

Rosh Hashanah 5783

When It Got Real

Rabbi David Englander

Congregation Beth El, Voorhees New Jersey

If you have not been opening your emails from Beth El, if you have not been reading the Beth El News, or if you have chosen to drive safely down Evesham road and not peek up at the billboard near the sidewalk, let me just begin by saying - surprise! And let me really begin by saying Shanah tovah to you and to all of our families. It is an honor to be able to share these holidays with you at our Beth El home, and I am already looking forward to many more.

I don't know if you have had the pleasure of driving from south Florida to south Jersey. Stephanie and I have had that pleasure - twice in the span of a few weeks in fact. Both were long and schleppey - podcasts, downloaded tv shows, and - how shall we call them - culturally diverse stops along the way only go so far to make that drive more pleasant. When you drive in the other direction it is

reaching the Palm Beach County line when you feel like you might actually make it. Going north, it was an exit off of 295 that you have probably taken a hundred if not a thousand times which was for me the moment I knew things had changed for us. Stuff, as the saying goes, got real. It is, for the record, exit 32. I still don't know what or where Gibbsboro is, but the sign pointing there is also the first sign on that long route that points by name to our new home, to this place called Voorhees.

We had "it just got real" moments before that as well. The first time a letter came to our Boca mailbox addressed to the new owners. Our last Shabbat in a place where we had celebrated a thousand. Our kids' last night in the only home they had even known. Applying for a New Jersey driver's license not realizing that they don't actually give you back your old one. Going to Shoprite for the first time and having to carry our groceries out one by one because we had no idea about the ban on bags. And one more "it got real" moment that has to do with all of you.

I made the consequential decision to seek a new rabbinic position last year soon after these holidays. It was, as I've said many times, time to go and time to grow. Interviewing is not simple in more normal times. In this pandemic era it was even less so. Sitting down to my Zoom interview, I found myself in a shirt and tie, which is considered dressed up for Zoom, in my makeshift office which was actually a corner of our bedroom. I clicked the link sent to me by co-chairs Jason and Faye to join the meeting of the entire Beth El search committee. I was a few minutes early. And I got that screen you have seen as well: please wait, the host will let you in soon. Stuff began to feel very real as I waited for that view to be replaced by the faces who would decide if they thought this all could be a good fit for you, and for me.

In that very real moment I want to tell you what I did, which I have not shared before, with anyone. I said a spontaneous prayer. I wasn't planning to pray, truth be told outside of our fixed services I don't spend a lot of time praying in words though I admire people who do. But at

that moment I felt the need to. And my prayer was not: please don't reboot my internet in the next ninety minutes. And it was not: please let me succeed in this interview and be offered this position. Instead it was something like this. God, please bless the members of this search committee with wisdom and courage because their work is important for them and for me. If this is the right fit for both of us please let us get to the place where we both understand that our lives will be enhanced because of this new connection that will exist between us. Mostly, though, I prayed that those on the other side of the screen should be safe and healthy and well, their family life should be loving and happy, and whatever happens, the congregation they represent should be successful in its mission to lift up all who are involved with it, in all ways that it has, is, and yet will be, with or without me. Soon the screen turned to boxes, the boxes turned into questions, the questions turned into a visit to Voorhees, and that visit led to two drives from Boca, and to exit 32 off of I-295.

This holiday is all about stuff getting real. We face what we otherwise might choose to ignore, push away, or delay until pushed by circumstances to do so. What did we do, what did we fail to do. What choices did we make, what choices should we have made, it is all open for consideration by God, and in a more accessible way, it is open to consideration by each of us.

It may seem like these hours together are not so very real, more like a break from our daily reality, a suspension from our everyday business that is disconnected from the rest of our lives that will pick up again when these days end. But there is another way to look at it. Rosh Hashanah gives us what amount to a few moments - sometimes it might feel like longer than that but I assure you in the grand scheme of time it is barely a few moments - to confront and reflect on what is referred to by a great teacher of Judaism as the realest reality of them all.

What does this real reality include? The ever more certain knowledge that time is passing, and that the day is short

and the task is great. That there is power and uplift in being together as a community, whether in person or online, and we get more out of linking our lives to something bigger than ourselves than we do trying to go it alone. There is meaning in doing something that many generations have done as well, marking this day as the day on which our collective human journey began. Of hearing the shofar and honestly reflecting without excuses and committing to pushing forward in this one blessed life we have been given toward meaning, substance, love and truth.

We have experienced so much over these last three strange and destabilizing years. But the most critical thing to remember about them is not that we learned how to Zoom and how to have our groceries delivered. It is that we lost people. We lost dearly loved ones to an illness that for a time seemed like it was waiting to grab all of us. It took them from us, from this community, from every community. Our tradition teaches us to move forward without forgetting and we will not forget. Synagogues can

be a repository of memory, a place where if you are involved and dedicated or even simply connected you will be appreciated and you will not be forgotten. We bear collective responsibility to memorialize those lost too soon to Covid, and to support those whose lives have been upended by a virus that took six and a half million lives worldwide and affected many, many more.

We are now learning together what it means to slowly do the very Jewish thing of moving forward back into life. We are taking the skills we have sharpened during this difficult and long chapter into what seems to finally be a post-pandemic world.

To me this includes making sure not only our building but what happens in it remains accessible to those who can't be here in person. We are so glad that so many have found their way into this beautiful synagogue that impresses me every time I approach and enter it, and I hope it continues to impress you too. It is an achievement to be proud of, to maintain lovingly, and to commit to

making sure it houses services, programs, and gatherings of meaning, fun, and inspiration. Yes you chose me but I also chose you. And this is why I did, because I saw what you have already built and achieved and I know that you did not do all of that to stop now but to keep growing, learning, celebrating milestones and mourning losses. All in connection to this amazing Beth El community, anchored in this uniquely and lovingly designed and constructed space, and open to all who click in to our broadcast services, classes, and programs.

I know I will have great partners in propelling the Beth El story forward. We will continue traditions that have served us well, that have given us and this synagogue direction and purpose. We will honor those whose contributions have been irreplaceable in bringing Beth El to this point, and balance the tried and true with the innovative and forward-looking. We will preach, teach and try to model and encourage each other to live out our Jewish identities in ways that will improve not only our lives but those of others whose real realities are often quite different than

our own. Twenty and thirty years ago it was Early Childhood Education and Infant Care that reinvigorated synagogue life. We are blessed with both, and we are so happy to see these precious children stride confidently toward their classrooms every day, who join in lots of Shabbat and holiday programming just for them together with their wonderful parents and families. They bring us a lot of energy and joy in the present, and they give us unending hope for the future.

We know that today these parents, as well as plenty of people of all ages and backgrounds, are seeking to make the most meaning out of Judaism not only in those ways but through volunteerism and giving of their time to improve the life of their community and the lives of others both nearby and further away. I see synagogues as having the great opportunity to be a hub of volunteerism of all kinds. This includes meaningful and clearly communicated ways to help for those who want to serve their shul, through age-based affinity groups, Sisterhood, Men's club, Adult Education, and more, as well as those

who seek to rise to enter the pipeline of needed lay leadership the likes of which Beth El is blessed to have.

It includes more than that. Synagogues can and should be great partners with organizations doing good work to improve the lives of those in close proximity, the way big brothers and big sisters does, the way those who read to underprivileged kids does, the way collaborations with schools in underserved districts makes a real difference as we seek to share our blessings of care, concern, time, and the fulfillment of the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Abraham, the subject of our Torah readings on these mornings, is called to be a blessing. That instinct, drive and desire still resonates, and it has been a growing force for good people doing good things in their synagogues and in communities nearby.

And it includes even more than that. Because of the same modern miracle that allowed us to stay connected during a global pandemic, we can learn about what is going on in virtually every corner of this world with the click of a

mouse or tap on a phone. With that comes information and inspiration, and with that also comes the certain knowledge that the needs are endless, but the effective ways we can alleviate a small amount of that need are more accessible to us than ever before. In this blessed country, the greatest Diaspora home for Jewish communities and Jewish living in all of history, we have our challenges but we also have ways to address them. And we can be involved in that as a synagogue without crossing the partisan divide because the strength of this country's democracy is without a doubt integrally connected to Jewish survival.

It was not a simple journey to arrive at this first Rosh Hashanah together. Not for me and my family, not for us collectively as a congregation, not as a community that together with people all over the world faced the real reality of living with and losing so much in a pandemic that we hope is mostly now behind us but the effects of which stay with us in ways we know and do not yet know. Not as proud and dedicated Americans who continue to strive

with our fellow citizens to contribute to making sure this grand experiment does not falter but instead gets stronger for having been tested in our own recent past.

And I know that this is not a simple holiday for you, but a year of transition to a new face and voice, and I want you to know I affirm, validate, and can identify with the stresses and the energy that great change brings with it. We will have the chance to appropriately, sincerely and collectively thank Rabbi Krupnick for his exceptional service and dedication to Beth El. I'm pleased as you are that in retirement he plans to stay close by. His guidance and wisdom have already helped me immensely. This rabbi will always rely on that rabbi for insight and sage-level advice. His and Helene's home at Beth El is a permanent one.

So, if I've met my goal for this first Rosh Hashanah sermon, I've reminded you that this holiday directs us to evaluate our lives with honesty and to look forward with hope. That it is incumbent on us to remember who and

what we have lost and with all the energy we can gather to stride forward into lives that matter. That our challenges are significant but our capacity to meet them is stronger. That finding a way to be of service to others, and if needed, to allow others to be of support to you, is an expression of Jewish values that has and will be embodied and encouraged by Beth El.

Everyone likes to receive a gift. The gift of this holiday is the chance to reflect on where we have been and where we want to go. Who we have been and who we yet hope to be. What we have done, what we regret, what we avoided, and, thankfully, how we have made progress toward becoming our better selves. The gift of this synagogue is the gift of preserving memory, of connecting to everyone who wants to be part of the next chapter of a story entering its second century, and of being a center of sacred service of God and our fellow human beings.

We have collectively persevered through a difficult time and we have committed to pushing forward on our

individual and communal journeys, humbly offering thanks for the blessings that are part of each of our lives. I am sure that our best potential waits to be pursued and achieved, in the kindest and most meaningful way we can encourage ourselves and each other to do that. I could not be more proud or honored to be on this journey with you. As I prayed for you before those Zoom boxes filled up at my interview, I pray for Beth El today and every day. There is so much that is ahead of us. On this Rosh Hashanah, may we be granted the strength and focus we seek to make the next year of our lives, our community, and our world as enriched, healthy, hopeful, and good as we pray it will be. May God bless us all with a sweet, uplifting, inspired, and in all possible ways a beautiful New Year.

Shanah Tovah.