Installation Speech
May 5, 2017

Shabbat Shalom.

A couple of weeks ago I finished the first draft of my speech. I felt pretty good about it. With a smile on my face, and unbridled optimism, I printed it out and handed my wife the seven pages of my neatly typed masterpiece for her honest feedback. Needless to say, this is not that speech.

After reading the speech, and in a not so subtle manner, Terri asked, "What do you want the congregation to know about you? Why did you even agree to be the president of Anshe Emeth?" Apparently, according to her, none of that really came through in any type of cohesive manner in my first draft.

So, how did I respond to her? Well, of course, I defended my masterpiece and I argued! The first problem, as she clearly stated, was that I had started my original speech by thanking the many people that have helped me along the way, as well as those that make Anshe Emeth such a special place. In my opinion, how could I possibly start my speech any other way? She said, "Well, that's nice and all, but people will probably stop listening by the end of page 1. Of course you need to thank people, but make sure it's personal and not a list that you are just getting through. But more importantly, you have to make sure that the congregation understands your story."

What really upset me was that she was absolutely right, and I knew it. After I picked my ego up off the floor, I sat staring at my laptop – the blinking cursor taunting me.

So, who am I? Most of you know that I am a Texas native, born and raised in Dallas. I also know that many of you have expressed doubt about this fact as I have no accent at all. However, I can assure you that this is true. My mom is here this evening and she absolutely has the Texas twang that I lack. As proof, I suggest that you say Hello to her at the Oneg. (Mom, raise your hand). I suspect I avoided this Southern identifier because my father was a native New Yorker. It

saddens me that my father passed away when I was in my 20's as I know he would be so proud of me. My father and I could not have been more different. His mother died when he was 10, and his father had no interest in raising him or his brother. He literally raised himself on the streets of New York, selling bananas from a cart. He was tough, street smart, and trusted no one. To give you a little insight as to his world view, shortly before his death his piece of advice to me was, and I'll never forget it – "the best helping hand you'll find in life is the one at the end of your arm". Now those of you that know me well know that this is not me. Unlike my father, I was fortunate to have a mother who provided me a safe and loving environment in my formative years. I was a happy go-lucky kid who didn't have to be tough to survive. Thanks, Mom.

The actual town I grew up in is called Carrollton, a north suburb of Dallas. I lived miles away from the kids who lived in the more Jewish, wealthier areas and attended Temple Emanu-El with me. I had very little connection to them or to Judaism. From a young age I struggled with my belief in G-d. I thought you either believed in the traditional view of G-d or you didn't believe at all. In my Bar Mitzvah Torah portion on Noah, I questioned the legitimacy of the story. I questioned everything. My attendance in religious school after my Bar Mitzvah was just barely sufficient to allow me to graduate. Future president of a synagogue? Not something I or anyone who knew me would have guessed! However, I always felt something when it came to my religion. I just didn't know what it was yet.

After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin I returned to Dallas for my first real job. And although I had girlfriends in high school and college it was at this time that I had my first Jewish girlfriend. Now, I bring this up because for me a light bulb went on. I loved the similarity of our Jewish backgrounds. There was something about the cultural experience of being Jewish, that added a layer of familiarity, even comfort to the relationship. She was from Connecticut and we took a couple of trips to New York and to her home so I could meet her family. Now, while she didn't last, my experience visiting the Northeast stuck with me. I loved it. I loved the culture, the diversity, the people – and I heard it had real seasons! So it is probably not surprising that I became extremely close friends with a woman named Ilayne Geller, a fast-talking New Yorker with the thickest

accent I had ever heard. We were both volunteering at Jewish Family Service in Dallas as part of their Big Pal program, and were each mentoring a young boy and girl who happened to be brother and sister. She claimed to know the perfect woman for me (someone she used to babysit for many years earlier). This "perfect" woman happened to live on the upper east side of Manhattan. So, of course, my answer was, "yeah, not so perfect". I was working full-time, getting my Masters at SMU, and oh, yes, volunteering alongside her at Jewish Family Service. A long distance relationship did not seem to be in the cards. She swore she was right and promised the next time this young woman came to Dallas we would meet. This young woman, as you may have guessed, was Terri. Terri had the same unexcited response as I did due to the distance. Long story short, we met a year later when she visited, immediately hit it off, dated long distance for almost a year, and then upon graduating with my masters I jumped on an opportunity to have my company move me to NYC. Right before I moved to New York, I was visiting Terri over the Christmas holiday. We were walking in Central Park and approached the corner by the Plaza Hotel. I stood staring at something I had never seen before. A menorah that towered above me lit for each night of Hanukkah. I'm sure that you've all seen it. Terri will back me up that I literally shouted, "My people are everywhere!"

So, here is what is hilarious about this whole story. My father and I both had to travel 1400 miles to find a woman willing to marry us – my father to Dallas and me back to NY. Now, without question my father didn't quite fit in Dallas any more than I fit in New York. As you can imagine, my polite Texas ways did not fare so well on the dangerous avenues of Manhattan. Terri was frustrated with me that when I bumped into people on the street I would say "excuse me". But what truly concerned her was when people bumped into me I would still say "excuse me". She absolutely questioned if I would survive. Of course this happened to me all of the time because even months after I started working on Wall Street I would still look up at the buildings rather than where I was going.

But I loved it. I loved every minute of the magical New York experience. It was our playground; it was romantic, and I learned a whole new way of living, including being a bit less naïve and a bit more street smart.

I soon became convinced that Terri suckered me, because right after we got married she told me that she wanted to get her doctorate in Psychology. Did she accept any of the offers (some with scholarships) in my exciting new playground? No. She let me know that the Graduate School of Applied Psychology at Rutgers University was the best school in the area for her. Rutgers? That school in New Jersey. That place that I had really only seen from the shores of the West Side? Oh, no… this is not the life I imagined! Of course, it all made sense. One salary, and the goal to start a family; it just wasn't going to happen in Manhattan.

So, we bought our first townhome in Somerset and Terri started calling around to find us a synagogue. It only took one conversation with Shari Rothstein and one Friday night service led by Rabbi Miller to seal the deal. Now, while we loved Anshe Emeth, we were basically non-existent for the first three years of our membership. I was commuting to New York City working for Merrill Lynch and she was deep into her doctoral program. Then we had Zoe and then came Avery and everything began to change. We and our daughters had the full Anshe Emeth Gan experience and life was moving along nicely until 2008. And this is where Anshe Emeth impacted my life in ways I could not have imagined.

I had spent eight years at Merrill Lynch in the corporate finance area and decided I wanted something different. In 2007 I took a position in the Wealth Management Division, and we all know what happened to the economy in 2008. Thousands lost their jobs, including me and the team that I was managing. I was already at that mid-life crisis age of 40, with two young children, and a wife working (without pay) on her doctorate in Psychology. Gulp.

Within two months, I decided to pursue what had been a longer-term goal to become a financial advisor. I was choosing to help people with their finances at a time when the financial world was falling apart! I figured, if anyone needed financial advice, this was the time. However, these were scary times for all of us. And it was during this time that I called on my Rabbi. I felt the weight of so many responsibilities, and Rabbi Miller gave me a little perspective. He gave me a gift. In 2010 he recommended me to represent Anshe Emeth on a trip to Israel as part of a leadership development program sponsored by the Jewish Federation. Like so many others, I came back from Israel changed. Funny, that within moments after

stepping off of the plane I got a call to join the Anshe Emeth Board. Coincidence? I think not. Rabbi Miller is always a man with a Plan, and I have been a fortunate recipient of his attention. Rabbi Miller, thank you for putting me on this path and having the faith in me to take on such an important role. Thank you for giving me the chance to give back in such a meaningful way.

So on to Terri's second question: why did I agree to become president of Anshe Emeth?

It's a fair question, especially since I have noticed that when people find out that you are going to become President of a synagogue their responses almost always tend to follow a common theme. And surprisingly, the responses almost always involve four words.

The four words that I hear the most are, "What were you thinking?" But in all fairness, a close second is "Good luck with that."

The answer is actually quite simple. Anshe Emeth has become a big part of our family life. It feels like a second home. We have friends here. Great things are accomplished here. We are proud to be members here.

We walk into this sanctuary on a Friday night after a long week, and no matter how tired we are, the music starts and we know we are exactly where we should be. The music; I love the music here - our music programming, all of our choirs, Jew Directions, and the Awesome Family Band with the incredibly talented Dave Schlossberg. Cantor Ott is a treasure who makes it all happen and honoring her at Crown of Torah on May 21st is something we would not dare miss. Beyond all this, she has nurtured a love of Jewish music in Zoe that astounds me. Cantor Ott, thank you.

But Zoe is not the only one in this family who has found an outlet for her passion here. Rabbi Bazeley has been instrumental in helping Terri and Sara Hymowitz establish the Tikkun Olam Task Force, with the plan to collaborate with local organizations to improve inter-faith and inter-racial relations; to help immigrants and refugees, and to lobby state legislators to enact needed reforms. It is real

systemic change founded on Jewish values that we are after. Social Justice is important to my family, and is a big part of Anshe Emeth's mission. Thank you, Rabbi Bazeley, for this, for the warmth you bring as our Associate Rabbi, for the positive impact you have had on our religious school, and for your friendship.

And of course, there is the impact of this temple on Avery. She walks around our home almost continuously these days singing the various prayers from her upcoming Bat Mitzvah service this October. I feel Anshe Emeth in my home when I hear her beautiful voice and I can't help but smile. And for her Mitzvah project she is volunteering at the GAN 1 hour a week. This happens to be Avery's passion. She loves taking care of children and Inna Shepard was more than willing to have her join her staff. Thank you, Inna.

So, these are some very personal reasons why I agreed to become president. But there is a third question that Terri did not ask me, but I have asked myself repeatedly. What makes me think I have what it takes to actually pull this off? In case you haven't heard, there will be a few things going on during my presidency, as everyone keeps reminding me!

First, there are two words that give me comfort. Heather Kibel. Our executive director has that perfect mix of being completely approachable, yet tough enough to ensure we come out on the right side of any issue. I have no doubt that she will help me to focus on the right thing at the right time.

And of course, I have the benefit of working with six other Officers and eighteen Board members who all take time from their busy lives to help ensure that Anshe Emeth continues to thrive. I am not alone in this effort, and I know that I can count on them whenever needed. I can't thank them enough.

And how could I forget to thank David Levine and Ina Horn, our First and Second VPs. I love working with both of them. I mean, everyone likes working with Ina. She's smart, thoughtful, and very honest. David has exactly the same traits. Of course you have to get past the inappropriate jokes before you realize this.

Something else that gives me confidence; following our immediate past-president, and my very good friend, Regie Roth. I have to thank Regie for doing such a good job as president as she is the reason we are in such a strong position as I begin my presidency. I only hope that I can do as good a job for David.

To the congregation, you have given me an advantage that few past-presidents can claim. What other past President has walked into their 2-year term after just having over 175 congregants explain what they love about their Temple, what their vision is 5 years into the future, and what leadership should be considering so that membership ranks continue to grow while also meeting the diverse needs of existing congregants. This is exactly what was just accomplished over the past few months through our ten "Envisioning Conversations" with the congregation, a crucial component of our rabbinic transition. Thank you for taking the time to be part of this very important process.

So not only do I have this amazing executive director, a Board that is there to make sure things get done, an immediate past-president (and other past-presidents by the way) reaching out to offer advice or just to listen, and a congregation that has shown a genuine interest in making Anshe Emeth better, I also have a multitude of volunteers – if not for all of you, we just could not afford to do what we do. Whether it's helping the office staff, serving on our various committees, or ensuring the success of a program event, the strength of Anshe Emeth is found within the dedication of our congregation. This includes our teens in AETY as well. I am so proud to see Zoe and the other officers of the AETY board installed this evening. Mazel tov to all of you.

Finally, the biggest reason I know that I can do this – my family. Gail, Roy, Jeff, and Mom, thank you for always supporting me and for travelling to be here to share this evening with me. I love all of you.

And of course, Terri, Zoe, and Avery. Most of you know that I am in a household surrounded by women. Four years ago, Mike Greenberg used one of my favorite quotes when describing the positive impact his wife, Helene had on his life; "the man may be the head of the family, but the woman is the neck, and the neck can turn the head any way it wants!" Well, I have three necks! But I wouldn't have it

any other way. Because of them, I'm a better person. Somehow, I have the love of a beautiful, incredibly intelligent woman and two daughters that I could not be more proud of. In fact, I know that Terri would agree with me when I say that regardless of our past accomplishments, or any level of success that we may attain in the future, nothing will surpass what we have achieved in raising our two beautiful, smart, funny, and caring daughters. The three of you mean everything to me and are without a doubt my biggest source of strength.

So, that's it. That's my story. That's why I'm standing here. And that's why I think I can do this. Through recounting all of this to you, I now know what my religion means to me. It is about being part of something larger than myself, feeling connected to family and community, knowing that I can count on you and that you can count on me to ensure the continuation of Jewish traditions and values.

Yes, there are changes on the horizon for Anshe Emeth and our temple will continue to evolve, but the core of what we are will remain. I look forward to working side by side with all of you to ensure that our temple and community remain as special as ever.

Again I thank all of you for giving me this honor. My promise to you is that I will try to be worthy of this responsibility in every action that I take. And finally, one more promise to my wife and daughters. I promise that you will see me on a regular basis. The fact that you have expressed concern that this won't happen gives me such joy. Especially since one of you has been putting up with me for over 20 years, and the other two… are teenagers! I love the three of you so much.

Thank you all and Shabbat Shalom.