

## **Thoughts on Jewish Education and the Future of Beth Israel**

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The Shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashanah. Scholars have debated, and written extensively, on the meaning and significance of the Shofar blast and its importance in Jewish life. The general consensus is that:

First, it commemorates the Creation of the World.

Second, it announces the beginning and end of the Ten Days of Repentance.

And third, it inspires us to live a Jewish life recommitted to our values and to stay connected as a people.

This third aspect of "connection" is extremely important in terms of the future of our Synagogue, and the future of Jewish Life in Greater Hartford. Our values, our heritage, and our culture, do not pass from generation to generation without parents' participation. Our way of life, the Hebrew language, and the history of our people (both Biblically and over the last 200 years) is not learned without a religious school and skilled teachers.

Our responsibility as parents, and as members of this Congregation (with or without children or grandchildren), is to insure that we are not the generation that breaks the chain; the chain that teaches our moral code, and the historic significance of our ancestors, to the next generation. If we fail to provide the best education within these walls, we risk the loss of our heritage over time and the eventual assimilation of our children, and their children, into secular society. I know the economy will be a challenge. But we must look to the future. To be a Jew is to hold fast to our vision of truth, to retain our faith in tomorrow.

And so, my goal today is to inspire you to help me, over time, renovate the Religious School. I know I've come to you each year for the last five years, always proposing a new project. And you have been wonderfully responsive. Our beautiful Sanctuary, the exterior of our building, the Silver Courtyard, and new Learning Center are testaments to your generosity, and the care we have taken with your financial trust. But I have one more goal: the School. We need to complete our plan.

However, we will not start until we see stability in our community. We will not burden our congregants until you are ready.

But we will also not forget our children. Please pick up our new Generations newsletter as you leave today. Over the last 16 months I have attempted to carry out a pledge I made when I became President of the Congregation. I said I would write a profile of a Jewish Hero, each month, in the newsletter.

One of my articles had to do with the economy. I wrote about Milton Friedman, who was a Nobel Prize winner in economics. I know the economy does not look good right now, and some people are feeling the effects. Some are nervous about their future. But we know, deep down, that things will improve. They always have. We can not succumb to fear or rumor. Let us stay the course, continue with our plans, and pursue our goals

What I said in the Friedman article continues to apply today. We, the Jewish people, are a very resilient bunch. We have lived through wandering forty years in the desert, slavery, evil Kings and Pharaohs, the Depression and the Holocaust. A few months of economic uncertainty, or a market correction, do not dampen our spirit or passion.

We do not fear the economic indicators or misguided policies of the present. They will resolve themselves.

We continue our drive "to heal the world" and promote social justice because it is our culture and tradition to do so. The economy will go up and down. Our vigil will not change. That is what we teach.

Another purpose in writing these short bios was to show our young people that it is "cool" to be Jewish. You don't have to be a football star or a pop singer to make a name in this world. It is no coincidence that Jews, who are only 2% of the US population, have won 37% of the Nobel prizes given to Americans since 1901. It is no secret that education is a core value to our people. We must provide the best, and we do. Our core values. Jewish values. What do we teach, as parents and educators, that separates us from secular school? What's unique?

- We teach a moral code—to respect human dignity, to treat all people equally, to be compassionate and seek social justice.
- We instill a duty to do your part, each generation, to make the world a better place—Tikkun Olam
- -We encourage knowledge of history, to know your people, the struggle, the Holocaust, so it never happens again and we instill the responsibility to assure Israel's survival.
- And finally, we impart a duty to carry on our traditions and heritage. We are the "chosen" people, not because we are special or elite. We were chosen to enlighten the world to a better way of life, to love peace and justice and do mitzvot and tzedakah.

This is our job. It is not secular. It must be done here in our school!

And beyond our children we have a responsibility to our adult community. To connect or reconnect the generations to what our students are learning. Adult education is a big part of Beth Israel's future. In this regard, I want to invite you to an inspiring Series of Ten Sermons by Rabbi Fuchs which began last night on "*What it Means to be a Jew.*" The series will expand on many topics related to education, family and our history. The dates are in the handouts and newsletter.

Our connection to future generations is extremely important for all of us. Just about three weeks ago, I had the honor of attending the opening and dedication of the new Performing Arts Center at the University of Hartford. The University has converted the old Thomas Cadillac building on Albany Avenue into a State of the Art Performance Center, with facilities for dance, music and acting students. I was justifiably proud that our congregants were the visionaries that brought this miracle to life. Walter Harrison, President of the University, who personally traversed the financial and construction maze through State and Federal grant procedures, fund raising, and faculty and student wants and needs, has now made the University a leader in all performing arts education. Mort and Irma Handel, who made the lead gift many years ago, and are also major donors to our Capital Campaign, were like proud parents. To see the smiling faces on the students, talking about the new pride they felt in their school, and the opportunities the facility provided, was well-worth the many years of planning and the dollars spent.

When Mort spoke at the dedication, our core values, and our need to provide the best school facility we can, clearly came through. He said, "This community has been good to us over the years and we believe in giving back. Leaving a footprint, however large or small, is a measure of our passing through this life with some knowledge that we have made a difference...that what we do...benefits someone else." I want to congratulate Walter, Mort and Irma on a spectacular opening. I hope we can continue that spirit here at Beth Israel.

This is my final High Holiday speech as your President. I have spoken from this bima five straight years, three as Capital Campaign chair and two as your President. I truly appreciate your willingness to listen and, of course, your generosity. Next week at Kol Nidre you will hear from April Haskell, who will be our next President. Her term will start next June. I hope you will give her the attention and support you have given me over the years.

She is a dedicated and committed member of our Board of Trustees and is truly the right person to lead Beth Israel and our Congregation. My job is not done however, until our school is complete. I will see it through and I will not abandon the challenge until it is met. But I must tell you as I leave this podium today, I will cherish my years of service to this Congregation and treasure the friendship of the generous and caring people I have worked with during my leadership years.

I thank you all for your support, trust, and confidence.  
L'Shanah Tovah