

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE CONGREGATION

Rosh Hashanah, 1 Tishrei 5772 / 29 September 2011

Shana Tovah

I am honoured to have this opportunity to speak to you for a few moments on this sacred day. My message is about the meaning of Temple Israel, which I will illustrate with three current activities that support our values. These activities are headed for a successful conclusion in the coming year.

For those who lived in large cities, my parents' generation sought to build Jewish institutions. Synagogues, community centers, federations, were a way to say to the world, "We are here. We are Jews. And we're not going away." My parents had several generations of extended family around them, binding them to Judaism and providing a haven in a sometimes hostile society, providing a community of spirit, and providing food for the soul.

Times change. Today, two generations later, fewer than half of the Jews living in Ottawa hold membership in any Jewish institution. But individual Jews need a Jewish collective to sustain them. Judaism has always been a religion not of "me" but of "us". Through sharing, each of us can have a personal Jewish identity that links us spiritually to our parents, to our

tradition and to our history. What we share also links our children to our community.

The reluctance on the part of many young Jews to join formal Jewish institutions is not because we're failing. It's because we're doing so well. Where older generations turned to Judaism for protection and comfort, today we have many options.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish philosopher and social activist, said, "Religion is a means, not an end." Temple Israel offers a place where each of us can discover our own spiritual meaning. At Temple, we do not say, "These are our committees. Which will you join." At Temple Israel we ask, "What can Temple Israel offer you to help you on your personal Jewish journey?", and if it is not already happening here we will help you start it. Because of our open and welcoming approach, because of our values and our culture, Temple Israel has grown, slowly but surely, while other synagogues have declined in numbers.

Of the many things that are happening here, I will speak briefly about three that will come to fruition this year. They are (1) the report and recommendations of the Task Force on Interfaith Marriage; (2) the formation of an Education Committee; and (3) the search for a new home.

First, the task force. Nora Sobolov and her committee have been working on the topic of interfaith marriage for the past year. Temple Israel prides itself on being an inclusive sacred community, one that reaches out. Here we welcome mixed couples. Patrilineal and the traditional matrilineal

descent are both recognized as legitimate. We have fully egalitarian practice. But almost a year ago, when Rabbi Orlitzky asked us if we marry mixed couples, the answer was: “No, you can’t get married here. But if you go away and get married somewhere else, you can come back as an interfaith couple and we will welcome you.” The reaction of most congregants who met with the task force in their public meetings was that this practice is inconsistent. The task force findings will be shared with all Temple members and additional feedback invited. The findings will then be addressed by the rabbi and the ritual committee and their recommendations will be presented to the board. I anticipate we will have a policy on interfaith marriage in the coming year.

Secondly, the new education committee. We are the people of the book. We invented lifelong learning. We offer opportunities for children to learn at our religious school, the largest part-time religious school in Ottawa with over 100 pupils from kindergarten through confirmation. Our youth group offers learning opportunities for 60 young people. Adults have torah study, lectures, concerts, and classes for learning. To coordinate our learning activities, for effectiveness and efficiency, we are creating an Education Committee. As a result of the efforts of David Hartman, who chairs our school committee, implementation will begin at the orientation of the new Temple board on December 8 when Debra Brosan, an organizational development professional and educator will share her experience and guide us to the establishment of a functioning Education Committee for Temple. Those of us who are already involved in the various stages of learning here at Temple know the new and greater

possibilities that a coordinated approach to learning, a key Jewish value, will bring to us.

And thirdly, the relocation of Temple. I am pleased to report that our meetings this past spring and summer with individuals from within our Temple community and from the larger Ottawa Jewish community has found strong support for the project. Many families have indicated they will support the renewal of Temple Israel financially.

In the spring, Brian Gold conducted negotiations with the Hellenic Centre on our behalf and successfully completed the conditional sale of the current property with favourable terms.

We are still focused on the Jewish Community Campus as the first choice of relocation site, and in June began concentrated discussions with the Jewish Federation of Ottawa. Brian Gold is also conducting these negotiations on our behalf. As we all know, negotiations such as these take time, patience and a willingness on both sides to work in a collaborative fashion.

You should also know that, in order to exercise due diligence, we are at the same time actively exploring other property options. Under the leadership of Paul Lyons and Debra Viner, the Building Renewal Implementation Committee continues to work steadily towards our goal of a sustainable, affordable new home for Temple Israel. The goal is to offer to the congregation, in the coming year, a building project of which

we can all be proud. You have been sent an update letter from them and you can keep current by visiting the Temple website.

Defining our position on interfaith marriage, promoting learning in all its forms and for all ages, and planning an affordable, sustainable new Temple building are only three of the many ways that Temple Israel -- we -- affirm our commitment to Judaism and practice our values as a reform congregation.

Shana Tova