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Beth Israel Congregation/Colby Hillel

Erev Rosh HaShanah

L'Shanah Tovah! Happy New 5777! It is so exciting and wonderful to be with all of you again for our sixth high holidays together. Each year on Erev Rosh HaShanah, I try and reflect back the best of who we are as a Jewish community in Waterville, and my hopes for the coming year. I have one image in mind that I am reflecting back on the past year. After saying goodbye to Burt Shiro, we gathered at Phyllis' house for shiva. All of us were exhausted, and moved, and prayed with deep intention. As we recited mourner's kaddish, Nitzan was passed from congregant to Colby student to congregant, bringing joy to a house of mourning, and learning at six-weeks old what it really means to be a Jew. It could have felt like a challenge beyond my reach to do a funeral and officiate at shiva with Nitzan – but

I know that Burt would have smiled as Nitzan wailed during my eulogy, and to be loved and embraced as a family by a community that has always believed in me, Mel, and now, Nitzan.

After several years of work, we celebrated two momentous milestones this past November. We celebrated the endowment of the Dorothy “Bibby” Levine Alfond chair in Jewish Studies which will ensure that Colby Hillel always has a rabbi and our community always offers college-level Modern Hebrew and other Jewish Studies Courses. Our community also received a gift from the Harold Alfond Foundation in order to cover a rabbi’s salary yearly. In the past five years we have gone from a place of financial insecurity to a path toward permanent rabbinic service to the Jewish community in Waterville. We also celebrated the launch of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life at Colby College committed to enriching Jewish life in

Waterville, the State of Maine, and in small towns like ours throughout the country. We raised \$230,000 to hire staff, grow the Maine Conference for Jewish Life, expand the mid-Maine Jewish Funtensive, pilot Community Conversations, and replicate the Hillel-synagogue model we've developed in Waterville throughout the country. We have reimagined what is possible for Jewish life in Waterville, achieved unimagined heights, and are now in a place to replicate a new, multi-generational model for Jewish life in towns like ours nationally.

Our Hebrew school has more than doubled in size over the past year, attracting new children for rigorous Jewish learning in mid-Maine. Five years ago, there was not a single congregant who was willing and able to read Torah on the High Holidays. This year we have five congregants and five Colby students reading Torah and Haftarah. At Shabbat services last

week, our Hebrew High made our main dish for the Shabbat potluck, and will help prepare Shabbat dinner at Colby Hillel at the end of the month. We have continued with the cherished tradition of home hospitality Shabbat, creating relationships across generations, and building a unified and hospitable Jewish community. For the first time last year, Colby Hillel decided to emulate Beth Israel's hospitality, hosting the congregation on campus. A new tradition has been created by our student leadership that evidences a commitment to and animation of our most deeply held community values. We have come a long way toward educating our community and cultivating religious leadership.

We have also placed Waterville at the center of Jewish Life in Maine. We welcomed over 200 people from throughout the state to Waterville for superior Jewish learning and celebration. Together we heard from Ambassador Dennis Ross

on the Israel-US relationship, baked challah in the Beth Israel kitchen, took a tour of Jewish Waterville, studied at the feet of some of the best Talmud scholars in the world, sang, did yoga, prayed, danced, and ate together. Now Waterville, Maine has developed a reputation for being the destination for spiritual, pluralistic, innovative Jewish life in Maine and across the country.

We also developed a reputation for serving the best kosher Puerto Rican food in Maine, if not in the world. If you were not at our annual fundraiser this past August, you missed out big time. Alfonso and Nilda, along with their many sous chefs, prepared an INCREDIBLE meal. I could not be more proud of our community for enriching the cultural fabric of Waterville, and bringing joy to all who attended. I look forward to continuing that tradition, bringing our friends and families

together to eat, dance, and rejoice together. There are moments when our experiences of Judaism and Beth Israel are defined by obligation and getting the job done. There are other moments of unbridled joy in who we are and what we can achieve together. Caribbean Kosher was an event that embodied both, but boy, at the end of the night the energy was simply delicious.

We also have so much to look forward to in the year to come. In addition to continuing the many programs and traditions that we have developed over the years, we will also be piloting a program called “Community Conversations,” a program that welcomes the Waterville and Colby communities to come together at Beth Israel. We will bring our communities together in learning and conversations on topics that unite and divide us. In our first year, we will have three conversations on the topic of “wealth.” In November, January, and April, we will convene to hear from secular and Jewish thought-leaders discuss

three topics: income inequality, philanthropy, and the relationship between wealth and dignity. Beth Israel will welcome the most prominent rabbis and Jewish scholars in the country, along with dynamic secular leaders, to explore the most important issues we face as a community. We will be actualizing our potential not only as a home for Jewish prayer, learning, and culture, but also as an intellectual engine for the larger mid-Maine community.

Additionally, we will be preparing for our first congregational trip to Israel in December 2017. We will spend the next year preparing, learning, and fundraising for our pilgrimage. We were lucky enough to receive a gift that will help all families in our community get to Eretz Yisrael, to learn, explore, and express our love together. If you've never been to Israel, please join us. I will work as hard as I possibly can to get everyone who wants to go there. The trip promises to be

inspirational, fun, and one-of-a-kind. On the whole, it will be a tour of everything Mel and I love to eat (and occasionally see and do) in Israel, shared with all of you in real time. We have been fantasizing about this opportunity since we have come to Waterville. Do not miss it!

We face so many challenges as a small community in mid-Maine. There are times when we get exhausted, bored, and just done with everything. But this is also an incredibly loving, supportive, and warm community that makes me laugh, smile, and feel deep gratitude for being your rabbi, and raising Nitzan among you. I cannot wait to make 5777 a banner year for Jewish life in Waterville.

L'Shanah Tovah!