

## EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5769

### REMEMBERING OURSELVES INTO THE FUTURE

On this eve we have cycled through back to the very beginning. The calendar has rolled through the seasons of the year. We have paused along the way to mark the times of celebration and commemoration: the festivals of Succot, Passover, and Shavuot; the triumphs inscribed in the stories of Chanukah and Purim; the profound reflections on survival evoked by Yom HaShoah. On a more personal level, some of us may have traveled through the shadowy seasons of illness, loss, or death. We may also have crossed spring times of renewal occasioned by births, weddings, and personal success. However we may have journeyed across the times of this past year, we all find ourselves here...back at the beginning. We have returned to a moment in time that we have been to before. Yet, it is one that by its very nature proclaims itself the start of something new.

On this particular New Year we have also returned to a place that to many is a source of profound memories. Look around. Drink in the amber colors of the rich woodwork. Immerse yourself in the contemplative hues of the stained glass. Absorb the sacred tones issuing from this grand organ.

Some of you may be able to gaze even deeper into our surroundings and see revealed a time past that shaped Temple Israel for generations.

Let us take the time to remember.

It was fifty-two years ago that Temple Israel first met here at First Congregational Church for High Holy Days. That move was occasioned by the previous year's High Holy Day services, which had been attended at the 9:00 a.m. service by 200 people and at the 11:00 a.m. service by an overflow crowd of 425 people. Membership stood at around 370 families. The impact of the post-war baby boom was in full swing, with almost 400 children enrolled in the religious school. The congregation responded to the challenges of its times aggressively and with confidence. David Feuer accepted the call to serve once again as president and led the board in realigning the dues structure with the growing needs of the congregation. Marv Lemmerman was hired as Director of Education and Activities. A School Board was organized. A camp program was initiated. To handle the increased administrative load, the synagogue hired Herta Frieberg as a

secretary. And a couple of years later it hired a teacher who would have a profound influence on an entire generation – Martha Poslaki.

Of course, there is another, whose arrival at Temple Israel preceded by only one year our congregation's first services in this sanctuary and whose power of presence shaped Temple Israel for decades.

This will be Temple Israel's first High Holy Day services in over fifty years without Rabbi Wolli Kaelter.

This year I did not get in the weeks leading up to these Days of Awe a letter from Rabbi Kaelter asking to see a copy of my sermons so that he might provide some comments. For the past nine months there have been, after Saturday morning services, no rides for me and Ana with him up to Bixby Knolls Tower, during which he would through story transmit his wisdom of how to serve as a rabbi. Handwritten letters addressed to the President of Hebrew Union College to be typed up by Charmaine have stopped arriving. Silent has been the voice mischievously singing out loud from the pews "farmer in the dell, farmer in the dell," as I and Cantor Finnley earnestly tried to lead the congregation in the final lines of the aleinu prayer: "bayom hahu, bayom hahu..."

Yet, who could honestly say that Rabbi Kaelter's presence no longer asserts itself among us? At his first meeting with the Board of Directors, Rabbi Kaelter announced: "Long before I was a rabbi, I was a Jew. And as a Jew I was accustomed to going to services on Saturday morning. Wouldn't it seem odd if I had to go to another synagogue for Saturday morning services?" Beginning in 1955 and continuing through to this very day, Temple Israel remains the only Reform congregation in this area that conducts a Shabbat morning service every Saturday, regardless of whether or not there is a bar or bat mitzvah scheduled.

Long before the Reform movement began reevaluating the value of many of the more traditional practices that had been rejected during the movement's early days, Rabbi Kaelter welcomed them into our congregation. He was the first rabbi at Temple Israel to begin wearing a kippah when officiating at services. He realigned the congregation's worship calendar to coincide with that of the Jewish calendar. From Rabbi Kaelter's tenure onward, Jewish holidays would be celebrated on their actual days not on the closest Sunday, which had been the practice.

Rabbi Kaelter also made it clear that his concern for Judaism extended far beyond the walls of the synagogue. He insisted that membership in a synagogue also entailed membership in and responsibility for the larger Jewish community. Over the past half-century members of Temple Israel have proudly provided a large proportion of the leadership of the Jewish communal agencies and organizations in the Long Beach area. The sense of civic responsibility inspired by Rabbi Kaelter has extended to positions of leadership both in city and state government and in many of the social and cultural institutions which enhance our quality of life and promote justice and equality for all.

This place evokes memories of a vibrant heritage and of courageous leaders who helped bring us to this point. The question now for us is: Will those memories produce primarily nostalgia about the past or inspiration for the future?

The Jewish people has sustained itself and moved forward into history not fundamentally through the power of its ideas, which are indeed profound, but through the power of its memory. The progressive, in the sense of liberating a people from its past, and the ethical dimensions of memory are inscribed in our Bible, beginning in the Torah.

When God first introduces Godself to Moses at the burning bush, God does not say: "I am the God of creation, the power who brought into existence all that you see." Rather, God says: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." This evocation of a heritage is designed to arouse Moses from his exile and to initiate him into a mission of freedom.

At Mount Sinai, the Voice that caused the very foundations of an ancient world to tremble began its enumeration of a code of conduct by proclaiming: "I am Adonai your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This reference to the past is crucial to the construction of identity for the Israelites, to the reason for their existence, and to the common purpose to which they then commit themselves by accepting the Ten Commandments.

The direction of Jewish memory is ultimately forward. Recollections of the past are not designed for the purpose of having us dream about a golden age

past. They serve to remind us of a covenant to be renewed, of a land to be either settled or restored...of a promise to be fulfilled.

In this sense, Jewish memory is about the future. It reaches back into the past in order to remind us of our obligations now: maintain the covenant; love the stranger; restore Zion; beat swords into plowshares. The stronger our memory, the clearer is our path toward the future.

Throughout our High Holy Days services we will say these words from our liturgy: "Remember us unto life." With them we acknowledge the power of memory to redeem us, to bring us out of what has been into what can be.

Let us make that the theme for this year's High Holy Days: To remember ourselves into the future.

As we sit here in this sanctuary of recollection, open up the floodgates of memory. However many or few may have been your years at Temple Israel, remember the shape they gave to your life, the design of community they constructed, the continuing fabric of a tradition they wove.

Remember friends; remember teachers; remember children; remember parents; remember moments of joy, and those of sadness; remember those who comforted you, and those whom you comforted; remember contributions you made, and gifts you received; remember what you learned, and what you taught; remember where you sat, and where you walked; remember melodies that you sang, and words that you read. Remember why you are here.

The more we exercise this power of memory, the more light we will shine on the way ahead. There are children to teach; classes to attend; committees on which to serve; contributions to be made; songs to be sung; services to join in; friends to meet; and strangers to be welcomed.

At this threshold moment between yesterday and tomorrow, we will best honor Temple Israel's past by dedicating ourselves to Temple Israel's future. If we do that, we will surely fulfill our tradition's challenge to us: "Remember us unto life."

May this be a New Year in which we grow, from strength to strength. L'shana tova.