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Rosh HaShana 5766
Rabbi Neal Gold
Temple Shir Tikva

Shana Tova again to everyone, and good morning, Shir Tikva – it is so nice to meet you!

The holidays, as they say, are very late this year – later, by the standards of the solar calendar, than they can just about ever be. For me, for us, that’s been such a special blessing. That blessing has meant all this extra time to meet so many of you, to be introduced to life at Temple Shir Tikva, and to launch as many of our new relationships as possible.

(By the way, this is also the time of year when rabbis talk among themselves about their new congregations. You hear it all the time: One rabbi will ask, “How big is the sanctuary in your new shul?” And the other will reply, “Pretty big – it sleeps 600.”)

This is a season of new beginnings, and obviously enough in many ways we’re embarking on new beginnings here at Shir Tikva. For my family and me, it has been an incredible three months of getting acclimated to the community, meeting so many of you, meeting the children of Shir Tikva, and so much more. You have made us feel... well, you have made us feel like this place is home.

And you all have been so generous with me – I hope you’ll continue to be in the months to come. I have met so many wonderful people here in such a small amount of time – please understand that even when I recognize your face, the hundreds of names that have come my way have a habit of getting lost in the shuffle. Please keep reintroducing yourselves to me, remembering: this is a big community.

And if I haven’t met you yet... fair warning: It’s no fair coming up to me in January and saying, “Remember me, Rabbi? We met on Rosh HaShana...” Instead, by all means, call, make an appointment, come around the Temple and say hello. After all, rabbis and congregations are about relationships if nothing else. All the Torah we teach, all the Mitzvot we do together, all the work that we do here... it is all contingent on the quality of the relationships we forge. It is going to take some time. It is going to take months, years. But we are going to do great things together, and I’m anxious to get to know you – in the singular, not the plural.

The Proper Care and Feeding of a rabbi, as you know, is a time-honored skill in Jewish communities... well, to an extent; in some communities more than others. Shir Tikva does it well. The generation of Jewish life that you have celebrated with Rabbi Blumberg is testimony to that, as well as the grace and wisdom and *kavod* that you expressed in our mutual transition process these many months. Know that in no way, shape, or form do I see my role here as having supplanted or replaced Rabbi Blumberg and his relationship with you. I see myself as his successor, nothing more... although “successor” is an interesting word, isn’t it? Thanks to the success that you and he had together in building this vibrant place, I have the privilege of riding an enormous wave of momentum. For that, I am deeply grateful.

Let's be honest about this relationship that we're going to create. We won't always see eye-to-eye with one another. We will wrestle, we will disagree, we will argue with one another. (That's the warning they give you when you become a Jewish professional: "You know they'll make you gray at the Temple."¹) There will be, quite frankly, times that I will disappoint you, and times you will disappoint me. That's been the hallmark of relationships in Jewish congregations since... well, really since the Book of Exodus, if you think about it. My prayer is that the disagreements in our relationship will only be those that are, in the words of our tradition, *l'sheim shamayim* – for the sake of Heaven. After all, if we disagreed about nothing – then there would be no room for any of us to grow. More than anything, I hope we can trust one another – the sort of trust that is built upon shared experiences and relationships that get constructed over time.

For I believe that synagogue life is desperately important. For all the flak that the modern American synagogue receives – and there is a lot of it, and much of it is quite deserved, believe me – still, the synagogue will continue to remain into the foreseeable future as the primary locus of Jewish communal life. And, when you think about it, our "hit" rate is much better than we often care to admit.

In our literature, we call Shir Tikva a lot of things: a *beit tefillah*, a "house of prayer;" a *beit midrash*, a "house of study;" a *beit kneset*, a "house" for gathering together to do sacred work. The Hebrew word *beit* is a grammatical form of *bayit*, which means "house..." and it also means "home."

We need a place that feels like home more than ever. We live in a world that is so transient, so turbulent, that we need the solidity that only a community rooted in our tradition can provide. Think about so many awful signposts in recent years: 9/11, the Intifada, the War in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina. Many of us found ourselves drawn, like spiritual magnets, to our spiritual homes in these times of crisis, for a reconnection to a place of permanence; for a reminder that some things in our world gone mad can remain intact.

I've been thinking a lot about the significance of these Temple homes in the past year. As the summer has turned to autumn and my family has been acclimating to our new home, I've found myself thinking about three people in particular. I've been thinking about **Nancy Chontow**, **Franz Rosenzweig**, and a teenager named **Rachel**.

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Last year I returned to my childhood shul to attend the funeral of **Nancy Chontow**. Nancy – a truly great lady, a dear friend of my family – was also a pillar of the Temple community since its founding. Everyone knew her, because she was one of those people who was omnipresent in all different aspects of Temple life. Although Nancy had been there since the '60's, she was not one of those who, as she grew older, began to grumble that "she didn't recognize anyone around here anymore." That's because subsequent generations of the Temple got to know her as well as the old-timers.

Nancy was also my nursery school teacher. (Ten years ago or so I surprised her at a Nursery School "reunion." Nursery School reunions usually mean first- and second-graders come back to visit their old teachers; I was the only alumnus in the room with a

¹ The line is Al Vorspan's.

graduate degree.) She was a great lady, and when she lost a shockingly brief battle with cancer, I went home to her funeral. Back to Temple Shalom, my second childhood home.

Nancy's funeral was a full house. The Temple was packed with people from all parts of the community, and representing several generations. There were plenty of people who had flown in from long distances to pay their respects.

For me, it was remarkable. Looking around, I saw faces of old Hebrew School teachers and my parents' friends whom I hadn't seen, in some cases, for over 25 years.

And here's the most incredible part. *They all looked exactly the same.* Oh sure, some were a little more gray at the temple. But I looked around and said to myself: *My G-d! There's Mrs. Vogel! There's Mr. Saltz! There's Mrs. Schwartz! And that's exactly what I imagined that they still looked like!*

It was as if all these manifestations of my subconscious were opened up and its inhabitants released, to walk and talk and interact with day-to-day reality.

I tell you this story because I want that relationship for every child in Shir Tikva. I want them to be here not merely two days a week for Hebrew school. I want them to live and breathe this space, to learn to pray here, to mature here and grow up here and fall in love here and work out their neuroses here. I want to only begrudgingly bid them farewell when they go off to college because of the presumption that they're leaving the neighborhood. And I imagine that 15 or 20 years from now, they're going to step back across this threshold and catch a glimpse of us old-timers, and say, "*My G-d! It's you! And you. And you. And you. You were such an important part of my life, when I was young and finding myself. And you might not even have realized it.*" ("And, by the way, you look terrific.")

To all our children, and to all the adults of this community, we invite you to come and make this place your home.

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As a spiritual home, Shir Tikva is also a place for personal transformation. That's why I've been thinking about **Franz Rosenzweig** as well.

Franz Rosenzweig was one of the most critically important Jewish philosophers of the 20th Century. He was one of the first to point us toward this post-modern age in Judaism, which Shir Tikva represents very well: an admittedly liberal place that isn't skeptical of tradition and ritual; we lovingly try on ancient tradition here to see how it fits. The 21st Century Reform Judaism that admits the possibility of virtually everything from the palette of Mitzvot is, in part, thanks to Rosenzweig.

He almost never happened, however.

Rosenzweig was born in 1886 in Kassel, Germany, into an assimilated Jewish home. His family's brand of Judaism was so-called "cultural." It wasn't modeled on spirituality or holiness or tradition. It was more of a counterresponse to the anti-Jewish bigotry of the neighbors, a rather permanent feature of European history. Judaism, as Leon Wieseltier has described it, as "anti-anti-Semitism."

Like many of his compatriots, Franz Rosenzweig entered university and studied philosophy, history, the classics. During this time period, many of his colleagues, in the fashion of the age, took the plunge and converted to Christianity, in an effort to become

“true Germans.” Rosenzweig, too, got caught up in the zeitgeist, and seriously considered taking this extreme step.

In 1912, he began a lifelong conversation with Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a noted Protestant theologian. Rosenstock urged Rosenzweig to defend his shallow Jewishness, or – simply out of intellectual integrity – to convert to Christianity. And, being an intellectual, Rosenzweig was seriously tempted.

It’s hard to imagine his psychological condition at that time in his life. Most of us don’t live so fully immersed in the world of ideas – we can handle a little disharmony in our intellectual lives. Rosenzweig couldn’t. What was it that made him a Jew? he asked. Were there threads that went beyond mere ethnicity? Was there more to it than just the quirk of fate that he was born into a certain family?

In the fall of 1913 – at this time of the year – he made a monumental decision. He was going to do it. He would cut the last remaining threads. And it was at this time – during the Days of Awe – that he stepped into a small synagogue in Berlin, quite possibly for the last time as a Jew.

History hasn’t captured what happened to him there. We don’t know what he heard or saw or experienced. We have to use our imagination. We only know the result.

He emerged transformed. He came out of the shul reversing his previous decision: He now declared that he knew he was through-and-through a Jew. And it wasn’t just culture or anthropology that made him such. “He declared that the Jew does not need to seek G-d, for G-d is already with him or her; and he devoted the remainder of his life to recovering Judaism for himself and, if possible, for others like him.”²

He went on to do just that, reclaiming Jewish life and spirit without retreating from the contemporary world. Yet this story terrifies. For he was very nearly lost to us.

Part of this story is the saga of one man’s personal transformation. But this story is also about synagogues. Because every synagogue community should ask itself: if the next generation’s Rosenzweig were to walk through our doors today... what would she find here? Would she stay? Or leave?

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More than anything, this home is a place of **values**. In the modern world, people balk when they hear the phrase, “traditional family values” – and rightly so. Let’s wrench back the meaning of those words where they belong.

For our gathering here is not neutral. The work we do together must be *value-laden*, otherwise it is pointless. The world around us is increasingly a place where people shun values like **community, cooperation, personal growth, peacemaking, and education not for degrees but for its own sake**. No one wants their Temple to be a place that is neutral on those things.

Temple life is a place for doing good. And what’s fascinating is that it has always been that way. Professor Frank Loewenburg of Bar Ilan University in Israel has demonstrated that the earliest synagogues we’ve found – over 2,100 years old – always had a component of social justice to them. Isn’t that remarkable? Archaeologists have discovered that those earliest synagogues were not simply places for communities to come together and pray. They were also – 2 millenia ago! – centers where homeless

² Steven Schwarzschild, “Franz Rosenzweig,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

travelers were put up for the night. And in the same era of history, the synagogue was the place where the first schools were located, and communal affairs were managed, and the day-to-day work of caring for poor people took place.³

See that? Doing the work of justice and goodness was never, never merely incidental to who we are as a community. It has been part and parcel of who we are from the very beginning. Feeding hungry people, taking in homeless and poor wanderers, gathering to defend people who are defenseless... this has been the synagogue's mandate from Day One. Make no mistake about it: the values of the synagogue are often – if not always – in radical contradistinction to the values of the society that surrounds it.

And that brings me to the story of my friend **Rachel**.

Rachel was a bat mitzvah student of mine, and she was a sweet, quiet girl. She was cute and friendly. She hung on for a year or so after Hebrew school but unfortunately she stopped coming back after eighth grade or so. I lost touch with her.

A few years later, I got a phone call from Rachel at the shul and she asked if we could get together. “Of course,” I replied, and she came in to see me.

The girl who entered my office was very different from the bat mitzvah of a few years earlier. She was about fifty pounds heavier, dressed in black jeans and black sweatshirt, with black eyeliner and black nail polish. (Now, I pride myself in not judging anyone, especially kids, by their appearance. Or, perhaps more accurately, I should say I have a special fondness for the kid who marches to her own drummer.) What was obvious was that this young woman had been through many changes.

I asked why she had gotten back in touch, and here's what she said. “I have a circle of friends whom I don't think really care about me. I don't think they really have my best interests at heart.” Which is a remarkable thing for a person to acknowledge. As we talked, she asked me this: “Can I come back to the Temple? **I just think I need to be around good people for a while.**”

She did come back. We found a niche for her as a classroom aide in our first grade. As a matter of fact, she discovered about herself that she had a special affinity for young children. She took a few community college semesters, and is now enrolled in a university in Philadelphia getting a degree in early childhood education.

Rachel explained to me more succinctly about Temple life than any other teacher I've ever known. She said, “I just need to be around good people.”

There is the quintessence of life in the shul. There are many things a shul simply cannot be:

- It can't shoulder the burden of Jewishly educating children without parents who reinforce the message at home.
- It can't act as a surrogate parent – for adults or for children;
- It can't be everything for everyone.

But Rachel reminded me that a shul can be a place of solidity in a world that seems adrift. It can and should be a place where we weigh our words more carefully. It can and should be an open place of inquiry, and learning, and a place where people are able to risk sounding foolish. It should be a place where we are challenged and provoked – not simply a place that reinforces everything that we already think or believe.

³ Frank M. Loewenberg, *From Charity to Social Justice: The Emergence of Communal Institutions for the Support of the Poor in Ancient Judaism*, New Brunswick, NJ & London: Transaction Publishers, 2001, pp.141-144, 169-170.

It should be a place where all the values we purport to believe are, in fact, acted upon.

This Rosh HaShana, this Season of Renewal, is a time for taking stock of our lives. It is our annual opportunity to ask the deepest and richest questions:

What do we love about our lives? And where do we come up short?

Is this where I expected to be at this time in my life?

Is this what I wanted – personally, professionally, intellectually, spiritually?

We ask the big questions. We do not change everything wholesale; there is much blessing and goodness in who we are.

This is also a Season of Renewal for Shir Tikva. It, too, does not mean wholesale change. Far from it: this is a wonderful, vibrant, spirited community. But allow the spirit of newness that is here now to be an opportunity to ask yourself: In what ways do I give of myself in this community? In what ways have I made this my spiritual home?

If you are new to the Shir Tikva community – welcome; we've been waiting for you.

If you have found yourself detached or estranged from the community – today we invite you back with open arms.

If you've been looking for something new and different in your relationship to the Temple – I'd like to invite you to explore it, in the spirit of rediscovery.

It is a season for new beginnings. Heidi and I couldn't be more excited about our family's new beginnings here with all of you. I hope you, too, will see this as a time of beginnings for your connections here as well.

The Psalmist wrote:

Im Adonai lo yivneh vayit, shav amlu vonav bo:

Unless G-d builds the home, its laborers have toiled in vain.⁴

Together with the Holy One, may we renew in Shir Tikva a place that will increase the amount of G-dliness in this transient and weary world.

May it be a place where Good People gather to do the sacred work of learning and growing and building.

May it be a place that feels warm and welcoming and powerfully decent and spirited and exciting.

May it be a place that ultimately, for each of us, feels like... home.

Amen.

⁴ Psalm 127:1