

State of the Synagogue
Marc J. Slotnick, President
Yom Kippur 2006

For some reason I had great difficulty finding inspiration for this State of Synagogue speech. Being distracted by a Bat Mitzvah, I thought maybe I could just keep it real short and say the synagogue is doing well, we need money, thank you everybody, please come to minyan. Of course I thought better than that, as you really have nothing else to do today other than flip through the prayerbook to see how many pages are left or go home and stare at the refrigerator hoping you can eat by osmosis without violating this solemn day.

My next thought came in Philadelphia, a couple of weeks ago. I stepped into a Barnes and Nobles, and as is typical in a city with a large Jewish population the first display was Jewish books on the High Holidays. So I thought, maybe I would pick up a couple for some inspiration.

The first book I started to read was Stars of David. A Jewish producer for 60 minutes interviewed a variety of stars and well known individuals on their Judaism. I made it through about 5 of the essays, and really just became disgusted. The first four individuals I read, appeared to be famous despite their Jewishness. For the most part Judaism was not part of their daily lives, nor any part of their lives for that matter. It appeared they even made excuses for not being part of their Judaism. I will admit that the 5th essay I read was about an executive at a large corporation and he took his Jewishness very seriously.

At that point I realized what we were as a congregation. We often hear terms such as religious, practicing, conservative, reform, orthodox, reconstructionist or secular. I believe I would describe our synagogue as participating, those Jews that I read about did not participate in Judaism. Although they were Jewish and it makes us feel proud that they are Jewish and they made it, they in themselves were not furthering Judaism. It is us and this type of congregation that furthers Judaism, we participate in our religion, and I don't mean that we all come to services.

What I really mean is that we come to the synagogue for various reasons, whether it is minyan, Saturday morning services, Friday night services, the myriad of Rabbi's classes, bring our kids to Sunday school, Hebrew school, or we come to men's club, or ladies auxiliary meetings, attend synagogue board meetings, join in a fundraiser, help in the kitchen for a Bar or Bat mitzvah, Barbecue for a Sunday School picnic, and the list goes on.

We feel both the need and the enjoyment of participating in Bnai Jacob Synagogue. Without all of us participating there is no purpose for this building, our Rabbi, our staff, our volunteers, our weight room, classrooms, sanctuary and the list goes on.

I don't ask you to come to everything that happens at our synagogue. The Rabbi has built an education program that is not intended to interest everybody at all times, but to make people interested in their Judaism for whatever they may be interested in. Men's Club and Ladies Auxiliary provide various speakers on a variety of topics to interest yet another portion of our congregation family. As a traditional synagogue we have religious services every day of the year to meet those spiritual needs of our synagogue family. We have Sunday School for the children, Hebrew School as they get older and a High School group as well. B'nai Jacob, as a traditional congregation, tries its best to allow all of our community to participate in Judaism. As you participate in your Judaism today, consider the various options that our congregation offers and make use of them.

You are now expecting me to speak about where we are as a congregation. We are seeing slight increases in membership since the past year, and are up to 211 families at are synagogue. That is up 5 from last year. All considering, this is extreme growth, considering the decline in our area.

On the vital statistics front, we had 4 Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, with 3 more through the end of the year, 5births and 3 deaths.

As I said last year, what our job as members of B'nai Jacob Synagogue is to make our synagogue appealing to new comers whether they are from West Virginia or looking to move to our city. Many individuals make a decision to move to town based on its amenities and religious institutions. When we have a new person here for services or a class, and they ask what type of congregation we are, we may classify ourself as traditional but let them know that we are a participating congregation.

The success of our Synagogue relies on people and while I cannot mention everyone here by name, I would like to make special mention of those that helped to maintain our synagogue this past year with special gifts and have given of their time:

Betty Schoenbaum has always made sure that our synagogue can raise the funds necessary to complete its projects. Last year she made an extremely generous donation to create a trust fund to help maintain our building, as well as

the start up money for the sanctuary project which I will discuss shortly. I cannot express enough, our thankfulness to Betty for her great contributions to our Synagogue. Without her support our finances would be quite a struggle. Betty has always shown such pride in our synagogue and our Rabbi, and proves to be an inspiration to us all.

I want to also recognize Sam Wilan, who as difficult as it is sometimes, makes an effort to be at Saturday Morning services every Saturday, not to mention to make sure my kids have their fill of tootsie rolls. Sam has been a pillar of our congregation, and has generously given to the various projects we have done.

Steve Rubin generously contributes his time to insure the maintenance of our facilities and will be spearheading a large project to renovate our sanctuary. We all sometimes forget Steve's efforts as well as others long time volunteers for our congregation, like Ted Kanner, without whose time our synagogue could not function. Those individually quietly make sure that there is a synagogue here to attend.

I want to thank Barry Ogrin who continues to work to keep our books in order, from his new home in Florida.

Mike Kingston has stepped in to oversee our books and to maintain the everyday financial condition of the synagogue.

Thank you to all of you are on the Board of Trustees for all of your work to maintain our synagogue.

Elliot Urecki, who once again has done a beautiful job of maintaining the silver on our Torahs.

Lynn Clarke who helps maintain our library.

Sara Cohen frequently has taken it upon herself to provide a beautiful lunch for Shabbat morning services.

Cary Levenson who helps with our landscaping.

I would also like to recognize all those that help lead our services and read torah in Rabbi's absence throughout the year: Ted Kanner, Trig Salsbery, Bernie Greisman, Steve Meyer, Gary Sheff, David Abramowitz, Justin Cohen, Donn Neurman. Bob Kazlovsky, Harvey Siler and all those I may have missed. Without

these individuals it would be difficult to maintain the traditions at in our synagogue.

Our Chevra Haddisha continues to maintain the traditions of Jewish burial and contributes to a variety of projects around are synagogue.

Our Men's Club under Stuart Bloom has provided a variety of spirited speakers, and regular support of our sports program.

Along with supporting our Sunday and Hebrew School, our Ladies Aux under Millie Snyder and the Ladies Aux board has spent much energy on our kitchen, and provided a variety of programs for our congregation and our community, including the very successful health fair.

I want to thank Helen Lodge who has added so much to our oneg shabbats this past year, not only with well thought food, but with elegant decorating, and wish her well on the road to recovery.

Stephanie Abramowitz came on board last year to help teach our Hebrew School, and has been a wonderful addition to our teaching staff.

We welcome back Cantor Weiss and thank him for adding a very personal touch and familiarity to our services every year.

We must not forget our staff. Terry Cooper has the great task of making sure that our synagogue is clean and ready for use, and as in past years has enlisted his family with that daunting task.

Nancy makes sure that our synagogue is running and takes care of making sure that our congregants are aware of our activities. I am not sure what we would do without her in the office. In addition, she spends must of her extra time on the weekends to help with special events.

Marilyn Urecki has continued to generously give of her time to organize our Sunday School and teach Hebrew School. In addition to making sure her children are prepared, I am sure she spends significant energies to insure that Rabbi is ready as well.

Rabbi Urecki has proven year in and year to be the perfect religious leader for our congregation. Remaining loyal to the traditions, but developing programs for our varied congregation. Along with the traditional roles at the synagogue, he

spends a considerable amount of time making sure that the synagogue is in touch with its congregants through e-mail. He has created an ever expanding education program to try to touch all of us, so that we all can participate. I know we all look forward to honoring his 20th year with us in November. No dinner, words or amount of recognition can reward our Rabbi for what he does for our congregation. What makes him happiest is to see us participate in our congregation. We always have high expectations for our religious leaders, so if you do nothing else this year for Rabbi Urecki, continue to attend his classes, minyans and Shabbat services.

Most importantly, I must also thank my family, Ellen, Frannie & Jenny who certainly get to hear about what is going on at the synagogue, and specifically Ellen who arranges all of our schedules to accommodate board meetings, minyans, work, school, cheerleading, dance, etc. Ellen and I have always been a team here at the synagogue, and without her support, whatever I do here would not be possible. As we believe it is important to participate in our synagogue, we make sure to have Frannie & Jenny involved as well. Frannie, whose Bat Mitzvah will be upon us shortly, makes sure to keep me straight when I am congratulating a Bar Mitzvah, and to inform me when I do a different tune than she learned, and Jenny is always excited to share what she has learned through Sunday School and Hebrew School, and to be patient with Frannie.

Now of course is the time that we ask each of you to help meet our needs as a congregation.

1. We have amazingly been able to keep up with our minyans in the evening. Although we do fall a bit short some mornings. Please take the time one extra evening or morning a week to insure we can continue our daily minyans. Although, most Jews and non-Jews believe participating in Judaism is limited to the High Holidays, Chanukah and Passover. There are various important holidays through the year, that require a minyan, and we sometimes fall short. Please make every effort to attend services on those holiday. Services are a bit longer, but we try to get through as quickly as possible. Thank you to everyone that helps with our minyans throughout the year.

2. As you are aware, the time has come that we must replace our seating and refurbish the sanctuary. Steve Rubin and his committee, have provided several alternatives for the sanctuary. I would ask that you review these with an open mind. A sample chair is available in our lobby, that chair would contain arms and the holder for the books would be placed on the back. There is a board with color options, with a picture of possible sample pews. The changes we make

now are intended to last an extremely long time and to enhance the versatility of our space, whether for a large Bar or Bat Mitzvah or smaller intimate services. We have a changing congregation, and the enhancements we anticipate will help define our direction. We intend to continue the traditions of our sanctuary, while modernizing its usage. Our anticipated costs have risen significantly, and I ask each of you to consider a 5 year pledge to our building fund for these improvements. Betty Schoenbaum has already committed \$150,000.00 to this important project. If you have already made a pledge for the previous addition then consider continuing to pay that pledge for an additional five year. If you had made no previous pledge, then please participate this time around. This must be an effort that the entire congregation participate in. We want to have a consensus of the congregation, but know some people may not like the final decision. Even if your preferred option is not chosen, please don't let that prevent you from contributing. This renovation must be done. Whether you are able to pledge \$500.00 or \$10,000, please make a pledge. Please do not wait to be asked, please let Steve Rubin, Bob Morgenstern or myself know that you are interested in contributing. Not only will it help meet our goal quicker, but everytime we sit in the refurbished sanctuary we will all know we contributed to its completion.

3. Not neglecting the importance of the sanctuary project, we have reviewed our finances which generally are not good. We are taking funds significantly from our trust funds, and although we may not be able to totally do away from that, we will be evaluating the dues structure. We are fortunate that we have trust funds available but these funds will not last indefinitely. We must get closer to balancing our budget with dues and contributions. As compared to other synagogues our size our expenses are very low as we have minimal staff, not to mention our dues are fairly low as well. There is a defined dues structure and you will receive a card to acknowledge that your dues are appropriate.

Alright, I have now spoken about everything, I believe I was supposed to. I wanted to take an opportunity for some personal observations. I grew up in Miami in a family that was very involved in synagogue life, my father was president of the synagogue when I was about Jenny's age or younger, my mother was president of sisterhood. In fact, my father currently serves as president of synagogue and my mother is on the board of the sisterhood. Their life still revolves around the synagogue. I am exactly where I imagined I would be at this point in life, speaking on the High Holidays to my congregation as president. It is with great pride that I know that I am chairing a board meeting and my father is chairing one as well, or that I am sitting in Saturday morning services and he is as well, listening to the same torah reading, and dare I say maybe not as good a haftorah reader as we have here.

My parents and I often talk about what is going on each other's congregation and I listen to what goes on in a large city synagogue. They worry about how do we payoff the building or how do we get members, with so much competition. How will a JCC affect our membership, how are we possibly going to make 2 minyans a week, and the list goes on.

As I recall those things, it makes me proud of B'nai Jacob. We have been around over 100 years, we don't worry about how we get members, we don't worry about how to get more people to join. We don't worry about how we will payoff the building.

We may disagree every once in while, but it is because we all care so much for B'nai Jacob Synagogue and its health. Those disagreements are small in comparison to what goes on in other synagogues. When I arrived in town, 15 years ago, this Synagogue, although it was an institution of Charleston, appeared like it could not survive, but here we are 15 years later, minyans and all, and even more vibrant and diverse then we ever have been.

I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to serve as President these past two years, and I look forward to the opportunity to continue to serve this congregation in whatever way possible. Bob Morgenstern will shortly take over the reigns and his ideas and leadership will further enhance our synagogue. We all have a place here at this congregation, and B'nai Jacob needs each of you to participate.

We will shortly celebrate Rabbi's 20th anniversary here at the synagogue. Rabbi Urecki is an integral part of this congregation, and well deserving of such recognition. But in November let us not only celebrate Rabbi's tenure, let us celebrate the longevity of our congregation and all that it means to us as Jews and the community at large.

On behalf of my family I want to wish all of you a L'shana Tova and an easy fast.