

It is a privilege to be President and an honor to stand before you on behalf of the Board of Directors to wish you a happy new year. Whether you are members or guests we are so happy you have chosen to observe Rosh Hashanah among our community.

I want to first acknowledge my appreciation for the clergy, staff and Board of Trustees for their involvement and dedication. And to each of you for being here today. What makes us a true house of light is not any one individual but who we are as a whole.

Compared to the history of Judaism, the legacy of Temple Beth Or is relatively short at 60 years. The cornerstone on this building dates to 1966 and stands for the families that created this unique congregation and provided us with our valued legacy. Our ancestors could not have foreseen us sitting here today and we can hardly imagine what the American synagogue will look like a generation from now.

In the current environment with ever shifting demographics and a trend towards non-affiliation, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Our leadership has long sought ways to trim expenses and explore every possible collaborative opportunity. For several years a small group of extremely generous members have continually bridged the gap when revenues fall short of expenses and we are scrambling for funds. **This is not a sustainable business plan! We must take action to find a healthier future.** We cannot survive in this building with our caliber of clergy and at our membership level of 300 families with the donor base we have. We can no longer wait it out and hope that something will change. Change is like rain; everyone agrees that we need it but no one ever really wants to get wet! We must boldly talk about significant change.

At our annual meeting last May, I explained our financial realities and the need to articulate a new vision where we not merely survive –but thrive! I shared the research of our Futures Committee who were examining every angle and launching formal negotiations with any potential partners. And we rolled out the TBO Voices Campaign to give our members the chance to share input on our values and give feedback on our options. Thank you for participating and being engaged in this process. Here are the results:

200 of you answered the on-line survey about the role Temple plays in your life. We asked your opinion on alternative sources of revenue, mergers, partnerships and a variety of relocation options. The survey results confirmed that we are not one size fits all. Our membership covers more than 20 different north Jersey towns. The responses clarified what is most important to us and what we want from our Jewish community.

The second part of our Voices Campaign was small group meetings to discuss our Jewish experiences. Nearly 100 families joined me and discussed our backgrounds, what prompted us to choose THIS Jewish community and what keeps us connected. It was clear that our Jewish lifecycle events create the most powerful memories. There is a strong desire to see increases in adult learning and social justice opportunities for all age groups. Another recurrent desire was that we offer more ways to feel socially connected to one another. We asked. We listened. We responded. The input from our Voices has already led to changes in programming.

In terms of what we could do to enact change, we proposed a wide spectrum of options. The first one was to do what we've been doing, to continue as we are for as long as we can, knowing that our congregation would scale back bit by bit until it is no longer operational. In the Voices Campaign this option was rejected with a resounding "no."

The next option was to seek additional revenue opportunities or partners to stay in this building. We initiated talks with numerous synagogues and organizations but we did not find a sustainable solution.

Having exhausted all other possibilities, we had to consider the options that would take us away from this building. We could move on our own, be absorbed by another synagogue or merge with another congregation to create something new.

After extensive research and deliberation our Board of Directors unanimously endorsed what we believe is the best path to ensure a strong congregational future. **The paperwork was completed just yesterday and so as we enter the New Year, we are ready to announce our path forward: in a pivotal move for the history of Temple Beth Or, we will be creating something new!**

In the coming days, we will list this synagogue building for sale and begin discussions on the merging of Temple Beth Or and Temple Beth El of Northern Valley to create a single Jewish congregation in a new location under a new name.

We have two same-sized, like-minded reform synagogues with a plan grounded in business sense and a compelling vision to create something new together. Temple Beth El has followed a very similar path to ours but they have already sold their building in Closter. Our news establishes a timeline that enables our two congregations to find a new home together.

I assure you this has been a careful, thoughtful and thorough process. The Letter of Intent I signed with their synagogue Presidents yesterday will guide our discussions as we seek the best possible location for all our families and consider all the details necessary to arrive at a Merger Agreement. In keeping with our By-laws, we hope to present this formal Merger Agreement and decisions related to the sale of our building at a special Congregational meeting next Spring.

There are many things we do not yet know about what our new merged congregation will look like, but we will keep you informed as we make progress towards our goal. We are thrilled to be establishing a stronger, more vibrant Jewish community for the families of both congregations and all the Jews of northern Bergen County.

We must enter this next phase of discussions understanding that no two organizations are exactly alike and no two synagogues share exactly the same issues. While there are issues we all share, there are also significant ways congregations differ. We will work to take the best elements from each and create a better version by combining them. The goal is that the new post-merger congregation will be greater than the sum of its parts.

We know these are going to be complex discussions: we have two rabbis, two cantors, two educators, two boards, etc., etc. We cannot take this building but we will take all that is meaningful – the Torah’s, our memorial boards and the Tree of Life, the bricks and benches, and of course, the people and the memories. The issues of money and finances, though important are really secondary to the softer, yet more important issues of cultural sync. We have been very comfortable in our discussions and compromises, and we know that negotiation will continue to be crucial to our efforts. If we remain true to the tenets and teachings of Judaism, any differences will work themselves out.

I am not yet able to answer some of your biggest concerns — specifics about the timeline, the location, the name, the clergy and staff. But opportunities to ask questions and give feedback will start right away this Sunday with a town hall-style meeting beginning here at 930am. A second meeting is planned for Sunday afternoon October 15th.

For now, nothing will change. We will be in this building throughout at least the current school year. Our calendar of events for 5778 will remain as is – with the addition of worship, education and social opportunities where we can get to know our new friends from Temple Beth El.

Our building is an ordinary building; it has a foundation, a roof and walls. But it is OUR Synagogue building. It is therefore not just another building. This building is the place we can go to keep those overly busy days in perspective. As we enter we transform an ordinary building into a holy space. But when we really think about it, it is not the building, it is the community that makes all the difference. Living Jewishly means building community among people with shared values. It is being among people who make us feel comfortable and safe; they encourage us to be active, engaged and inspired. These are people we can worship with, families we want to educate our children with, friends we want to celebrate the holidays with and people we want to work with to bring healing to our world. I hope you see that our sacred community is your extended family ready to share the burdens of sadness and the joys of simcha. These are all values of this community.

It is important that we don’t become disconnected from our values. We must continue to support our values by donating to this years’ High Holy Day Appeal. Your generosity is more important than ever. Our contributions will help sustain our operations as well as lead us into the next phase. We are paying for beautiful worship services, we are supporting Jewish education in our religious school, among our teens and for our adults and we are showing concern for those in need in our community and beyond. The best intentions die due to lack of funding. We can no longer be indifferent but need to each make a difference! Our hopes and dreams will be useless without your support to make them a reality. There are so many reasons to give from your heart and contribute whatever you can this season. Our community needs your investment be it \$18 or \$1800. The spiritual, education, musical and nurturing qualities of this community make it such a special place in which to belong. As individuals we make up this congregation, as a group we make our community come alive and we are confident that with our new partners, WE WILL THRIVE!

Our congregation is steeped in history but there is incredible excitement in forging this new future. The work we have done together puts us at the forefront of envisioning a congregation that meets the needs of today's Reform Jewish community. I could not be more excited about this opportunity!

Rosh Hashanah is a time of new beginning—a time of creation or re-creation. How fitting that this opportunity to renew ourselves is upon us just at this season.

May the new Jewish year overflow with happiness and good health for you and your family.
L'Shanah Tova.