

Temple Beth Am 5784: Creating a Jewish Home Together

Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick

As Greg shared, people describe synagogue annual meetings as *just* the “business” meeting of a congregation. We review the finances, the Board slate, the controversies, and successes of the past year, and we peak at what to expect in congregational life through the prism of the new fiscal year’s budget.

For me, annual meetings have never been *just* business meetings. I hold a deep conviction that every aspect of synagogue life is sacred; every activity or interaction is filled with sacred possibilities—from unclogging a stopped-up drain to confessing our sins on Yom Kippur. To be a true synagogue community—a center for inspiration and connection and Jewish engagement—we must believe there is a higher purpose for what we do, and that each of us matters, and by our very presence, we contribute to a larger whole.

This was a sentiment I shared in my very first conversation with Temple Beth Am, back in October 2013, when Rabbinic Search Chairs Dita Appelbaum¹ and Sandy Melzer plied me with questions about my rabbinic vision. Back then—remember, it was the Obama administration—Ist round rabbinic interviews were on the phone; 2nd round was on Skype; and finalists, if you were lucky enough to be a finalist, were brought in for a site visit. My Skype interview took place at 10 pm East Coast time, so I can admit now that I wore a slate gray blazer and pearls over my pajama bottoms. (Wait, did I invent the Zoom mullet long before the pandemic?)

I believed then as I believe now that we must shift the model for Jewish institutions of all kinds to meet the challenges and the opportunities of the 21st century, and that synagogues must be mission-driven organizations, based on a collaborative leadership model. I believed then

¹ As they say, “No good deed goes unpunished.” Dita has also served as co-chair with Ben Glatstein for our most recent Search Committee which hired Rabbi Laura Rumpf

as I do now that every aspect of synagogue life is sacred because every person, every interaction, every act reflects enduring and life-affirming Jewish values. Every time we engage in Jewish experiences of the soul, heart, and mind, the sacred dimension of our lives is sparked.

As a reminder, at last year's Annual Meeting I shared a vision for 5784/Fiscal Year 2023-2024 which reflects this belief:

“At Temple Beth Am we seek to co-create a Jewish home for all our members, in all our wondrous diversity. Led by our vision, mission, and values, we aspire to create a congregation where every individual who enters our Jewish home can discover joy, meaning, and belonging. We will achieve this vision of a synagogue home by transforming our 900-household congregation into a nimble, networked, and interconnected web of relationships rooted in powerful Jewish experiences and person-to-person connections.”

Our members, guided by our Board of Directors and professionals, passed the 5784/2023-2024 budget to help us work towards this aspirational goal. Last year at this season, *you*, the membership of Temple Beth Am, laid the foundation for building a Jewish haven for a community of individuals who span generations, identities, and political affiliations. *You* ensured that in the year ahead, however the year might unfold, we would embrace our differences as we engage in our congregational activities.

This is my 10th Temple Beth Am Annual Meeting; you'll forgive me for a moment's nostalgia as I reflect on the decade we have spent together:

Together, we navigated the unprecedented presidential election season of 2016; followed by the unprecedented Trump presidency; followed by the unprecedented Jew hatred sparked by the Charlottesville riots; followed by the unprecedented #metoo movement; followed by the unprecedented Tree of life synagogue massacre; followed by the unprecedented trauma of a global pandemic; followed by the unprecedented #blacklivesmatter movement; followed by the unprecedented insurrection that almost toppled our American democracy.

Then on October 7, 2023, on the last days of Sukkot as the High Holy Day season was drawing to a close, Hamas engaged in a brutal, ferociously executed attack on Israelis living in Israel which sparked the unprecedented Israel/Hamas war; the unprecedented humanitarian devastation in Gaza; and the unprecedented rise in global Jew hatred, which we in Seattle have experienced in our schools, work places, on our streets and yes, our congregation.

Forgive me for saying this in a crass way, but it's been a helluva decade for all of us, especially for our young people. And a new election season is upon us. And the future remains uncertain.

In the words of my grandmother of blessed memory who was born in a shtetl outside Kyiv: Oy ve voy.

Of course, as Senior Rabbi, your physical, emotional, and spiritual safety has been my top concern, especially since 10/7; but it has not been my *only* concern. I also sought to ensure that we do not give up on our values as a pluralistic and progressive Reform synagogue.

Our community has engaged in conversations about the war filled with nuance, compassion, and complexity. In November, from the moment we arose from *sheloshim*, the Jewish first month of mourning, we have used the vision *you* embraced last year as our road map for moving forward. We incorporated prayers for the hostages and their families in our services, and for the Palestinian and Israeli civilians who have lost their lives, their limbs, their hope. We've educated ourselves and our young people on the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and we've listened to each other as we parse our own complicated feelings about this war—hearing from people with whom we disagree, sometimes vehemently. We've listened to *your* concerns (with huge thanks to the Project Bina Committee) and offered resources for how to engage in heated conversations with school administrators, and professional colleagues, and loved ones around holiday tables. We've immersed ourselves in understanding systemic antisemitism that emerges on the left and the right, across the globe. We've partnered with like-minded Jewish organizations and synagogues, the other local Reform and Conservative congregations, T'ruah, a rabbinic human rights organization, Unxceptable which seeks to save Israeli democracy from far-right government activists, and the New Israel Fund. From October

8th onward, my focus as your rabbi was to ensure that we thrive by living and acting Jewishly; and indeed, so many of you seem to have deepened your connections to Judaism and to one another over these past eight months.

Still, there are those of you who have asked me or Davida or our Board members what is the “official” Beth Am statement on the war. I have heard from so many of you about this topic. Some have asked to hear a statement affirming Israel’s right to defend itself at all costs; indeed, asserting Israel’s right to exist as a nation state. Others have asked us to center Palestinian suffering, demand a total ceasefire in Gaza, and to call out Israel as an evil actor in the world. Some want to hear public praise for our young people involved in campus protests who are in pain over the catastrophic humanitarian disaster in Gaza; and some want to hear public criticism of these same protestors for endangering their Jewish peers.

The beauty of a decade-long relationship between a rabbi and her congregation is that our love and understanding of one another deepens over time. On Yom Kippur 5775/2015, I preached against candidate Trump’s rhetoric of hate in my Yom Kippur sermon. While many folks thanked me, others were displeased. I was genuinely grateful for the critical feedback, and I learned from every one of those conversations. Those of you who disagreed with the sermon reminded me that I am a rabbi, not a political pundit. And you were right—although I still stand by the sentiments of that sermon, I have learned the power of the pulpit to draw people together or wedge them apart. My job is to be a moral and spiritual leader steeped in Jewish wisdom and sacred texts. My words need to build bridges across polarized factions, across differences. As a rabbi, I am a particularist; and my concern first and foremost is for the Jewish people. And as rabbi I am a universalist; and I worry for any Jewish soul who forgets that all humans are God’s children, we are all made in God’s likeness.

As we wind down this fiscal year, I understand your need for a clarifying statement on what it means to be a progressive and pluralistic Reform congregation in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war. Allow me to offer these five points, and please remember, it’s just this rabbi’s opinion:

Number one: We cannot give up hope for peaceful coexistence for Israelis and Palestinians, and we must continue to support and work to improve the imperfect democracies of Israel and the United States.

Number two: We stand with those Israelis and Palestinians who seek a hostage and ceasefire deal which brings home the hostages and stops the bombardment in Gaza. As my dear friend, Rabbi Sarah Reines has said “the only choice for anyone’s security is a shared future; we must find avenues of hope and repair based upon feasible solutions.”

Number three: While not all critique of the Israeli government is antisemitic, we will not turn a blind eye to the ease with which some activists purport and spread antisemitic vitriol in the name of standing up for the oppressed. I stand with the author Dara Horn who has strongly and clearly articulated that antisemitism is *not* a Jewish problem to solve. We need allies in the non-Jewish world to hear our pain and understand that systemic antisemitism is a foundation stone for Western and Middle Eastern civilizations. We will resist antisemitism wherever it crops up, be it in Charlottesville or Seattle, be it from the right or the left.

Number four: We at Temple Beth Am will continue to approach this awful, horrific war with complexity, nuance and compassion. We will continue to elevate those voices that go beyond polarizing rhetoric and towards peaceful coexistence. I will not lie to you. The work ahead is challenging—leaning into relationships in a pluralistic synagogue means assuming good intentions, and shared ideals, and constructive communication. We commit to growing in our understanding of our differences and seeing beyond the labels we might ascribe to one another.

Number five: What I knew from the moment I saw the news reports on the morning of October 7, even before I headed to this bima for Shabbat morning services, is this: we cannot let this war destroy the bonds we’ve created among ourselves here at Temple Beth Am, because we *need each other*. Otherwise, Hamas has the final say both in Gaza and in Seattle. What is happening in Gaza and Israel is horrendous, but the impact we can make is right here, in this shul, in our beloved, quirky, smart, passionate sacred synagogue home. And the way we demonstrate that is how we show up for each other.

And, my friends, over the last eight months, *we have really shown up for each other*. We've done what Jews have done throughout our complicated and long history—through cataclysmic and quiet times alike—we've held firm to living Jewishly. The fact that you all are here, whether virtually or in person, means that tonight's gathering, this annual meeting, *is sacred*.

In 5784/Fiscal Year 2023-2024 we've grown stronger as a congregation because we kept our sights on our vision: co-creating a Jewish home together—a spiritual and emotional refuge—for *all* our members, in all our wondrous diversity. Thank you. You laid that visionary groundwork last year.

Before I conclude, please indulge me in one last nostalgic note: a decade ago, I nervously stood right here at my first Temple Beth Am annual meeting and shared these words:

“From its founding in 1956, Temple Beth Am has been like our matriarch Ruth, whose story of commitment to God and the Jewish people we read on the festival of Shavuot. Our matriarch Ruth acted with lovingkindness, courage, and commitment, and a Jewish path to spiritual fulfillment and deeper meaning unfolded before her.

These have been extraordinary times for Temple Beth Am. (*aside*: “I shared then.”)

Like Ruth this congregation has faced an uncertain future.

Like Ruth, this congregation has engaged daringly in the new.

Like Ruth, this congregation has been emboldened by its courage.

Together, with lovingkindness, courage, and commitment, we can transform Temple Beth Am into a synagogue that meets the challenges and the opportunities of the 21st century.

How very blessed we are.”

What was true then, remains true today: Our vision is clear; our path forward awaits; and no matter what befalls us in the year ahead we will continue to show up for one another right here in our synagogue home.

How blessed we were. How blessed we are. How blessed we will be.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Thank you.²

² A few other thank you's:

I am grateful to the Israel Engagement Team, led by Sandra Berger, Corinne Fligner, Rebecca Fox, and Carol Sanders, who organized well-designed dialogue programs that has trained several of us in active listening and helped us find our voice amid the sorrow.

I am also grateful to Stacey Symonds, and the extraordinary Project Bina Committee; as clergy, professionals, and lay-leaders we continue to respond to what we are hearing from all of you, regarding all the challenges we've faced in 5784.

I am also grateful to our Board of Directors and, particularly, to outgoing Director Rachel Zerrell, who engaged with me in thoughtful conversations around these issues.

And, finally, a special word of gratitude to my professional and clergy partners. This has not been an easy year to be employed at a North American synagogue. Please, please share your appreciation with our remarkable Temple Beth Am team whenever and wherever you see them.