

## High Holiday Speech- 5780

Good morning. L'Shana Tova. It is so wonderful to see all of you here today, and especially Rabbi Silverman.

As Co-Presidents of CBJ, Fred and I have been warned by past presidents that we should not assume anything we put in writing is actually read. The obvious corollary is that whatever I say may or may not be heard. However, I will this morning doubly tempt fate and read what I have written in the hopes that my words will in fact be heard and even listened to.

Many of you already know me, but for those who may not, let me begin by telling you a little bit of how I got to this podium today. In case my accent hasn't already given me away, I was born and raised in the Bronx. I grew up in a housing project surrounded mostly by Jews, but my two early best friends were Linda Roveto and Donna Mussomeli. I thought everyone was either Jewish or Catholic. I didn't realize that the majority of Americans were Protestants. Growing up Jewish in the Bronx was easy and uneventful. I rarely, if ever, heard anything that could be construed as anti-Semitic. I didn't even know the word. I was brought up in an unobservant family and only went to temple, and that was just to stand outside with my friends, on the High Holidays. After the fathers came out after services, it was the tradition for many of us to walk over to the Botanical Gardens. Very little about the actual holidays and what they meant ever came up. So growing up Jewish in the Bronx really had little to do with Judaism and more to do with sharing an identity with others, something positive and pleasant.

Skipping ahead, after marrying my childhood sweetheart Dan (who was known as Danny), your current Vice-President and Fearless Leader of Brotherhood, we moved to Queens, where being Jewish was still easy and positive, but again had really little to do with Judaism. I was

fortunate not to be exposed to anti-Semitism until I heard it for the first time from a colleague of mine at the high school I taught at. I had just created a Human Rights Club at the school which led him to make the claim that every time he saw a picture of teachers at the forefront of forming such clubs at their schools, they were always Jewish. At first, I thought he was paying us a compliment, but when he went on to say that while all of these Jewish women claimed to be interested in everyone's rights, they were really only interested in protecting and furthering the rights of Jews. Wow, what a wake-up call that was.

When sometime later we moved to the suburbs of NY we found ourselves to be part of a very small minority, not unlike here in Plymouth. Although there was a temple in the town, a group of young Jews decided another approach, forming a Chavura. Without going into details, suffice it to say that within a very brief period of time we created a viable and meaningful Jewish experience. We hired a part-time rabbi, created a school (so many of us were former teachers), and had an incredible adult education program. It was such an emotional awakening of Judaism for so many of us that when we spoke of it tears would literally come to our eyes. We were so proud to be able to give our children, many of whom were quite young at the time, the Jewish education and experience so many of us never had. We were so happy for them to have a sense of community and identity and to feel good and so positive about being with other Jews in a very Christian community.

Okay. Enough about me. Are you still listening, because now comes the important part. I want to ask you perhaps the most significant question-what are you doing here? It would be safe to expect that everyone has different responses to that question. Some may be here out of a sense of obligation and tradition, some because you appreciate and value the power of community during this time of reflection, and for some, you may not have really figured out the answer at all. But,

whatever your answers are, one thing is for sure- you are here! And that, is a good thing, a very good thing!

Some of you know that I have been involved in Holocaust education and all of you are aware of what the last few years have been like for Jews, as well as for other groups. I could certainly, and in great detail, tell you that the history of Jews has not been an easy one. We all know about all the attempts throughout history to separate us, repress us, take away our rights, and even kill us. It would be an easy sell to tell you that we should be here because of all the terrible things that have been done to us simply because we are Jewish. We could say that our persistence has made sure that none of these things worked and we are still here and that would be true and a viable reason for your presence..

But, I would like to give you the other reasons we should be here and should be committed to ensuring the continuation of Judaism and to be self-serving, the continuation of Congregation Beth Jacob. There is so, so much to be proud of as Jews. Now try to stay with me because this is about you, me, and us. Just consider the very small percentage of the world's population Jews are and then consider all the accomplishments, ideas and contributions Jews have made to the world. Let's start at the beginning. The very first ideas Jews gave to the world include the idea of monotheism, the 10 Commandments, and the creation story. Those ideas were considered important enough to be later adopted by other major religions. And then, no matter where we were or how many times attempts were made to destroy us, think of all that Jews accomplished anyway. We never stopped thinking and creating. We built a culture that was worthy of admiration and replication. Christianity is after all built upon the foundations and beliefs of Judaism and both Christianity and Islam revere and accept the Old Testament as the first part of their stories. We are part of the grandest narrative of all people who preceded us and will long endure.

We have a history and culture which have contributed to and influenced the history of humanity. We have beliefs and traditions that span thousands of years. It always blows my mind to think that these have persisted throughout our tumultuous history and at the same time are universal. Just think, today the same prayers and melodies we have been saying and singing are taking place all over the world, all over the world and have continued to take place for over 3500 years! What does that say about us as a people? What does it say about the necessity of keeping that sacred religion alive?? We all need to celebrate, participate, and play a role in ensuring the future of Judaism. Judaism is a gift to the world. Let me repeat. Judaism is a gift to the world. It has beauty and values that have had a major influence on the world throughout history. Isn't that enough reason to be here today?

I could tell you that I really believe with all my heart and soul that it is our moral imperative to ensure that Judaism has a future. You can't really study the Holocaust and not believe that. But, we cannot base our love and support of Judaism upon I thing, even if it is the Holocaust. We cannot allow the recent and tragic acts of anti-Semitism both here in the U.S. and throughout the world be the sole reason that compels us to love Judaism or even be here today. No love can survive based on one thing. If it is it will not endure. But we don't have to do that because we have so many other positive reasons to love and be proud of Judaism.

Very briefly, let me remind us of all that Jews have accomplished despite their small numbers and the repeated attempts to destroy us.

First, consider the values that are the core of Judaism which make life sacred and meaningful. Our belief that all people should be treated with dignity and with humanity led to the significant role Jews played in

the Civil Rights movement, whether it was marching alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. or our Jewish young people who went on the Freedom Rides, or those who registered blacks for the first time, or those who even died for the cause. Consider the roles Jews have always played in the ACLU, even when they fought for the right of all people to speak their mind, even it was heinous.

Think of the great literature and stories that have become so much a part of the American fabric. Whether it was the biblical stories, or the stories of Chelm, or the writings of Philip Roth think of the insights, values and morals they so brilliantly conveyed. Whether it was the music of Rodger and Hammerstein, the beautiful work of Marc Chagall or Pissarro, or the monumental and life-changing contributions in the fields of science and medicine, as in Einstein and Jonas Salk, or the roles Jews have played in government, like Madeline Albright or Henry Kissinger or Bernie Sanders (who could have thought that a Jew could actually run for president?), or the many, many Nobel Prizes Jews have won. It was accomplished by us, a small group of people who have been oppressed over and over again throughout history.

We are a link, a link that has lasted 1000s of years. We surely don't want to be the people to break that link. Judaism provides us with so many things not only to each other but to the past.

This is a time for reflection and renewal, a time to ask ourselves something only we can control. Do we have the drive and strength to do better, to be better? Do we want to help make the world a kinder and a better place? It is essential for us as a community to stand up together and say this is important to me, this is important to us, and we prioritize our faith to the community and to the world. We need to be proud of who we are and of all that we have accomplished. The continuation of Judaism is vital in our homes, in our community, and in

the world. We are here for many reasons and hope what I had to say may have reminded you of some of them.

But, how did I get here today? When we moved to Plymouth, the last thing I ever expected or wanted was to become co-president of CBJ. It was well outside my comfort zone. But I am here because of a feeling of responsibility and commitment to this congregation. Also because of the support, strength, conviction, skills, and convincing of my co-president, Fred Sarke. But to be completely honest my daughter Jeremy, who was the chairperson of the nominating committee could not get anyone besides Fred and me to volunteer. And I put that word volunteer within quotation marks. But, I have come to love CBJ and my commitment to it and to you is intransigent. This temple cannot function without its wonderful rabbi and the number of people who have and have continued to volunteer. We all know that they are the engine that keeps us going and are often unrecognized and underappreciated. Fred and I are so grateful to all of you who support CBJ with your checkbook and by being here today. We would be even happier if we could get more of you to be involved and actively work with us to make CBJ the very best it can be and to help ensure the future of Judaism here in Plymouth.