

Rosh Hashanah September 30, 2019 / 1 Tishrei 5780

President's Welcome

A Warm Welcome to Everyone. For those who do not know me, I am Doug Marden, President of our Congregation.

I grew up in the 60's in what was then, a small, anti-Semitic suburb of Boston. When we moved to the town, real estate agents sold property to Jewish families only in one neighborhood—later this expanded to a second. We were one of the first Jewish families. By the time I graduated high school, there were less than 10 Jews in my class out of about 170.

I say all this to share with you the relief I always felt when coming to Temple two times a year to observe the High Holidays. For me, upon entering the sanctuary, there was an immediate sense of comfort knowing there was a roomful of people with a similar background, sharing an experience. Temple was a place where taking a deep breath felt comfortable and where meeting people of my own faith presented safety and refuge. This was always for me the most impactful quality of observing the High Holidays—the coming together as a community

Today, with so many topsy-turvy happenings in the world so much of which impacts us as Jews and citizens, it is again important to me personally to take a moment in these Days of Awe to reflect, to find respite, to come together in safety and numbers, and to simply be able to breathe together, communally.

With this backdrop, I feel compelled to express my gratitude to all of you for coming here today. So to the entire Temple Sinai Congregation, it is truly heart-warming to share these Days of Awe with you. And to all the new or unfamiliar faces, to all of you, I also extend a warm welcome from Temple Sinai. **Thank you all for coming.**

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President's Speech

My goal in this speech is to bring you all up-to-date on how things are going here at Temple Sinai and to encourage all of us to participate in those areas where we may be falling a little short.

In short, we are doing great.

First and foremost, let's talk about our community. We have great people here.

I think we all agree that in Rabbi David Edleson, we have found our true spiritual leader and, to borrow the words of one of our Congregants who spoke of Rabbi during a time of personal mourning, a "real mensch." We are fortunate.

Our staff, from top to bottom, are dedicated and hardworking, coming up with new ideas and new ways to enhance all of our experiences at Temple. I want to take this moment to personally thank our Temple Administrator, Michael Levine, and our Director of Education, Judy Alexander, for the work you two do every day.

And to all of you, our Congregants, you too are wonderful. We have faced many frightening issues over the past year including the senseless killings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the Chabad in Poway, California; we have seen threats and a rise of antisemitism closer to home; we have addressed and supported many global and national issues ranging from the support of the LBGTQ community and to religious and racial inequality in Vermont schools, as well as joined in national protests against the treatment of immigrants.

Closer to home, we have acted in a hands-on manner with respect to the local food shelf, blood drive and meals-on-wheels. Chavarim has stepped up to help members in need. **Mazel Tov.**

And we have taken all these actions in a thoughtful, respectful and courteous manner, consistent with the tenants of Reform Judaism, even when the decisions and actions taken by Temple may not have quite matched our own personal views.

I want to make sure that you all know how much I appreciate your engagement and your commitment to civil discourse. As President, I have been involved in many controversies impacting our Temple and, indeed, our Jewishness, over the past year. And we have met each controversy head on in a respectful manner, giving due consideration to opposing views.

It is inevitable that crises and situations needing our voice will continue to arise. Given this, and given—particularly in today's political environment—an environment where civil discourse always seems like it is the "road less traveled"—it is critically important that we have and continue to confirm to ourselves, how controversial issues can be addressed in a meaningful and sympathetic manner. So thank you all for your commitment to activism and civil discourse. And, notwithstanding what happens elsewhere, that here, in the four walls of Temple Sinai, we

have shown time and time-again, that we are committed to satisfying this central tenant of Reform Judaism.

So, in terms of the people who form our Congregation—all the people who are engaged here—this Temple is blessed and it has been my joy to be part of the great work being done here.

So our people are great, but how are we doing with our spiritual lives and Jewish-related programming?

-Most Friday evening Shabbat services are well attended and offer a variety of ways of approaching our spirituality. Anecdotally, our parking lot is almost always full.

-We have added Saturday morning traditional Shabbat services and Torah study. Everyone is invited to attend both or either.

-Our revitalized religious school has new and exciting programs, and new attendees.

-We have added a religious school program for our post-b'nai mitzvots and our teenagers.

-We are offering a number of adult education classes including: A Taste of Judaism, the Adult B'nei Mitzvah Class, Introduction to Judaism, Hebrew for Beginners, and Torah Cantillation for Adults.

-We have enhanced our connection and association with other Jewish Communities in Northern Vermont including UVM Hillel, Ohavi Zedek, Ru'ach HaMakom, the Jewish Community of Greater Stowe (JCOGS), and Jewish Communities of Vermont, and have events and/or services planned with each.

-And our Membership is up by about 20%.

In addition, we have many upcoming events.

-We have our first “Harvest Hoedown” on October 12th. We will have a DJ and dessert, and a lot of fun, so I hope all of you will attend.

-We are going to the URJ Biennial in December.

-We are planning a trip to Israel.

-In the spring, we have committed to bringing in Dan Nichols as our Scholar in Residence. He has been described as “a singular talent in the world of Jewish music” and as “one of the most dynamic, influential and beloved Jewish musicians in North America.”

So People—Great (check); Spirituality—Great (check). What about our lay leadership?

We have a strong and active Board and a number of committees doing fantastic work:

I have already touched on the great work being undertaken by our Social Action Committee, the Membership Committee, and the VP of Education.

Our Spiritual Committee has reinvigorated while managing to broaden the appeal of our Shabbat services.

Through our VP of Marketing and Communications we have established a comprehensive social media policy and continue to grow our presence on social media.

We have updated our website.

Our Safety and Security Subcommittee has made security plans including establishing internal safe rooms, developing a greeter system, adding cameras and other security measures, meeting with Homeland Security to undertake a physical plant assessment, and now are in the process of applying for grants to fund improvements not already in place.

Our Sisterhood and Brotherhood are doing wonderful and **FUN** things—too numerous to list here.

We continue to take steps to maintain our aging building and improve both the look and functionality of the interior and exterior all while making our building and community safer yet more welcoming.

And our plans continue to grow. We are making an effort to establish a Program Committee to work on these ideas. **Is this something that interests you?** Is there something else you want us to consider?

For all of this, I want to thank all of our congregants who have participated in these events in some capacity—whether planning, engaging or supporting. Here is how I want to thank you:

- People serving on the Board, please stand up—and stay standing;
- People serving on a committee, please stand up;
- If you have been to a Friday night or Saturday morning service, or attended Torah study over the past year, please stand up;
- Anyone active in Sisterhood or Brotherhood, please stand up;
- If you have attended religious school or an adult ed. class over the past year, please stand up;
- If you have helped Temple at the Gay Pride Parade, or with Meals-on-Wheels, or given blood, or volunteered for or participated in some other Temple-related activity or event over the past year, please stand up;
- If you have come to Temple to meet or talk with Rabbi, please stand up.

This is our a capital “C” “Community.” Temple Sinai is lucky and blessed to have such active and engaged membership. Thank you.

So we have great programming and we have fabulous members; we have great spiritual leadership and a committed staff. We have engaged lay leadership.

BUT I AM HERE TO TELL YOU THAT WE ARE NOT YET WHERE WE NEED TO BE.

Juxtaposed with the external discord and violence of the past year, such as the killings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the daily tweets from our President, I believe, is our own internal process of revitalization that we as a Congregation are in the midst of undertaking. And as we revitalize ourselves, many of us are realizing and acknowledging how important it is to have a vibrant Jewish community in our area. And for those of us who are progressive, those of us in mixed families, those of us who connect our Judaism with social justice, we want to see in a place like Burlington, a vibrant Reform synagogue that welcomes all and that we can join and be a part of.

But we need your help to really reach this standard. We need more of you to be active on our social action committee. We need you to help with our Onegs. We need you to participate with choir, with Purim, with the religious school. We need you to attend an adult ed. class or come to Shabbat one more time. Simply, we need more of your participation.

Moreover, as fewer people join synagogues and fewer people are engaged in civic organizations like synagogue, having sufficient participation is very challenging. The fact is synagogues and religious institutions across the country are closing.

So those of you who are not members who are here today to observe with us, we want you to join. And for members who know other families or individuals who are not affiliated, we ask that you invite them to our Congregation. If we have only 20 more families join, we would be in the position to do more programming and to offer more support to those in need, locally and globally. If you are proud of your Jewish heritage, if you want Burlington to have a vibrant, progressive synagogue – we need new members to join and to become part of our community.

And—because it is a fact that our revenue from membership does not support our programming, we also continue to rely on your financial generosity beyond membership fees. I want to thank all of you who have contributed financially to Temple Sinai. And another thank you to all of you who are considering making a donation.

There is a lot here to unpack. And I thank you for your indulgence. I want to close with a simple parable; the story of a wise man, Honi the Circle Maker and the Carob Tree.

One day, Honi the Circle Maker was walking on the road and saw an old man planting a carob tree.

Honi asked the man, “How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?”

The man replied, “Seventy years.”

Honi then asked the man, “And do you think you will live another seventy years and eat the fruit of this tree?”

The old man answered, “Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.”

Let us plant those trees, not only for ourselves, but for those that come after us.

Thank you all for coming to Temple to celebrate this Rosh Hashanah and these Days of Awe. I wish you all a joyous New Year, one filled with Jewish life and community.

L'Shana Tovah.