

President's Rosh Hashanah Remarks
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Shanah Tovah. It is an honor to be here today, which marks the 10th Rosh Hashanah I have celebrated with this community and I feel very fortunate.

And I believe that Beth Meyer is fortunate as well.

At a time when many religious institutions in America are facing declining membership, financial hardship and, frankly, a crisis of identity, we are blessed at Beth Meyer with membership growth, fiscal stability and so much opportunity.

In part this is luck, an accident of being located in a growing and vibrant metropolitan area, but let us not discount the hard work of generations of volunteer leaders, the generous donations of our members' time and money, an amazing staff, and a couple of pretty good rabbis -- without whom many of us would not be where and *who* we are today.

But we cannot simply bask in our success. Our *shul* is not immune to the challenges facing other *kehillot* in the Conservative movement. The last numbers I saw from our treasurer David Perlmutter showed we have 463 member units on the books, the most we've ever had -- yet only 30 of them are headed by an adult under 35 years of age.

The era of people joining synagogues just because it's "what you do" is over. Prospective members do the math. They need to see the value in keeping lights on in a building they might expect to rarely come to or pay for programs and services they have yet to need or even know exist.

We are challenged to find new ways to engage young adults *and* empty nesters, singles *and* families with children, teens *and* seniors in ways that speak to their unique and important needs and talents -- perhaps straying a little outside our traditional role as a house of prayer and study, and perhaps even by going outside our traditional definition of "membership" and community -- so that when affiliation with a synagogue community becomes a personal need or the next logical step in someone's journey, whether that be for preschool or *bnai mitzvah* preparation, a *simcha* or a tragedy, Beth Meyer is here for them -- and importantly so that once they join, they stay.

It's a tall order, but let's consider four important strategies, things we must to do succeed

1. We must provide opportunities for members to form strong personal relationships.

You already know that Beth Meyer recently expanded Rabbi Jenny's professional role. In addition to being director of our *mikveh* and sharing her words and her voice on these High Holidays, Rabbi Jenny has jumped feet first into her position as Director of Spiritual Engagement. In this role, she will teach, counsel, program and organize, support

our youngest congregants in both the preschool and on Shabbat mornings, and provide mentorship, support (and some nudging when needed) to what I hope and pray will be a renewed spirit of volunteerism and engagement for our community.

Speaking of renewed engagement, I've got just a few shout outs: to Rondi Goodman our membership chair and her committee for their work in reaching out to prospective members and welcoming new members this summer; to Bonnie Leach and our staff for pulling off our first Summer Schmooze at the JCC and bringing such energy to that event; and to our Sisterhood and Men's Club presidents and their boards, Elyse Werner, Genny Spiliopolous and Scott Checkoway who do great *mitvahs* and offer the kind of programs that build lasting relationships.

It is in the spirit of building strong relationships that the Board has recently welcomed increased interaction and cooperation with Raleigh's Jewish Renewal congregation Yavneh. For several years, the congregants of Yavneh -- led by Rabbi Raachel Jurovics -- have shared Shavuot with us. This year, have increased this cooperation, first by sharing adult education programs, and you will see several Yavneh programs in our fall adult education booklet. And second, beginning in November, Yavneh will be moving their once a month Friday evening Shabbat service to the beit am.

2. We need to meet people where they are.

I mean this literally.

For some folks, more informal and intimate settings are less intimidating and more socially engaging than a classroom. Our rabbis are planning more off campus learning opportunities this year, including Rabbi Jenny's Ask Big Questions luncheons and Men's club sponsored Torah on Tap events.

And then there's distance. There was a time when most of our members lived within a 15 minute drive of our campus. We now have many members driving pretty long ways to get here. What if we *sometimes* could go to them? Beginning this summer, an ad hoc committee of volunteers and Rabbi Jenny have been looking at ways for us to bring programming to our members and potential members in Wake Forest -- with the hope to have our first event during Hanukkah this year. If you live in other remote areas, say in the toll road section of I-540, we are thinking of you too, and if you have ideas I would love to hear them.

You may notice a strange looking camera above the rear doors in the sanctuary. I am so pleased to announce that this Rosh Hashanah's services are being live streamed over the internet for the first time (in what we hope is very high quality sound and video) to a small number of folks in our community who are unable to join us in person today because of health or distance. These beta testers have agreed to report back to us next week on how well it's working. The work that our amazing and tireless Executive Director Susan Sugar did to get this done was Herculean.

For this and so many other things you do Susan, the Board and I thank you.

3. We need to provide a safe and welcoming environment.

If you have traveled you know that many synagogues in the US and abroad have increased their security due to a rise of anti-Semitic threats and actual violence and vandalism. I'm grateful to Saul Schiffman and the safety committee for all they have done to provide our staff with resources to stay safe and respond to an emergency. In the coming year, our new safety chair Steve Katz, with the help of Saul, Henry and others plans to develop a training program for our ushers, Also, our camera system will be improved to allow staff to better see and control who is coming in and out during the day, to serve as a deterrent, and to provide law enforcement with recordings of any break-ins or vandalism.

So we need to safe, but also welcoming!

Our website's home page says that "at Beth Meyer we strive to be a welcoming space for everyone in our diverse community." I truly believe that. I want us to keep on striving, and there are three areas of focus I want to mention, in no particular order, because they are all equally important to me

First, I want to stop being afraid to engage this community in dialogue about important Jewish ethical and existential issues. Immigration, peace & security at home and in Israel, racism, *tzedakah*, free speech, justice and good governance are *Jewish* issues, and our synagogue is strong because of the diversity of opinions we hold on them. We will be stronger if we find a safe and respectful way to share **all** of them and find common ground (or respectful disagreement) rooted in Jewish principles. Like Hillel and Shammai!

Second, I want to speak personally about how grateful I am for the welcome my husband Brian and I were met with as one of the first openly gay couples to join this synagogue 9 years ago. I'm old enough to remember when that would not have been the case, not at Beth Meyer and not in the Conservative movement in general. The legacy of that history is that as I look around this congregation today I see just enough LGBT folk that if I count the Torah scrolls we might just have a minyan. My generation was shunned, kicked and chased out of organized religion -- so it's no small wonder we're here in such small numbers. Our friends at Beth El in Durham have created an alliance called *Kol Koloteinu*, (All our Voices) to promote support and inclusion in their community for LGBT Jews and their families. It's time for us to catch up.

Third, let us continue to make strides in welcoming interfaith couples and the non Jewish relatives who make up a part of so many of our families. I am proud of this congregation's vote this past May to welcome non-Jewish spouses and religious school parents into full membership in our community. Their commitment to creating Jewish homes and raising Jewish children makes them worthy of a place of honor *karov eileinu*, close to us.

4. We need to strive to reduce barriers to membership

I want to thank Bonnie Leach for sharing with me Rabbis Kerry and Avi Olitzky's book *New Membership & Financial Alternatives for the American Synagogue*, and to those members who have called, emailed or written to me to discuss their feelings about our current dues structure after the renewal letters went out this summer.

Quite simply, as long as we have a fixed dues structure, dues are always going to be too high to be affordable for some individuals and families. As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that no one is prevented from joining because of financial circumstances. The very *perception* -- and I've seen evidence of this perception in social media -- that our dues are too high or that our process for paying less than full dues is onerous or stigmatizing (even if these things are not true) is enough to keep prospective members and their children away.

The Board of Trustees has an obligation to ensure that we have sufficient funds to operate and grow. In very rough numbers, fixed dues make up about 60% of our income, with voluntary dues contributions through our *Trumot Ha'Lev* (Gifts of the Heart) program adding another 10%. As a board, I feel we need to work hard on that 60% number, to decrease our reliance on fixed dues through continued emphasis on voluntary dues, donations to our various restricted funds, and through endowments.

Endowments in recent years have contributed approximately \$30,000 per year of additional income to the Synagogue. These funds help to minimize annual dues increases. You may be receiving a brief survey in the current months that we hope you will take the time to complete. This will help us understand your priorities and interest in building a secure Beth Meyer for the future.

I'm going to go out on a limb and make a statement that may seem farfetched, but really I'm only paraphrasing what 20 years ago a former visionary president by the name of Burton Horwitz said in his own president's speech, and that's this: Beth Meyer should have an endowment of 5 million dollars. An endowment of that size would ensure our financial future. We have existing and pledged endowments already, so to get to that 5 million dollar goal, we've "only" got to come up with another 3.75 million!

If we can raise the funds to *build* the building, surely we can raise the funds to ensure it remains full. Please help us explore the possibilities by responding to our survey.

I've barely scratched the surface of what Beth Meyer has to be proud of but let me just wrap it up here by saying that all the members of the Board of Trustees truly appreciate the ideas and feedback of everyone in our community. Please do reach out to us.

And so in closing, on behalf of the board of trustees, let me say
Shanah tovah u-metukah!
A good and sweet year for all!