

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5778

On Shabbat, the EBJC sewage system ceased working. In the days leading up to this Rosh Hashanah, water leaked into the Social Action room and damaged a number of things, and the building was suffused with a foul odor, which has now, thankfully, dissipated. As a result I have a whole new way of looking at the task in which we are engaged over these High Holidays: This is the time for us to recognize just how fragile a synagogue is, how important it is to keep in it in good working order, and how cautious we must be about the dreck we flush through the system, metaphorically speaking. Now that so many of the problems that had been stopping up the system are gone, I hope that we will look ahead to a year of clearing air, of a well functioning system, of friends coming together in a spirit of shared concern for each other and for the institution that we all call home. I want to thank the volunteers who came in to clear out damaged items and clean up, even prior to the professional team who came in. Your devotion to the synagogue, to do anything that is needed, is exactly the type of that I have come to expect in my short time here.

My family and I have now been in the community for about seven weeks. Our three children came with us, as well as our dog, on the two day drive from Chicago, stopping overnight for a glorious stay in Punxsutawney PA. When we arrived, the parsonage house had been improved tremendously by a number of volunteers, many of whom welcomed us personally, and whom we thank with all our hearts. The work continues, with improvements and repairs a constant feature of our days. Now one kid is in New Hampshire, one is back in Chicago, and one has started at a new school; I have struggled to learn dozens of names and faces, begun teaching in our Keshet school, learned all sorts of synagogue rules, policies and

customs, and have attended any number of Meet and Greets, services, committee meetings and sick visits. So the answer to the question that all of you have been asking over the last seven weeks, 'How has your transition been?' is: Wonderful. You never really know how things are going to work out when a you move into a new community. Like a quick courtship and wedding, the short time between August 1st and the holidays have been a whirlwind of an experience. Having said that, I am more convinced every day of how lucky I was to be invited here to be rabbi, and how right Lisa and I were to accept that invitation. From social gatherings to services, in my interactions with religious school classes and the preschool, as well as at life cycle events and in casual conversations in the hall, you have all welcomed us with warmth and have encouraged me in what I have been doing. I look forward to a year of learning, of enjoyment and of meaning as our relationship with one another deepens. So far the shiddukh between me and the community seems like a good one, and I once again thank the Board of Directors and the members of the Rabbinic Search Committee for giving me the opportunity to serve here.

I heard a great deal about you all just before and just after arriving in East Brunswick. In the synagogue questionnaire I read as a candidate for the position, and in my conversations with the search committee, it became apparent that there were a few issues that had been a source of disagreement, that there was a set of challenging circumstances that awaited me here. As we begin this year together, I look forward to meeting those challenges head on, to hearing your voices in loving, concerned discussion, and to helping to guide this community to healing. There is no point of view I do not value, no set of practices that do not cherish, at least at the outset. Over the course of this year we will have a number of opportunities to talk together about who we have been and who we want to be, but that conversation will not begin with details about

practices, but rather with an exploration of values. Once we have had a good amount of time together to talk about what we believe, we can then move to discussion about what ritual practices we want to symbolize those values. Only by beginning with an understanding of who we are can we will travel the road to who we wish to become.

These ten days are known as *asoret yamei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. Rosh Hashanah leads to Yom Kippur, as we link the theme of God's creation of this world to our conception of our place in it. Judaism assumes that each of us is an active player in the ongoing miracle of creation, in partnership with God. Our tradition places us at the nexus of creation; we are both God's creations and the main protagonists in the drama of existence. Unlike the plants, animals, mountains and rivers that make up the rest of God's creation, we are moral agents. We are choosing beings, and our decisions matter. What we choose to eat, or not eat, how we spend our time, on Shabbat and holidays certainly, but truly every day, how we treat other people, how we spend our money and a thousand other decisions all refract our beliefs and our character in their every detail. If you don't think that driving a car that gets twenty miles to the gallon is a moral choice, one that has a direct and measurable impact on the world we live in, I would really like to speak to you about it from a Jewish point of view. Every aspect of our lives is deeply enmeshed in the larger story of humanity; how we choose to live determines how that story is told. These ten days are meant to remind us of our responsibility to live up to our part in a covenant with God. Where we have done so, we should rejoice; where we have not, we must apologize, to one another and to God, and begin again.

We atone for sins known and unknown, acknowledged and hidden, personal and communal. We turn to one another in openness and honesty, hoping that a sincere apology will

be met with true forgiveness. I have delayed us from our obligations this night long enough. It is time for us to begin our services, our holidays and our year as we open the mahzorim and begin our services for this first day of Rosh Hashana. As we do I wish everyone shanah tovah tikateivu, may you be inscribed for a good year.