

ONE HUNDRED YEARS: A COMMITMENT TO UNITY

June 30, 1989 Temple Beth Israel, Sharon Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl

Rabbi Sniderman, Dorothy, members and guests of Temple Beth Israel, it is so good to come home again. I rejoice as I stand at the very spot where I became a Bar Mitzvah and where I was confirmed by Rabbi Meyer M. Abramowitz, z"l, who had a profound influence on my decision to enter the rabbinate. It was here that I delivered my first High Holy Day sermon as a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College. This sanctuary is replete with fond and tender memories for me.

I am especially honored that of all the alumni of this century-old congregation, you invited me to present the message on this centennial Sabbath. Since I was asked, I have awaited this moment with enthusiastic anticipation. I have been eager to see old friends and to renew acquaintances after an absence, in some cases, of several decades.

Let me first address those of us who have come back to Sharon for this weekend. You most likely share my ecstasy and my excitement. Many of us have assembled here this weekend to restore lost friendships and to catch up on the events that have transpired in each other's lives. Those of us who spent our youth here look upon Sharon with fond nostalgia.

What is it that draws us here so magnetically and so irresistibly to Sharon at this time in our lives? Sharon will always be, for us, the symbol of the radiant promise of our youth. It was here that we spent our formative years, probably the years most critical to our personal development. It was a simpler world then.

Admittedly, our pre-adolescent and adolescent days weren't always easy. We can not gloss over the anxieties and the fears that plagued us as we were growing up here. There were severe peer pressures to conform, to look good, to dress well, to be popular, to be accepted by the "in" crowd. Yet, even with all our psychological burdens, those years were a time of unlimited possibilities for us. We thought we had the whole world in our hands.

In this connection, a high school graduating class in Carmel, Illinois, took for its class motto a most appropriate line from Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant: "Go forth under the open sky." When we were young, the sky seemed limitless. Opportunities abounded. There was nothing that was impossible for us to accomplish. Even thoughts of our mortality were remote and academic. It was a time of adventure and idealism.

Since those halcyon years, many of us have undergone traumatic mid-life crises. Some of us have had a brush with death. We have lost significant numbers of loved ones. Our lives probably did not bring us the satisfactions that we had once expected. Those opportunities that once were plentiful seem to have shrunk.

The Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai, put it this way:

"God has pity on children in kindergarten.
God pities school children less.

But adults, God pities not at all."

As adults, we have faced many harsh and bitter realities. Thus we yearn for that simpler time of our youth that we spent here in Sharon, Pennsylvania. We have come back to recapture that sense of innocence we once knew.

Now I would like to address all of us: those who have returned to Sharon, those who never left, and those who moved here from another place. Tonight all of us want to acknowledge the critical role that this congregation has played in our Jewish development. This congregation is an extraordinary one. To the Jews of Sharon, it has been our sole Jewish institution outside of our homes.

Unlike other cities, Sharon has not had a Jewish Community Center or a YMHA or YWHA. It is here, at the Temple, that we have sought a total Jewish experience. This Temple has performed its work amazingly well over these years and decades. I appreciate its uniqueness more and more as I observe congregations in other parts of the country.

One of the most significant contributions of Temple Beth Israel of Sharon is that it has managed, for one hundred years, to keep the local Jewish community unified. Some of you may know the story of a group of explorers who come to a deserted island. The island has only one resident, who is an elderly Jew. The explorers notice, in the background, two synagogue buildings. Puzzled, they ask the Jewish resident for the reason. Pointing to one of the two buildings, he replies: "That's the one I don't go to."

We Jews have been a fiercely individualistic people. We are known for our strong opinions and our definite preferences. In most places, Jews have demonstrated a pronounced tendency to start new congregations.

In 1969, I became the Rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel, in Galveston, Texas, which also has a relatively small Jewish community. I then learned that before 1930 Galveston had three Jewish congregations: an Orthodox shul for Russian Jews; another Orthodox shul for Galician Jews, disparagingly called "Galitzianers"; and a Reform Temple, which had been founded by German Jews. For many years, the Russian Jews and the Galician Jews hardly spoke to each other. There was a lot of strife and rivalry between the two, until they merged into a single Orthodox congregation in 1930.

The people of B'nai Israel, the Reform congregation, held themselves aloof from their Orthodox co-religionists in Galveston. In fact, I can vividly remember introducing an elderly native of Galveston - a member of my Reform congregation, to another elderly Galveston native - a member of the Orthodox congregation. They had never met each other before, even though both of these Jews had spent their entire lives in the same city.

Most Jewish communities of Sharon's approximate size in Western Pennsylvania have supported at least two congregations: New Castle, Beaver Falls, Altoona, Uniontown, and Johnstown are prime examples. Sharon also could have been a city with multiple synagogues. Yet, the desire for solidarity and unity has always been so strong, that, on at least three occasions, that possibility of rupture was averted.

The first time was in 1889 when Temple Beth Israel was founded as the House of Israel Synagogue by Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe. Some of them are ancestors of this congregation's present-day members. The names of Rosenblum and Routman predominated at that time.

When this congregation was established, there were already some German Reform Jews in Sharon, like the Alexanders and the Traxlers. They did not get involved with the House of Israel Synagogue at that beginning stage. Yet, they refrained from forming a second congregation here, and thus Jewish unity was preserved.

A second significant incident occurred in the early part of this century. Some members of the House of Israel Synagogue became disenchanted with a few of its ritual practices. For a time, they broke off and formed a second congregation called "Sha'are Torah." Later, however, they were asked to reunite with the House of Israel Synagogue. They accepted the offer and dissolved Congregation Sha'are Torah so that Sharon again had only one synagogue.

There was a third time that congregational unity was threatened, and many of us here tonight remember those days clearly. This congregation faced its greatest danger of splintering in the years immediately after World War II. At that time, this congregation's leadership decided to adopt a program of Progressive Judaism.

Over a period of five or six years, Reform practices, which deviated significantly from traditional norms, were introduced. An organ was installed. A mixed choir, consisting not only of Jewish men and women, but even of non-Jews, began to sing at most services. The Reform Union Prayerbook supplanted the traditional siddur and machzor on Sabbaths and holidays. Services became shorter and much of the Hebrew was eliminated. Rosh Hashanah and the major festivals were observed for only one day. The wearing of the yarmulke and tallit became optional.

I can well recall the heated battles and the stormy arguments that raged during that time. My father, z"l, who opposed these reforms, and his Traditionalist friends on many nights commiserated in our living room until the wee hours of the morning. There they anguished and agonized over what they thought were desecrations that had come to their synagogue.

It was a particularly difficult time for me. I was strongly drawn to the Reform movement. I liked Reform's rational philosophy and its emphasis on decorum and aesthetics. Most of my friends' parents were also advocates of Reform. I was torn between my father's insistence that I embrace Orthodoxy and my powerful attraction to Reform. During those days I developed a very troubled relationship with Orthodox laws and practices. It took me many years to overcome this difficulty and to appreciate the beauty of Traditional Judaism.

Nonetheless, congregationally, this struggle between the Traditionalists and the Reformers was skillfully resolved. The visionary rabbinical and lay leadership at that time made certain that the religious needs of both groups would always be met. A two-track program was introduced. Reform services were set for the main sanctuary.

A separate Traditional worship service was held every Shabbat in the Rosenblum Chapel or the Freyman Meeting Room. On the High Holy Days, the congregation engaged a hazzan for the Traditionalists. Out of respect for them, the congregation adopted a policy that non-kosher food could not be brought into the Temple.

Even synagogue furniture was designed with both groups in mind. The Traditionalists did not want an organ to be heard, nor even seen, in the area where they davened. I recall an ingeniously crafted portable organ on wheels. It was moved into the Rosenblum Chapel, where the Reform Religious School assemblies were also held, and then rolled out again in preparation for the Traditional services.

Unless something has changed, I also remember that the top of the pulpit in the Rosenblum Chapel can revolve 180 degrees. In this way, the leader of the Reform service can face the congregation while standing at the pulpit, and the leader of the Traditional service can face the holy Ark at that same location.

The leadership was also careful not to use the terms "Reform" and "Orthodox" to describe the two types of Jewish religious experiences it provided. Both words are highly charged and can be alienating to large masses of Jews. Instead, the terms "Liberal" and "Traditional" were employed exclusively.

This pluralistic arrangement has been consistently maintained over these decades. In fact, in the early 1970's, when the time came for Temple Beth Israel of Sharon and the Orthodox Congregation B'nai Zion of Farrell to merge, a dual-worship structure was already in place.

Wisely, the leadership of this congregation never tried to integrate the Liberals and the Traditionalists into one service. Such a plan can hardly work. I realized that fact very clearly soon after I was ordained and was assigned as a U.S. Army Chaplain to Fort Belvoir, Virginia. At the High Holy Day services that year, I conducted a so-called "middle-of-the-road" service. Some Reform Jews thought it was much too Traditional, and many Orthodox and Conservative Jews considered it excessively Liberal.

The following year, I was sent to Korea. There I instituted a plan, based on Sharon's model. The other Jewish chaplain, who was also Reform, and I conducted a Liberal service in the main Chapel. Our two chaplain's assistants, who were Orthodox, led a Traditional service in another part of the building. The Sharon system succeeded beautifully in Seoul, Korea, during the High Holy Days of 1968.

Thus the goal of maintaining congregational unity has been effectively achieved at Temple Beth Israel for an entire century. Today, however, there are other challenges besides denominational differences. When many of us were growing up here, the Jewish world was different and the Jewish demands and expectations of us were different.

Our goal in those days was to make American Judaism more American. In the 1940's and the 1950's, many of us were insecure about our Jewishness. We were self-conscious. We believed we were here in America at the sufferance and tolerance of our Christian neighbors. We thought of ourselves as guests, rather than hosts, in America.

We were victims of subtle anti-Semitism in many arenas. Top universities and medical schools still had Jewish quotas. Certain professions and vocations were closed to Jews. It was rare to find a Jewish Chairman of the Board of an insurance, oil, or utility company; or a Jewish officer of a bank; or a Jewish president or dean of a college or university. Many industrial plants, like Sharon Steel, rarely, if ever, hired a Jews for their executive suites.

Many social organizations did not want Jews. What an irony it is that tonight Lynn and I enjoyed a Shabbat dinner at the Sharon Country Club and that tomorrow night, this congregation will hold its centennial dinner dance there. During my youth, I do not remember ever entering the Sharon Country Club, as its atmosphere was not particularly welcoming to Jews.

Today, our times are different and our challenges are different. We are now fully accepted as Jews in America. There is no university or profession that bars Jews. The number of country clubs that still reject Jews is tiny. Our children and grandchildren are therefore totally unself-conscious about being Jews. They do not wince when they hear Yiddish spoken. They are not uneasy when they see kipot worn on the street, as some of us used to be. They are secure Jews.

The problem is that our children and grandchildren feel so much at home in America that they are casual about being Jewish. There is a stronger danger of assimilation than ever before. Many of our newer generations lack a strong feeling of attachment to the Jewish people and the State of Israel. They do not see the Jewish people or the State of Israel as entities demanding their Jewish loyalties.

Because of all these factors, the task of Temple Beth Israel, as well as all Jewish congregations throughout America, today, is no longer to make American Judaism more American. Rather, it is to make American Judaism more Jewish.

This congregation faces still another challenge - a demographic one. When I grew up here, almost 200 Jewish families had affiliated with Temple Beth Israel. The Religious School enjoyed an enrollment of more than 125 children. Over these past several years, the prosperity of the Shenango Valley has diminished and its economy has been troubled.

These have not been easy times for this congregation. Many longtime members have moved away. Their children who grew up in Sharon have not returned to live here. The membership today, even when combined with those who joined from the Farrell congregation, is somewhat below the 200 that this congregation once numbered.

Yet, in spite of these discouraging and foreboding statistics, I salute this congregation and its present leadership for your determination not to despair. I read the Temple Beth Israel Bulletin with great joy. I see how active a congregation this is. You maintain a complete schedule of worship; of adult and youth educational programs; of social, humanitarian, and cultural activities. You support an able, full-time Rabbi, Stephen Sniderman.

You who are members and leaders of this congregation have demonstrated that stubborn Jewish trait of remaining asirei tikvah, "prisoners of hope." You have transformed a crisis into an opportunity. In these difficult times, I commend your unwavering faith in the future of this congregation.

It is my fervent hope that you will remain undaunted and courageous as you enter the second century of the life of Temple Beth Israel. To you, I now offer the words uttered upon the completion of the reading of each of the Five Books of Moses in the synagogue: "Hazak, hazak, v'nithazek - Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other." Amen.

I am especially honored that of all the alumni of this century-old congregation, you invited me to present the message on this centennial Sabbath. Since I was asked, I have awaited this moment with enthusiastic anticipation. I have been eager to see old friends and to renew acquaintances after an absence, in some cases, of several decades.

Let us first address those of us who have come back to Sharon for this weekend. You most likely share my ecstasy and my excitement. Many of us have assembled here this weekend to restore lost friendships and to catch up on the events that have transpired in each other's lives. Those of us who spent our youth here look upon Sharon with fond nostalgia.

What is it that draws us here so magnetically and so irresistibly to Sharon at this time in our lives? Sharon will always be, for us, the symbol of the radiant promise of our youth. It was here that we spent our formative years, probably the years most critical to our personal development. It was a simpler world then.

Admittedly, our pre-adolescent and adolescent days weren't always easy. We can not gloss over the anxieties and the fears that plagued us as we were growing up here. There were severe peer pressures to conform, to look good, to dress well, to be popular, to be accepted by the "in" crowd. Yet, even with all our psychological burdens, those years were a time of unlimited possibilities for us. We thought we had the whole world in our hands.

In this connection, a high school graduating class in Carmel, Illinois, took for its class motto a most appropriate line from Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant: "Go forth under the open sky." When we were young, the sky seemed limitless. Opportunities abounded. There was nothing that was impossible for us to accomplish. Even thoughts of our mortality were remote and academic. It was a time of adventure and idealism.

Since those halcyon years, many of us have undergone traumatic mid-life crises. Some of us have had a brush with death. We have lost significant numbers of loved ones. Our lives probably did not bring us the satisfactions that we had once expected. Those opportunities that once were plentiful seem to have shrunk.

The Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai, put it this way:

"God has pity on children in kindergarten.
God pities school children less."