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Temple Beth Or

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778  
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## The Future of Temple Beth Or

[Delivered upon the announcement that Temple Beth Or will be pursuing a merger with another local synagogue in a new location under a new name.]

*“My love is like a gazelle” (Song of Songs 2:9). As the gazelle leaps from place to place and from fence to fence, and from tree to tree, so God jumps and leaps from synagogue to synagogue to bless the children of Israel.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>2</sup>...משנה מקום, משנה מזל.

I'm not here to give a eulogy. Because Temple Beth Or isn't dying. Far from it. This synagogue is as strong as it has been in a long time. After years of declining numbers, our membership has been stable for several years. Under Anat Katzir's leadership, our Religious School is thriving. Every year we introduce new ideas and new programs, and we will this year as well. Most importantly, we are carrying on the legacy of Judaism, finding moments of meaning and connection in a turbulent world and enriching the lives of our families and our community.

None of this is going to change. As you process what you're hearing this morning, hold onto that. Wherever this new road leads us, we will continue to fulfill the mission of a Reform Jewish synagogue.

If our congregation is so strong, why are we doing this now? To be honest, our strength is more spiritual than financial. But also, our leadership understands that it is far better to act from a place of strength. I know what happens when a synagogue resists making a big change until they have no other choice. I have seen it many times. That synagogue dwindles, slowly or suddenly. More often than not, its families scatter, and that synagogue ceases to be. Today we know that that will not be our future.

We are joining with another large group of likeminded Reform Jewish families, most of whom live only minutes away. We will find a home that meets all of our needs as closely as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers Rabbah, Naso 11:2.

<sup>2</sup> “Change your place, change your fortune,” Hebrew proverb.

There will be brises and bat mitzvahs, Jewish weddings and funerals. There will be services for Shabbat and holidays. There will be a Religious School to educate and inspire our children. There will be a rabbi and a cantor and a Sisterhood and Torah study and all of the experiences that make Temple Beth Or precious to us.

But they won't be here. We will leave this building, and we are allowed to be sad about that. It's a kind of mourning—the severing of deep connections we have to this place. Within these walls we have laughed and learned together; we have cried. We have celebrated countless family simchas and holidays. This is a beautiful synagogue. Leaving will be hard, it's true. As Lee Anne said, we will take as much of it with us as we can: the Tree of Life and the Confirmation pictures...everything that's not nailed down. We will try to invest our love of this place in those permanent reminders. And before we leave here, we will take to time and gather and to use Jewish rituals to honor our connection to this place.

But our community does not exist to support this synagogue building. This synagogue building exists to support our community. Temple Beth Or is not a building. Temple Beth Or is a group of 300 Jewish families from more than a dozen towns. The day after we leave this building, we 300 Jewish families will be joined, we pray, by hundreds more, and I believe we will be just as committed—more committed, I hope—to being a part of a strong Reform Jewish community, to demonstrating that commitment as an example to our children after us.

As Lee Anne said, the cornerstone of this building was laid in 1966. In 1966, the president of Temple Beth Or was Paul Mandell; his daughter Margery is in the very first Confirmation picture on our wall, from 1963. Paul is now in his 90s, our oldest living past president. I spoke to Paul yesterday. I asked him what he thought about the possibility of Temple Beth Or moving to a new building, like it did 50 years ago. He said, “You have to do what's best for the families.” In speaking to many of our longest-time members over the past few months, I have been awed and proud to meet the same response. They have more memories in this building than anyone. And yet, they are able to see what I see—that Temple Beth Or is the people.

Earlier this morning, I led a service with 100 0-6 year-olds. They need a synagogue: to go to religious school, for bar/bat mitzvah, for Confirmation, to get married. To build a sukkah and have a Purim carnival. To learn to be proud of being Jewish. To become kind and wise. They need a synagogue, and we are making sure that they will have one.

There could not be a better time for this announcement than Rosh Hashanah. More of us are gathered here than at any time in the year. But more than that, this is the day for new beginnings. On Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life stands open, but nothing is written in it yet.

Our actions this year will be written, our decisions will determine the course of our future and the blessings we will find and make together.

We are writing a new chapter in the history of Temple Beth Or; we will write it in the Book of Life. Our parents and grandparents built this place for us. We have the privilege of being the founding generation of the next era in Jewish life in Bergen County. We live in one of the most Jewish, Jewishly-educated, and Jewishly-engaged places in the entire world, and we are about to create something new and wonderful, a new, larger congregation under a new name that will sustain this Jewish community for generations to come.

*We're not just moving—we're going somewhere.*

When God first appeared to Abraham, God said, "*Lech lecha... Go forth from your country and your birthplace, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. And I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.*"<sup>3</sup>

Abraham didn't know where he was going—but he answered the call. He was a wealthy man; he was settled in his hometown. He was comfortable, he was well-known. But he saw the opportunity to build a future of blessings he could not imagine. And so he left. He didn't know where he was going. He had faith that God would guide him. But he also didn't go alone. Abraham took with him his wife, Sarai. He took his nephew Lot. He took all of their possessions. He even took with him the whole community that had gathered around him in Haran.

*Abraham wasn't just moving—he was going somewhere.*

When we eventually make our move, we will be like Abraham. We will be leaving this building, but we will not be leaving what's important behind. We will be taking our families and our friends; we will be taking our children's classmates. We will be taking all those people you see sitting around you, people you recognize and have known for years, even though you don't know their names. (After services let's do something about that.) We will be heading for our own Promised Land. We will be taking a leap of faith.

*We're not just moving—we're going somewhere.*

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:1-2

Change is uncomfortable; we don't like uncertainty. What will our new space look like? What will it feel like? Will it be farther from my house? How will we get along with the Beth El families? Will any of our traditions need to change? It is difficult to set off on this path, not knowing where it will lead. The midrash tells a story:

An old man sat on a highway from which there branched two roads [one full of thorns at the beginning but level at the end] and the other level at the beginning but full of thorns at the end. So he sat at the fork of the road and cautioned passersby, saying, "Even though the beginning of this road is full of thorns, follow it, for it will turn level in the end." Whoever sensibly heeded the old man and followed that road did get a bit weary at first, to be sure, but went on in peace and arrived in peace. Those who did not heed the old man set out on the other road and stumbled in the end. So it was with Moses, who explicitly said to Israel, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, that you and your offspring may live."<sup>4</sup>

We are choosing life. We are hearing the words of Moses, choosing the path that is difficult at first, but that will bring us safely to where we want and need to be.

*We're not just moving—we're going somewhere.*

I don't know when, but someday soon, we will take those Torahs out of our holy ark, we will carry them out the door together, and we will carry them down the street. We will carry our Torahs to our new home, and there will be a holy ark there waiting to receive them.

*We're not just moving—we're going somewhere.*

Hillel says: "Do not separate yourself from the community."<sup>5</sup> We need every person in this room. We need your investment in our future. We need your commitment to doing this together. This is one of those rare times that we are like the small village shul in a shtetl in the Old World. If we don't do this together, it can't be done. And we have a responsibility to do it.

*We're not just moving—we're going somewhere.*

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<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Re'eh 3.

<sup>5</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:4.

Rabbi Isaac said: A person's judgment for punishment at the High Holy Days can be torn up due to four things: giving tzedakah, crying out in prayer, changing one's deeds, and changing one's name. And some add a fifth: moving to a new place.<sup>6</sup>

We have been crying out in prayer. And we are ready to change our deeds. We will give tzedakah. And this year, as we have not for many years, we will change our name, and we will move to a new place.

And so, no judgment will be decreed against us during these Days of Awe. No, we will be inscribed and sealed for blessing. All of us. We need all of us. For the future of the Jewish people. For ourselves and for the children.

As it is written: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will give you strength, and I will help you, and I will hold you up with my own righteous hand."<sup>7</sup>

This Rosh Hashanah, let us not be afraid, for God is with us. Let us bear the discomfort and sadness of change, in order to see the vision of a more vital, more vibrant community ahead.

*Yeilchu mei'chayil el chayil...* May we go from strength to strength.

May all of us, and all those we love, be inscribed for a year of joy, health, and blessing in the Book of Life. L'shanah tovah.

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<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 41:10.