

"Our Congregation and Its Members"
Delivered By: Rabbi Stephen Kahn
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This evening I think it is appropriate at the outset of my remarks to take a minute to speak about our outgoing president Carol Reynolds. I remember that hot and humid evening in August of 2002 when Carol was given the charge of schlepping this Senior Rabbi candidate around the Valley. From meeting to meal, interview to seeing the sites, Carol was with Michele and me for the better part of a day. I knew, even seven years ago, that Carol would become president of this distinguished congregation one day. In fact, I vividly remember telling Michele how much I looked forward to it and mostly how I thought it was such a positive reflection on this community that a person of Carol's character would become its president.

This small bit of anecdotal evidence says it all. Carol is one of the most exceptional Synagogue volunteers anywhere. From schlepping to meetings, from programs to Services, from hours on the phone to smiles shared with children in our library, Carol is a *mensch* above *mensch*s. To lead a congregation as its president can be at times a thankless job. But to do it with the warmth, dignity, honor, grace and above all else *yiddishkite* that Carol does it can be an exemplary act of selfless devotion to God and community. Carol, we ask for God's blessings upon you and your beloved husband Danny, on your children and grandson with all of our love, for a life filled with goodness and health. May you always know how blessed we have felt to be partners with you in our sacred tasks.

I would also like to be the first to wish Mazel Tov to our incoming president Steve Bandler. Steve's friendship and wisdom; his optimism and endearing qualities of kindness and gentility will make him an excellent and worthy president of our historic congregation and I, for one, look forward to working with him in these coming years.

Congregation Beth Israel will turn 90 years old this coming High Holy Day season. In just one decade we will be preparing for our 100th birthday! Our place in this community is defined by our members. We are honored with fifteen living past presidents, a Board of Directors second-to-none in their depth of knowledge and passion for this congregation, a staff who often work six days a week (if not more) to bring our members and their children and grandchildren closer to God and to our tradition and a community who are engaged in a variety of Services, programs and events throughout the year as volunteers and participants. Indeed, we are very blessed.

This year has also been challenging for many of us here at Congregation Beth Israel both personally and professionally. Our members have suffered significant financial and personal losses. We are part of a larger world of non profit organizations who are suffering under many conditions neither of our choosing nor our design.

We also live in a time with many choices for Jewish involvement in our community. Some choose to support the plethora of local agencies here in the Valley (most of which - unlike Synagogues - are recipients of significant Federation allocations and support). Others are supporting causes which are more abstract in nature – that is they never really see the direct result of their philanthropic efforts or of their volunteerism. While others have chosen not to participate in local organizations and causes altogether, electing to give of their time and resources to causes on a national or even international platform. I am certain that in most cases these efforts are sincere and the intentions noble. It is our task, however, to bring Torah living and Torah learning to the center of people's lives.

We are reminded of our calling to be a center of Jewish living and learning for all the generations. We know from our own experience this past year that connection to this sacred community is making a huge difference in peoples lives each and every day. For the Synagogue's sole purpose is to create opportunities for partnering with God in the ongoing perfection of our world. Our congregation and its members have brought light into a dark world these past few months and made an indelible impact on our community and world.

Our congregation and its members have fed the poor to the tune of over 30,000 pounds of donated food, clothed the naked in shelters and crisis centers and brought a sense of order to those who live in anguish and chaos. Our congregation and its members have painted houses, fed the home bound and given school supplies and clothes to children who suffer from poverty. Our congregation has raised funds for cancer research and has now created a synergy with one of the largest cancer research projects in the world, and partnered with numerous other organizations who strive to create a better world. Our congregation and its members have made a difference, built relationships and initiated direct connections throughout our community.

Our congregation and its members also continue to pray together and learn together and celebrate simchas together. We have shared in seeing another 45 children become Bar and Bat Mitzvah on this bima, we have watched nearly 20 couples stand under the Chuppah and welcomed so many new babies into our community. Our congregation and its members have also been here to comfort each other in their times of grief this past year as we mourn the loss of another 46 of our beloved members and their family members. Our congregation and its members have made chicken soup for each other, visited each other when they were sick and shared a hug or a smile with each other at Shabbat Services.

It is for these encounters, these times and events, these lifecycle moments that Congregation Beth Israel exists. Our sacred task in this coming year is to continue in making your affiliation with Congregation Beth Israel important to you and nurturing to your souls. We will do this by showing you through act and deed that your membership here means something of tremendous importance to the Jewish community. We will do this by reminding you that being part of this Holy Community can touch a deeply meaningful place in your hearts and minds.

May the coming year be a blessing for our Holy Community. May we be worthy guarantors of this Place we call home for the coming generations. May we all be blessed with health and tranquility of spirit. May we continue to act as partners with God in the ongoing perfection of our world. Amen.