

Where We are Going
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5772
Jewish Congregation of Brookville

Thank you to Josh and Bruce, our co-presidents. Thank you to the Board for your tireless efforts in behalf of the JCB. I have said this before but let me say it again, I am grateful, we should be grateful, to our Board who volunteers to serve our congregation. Our Board's service can only be because of love and devotion. We should be endlessly thankful for their hard work.

I want to thank Josh for his talk this morning and presenting a new direction for the JCB. Some might be surprised by this announcement. Some might have expected such a new direction. I apologize if this comes as a shock. I plan to speak with everyone about this idea—soon, in the near future. (By the way in case you are itching to hear about Israel, you will have to wait until Kol Nidre.)

This morning I want to share my opinion about this venture. So let me say loud and clear at the outset. I think this idea is fantastic; it is wonderful. Amen! Although I can't tell you how to feel I think everyone should be excited about this idea.

Let me tell you why this idea is so great. Of course I am rabbi so this is a more philosophical talk. And also let me address some concerns or worries that you might have. This morning's sermon is about us and where we are going. Let me be clear; we are only at the beginning of this process. We are not at the end; there are many details still to be fleshed out. Let me also be clear. We are never going to lose what makes JCB special and unique.

We have been on an extraordinary journey these past 12 years. I have learned a great deal. Part of what I come to understand, serving as your rabbi, is that you can never exactly be sure where you are going. We planned for years to have our own building. I spoke for years about this plan at almost every High Holidays and every bar/bat mitzvah. Now the goal and direction have changed. Despite the best of plans, destinations sometimes get changed. Actually we often change directions.

When I learned to sail there was no such thing as GPS or autopilot. The wind often pushed us off course. We had to adjust and redirect our course and heading. That was always part of sailing. We would look over the charts in the cabin's poor evening light and plot our course with compass and ruler. But then in the morning we would inevitably have to make adjustments based on the weather and conditions of the sea. Many times, many times, we would not only have to change direction but change our destination; the sea would not allow us to get there.

Sometimes I think that in our technological age we have the false impression that you never veer off course; that your destination remains fixed and sure. The computer takes

you there. Set the GPS and you will always get there, we seem to believe. We have all read the stories of people who blindly follow their GPS into a dead end street; or even off a cliff. I am sure all have experienced this moment when your car's GPS takes you to a street behind your destination; you could get there if you drove through several people's backyards. So now you have to find your own way. And who has a map in their car anymore? If you plan on coming to my sukkot party and you're following your GPS say hi to my neighbors down the block when it takes you there instead of to my house. #30 is at the top of the hill, on the cul de sac, not the middle of the street. Can we still find our way without the aid of iPhones, Blackberries or GPS?

If the Torah was all about the destination it would be only two books long; or perhaps only one and a half. God creates the world; calls to Abraham; his grandson Jacob is sold into slavery in Egypt; God frees his descendants, the Jewish people, from Egypt; God reveals the now abbreviated Torah at Mount Sinai; the Jewish people enter the land of Israel; the end. That of course is not the story. The majority of the Torah is about the journey.

The only thing I ever wanted is one thing. That we stay together. Some might be thinking that with this change of course for our congregation I must be upset; my dreams must be shattered some might suggest. But my dream has never been about a building. It has been about this congregation and this community. I came here to build a home not a shiny architectural wonder. I came here not to build a building; but to lead a congregation and fashion a community. A building is not an end; it is a means; it is a tool. Too many congregations have lost sight of this truth. All of their energies are devoted to maintaining the building.

I have seen many beautiful sanctuaries that sit empty. I remember praying in one beautiful synagogue; ten people sat in various rows in a room that seated 300. I suggested that we should all move to the front so that we could be together. I was rebuffed. "Rabbi my family bought this seat over 70 years ago, I always sit here." But you are by yourself in the back." "Rabbi I always sit here, I only sit here." That is not what I want for this congregation. I want that we should sit together.

Everyone knows that there is a lot of schlepping involved in setting up our various locations for our remote bar/bat mitzvah services. We have prayed in some unusual locations. When I begin to bemoan the schlepping I remind myself that there is an important lesson here. We can be us anywhere; all we need is our Torah. All we need are our prayerbooks; we can pray anywhere. We can be the JCB at a country club, at a stadium, in a sculpture garden, on a beach, in a home, at a university's student center and of course in a church. What makes the JCB the JCB is not a building; it is the people; it is the congregation. And now soon we might have a building that will serve the people, a building where we can pray, where we can study, where we can sing.

The facility may not be at 106 and Brookville Rd; it may not be designed by a famous architect; but it will be ours; it will be shared by two congregations dedicated to serving Jews in different ways but united in serving the Jewish people.

There are many synagogues about which people say, “What a beautiful sanctuary! What gorgeous stained glass windows! What an extraordinary ark and ner tamid!” But none of the Hebrew names for synagogue say anything about the building; they speak only about what people are supposed to do there. Beit Tefillah—house of prayer; Beit Midrash—house of study; Beit Knesset—house for people to gather. So let people say about our congregation these words, “Here is a community who makes a difference in each other’s lives and makes a difference on its Long Island!” Such principles should be our guiding light. That should be our most lasting architecture.

So what could be better than this alliance? Here is a building that is bigger than both congregations require. Why would we not join together—and share this building? It is better than building our own place.

Too many times our country, our Jewish people, our small Long Island community, is divided by ideology. Are we that big that we can afford such ideological divisions? I am not Conservative we say; they say, I am not Reformed. My friend, Rabbi Richardson and I do not agree about everything. He likes long Shabbat services; I prefer short. You will always find him in shul on Shabbat and holidays; you might find me on my bike (you should join me!) or at a park or hanging out with my family.

I think Shabbat can be about its feeling; he thinks it must first be about our tradition’s prayers. But we both love being Jewish; we both love studying Torah. We both think that the Jewish people are worth fighting for. We both love Israel and in the past have seen each other more often in Jerusalem than here on Long Island. We both believe that the world needs Jewish values; and it would be bereft if our people did not survive.

The Jewish people are at best 14 million people worldwide. The world’s population is nearly 7 billion. So we are but 0.2% of the world’s population. There are approximately 6 million in Israel; 6 million in America. And there are 2 million spread throughout the rest of world. The odds and numbers are indeed stacked against us. We have survived for thousands of years against even greater difficulties. I am not going to give up now; we must not give up.

We are however too small to be fighting with each other. How many resources are needlessly consumed when one Jewish organization and congregation compete against the other? Why not band together?

Forgive me for dreaming big and bigger than ourselves. I think everyone should be doing what we are doing. Every community would be better served by such a model. The Jewish people will be better served by such a vision. The Jewish future will be

better served by this endeavor. We are going to lead the way! We are going to save the Jewish world! And save the Jewish people. Sorry I got carried away with myself. Back to us.

Some might say, but they are going to look down on us. There will be that Conservative-Reform tension. There might be snide comments about those Reformed Jews. But such comments should not be a deterrent but instead a motivation. There might be snickering jokes about Conservative Jews pretending to walk to shul. But all those jokes and comments must stop. Because looking down on others stops now and stops here. We must stop trying to shore up our own identities by looking down on others. We should form this alliance so that Jews only look to each other for strength. We are too few to be fighting and competing with each other.

All I ever wanted was to create serious minded Jews. Every other division is meaningless. Our shared goal is to find meaning in our Judaism and to fashion commitment in our children.

Our congregation will continue to pray as we have grown accustomed. We love our music; there is no way we can imagine singing and praying without it. We love our Reform prayerbook with its beautiful English prayers. Our Hebrew School will continue its hallmark of being first about instilling a love of Jewish learning in our children's hearts and souls. Our celebrations and milestones will continue to be marked by the personal touch. Let me reiterate: this is not a merger, it is an alliance. We will not lose our unique and special identity. Circumstances have changed, but our vision remains certain.

But it is time that we teach ourselves to say that it is not all about me and what I want. We have an obligation to the Jewish people that transcends our individual selves. We must relearn this sense of obligation. If Judaism is about one thing it is about mitzvah—holy obligation. Judaism organizes the world into to do lists; we have things that we must do. It is not about being happy. Happiness is not the goal, but bettering our world. It is not about me; it is about our obligation to others. It begins with mitzvah, obligation. The Jewish ideal is thus the joy of fulfilling obligations; the joy of the mitzvah. We have an obligation to ensure our people's survival, here in our little corner of Long Island and in the world. Let us rejoice in this task.

Moreover too few Jews live by the principle of Ahavat Yisrael, love of the Jewish people. Loving the Jewish people and working for our survival does not mean agreeing with every Jew. God knows I have my disagreements—we can be very difficult to get along with. Thus our goal is not to be the same, but to remain different, to retain our different ways of praying and learning and celebrating. These differences make our people stronger. We can be different while still living by Ahavat Yisrael, love of the Jewish people. We can share the same building while remaining different but also while caring and loving each other. Together we can be for the Jewish people. We have a

place where we can be one people; where we can be am echad. There is too much division; there is too much divisiveness. Let us model here a place where there can be loving disagreement.

This idea starts here. It begins here again with this new venture. Let us band together to preserve the Jewish people. Let us join together to preserve our own unique congregations. With this formula we can achieve both. We can remain the JCB congregation that we love, while also ensuring the Jewish people's future. We are no longer so numerous that we can sustain a synagogue in every town.

When I first came to Long Island one of the things that most struck me was what I call this shtetl model of synagogue life. Here is how it works. Jews begin moving to a town. The town reaches a critical threshold of Jews. The Jews say to each other, "We need a synagogue." Then when Jews begin moving to another area the synagogue struggles. And then, once proud synagogue buildings become catering halls.

Here we have an opportunity to remind people that what makes a synagogue is not the town where it is located; it is instead its vision. We can be in Jericho, or Muttontown, or Brookville. We drive to the city for the best restaurants and best musicals. Why not drive to the best synagogue. Besides, you know what, the best music is here anyway. We are the JCB not because of our synagogue's address but because of who and what we are.

All of this traveling, and even wandering and journeying, should have taught us that it is never about where we are, or even where we are going, but who we are with. This idea is the future; this idea promises to be a blessing. It is not only the best solution for our needs of building adequate space. Here we can create something that can ensure the Jewish future. We have a responsibility, an obligation, a mitzvah to ensure this.

Many know the joke about the Jew shipwrecked on an island. He is finally rescued; the rescuers notice that he has built three huts. They ask him about the buildings. He says, "The first is my home and the second is my synagogue." "And the third, what is that building?" "That is the synagogue I would never set foot in." The joke is still funny; it is funny because it reflects how we have built our Jewish world. We are just not mighty enough to sustain such a vision anymore. The joke also suggests that this vision was broken from the beginning. Why can't we share a building so that two communities can flourish?

Yehudah HaLevi, the great medieval Jewish poet, never in fact even arrived at his intended destination, the holy city of Jerusalem. In some ways you can understand all of diaspora Jewish history as reaching for Jerusalem but never getting there. We accomplished great things during those 2,000 years. We wrote a Talmud, produced law codes, authored the first prayerbooks, created influential philosophies and of course penned extraordinary poems.

Were those not great successes even though the hoped for destination was never realized? HaLevi wrote many poems about his love for this city of Jerusalem, of his dreams of touching its stones. He also wrote a few poems about women, and even quite a few about wine. But my favorite (at least of those that I can read aloud in synagogue) is the poem in which he imagines his journey, sailing the Mediterranean from one port to another, trying to reach the land of Israel.

He writes:

The stars are astray in the heart of the sea,
like strangers expelled from their homes.
And in the heart of the sea they cast a light,
in their image and likeness, that glows like fire.
Now the sea and the sky are pure,
glittering ornaments upon the night.
The sea is the color of the sky—they are two seas bound together.
And between these two, my heart is the third sea (levavi yam shlishi),
as the new waves of my praise surge on high!

That is how I have always felt to be a part of this congregation. As we travel together my heart surges on the waves. I am lifted and carried; we are lifted and carried by each other. That is how I will always feel as long as we are sailing together.

It is a privilege and a blessing to be called your rabbi. I will always be happy, I will be always be overjoyed, I will always be proud as long as we are bound to each other. I believe, I am convinced, that we have found a building where we can pray and learn together; where we can continue to be bound to each other. We have found a place that will best serve our congregation, and help us keep people at the center of our vision. The building must always serve the congregation; never the other way around. We have found just such a place.

May we realize this vision very soon. May we continue to be carried forward on the surging sea of change. May we continue this journey, always together. Thank you for the continued honor of leading this holy congregation. I look forward to many more years of journeying together.

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