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The Spirit of Emanu-El

Chaim Nachman Bialik, the brilliant Hebrew poet, wrote:

If you wish to know the fortress
to which your fathers bore their treasure,
their scrolls of Torah, their Holy of Holies...
if you would find the refuge
which kept your people's mighty spirit safe...
turn to the ancient house of prayer....
Your heart will tell you:
your feet touch the threshold of our house of life,
your eyes behold the storehouse of our soul.¹

Bialik's verse, included in our new prayer book, captures the synagogue's timeless hold on us. Here we celebrate life's most cherished milestones. Here we turn for comfort in loss, for faith in tomorrow. Here we affirm the values of kindness and fairness, honesty and integrity as the most important values of all. Throughout the ages, whether in the shtetls of Eastern Europe or the big cities of America, the synagogue has been present for our people, a symbol of hope and stability even in our darkest hours.

As each of us crossed the threshold of our synagogue this Rosh Hashanah Day with joys and sorrows, dreams and fears only we can know – but also with shared concern for the welfare of the Jewish people and, as I discussed last night, for this beloved country – as we entered, none of us could help notice how our threshold is different this year than last. The boulders on the sidewalk, the scanners, the security guards – who ever would have imagined that here on Fifth Avenue these would be necessary to keep us safe? We have become a fortress, and not the sort Bialik meant. Now American Jews grasp what European Jews have understood for years: the synagogue is an institution under siege.

It is said that our enemies have always known where to paint their swastikas and burn their crosses,² for the synagogue is “our house of life...the storehouse of our soul,” the fortress guarding our most treasured memories and ideals. This morning, I want to talk with you about ours.

One hundred seventy-five years ago this April, thirty-three German immigrants, refugees of the despotism surging in Western Europe, founded Temple Emanu-El in a small rented facility downtown on the corner of Clinton and Grand streets. It was the city's first Reform synagogue. Within twenty-five years though, Temple Emanu-El had become the model for Reform congregations around the country.³ And for much of our history, this temple exemplified

¹ Translation by Rabbi Chaim Stern.

² Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, “Ninetieth Anniversary Sermon,” Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, November 12, 2018.

³ Rabbi Ronald B. Sobel, *A History of New York's Temple Emanu-El*, p.83.

American Jewry's responsibility to world Jewry and to the world at large by lifting a voice of moral leadership, by embodying for future generations just what a synagogue can be, and by proclaiming our ethics and creative vision in unique liturgical beauty. The time has come for us to do so again....

Lifting our Voice: Moral Leadership in an Age of Moral Bewilderment

To sound a voice of moral leadership in an age of moral bewilderment – one informed by our own experience as immigrants and as victims of hate.

Some of our members can trace their roots to America's earliest settlers who came in search religious freedom. Many of us descend from our congregation's founding generation, and more of us from Russian and Eastern European immigrants fleeing the pogroms. Among us, certainly, are children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, and even those who lived through Kristallnacht. Some here escaped persecution in Iran. Others left the Soviet Union where they lived as "Jews of silence."

All of us, though, were blessed to find a home in America, and have depended on America to keep us safe, which it has. But this past year, we were afraid. Jewish, Christian and Muslim houses of worship became scenes of bloodshed. The synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway shook us to the core. Anti-Semitism in America isn't new; many of us grew up with it. But never, here, has it been inflamed by such ethno-nationalist hatemongering and armed by so many guns.

Terrorized by the violent anti-Semitism of the militant right, we are bullied by the insidious anti-Semitism of the intersectional left, which even the United Nations now admits employs spurious opposition to Israel as a flimsy cover for antipathy to Jews. Some vocal congressional Democrats have trafficked in it. *The New York Times* drew us a picture of it with its vile cartoon of a blind, Jewishly clad Donald Trump led around by Benjamin Netanyahu as his guide dog with a Jewish star dangling from his collar.

Elected officials at all levels of government, including the President, are guilty of such inflammatory rhetoric as can only sound like music in the ears of anti-Semites on both extremes.

How should we respond?

In a recent *Times* column, Bari Weiss, who will join us on the first anniversary on the Tree of Life shooting, advised: "The long arc of Jewish history makes...clear that the only way to fight [anti-Semitism] is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are. By entering the fray for our values."⁴ In other words by lifting our voice against hate in all its forms; by offering no quarter to bigots, bigoted speech or bigoted ideologies, including the anti-immigrant nativism with which we Jews are all-too-familiar now shaping an immigration policy increasingly reminiscent of the 1920s. How can we view the scenes of children caged at our southern border and not be outraged? Or hear the stories of families separated and not remember the horrors of the Shoah? Or recall the photograph of father and daughter drowned in the Rio Grande and not weep?

After Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein's finger was shot off at the Chabad of Poway, he wrote: "I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me...that my ancestors gave their lives so that I [could] live...in America...a country founded on the ideals that all people are

⁴ Bari Weiss, "To Fight Anti-Semitism, Be a Proud Jew," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2019.

created in God's image and that all...deserve freedom and liberty. We fought a war to make that promise real," he concluded. "And I believe we can make it real again."

That is how we respond to anti-Semitism. By making that promise real again. By upholding in America the values of democratic pluralism our great grandparents, our grandparents, our parents, and even some of us came here yearning to breathe free. But at two percent of the population we can't do it alone. We've got to stand shoulder to shoulder with other faith communities who also believe that all people are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image.

So I have a plan for that. I propose Temple Emanu-El establish a Center for Interfaith Engagement and Social Responsibility convening individuals from across the religious and political spectra, and from specific vocational fields including law, medicine, media, business, education and government to examine from a faith perspective such issues as domestic and global anti-Semitism, racism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the nuclear threat posed by Iran and North Korea; but also immigrant justice, gun violence, climate change, women's reproductive rights, attacks on the press, the breakdown of trust in our nation's institutions, and the wide array of issues tearing our country apart. Where consensus is reached, the Center will provide an amplified voice of moral leadership and a vehicle for coordinated public action. Where it is not, the Center will, by example, offer a model of civil, nuanced debate.

History has proven that courageous religious leaders and institutions can shape public discourse. Many of us, hearing the enmity and the divisiveness all around us – witnessing the assault on honesty, civility and decency and the contemptuous, autocratic finger in the eye of democratic norms – have begun to question the political viability of principles we once deemed fundamental to our identity as Jews and as Americans. The synagogue has been and will ever be a bulwark against such cynicism and our fortress of hope. Here we will lift up a voice of moral leadership proclaiming that kindness and justice must always remain the warp and weft of our social fabric. Our own wellbeing, and America's future as an example of compassion, democracy and freedom to the world depend on it.

Today, we are citizens of a nation gravely concerned for that nation's wellbeing at a difficult and upsetting moment in its history. As I said last night, in the matter of impeachment, we do not yet know the full truth. We do know that hunger for control can lead those who seek it to level politically motivated allegations against those who have it. But we also know, because we have seen it before, that the thirst for power and the desire to maintain it can drive leaders to unconscionable acts. And that to defend those acts leaders even claim exemption from moral and legal canons. These Holy Days proclaim to us a set of universal ethics by which all are bound. May our country hear them. May we hear them. What Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a generation ago admonishes us today: as Jews "we...cannot remain aloof or indifferent."

Serving our People: Synagogue Outreach for a New Jewish Moment

Now the synagogue is under assault in another sense too. Those who would do us harm understand the importance of the synagogue as the heart of Jewish life – sometimes even better than we do.⁵

While prior generations cherished the local shul as a touchstone of Jewish identity and continuity, increasing numbers – of younger Jews especially⁶ – consider the synagogue

⁵ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, "Ninetieth Anniversary Sermon," Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, November 12, 2018.

superfluous. They tend toward greater individualism in their choices, seek to weave a more personalized tapestry of Jewish experiences, and have at their disposal countless non-synagogue-based options for their own Jewish learning and, when the time comes, the Jewish education of their children. Though our membership continues to grow, and tens of thousands participate in our programs, still fewer than thirty percent of our congregants are under fifty or have children under eighteen.

We are not the first generation to confront this challenge. At the temple's seventy-fifth anniversary Rabbi Samuel Schulman⁷ lamented the alienation of younger Jews from the faith and traditions of the past. Yet he remained ever hopeful that Emanu-El could figure out how to rekindle the fire of Jewish commitment within them and show other congregations how to as well. "In this work of revival," he insisted, "Emanu-El should take the chief share. It has the means, it has the power, it has the influence."⁸

So how did our congregation respond then? Simply and brilliantly. Members of the Women's Auxiliary went knocking on doors to create a list of all Jewish children in the neighborhood, enrolled them for free, and the religious school grew by almost one hundred students.⁹

It is time for us to go knocking on doors. It is time for us to meet people where they are – whatever their interests, whatever their needs, wherever they live.

There are thousands of Jewish twenty and thirty-year-olds living and working in New York seeking social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual connection, as well as career guidance and support. And as David Brooks notes, "young people...are [especially hungry] to find ideals that...give meaning to their activities," and to link themselves to organizations that demonstrate a larger purpose. If we don't assume responsibility for shepherding them along their Jewish journeys, who will?

For young families, let's add to our religious school, nursery school, early childhood and parenting programs new opportunities for non-members – in music, art and drama for their littlest children; in journalism, photography and filmmaking for their older ones. All can spark deeper exploration and love of Judaism. And let's offer drop-in classes and afterschool and summer sessions to help working parents meet the challenges of city living; and learning tracks for children with special needs, a population shamefully underserved by mainstream Reform congregations.

And let's go to them where they live. The population of Jewish singles, couples and families downtown has exploded. Let's open a satellite campus. We've done it before, long ago on the Lower East Side;¹⁰ and later, to mark Emanu-El's seventy-fifth anniversary, in the Bronx.¹¹ In honor of our one hundred-seventy fifth, let's do it again.

Let's throw open our doors to anyone of any background seeking the spiritual sustenance Judaism and the Jewish community provide. If we are searching for a response to anti-Semitism in America today, there can be none more potent than securing the future of American Jewish life. In an era when even Jews can choose Judaism or reject it, the Jewish community will be

⁶ Steven Windmueller, "The Future of Liberal Judaism: Reflections and Recommendations," E Jewish Philanthropy, December 6, 2017.

⁷ Then of Temple Beth-El but who would become the rabbi of Emanu-El when the congregations merged.

⁸ Rabbi Sobel, pp.307-308.

⁹ Rabbi Sobel, p.287.

¹⁰ Rabbi Sobel, pp.216-221.

¹¹ Rabbi Sobel, p.298.

only as vibrant as it is embracing. Opportunity awaits us. Together let's seize it and ensure the continued vitality of our congregation.

Renewing our Home: A New Liturgical Identity

Now where do we affirm our ethical commitments? Where find personal and communal inspiration to embrace the future with hope? Right here, in worship.

On Yom Kippur morning we will pray:

Our God, the Guide of humanity, let Your spirit rule this nation and its citizens, that their deeds may be prompted by a love of justice and right....Teach us to work for the welfare of all...and to enlarge our nation's virtues....You have endowed us with noble powers; help us to use them wisely, and with compassion....You have given us freedom to choose between good and evil, life and death. May we choose life and good, that our children may inherit from us the blessings of dignity and freedom, prosperity and peace.¹²

In your hands is a pilot draft of a new High Holy Day prayer book with gender sensitive poetry and prose composed in contemporary idiom and with Hebrew transliterated for those who cannot read it. The art comes from our own sacred spaces. It is a work in progress. As we use it my colleagues and I are noting necessary edits. And we will want to know your recommendations too, so that we can publish a hardbound (but lighter) edition to celebrate our one hundred seventy-fifth anniversary. Then we will reformat our Shabbat prayer book in the same style and add to it a daily and festival prayer book to create a three-volume set of our own.

As I acknowledged at our annual meeting last spring, change can be challenging for both those receiving it and those implementing it. Wrapped in the words of the *Union Prayer Book* are memories of loved ones and of our own experiences. Familiarity alone brings comfort and closeness. But I do believe it is critical to recognize that, except when we gather the full congregation together on Rosh Hashanah evening and Yom Kippur afternoon, large numbers of seats sit empty in our main services, many of our members opting to attend other services sometimes in other synagogues with more modern liturgies.

Synagogue worship must answer a breadth of spiritual yearnings. Some of us seek out a God who transcends time and space and the moral relativism of our age. There are occasions when we desire only to be alone with this God, and the sheer magnificence of our sanctuary and the power of the organ and choir allow us that. But others connect to God differently, as do many of us at distinct moments in our lives. There are times when we long for God's nearness, a more immanent experience of the Divine; when broken or hurting, we ache to feel God's loving embrace in and through the company of others. Our new prayer book attempts to evoke both aspects of God's presence:

Eternal God, the power of Your spirit pervades all creation. When we open our hearts to You, we are filled with Your strength: the strength to bear our afflictions, the strength to refuse them victory, the strength to

¹² Rabbi Chaim Stern and Rabbi Israel I. Mattuck.

overcome them. And then our will is renewed: to lift up the fallen, to set free the captive, to heal the sick, to bring light to all who dwell in darkness.¹³

I believe that Temple Emanu-El can offer a unique contribution to the synagogue world marrying awe and intimacy, the liturgical majesty we have always treasured with the participatory warmth many younger and unaffiliated Jews crave. And we can elevate our magnificent choral tradition within an arc of worship that includes our own voices. For our sages, to pray was to sing. By making ourselves instruments of prayer we become powerful in bringing our personal and communal hopes and dreams to fulfillment.

The Spirit of Emanu-El

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. Our tradition teaches that during Creation's first six days God fashioned the world as humanity's dwelling place, and that on the seventh day God rested and summoned the Israelites to build a sanctuary as God's dwelling place to infuse their lives with an awareness of God's presence. This has always been Temple Emanu-El's purpose.

Temple Emanu-El held its inaugural service at Fifth Avenue and Sixty-Fifth Street October 4, 1929 – Rosh Hashanah ninety years ago. For those who built it, our magnificent house of worship was itself a prayer, a sacred pledge to make real in this their still new land the timeless ideals of our ancient faith.

When the proposal to move the congregation from its prior beloved sanctuary on Forty-Third Street was first advanced, there was understandable reluctance. Temple president Louis Marshall sympathized. Still he proclaimed: while “we honor...these natural sentiments...there is a sentiment...more important...the perpetuation of our sacred faith...It is for us to carry forward the Ark of the Covenant...to enlarge our horizon, to become builders...as worthy sons and daughters in whom abides the spirit of Emanu-El.”¹⁴

And now again this is our mission: to carry forward the Ark of the Covenant – proudly, bravely, unafraid. To become builders. To lift up a voice of honesty, integrity and moral courage for our people and our country. To enlarge the horizons of synagogue life. And to sing a new song unto God.

Amen.

¹³ Rabbi Robert I. Kahn and Rabbi Chaim Stern.

¹⁴ Rabbi Sobel, p.334.