel and regard all of you as *mishpacha*. We've had a wonderful journey together, and I'm hoping that it will continue for some time into the future, God willing.

None of the prayers sung or chanted at this season of judgment is more poignant than our heartfelt entreaty that we and our families be kept in life for the coming year. "Zochrenu l'chaim" – remember us for life, sovereign God Who delights in life, and inscribe us in the book of life. We focus on life and its preservation not only in our prayers but also in the Scriptural readings for these two days of Rosh Hashanah. New life is the theme of both the Torah and Haftorah readings tomorrow morning, in which we read of the birth of Isaac, the long-awaited heir to Sarah and Abraham, and of the birth of the prophet Samuel, son of Hannah and Elkanah. Life renewed and restored after being imperiled is the common motif linking the readings of the second day of Rosh Hashanah. We read from the Torah the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac on the altar; had the narrative proceeded to its expected conclusion and had Isaac been offered up as a sacrifice, it would have spelled the end not only of the child's life but of Abraham's hopes for the transmission of his spiritual heritage to posterity. The collective life of the Jewish people is the concern of the prophet Jeremiah in the Haftorah. Mother Rachel weeps for her children who have gone into exile where their survival is endangered, but the prophet admonishes her to refrain from weeping and assures her that her offspring will return to their land, where their life and well-being will be renewed and restored.

New life, as we are reminded when we experience the birth of a child or grandchild, is a miracle worthy of celebration. When a child is born into the Jewish community, we link the birth with entrance into our people's age-old covenant with God – at the *b'rit* for an infant male or at the ceremony conferring a Hebrew name for a female new-born. The experience of losing a loved one, of enduring the ravages of life-threatening disease, or of caring for a dear one who is struggling with such an illness

reminds us that life is both precious and precarious. Hence, our fervent plea, born out of those experiences – Zochrenu l'chaim.

Taking my cue from Abraham's concern with the continuity of his spiritual legacy and from Jeremiah's message of hope at a time when Jewish survival was endangered, I would like us to reflect this evening on the Jewish future here in Springfield as well as around the country. Will there be a continuity of Jewish life, a new birth of Jewish learning and knowledge, of Jewish practice and of commitment to Jewish community in Springfield and within American Jewry?

We may take comfort in knowing that we are not the first generation to raise the question. A prominent Jewish historian once described us as "the ever-dying people", because in each age the Jewish community of the time thought of themselves as the last generation of Jews. Let me also establish the parameters of my concern. Israel faces many challenges, both internal and external, but assimilation and the fading away of Jewish culture and religious practice are not among them. That's one of the major pluses that come from having a Jewish state in which Jews are the majority. And it should be mentioned that in Israel, we may be seeing renewed signs of interest in Jewish religious texts and in our spiritual heritage on the part of the non-Orthodox. Within the Jewish community outside of Israel, ultra-Orthodoxy as well as modern Orthodox Judaism will survive as well, I believe. Those segments of the Jewish community have staying power and less to fear from attrition than the rest of us. My focus then in asking my question is on Conservative, Reform, non-denominational and secular Judaism in the Diaspora. The survival of Judaism matters to me, because our faith tradition has been a source of meaning and fulfillment in my life and because I believe it can serve the same ends for future generations of Jews. The disappearance of Judaism would be a tragedy to my mind. I am gratified that Orthodox Judaism will continue into the future and remain a vibrant force (we benefit greatly from the admirable example of Orthodoxy's commitment to observance and learning), but I would hope that in our future, alongside the more traditionally-inclined segment of American Jewry, there would exist a thriving community equally committed to knowledge of Jewish history and heritage, equally proud of its identity and ( I hope I'm not offending) less obsessive about stringency in ritual matters, less reliant on isolation from general society and culture as a survival

strategy, fully committed to egalitarianism, and more open to integrating the findings of science and literary-historical criticism into its belief system.

Humility is the prime religious virtue. We need to see and understand our place in the total scheme of things, to view the self in relation and in reference to others. Our generation needs to consider not only its own needs and interests but those of future generations as well. We have no right to squander our precious resources of air, water, and land and heedlessly diminish the quality of life of those who will inhabit planet earth after we are gone. We must endeavor as well to avoid saddling our children and grandchildren with a massive burden of debt. And to the extent possible (for not every conflict in the world is ripe for resolution), we must defuse tensions between nations, races, and religious and ethnic groups and lessen the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, so that our children might inherit a more peaceful and a less threatening world.

The foregoing, of course, applies universally to all humankind. As Jews, our responsibility to the future is to transmit, to pass on that which was handed down to us and to do so in a manner that bespeaks appreciation and enthusiasm. What we pass on will not be identical to what we received but it will be rooted in our past and will reflect our interpretation of what is relevant and significant within the tradition. Our Jewish heritage has something to offer us and our children – a rich culture, a set of rituals that imparts beauty and poetry to our lives, the warmth and embrace of community, and a sense of purpose and meaning. We would not want to bequeath our descendants a polluted environment, a dysfunctional economy, or a world on the brink of catastrophic and devastating warfare. Nor, as Jews, would we want to leave them spiritually impoverished, when we have the treasures of such a splendid heritage at hand.

The analogy admittedly is an imperfect one. The responsibilities that I enumerated first take precedence, because without a secure and peaceful world, a thriving economy and an intact environment, the basis for material/physical existence is undermined. Lacking physical sustenance, maintaining a spiritual life becomes difficult, if not impossible. Or as the Sages said, *im eyn kemach eyn Torah*, “if there is no flour (no bread), there can’t be Torah.” Moreover, fixing the environment and the economy and diminishing the prospects of war, violence and destruction are primarily our

responsibility; transmitting Torah implies a willingness to teach and to model by example but also a willingness to receive.

The signs regarding our Jewish future are worrisome. Although we do get a skewed perspective here in Springfield because of factors unique to our situation, I begin by speaking of our local community. Some of what is happening here, after all, is mirrored elsewhere as well. Our numbers are diminishing. Temple Israel as recently as the 1980's had upwards of 150 member households; we are now below 120. Perhaps, more frightening is the precipitous decline in the number of students enrolled in our educational program. I can remember that in the early years of the Springfield Board of Jewish Education, our joint school serving young people from both Jewish congregations had 100 plus pupils; we struggle now to maintain an enrollment between 40 and 45. Many of our young people, when they've completed their college education and professional training, seek their careers elsewhere. Fortunately, some of our young people, who grew up here, do remain in town, and we have had new young families with children move in. We've tried to reach out to them with programs such as Bubby and Me at our Temple and a Sunday morning play group through the auspices of SBJE. We're grateful to those involved in these efforts, but I hope I may be forgiven for thinking that (and I attribute this largely to demographic factors) neither congregational membership nor school enrollment figures will ever again rise to anywhere near past levels.

Mobility and transience are the rule in America. We've lost many active and involved members over the years, who have moved away because of employment opportunities elsewhere or who have retired, and no longer being tied to the workplace, have left our community for larger metropolitan areas or for more hospitable climates. To balance out the negatives and to avoid painting a uniformly bleak picture, however, I should note that we have had over the last year a large number of members still active, healthy and in their prime, who have retired from work and who have been giving generously of their time to Temple Israel and to the Jewish community. I can foresee over the next several years a golden age of Jewish voluntarism in Springfield, a volunteer base for our Social action committee's various projects, and a receptive audience for TI's Lunch n' Learn and Federation's Knosh and Knowledge, and these are all deeply gratifying to me. But overall we are still a shrinking and an aging Jewish community.

We live, moreover, in an open society and participation in Jewish life is but one of many interests and commitments that people have. For some, like it or not, it's more of a priority, for others less. The challenge is especially acute when it comes to attracting younger Jews (particularly singles) and interesting them in affiliation.

My observations about communities outside of Springfield derive more from anecdote than from accurate statistics, but I have the impression from reading Jewish periodicals and from speaking with friends and relatives that many synagogues around the country are facing similar problems – challenges regarding membership numbers, finances, and maintaining aging and expensive building facilities. I'm alluding to communities like Kansas City, St. Louis and Milwaukee, and that's not to mention places like Danville, where the synagogue that now serves less than 20 Jews will be closing its doors in October, or Decatur, where following my granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah next winter, there will be at most one or two Jewish children coming up through the ranks. As to Springfield, I am saddened that our discussions regarding the future of the Jewish religious community here ended in a deadlock. I do not underestimate the potency of the emotional factors that have been operative in our deliberations, but we are duty bound to maximize our resources and to do what we can now to assure a future, while our Jewish institutions are still in a position of relative strength and before we reach a point of desperation. The continuity of Jewish life must be our priority.

As to educating our young and retaining their interest and their affiliation, I have no doubt that we will need to do some creative and out-of-the-box thinking and also that Jewish congregations and schools in the future will have to undergo some type of transformation in order to remain relevant. Some of our current programs and institutions have been highly successful. Jewish camps have integrated the experience of learning and worship into a context that is fun and have been especially valuable for youngsters from small communities who have an opportunity to meet other Jewish young people of their own age group. Birthright provides young Jews, ages 18 to 26, with the chance to experience Israel and has had over 300,000 participants in its twelve year history. Jewish day schools transmit a high level of Jewish knowledge and a heightened sense of Jewish identity. Online resources make it possible for a grade school student to learn how to read Hebrew phonetically from a computer screen or for an adult to find *divrei Torah*

explaining the portion of the week from multiple points of view. In conjunction with the recent completion of the seventh cycle of Daf Yomi (a page a day of Talmud study) it was noted that there are even iPad apps for studying that most challenging of Jewish texts. We can make things more fun, more convenient, more accessible, but Jewish knowledge and commitment will still make demands on our time, our energies, and our finances. The success of camping and Birthright depend on the quality of the follow-up activities that are available. Day schools have become prohibitively expensive and are out of reach for many of more modest means. Online learning and community are no substitute for face-to-face interaction with fellow Jews and with actual teachers. Learning Hebrew, which to my mind is the foundation of Jewish literacy, will always require effort and mental application. To achieve *kavvanah*, true inwardness, in prayer, we need spiritual self-discipline and the capacity to shut out distractions. And, whatever the program or activity, salaries of teachers, spiritual leaders, and facilitators will have to be paid and expenses covered. There are some shortcuts but there will still be distances that must be traversed.

This overview, I recognize, is inconclusive and short on details, but it does have a message, one that I convey to you with a sense of urgency. For the coming year and for the foreseeable future, our priority must be Jewish continuity – not just survival but the flourishing of a community knowledgeable about and grounded in its cultural and religious traditions.

January will mark 40 years since I began to conduct Shabbat services here, June will be four decades since I became full-time rabbi. Dr. King borrowed from the Torah the image of Moses ascending to the mountaintop. I'm not yet ready to climb to the top of that summit, but when I do and, if I am afforded from there a glimpse into the Jewish future, I pray that I might see a Promised Land of continuing, thriving Jewish life.

*Zochreinu l'chayim*, remember us, O God, to life.