

President's Speech – Rosh Hashanah 5767

L'shanah Tovah.

The Talmud contains a short tale about Rabbis Tarfon and Akiba: Rabbi Tarfon sat conversing on serious matters with other sages in a house in Ludd.

One of his companions asked: Which is more important, learning or action?

Rabbi Tarfon replied, "Action is more important. Of what earthly use are fine words and preachments unless they are put into practice?"

Rabbi Akiva upheld the contrary viewpoint.

"Learning is more important," he said.

The sages concluded that both were right.

"Learning is more important when it leads to action," they declared.

Learning is more important when it leads to action.

Every Shabbat as part of the service for taking out the Torah, Cantor Larry leads us in a stirring chorus of:

אנה עבדא דקדשא בריך הוא דסגידנא קמה ומקמא דיקר אוריתה בכל עדן ועדן.

I am the servant of the Holy One, whom I revere and whose Torah I revere at all times.

We declare in full voice that we are each servants of Ha'Shem and that we revere Torah. How do we serve Ha'Shem and revere Torah at Beth El?

Actually, if we look back at the past year, we have in fact done pretty well at supporting our words with our actions.

Last year, at Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the strategic plan that the Board had just approved. At the time I shared my hope that the plan would serve as a road map to guide us from where we were to where we would like to be in 5 to 10 years.

This morning, I'll share with you a few of the successes we've had and address a few of the areas on which we will focus in the coming year.

Many of our initiatives have supported multiple goals. Let me mention a few and explain how they have helped us to move towards our vision of the future Beth El.

Time won't permit me to thank each of you who have played an invaluable role this year by name. Instead of trying to list each person involved in each activity, I'll take this opportunity to say Todah Rabah, may you go from strength to strength. Without you we might be a congregation, but we would not be a community.

One of our greatest challenges, as our membership continues to grow, is maintaining the personal warmth and connectedness that has always characterized our community. This year we've done a number of things to ensure that we don't lose that trait.

At the beginning of the year, we revised our social hall rental policies to make it easier for members to include the whole community when they celebrate B'nai Mitzvah and other joyous right of passage events. This plus more focused family education programming, has resulted in a resurgence of families hosting community luncheons as part of their Simcha celebrations.

Moreover, almost every prospective member who attended services on a Shabbat during which we had a community luncheon, has been drawn in by the genuine warmth of our family, and subsequently, has become a member. This is just one way that we have increased community bonding, attracted more people to Shabbat services and helped our membership recruitment.

It was just a start. Our Board now has a designated Trustee for Catering to lead the development of member-friendly guidance and community nurturing policies, to make our social hall the venue of choice for all Beth El member celebrations.

Last Spring, we piloted our Shabbat Matchmaker program. Folks who would like to host a Shabbat dinner at their home are matched with folks who would like to be guests. We look forward to expanding this program this year. The Matchmaking program provides a way for people to get to know one another better. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for those of us who are not as familiar with the Shabbat Seder experience to enjoy Shabbat and learn about the beauty of sharing Shabbat with friends. These in-home Shabbat experiences are complimented by the frequent communal Shabbat dinners at Beth El. Returning to the tradition of having Kabbalat Shabbat Services precede dinner, we have been able to share the beautiful experience of the Shabbat Seder under the leadership of Rabbi Kornsgold and Cantor Brandspiegel. Responding to the concerns of congregants for whom our 6:00 PM services created a hardship, we have piloted a once a month, lay-led 8:00 PM service.

Just last Shabbat, we held our first Carlebach-style Kabbalat Shabbat service and dinner. The 150+ folks who joined us last week for this amazing evening really caught the Beth El Ruach! I encourage everyone to join us at our next Carlebach Shabbat now scheduled for December 29th. Look for announcements, which should come out in the next few weeks.

Did I say announcements? We are now publishing the Shalom electronically. If you have a high speed modem and are not choosing to receive your Shalom via email, you are really missing something!

- First, it arrives on time
- Second, it's in full color.
- Third, if the small font is hard for you to read, you can zoom in to enlarge the print to whatever size works for you.
- Forth, every time you want to send in a form, you can print just the page with the form. You no longer have to cut your Shalom into pieces just to send in your Leagrams, and sign-up forms.

I encourage everyone who has a high speed internet connection to try out the electronic version of the Shalom. If you like it, you may choose to discontinue your hard copy subscription. I have.

The other vastly improved venue for information about Beth El is our website. The site is now a dynamic resource with tons of information about Beth El activities and hyperlinks to other useful Jewish-content websites. Upcoming events are highlighted on our home page. The home page also includes an interactive tool that lets **you** post announcements about **your** activities. There's even a password protected Beth El Officer section that contains a tremendous variety of resource material for our Board members.

This past year we have made important progress in the area of office administration. As we continue to strive for administrative excellence,

our professional team has done a great job of defining key processes and helping our volunteer leaders to get the support they need efficiently. We are making better use of technology, and our volunteer leaders are doing a much better job of anticipating their office support needs.

Our membership growth has kept pace with the numbers we had envisioned when we planned for the building expansion project. However, we face important challenges. Although the Board does everything possible to control Beth El's operating expenses, our dues and fees create a hardship for a significant portion of our community. In fact, one member in five is on some form of financial arrangement. To help ensure that ability to pay never becomes a criterion for membership at Beth El, this year we have instituted a **sustaining membership** opportunity. I'll speak to this in more detail during my Yom Kippur address. For now I encourage everyone who can, to become a sustaining member.

In case you have misplaced or never received a copy, Sustaining Membership fliers are available at the Ticket tables at the Beth El entrance.

Israel is very important to each of us. This summer, the Rabbi and Leslie led their third Beth El journey to Israel. They are already making plans for the next synagogue trip in 2008. Also this summer, we

launched Beth El's new Israel Program Committee. Eric Pastman is recruiting members from all age groups – teens and older. Look for details of upcoming, Committee sponsored events in the Shalom and on our website, or contact Eric if you'd like to get involved.

Clearly, we have made progress in many strategic areas this past year. To help us make even more progress in the year to come, we have joined Synaplex. As I explained in my September President's perspective column, *Synaplex* is an initiative of STAR – Synagogues for Transformation and Renewal – designed to transform the contemporary American synagogue from an institution that speaks to an increasingly limited segment of the Jewish community to one that is **relevant, inspirational** and **significant**.

Synaplex will help us develop even better programming and do a better job of communicating with **you**.

By this I mean delivering our messages in ways that connect with you, stimulate your interests and entice you to participate in Beth El's activities.

Synaplex provides out lay leaders with a growing library of tools and training materials to help us do our jobs better.

Synaplex also provides us with tools to help us create Jewish experiences that will inspire you to grow Jewishly; experiences that you'll choose not to miss.

Much of our progress over the past year has been subtle. Much of it has been in the background. As we look forward to 5767, our goal is to build on the foundation that we've already laid.

I invite you to sign up as a host or guest of our Shabbat Matchmaker program. Take advantage of some of our wonderful adult education opportunities.

Speaking of which, in the next few days, you'll be receiving your 2006-07 Adult Education brochure.

In addition to the usual range of lifelong learning opportunities, this year we will have two Scholar-in-Residence weekends.

On 19 & 20 January, Rabbi Moshe Edelman, USCJ Director of Leadership Development, will join us to help us explore different aspects of Jewish spirituality.

On March 10th Neshama Carlebach will entertain and teach us as we honor Cantor Larry and Dr. Laura.

Join us for both of these events and let yourself be swept away in the current of passionate, engaging and spiritually nourishing Judaism.

I have used the term “strategic plan” repeatedly this morning. *Strategic Plan* is such a cold term, but the plan is no more than a guide to help us to find our way towards the future of our Jewish Community.

אנה עבדא דקדשא בריך הוא דסגידנא קמה ומקמא דיקר אוריתה בכל עדן ועדן.

I am the servant of the Holy One, whom I revere and whose Torah I revere at all times.

This year consider this line from the Zohar that we quote weekly in our liturgy. See yourself as a servant of Ha'Shem; a servant who reveres the Torah at all times.

Embrace Beth El as your spiritual home;

The place where you find your extended Jewish family;

The place where you come to learn;

The place where you come to give of yourself in service to Ha'Shem.

If you see yourself as a servant of Ha'Shem, you will quickly find that your relationship with Beth El will deepen as will the richness of your life. Besides enriching your own life, you will be building the future of

Judaism; here in East Windsor; in New Jersey; the United States and the world.

Willa, Ian and I wish each of you a sweet year, a year of contentment and a year of Jewish spiritual growth.

Shanah Tovah Um'tukah!