

ROSH HASHANAH 2006/5767

Shanah tovah! Shabbat shalom!

These very special days in the Jewish calendar, the Days of Awe, cause us to reflect on where we have been and how we go forward in our lives. They bring us together—regardless of where we are coming from. In this changing world, a world in which there is so much instability and uncertainty, a world in which there is growing anti-Semitism, and escalating threats to Israel's existence, it feels even more important to be able to come together as Temple Isaiah. And it is my privilege to serve as President of this special congregation.

How often do we read in the Torah, “And you shall be a holy people?” What does it mean to be a holy people? One interpretation is that God chose the Israelites for a special purpose and their holiness derives from their very being. Another view is that the people of Israel become holy through their observance of God's commandments. How does this apply to us in our community? There is a spiritual, a sacred, component to what constitutes community for us, one of shared values and beliefs, a common history, relationships that bind us together. As such a community, we have a responsibility to each other and to ourselves to share our gifts and to celebrate our stories.

In a few years, Temple Isaiah will celebrate its 50th anniversary. In mid-1959, 40 families came together. There was no property on Lincoln Street, no beautiful sanctuary as we have today but there was the essence of a synagogue. It is all about who inhabits the space, and what values and beliefs bring them together. We have a very strong foundation on which to build and move forward with our more than 800 households: the thousands of years of the history of the Jewish people and the almost 50 years of the traditions and leadership of Temple Isaiah. We are after all a community of memory. But different times bring different challenges and require different structures, responses, and skills. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy, Worship and Religion at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, notes in his book *Rethinking Synagogues*: “What the synagogue is—its people and their relationships—constitute community. How the synagogue works—the channels by which people communicate—constitutes the system. System determines relationship. Community follows from system.” We at Temple Isaiah have been working on the system in order to strengthen community.

Last year, the Congregation, after a significant study and work by a Board of Trustees subcommittee, approved a reorganization of the Board, which reflects our mission and our core values. Six areas of responsibility have been designated which also correspond to circles of community within the larger community and six vice presidents now hold specific portfolios: Worship reflects our spiritual community; Education, a community of lifelong learners; Finance and Administration, an organizationally responsible community; Programming, a Jewish community; Leadership and Community Development, a growing and connected community; and Tikkun Olam, a just and kind community. These circles overlap in responsibilities and constituencies, and in so doing foster collaboration, connection and innovation.

We are, of course, in the early stages of implementation and recognize that much of what we are attempting is a work in progress. We are shaping a new organizational culture which distributes responsibility, broadens authority, and reflects the partnership between clergy and lay leadership prevalent in Reform synagogues today. An early benefit of the new structure is the opportunity to develop a leadership team to benefit the congregation—and dare I say, the president. I envision many such teams working on specific tasks, solving problems, making decisions. This allows the community to benefit from the talents and expertise of many of you.

A part of the new structure was the creation of an ongoing Leadership Development Program. We now have one—with the help of a dedicated team of congregants and consultants from the Commission on Jewish Continuity and Education. I urge you to consider joining, if not this year then a subsequent year. The initial program will be launched in December. We will start small in terms of numbers but we have grand plans for what we want to accomplish over the long term. The Program will stress communication and inclusion, team building and community. It will build skills that will benefit both professional and personal development. What distinguishes it from other such programs is its focus on leadership in a Jewish context. We hope that this will mean that more of us will become involved in the Temple community, in a variety of capacities, both small and large. But more important, this kind of program is of intrinsic benefit to every one of us, in how we live our lives, at home and at work, in volunteer roles across a broad spectrum.

This year we also have a new program of worship. In addition to our thriving Yom Shabbat program, each month there will be a service appropriate for families, a music service and a Torah service. Last week, Philip and I had the honor of holding up the Torah while it was being read, a very special experience. We are continuing the successful Family Connection Program in the high school. This year, parents of college students will join the sessions to keep abreast of issues of concern to young adults. Our Social Action Committee is involved in so many projects, but let me single out the Community Organizing Project and the momentum, the excitement and empowerment, that have been established through its collaboration with other synagogues and participation in assemblies of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. Our Israel Action Committee has taken a leadership role in the local area in support of Israel during these especially trying times, in establishing public forums, in the press and in interfaith dialogue. These are only a few examples of how we are making community here and elsewhere.

Let me close by expressing our gratitude to those who contribute so very much to this community these days and every day. To our clergy: to Rabbi Jaffe, who earlier this month, was honored by the Combined Jewish Philanthropies with its annual Rabbinic Award. We are proud to share it with him. To Rabbi Brown who has become so integral a part of our congregation, and is ever present in Social Action, especially the efforts in Darfur. Please join us on Friday, October 13, the 7 o'clock erev Simchat Torah service, when the Aufruf, the pre-wedding ceremony, of Rabbi Brown and Gregg Gardner will be held. To Cantor Solomon, who, with his extensive musical gifts, is teaching us what a cantor can bring to a congregation. His band Safam, with their Jewish American Sound, will be featured at the Carey Yales Memorial Concert at Chanukah. To Rob Humphreyville and our choir whose

music and voices so enhance our services. To Betsy Herman, our dedicated administrative director and her able staff who ensure the smooth functioning of the Temple on a daily basis. To Ed Preciado, who is new to his role as Head Custodian, but not new to the Temple, for getting our space in the best shape it has ever been. To Bruce Ward, his High Holiday Committee and ushers, who with their superb organizational and logistical skills, tireless and intensive work, ensure our spiritual well-being and personal safety during these important days. To Abbe Smerling, whose excellent child care provides a High Holiday experience for our youngest members. To the Board of Trustees, to all who have come before, and to all of you, our wonderful congregation, who make Temple Isaiah the special place it is. I thank you.

Rabbi Hoffman describes synagogues “as places where good deeds characterize the way members treat one another and the way they reach out into the world.” By working together, helping one another, being there for each other, we strengthen the community, other communities and ourselves. Let us broaden our own circles to embrace the visitor, to welcome the new congregant, to become acquainted with the congregant of longer standing we do not know. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel remarked: “When I was young, I liked clever people; now that I am old, I like kind people.” With that said, perhaps we should all try to be clever and kind.

From me to you, from my family to yours, shanah tovah! May it be a sweet year, a year filled with good health and happiness, a year of peace and blessings for us all.

Laura Gordon Fisher