

## Erev Rosh HaShannah Sermon 5775

I want to begin our high holiday season talking about one thing: a shoe. In some cultures, shoes have deep significance. Not really in Judaism -- a shoe is used in a rare ritual if you have a brother who dies before his wife has had children -- but other than that, there really isn't much to shoes. But, one of my most vivid memories of Beth Israel Congregation involves a shoe. It was about 2-3 weeks after Carol Shapiro had died, and Sam was sitting downstairs as we were davenning. There was little that I could say to console him because there is nothing anyone can say to mitigate such a deep loss. But as we were praying, Eben Haviland took off his shoe, and wobbled over to Sam, across our little circle, and gave him his shoe. It was the first time I saw Sam smile or chuckle in weeks. What theology could not achieve, what prayer only approached to accomplish, a baby with a shoe could do: bring some sense of solace, create some sense of connection despite the loneliness borne of grief. The unselfish generosity of a 1 and half year old conveyed the wisdom and values of Torah better than I ever could. With a shoe, Eben taught us Psalm 71:9

ט 9 אֵל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי, לְעֵת זְקִנָּה; כְּכֹלֹת כֹּחִי,  
אֵל-תִּעַזְבֵּנִי. when my strength fails, forsake me not.

From a shoe to an arepa. One of the hallmark programs of Jewish life in Waterville is the Home hospitality Shabbat. Students -- Jewish, non-Jewish, and some folks in between -- come to Beth Israel for services and back to the homes of our members for dinner. These services are livelier than most and warmer than most, but the real treat comes with dinner. Over Shabbat, students are matched with their Waterville families. This past year, many Shabbat matches were transformed into deep and sustaining relationships. One of the relationships that

stands out to me is the one between Hillel Co-President, Gabi Cortez and Beth Israel Congregation board member, Nilda Wolman.

This past year when times were, let us say, meshigunnah is Venezuela, I knew that the two Venezuelans in our community would be in pain. It is agonizing to know that your family is living in terror, under the thumb of a criminal government, while you are living amidst the ostensible serenity and normalcy of Waterville, Maine. What theology could not achieve, what prayer only approached to accomplish, a Friday night of making arepas for Shabbat dinner could achieve. We learn in our tradition, that whenever two people speak words of Torah to one another, the feminine manifestation of God rests between them. More often than not in Waterville -- or actually for Jewish women throughout our history -- when two women cook Shabbat dinner, talk, and keep each other company in order to create a island of calm in the sea of a crazy world -- God's presence dwells among them, if only for an hour or two.

In the first year of the Waterville Jewish Leadership Initiative, Cara Goldfarb from Westchester, NY worked with Abi Bloom of Waterville, Maine to prepare for Abi's bat mitzvah. Through this shidduch, this pairing, both women learned Torah trope, haftarah trope, the blessings and burdens of what it means Jewish in Waterville, and what is required of an effective Jewish leader. Through their learning and their relationship, they sustained each other, our community, the Jewish people, and our world. They made manifest the moving words from the Talmud, **The world is sustained** only through the **breath of** the Torah **learning** of our **children.**" (Talmud, Shabbos, 119B)

These stories illustrate for us what it means to have a multi-generational community. It means sustaining and being sustained by folks of all ages and all backgrounds united by a common mission and covenant. It means recognizing the gifts of each generation and sharing

them with one another, celebrating them, and crafting a full and rich life with the contributions of each individual.

The type of community offered by our synagogue is increasingly rare. Where else do we let folks who aren't family or close friends hold our babies, visit our dying relatives, or comfort us during our times of grief? Where else do college students make yahrzeit minyans, pastoral visits to seniors, and put on the Purim play every year for small children? How often do synagogues get to rely on the talents and commitments of young Jewish adults in college to exercise religious, civic, and educational leadership? While these phenomena may have been taken for granted in another era, they are now outstanding and precious. And they are happening here, in Waterville, Maine. Maybe this is yet another example of Waterville, Maine being stuck in some fabulous, bizarre time warp, or maybe it is something else.

There is something special about Jewish life in a small town that is of value both to our nation and to the Jewish world -- and that value is too often ignored. Even though we may not have the greatest financial resources or the greatest numbers, there is a spirit to places like Waterville. In our communities, every person is needed -- they matter, they are recognized, they understand that there is an essential role for them to play. The ethos of the small town is the spirit that is so desperately needed to keep the Jewish people alive and vibrant. We, the Jewish people, don't need, nor can we afford, half-invested consumers, or casual participants. We cannot confuse rich endowments with rich spiritual lives. Millions of dollars alone cannot save a people -- only people can. Only when those dollars are coupled with investments of time, energy, creativity, and generosity do they actually make a difference. To quote Rabbi Doctor Suss, "Unless someone likes you cares an awful lot, nothing is going to get better, no its not."

We are at an exciting juncture at Beth Israel Congregation and Colby College Hillel. Over the past year, dozens of people came together to begin a campaign to endow the position of

rabbi at Colby College and Beth Israel Congregation. We raised over a million dollars in 8 months to ensure that this community will always employ someone lucky enough to guide, teach, and learn with this incredible community. Students told their stories, congregants wrote letters to the Daily Jewish Forward and hosted events, parents opened their homes and served hundreds of bagels and cups of coffee, and Colby alumni opened their homes, their hearts, their minds, and their wallets. Professor David Freidenreich has written endless proposals and emails, met with donors, and offered invaluable guidance to our community and me through this process. Dean Lori Kletzer threw her support behind this very, shall we say, un-Orthodox campaign with incredible results for the college and Waterville. And the folks that really deserves our biggest Todah Rabbah are Liz Armstrong and her colleagues from the Colby Development department who have been tireless in opening every door and organizing every event to make this all happen. For a Jewish community of our size, we are very rich -- with people who are working with us, with a synagogue board that doesn't quit through floods, high holidays, or other crises, with dedicated members and students (and student members!), and most of all, with Mel.

But we are not going to stop or be satisfied. We Jews are not a people who stands still. It's not our way -- if we're not growing and evolving, we dying or complaining too much for our own good. We are growing and moving forward. In cooperation with Colby College, we are establishing in Waterville, ME the Center for Small Town Jewish Life, dedicated to improving Jewish life in Waterville and throughout Maine. This past year, we hosted the first annual Maine Conference for Jewish Life in Waterville. Over a hundred people participated over the course of the conference, with over 36 faculty from across the country. Never has Shavuot, the holiday that is too easy to forget or be confused with its cousin festival cousin Sukkot in the fall -- never has Shavuot been so exciting, fulfilling, and memorable in Waterville. We will continue to grow,

evolve, and spread the message of Torah to more Jews in more synagogues and Hillels like ours. But no matter how much money we raise, we still need every person in this room to contribute gifts of the heart. Our board has been working too hard for too long -- we need others to step up to the plate. If only for a year or two, we need folks to help with the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, the conversion to gas energy, and envisioning the future of this synagogue. Board membership should be a temporary privilege, not a life-sentence. We need others to step up and help create the future of our synagogue. We need folks to take ownership of an event --any event throughout this year. Host a movie night at your house, sign up for home hospitality Shabbat if you haven't done so before, lead a discussion. I'll buy the bagels -- even a brisket -- if you bring your heart, your mind, and your creativity to this community.

Beth Israel Congregation has always been a civic anchor in Waterville, Maine. It has served as the spiritual home to civic, economic, and intellectual leaders in our town for decades. This year, let us truly fulfill our potential with ideas, programs, and relationships that show us fulfilling our mission of being a light unto the communities in which we dwell -- not only as individuals, but as covenanted community. May we all be blessed with a Shannah Tovah u'mitukah -- a sweet and fulfilling new year.

Shannah Tovah.

