

The year is 1975. Saigon falls, leading to the end of the war in Vietnam. John N. Mitchell, John Ehrlichman, and H. R. Haldeman are convicted on charges of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and perjury for their role in the Watergate scandal. Elton John and the Eagles top the Billboard charts and *Godfather: Part II* wins best picture, although summer blockbuster *Jaws* by a little-known young director named Steven Spielberg blows away all the competition at the box office. The Pittsburgh Steelers win what will be the first of four Super Bowl championships in six years, and a late-night variety show called *Saturday Night Live* makes its debut. A small company called Microsoft launches that year, and a small group of Jewish families living in Wyckoff, New Jersey decides to start a synagogue in a town that doesn't have a history of being particularly welcoming to Jews. Thank God they did! So on this, our fifty year celebration, I want to reflect on our congregation's beginnings and on our future.

Many of us know the stories of the earliest days of Beth Rishon – indeed, a number of people sitting here today *lived* these stories. But for those who aren't familiar they definitely bear repeating. Temple Beth Rishon was originally founded as the 'Wyckoff-Franklin Lakes Synagogue,' an outgrowth of the Jewish Community Organization which served the small but growing number of Wyckoff Jewish families. The congregation initially met at the Wyckoff Women's Club, and the first High Holiday services were held at the North Haledon Fire House fifty years ago today. Rapidly growing and needing its own space, the congregation bought Lemmerman's Farm in 1977 to build its own synagogue, but nothing was easy. Town officials told our founders that Wyckoff already had twelve churches and didn't need another. And so the township changed the zoning laws to prevent Beth Rishon from building a synagogue on this property under the guise of trying to prevent too much traffic on Russell Avenue. But an ugly act of bigotry gave rise to many beautiful gestures of welcome as people went door to door with a petition to allow Beth Rishon to build our synagogue. And not just Jews – the priests of St. Elizabeth Catholic church and St. Nicholas Orthodox church at the time instructed their parishioners to gather signatures as well as a gesture of solidarity with their Jewish neighbors, until finally the construction was approved. The community broke ground on our beautiful building on April 22, 1979, and the very first service in the building was held in October of that year in an open, framed structure with just one electric line and one water line because, apparently, the congregation needed to hold a service in the space by that date in order to be granted not-for-profit status as a house of worship so our land wouldn't be taxed. The first High Holidays in the building were held the following year, and even then the synagogue was still a work in progress – there were no pews or carpet or heat and the building was cold on an uncharacteristically chilly and rainy September day. Some things never change – fifty years later, people still routinely complain about the temperature!

In the time since its inception, Beth Rishon has undergone many changes. The fledgling synagogue attracted new members and within the first year grew to about 90 families. The religious school was part of the congregation from the beginning, meeting first at Fair Lawn Jewish Center and then at Eisenhower until our building was complete. It launched a preschool five years later in 1980 to serve the needs of the growing number of young families moving to the area. Beth Rishon initially relied on a number of rabbis in brief succession until hitting its stride with Rabbis Belzer and Perl of blessed memory, whom many here remember fondly. In 1981 the congregation changed its name to Beth Rishon, from the Hebrew '*rishon*,' 'first,'

reflecting all it had overcome to establish itself as the first Jewish house of worship in Wyckoff; fifty years later, it is still the only synagogue in town.

The congregation truly grew and thrived under the tenures of Rabbi Kenneth Emert and Hazzan Ilan Mamber of blessed memory, our rabbi and cantor emeritus who served at Beth Rishon for twenty-two and thirty-one years respectively. Their partnership was, by many accounts, tumultuous at times, but together they built Beth Rishon into a true pillar of Bergen County Jewish life. It was during this period that the current sanctuary was built and the education wing was added to create a dedicated religious school and preschool space to accommodate the needs of our expanding congregation. Beth Rishon's services were marked by joy, a love of Israel, an emphasis on welcome, pride in being Jewish, and distinctive musical selections that reflected Hazzan Mamber's eclectic tastes and influences.

Rabbi Emert retired in 2017 – although we are delighted that he is still an active presence at Beth Rishon, most recently at our Fiftieth Anniversary Gala in May. Hazzan Mamber was tragically and unexpectedly taken from us just one year later in 2018. His sudden passing rocked the congregation, and his guitar is mounted on the wall by the entrance to the sanctuary as a loving tribute to the many lives he touched. Following his passing, Beth Rishon went through something of a rocky period, which was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, whose repercussions are still being felt today in many Jewish institutions. Despite these challenges, Beth Rishon is now growing and thriving again, and there is a palpable sense of optimism and excitement as Beth Rishon marks the end of its first fifty years and turns toward the future.

I was honored to be selected to serve as rabbi of Beth Rishon in 2021, and am privileged to be celebrating my fifth High Holidays with you along with Cantor Dubin who is taking part in her third. For me, coming to Beth Rishon was love at first sight. Beth Rishon is a truly precious community: people here genuinely care for one another – not just sharing in each other's celebrations and successes, but accompanying and supporting one another in difficult times as well. Our members feel a personal investment in the community – they know that their effort and their presence make a genuine difference. This sense of personal commitment drives our countless amazing volunteers, who give of their time and talents and treasure not with thought of accolades and recognition but simply because they want to do whatever they can to build and strengthen the community. It's the openness to an array of perspectives and backgrounds, it's the commitment to building a thriving Jewish community in Wyckoff, it's forming a safe and supportive space to celebrate Israel. It's the volunteers who help out in the office, run our gift shop, assemble our sukkah each year, drop off Shabbat meals to congregants who have experienced losses and welcome baskets to new members, polish the silver, purchase our supplies, and so many behind-the-scenes roles that keep our synagogue running. It is our president and trustees and other lay leaders who labor tirelessly to preserve and expand all the things we do here, who nurture our community with energy and devotion, ensuring that the initial creative burst that gave rise to our synagogue keeps burning strong.

It's important to mention an aspect of how Beth Rishon's significance and function has shifted over the course of these fifty years. For our founders, Jewish identity was a given and affiliation with a synagogue was highly likely. They were Jewish in their *kishkes*, and most of their friends were probably Jewish as well. Moving to Wyckoff took them farther from the Jewish neighborhoods where they had grown up and so there was an imperative to start a synagogue because the Jews of Wyckoff needed a place where they could hold services and educate their

children. In our own time, identity is more fluid and affiliation cannot be assumed. It is not enough for a synagogue to exist; connection with a Jewish community is voluntary, and there are many more avenues these days for families to find a Jewish education for their children and even celebrate lifecycle passages. In the face of that changing reality – which is generational and is in no way unique to Beth Rishon or even to the Jewish community – the synagogue has taken on if anything an even greater importance: for some it may be the one and only place outside of family gatherings where there is a critical mass of Jews around them, where they form and sustain a sense of Jewish connection that in turn helps to anchor them in their Judaism. Rather than an expression of Jewish identity Beth Rishon is an incubator for it, and in that sense has a greater responsibility than ever to provide a thriving, inclusive, joyous environment that welcomes everyone seeking to build and support a Jewish home and serves as a place to learn, grow, and belong. I don't take this responsibility lightly – at one point if a rabbi alienated someone he might drive them away to a different synagogue, but now if a rabbi alienates someone they might be driving them away from Jewish life entirely.

We are profoundly fortunate then, that we have some advantages and strengths that were built into our DNA from the very beginning. Among these is the fact that Beth Rishon is a non-denominational congregation, unaffiliated with any of the movements in Jewish life. Because we are not beholden to any particular denomination or organization, we are free to be who we are, which is in turn an expression of our members. We are not confined or constrained by any orthodoxies that dictate what we must think, do, or say – other than a deep love and appreciation for Jewish life and a commitment to building a thriving Jewish future. This openness means that our community draws on people with a diverse array of backgrounds and perspectives – from those who grew up in very traditional Jewish communities and synagogues, to Jews-by-choice, to those who grew up Reform or Conservative, to those whose primary connection was their Jewish youth group, and to members who are not themselves Jewish and yet choose to be part of a Jewish community and help create a Jewish home for their families. This diversity is another strength of Beth Rishon and helps us create a space where everyone feels at home and knows they have a place where they belong.

Chief among our strengths from the earliest days are the amazing people who form our community – dedicated, generous, passionate, and down to earth. We see this in our founding members who are still part of this community, and also in many cases in their children and grandchildren who have chosen to make Beth Rishon their Jewish home as well. And not just our founding members – there are so many long-term members who raised their children here, and now those children are part of the community in their own right and are choosing to raise *their* children here. The number of three and even four-generation families in a synagogue only fifty years old is astounding. It is a constant source of joy and wonder to me that we have so many multi-generation families here at TBR, and it would be hard to imagine a more beautiful, meaningful, and lasting tribute to our founders' vision for this community. It is no secret that a beautiful building and talented clergy will only get you so far; it is the people of Beth Rishon – all of you – who are our greatest strength and whose devotion and energy make our synagogue community vibrant and dynamic every single day.

I saw a great example of that devotion and energy in action just a few weeks ago at our Welcome Back Barbeque, which also served as an open house for prospective members. People who were here checking out TBR were warmly greeted by congregants who took

genuine interest in our visitors and were offering all kinds of tips and suggestions for those who had recently moved to the area. The prospective members I spoke with all remarked how much they enjoyed and appreciated the energy of all our young families – our kids playing in the bounce house or making crafts at the various tables – but also seeing the mix of more veteran members on hand to celebrate the beginning of fall, all seamlessly integrated and interacting as part of one vibrant community. The *feeling* in the room that morning reflected the very best of Beth Rishon – a program planned and put together by our amazing volunteers, who pivoted because of the weather to move the whole event inside which added all kinds of logistical headaches; and yet it came off without a hitch, and the whole morning was filled with joy and connection.

These have been hallmark qualities of Beth Rishon for the past fifty years and we are so grateful to be the recipients of this legacy of warmth and welcome. And since we're talking about old traditions, I want to take advantage of this opportunity to encourage you to participate in a new tradition that I inaugurated here last year at the High Holidays. In many communities there is a practice to wear white on Yom Kippur, and I want to remind you that everyone is invited to dress in white once again this year for our Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur morning services. We want to create a sense of community and intentionality, and last year it was truly transformative to see so many who showed up in white and how that visual queue connected us to the power and purpose of the day. As a reminder, for men dressing in white can be as simple as skipping the jacket and tie and wearing a white dress shirt. For women, a white blouse or top is great if putting together an all-white outfit seems too daunting. Dressing in white can turn us away from external appearances and focus us inward. It can act as a spur to contemplation – both for ourselves, and also for the people around us in the way that it changes the overall feeling and atmosphere in the sanctuary, and provides a visual touchstone for the spiritual work of the day.

That spiritual work calls on so many qualities, and there is one quality in particular that I respect and admire about Beth Rishon and which is a critical part of this fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating. Many of the founding and earliest members I spoke with said they never imagined that the congregation they started would grow into the splendid home where we are all gathered today. The idea of beginning something from nothing, of creating a new reality, requires many qualities. It requires vision, it requires commitment, it requires perseverance. But there's something else as well I think which is necessary to launch an enterprise like Beth Rishon, and that is audacity. Audacity is the quality of being able to look at a situation and, without denying or minimizing the challenges, to believe that there can be real, substantive, and lasting change and that you can help bring it about. It is a deeply Jewish quality; the *chutzpah* that we talk about all the time and imagine to be a Yiddish term is actually ancient Aramaic and appears more than 1500 years ago in the Talmud, a testament to how central the notion of audacity is for the Jewish people. It is the bursting of boundaries, the boldness to dare. It is a belief in the power of the possible, a refusal to let what *is* define or constrain what might be.

The truth is, that same audacity lies at the heart of the holiday of Rosh ha-Shanah. Rosh ha-Shanah celebrates the Creation of the world, itself an audacious act of hope. God, you might ask – can God be audacious? If God can do anything, is there really any such thing for God as having to hope, of taking a chance? The answer is a resounding yes, because in creating this world and placing human beings in charge of it, God takes the enormous risk of placing the

success or failure of this grand experiment we call the universe in the hands of frail, fallible beings that God does not control. This improbable – perhaps even irresponsible – step is reflected in a powerful story in the Talmud where the angels all try to convince God not to create human beings, arguing that we would not be worthy custodians and caretakers of the gift we received. While they may indeed have been correct, we are all fortunate that the angels did not succeed in their task, that God went forward with the audacious project of creating this singular precious world and entrusting it to us in the hope-against-hope that our impulse toward goodness and generosity would overcome our selfishness, fear, and small-mindedness.

And in that way audacity lies at the heart of Rosh ha-Shanah, because every year we are called upon to make a change in who we are and how we behave – to bring ourselves more fully in line with God's image of all we could be. And it's hard, and we do it for a while, and then we revert back to our old habits and routines. And so we might give up, but we have planted within us the seed of audacity to imagine that we really can change something fundamental, that we can with God's help transform ourselves in meaningful and lasting ways, and that even when we fall short there is both valor and value in the attempt. It is in this regard that the great twentieth-century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "The most unnoticed of all miracles is the miracle of repentance. It is not the same thing as rebirth; it is transformation, creation. In the dimension of time there is no going back. But the power of repentance causes time to be created backward and allows re-creation of the past to take place. Through the forgiving hand of God, harm and blemish which we have committed against the world and against ourselves will be extinguished, transformed into salvation."

It is very fortunate, then, that we are gathered in this beautiful space that is a testament to audacity – to demonstrating what it is possible to accomplish if we dare to dream. If we envision the world we want to see, the world we want to leave to our children, and ask the question of what role we need to take on to do our part. If we ask what kinds of people we can become, and how we will be able to rise and meet that challenge. If we ask what capacities and attributes we need to develop in ourselves – whether it's boldness, or patience, or courage or kindness. Ask how we can claim the mantle of audacity to make the changes in our lives we need, envision these new possibilities. And most crucially: how can we mobilize the power of this community of which we are a part, this community around us that is the product of holy *chutzpah*, in order to steer us in those directions and support us along the way?

The Talmud tells a story that highlights the power of audacity and vision. The story is about a man named Honi, who is walking in a field when he sees an old man planting a young carob tree. Honi mocks the old man, saying: You foolish man, don't you realize that a carob tree takes seventy years to mature. You will have died long before that tree gives forth fruit. The old man replies: Just as my ancestors planted trees for me so I would have fruit to eat, I am planting for those who come after me. The story relates that Honi lies down and falls into a deep sleep that lasts seventy years. When he awakens, he sees that the carob tree is now full grown, and he sees an old man harvesting its fruit. He calls out, "Are you the one who planted this tree?" "No," replies the man, "My grandfather planted it for me long before I was born."

The story is beautiful in its wisdom and simplicity; and how fortunate are we all that the founders of Beth Rishon needed no parable to understand the lesson Honi couldn't grasp for himself. From the start, they appreciated the importance of what they were planting and they have been privileged to see not only the next generation but the one after that reap its fruit. All

of us have been the beneficiaries of their radiant audacity. And as we celebrate the beginning of a new year here – together, today – let us be sure always to remember those who made this moment possible. And let us be sure to add our own new boughs and branches – to make this precious inheritance we have received even stronger and more enduring for the next generation.

May Beth Rishon continue over the next fifty years and beyond to inspire us to grow, connect, nurture, dare, and dream as our community flourishes *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation.