

Kol Nidre 5783
Congregation Beth El - Voorhees, NJ
Rabbi David Englander

A common bit of dialogue that I experienced in my first weeks with you at Beth El and in my new community went something like this. Someone would ask me, "So where are you moving from?" And I would say south Florida, Boca Raton. And almost everyone had the same reaction. Their eyes would widen and they would kind of gasp a little and they would say in an elevated volume - and you moved here? As in - why would you do that?

I want to say first of all that I think a lot of that has to do with what I would call post traumatic winter stress disorder. It is true that winters where I spent twenty-three years were a blessing. But summers, and hurricanes as we were reminded again recently, were no bargain. We bless our members and those who have spent time here for decades who are now seeking the warmer climes of the southeast whether for all or part of the year, and we will stay in touch with you and hope you will continue to

partner with us here. You are important to us, so important that you get a mention right here at the outset of this inaugural Kol Nidre message.

While that conversation happened frequently it was not the most often repeated one. That one went something like this. I would ask people if they are from this area or came from somewhere else. And you know the answer - many, many of you are from right here. And those who are not from here are from, you know, like 10 miles away. It is a rare couple where one partner is not a local. So as a transplant to southern New Jersey the Englanders are not alone but we are in the minority. Unless you count that my great great grandfather, Rabbi Simon Englander, and my great grandfather, Rabbi David Englander were both rabbis of the Hungarian shul at 5th and Gaskill in south Philadelphia. Fortunately for us, you really know how to welcome people, and that is something we have experienced first hand through programs and gatherings for all ages, from the splash pad on the ECC playground to Zed's Brewery and lots of water ice in between both

here and down the shore, and through open minds, hearts, and arms as we began this south Jersey era of our lives.

Something else would be mentioned in those conversations and if we have come to take it for granted we should not. A person or couple who is from here or right nearby would say I left for college, stayed away for a little while, but always knew I would come back and now I am. Being in a place that people want to come back to in an era of extreme mobility, with more and more jobs being able to be performed from anywhere, it is a sign of great strength. A sign that you have gotten something important right. You have built a community with deep roots and high expectations. Expectations of a quality of life that is measured not simply in creature comforts or a lovely environment, and yes I know winter is coming. But also in good schools and strong shuls and active partnerships among Jewish institutions doing good and meaningful work, in close knit families that would prefer to be in closer proximity than further away.

So we did the dance that I reflected on a bit on Rosh Hashanah which was for you seeking a rabbi and for me seeking a rabbinic position. Fast forward through all that and the moving trucks and the house buying and here we are. By the time I began my work here on July 1st, I had made a list of a number of things I wanted to accomplish before my first High Holy Days. Some were programmatic, as in what would we put on the calendar so I could meet a lot of people and they would have the chance to meet me. Some were very practical, like unpacking dozens of boxes of books, getting to know our terrific professional staff and reaching out to people who could help me learn about Beth El's culture, history and traditions. I also wanted to go to a Phillies-Mets game - check. I wanted to get a JCC membership and actually use it once in a while - check. And I wanted to try that first water ice - also, check.

I have already been deeply impressed and impacted by people's love for this shul. It is my highest rabbinic hope

to help foster an environment that continues this feeling for those who already have it, and to invite others to benefit from the enormous positive difference that calling Beth El home can make for them, as it has for so many others over a full century of progress. It was my desire to learn about that sweep of history that led to putting something else on my immediate to-do list. And that was to visit, see, and pay my respects to the former sites of this congregation. And so one hot Wednesday morning in early August Bill Baranoff picked me up and we drove first to Camden where we pulled over in front of the Marjorie & Lewis Katz East Camden Clubhouse of the Boys and Girls Club, which is as close as we could get to the the site of the first Beth El building. We also saw the structure that housed the first JCC in the area, which still has a Hebrew inscription above its front door. Then we drove five miles east to Chapel Avenue and parked outside that uniquely compelling structure where service of God still takes place under a different religious banner. And we wound up where we started, at the front door of this astoundingly

beautiful campus which I have and will continue to appreciate and to be inspired by every moment.

All those in Camden a century ago who said we need a synagogue and all those who supported it, all those who knew that due to demographic forces beyond anyone's control the future of the Jewish community lay not there but in Cherry Hill, and all those who made the brave decision to vacate that space and invest mightily in this one shared a trait, an exceptional characteristic the name of which I learned only recently. On the one hand maybe this existed beneath the surface, buried under the immense pressures of meeting the needs of that particular day. On the other, I think they knew that this human capacity was something they needed to keep at the forefront of their minds as they envisioned not only what was but what might yet be, once, and then again, and then again after that.

It is a uniquely human capability to consciously think not only about finding food, shelter and other basic needs in

the current moment, and to focus not only on one's own survival and maybe protecting one's own young or only one's own family but to expand that circle of concern well beyond that important but ultimately too-narrow place to spend all of our time or attention. It is something all visionaries share and it is a value that is embedded deep in our Jewish tradition as well. It runs contrary - as many Jewish values do - to the popular trends of any individual era, including today's radical in-the-moment focus and need for immediate gratification.

It is why sitting here, being together in sacred gathering for some hours at a time mostly with only a book and our own thoughts to accompany us is a return not only to our Jewish practices but a reminder that that we have and still can operate on a different kind of time horizon. Jewish time does not actually mean being 10 minutes late to every meeting or appointment. Even so, the early Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann once said, "I tried my whole life to come late to a Jewish meeting and never succeeded." Jewish time extends far back to the past, it demands of us

some patience mixed with fortitude and resilience, and it requires a deep understanding passed along from generation to generation that while it is up to me to live my fullest life, that life is best lived in service to something bigger than myself.

There is a word, likely of recent invention, that represents this core Jewish value of having a perspective that is rooted deep in the past and seeks to assure at least the possibility of a vibrant Jewish future. It is a word I hope you will remember well past our moments together tonight and tomorrow. I hope it will motivate you and all of us to consider important decisions through its lens and perspective. If we can remind each other to do that we will have absorbed one of the most important single ideas that our grand tradition teaches in many different ways and has always - to this very day - managed to act on. That word is longtermism. It is a school of thought popularized this year by an Oxford philosophy professor named William MacAskill in his book and at least one much-forwarded Op-Ed called What We Owe the Future.

MacAskill starts with a compelling thought experiment. Imagine that you were born as the first person ever born in the world and you lived out that person's life. Then you were re-born as the second person born in the world and you lived out their life. Lather, rinse and repeat until you have lived all the lives that have been lived, and will be lived. The guiding question that presents itself when we see ourselves as the person who is not only the beneficiary and latest link on the chain of humanity that stretches backward but also the very same person, with the same value and importance that will be born a decade or a century or a millennia from now is this: If you knew you were going to live all these future lives, what would you hope we do in the present? He calls the way we answer that question a moral priority. Whether you agree or not, I bet you identify with the sentiment. What we do today matters because we bear some responsibility for the kind of world that others will eventually inherit.

Judaism is the product of long term thinking by every prior generation, each of which we can and should be mindful

of and grateful for as we experience this important annual gathering. Not every single individual but every single generation without fail has figured out how to navigate their own challenges - and if we are being honest and appropriately humble we can say that many of their challenges were much more significant and threatening than our own - while also passing a livable set of practices and values on to those who came next. When it comes to miracles like the splitting of the sea and manna from heaven and how God spoke to Moses I'm with Forrest Gump in saying now I don't know much of anything about that. But this miracle of Jewish longevity we can identify with. Because we know that no such thing is assured in this world where entire civilizations let alone religious faiths and cultures actually do disappear. Fortunately as we consider this idea and how it applies to us and how we can act on it we do not start from nothing.

Probably the most famous midrash in that endless collection is of young Abraham smashing his father's idols. But somewhere in the top ten is another that is still

teaching us exactly what this Oxford professor is reminding us of as well. It is about the old man who plants a tree to the laughter of those watching him - surely you know you will not live to see its fruit? I do know that, but I'm not planting it for myself - my ancestors planted for me and I am planting for those who will come after me. And it is not the only example. In a midrash I was reminded of by Reb Andy Weisfeld, Beth El's rabbinic intern who was here last year, while I was checking you out on Zoom. We are taught that as the Israelites came out of Egypt and were commanded to build a temporary Tabernacle it would require the wood of acacia trees. Which are not very easy to find in a desert! But Jacob centuries earlier had planted those trees as he headed to Egypt to see his long-lost son Joseph, and now they were right where they were most needed by a young people. Others planted for us, now we do so for those who will come after us, those who we can imagine but will never personally know.

There are so many trees we can plant in the service of Jewish Longtermism. There is a Jewish culture to

preserve that is the sum total and product of all the places Jews have lived over milenia with an extra helping of this blessed American experience and our connection to the modern State of Israel, prayers that have been added to our siddur and machzor from all over the world, melodies and foods, jokes and holiday traditions. Values and commitments that include gratitude and generosity, protecting animals, nature and our own bodies, pursuing justice and repairing a broken world. And our more recent commitments that stem from them, which I spoke about at length in my interviews and you have embraced already and will continue to guard with sensitivity and strength of character - inclusivity, leaving no one out of our community who wants to find their place in it. Learning from everyone, being broad and open minded while also holding fast to our core commitments and ideals which are and always will be the interconnected three point stars of Torah, Worship, and Acts of Kindness, intermingled, overlapping with and incomplete without Truth, Justice and Peace.

You know this, you have lived it, you have built it, and in this year of transition it is my honor and obligation to remind you of it. Beth El's own history is an amazing one and with your help there are many more pages to be written in it. There are so many ways to contribute to it, and every single one is not a sacrifice for the moment but an expression of Jewish longtermism. That's our secret, it really is. If we can embrace our mission as being the irreplaceable connectors between the past and the future, connections made by living out our commitments with as much strength of mind and character as we can gather, we have every reason to believe that God will bless our efforts. Many years from now the Jewish narrative will still not have concluded, in part because we did what we could to keep it going. We fan this eternal flame with our commitments and our dedication, not only out of deference for yesterday, or out of satisfaction and fulfillment today, but so it will burn and emit the light that has guided us toward our future for so many years.

I have spent a fair number of hours in our boardroom, just down the main vestibule of this beautiful building. I look at the faces of past presidents, read their names, wonder about their biographies, the problems they faced and the hopes and visions they had. I know we are the product of their work and of thousands more whose names I will never know. I am particularly intrigued by the first two pictures, right next to the photo of the original Beth El building in Camden, the site of which I visited not long after I arrived. Unlike almost all the other photos, Morris Handle and Louis Berkowitz, in their black and white portraits, are not looking at the camera but past it. Past the present moment to the future that they believed in so strongly that they founded a shul named Congregation Beth El. I feel blessed to be with you, to be the latest rabbi entrusted with this position of great responsibility and possibility. We are all fortunate to live in this moment and to look to a future that we make possible by way of our good and values-driven choices today.

For the world longtermism is a moral priority. For Jewish life, it is what has, and always will, assure the very possibility of our future. Onward we go, and onward we grow, with optimism, hope, and needed strength. As we look back to those who paved our way forward, we can imagine that others will look back to us. May it be with gratitude for what we did or at least for what we tried to do, in this blessed corner of the Jewish world, to propel forward this extraordinary and ever increasingly inspirational Jewish story.

Shanah tovah, and g'mar chatimah tovah.