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President's Speech – Yom Kippur – Sept. 16, 2002

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This is my second Yom Kippur speech to you. It is also my last. I have a number of things to say, but first of all, I want to thank you for the opportunity you have given me to serve this congregation. I have been on the board and secretary of two congregations now, a much smaller one in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and here at Temple Beth-El, but nothing compares to being a shul president.

I want to tell you that so far it has been a remarkable experience to be directly involved in the continuation and vitalization of Jewish life. I have been given an opportunity to meet and to know some wonderful people. Really fine people.- in the old fashioned sense of the word. They have added enormously to my life, and I thank you all for that.

However, if at any time during the past year I have offended or wronged any one of you, or my colleagues on the board or our rabbis, cantor, executive director, or education director, or any of my friends, or my wife or my children, I use this Day of Atonement to apologize and to seek your forgiveness.

I came to you with a very basic belief. It is that regardless of all of the other institutions throughout the Jewish world, the schools, the community centers, the

social service associations, the Jewish cultural organizations, the political groups – all of which have enhanced our lives, and the lives of our fellow human beings, the central core of Jewish life is a strong and vibrant synagogue. Without that, all our other activities are insignificant. With that, the other aspects of Jewish life both in this country and throughout the world, will flourish.

With this in mind, there were times, when I truly felt that we as a people were finished. We always seemed to be under attack. The situation in Israel, the hypocrisy of other countries, and attacks in this country and other parts of the democratic world against synagogues and centers of Jewish life, and the unspeakable acts of a year ago, have filled me with a feeling of frustration and sometimes despair. When my own son had to travel in an armored bus to get back and forth to the AIPAC conference in Washington, and at one point was surrounded by people one of whom screamed "Kill the Jews" my heart breaks. That is why my entire family left Russia and settled in the safety of Canada. He was also involved demonstrations at Virginia Tech with the Jews on one side of the road and Arabs on the other. Last week, there was a full scale riot at Concordia University in Montreal where I became Bar Mitzvah. It prevented a speech to be given by Mr. Netanyahu – in a country which regards itself as being among the most democratic countries in the world. I weep for where we are heading.

We are fighting battles which are different than in the past. We cannot just collect money and help Israel buy more tanks. Even if we rose up and all made aliyah, that would not solve the problem. There is no guarantee that anything will work. We just want the feeling of desperation to go away. We cannot hide from it. We cannot be like the Jews of Europe in 1939.

At the same time, we seem to be losing the internal battle here at home, in the Diaspora, in the United States, in Richmond. We are losing the battles of numbers. While we have been enormously blessed, particularly in Beth-El by having so many people leave the safety and comfort of the outside world, and join our faith and our people. We and they have followed the tradition of Ruth.

However, thousands simply drift away, by intermarriage or by disinterest which takes hold over a period of years. The number of unaffiliated people is enormous. The number of people who are affiliated with a synagogue, this one or any of the others in town, but who only affiliate in name, may even be larger.

This is not a time to condemn, or to criticize. Everyone has their reasons for doing what they do in life, or perhaps their journey in life simply took them to parts which they did not expect.

On your behalf therefore, I have tried to concentrate our efforts on strengthening what we already have – a religious institution that is for many, and must be for

more, the foundation and central core of our Jewish lives. Only with a strong Temple Beth-El and synagogues of every denomination and ethnicity, will we survive the current disarray, error and war..

From a practical point of view this takes organization and it takes money, but in my view organization comes first. First we have Rabbi Rosin to work with Rabbi Creditor and all of us. This is an important step in our development as a Jewish community. We welcome Rabbi Rosin on his first High Holy Days with us.

I have appointed a long term planning task force. We have revitalized the membership committee, and have an active young adults committee. We are trying to rationalize the use of our buildings and bring in extra income from them, along with our bingo income, so as not to increase the burden on our members. Numerous additional services have been scheduled particularly for families and young children.

However, we need your help on two matters. The first is to increase our attendance at shabbat and daily services. No matter how many children we have in the religious school, or members of the Sisterhood, or volunteers for bingo or on any committee, without a vibrant religious attendance, we will not have a place of worship for ourselves or for our children.

The second is to think of what we must do to perpetuate Temple Beth-El for our children, our grandchildren, for this community and for the Jewish people. How do we keep it going in years to come?

At our last Congregational meeting, you changed our constitution to establish a permanent source of funding. The result is the endowment committee which is now working on plans to set up a fund to ensure that this synagogue will not only survive for years to come, but flourish. We are following the lead of universities, art galleries and scholarship funds so that enough money can be put away, so that Temple Beth-El can live at least partially off the interest. You will be advised as the plans develop. If you have questions or suggestions, call the Endowment Committee chairs Helen or Hal Horowitz, or Carl Hayslett. This will not only keep this community strong, but will provide the bulwark of the defence in our current difficulties. We must start the fight at home. Without it, I dread the consequences.

We are blessed with not one but two rabbis from not one, but both Conservative seminaries in the United States, a cantor who has added meaning to our lives, an education director who is helping us build a real center for Jewish education, and an executive director and his staff who keep our corporate ship heading on course. I thank all of them and our rebbitzin, for their help, their guidance and their dedication. I thank all of you. I thank my wife Fay, and our sons Joshua and Aaron, and in the words of the priestly blessing, May the Lord truly bless us and keep us, our families, our community and the people of Israel. Amen.