

## Kol Nidre 5776—2015

### Ivy Eisenberg

I am deeply honored to stand before all of you this evening, and I want to thank each of you for being part of the Bet Am Shalom community—from members whose families have been here for many generations to those of you—members and guests—who may be here for the first time.

I began drafting tonight's speech in January of this year. On January 12, I read a blog post, written by a storyteller, Matt, who talked about finding the meaning in each day by extracting **the** story-worthy moment of that day. Matt's post was in response to someone else who had taken laptop selfies every day—in other words, he was sitting in front of his computer, snapping a picture of himself every day for a year. At the end of the year, he commented on his photo essay as follows "You live your life. Most days are pretty much the same. You forget most things you've done. Then it's over." Matt took this as a challenge. And he decided that each night, **he** would sit down in front of his computer before he went to bed—but he would ask himself: "If I had to tell a five minute story **onstage** about something that happened to me today, what would that be?" He sought out one defining, possibly story-worthy moment—something that made that day different—and might bear retelling. 194 stories emerged, and he claims it changed his life.

Now a story is not a diary or journal entry. It's not just about what happened. A story has a purpose, beginning with a character's yearning and ending with some change or transformation in the character, some lesson learned. Matt learned 194 lessons.

As for me? I had 253 days before Erev Yom Kippur to do this simple exercise. That snowy January, I imagined myself, standing before you today, many stories later, many pounds thinner, sharing a selection of the best of these moments and talking about how finding meaning each day is connected to the work of *teshuvah*, to return. That was where I was going.

I'll cut to the chase. I didn't do the exercise. I did a couple of them—maybe 10 or so. I read other people's stories and I heard other people's stories. I clicked on shiny Facebook posts that caught my eye. I watched YouTube clips. I got busy. I got tired. I forgot. Believe it or not, I went to Planet Fitness more times than I sat down to write my story of the day. Those stories are lost. Not actually lost perhaps, but buried in the recesses of my mind. It would take an extraordinary amount of work to get them back and make something of them.

Here's the thing: even when the work is meaningful and worthwhile, things always seem to get in the way.

That is why we are here tonight and through Yom Kippur. We are here so that **nothing** gets in the way. Tonight is about clearing away all the distractions so we can focus, so that we can do the work of *TESHUVAH—TZEDAKAH—TEFILAH*. By being here we have already begun.

Our odd tradition of asking for donations on this, the holiest night of the year goes back to World War I, where Rabbis appealed to congregants for funds to support Jewish sufferers, according to Jenna Weissman Joselit, who wrote a 2005 Forward Article entitled: “Before We Begin, Let Us All Reach Into Our Pockets.” Those little pledge cards? They’ve been around since 1933.

In each and every instance, in each synagogue community, says Joselit, the community’s leaders have had to square the imperatives of raising money with the rhythms of a sacred service. And that is the imperative I am proud to take on this evening. This is the time of our year where many of us return from wherever we’ve wandered and we embark on the sacred work of taking care of our inner selves—and the sacred work of taking care of each other. At Bet Am Shalom, we take care of each other. This caring for one another, of which the Kol Nidre appeal is a component, is *Tzedakah*.

From baby namings, to early childhood programs—and by early childhood, I proudly say that we host events for children beginning at age zero—through our family programs, our extremely popular teen program, Dor Hahemshekh, through parent programs, adult education programs, ritual, social action, and artistic endeavors to enrich our Jewish lives—to helping those who are ill or in need of support and companionship—to the way we encircle our members and their families with love, support, and prayers upon the death of a loved one—we take care of each other.

The executive committee sent out a letter a few weeks ago, giving some specifics about the inflow and outflow of the money— and emphasizing that we depend on your generosity during this Kol Nidre appeal for our base budget. Your money gets put to work.

As you know, we turn no one away for lack of money. Every member of our synagogue, whether they are able to pay full dues, give generously above and beyond the dues amount, or are giving an abated amount, is entitled to the full range of programs, services, and community embrace. Your generosity enables us to make Bet Am Shalom the wonderful, thriving congregation it is and has been for 60 years. Sixty years! This is an anniversary year for us. Over this time, we’ve grown to more than 430 member units. We are fortunate to have the excellent clergy we do, the unparalleled office and building staff, and especially YOU—an incredibly talented and diverse community of numerous volunteers that helps us provide the rich array of programs and services. We are a congregation where everyone contributes with their work and their wallets.

Whether or not you are here every week, whether or not you participate in a committee, whether or not you come to an event or service, **you** are an important part of our community. Last year, 60% of member households participated in the Kol Nidre appeal. We are hoping for 100% participation this year. Anything you can give is welcome. Consider whether you are in a position to give more than you did last year.

By sustaining our BAS community, our BAS community is able to take care of the greater community and the world. We are tackling major challenges this year—immigration reform, the environment, feeding the needy and homeless, helping early childhood education in our greater community. This past year, Bet Am Shalom members marched at the People’s Climate March, we walked with other faith communities to honor the lives of those killed in Charleston, South Carolina, and we attended the Salute to Israel Parade. We rebuilt homes in the Rockaways. We are stepping up to become part of Habitat for Humanity. We want to make more of a positive difference in this world, this year. And you can help. The Kol Nidre appeal is about the “m” word, money, but it is about community—about taking care of each other.

I will end with one story from this year.

I was going to a networking breakfast with an acquaintance I had never met in person, but who lives pretty close by in Hastings. I was late, I hadn’t had time to dry my hair, there was construction on Warburton Ave, and I rushed into the place 15 minutes late. There she was at a table in the back. You recognize people from their LinkedIn profile pics.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“No problem,” she said. “Go, order. It’s fine.”

So, I get up to go to the counter, overly chattering as I do when I am being obsequious, “Oh, I love this place. I love the.....oooh. I don’t seem to have my wallet.”

I didn’t have my wallet.

“Here. Take this.”

My breakfast companion handed **me**—a near stranger with a dubious hairdo—a \$10 bill.

“Oh, that’s okay, I said.” And then I began to rattle on about why my wallet wasn’t there—I had turned a water bottle upside down in my handbag yesterday, so I moved my valuable items to my backpack, and I musn’t have remembered...blah, blah, blah....

“No please. Take the money!”

I took the money. The rest of the meeting went quite well after that humiliating start. I concentrated very hard on acting normally and professionally, and being helpful to her business needs. Of course, as soon as I got home, I wrote her a card, stuffed a \$10 bill in it, and made sure to mail it right away. I was so embarrassed, and who knows what she thought, but we moved past it and got to work.

It only took half an hour of mad searching through the house and a call to Bet Am Shalom to see if I had dropped my wallet here to discover that my wallet was in my car next to me the whole time. My gaffe allowed someone else to take care of me, and we were both stronger for it.

There is a poem, translated from Yiddish by Danny Siegel—it’s in some of our prayerbooks. It goes like this:

If you always assume  
the person sitting next to you  
is the Messiah  
waiting for some human kindness—  
you will soon come to weigh your words  
and watch your hands.  
And if he/she so chooses  
not to reveal him/herself  
In your time  
it will not matter.

By giving this night, we may not bring the messiah, but we can help reveal the best in ourselves, and make it possible to bring out the best in us all in this coming year.

I wish you all a healthy and a joyous year. Gemar Hatimah Tovah