

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

The poet Alvin Fine has written, “Life is a Journey, a sacred pilgrimage made stage by stage.” One of my favorites lines is “Looking backward or ahead we see that victory lies not on some high place along the way but in having made the journey stage by stage.” 5770 marks the beginning of a new stage in my life, in the life of the congregation and especially in the life of our Senior Rabbi designate Rabbi Andrea Coustan London.

For thirty years I have had the privilege as the Senior Rabbi of Beth Emet of wishing you *Shana tova umetuka*, a good and sweet year on behalf of myself, Elaine, my children, their wives and my grandchildren. Although I hope to offer you this same greeting for many years to come, it will be in a different role. The present stage of my journey will end on June 30, 2010 when I become Rabbi Emeritus. Then I will begin a new as yet unplanned stage. I expect these next nine months to be an exciting and momentous time as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of Beth Emet, the Centennial of Rabbi Polish’s birth, Rabbi London’s 10th anniversary at Beth Emet and my retirement after 30 years. So many wonderful milestones!!! So many significant blessings!! But Wow! How the time as flown by!! What a year of Transition!! In addition to everything else, we also are welcoming our new and talented Cantor Arik Luck and our new and wonderful Principal Marci Dickman.

As those of you who were here last night learned, the holy day Rosh HaShanah has four names—*Yom HaZikaron* the Day of Remembrance, *Yom HaDin* Judgment Day,

Yom Harat Olam the Day of the World's Conception, and *Rosh HaShanah* the Beginning of the year. These four designations are markers for our individual and collective spiritual journeys at this season of awe. Memory allows us as individuals and communities to reflect on our past and to understand from where we came and assess which acts and beliefs shape our journey. Judgment determines which acts and beliefs should remain at the core of our identity, and which should be shed or modified. Conception encompasses a period of gestation. It is the necessary stage in preparation for the future. The final stage of this journey is implementing the new things which transform our ruminations, evaluations, and planning into a dynamic response personal and communal to our understanding of who we wish to be in the future. It is an act of *Teshuvah*, of turning away from what must be rejected, and turning toward what must be embraced.

Yom Ha Zikaron the Day of Remembrance--- Without memory we have no perspective. We cannot celebrate success nor evaluate shortcomings. Memory allows us to weave a personal and collective narrative. I have no intention this morning of reviewing the whole history of our congregation nor do I wish to engage in nostalgia. I merely want to remind all of us how we came into being and why I came to Beth Emet. Each of these narratives helps set the frame for reflection on where we are now and where need to go.

Last night Rabbi London recalled for us Beth Emet the Free Synagogue's important founding narrative. Rabbi David Polish was barred from another congregation because of his pro-Zionist views. He and a small group of our founders established this congregation based on freedom of the pulpit, a deep commitment to Israel, to dynamic

participatory worship, quality Jewish educational experiences, and deep engagement in the struggles for equality and justice in the local, national and international arena. Let us remember that 1950 was a crucial moment in Jewish history. The Shoah had just ended and Israel was a struggling nascent state. Anti-Semitism was a real threat. The Jewish community felt vulnerable and insecure. Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities committee were seeking Communists under every leaf. The ability of religious leaders to speak out was a desperate necessity and required not only courage from the clergy but from congregants as well. Central to Beth Emet's identity and its principles is that we expect that our Rabbis will speak out on the issues that confront the world, our nation and the Jewish people and as a congregation we will be engaged in the work of *tikkun olam* (perfecting the world) and the preservation of the Jewish people. Our founding rabbi and our founders were committed to being a leadership congregation, respectful of the past but committed to the ongoing and open exploration of Judaism. I recommend for your reading a memoir that Rabbi Polish wrote commemorating our 30th anniversary. I will ask Bekki Kaplan, our incredible executive director, to post it on the website. We are a congregation that embraces controversy and activism. This has been essential to our mission and a significant part of our identity. No plan for the future can ignore our founding narrative, as no Judaism can ignore the Biblical narratives that set us on the path of history.

The life of the mind, intellect, freedom, and moral activism, all has been the hallmark of Beth Emet the Free Synagogue. I remember my interview at Beth Emet. When I called Elaine late that night, I said that I did not know whether I got the position or not but I had a wonderful evening discussing Judaism with deeply knowledgeable and

committed Jews. As I speak with congregants and non congregants alike they tell me that they believe Beth Emet's uniqueness is to be found in the knowledge and commitment of its membership. While we have striven to be a large tent and open to all who wish to participate, it is clear that we cannot nor should we be all things to all people. Our strength now and in the future will be based on a clear understanding of who we are and who we are not. Among the many congregations in the area we should strive to be unique. Our strength will come from attracting people who are committed to our mission and share our vision of a redeemed world. Beth Emet must remain a mission driven congregation.

Yom Hadin The Day of Judgment--- We stand here today between what was and what is yet to be. On a personal level this is a potentially powerful spiritual moment. My fate, our fate, will be determined by what we decide today. It is no less important on a congregational level. Honestly facing our fears and our shortcomings as well as honestly assessing our accomplishments and talents is important. At crucial moments we need faith to forge ahead. We can become paralyzed by the formidability of the task. We can remain in limbo by looking for just the right piece of data which will assure us that our decision is correct. We become dependent on the support of others rather than looking to our own inner strength. I am reminded of one of my favorite stories about Moses.

Moses led the people out of Egypt and they are now in the desert. The people are restless, unhappy and most of all fearful. Moses begins to question his own mission and his own ability to lead. Moses himself needs reassurance. So he asks God to let him see God's face. He wants absolute assurance. But God said, "You cannot see My face, for a person may not see Me and live." "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the

rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.” Exodus 33: 12-23

Here Moses, who has had the closest encounters with God of any human being, still needs further reassurance. He wants perfect knowledge of God and absolute assurance that everything will be alright. God tells him that while God will accompany him that Moses will have to be satisfied with imperfect knowledge and have the courage to go ahead without absolute assurance. He must have the personal faith and courage and he must convey that faith and courage to the people. We all know that Moses in fact leads the people towards the Promised Land, but it is not an easy journey, and Moses finds himself frequently in conflict with people and in trouble with God. Ultimately, Moses must transfer leadership to Joshua who will be the one to complete the Exodus and lead the people into the Promised Land. Transitions are exciting and worrisome times. We mark our transition at a marvelous moment in the history of our congregation. “Life is a journey made stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage... Looking backward or ahead we see that victory lies not on some high place along the way but in having made the journey stage by stage.”

Over the past ten years I have had the privilege of working with Rabbi Andrea London, our senior rabbi designate. This morning I know that I do not have to rehearse for you her credentials or tell you about her many talents. She is well known to the congregation, and for those of you who do not know her, I encourage you to take one of the many opportunities during this year to get to know her. I am proud that she has been chosen as my successor. As we contemplate the future, I want to share just a few aspects

of the direction she has given to our congregation. As you can tell from last night's D'Var Torah, she understands and respects the past, but recognizes that we cannot live off our past laurels. Essential to her teaching and living Judaism is a deep commitment to the Jewish concept that human beings are both body and soul, intellect and emotions. She teaches us that Judaism cannot be viable unless all these aspect of our humanity are integrated into our Judaism and its practice.

Let me illustrate the Jewish understanding of the dual nature of the human beings. There is a Talmudic parable about the relationship between the body and the soul. "A human king owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. Now, he appointed two watchmen, one lame and the other blind. [One day] the lame man said to the blind, "I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon your shoulders that we may procure and eat them." So the lame man straddled the shoulders of the blind man, procured and ate them. Sometime after, the owner of the orchard came and inquired of them, "Where are those beautiful figs?" The lame man replied, "Have I then feet to walk with?" The blind man replied, "Have I then eyes to see with?" What did he do? He placed the lame upon the blind and judged them together. So will the Holy One, blessed be He, bring the soul, [re]place it in the body, and judge them together.'San.91a b

Classical Reform emphasized the intellect at the expense of a richer understanding of the human being. It bought into Greek and Christian concepts which saw the body as the source of evil and modern philosophical concepts which understood God as an Idea. Its ideas of worship were shaped by Protestant models and God was conceived as transcendent, and the rabbis, like God, were distant and remote. Classical Reform rejected all of the *mitzvot* connected to the body; for example, the dietary laws,

the wearing of *kippot*, and the use of the *mikvah*. On Yom Kippur it eliminated the reading in Leviticus 18 about sexual sins. It rejected Zionism which embraced us as an embodied people with a land. We must never forget that Classical Reform Judaism was deeply committed to ethics and social justice. Its God, while remote and distant, was a demanding God. I am a product of classic Reform. Classical Reform Judaism also believed that only Western culture was advanced and had anything to teach us, but gradually, as we began to rediscover our own sources of spirituality, we also discovered that the insights of the East could contribute to our understanding of Judaism. Among the many things that Rabbi London brings to us is the integration of spirituality and spiritual practice to our Judaism, an understanding of the connection between body and soul, the intellect and the emotions. It is this rediscovery of whole self which has begun to permeate the whole of Beth Emet's program.

Beth Emet is known for its social activism. *Tikkun Olam* is central to our mission. The Beth Emet soup kitchen remains the center piece of who we are. But we know that only if we cure the systemic ills of society will be able to eliminate poverty and hunger. We are in a new age of social networking and community organizing. Under the leadership of Rabbi London, we have become deeply engaged with Just Congregations, which is a community organizing approach to congregational activism. It is a bubble up approach which discovers the issues which people are passionate about and through the development of personal relationships encourages them to join with others in pursuing a better world. It does not replace our traditional approach, but it is a recognition that a truly engaged community can join with other truly engaged communities to pursue systemic change on a different level.

Rabbi London also continues the hands on activism as exemplified in the two trips she led to the South to help the victims of hurricane Katrina rebuild their lives. She has expanded our interfaith work by becoming one of the leading figures in the Chicago Jewish community to develop strong relationships with the Muslim community.

Zionism and love for Israel have been central to our mission. Rabbi Polish was a founder of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, and composed its platform. I have carried on his work here and abroad serving as a National VP of ARZA, Chair of the Institute of Reform Zionism and a member of Zionist General Council (Vaad HaPoel). Peace in the Middle East remains central to my personal and communal agenda. I believe that Reform Jews need a new concept of Zionism. Rabbi London and I are deeply committed to peace. Our voices are loud and clear and are often outside the establishment consensus, yet we want Beth Emet to hear all of the relevant views so that as a community we can be well informed. To strengthen our ties to Israel, Rabbi London has created a close relationship with our sister congregation Kehillat Tzur Hadassah. People to people and congregation to congregation is the way to forge genuine connection.

Our youth represent our future. Camp and trips to Israel are important elements in our program. Rabbi London's involvement in OSRUI has been so important to the camp and it is paying huge dividends to the congregation. Rabbi London's commitment to youth has resulted in radically changing our youth program by moving from part time youth group advisors to a full time youth director. Under her direction, Aaron Gunning has integrated our youth program and our education program, combining formal and informal Jewish education and expanding our programs to younger and younger children.

By ensuring that we have a fulltime Youth Director, Rabbi London is leading the effort to secure funding for this program for the next five years, with the goal of eventually endowing the program.

Beth Emet and the Jewish world are at a crossroads. Congregational organization and congregational life remains rooted in the models which were created in the immediate Post War World II religious revival and the move from the city to the suburb. Intermarriage was almost nonexistent, the divorce rate was low, the two career family was almost nonexistent and male and female roles were distinct and clearly defined. Gays and Lesbians were in the closet. So much has happened since those times. Today the pace of change is accelerating. Congregations who wish to flourish must be nimble with changed forms of governance, the judicious use of technology, and a clear vision of their mission. The assumption that when people marry and have children, they will automatically join a synagogue increasingly seems to be untrue. Nationwide High Holy Day attendance is declining and we are the fastest aging community in North America.

Denominationalism has diminished. The differences among Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist are more style than substance. In an age of meaning, people join congregations that speak to their sense of self and that stand for something. National platforms which seek to define the boundaries of movement are important to set the goals of the denomination's national programming, but they are largely irrelevant to the Jew who is seeking his or her place in the Jewish community. Viral networking and new forms of social organization are being spawned by the internet. The economic crisis has raised questions about resources for the future. The Cassandras among the pundits are once again predicting the demise of North American Jewry. However, purpose driven

congregations and organizations are flourishing. A grand vision faithfully executed is a powerful draw. In 1950 Rabbi David Polish and the founders of Beth Emet championed a vision of a bold approach to Judaism. It was out of step with the mainstream of Reform Judaism and eventually Reform Judaism caught up with Beth Emet. As we approach the future we must do so with the same boldness as our founders. This is for me the meaning of Beth Emet –the House of Truth. To honestly face the contemporary world with the insights and values of Judaism and be willing to radically rethink our approach based on the changed reality. The Free Synagogue means a place faithful to principle and committed to change, experimentation and risk taking.

Yom Harat Olam The Day of the World's Conception--- This implies a period of gestation before birth. This year as I mentioned will be a year of celebration. It will also be a year of transition and planning. Rabbi London will use her sabbatical to clarify the direction that she will take us. We have engaged also Dan Hotchkiss, a transition consultant from the Alban Institute, who will be working with the Clergy, the Officers, the Board, and the congregation to pave the way for the future. Our Strategic Planning Document will form a basis for these explorations. The future is beginning to unfold slowly. *Hazak ve Ematz* Be strong and of good courage. It was with these words that Moses blessed Joshua. It is with these words that I bless Rabbi London and all of you. The ceremony of *havdalah* is necessary to bring a holy day to an end. It helps us appreciate its beauty, importance and sacredness by marking the boundary. To begin the next holy day we light candles and recite Kiddush, marking the time as sacred. This year will be a time of *havdalah* concluding with my retirement.

Next year will be **Rosh Hashanah The beginning of a new year.** It will formally begin with the installation of Rabbi London as the third Senior Rabbi of Beth Emet. In the meantime we all have a great deal to do to prepare. I ask each of you to think about how you can strengthen Beth Emet. How about bringing a new member to the congregation? How about trying one of the worship opportunities which you have not tried? How about driving a person to a service that needs a ride? How about taking a class in our Judaic Studies program? How about joining the conversation about our future? Each of us has a gift to give. Each of us has a talent to share. Beth Emet is your community. Join all of us in making Beth Emet more welcoming and even more participatory, vibrant, creative and hopefully more controversial. Beth Emet needs you.

This year I am looking forward to planning the next phase of my life and participating with you in all of the activities and celebrations and helping Rabbi London and our leadership prepare for Rosh Hashanah. I look forward to watching Rabbi London and the congregation kindling lights and making Kiddush to mark the dawning of the New Year. "Life is a Journey, a sacred pilgrimage made stage by stage. ...Looking backward or ahead we see that victory lies not on some high place along the way but in having made the journey stage by stage."

As Rabbi London began with the words of David Wilcox's song, I conclude with them.

I said God, will you bless this decision
I'm so scared. Is my life at stake
But I see if you gave me a vision
Would I ever have reason to use my faith?

I was dead with deciding - I was afraid to choose
I was mourning the loss of the choices I'd lose
But there's no choice at all if I don't make my move

And trust that the timing is right
Yes and hold it up to the light

And let me add. If you hold it up to the light you will see the future is bright.

I believe it is bright for Beth Emet, for our country, our people and our world, bright
because I believe in you. I believe in Beth Emet and I believe in Rabbi London.