

YOM KIPPUR SPEECH

GARY SHEFF

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 19, 2018

Rabbi and Marilyn, Cantor Scherr and Susan, fellow congregants.

I said these words after becoming your president last November, “We always need to remember “WHAT WAS”, understand “WHAT IS”, and let’s think and work toward “WHAT MIGHT BE”.

I want to recognize and thank you all for your unbelievable support throughout the year 5778 and the 124th year of B’nai Jacob Synagogue - and what a year it has been!

This year you overwhelmingly turned out and voted to accept adult men and women of the Jewish faith as equals and full participants in all religious services and activities. In so many ways, this marks a significant step in the history of our congregation, one that we believe will help shape our future for many years to come. I am particularly grateful to Rabbi and Marilyn who today not only fully believe in this, but are so committed to help us balance the two great strengths of B’nai Jacob: Tradition and Inclusivity.

Rabbi your speech last week about your struggles was heart felt. I remember that Tuesday -May 29th, so well, because we had a Board meeting that evening, and when I spoke to you after that call, you were crushed. At the same time, you were not sure you wanted the Board and others to know. A few of us discussed, and thought it was important to share with the board. As the Board discussed on how to respond I was writing a note to you. It was a very easy note to write.

Rabbi,

I’m sure I speak for everyone, in letting you know how much we appreciate the sacrifices you, Marilyn and your family have made to reflect our changing congregation. B’nai Jacob and Charleston are unique in Jewish life, and you have made That uniqueness very sheik. I couldn’t be prouder today, then to call you my rabbi, and the rabbi to B’nai Jacob and all West Virginians.

Hope this means something.

Gary

A funny note - when I passed it around to have others proof, because I'm not known for my spelling - Eric Persily let me know that sheik is not spelled CHIC!

So let me say these words by Rabbi Harold Kushner that you can find in the intro to our new daily prayer book.

“What does religion offer that we lonely souls need? In a word community. Our place of worship offers us a refuge, and an Island of caring in the midst of a hostile, competitive world. In a society that segregates the old from the young, the rich from the poor, the successful from the struggling. This house of worship - B'nai Jacob represents, one place where the barriers fall, and today we all stand truly equal before G-d.

I again thank you all so very much!

Now if that's all we would have done last year it would have been enough.

Though let's go back and briefly remember our cherished past (WHAT WAS), understand today (WHAT IS) and take a look at the possibilities of “WHAT MIGHT BE”.

As a life long member of this congregation I realize that all that is ours is a gift from One Hundred and Twenty-Four years of those that came before us. We owe so much to our past, but I am proud to say we are pioneering our own way forward, building on the traditions of the past and embracing new ideas that will draw the next generation.

Visit our archives in our lower level, that has had a beautiful upgrade with the very special contribution from Ruth Bernstein, her late husband Dutch and her children. Thank you so much Ruth and we look forward soon to honoring you and your family with a special dedication.

When visiting the archives, you will read the names of our founders. Names such as Gluck, Cohen, Frank, Frankle, Pablibsky, Hark and Nearman.

The first services were held at the home of Julius Nearman, in the 1880's, before moving to our first location on the site of which is now Laidley Tower.

Let me read a story on one of our early congregants.

I was born in Lincova, Lithuania in 1870. I was smuggled out of the country when I was 15 and travelled alone across Germany and Bremen. I then went to England where we had relatives and then across the ocean to Baltimore.

I traveled with a note around my neck written in English, and with a small amount of money in my pocket.

In Baltimore I first got a job as a tailor but decided that my best future might be further west, so I borrowed \$100.00 and went to West Virginia.

At first I was a back peddler but as soon as I could I bought a horse and buggy. Things went well until one day the buggy got stuck as I was fording a river at Lowell and I lost it.

So, I opened a store in Talcott, WV. (Now just to let you know, Lowell and Talcott are suburbs of Hinton in Summers Co. On the Beautiful Greenbrier River). Talcott was a newly developing lumber town, so I started buying railroad ties and selling them to the railroad company. I sold whatever I could, piece goods, frock coats, butter and more. I even shipped butter back to Baltimore. I learned how to set broken bones too!

In 10 years in Talcott I saved \$28,000.00 and sent to Europe for the rest of my family. In 1889 I moved to Charleston and opened a store on Capitol St.

A friend of mine named Fitzgerald taught me how to be a watch inspector. And I was the official watch inspector for the C&O Railroad for 60 years.

I married Ida Meyer and we had seven children. "I have always been close to B'nai Jacob."

Note: After starting as a 16-year-old teenager with a borrowed \$100.00, Abraham Polin will always be remembered for making the first large (10,000) donation to B'nai Jacob in 1947 to kick off the drive for the new Synagogue in which we sit today. His generous example led others to join and successfully raise the needed funds. By the way, \$10,000 dollars in 1947 equates to \$114,662.33 cents in today's dollars.

Abraham Polan is the Grandfather of Steve Meyer and the Great Grandfather of Louis Weisberg. "I will always be close to B'nai Jacob."

This is just one of many such stories. You will also find the only chair that is in private hands which was used at the Camp David Peace talks in 1978 between president Carter, Menachem Begin, and Anwar Sadat. And a thank you letter from Elie Wiesel after his visit to B'nai Jacob in 1972.

Thank you Dr. Phil Goldstein - A great history please visit the Archives.

So, let's understand today (WHAT IS) at B'nai Jacob.

It still amazes me what people say about our Jewish community, our B'nai Jacob; those that are from here, but have moved away, and those that visit. Ones that are from here and have moved away always tell me they have not found another community like ours; people who visit can't believe there is this vibrant Jewish community in these hills of West Virginia.

A story that happened recently illustrates our synagogue so well.

I have been honored to speak on behalf of B'nai Jacob for five Bat and Bar Mitzvah ceremonies. One in particular was for twins Aiden and Adam Zaborsky, twins that live in New York, but came back to celebrate their special moment here. Through new technologies such as FaceTime and Skype, our Rabbi taught them, imparted his knowledge of Jewish learning, even threw in a healthy dose of comic book discussions!

Now why would two young twins whose mother Marietta was born in Uzbekistan, and their father Andre was born in Odessa Russia, choose for their sons B'nai Mitzvah service - B'nai Jacob Synagogue?

At the age of nine, Marietta and Andre's parents' moved from Uzbekistan and Odessa to Brooklyn and Queens respectively. As young adults they meet on a blind date, get married and move to Charleston West Virginia. Not exactly a hotbed of Jewish or Russian life. While in Charleston they formed so many special friendships in our community, and though work took them back to New York, when it came to the biggest day in these children's young lives - Marietta and Andre, Aiden and Adam chose our community to celebrate their special day.

I will never forget the comment from one visitor that morning: She said in her very strong Eastern European accent, "This is a community, and those of us from the outside can feel it."

And let me say the Zaborsky's continue to be paying members of B'nai Jacob. They too, like Abraham Polan will always be close to B'nai Jacob.

I here words like this so much. When our Mitzvah group prepares meals for families that have experienced a death - I hear it!

When I'm representing the CCRA, in my capacity as president and people will ask, "What church do you attend?" I hear it!

I was in Ripley just a couple of weeks ago, and a man starts asking me about my faith. Yes, I replied "I am Jewish." His response, our church group has been to B'nai Jacob and we love Rabbi Urecki! I hear it!

You want to really learn - come sometime when rabbi is hosting a church group. They ask the questions you and I are afraid to!

Our daily minyan is still going strong. I had a message the other day. It was from Steve Loew and his recently Bat Mitzvahed daughter Jordan. He said Jordan wanted to start attending minyan once a week and asked if there was a certain evening we needed help. I hear it!! And let me say, I'll put us up against many synagogues much larger than ours, and I guarantee their minyan and minyan breakfast can't match ours! Thank you Steve and Sam, and all our menyinears!!

Our Chevra Kadisha - Ask people in big cities about their Chevra Kiddisha - Many leave it to the funeral homes. Others don't even know what the CK is. When people of out of town hear we have our own CK, they are amazed! And let me say, if you want the ultimate feeling of reward, of doing good, join the CK - also referred to as the secret society. But I'll tell you a secret, ask people like Mary Hogue, Ellyn Goldberg, Pam Pushkin, Kristen Clendenning, Shelley Kanner, Eric Persily, Steve Meyer, Mike Victorson, Steve Rubin, Ted Kanner, Elliot Urecki about the feeling. Tending to the dead is a favor that the recipient cannot return.

I spoke of the CCRA: Before we were accepted to Edgewood and Berry Hills Country Clubs we were a member of the CCRA, which made up of over 40 churches and over 130 teams! Again, why you are in the archives look at our teams dating back to 1917! And you know what else? Girls were participating in CCRA sports years before public schools had girls participating!

If you are interested in participating contact Daniel Kanner or David Levin. They know the president of the CCRA - he's a Jewish guy!!

So those are just a few of the traditions of our community B'nai Jacob, so what are the newer activities?

Rabbis Torah and Talmud classes continue. Bringing together Jews and non-Jews for enlightened discussion. Inclusivity

Jews and Brews on location for young adults.

Tot Shabbat

Tot Havdalah service - an idea from Blaire Malcom

Rabbis Shabbat thought video for the week. Which is a short 4-minute video that comes out on Thursday that is intended to help you get your mind set for Shabbat, and can reach both you locally, and our many family and friends that live far away.

And our new Shabbat morning service. Since this summer, people have been joining us for our new approach to Shabbat morning service, short triennial Torah readings and transliterations of all major prayers and a sermon on the sedrah (Torah Portion). Truly an inclusive and participatory and inviting service.

Thank you Marc Slotnick and Rabbi for your work on the service and Alvin Preiser for bringing the idea of sponsorship & food. And the conversation is FREE!!

Thank you Marilyn, Avrah and Chavah for your tireless preparation of these fabulous shabbat meals. And this could not have happened without our sponsors. Thank you all!

Who would have thought food would bring Jews out?!! Ok rabbi, it's the sermon!

And I have to tell this story. A couple of weeks ago after Saturday service. People were enjoying great conversation and food, and one of those was my good friend Ed Goldberg. I walk in the gym and Ellyn, Joy and Ben are watching Raya and Sibbie Running around having a great time! I go to the office come back and Sibbie has gone missing. The alarm went off in the Sanctuary, so I ran here, we are running all over looking for her. Finally, she is found running around in our newly remodeled lower level. Needless to say, we were relieved and yes Sibbie was in just a little bit of trouble. Ellyn said to me, "Sibbie just feels so comfortable, so at home here - she thinks she can go anywhere." I hear you!!

And our new prayer books. This inscription you will find on the inside front cover of your new High Holiday Siddur.

"In dedication to and with devotion for B'nai Jacob Synagogue. Samuel and Rebecca Zacks."

There's a saying that all Jews walk to Shul on Shabbat and Yuntif: Some walk from home, most like me walk from the parking lot.

I say this because I can still picture in my mind, even in her senior years, Becky Zacks walking from her home on Kanawha Ave, across the 35th St. bridge, up the Blvd, down Greenbrier and up Virginia. Rain, snow, hot or cold Becky was here. "Dedication and Devotion to B'nai Jacob."

Thank you so much Ben and family for this most generous contribution.

There are so many great commentaries that I wanted to share, from these new books, but I'll Jewish guilt you into coming and finding them yourself. I will give you one from our Shabbat Siddur. It reads like this.

“Our origins as a people contain a certain nobility - not of wealth or power, but of faith and faithfulness. As individuals we have parents - a personal genealogy. The lives they led, the wisdom they taught, the letters they wrote, are their legacy and our inheritance.”

My inheritance I'm still enjoying every day - she is sitting right over there - 93 years strong!

Listen to this from the year 1962. In July of 62 she enjoyed the confirmation of her eldest daughter Ilene. In September of 62 she gave birth to what I've been told was a mistake - a baby boy. And in November of 62 her eldest son Ivor was Bar Mitzvah. Now you would have thought this would have been hammered in our head, “Look at the sacrifice I made for you all!” But, you know we just recently realized it when we found a file of rabbi Cooper containing all the confirmations, bat and Bar Mitzvah speeches! HER LEGACY, MY INHERITANCE.

In 1967, tragedy struck. With 5 young children, my father informs my mother, an only child, that her parents David and Sarah Schwartz had been robbed and brutally murdered in their home in Detroit Mi. An African American band mate of my brother Ivor tells the story so well. He said, “My mother asked when we were going on a condolence call to Mrs. Sheff. I looked at her and said, mom do you really think that's a good idea? They were killed during the race riots. My mother made me and my brother and the other band members go visit. We walk in your home and she greeted and hugged us like her own children.” HER LEGACY, MY INHERITANCE.

Now this year also marked the passing of many dear congregants that we will remember during our Yizkor service.

The rabbi and the Board received a letter from one of those just months before her passing.

Dear Rabbi Urecki and B'nai Jacob Synagogue Board,

I completely agree with the Trustees in making a change to the by-laws, accepting adult men and women of the Jewish faith as equals and full participants in all religious services.

Many religions would benefit by changing some of their laws that were made hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

It invites more people to join and be comfortable at the Synagogue.

I heartily approve, Betty Schoenbaum
"100 years old"

Now with all that goes on here, you would think we have a very large staff. We have 1 full time, 3 part time employees, and we contract out cleaning and lawn care of here and both cemeteries. WE ARE A LEAN OPERATION!

This following group does the unsung work around here every day.

Elliott Urecki

Steve Max

Marc Slotnick

Ted Kanner on everything including and most importantly letting me vent not taking it personal, and still being my great friend!

And everyone needs a mentor. Alvin Preiser and I had lunch about 6 weeks before I became president. He got me started on the right track and we've been there all the way. Thank you Alvin!

With that said, as the Rabbi mentioned in his speech last week, he nor any of the people mentioned above especially ME are perfect.

Back in my youth, after returning from a friend's home that had every toy imaginable and their family every year enjoyed fabulous vacations, I was just a little envious a little jealous and I told my dad.

My father said, "Son, people and families you think have everything and are perfect, are people and families you really don't know." MY INHERITANCE.

I live by this - I know at some point we all have tsoris- problems. I and the rabbi are always available if you have an issue both personal or financial. Call me - text me - let's talk. This is your community, it's your synagogue, I'm just your president for the next year. But please do me a favor this year - pay your dues, pay more if you can. Don't hold 125 years hostage because I or the rabbi made a mistake - we aren't perfect, and we will try to be better. This year we ran a deficit of \$200,000. Even if we all pay the dues we are supposed to, we will still have a deficit. Thank you to our past - thank you Abraham Polan, Alex & Betty Schoenbaum and others, for giving us a small cushion. If you hear me show me, and do it soon before you forget. Set up payments electronically- we make it easy!

Last year, under Janet's guidance, we revised our membership dues guidelines to gain more participation and achieve equity for our membership. The individuals and families that pay a level more than our suggested minimum dues will be recognized in the coming months. If you'd like to add your name to one of our many levels, please let Ted, Nancy & Nancy or myself know by the end of this month. If any of you rather not be recognize, please let us know as well.

And finally, the possibilities of - "WHAT MIGHT BE"

People ask if we have children here, and when I give them numbers they are shocked because they aren't her at tot Shabbat and Sunday mornings.

We are only as good as our children. We must continue to experiment with new programs. I would love to see a new playground.

Post Bar/Bat Mitzvah children: We will do better. How about a trip the Holocaust Museum in DC and a get together with our many young professionals in the DC area.

How about yoga or palate classes, bridge or Maj games? Sunday morning walking or jogging groups, followed by - yes maybe even a bagel and coffee!

Harry Kanner always said, "As long as the lights are on and people are in the building we are good." Let's get better!

(History & genealogy) I need your help. We need to find as many lost tribe members locally and ones from our past. They need us, and we need them. Please give me or Rabbi names and we will reach out!

And Finally, as I've mentioned, this year is our 125th anniversary! And that is BIG! We will celebrate! I have asked Lyn Meyer and Ellen Slotnick to co-chair. We will meet very soon and will be asking for help.

B'nai Jacob Synagogue, Charleston WV. One 125 years of a special community of Jewish living, reaching out to people both near and far. A spirit of inclusion and everlasting tradition.

I hope you are as excited and proud as I am. I wish you all an easy fast and a healthy and happy New Year.