

Rabbi Urecki, Cantor Weiss, fellow congregants, good morning.

Rabbi and Cantor, standing up here with you two reminds me of a story: a rabbi, a cantor and a synagogue president, not necessarily the three of us, are on a trip to Africa where they are unfortunately captured by cannibals. After informing them that they are about to be killed and eaten, the chief offers them each one last wish. The cantor says, "I want to sing Kol Nidre one last time. But this time no one should come in late; no one should talk while I am singing. It should take about 45 minutes." The rabbi says, "I want to give one last sermon with no babies crying, no one talking or sleeping, no one coughing, no one coming in or going out. It should take about an hour." The synagogue president says to the chief, "just kill me first."

Seriously, though, it is my pleasure to welcome you back to Charleston, cantor. It is always a pleasure having you with us each year on the High Holidays. This is your fiftieth year, no? Actually, I think your first year here was 1994, which makes this the 17th time we have been able to share this experience with you. And Rabbi, if my math is correct, you just celebrated your 24th anniversary as our Rabbi making this your 25th year leading High Holiday services at B'nai Jacob. That is quite a milestone, and I wanted to recognize it today. Congratulations. As you know, Rabbi Cooper was the rabbi here for 49 years, from 1932-1981, and now you are halfway to reaching that number. You worried me last week when you said you didn't think you could make it for 25 more years because I know that we are all counting on you to stay with us long enough to break Rabbi Cooper's record. Fifty years is a nice round number, and your 50th anniversary as our rabbi will be in August, 2036, so let's not have any more talk of you leaving before then. Besides, do they even have a synagogue in Hilton Head? This has been a great year for you. You finally seem to be getting the hang of this job. You made several trips to Washington and were asked to meet, along with other rabbis from around the country, at the White House with the president's chief of staff, among others. You led a successful interfaith event with some teenagers from our congregation and some teenagers from the Islamic center; and I even understand that you have recently been elected to serve on the board of trustees of the University of Charleston. You are well known throughout Charleston, and your

successes reflect well on our whole community. Your Bar and Bat Mitzvah students are all doing well and you continue to lead a variety of adult education classes throughout the year. I really feel like we are watching a great career unfold in front of us. You're like the Peyton Manning of rabbis, but sometimes I feel like we take you for granted.

Please, I encourage all of you to take advantage of what we have here. Many synagogues around the country would love to have a rabbi like ours, in the prime of his career, leading them. Please try to come to services more often, come to a minyan once in a while.

When I was first asked to take this job, I told the nominating committee (Ted and Steve) that I didn't know if I was the right person. I didn't really consider myself to be a 'vision' kind of guy. I saw myself more as the kind of person who would simply make sure we could keep the lights on and the bills paid. So I told them that if that was okay with them, then I would be happy to serve. But as I recently thought back about this last year in particular, and as I looked forward to discussing with you this morning the future of B'nai Jacob, I realized that I wish that I had spent more time thinking about what the first President Bush called, 'that vision thing,' because I have come to realize that we are a congregation in transition. I tried to find a better way to say that, but I couldn't. Last year, I spoke about our declining membership. I thought that we were becoming a congregation that was fading away, but now realize that that is too harsh a description. I really believe, though, that we are a congregation facing many challenges and changes in our members and their needs. Let me see if I can convince you of that.

Cyndi gave me a book to read last month. It is called *Our Iceberg is Melting*, and it was written by John Kotter, a professor at the Harvard Business School. This professor has studied what he calls "the challenge of change," particularly as it applies to organizations. As you may have guessed from the title, it is a story about a colony of penguins living on an iceberg in Antarctica. One member of the colony, a penguin named Fred, is described as unusually curious and observant. Fred studies the world around him and makes many observations and

measurements, and comes to the conclusion that the iceberg on which the colony of penguins is living is melting. In fact, this colony of penguins has lived on this iceberg for as far back as any of them can remember. Fred takes it upon himself to try to convince the other penguins that the iceberg is melting and they better do something about it before it is too late. Of course, he comes across some stereotypical antagonists during this process, most notably the loudest dissenter among the other penguins, a penguin named No-No. The book follows this colony of penguins as Fred tries to convince them of the need to recognize their situation and accept that they need to find a new place to live in order to survive. Then it follows them as they make a plan and carry it out, ultimately moving not once, but twice, until they find a new iceberg on which to live. And the new iceberg offers advantages that they never would have discovered if they hadn't first listened to Fred and accepted the need to change. At the end, the author explains the eight steps that were used by the penguins and that the author feels that people must use to better achieve what they want and what their organizations need. The first step in this process is to set the stage and create a sense of urgency among the members of the organization. That is my job today. I would like to introduce the need for change to you today, and I will discuss it in more detail with the board at our meeting at the end of the month. Because for change to be effective, it is necessary to recognize how the future will be different from the past. The second step in the change process is to pull together what will become the guiding team; hopefully, this is a group with leadership skills, credibility, communications ability, authority, analytical skills and a sense of urgency. I hope that there are people in this room who might be interested in helping to develop the change vision and strategy for B'nai Jacob. If that sounds like something you might be interested in, please consider serving on the board, or at least making your service, intellect, creativity and problem solving skills available to the rest of us by contacting me or our next president, Cary Levenson, and volunteering. We will be holding our next congregation meeting during the last week of October, at which time we will elect four new board members. The nominating committee consists of Ted Kanner, Steve Rubin, and Steve Meyer, and they are looking for volunteers who want to join the board for the next three years. We already have a board of trustees comprised of people who really care

about the success of the synagogue; and before I continue, I would like to thank them again for serving these last two years on the board with me.

Anyway, let me get back to why I think we are a congregation in transition, rather than a congregation that is fading away. I sat down to write a review of the last year and was happy to be reminded of the number of great things that go on here all year long. If you are someone who volunteers your time and talents on behalf of the synagogue, but I fail to mention your contribution today, please accept my apology and also my thanks and realize that I meant no slight.

In many ways, last year was a typical year for B'nai Jacob, at least when we compare it with the last five or ten years. We had one boy and five girls celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We lost a number of our members this year, some of whom passed away, some of whom moved away. In fact, we had very well attended ceremonies to honor Phil and Shirley Goldstein and also Bob Nearman before they moved away. The board chose to name our basketball court in honor of Phil Goldstein to recognize his years of dedication to our sports programs. Thinking about the members who passed away this year brought to my mind an example of a challenge, or an opportunity for change, facing the congregation. More than two years ago, the board looked at the issue of what to do if a member of the congregation, or more accurately, if a non-Jewish family member of a member of the congregation passed away. Currently, these family members can't be buried at either of our cemeteries. This issue was predictably emotional and never progressed past the exploration stage at the board level, with the board divided, but leaning slightly toward not changing the current situation. We basically explored the option of dividing the South Charleston Cemetery and creating a new section that would be open to both Jewish and non-Jewish family members thereby allowing families to be buried together. The rabbi put together a proposal he felt comfortable with, and we discussed it in great detail, finally deciding to table the matter because there was not a strong consensus on what to do. During the last year, several things happened that made me want to revisit this issue with you today. First, at least one national Jewish newspaper wrote an article about this very problem, describing how Jewish communities all over the country were having to face it. And we have had at least two instances during the

last two years where the spouse of a member of this congregation couldn't be buried in our cemetery, prompting at least one past board member who was against dividing our cemetery two years ago to tell me that if he had it to do over again he would change his vote. This might be one instance where we have to recognize that our iceberg might be melting and action might be needed. In fact, I am going to say to you today that if the thought of changing the rules for our existing cemeteries is too painful for some, then I think we should consider buying a new piece of property to use to create a new, third, cemetery to better meet the future needs of our congregation.

What else can I tell you about the changing needs of our congregation? Well, we have remained a small but stable group this year. At last count, Nancy's computer lists 203 families or individuals as members or friends of B'nai Jacob. But only about 170 of those families live in Kanawha and Putnam counties and the surrounding areas. The remaining thirty or so families are members or children of members who have moved out of the area, often out of state, but who want to stay in touch with B'nai Jacob. All these people receive the rabbi's weekly emails and many of them continue to support B'nai Jacob financially to some extent. But that still leaves only 170 families locally to support the activities of the synagogue. As rabbi described in his sermon last week, it is easy to see why it has become so hard to maintain the daily minyans. Although I would like to note that we did keep the streak alive this week, reaching consecutive minyan number eight thousand eight hundred four last night. By the way, this also means that we have less than 200 families paying dues each year. Our dues payments continue to fall short of providing enough income for us to meet our expenses. Fortunately, we have our endowment fund available to provide us with money each year to fill in the gaps. Our investment committee, headed by Steve Rubin watches our money carefully. A rising stock market, along with a very generous bequest we received this year from Sam Wilan has enabled our endowment fund to remain healthy this year, but we cannot afford the luxury of complacency. When I was growing up in New Jersey, the president's Yom Kippur speech was usually nothing more than an appeal for funds. My father got his pledge card when he arrived at services, and then he folded down a tab indicating how much he was going to give

that year, and then he passed the card to the aisle for an usher to collect. A couple of years ago, I thought we would be doing the same thing here. But we don't need to do that yet, and dues at B'nai Jacob remain reasonable, unchanged this year, and still voluntary. But please consider how much you gave last year, and, if you can, at least consider increasing it a little bit this year.

What else can I tell you about our 170 families to convince you that we really are a congregation in transition?

The leadership of our shul is made up of a lot of people who have been here a long time. At age 45, I am the second youngest member of our current Board. I have lived here 17 years, but every other member of the board has lived in Charleston longer than I have. At least seven former presidents still serve on the board. We have to acknowledge, though, that the congregation we serve now is changing. Our traditional congregant is aging, while many of our younger families want and need different things from a religious home than we needed in the past. Our Sunday school was packed on opening day last weekend. I bet most of you don't know that we have over 50 kids enrolled in Sunday school now, and when Rabbi and I did a quick count of high school age children in town we easily came up with 20 Jewish high school students in Charleston as well. But here is an example of what he and I have discussed frequently this year: Many of our Sunday school kids never attend services here. Not for Shabbat; not for any holidays. There is a difference between many of these kids and their families and a more, for lack of a better word, traditional family that might attend services more frequently. There is a group of families who want their kids to have a Jewish education, or at least some kind of a religious experience, but for whom the prayer service isn't necessarily a part of that education, at least not yet. As an example, one of our new students is the three year old son of a family that Rabbi and I both know. They have lived in town for a few years, but haven't come to services here yet. The mom isn't Jewish; the dad identifies himself as Jewish, but hasn't practiced his religion for some time. But the couple decided to send their son to our Sunday school this year, mostly, I think, because they like the Rabbi. After class last Sunday, Rabbi asked them if they would be back this Sunday. They told him they couldn't be here this weekend because they were going away for

the weekend to Canaan. Now this couple gets our emails, and knew about the opening of Sunday school, but they are still so new to Judaism that they didn't realize or didn't care that this weekend was Yom Kippur so they made other plans. Now maybe next year, this will be different for this family, but very possibly, it won't be. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with sending your kids to Sunday school but not attending services. After all, who am I to judge? I don't have a perfect attendance award for coming to services. But I told this story because I need for you to recognize the reality. The needs of the modern family are different from the needs of families in the past, and if we are going to continue to remain viable, we are going to have to address the needs of all people who want to partake of some portion of the B'nai Jacob experience, however they choose it to be. Now I think we can all agree that the days of having Hebrew School three or four days a week are long gone from Charleston. But our rabbi has consistently tried to change the type and breadth of things we offer to reflect our changing times. Please, please do yourself a favor and spend some more time at the synagogue this year. We need you, but you may even find that you benefit from it as well.

What else can I tell you about the last year? The rabbi likes to talk about the 'reach of B'nai Jacob' extending much farther than can be measured just by attendance at services. For example, in the last year, we had two Jewish film festivals, and Fred Pollock is always stopping me at work to discuss the latest films he is reviewing as he always seems to be planning the next one. Our synagogue sent its largest delegation ever to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) convention in Washington last spring. Over a dozen of our members attended all or part of the conference, with many planning to attend again this year along with several new people as well. There is a poster about AIPAC in the lobby showing the dates of the next Washington meeting. Please check there or talk with Fred Pollock if you are interested in finding out more information about AIPAC. What else? Last year at this time I told you about the project we were starting to restore our Torah scrolls, which had fallen into disrepair after years of use. At that time, I also announced a fundraising drive that the board wanted to undertake to raise enough money to pay for that project. The results of the

fundraising drive exceeded our expectations. Over sixty families contributed, and we raised over \$21,000. Because of your generosity, we were able to restore not only our Torahs, but also our haftorah scrolls as well. And I am happy to report that the restoration project is now completed. Just last week, we received the last of our haftorah scrolls back in Charleston. So many people gave so generously to allow this project to be completed without using any money from our general fund or our endowment funds that I hate to single anyone out, but I would especially like to thank Al and Ruby Newman Peck and Justin and Sarah Cohen for their very special donations to this project. We are still trying to decide how we will acknowledge the donors and we are still planning to have re-dedication ceremony for the torahs later this year. And speaking of donations to the synagogue let me also tell you about the very generous gift we received this year from the estate of Sam Wilan. You may remember that he donated his house to the synagogue after he died. We were able to sell it shortly after Rosh Hashanah last year. But we also received a substantial additional gift from the settlement of his estate this year as well. Even though Sam doesn't have any family here to thank, I wanted to acknowledge his generosity today. Ok, what else? This year, we had another successful art expo here in the spring. This was organized by Linda Toborowsky, who I just recently found out continues to serve the synagogue, as she is about to complete another very important project. Apparently Rabbi Cooper, in his later years, wrote about his career at B'nai Jacob. He left these unedited memories and recollections behind when he passed away a few years ago. Rabbi told me just this week that Linda has been working on editing them, has completed the project, and that a book will be published this spring in time for Mrs. Cooper's 100th birthday. What else can I tell you? Ken Rubin donated his time and expertise to the synagogue earlier this year when he performed a thorough inspection at the rabbi's house. This was probably the first time something like that has been done since Rabbi and Marilyn moved in. Ken prepared an extremely detailed report for the board showing us exactly what repairs need to be made at the rabbi's house, and we are, slowly but surely, moving forward with these. Thank you, Ken, for performing that service for the shul.

I am happy to tell you that the three main support groups within our synagogue are going strong, with great leadership in place for the coming year.

The ladies' auxiliary continues to remain a vital organization that serves the needs of its members and the needs of the synagogue in general. But we are in need of a mens' club president this year. Stewart Bloom has served in this role for the past four or five years and he asked us over a year ago to find a replacement for him. But we haven't been able to do so, so he has continued to serve; but I think even his commitment will run its course someday. Gary Sheff stepped up last year to take over as president of the Chevra Kaddisha, and while their services, thankfully, aren't needed too frequently, whenever they are needed, there are people ready and able to perform the important duties of the chevra Kaddisha. The day to day operations of the shul are in the very capable hands of Steve Max. As I said last year, he does all the things around here that I would have to do if he weren't here, so once again, I would like to thank him for everything he does for us. If you get a chance today, take a minute to thank him for his service. Nancy and Terry keep the office running smoothly and maintain the building and prepare the synagogue for all of our services and functions throughout the year. I appreciate their long dedication to B'nai Jacob. There is a long list of people that keep this place running on a daily basis. Despite the fact that I will surely leave someone out, I would like to thank once again, Steve Rubin, Ted Kanner, Cary Levenson, Gary Sheff, Trig Salsbery and Elliott, Jean, and Marilyn Urecki for all their work throughout the year. Not a week goes by, heck, not a day goes by that one of those people isn't doing something for the synagogue. And Rabbi and I wanted to take this opportunity to say a special thanks to Steve Meyer, as rabbi told me, "not for one thing, but for everything." Steve is at minyan twice a day, almost every day. He leads the service whenever asked. No job around here is too small, or too large, for him to take on. With the help of his wife, Lynn, they are constantly working to ensure the success of our synagogue. Steve's term on the board expires next year, and if I remember correctly, he is not eligible to run again. There is a seldom used category of board membership called lifetime membership. To my knowledge we haven't offered this to anyone during my ten years on the board, but I would like to suggest today that we offer Steve a lifetime

appointment to the synagogue's board next year when his current term expires. I certainly hope he will accept it. In addition, I also need to thank my family: my wife, Cyndi, and our children, Aaron and Alexandra. Their support and encouragement have been invaluable to me.

Finally, let me talk for a minute about our sixty-year old building. While we are so much more than our building, we do need to maintain this building for many more years. But that is getting harder and harder to do. This aging building took up a lot of the board's time and attention this year, in both a good way and a bad way. On the good side, I don't know if you have noticed yet or not, but we completed a renovation project in the front lobby earlier this summer. The ceiling in the lobby was in terrible shape, and I am pretty sure that the light fixtures were originals from the forties or fifties. But due to the generosity of the Goldfarb and Weisberg families, we now have a new ceiling in the main lobby, and new light fixtures not only in the main lobby, but also upstairs in the classroom area as well as new lighting going down the stairs to the basement. Believe it or not, we never had lights on the stairs until this summer. And we have new lights to better highlight the trees of life on the walls and the Golden Book pedestal as well. We also have fresh paint on the walls and ceiling and new heaters in Rabbi's and Nancy's offices, also courtesy of the Goldfarbs and Weisbergs. I would like to thank both of those families on behalf of the congregation. But now for the bad. If you walk out the front doors or drive by on Virginia Street, you will notice that sometime around the beginning of April we covered the middle section of the front steps with several large decorative planters. We did this because the steps out front have become uneven, a situation we have been monitoring for the last several months. In addition, depending on whom you ask, the front steps may or may not be sinking and/or separating from the building. We have been advised by several different engineers to do nothing and observe them longer and we have been advised by other engineers to tear them out and see why the ground beneath them seems to be settling. Needless to say, the board will continue to focus on this issue in the next year.

In our library, I found this book. It is called *100 years of Charleston Jewry: an anthology*. It was published in 1972 and edited by Simon Meyer. This congregation obviously features prominently in this book. In the 38 years since that book was published, B'nai Jacob has continued to survive and thrive. We even celebrated *our* 100th anniversary in 1994. I would like to read something from the introduction to that book: “.....” We are those children. And when it comes time to write the story of the second 100 years of the Charleston Jewish experience, how will we be portrayed? We have a choice. We can either be the next generation of Charleston Jews, or we can be the last generation of Charleston Jews. The choice is up to all of us.

Thank you for the opportunity you have given me to serve as president of this congregation.

On behalf of Cyndi and myself, as well as Alexandra and Aaron, I wish you a very happy, healthy, safe and prosperous new year. May you all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life today.