

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

I was walking before dawn one morning. It was dark, early autumn, in the mountains. I wasn't sure exactly where I was. There were trees on one side of me, and a lake with hills in the distance on the other. Suddenly, the mountains across the lake were bathed in the first rays of sunlight. More and more of the hills lit up; finally I felt the sun's warmth fall across my own cheek, slanting sideways into my eyes.

For a while I kept walking, looking down at the pavement, watching it roll beneath my feet. It was mesmerizing. I have no idea how long I walked. All I know is when I finally looked up again, there was my house -- right there, in front of me -- with dew dancing across the grass, and the blue sky reflected in my windows.

I was home. I had come to it unaware, but I instantly knew where I was. The place where I could reach down into the well of my being, be with people I love, and get the sustenance I need to step back out into the world next time.

Bet Am, of course, is home for me too. And no, that's not just because these days I never seem to leave this place!

Here, I can reach down into the well of my being, together with people I love, and get what I need to go back out into this deeply troubled world – a world that these days indeed sometimes seems to be on fire.

We live with racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, corruption, people separated from their families, kept in cages, opioid overdoses, our eco-

system approaching a tipping point. People on both sides of the political divide vilify one another. And now we have to put teams of trained security people around our houses of prayer so we can even pray in safety from the haters.

It is not enough to wring our hands, and post on social media. There is a fire burning. And Bet Am Shalom brings us real opportunities to act to help heal and change this world; what's more, it also allows us to heal and change ourselves. And this combination is something of extraordinary power.

This year alone we have been mighty actors on a stage of monumental proportions. Our rabbi Les Bronstein is the head of the largest pluralistic rabbinic association in the world. We have taken responsibility for settling a Muslim refugee family here. We have shown up for one another in profound ways, in times of loss and need. We have undertaken interfaith dialogue that our parents would have found amazing if not shocking.

We have mourned the dead in Pittsburgh and Poway, and have summoned the courage to stand guard for one another through CSS. We have fed hundreds and hundreds of homeless people, protested laws we felt were wrong, engaged in difficult and holy discussions of wrenching issues. We also have gathered to celebrate a beautiful anniversary - 30 years of joy and meaning with our rabbi and cantor. And we have danced, looked at the stars, and celebrated Shabbat with our children.

We have seen unprecedented levels of anger and hate in our nation, and yet we rise like the sun on the hilltops to strengthen and love one another as we continue to work toward a time when reason, justice and compassion reign.

My Judaism - maybe yours too - is not a string of beliefs, or a bagel with a shmear. It's an approach to life that requires intelligence, kindness, humor, and all our hearts, all our souls and all our might.

When Vince and I first came here, we were drop-off Hebrew School parents. I felt distant from and sometimes a little irritated with so-called organized religion. But I was very connected to being Jewish. And this place eventually became an anchor. So it could be yours too. Even if you don't "believe" in a traditional God. Even if the prayers in the book don't speak to you. Even if your family looks different, is interfaith or LGBTQ, even if you are all alone. You're a real lefty. A political conservative. Just too freakin' busy. Sick. Afraid. Or you used to feel close, but lately find yourself tired, angry, or just drifting.

There is a lot of work to do in this world, in our families, in our own hearts. Nobody can do this but you - and by you, I mean us. Here at Bet Am, we hold ourselves to high standards of humanity and compassion, support one another and cut each other a lot of slack as we walk through this muddled, precious, chaotic thing we call life. Maybe you think you can do it on your own, but I tell you it's not easy. It's very hard and pretty lonely trying to live a life of meaning, purpose and joy in isolation.

Bet Am is a very special, very different kind of Jewish community.

This past year, in these changing times, we've seen wonderful developments here. We are deeply engrossed in our Visioning Work, we are launching the Open Tent initiative and we have used our UJA-CLAL SPARK Fellowship to learn techniques for implementing thoughtful incremental change to help us thrive even as society morphs before our eyes.

Some wonder how we will make it through the next five or ten years of transition in our own synagogue. I'm here to tell you our leadership, lay and clergy, are indeed thinking very deeply about this future, about the changes we are facing over the next few years, and we are walking there carefully, with intelligence and heart, implementing best practices and using courage, *menschlichkeit* and honesty as our instructors.

We also are working actively to cement our synagogue's future financial health in a variety of ways. One thing Bet Am will never be about is money. And yet – we do need money. These beautiful grounds, our phenomenal clergy, staff, educators, programs, all these things we dearly love – cost money. We must clean our gutters and repair our AC system. Our lawn gets mowed, our electric bill gets paid, and our snow gets magically cleared. Actually... it's NOT magic.

I'm not entirely sure, but I don't even believe this tent was placed here by divine decree, nor the sound system, lights, extra security, chairs, prayer books... I mean, we LOVE this tent. We love to do this. It's Bet Am. But do the math. Dues cover just 62% of our operating expenses. That's pretty typical for synagogues. So it is my sacred task tonight to ask you – that means all of us – to give.

If you are a person who donates to other causes, I urge you to move us up as you allocate your giving to wonderful and deserving charitable organizations.

Bet Am is giving serious people the strength to live lives of purpose and meaning, to go out and do holy work with underprivileged kids, refugees,

immigrants, abused spouses, local politics, interfaith relationships; to help people suffering from mental and physical illness, the aged, the infirm; we are working every day for economic, environmental and social justice and the end of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism. This place nurtures the arts. It feeds our spirituality and compassion. It pushes us forward in the search for meaning.

The forging of this community of purpose radiates out into the world and it is **a very worthy cause.**

In a moment, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller will lead us in a melody, and while we sing together, please fold down a flap on your pledge card and hand it to a member of the Executive Committee coming through the aisles.

If you gave last year, perhaps you will find your way to giving extra – you know, we have no gala this year to help with fundraising. You will see a row of tabs on the top of the card allowing you to give, perhaps 25 or 50%, more – or you can fold a tab at the bottom to designate a specific dollar amount – and know that we are extraordinarily grateful.

If you didn't give last year, and you are able to, pick up the card and fold down any tab, or mail us a check with Kol Nidrey in the memo line. Even a small donation is symbolically important and it's deeply appreciated. Give \$18. Give \$18,000. Of course if you can't, we understand. And if you can, we know you will try. I'd love to see 100 percent Kol Nidrey participation – at any level that's right for you.

If you are a guest, we are so glad you are here. Help us be here for you. Take a guest form before you leave and give generously as you can to help

us keep this tent open for you. Thank you; and please -- come back from time to time during the year. We want to get to know you.

And as you give, I want you to picture yourself walking a vibrant path.

Along that path, there's Tot Shabbat, the Purimspiel, El Centro, Torah La'am, Hamentaschen, a Craft Show, Shabbat Kulanu, food for the homeless, study, davening, Simchat Torah, Kol Nidrey, hiking, singing, learning, socializing, all while life's road just rolls under our feet. And maybe you'll lift your head at some point and suddenly realize that you're home, this amazing home, where we are welcoming the next generation of beautiful families, who are more diverse than ever, and who are liberal Judaism's greatest asset and hope.

I ask you to step up. To give, as generously as you can. Please reach out to me any time, to talk, ask questions, criticize or praise. Help us build Bet Am Shalom's future as a home for progressive, humanitarian Judaism.

Thank you for the extraordinary honor and privilege of being your president. I wish you an easy fast, a meaningful Yom Kippur and a good, sweet and healthy new year.