

Yom Kippur Morning

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In doing my best to channel my impression of Sophia from the Golden Girls...

Picture this... It's June 2025 and you see an email in your inbox from housing and residence life detailing the move-in information for your child's freshman year at college. You anticipate what the move-in will be like, decorating the room, meeting new people, fun orientation activities and ***nothing*** getting in the way as you help your child settle in for what you hope will be the best four years of college. And then you look closely at the dates, and you can't believe what you see, move-in for the first-year students has been scheduled for September 23rd and 24th — Rosh Hashanah.

So,... if you wondered why I was not sitting on the Bima last week, as is customary for temple presidents, and praying here with you as my family has done for the past 23 plus years, it was because I was 800 miles away, standing in a University of Chicago dorm room, shvitzing, while I was trying to set up my son's bed, and putting away 200 tide pods that we all know will come home barely used.

While the choice of move-in dates may not have risen to the blatant and deliberate acts of antisemitism and Jew hatred we are witnessing here and around the world, it was still incredibly insensitive of the University, and made me feel unwelcomed and othered. It reminded me that we are still required to make adjustments to fit into a world that seems unwilling or

afraid to treat us equally—whether it’s accommodating our sacred holidays into a schedule or recognizing our right to exist without the need to defend who we are.... In that moment, I learned something profound about what it means to belong. And I realized that my sense of belonging to our TBE community, whether I was seated here physically with you—or standing there in Chicago, transcends our space in the most profound way. A simple email from Howard and Barbara Herman on the morning of Rosh Hashanah—wishing us a shana tova and good luck on our son Jacob’s move-in—along with other messages we received, reminded me just how important this community is in our lives. Even from so far away, I felt deeply connected. It reinforced for me that, even as we go through this transition here, it is **who** we are as a community that defines us—**not** the space we inhabit.

The ill-timed move-in schedule, as upsetting as it was, pushed me to think about how the membership of Temple Beth-El is navigating its own path between the comfort of the familiar and the promise of the new.

The reality is that we are always living with change. Nothing stays the same. Even when we feel most stable, the world around us is in motion. Change is woven into the very fabric of creation itself.

Sometimes change is exciting, opening doors to new opportunities. Other times, it unsettles us, pushing us beyond the familiar. But either way, we don’t get to choose whether change will come— we only get to choose **how** we meet it.

And that is exactly what makes this day, Yom Kippur, so powerful. It gives us the chance to pause, to take stock, and to remind ourselves of what

matters most—the values we hold, the people we love, and the community we have built here together.

This Yom Kippur morning we read from Parashat Nitzavim. The opening words are both powerful and deeply relevant to our community: “Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem—You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God.” What matters in that moment is not **where** they stood, or **what** surrounded them, but the fact that they stood **together**—kulchem—every single one of them.

Our synagogue is the same. **What defines us** is not the walls that surround us, but the people—*kulchem*—all of you, who fill our community with meaning by living our core values of Torah, Avodah, G’milut Chasadim, Kehillah, and Israel. **What defines us** is not a place but a promise—the promise we make to one another to show up, support each other, and keep building Jewish life together.

This year marks a pivotal moment for our congregation. As you know, we are preparing to sell our building and lease back a smaller space that meets our needs while freeing us from financial burdens that have held us back. But let me be clear: *this community is not going anywhere*. Once the sale and leaseback are finalized and brought to a congregational vote—which we anticipate in the coming months—we will move forward in a way that secures our future.

Yes, change is hard. Even when the next step is the right one, it is not easy. I know how deeply many of us are connected to this building and its history. But our beloved Rudin Chapel will remain our main worship space.

We will keep our offices, our library, and other essential rooms. In fact, we will be returning to something close to TBE's original footprint.

We faced a choice: hold on to a building we could no longer sustain, or hold on to what truly makes us Temple Beth-El. Guided by our visioning committee, our Board, Rabbi Stoller's leadership, and Stu Botwinick's support, we chose the path that preserves our values, our vibrancy, and our future. Rather than waiting for circumstances to dictate our fate, we took intentional, forward-thinking steps to secure it.

In Parashat Nitzavim, the words guide us to an essential truth. Our congregation is not defined by brick and mortar, but by the people who gather...by us. A synagogue has always been more than a building. The Hebrew word for synagogue, beit kneset, means "**house** of gathering." But I propose to you that it is the **act** of gathering, of showing up for one another in joy and in sorrow, in prayer and in song, that makes **us** a community, wherever and however that may be. We are in many ways a family here, and it shows in everything we do.

When we help lead a shiva minyan...

When we march with our Israel committee in the Israeli Day Parade...

When we help stock the shelves at the Interfaith Food Pantry at St Al's...

When we sign up for one of our many wonderful programs offered in our *Horizons* catalog

When we raise our voices in prayer and reflection on days like today—**that** is what makes **this... (us)** Temple Beth-El.

The work ahead will take all of us— not as passive observers of change, but as active participants in leading and shaping our future. Let us ensure that Temple Beth-El remains a place where everyone feels truly welcomed, where Jewish learning thrives, where social justice is pursued, and where the sacred is found in both grand moments and quiet ones. And to make this happen, we need your help.

When you read through the *Horizons* calendar, you'll see a robust catalog of events we have this upcoming year. We have an activity, class or an event scheduled almost every day. If Adult Ed inspires you, if our cultural arts programs enrich you, if our worship experiences uplift you, I can ensure that there is something available for you. We are investing our money, time, and effort into the things that make the highest impact and include a range of interests for everyone. **This** is where your dollars, through your donations, matter.

As Rabbi Stoller shared with you on Rosh Hashana, 100 percent of our membership dues goes straight into our operations budget, yet that barely covers half of those costs. Our investment needs to be in us, here, today at TBE. If you've given before, then I ask you to please give again; if you did not give last year, I ask you to please consider giving this year; and if you've never given, let this be the year you join us. Let's aim for 100 percent participation for the ELI campaign, which represents a significant portion of our overall annual gross revenue. Your investment is vital in securing the long-term well-being of our spiritual home.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary volunteers who make our community possible. Our board members, and the members of

our executive, finance and visioning committees all give countless hours to governance and planning, and are some of the most hard-working, compassionate, engaged, supportive, and selfless individuals. Their dedication allows Temple Beth-El to thrive. Our volunteers who bake for our Onegs, who visit the sick, who are our committee chairs, who work in our temple office, and more—you are the hands and heart of this sacred work.

On behalf of myself and the entire congregation, I am profoundly grateful to Rabbi Stoller, whose inspired leadership and powerful words have guided us not only during these Days of Awe but throughout the entire year.

Thank you for your wisdom, your guidance, and your unwavering commitment to our spiritual growth. Thank you for your meaningful sermons and teachings that challenge us to reflect and become better individuals.

Rabbi Megan plays an integral role in our programming and in The Kehillah Project, our innovative religious school program. I am thrilled to share that in its second year the program **is thriving!** Rabbi Megan, you are such a valued part of our temple, and we thank you!

Stu Botwinick, our executive director—I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for the extraordinary work you do. Your dedication, leadership, work ethic, and attention to detail are unmatched. You consistently go above and beyond, always finding a way to make things happen. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to keeping our community strong and flourishing.

I want to also make sure to thank my family. My husband Stan, who sat through more edits and iterations of this speech than I'm sure he wanted to. To our three children, Ayden, Zachary and Jacob, who by far are my greatest gifts and biggest accomplishment. I am so grateful for the family that we have created together and for the way that we all show up for one another.

And...yes, there are some more thank yous...but I will save those for the end of the service during our announcements.

As I enter the second year of my presidency, I remain honored to serve in this role and humbled to follow in the footsteps of so many dedicated past presidents. I hope you have found me approachable and committed to keeping you connected and informed about all that is happening at TBE. After the High Holidays, I will continue my 'Meet the President' opportunities...please look out for those details. In the meantime, I am always just a call, email, or text away.

May this day of fasting lead to a year of fulfillment. May our willingness to change what needs changing strengthen what must remain. And may we continue to be, in every sense, Beth-El—a true house of God, whatever the configuration of our walls may be.

We are *nitzavim hayom kulanu*—standing together as one community, committed to a Jewish future that is vibrant and strong. Change is inevitable, but covenant endures. What matters—what will always matter—is us.

G'mar Chatimah Tova. May you be sealed for a good year and may all our hostages come home **now** - Et kulam Acshav!!!!