

Annual Report to the Congregation

Rabbi Stephen Fuchs

15 Sivan 5769 -- June 7, 2009

This has been a wonderful programmatic year for Congregation Beth Israel. Our new Learning Center with generous funding from the Goldfarb family and the inspired creativity of Cantor Pamela Siskin and Jane Zande has sponsored a wide and wonderful array of programs—from finding your Bashert to a wonderful Sukkot program and everything in between. The specifics of what we have done are a matter of record. Unlike in past years I will not list every significant congregational activity. The list would be too long: Peter Pitzele, Elizabeth Yaari, Jane Bernstein, Simcha Weinstein, Cindy Rivka Weinstein, our Anti-Semitism series, are just a few of the outstanding programs that we have presented. I am also gratified by the response to the ten-sermon series on “What It Means to Be Jew” which I presented this year. For more details of more programs a quick browse of the last twelve months of our Temple Bulletin and our marvelous website, both of which Jane lovingly prepares and tends, will convince anyone that in terms of what we offer our congregants—the breadth and depth of our activities—it is hard to imagine a synagogue community with a limited budget doing more.

“Limited Budget”... Ah, there's the rub. The economic climate of our nation has not spared Beth Israel. We continually face the challenge of trying to do more with less. The Greater Hartford area in recent years has not been a magnet for large numbers of young single Jews or young families. Still, our Young Family Shabbat program and our monthly Tot Shabbat have been wonderfully enjoyable and very well-attended. On the other end of the spectrum, our S.A.G.E. program continues at a level of excellence that any congregation in the nation would envy.

In short, we have confronted the economic downturn that has afflicted our country and our region by following the advice that the great Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr articulated in his famous Serenity Prayer. We change the things we can change, we accept the realities that we cannot change, and we are developing the wisdom to know the difference.

Now I wish with all of my heart that God would bless me with the vision and the ability to lead Beth Israel safely past the economic danger zone in which we now find ourselves. I wish I would awake one night with the answer to our fiscal dilemma implanted in my mind. Alas, the formula has not come to me, nor has it really come to any leader in a congregation whose demographic picture approximates ours. So we must continue to do what we are doing: Provide the most meaningful, heartfelt, educational, spiritual, and lifecycle experiences that we can. We must also continue to strive to make Noah's Ark a conduit for future congregational membership. It is the most we can do, and it is certainly the least that we shall do.

A Hasidic Master advised that in difficult times, we should pray as if everything depended on God, and act as if everything depended on us. That is what we are doing. Wonderful volunteers meet all the time to discuss ways to save, ways to grow, and ways to ensure the future of Jewish life in our community. We must pray and trust that the Almighty wants us to endure. But we must also continue to leave no stone unturned—and no potential donor un-asked—in our ongoing efforts to assure that Beth Israel remains sufficiently strong and viable to meet the spiritual challenges of our grandchildren and great-grandchildren and that no congregant or potential congregant is turned away because of true economic hardship.

In this sacred endeavor we are blessed with a most capable administrator in Abby Mayou. With a staff that is undermanned and overworked, Abby keeps morale high and the ship moving steadily forward.

Over all the years I have worked with Abby, no task has been too great or too small for her to embrace with enthusiasm. Her attitude has always been “whatever it takes to get the job done, I am eager to do.” We are blessed by her presence, and what a marvelous example she sets for our staff that she inspires with her leadership: Sarah Beck, her capable right hand, Lily Beider, who mans our front desk, Aliha Fine who handles our finances, Rachel Gilbert who has been invaluable to Cantor in the YEP program, Danielle Stordy who does wonderful work with Jane in the Learning Center, and Cheryl Goldberg who works tirelessly and effectively to keep Rabbi Pincus and me from drowning in the many projects and tasks that call for our attention.

When one looks for inspiration in contemplating the output of Beth Israel, one finds it in abundance in the hard work and cheerful demeanors of our incomparable building maintenance staff. Rudy Allen, Bunny Reynolds, Edward Blissett and Andrew Bartley work incredibly long hours with incredible efficiency. To me they epitomize the spirit of Congregation Beth Israel, and I applaud them.

I have mentioned the Cantor’s amazing work with the Learning Center. If that is all she did, *Dayenu*. But...she is also our Youth Education Program Director, a deeply empathic counselor and pastoral visitor, and a spirit-filled voice who leads our worship with skill and beauty. She also coordinates and produces the most wonderful music programs from our incomparable Purim play, to our Holocaust commemorative, to the Harold Arlen event that provided a wonderful evening of entertainment and a wonderful outlet for the talents of so many of our congregants. We showed our appreciation to her with a warm and loving tenth anniversary celebration this past fall, and she continues to earn our kudos with everything that she does.

There are also not enough words to describe my admiration for and my appreciation of my rabbinical colleague and partner, Rabbi Michael Pincus. His wonderful temperament, his pastoral presence, his ever-growing pulpit prowess, his patience and pedagogical proficiency are just some of the amazing qualities he brings to the vast array of duties and tasks that he undertakes. When I think of the combination of strength, tenderness and wisdom—of idealism, practicality and humor—that a rabbi should possess, I think of Michael Pincus. After we finish this meeting, we invite you all to work together on Mitzvah Day. Rabbi Pincus would be the first to credit and thank the marvelous array of volunteers whose efforts make this project possible. Spearheading it all, though, and motivating them all is Rabbi Pincus.

Personally, I am particularly proud of our tenth grade Confirmation students who led a wonderful Service a week ago Friday night. Just two weeks earlier, our first Adult Confirmation class led and taught the congregation with remarkable depth and feeling.

As I think of all that we do here at Beth Israel, I am in awe of the many volunteers and the countless hours they contribute in so many different ways to make Beth Israel a sacred congregation—creatively concerned about Judaism and deeply concerned about each other. To name only a few: WHTY, our Sisterhood and Brotherhood, which add so much energy, vitality and substance to our community’s programming, and our Caring Committee, which now works with renewed purpose and energy. To all of you whose efforts make Beth Israel the special place that it is, I offer my deepest thanks.

In particular, I want to thank Gary Greenberg who has guided us through a historic renovation, always kept his eye on the big picture, and didn’t sweat the small stuff. Gary, you have been an outstanding leader in the Jewish and secular community for years. We shall continue to draw inspiration from your vision, vast experience and the way you make each of us who works with you feel affirmed and appreciated.

The woman—only the second in our long history—to whom Gary passes the president's mantle is April Haskell. April, no one has prepared more thoroughly or lovingly for volunteer leadership in my experience than have you. You have served on or chaired every major committee that functions at Beth Israel. You have been so very generous with your time, your wisdom, your talent, your energy, and your resources. I shall strive to match your dedication to making Beth Israel's future worthy of its illustrious past, and I look forward to working closely with you for the welfare of the congregation that we both love.

As I look at the rabbi pictures on Generations Way, I note that as I complete my twelfth year as your rabbi, I have passed Isaac Mayer to take sole possession of fourth place in longevity among the rabbis who have served during the 166-year history of this venerable congregation. Because I came here at a later age than any of them, I have no hopes of catching Rabbi Abraham Feldman who served 43 years or Ed Cheffetz's Great-Grandfather, Rabbi Meyer Elkin, or Rabbi Harold Silver who served for 25 years each.

Next Shabbat with great joy we shall celebrate Rabbi Silver's 85th birthday. We shall savor the sculptures that have enriched his retirement years, and once again thrill to his sonorous voice and vast wisdom as he preaches from our pulpit. Since the day I arrived, Rabbi Silver has been a wonderful friend and confidante to me. May he, Ruth Lee, and their wonderful family take delight in this and many more joyous occasions in the future.

The years have flown by. It seems like yesterday that the placement office of the Central Conference of American Rabbis contacted me with the flattering news that the historic congregation in West Hartford wanted to speak with me about their position. The encouraging suggestions and the warm affirmation that you have shown me since that day have meant more than I can say.

There is no question, though, in my mind that anything that I may have accomplished during these past twelve years or the 24 previous ones that I spent in Nashville, TN and Columbia MD, is due to the love and support with which Vickie blesses me. On Tuesday, we shall mark the 35th anniversary of our marriage, and I pray that both the Almighty and she will continue to put up with me—may it be in good health—for many years to come.