



Good Morning and good Yon Tov.

When I was asked to speak to you today I thought about several topics that I thought might be of interest and I actually wrote a discussion which I thought might be too technical concerning different calendar systems touching a bit on the Y2K phenomenon. So I thought hard and decided to base this discussion on a topic with which I can speak with a more intimate knowledge. This topic is what it is like to be a member of Beth Israel Center from a Christian's perspective. First you will need a bit of background.

As many of you know my wife, Louise, and I are from radically different backgrounds. Louise was born and was raised in a kosher orthodox environment in Queens New York. In a home still occupied by her mother who still strives to maintain her kosher lifestyle in a dwindling Jewish community.

I, on the other hand, grew up in Washington PA, and am not Jewish. Prior to our marriage the only exposure I had to Judaism was a class I took in college on comparative religions. In this class many different religions were studied. I took this class thinking it would be an easy humanities elective toward my degree in Chemical Engineering. The funny thing was this elective was not very easy. It required the class to attend several different services at local churches and the one synagogue at Grove City, but the class was interesting in that it showed that most religions are not very dissimilar and that Judaism is the tap root of Christianity. By the way the easy class earned me not the A I had hoped for but a B that required a lot of work. It was probably this class that helped me to understand that religion is a purely personal decision and that every person is entitled to their own beliefs no matter how much they may differ from mine.

When we were first married we lived in Butler PA. To Louise being from New York this was certainly a difficult experience. Butler does have a small synagogue and Louise and I did attend a service there together. So in coming to western Pennsylvania she found that she had to make many adjustments from the New York City hustle and bustle to a small town environment.

Our daughter Melissa was born and at one month old we moved to South Park, where we still live. Louise quickly found Beth Israel Center. In that first visit, she being from New York, did not know how to drive since owning a car there is often a liability, and took Melissa in a cab for her first Holiday service. At that time she was a traditional holiday attendee. I even attended during the holidays a few times.

As we settled into our home Louise learned to drive. Melissa entered grade school. During the Thanksgiving holiday in 1990 we were in Phoenix Arizona at the Bat Mitzvah of one of Louise's cousins when shortly after the affair Melissa came to me and asked me if I would be upset if she were to be Bat Mitzvah also. I told her that not only wouldn't I

be upset but I would do all I could to support her goal. I thought it very mature for a nine year old to decide what religion she would practice. You might be thinking to yourself that since Melissa was born from a Jewish mother she is Jewish because of Jewish law, this is true but Melissa decided to live up to her obligations without being pushed to do so. In January 1991 we enrolled her in classes here for the first time. Even though she was behind the rest of her class of four she quickly caught up and made us all proud when she became Bat Mitzvah in May 1994. She continued with her classes and was confirmed at this Center in 1997. During this time we as a family started a more regular attendance at services which Melissa helped lead on several occasions after her Bat Mitzvah.

I am quite pleased with my daughter's accomplishments and due to the help she received from this congregation we try to help as we can to repay the effort others have made for us. This year she is attending college and we are disappointed that she was not able to be with us today.

As I began to attend services at Beth Israel there was always, in the back of my mind, some fear of what I might be asked to do: read Hebrew, take part in the service, do something that I was not supposed to do, or maybe offend someone unknowingly. These were the excuses I used for not attending services at the beginning. I didn't want to be embarrassed by my not understanding. Not a good excuse but reasonable enough for me. I just didn't want to be put on the spot and Louise never insisted that we attend more regularly. But my fears were unfounded and many of you made me feel at home with this congregation. As Melissa progressed through the Hebrew school program and as the Hebrew school grew in size I found that I was not the only non Jewish member of the Center.

As I have become more involved in the aspects of the life here at the Center I have found that there are really few areas in which Christians and Jews differ in every day life. Obviously though there are differences which are **not** important in this topic but one that I did want touch upon is that of keeping Kosher.

Recently this has been the topic for great debate here with respect to the kitchen. There have been numerous discussions at board meetings and general membership meetings. Usually I have steered clear of any great involvement since my understanding is not deep seated. But I can tell you of a single recent situation in our own family. My brother in law's family is Conservative and when their son went to college he became a Lubavitch. So strict were his new beliefs that he would no longer eat at home and almost was a vegetarian. After several years as a Lubavitch he decided to return to a more Conservative tradition and now he feels comfortable eating with his parents again. While there is a little more to the story the point that I am trying to make is that the degree to which one feels comfortable with a kosher lifestyle is personal and there are as many degrees to being

kosher as there are families in this congregation. While the orthodox tradition spells out a rigorous set of guidelines as to how day to day life should be handled the Conservative and reformed movements have allowed some differences in interpretation.

Obviously there are many other differences between Christians and Jews but the point here is that as the world gets smaller there is less room for placing religious barriers between us and we all need to work together and understand each other better. Mutual understanding of religious differences will help us to understand how we can better work together. Religious tolerance must become absolute. It seems to work well here at Beth Israel.

You might ask what does all of this have to do with me? This synagogue is similar to our family in that it is composed of people of many and various backgrounds. At the beginning this synagogue came together due to many of you with common interests wanting a place to worship. More recently it has become a congregation that has embraced family membership, regardless of religious preferences, understanding that this is not the traditional philosophy of the past. But this fact is what makes Beth Israel special.

In doing so the Beth Israel Family increased in size and the religious school has grown by leaps and bounds. When Melissa started attending here there were four children in her class now look at the thriving program that is offered today. Some of these children are similar in that they have a family of varied religious backgrounds.

It has been the fundamental precept of this congregation to accept members with an open heart and an outstretched hand without ever questioning a persons background or roots. This fact makes Beth Israel truly special.

Only a few weeks ago this congregation celebrated its 40th anniversary. I Am positive that no one associated with that founding group would have realized what changes the future would bring just as I am certain that we can not fathom how different it will likely be at the 50th anniversary. One thing that must certainly continue is the warm feeling one gets at a time like this when the entire family is together. Only a few times each year are we all able to come together and share the happenings in our lives with each other. This New Year is one of those times.

As we move into the future one thing we should all keep in mind is that the strength of this synagogue is the rich diversity of its membership. The always open door policy will help keep this congregation strong far into the future. As in any family problems do crop up from time to time but it is incumbent on all of us to work together to seek a solution to the problem no matter how difficult it may be.

As we celebrate this year of 5760 we should remember that one of the oldest continuing calendar systems belongs to one of the worlds oldest religions. Judaism has persevered through the ages just as this congregation has over the last 40 and both are like the wild flower that continues to bloom year after year no matter what may befall it.

With this new year we should rededicate ourselves to keep this congregation strong and vital placing an emphasis on growth of the educational program and the congregation. It is essential to bring more new members into the Beth Israel Family and to maintain the interest of the children.

I would like to extend the wish from my family to yours, and all of you, for a good and happy new year and hope that we can all meet again here next year to reaffirm this celebration of our **Beth Israel Family**.

Bill Hunt

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