

We do!
 Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg
 Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777/ October 2, 2016

Shana Tova! It is great to see all of you. In fact, one of the reasons I love the High Holidays is because I get to see so many of you who I don't see most of the rest of the year. And that is not a dig or a guilt trip. It's the truth. And, since the High Holidays are a time for confessions, let me let you in on another secret. You know what we rabbis talk about when we get together? You. We talk about you. Not to be concerned; we don't tell your secrets. But we do share how you are doing, like: whether or not you and your families are healthy and well?

Why do we take your well-being to heart? Because we care about you. You are our community and, by extension, our family. And if we didn't genuinely love you, we wouldn't be here. Because, let's face it, being a rabbi is no job for a nice Jewish girl . . . or boy. And since we are Jewish and we do feel responsible for the care of your spiritual lives, like all Jewish mothers and fathers, we worry about you too.

How are you coping with the challenges in your life: Illnesses of your own? Aging parents? Ornery children and some of your young adult kids who won't grow up and can't seem to find their way?

And how about you? Are you taking care of yourselves - eating healthily, getting some exercise, and enough sleep? Or are you stuck in a rut from which you can't seem to get motivated to climb out?

Are your relationships with others going well -- your marriage, your business partners and associates, your siblings? Are you moving in the right direction toward healing and wholeness or do you need help?

Is your work meaningful, your leisure time fulfilling? Do you experience joy in any of it? Does your life have purpose? Over all would you say you are content with yourself, and your life?

And, we worry most of all, about your connection to Judaism and whether or not our tradition is helping you to live a more fulfilling, peace-filled life for yourself, for your family, for our congregation, and beyond?

Of course it makes me sad that many you are not here at other times of the year; but if you aren't, I hope you are doing something in your life that elevates it above the daily grind, that makes your life meaningful. I pray that you have a connection to God, a God that inspires you to do good. I wish for you to be doing Jewish learning that reinforces the values that you hold most dear and that reminds you that those values are rooted in a timeless Jewish tradition that has served our people well for thousands of year. I yearn for you to be part of a Jewish family that marks Shabbat and observes the holidays together, passing on your personal stories, cherished traditions, and love of Judaism *l'dor va'dor*, from one generation to the next. And if your family of origin is far away, or long gone from this world, or if you have newly come home to Judaism, I desire for you a family of your own making -- an extended community of "friends-like-family" -- with whom to discover the strength, guidance, and fulfillment that only a fully embraced Jewish life can bring.

And, finally, I trust that you are contributing in some meaningful way to our Jewish community, whether here at Ohef Sholom or in one of the myriad agencies that do so much good both for Jews and for people of other faiths as well. And I don't just mean financially, although, if you are able, that is and would be greatly appreciated. But I also mean with your bodies, hearts, and minds -- by being interested, engaged, and active in Jewish living. Why? Because if we don't support Judaism, our community, and our congregation no one else will.

You may be aware that, in addition to our Campaign to listen to each and every one of you, we have been doing "Walking Together" parlor meetings to educate you about where our Temple is and where it needs to go. My message is always the same about why this is so critically important. And I believe this with all my heart:

Nowhere else in Hampton Roads can you be Jewish the way you are here at Ohef Sholom. What other congregation can honestly say that their clergy, lay leaders, and membership meet you where you are on your Jewish journey, without judgment, but rather with acceptance, open-heartedness, and love? Where else can you and your families be fully welcome as members of our Jewish community regardless of your faith tradition? At OST you are part of our Jewish family, respected, appreciated, treasured, and yes, loved, for who you are and what you bring.

Who else beside Ohef Sholom is called upon to exemplify the Jewish universal message that all people are children of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect? And because we live out this value sincerely each and every day, we are also sought after to represent our particular Jewish heritage in the context of the larger community. In July, we were the only synagogue invited to Mayor Alexander's Inaugural Prayer Breakfast where I gave the Jewish prayer for our city amongst a half a dozen other Christian and Muslim faith leaders. The same was true twelve years before when I was asked on behalf of OST, to offer the Jewish prayer for the city for Mayor Fraim's inauguration.

We are the only Jewish congregation in Hampton Roads with our own Soup Kitchen.

We are the only area-synagogue to attain the distinction of being a Two Star River Star Business of the Elizabeth River Project and to be designated a Pearl Safe Community through Lynnhaven River Now. In fact three hundred of us just enjoyed an amazing Congregational Picnic at the Brock Environmental Center where we learned about doing our part to preserve our precious Chesapeake Bay eco-system.

All of these programs, created by you, are manifestations of our values. We are responsible for the less fortunate, so we feed the hungry. Being good stewards of the earth is one of our first and foremost commandments so we observe it by living it out every day.

Even if you don't currently participate in these programs here, you believe in these very Jewish and human values and you ought to support them, because who could imagine our Jewish, civic, social services, and arts communities without Ohef Sholom and who would want to!?!

Author Shulem Dean recently wrote an article in the *Jewish Forward*, entitled, "Why I stay connected to the family of Jews." He argued, in part, what I shared a

little while ago, that our Jewishness comes not only from us being a religious community or nationality, but, first and foremost, from us being a family -- the Children of Israel, the House of Jacob. We care about each other. We worry about each other. We look out for one another. Sometimes we drive each other crazy and we'd like to strangle one another; but, ultimately, we love each other. And like any family, that love connection and lifelong commitment are what bind us to one another.

But that isn't enough, Dean argues. A Judaism based only on the unifying principal of family or kinship, or our tribal bonds, where we get together once a year for the High Holidays, has little chance of survival. Just having the shared ethnicity of peoplehood, without profound purpose, is doomed. If, as is true for many of you, you aren't keen on religious faith or practice, still you have likely been concerned with how to pass on your Jewishness to the next generation -- to your children and grandchildren and theirs. It is an absolute fact that without at least some traditions and practice, along with communal affiliation and engagement, Judaism isn't likely to stick.

Of course, I recognize that kinship or being part of a family, is a paradox. On the one hand, as human beings we crave connection, community, and love; on the other hand, there are times when we want to run, both from family and from Jewishness — times when we feel alienated, insufficiently supported, or irritated with the misdeeds of other Jews. Or when we just want to be free of obligation, to history and tradition, or to others. But as far as we might run, the ties run farther; and this, to us Jews, especially on these High Holy Days, demands that we wrestle with our commitment to Judaism and to Jewish living; otherwise we wouldn't be here year after year.

I know you are thinking: why exactly is it important to perpetuate Judaism? Why be, let alone, do Jewish today? Perhaps even more so than with our families of origin, with our Jewish communal family we share a collective unconsciousness of history and memory, an awareness of common ancestry, rooted in antiquity, and projected toward eternity. In other words, our collective past and common future are inextricably linked. We are bound together by history and heritage; a vision of what the world should and could be; and a shared mandate to make it so. It is that kinship that makes our hearts stop when one of ours gets the nomination or wins the prize. It is that kinship that makes us shudder when Jews around the world feel growing anxieties about their safety. It was Jewish kinship that held us together to rebuild anew after the Holocaust, both in Israel and the Diaspora. It was Jewish kinship that created and spearheaded the movement for Soviet Jewry. And, it is also that Jewish kinship that enables our synagogue to continue to do the work of *Tikun Olam*, of repair and healing that sustains us, our community, and our world. That is why perpetuating Judaism matters and is critically important.

True, making too much of kin and tribe brings a risk of parochialism, but it is precisely our particular Jewish values, which inspire our universal principals that extend out to and include all people. Jewish kinship means maintaining the best of our tribal instincts while radiating them outward to the rest of society. It is the Jewish value of believing in the dignity of every human being that inspires us to help the less fortunate; to strengthen our cities and institutions; to stand up against

injustice; and to act to correct it whenever and wherever it manifests itself; in other words, to work for a more fair and whole world for all people.

The concept of *ahavat yisrael* — love for your fellow Jew — is valuable not because your fellow Jew is more special, but because by your best attitudes toward your own, you learn what you can do for those beyond. Kinship isn't easy, nor is it an imperative. Rather, it is an existential reality that we can choose to override or to embrace. To be consciously Jewish, then, is to embrace it, to accept both the gift and the responsibility. Our own *ahavat yisrael* — our love and caring for and feelings of kinship to other Jews -- doesn't have to be perfect. Sometimes we've had it with our fellow Jews, and sometimes they have had it with us. But so it is with family: We get frustrated, sometimes angry, occasionally declare we want nothing to do with it, but for most of us, something calls us to return.

And so here we are. Reconnecting to our faith, tradition and community; reaffirming our Judaism, its values, beliefs, and practices; and recommitting to living out our ancient heritage purposefully this year . . . No matter how imperfect we are at it, we don't quit. We strive to make better Jewish and human choices, to treat those we love with more love, and to do better at bettering our world one *mitzvah*, one commandment or good deed, at a time.

We want to help you. So we are asking you to make a pledge. Not on the old fashion cards where you push back the tab of the amount of money you will give this year; this is a different kind of promise. It is a personal commitment to do one *mitzvah* this year, hopefully on an ongoing basis, that will connect the values you hold most dear back to your Judaism, back to your Jewish community, back to your OST congregational family, back to God, and Torah, and Israel. Tomorrow morning and afternoon, as you leave *Rosh Hashanah* services, along with the paper bags that you receive for canned goods and other non-perishables to benefit the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Jewish Family Service Food Pantry, you will receive a pledge card along with a list of possible *mitzvot* for you to consider.

Some suggestions include: Going to Shabbat, other Holiday, or Religious School services, the ones that your children and grandchildren lead, every Sunday morning. Or you can attend Torah study classes or any other of our many adult education offerings or even host a class at home for friends and family through our OST University on the Road -- you pick the teacher and topic and a mutually agreeable time.. Or you can volunteer at our monthly soup kitchen or NEST, the Norfolk Emergency Shelter Program that we host in January; or help out in our office, or in your child or grandchild's Religious School classroom. Or you can join Men's Club or Sisterhood so you can help them support the Temple in the myriad ways they do. Or you can become a Temple Pillar; sponsor any Temple or communal program or event; or remember the Temple's Eternal Light Society Endowment in your estate planning so that Ohel Sholom can remain the House of Prayer for All Peoples that it is today for generations to come. I am certain that engaging in any one of these *mitzvot* that sustain our world -- the study of Torah, Worship, or Deeds of Loving Kindness -- will be more meaningful to you and your loved ones, than they are to our congregational family and Jewish community.

Whatever *mitzvah* you choose, your pledge is to be made anonymously between you and yourself or you and God. Along with your food donations, you can,

if you wish, bring your card back on *Yom Kippur* to be pinned on a board where it might inspire others. Or your card can remain on your refrigerator or wherever you want to keep it to remind yourself of your vow. I ask this of you not only from me and our Caring Committee, but also from the most visibly physically absent member of our Temple family -- the man who did more to remind of us of our responsibility as Jews, particularly as Reform Jews, than perhaps anyone else. Wise, funny, principled, and above all, a man of action, Rabbi Arthur Steinberg, of blessed memory, believed that God wasn't simply a supernatural being in the sky; rather, plain and simple, to Rabbi Steinberg God was the work of our human hands. Indeed, he taught his family and community, by example, that to be a Jew was to do. "That's what a Jew does," he would say, "we do."

So I conclude tonight with his prophetic call to us three years ago *on Yom Kippur*. With the following words Rabbi Steinberg challenged us. He said:

"We walked away from Orthodoxy because ritual without meaning was simply not enough. But values without heritage is also not enough. And faith without sharing is also not enough. And deeds without knowledge is also not enough. For what happens, if with all your deeds, your house is unattended, and your children undernourished? For they need something more than what you give them. To love their faith they have to share their faith -- they have to share their faith with you. Because sharing is really what it is all about . . .

Do we express to those we love the most that is this faith of ours, that they love it too? Or share with them the knowledge or the learning of it? . . . What we do in this sanctuary is preparation for worship. Worship, real worship, is what we do with our lives in between visits to this sanctuary. Why then come here? Not as an end in itself, not as a ritual that has to be performed, a deed that must be done. Not at all. But rather as a way of rekindling the flame, recharging the battery, renewing an affirmation toward a set of values and ideals . . . Worship is reaching up and reaching out. Because our lives are more than breathing in and breathing out, more than earning what we call a living, more than a search for games to play, more even than the struggle to survive.

Our lives are sacred, and there is a need to plumb that sanctity, a need to search it out! A need to find our way with those who share the dream. We need each other, and we need us here. Here to strengthen one another and ourselves. Not in mystery or magic or in fear, but with a yearning that will not be denied [because] we are the keepers of the flame."

During this New Year, may we heed Rabbi Steinberg's call. So may we be sealed for a year of Torah and soulful searching; a year of open hands and hearts; and a year of kindness, good deeds, and love. Amen