

## High Holiday Address

**Marc Rothstein**

**10/8/11**

Anshe Emeth is an extraordinary place

I hear words to this effect anytime I say that I belong to Anshe Emeth. From Oconomowac WI, to Kibbutz Tzuba, from Washington DC to the streets of New Brunswick, we are known as a temple of extraordinary people doing extraordinary things. I am so proud to be the President of Anshe Emeth. We should all be beaming with pride about who we are. Just a look through our Program Book tells you a lot about us, and what we stand for. AEMT truly is a Beit Tefillah, Beit Hamidrash and Beit Knesset. A house of prayer, a house of study and a house of gathering. From Shabbat Dinners to Sukkot Lunches. From Religious School events, to youth activities, from mitzvah projects to religious services and musical celebrations, our temple is a community of learners, teachers and givers of all ages.

We are the envy of other synagogues. I am constantly asked how we do what we do. In fact, I should start asking for a Consulting Fee. But the truth is we have something that other places don't--- and that's our committed clergy and staff who continue to bring us to places that we never thought we could go— and of course all of you.

Our commitment and love for this wonderful place won't allow us to accept anything else but excellence.

While other religious institutions struggle with complacency and disinterest, more and more of us have been willing to step up and do more. Despite demographic and economic pressures, we continue to thrive. While we have needed to reduce our expenses, we have done so in a smart, thoughtful, and methodical way. I am so grateful to all of our volunteers and our dedicated clergy and staff who continue to give more and more of their time to enable us to do this while keeping our program book filled and our community engaged. I am grateful to all of you who understand why it is so important to support an institution that makes such a dramatic impact on so many lives.

We have understood the struggles of many of our congregants during this difficult economy and have managed to keep most of our fees to minimal or no increases while never turning anybody away simply due to the inability to pay full dues. We've been able to do this by creatively looking for new revenue sources.

The Young @ Heart Concert is a perfect example of this. This concert is our largest fundraiser and enables us to raise revenue without raising dues and fees. I hope that all of you will join me on October 16<sup>th</sup> for what I know will be an unforgettable experience. We hope that this will be a new model that we will continue to use.

Because of you, the leadership of this temple continues to find new and exciting ways to engage you. We are confident that we can set more lofty goals, engage in more ambitious programming and provide even more to our community. We must and will continue to raise the bar.

I believe that our ability to raise the bar and offer more and more is rooted in a decision made by our leadership just about a decade ago. That was when our leadership heard the Shofar blast and was called to action. They recognized that Anshe Emeth was ready to be reinvigorated and reenergized and that we needed the space to do just that. Those leaders were not satisfied with what we were but had a vision of what we could become. They embarked on the Legacy Campaign.

They had the lofty goal of raising \$10M to remodel our existing space, add new exciting spaces for us to have room to grow, and put us on sound financial ground by growing our endowment. I want to thank all you who committed to the legacy campaign. By all accounts, this campaign was a rousing success.

Once testamentary gifts are paid, our endowment will be in a better position to meet our needs in the future.

This beautiful building is one to be proud of. This sanctuary is a breathtaking and inspirational place to pray and share in life-cycle events. It is a testament to our love of God and the importance of prayer in our lives. We are reminded of this when we sing Mah Tovu during Rosh Hashanah Services

*Ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha Yisra'el..*

*How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!*

*As for me, O God abounding in grace,  
I enter your house to worship with awe in Your sacred place.*

*I love your house, Eternal One, the dwelling-place of Your glory;*

I hope you feel the awe as you enter ---what a sacred dwelling place we have for ourselves and for our future generations

Most importantly Anshe Emeth is more than a building, it is a community. The new space has enabled us to grow. It has allowed us to engage in Jewish life in new and exciting ways. Incredibly the additional space is filled almost every day. On any given day every room is filled with activity. In fact, on a recent Saturday, somebody came up to me and told me how he had difficulty finding a parking spot. My response: "that's great to hear".

I don't think that anybody can deny that we are reaping the rewards of the Legacy campaign. As Anshe Emeth—people of truth, I need to share with you--the truth; once we were completed with this campaign and the last of the commitments were paid, we found ourselves with remaining debt.

While the debt was a little higher than previously anticipated, it was not a surprise. During the course of the campaign, and understanding the financial needs to complete the project, the congregation authorized a long- term loan. We understood that at some point this loan would either need to be paid off or be converted to a long term mortgage.

Through refinancing and restructuring of our loan, we reduced our costs and gave ourselves some time to decide on our next steps.

We knew, though, that we really only had one option. Sure, we could go down the path that other synagogues have gone down: the "Stick your Heads in the Sand and do a lot of praying" strategy. But, when that strategy failed, and the bill came due, these institutions were forced to cut staff, which led to the slashing of programming. They had no choice but to raise dues and fees. They were so focused on their own plight that they could no longer help those in need.

The results were obvious—with reduced programming and increased fees, membership dropped and new members stopped joining as the reasons to belong became less compelling.

These synagogues could no longer meet the needs of their congregants. I hope you can all see that this strategy is not worth the risk.

AEMT leadership knew that this was not an option. We knew that we needed to pay off this loan. So just about two years ago, with loan maturity date still 4 years away, your leadership recognized, like those before us, that our responsibility extended beyond the years that we serve in our leadership roles and that we needed to not only manage the present, but look to the future. We needed to raise funds to ensure the elimination of this debt. We understood that it was not the best economic conditions to embark on this type of endeavor. But we also understood that we had no choice. We needed to be proactive and not wait until it was too late. We understood that without the funds coming in, our operating fund would need to absorb this additional burden. A burden that would strangle us. A burden that would require us to make difficult, short-sighted decisions that would ultimately prevent Anshe Emeth from being Anshe Emeth.

We needed to fulfill the Promise that the Legacy of our previous campaign would be one of growth, beautification and strength, not one of debt

We kicked off the quiet phase of what we are calling the “Promise Campaign”. The Board enthusiastically endorsed this campaign and then “walked the walk” by being amongst the first to make financial commitments. Thanks to the tireless dedication of the Promise Campaign Committee chaired by Marvin Zektzer and Gerry Horn, we held parlor meetings, made phone calls, and met one on one with many of our temple families. Most found our case to be compelling, and thanks to the generosity of some of you; we were able to meet close to 50% of our goal. We are so thankful to those who have already stepped up by making a financial commitment. This commitment has enabled us to continue to pay down the debt without having to draw a single dollar from our operating fund.

We’ve certainly come a long way, and made a significant dent in our debt, but we have more work to do to truly meet our goal. So like the Shofar blast 10 years ago, there is now another call to action.

Today I ask us to help complete the Promise we made and participate in committing to raise an additional \$1.5M to pay-off the remaining debt.

Ok—now take a deep breath--

I know what some of you are thinking—I can’t believe he’s discussing this issue on this day, and believe me I struggled with this decision. I was nervous about sharing this with you today. So it should give you a sense of the importance. However we would not be fiscally responsible if I did not share with you the financial reality of the mortgage, and why we must deal with this now. So on this day that we ask for forgiveness, I ask you to forgive me today but help me tomorrow.

I also know that this information has caught many of you by surprise, and I understand that you have lots of questions. Over the next weeks, there will be more extensive communication about this initiative.

We pledge to you full transparency, there is nothing to hide.

I ask that you take the call from our committee and listen to what we have to say. We hope to answer all of your questions. While we can’t guarantee that all of you will accept the answers, we hope you understand that there really is only one solution. We ask that you participate generously in this solution.

And in the end, we can’t dwell on the past; we must all be part of helping to secure the future.

On this day of reflection though, I do ask that we look to the past one more time. Close your eyes and reflect on what Anshe Emeth has meant to you. Reflect on the warm embraces during your times of celebration, and the shoulders to cry on during your times of pain. Reflect on life-long friendships and life changing opportunities for you and your children.

Reflect on the beautiful music, inspiring services and the celebrations of Jewish life. The greatest gift we can give a future Anshe Emeth is that they see these same reflections.

While I see this next goal as a challenge, one that we must meet, I know that we will be successful in this.

In our 150 year plus history we have tackled every barrier thrown in front of us with remarkable resilience. We have always proudly answered the call when it comes to supporting our wonderful home. We have a lot more history to be written, and when it is, I have no doubt that our future generations will speak in love and reverence about us, much as we speak about our past generations.

This campaign is much more than making a financial commitment, it truly is about making a promise. So together let's make a promise:

A promise that our future leaders will have the financial resources to be able to continue to dream

A promise that we will be able to retain and hire dynamic and visionary staff and clergy to help us fulfill our dreams

A promise that we will continue to be able to provide our youth with opportunities to develop and grow their Jewish identity and to make the world a better place

A promise that we will continue to be a shining star to the Middlesex Jewish Community and the community at large

A promise to do anything and everything to help ensure that Anshe Emeth remains a meaningful and sacred community; one that we can all be proud of.

And a promise that in the years to come people will stand in awe of our beautiful building, bustling with activity, and that we will still hear the words:

"Anshe Emeth is an extraordinary place"