

Yom Kippur 2017

Opening Address

Good morning and Shanah Tovah.

Just for a moment, imagine that you're me. You're the president of a congregation in transition. And it's not a small transition. The senior rabbi of 44 years, the spiritual leader of the congregation is retiring. And it's going to happen right in the middle of your two-year term.

Sounds a little daunting, doesn't it?

I mean, transitions CAN be daunting. Things are uncertain. You're not 100% sure what's going to happen. But expectations are high. There's a lot riding on your shoulders. You feel the pressure because more than anything else, you want everything to go well. Oh, yes, and did I mention, you actually have a full-time job and two teenage daughters in addition to being president?

Well, Mazel Tov. It probably feels good not to be me.

Ironically, I happen to be going through a bit of a transition myself which has helped me to relate to my role as president during this period. Two weeks ago, I turned 50 years old. It's a little daunting. Expectations are running high, and there is absolutely a lot riding on my shoulders.

I am coming to terms with the fact that my youngest daughter will become a Bat Mitzvah exactly one week from today, and my oldest daughter just started driver education. So, I find myself asking a lot of questions. How did this happen? At 50, am I where I should be? What have I accomplished? What do I still need and want to do?

So, while I don't know what my future has in store for me, I do know that how you approach the planned and unplanned transitions in life can make all the difference. I don't expect to have all of the answers to the many questions I ask myself, but my gut tells me that as long as I keep asking them, I will always stay on the right path and never settle for less than I am capable of. When you ask the right questions, you usually find the right answers.

And so it is with our transition. We started this process almost two years ago. And we asked a lot of questions to a lot of different people. We spoke to synagogues across the country that went through transitions. We spoke to the Union of Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis to get a better understanding of the transition process. And once we had a handle on this, we reached out to our congregation to ensure that everyone had a voice in the future direction of our synagogue.

And when we did this we made sure to ask the RIGHT questions. In the envisioning conversations and the online survey we did not ask "Who should be the next rabbi at Anshe Emeth?" The emphasis was on what do we, as congregants, want our temple to look like in the coming years. Once we knew that, we'd know what we were looking for.

And none of us held back. Together, we celebrated what we love about Anshe Emeth, but we also asked the hard questions that we know we need to answer. I walked away from these sessions feeling truly invigorated and optimistic because in our membership, I saw such passion and love for this place. We are all committed to its long-term success. The reason we have continued to thrive in a time when other religious institutions have struggled is because we have never stopped asking the RIGHT questions. We never stop reinventing ourselves.

So, while it is easy to pat ourselves on the back, it's really not our style. We know what our strengths are, and we absolutely take the time to appreciate and nourish them.

For example, I heard congregants speak about their pride in our long history and reputation in New Brunswick with local hospitals and politicians; our support for communities in need through the CDC and our social justice programs. But our reputation extends beyond the borders of New Brunswick and even New Jersey. You've all heard the impressive fact that we send more students to the Heller EIE Semester in Israel Program than any other congregation in North America. And these things are just a small sampling of what was discussed. Not surprisingly, these are all strengths that we see as essential as we move forward.

When it comes to our educational programs, we are so proud of what we offer all congregants, but especially what we provide for our youth. We all take great pride in the high bar that we set for our students. We love that when visitors attend our B'nei Mitzvah services they are awed at the poise with which our students run the entire service. Our post-B'nei Mitzvah retention rate for those that attend our high

school is 96.5% (Rabbi Bazeley would be upset with me if I left out the .5%). In any case, this statistic is unheard of.

But also at these sessions, what we heard the most was that, for many of us, it's all about community. We thrive on the social interaction and support that we receive here. We want Anshe Emeth to continue to be a welcoming place. But this discussion around community almost always led to a conversation about the demographics of our congregation. And here, we had very productive discussions and asked MANY questions. The core question: What is happening with our membership and what do we need to do to thrive in the coming years?

The good news is that we continue to bring in new members of all ages. But we are seeing the average age of our congregation inch upward. So we ask, "Why is this happening?" Some congregants noted that in general, younger generations are earning less than their parents, so it is harder for us to attract this age group due to the financial aspect of joining a synagogue. So, we asked additional questions. Is it really just a financial issue? Are we offering what they are looking for? Do we even know what they are looking for? For our existing congregants, are we doing everything that we can to accommodate the demands of daily life outside these walls while staying true to our vision? And for those that are unaffiliated, what would inspire them to join this community?

There may be some answers to these questions and others through the practice of audacious hospitality. Essentially, the Union of Reform Judaism defines it as "*the focused effort to embrace our diversity and reach out to those currently not engaged in Jewish life. Judaism must meet people where they are today to thrive tomorrow. Audacious Hospitality is a transformative spiritual practice rooted in*

the belief that we will be a stronger, more vibrant Jewish community when we fully welcome and incorporate the diversity that is the reality of modern Jewish life.

So, the question is, what does Audacious Hospitality mean to us? How WE decide to incorporate this idea into our community is something that we will discuss and embrace together. However, what we know is that this is a conversation that we need to have to continue to be relevant in the coming years.

Last week in Rabbi Miller's Rosh Hashana sermon, he added two commandments for us. The 11th commandment was "don't change anything", followed by the 12th commandment, "change everything".

That really does say it all, doesn't it? We want continuity here. We value and want to hold onto everything that makes Anshe Emeth so special. But we know that in order to thrive, change will continue to be the only constant.

As part of this process, I also want to assure you that the lay leadership at Anshe Emeth intends to take full advantage of this transition period. We are also asking a lot of the right questions these days. This is an opportunity for us to look inward. What role have we had in the past and what might be done differently going forward? How will we interact with the next senior Rabbi? In working to answer these questions we are not alone. We are collaborating closely with the Union of Reform Judaism to help facilitate our Board retreat in October which will focus exclusively on this topic.

So, what can you expect in the coming months?

As I noted in the letter that I sent to you earlier this month, after the High Holidays are over, I hope to share with you the result of the Search Committee's hard work completed over this past summer. Our Search Committee spent considerable time reading pages upon pages of notes from all the Envisioning sessions, and every single response provided in the online survey. They then discussed this feedback at length before taking next steps on our behalf.

And as we have done consistently throughout this process, we will continue to provide you timely updates as to the status of the transition and what you can expect next.

But the coming year will not be just about planning our future, it will also be a year for celebrating our past and who we are today. Not just a celebration of Rabbi Miller (although there will be quite a bit of this), but a celebration of all of us. We are what make Anshe Emeth so special. And if there is one thing that came through loud and clear at the envisioning sessions, it is that without question, this is a congregation that feels that we have something special here not to be found anywhere else.

By this week you should have received your program book for the upcoming year. Not only is this year's book filled with more programs than ever, but numerous events have been planned so that we can celebrate and honor Rabbi Miller's retirement year. I encourage you to look through the booklet and mark your calendars for events of interest to you.

Although there are many dates to consider, make sure that you reserve Rabbi Miller's Retirement weekend to be held Friday, June 8th through Sunday, June 10th.

The entire weekend will be filled with events including what we are currently calling the “non-gala” gala (Rabbi Miller made it clear, “I don’t want a gala...”). The weekend will culminate with breakfast and a photo of all of us on the front steps of the building on the morning of Sunday, June 10th.

I’m so excited about what is to come this year, but I want to take a moment to focus on the here and now. This is a very special time for us. I think that we can all agree that the High Holidays takes on additional meaning this year, as together we reflect on our last High Holidays with Rabbi Miller as our senior rabbi. I personally have been thinking about all of the ways he has been there for my family, in both good times and bad. Anshe Emeth has been a big part of his life. You heard it in his voice last week during his Rosh Hashana sermon. Through his emotion, how could you not feel the love and compassion that he has for us. I encourage all of us to take the time to think about what he has meant to our families, and be sure to let him know.

And I ask that we also reflect on who WE are as a congregation. We have a wonderful opportunity here. But it is up to us to build upon the strong foundation that Rabbi Miller has helped us create during his long tenure.

The start of my address today suggested that the work required to build upon this strong foundation would be daunting. But, the truth is, it’s actually not so daunting to be president of Anshe Emeth during this time. I have never felt alone, nor that the weight of this responsibility falls solely on my shoulders. The Board of Trustees, the clergy and staff, our past presidents, and you have been involved and so supportive. For this, I cannot thank all of you enough.

I, along with my wife, Terri, and my daughters, Zoe, and Avery wish all of you a happy, healthy, and fulfilling year.

Kein Yahe Ratzon. So may it be written. Shanah Tovah.