

Dear Friends,

When I was about to become president of Bet Am Shalom two years ago, a former president told me, “There are challenges you know about. You also will face challenges no one could have anticipated.” And what a tumultuous two years this has been - a rollercoaster of events none of us could have foreseen.

Just four months into my term, Pittsburgh happened, and then Poway, and our entire sense of how we think about safety and security in our sacred spaces shifted. Actually, of course, these events didn't just “happen.” They were the result of a gradual coarsening of public discourse and a growing sense among an armed, violent few that their repugnant acts of hatred are somehow justified. Regardless of political perspective, we all have seen an unraveling of the sense of respect and common purpose in our nation.

Now we have hit what feels like rock bottom: the nonchalant and brutal killing of a man on video in front of a group of bystanders by a police officer, while colleagues stand by and watch.

Now, we are experiencing profound social unrest. Pressure for long-overdue racial justice has exploded across our nation, often into tragic events. And the response to those events could threaten our fabric as a society.

All this has come on the heels of the terrible COVID-19, the worst pandemic to hit our nation in a century, a virus that has directly touched dozens of families within our own congregation, taken precious lives, and changed so much about the way we function, both in the larger world and as a community. Bet Am Shalom members had sought to travel together through the south on a Civil Rights journey earlier this year, a journey that was to be the launching platform for a robust program of social justice initiatives. The virus cost us that trip. We also have lost the ability to hold events, services, Torah La'am, b'nai mitzvah, funerals, classes, and meetings face to face for now.

Yet, we have retained our desire to love and support one another through our darkest and most challenging times. We have created a support network, classes, activities and spiritual alternatives that operate without our having to meet in person. Indeed, this experience has lifted us up and shown us the potential of our community to rise in times of adversity.

We still study, pray, talk, sing, and learn together. We laugh and share a Seder. We try to be a place where young families want to raise their children. We struggle, argue, serve one another, and lift one another up. We talk and talk and talk some more and we vow never to stop until we become all we can be – which of course means that we will never stop talking. We advocate for social and environmental justice from our homes while the pandemic rages. And when the virus recedes, as it inevitably will, we will go out into the world and fight in person. Bet Am Shalom is a well we reach into not only to quench our own thirst for meaning, but to serve the world.

Being president during this tumultuous time has been one of the most significant experiences of my life. Each interaction, decision, shiva call, bar and bat mitzvah, announcement, letter, email, conversation, anniversary, meeting, service, and thank you has changed me. Serving this sacred community has carved itself into me in ways that I don't think I have fully processed yet. I thank you for this profound experience, and for the opportunity to serve this community that I love so much. It has been a momentous time, and your faith in me, and the wonderful congregants and staff who have shared leadership with me over these 24 months, has been deeply humbling.

As I turn over the presidency at the end of this month, a fantastic leadership group under Rabbi Les Bronstein, President Barbara Aloni and Board Chair Susan Roth will be continuing to make sure that Bet Am Shalom thrives and serves us, the Jewish people, and the world.

This moment is calling on us to face daunting challenges and to rise up. It is up to each of us to live our Jewish values and serve our community, so that it will continue to be that wellspring of strength from which we and others can draw to help make this world a better place.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Ilene