

La Shana Tovah, my name is Jay Stellenberg. It is my pleasure to have the opportunity to address you tonight. As I stand here looking out into the congregation I must tell you that the view is extraordinary. What a breathtaking sight from this vantage point to see so many of you praying, singing, and sharing another year with Rabbi Kaplan, and Cantor Shapp. It truly is as Mike Kletter said as he finished reading the announcements on Rosh Hashanah eve, “the view from the Bimah is awesome”.

From this perspective, I look out into the sea of faces and see people I know well, people I know casually, and people I hope to know. What I like about this view is the opportunity it gives me to recall the connections my family and I have made with so many of you. I see people whose joy we shared by attending their bar or bat mitzvahs. I see people who were glowing during their child’s baby naming or during their spouse’s conversion. I see people our daughter’s Jennifer and Rebecca shared group experiences, either in confirmation or through BBYO. I see people my daughter

Jennifer worked with as a teacher's aid here at TBE, and I see people whose homes we visited for a shiva service of a loved one.

Temple Beth El remains the caring community our founders envisioned over 50 years ago. Our accomplishments are many. A little more than 22 years ago we moved from our location on Amstel Avenue to this wonderful facility. Last year we finished having a Torah written specifically for us. Our Social Hall renovations are very close to being finished, or as Al Kagel has told me, the light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter. For those of you who may not know, Al has been here almost daily over the last six months or so. His love and dedication to this synagogue is without question. Those of you who are seated in the Social Hall please take a moment to look around and try to visualize what it was to what it is. Over the years, there are many people who have participated and are still participating in making TBE the place it is today. We can thank people such as Ann Herman as our Administrator/Principal, now Linda Oster, and our

secretary Linda Crist, but special recognition should and must go to our teachers. It is our teachers here at TBE that deserve this special recognition for the trust we place in them to teach our children not only Hebrew but Jewish traditions. Our students, from Aleph through confirmation are strong. We have a partnership with the JCC for a preschool program that currently has up to 15 children in attendance. And while we, like most Temples, face significant financial challenges, I am sure you, our congregation, will continue to respond as you have always done when called upon.

There are many elements that contribute to our strength, such as our Sisterhood, currently in the very capable hands of Dee Aaronson, or our Men's Club, in the capable hands of Scott Swerin. However, let me concentrate on one of our strengths that many of us have gone through, and that is the bar and bat mitzvah experience. Our bar and bat mitzvah students not only lead our Shabbat services, both Friday night and Saturday morning, and

learn their torah and haftorah portions, but we also ask our students to share a D'Var torah, a report to the congregation that they have either learned over the course of their study or a specific subject that they find interesting. It is no accident that all of our students are able to meet these requirements. The process actually begins when they begin Hebrew School and it intensifies several months prior to the bar or bat mitzvah date, with an orientation for families regarding expectations and scheduling. Students then have several sessions with our Rabbi to familiarize themselves with their materials, discuss their Torah portion and its relevance to being Jewish.

Parents are a significant component every step along the way in this spiritual and educational journey as well. Along the way, the spiritual bond that is developed between family and synagogue and parent and child is truly meaningful. So the big day comes and it's typically wonderful, but like anything, once it is over, the process recedes into the background, life moves on. However, the Jewish

studies and connections to our Temple do not end for our students, and in fact become stronger. Steve Herst exemplified that with his speech Rosh Hashanah eve. In fact, I was so impressed with his poise and articulation I was tempted to ask him to ghost write my speech tonight.

So why do we do all this? Why do we put so much time, effort and financial resources into this process? We do it because TBE realizes that it is our responsibility to build the future of the Jewish people through this rigorous process. It is not someone else's work. It is our work, and we engage in this effort wholeheartedly and the reward is that we are able to witness the strengthening of the Jewish people right before our very eyes. My children have a strong, positive Jewish identity in part because of how Lynda and I have raised them; it also has a lot to do with the religious education and experiences they received here at TBE.

Temple Beth El stands for many things, but I think our most significant legacy is the values and sense of Jewish identity we instill in our youth. Parents know that our students are not silent when they hear the casual anti-Semitic joke in the hallway of their schools. They often add much needed insight and depth during classroom discussions. They are prepared to explain why Chanukah is a bit more involved than flipping latkes for eight days. In college, our students often participate in Jewish life on campus.

Clearly the connection we are making with our youth and families is working, and our good reputation spreading. While membership at many congregations throughout the country has fallen, our membership has remained relatively stable and the number of students in our religious school has increased.

Since its inception, Temple Beth El's dues structure has always been based on your good faith pledge. For many, meeting their financial obligation, particularly in light of layoffs and salary

freezes at corporations and small businesses, not to mention rising housing and gas prices, is a challenge. Nevertheless, TBE will always be committed to welcoming anyone who wishes to join our synagogue, regardless of economic circumstances. We can maintain this policy because of your generosity. Your generosity is truly a blessing. By the same token, those who are struggling financially often give what they can as well, and that commitment to TBE is deeply appreciated.

TBE is a community, and sometimes the community cares for us, and sometimes the community cares for others. What does that mean? I think it means that while you may not need a roof over your head, TBE is there for those who do through our participation in various social action programs.

At its core, the High Holy Days are not about attending services, or about fasting, or even giving Tzedakah. The High Holy Days are about T'shuva, turning, turning from our judgmental self, turning

from our selfishness, turning from our transgressions, and turning towards that part of us that is helpful, loving and caring in order to make amends, resolve conflict, get along with each other and forgive.

TBE is filled with loving kindness because of those who contribute what they can, some in time, some in funds, and some, while no longer with us, in spirit. Those contributions are a blessing to us all. When our synagogue needs help, our members do not react like observers, as if the congregation belongs to someone else.

TBE isn't my synagogue, Rabbi Kaplan's synagogue, or the Board's synagogue: it belongs to all of us who are here tonight. It is this kind of ownership that allowed us to finance the renovations to the Social Hall. It was this kind of ownership that allowed us to purchase a new Torah. It is that kind of ownership that allows us to do all that we do.

In closing, I wish all of you and your families, a healthy and happy New Year and an easy fast. May we all be sealed in the book of life, may our children who are serving in the arm forces be safe, and may the entire world know peace.