

## PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

### L'Shana Tova! THE FACE OF GOD

We are gathered here together tonight as for us, God has given us another year of life. L'chaim. This is unfortunately not the case for everyone we know and love, however. But we are here. And, if we are allowed to continue, we are commanded to do certain things during these most sacred High Holy days.

During Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we are commanded to look back at our past to understand and honor where we come from, **face** the present for who and what we are now, and look into the future to prepare and mold what we hope to become, planning to do better and be better.

Let's look at where we are now. This beautiful Temple Emanu-El was brought to us by courageous and persistent people in the past who wanted a beautiful place for Jews to congregate and pray. We honor them by doing just that. Our numbers are strong and growing. We maintain this beautiful synagogue and provide a sanctuary to pray, learn, be inspired, be together and give one another solace when needed. We have an internal structure which includes volunteer opportunities for many of us who want to give back by giving to others. We continue to honor the past by providing not only for the present here, but also for the future.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to all the congregants who volunteer and give of their time, money, and expertise to continue to make this temple what it is today, a loving space that is beautiful, open, safe, secure, welcoming and spiritually uplifting. Just look around.

We have more than 13 committees filled with hard-working volunteers: Ritual, Security, Membership, Programs, Marketing, Finance, Executive Board, BOT, Education, Kitchen, House & Maintenance, Chesed, and Tech – and the Number of volunteers is almost 25-30% of our 120+ membership. Probably unheard of. We have an amazing administrator in Yudi who keeps us all in order, not an easy task. We will miss her as she glides gleefully into the next phase of her life.

So we **face** our future with gratitude and hope, and we position ourselves to do that during this very important High Holiday season. I have used the word “**face**” a few times now. Let's talk about the word **face**. As a noun, it means our outward countenance which reflects our inward thoughts and feelings. In Judaism, the face holds deep spiritual, ethical, and halachic significance. It is seen as a window to the soul, a tool for a divining encounter, and a symbol of dignity and respect. God's face describes how the divine communicates, shows favor, or relates to humanity. In the torah, it says the that the face is a threshold – a place where the human and divine meet, and where humility and reverence are essential.

Jewish law commands a “pleasant countenance” when greeting others, meaning a warm, welcoming expression (*panim yafos sever*). This is rooted in Jacob’s blessing to Yehudah, interpreted as the “smile of your eyes” being more nourishing than wine. Smiling is seen as a mitzvah that benefits both giver and receiver, fostering kindness, reducing stress, and spreading joy. So ,everyone, indulge me for a minute. Please turn to your neighbor and give a huge smile. It really doesn’t hurt and try to avoid sneers and other non-halachic expressions. Enough already, and thank you!

And speaking of smiling, what do we see when we look in the mirror in the morning? What is our own punim saying? Personally, I usually jump back because I see my dear mother’s face, sometimes smiling, sometimes giving me that frightening side eye, under the glasses glaze that could stop a terrorist dead in his tracks. This is the same look I am working to perfect, as I tell Larry I will use it to disarm bad people who dare to come here to do harm.

In a great book I recently read, Theo of Golden, a stranger moves to a town in America’s south, goes into cafe, and there he sees hanging on the walls, renderings of many different faces. He discovers that a local artist has drawn these likenesses of the townspeople, and our stranger, who we later find is himself a very famous artist himself, sees all kinds of things in these faces: love, fear, insecurity, disappointment, courage, promise. He decides to buy up all these renderings and to meet those people one on one to share what he sees in their faces. He gifts them their picture, hoping his words will inspire them to move forward and to recognize their unique talents, gifts, and all they bring to the world.

This book got me thinking. The word **face** is also a verb. **To face**. To look closely at something or someone. This is what we are commanded to do during these High Holidays. We are to face ourselves honestly, particularly in the last year, be truthful about what we have done well and what not so well (hence the list of sins in our prayer book, my favorite part). We are also commanded to “face” God and be forthright about what we have done, said, and even thought about in our relation with God and of course, vow to do better. We are to “**face**” ourselves, our God, and the others in our lives, to be honest about the “sins” we have committed (refer to those pages in our prayer books), ask for atonement, and vow to do better in the future. What a gift is this to be given absolution and hopefully to be inscribed in the Book of Life for the coming year!

As we “**face**” our past as Jews, we see difficulties, sadness, and challenges, and horrors, but we also see love and joy and friends and family who have been there for us. We use that history of strength and the strength of our history to “**face**” ourselves, God, and others . We pray to use all that to help us move forward as the most loving, caring, productive, and resilient Jews we can be. We give to our temple, to our communities, to Israel and we pray

fervently for the courage and stamina to keep “facing” all these challenges with the strength of our forebearers. And to all of you, I wish: GMAR HATIMA TOVA!