

Kol Nidre Speech

Good evening and L'Shana Tovah. I am Barry Marks Temple Beth El's president of the Board of Directors and it is my privilege to welcome you to our mutual home at this sacred time of the New Year, 5770. First, I want to thank Drew Barkley our Executive Director and our wonderful Temple Office Staff, Custodians and volunteers who did all the behind the scenes work to make these events run smoothly so that we might all benefit. Second, Rabbi Rick and Rabbi Paula for enabling us to deepen our spirituality with their thoughtful sermons and chanting. Also, Rabbi Shifra and those helping her in providing meaningful services for the younger children. Third, Rebecca and the Choir for providing amazing music that takes us to a higher level. Fourth, I want to welcome all of you; congregants, families and an especially warm greeting to visitors or visiting relatives. Finally I want to send my personal message of appreciation to any of Temple Beth El's past presidents who are here tonight.

There is one past President who is here in spirit. His name is Ed Spire and I am dedicating this speech to his blessed memory. I'll start with a brief attempt at humor that he would have especially appreciated.

There is a story about a recently installed temple president - who was asked how he was sleeping, with all the pressures and obligations that are intrinsic to the job. He responded, "Ever since I have become president, I am sleeping like a baby." "Really?" asked his friend. "Absolutely", he responded, "I wake up every two hours and cry." Ed, I sense your spirit is with us tonight and I hope you enjoyed that. I miss you and your wisdom in these challenging times.

A portion of our focus throughout these 10 days is a series of reminders about the importance of our Temple Beth El community now and in the future. We heard this theme interwoven in the Rosh Hashanah remarks by Rabbi Paula (forgiving oneself) and Rabbi Rick (permission to make U-turns anytime). Scott Roseman with humor and passion challenged us to become better acquainted, to recognize the value of our community and to support our temple both spiritually and financially. Aly Pomerantz enthusiastically informed us how important the Temple community is for our youth and how equally important our youth is to the future of Jewish communities everywhere.

Tonight, we've reached the eve of Yom Kippur. This evening's service is named for its opening prayer, Kol Nidre (All Vows). It is beautiful and unique. It speaks of vows spoken and not fulfilled, of future vows that we deliver with every intention of keeping, yet some we will not keep.

In a way, we are entering the home stretch toward the gates that will close tomorrow at sunset. We are immersed in reflection, teshuva (repentance), and atonement. For me, this year, this immersion has resulted in some intense questioning. I sensed that something was coming to the surface of my conscious thoughts. It was bringing me back to the year 1998. That year my mother Dorothy, who lived in the Los Angeles area, had been going through a series of physical and mental setbacks. She had always been upbeat, even after two bouts of breast cancer and the 1991 death of her husband. I anticipated that she would approach her physical ailments (that were not life threatening) with her usual blend of determination and positive thinking. She was 79, yet I knew that both her mother and uncle had had active, relatively healthy lives into their late 90's. But, a mysterious emotional condition ensued. There was a change in her demeanor and during the summer she stopped eating. I talked with her about this repeatedly in an effort to determine what had happened and to provide support. She seemed lucid, and I was perplexed. She finally told me in late August that she had been visited by a man on July 26th (my birthday) who told her that she would no longer need to eat. I pointedly told her that if she continued to follow that advice she would die. We discussed the High Holidays coming up in a month or so and she responded that she wanted to be inscribed in the Book of Life. I vowed to do whatever I could to support that choice but I left feeling concerned and uneasy.

In early September I agreed to arrange for the hospital staff working with her to meet with us so that she could demonstrate to them her physical and emotional improvement. At that meeting I watched in amazement as she summoned the will to do things that surprised and impressed the staff. At that point I had to return home to my wife, Julie, and the kids. Two weeks later her condition deteriorated significantly and then I was told she would need a feeding tube to survive. She wasn't able to tell the doctors what she wanted to be done. I knew from talking with her that she wouldn't want to be kept alive in that condition, yet I had vowed to help her survive. My sister, who is 10 years younger than I, left the decision to me. I sought out advice and decided at the last

possible moment to refuse the procedure. She died 10 days later on erev Rosh Hashanah (September 20th) and I was plunged into grief, guilt, and confusion. I traveled to LA and worked out the details for her burial (not an easy task during the High Holidays). This experience has left me with bitter-sweet feelings toward the High Holidays.

Now, Rosh Hashana 5770 has arrived and my speech for tonight made me concentrate on these memories.

I listened to Rabbi Rick describe the “final test” questions. I read Rabbi Paula’s Kol Nidre sermon from 6 years ago. Perhaps I’m now ready to look again at the vows that I made eleven years ago and also give more consideration to the ones I might make during 5770. Perhaps our community may be ready to do likewise. Reflect, repent, atone, forgive. We are currently embarking on a healing process. Words have been exchanged, sometimes painful ones. Vows have been issued and pushed aside.

I pray that we will be blessed with the courage to truthfully examine the issues that may prevent us from fulfilling our commitments. May we also be blessed with the knowledge that we have an opportunity to begin anew. May we be granted the gift of perseverance and the audacity of hope. May we truly feel the sense of release that the Kol Nidre experience offers us as a gift of our tradition. And may we be inscribed in the Book of Life for a Year of increased compassion, joy in our relationships, and shalom. May you have a tzom kal, an easy fast.