

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. A couple of weeks ago, I was up in the Berkshire Mountains. It was a clear night. I sat for an hour on a plain wooden deck in the dark, leaning back, just looking up. Thousands and millions of stars. The Milky Way a band across the night sky and every few minutes the flash of a shooting star. I felt I could almost reach up and touch them - so at peace, so ready to begin this new year.

And here we are. Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. We have just sung the mysterious Kol Nidrey, which sets the mood for a night and day of serious introspection. Another year. Some have been preparing for this day for weeks or months. Some of us looked forward to tonight; some were dragged here by relatives or friends. Some are members of our community; some are guests. Each in our own worlds. Under those thousands and millions of stars. Under the tent together. At Bet Am Shalom.

On Yom Kippur we have two tasks. One personal, one communal. The first is to take individual stock of our lives, examine ourselves without being either too gentle or too harsh, seek forgiveness where needed, and find ourselves worth saving, worth investing in, worth caring about, worth loving, worth fighting for and working so hard for that next autumn, perhaps we can be a tiny bit closer to the person we know we have the capacity to be.

The other task, the communal one, is to look around at the sacred work of our world, our families, and our communities, and to take the same stock, again without being too harsh or too gentle, and to find ourselves communally worth saving, worth investing in, worth caring about, worth loving, worth fighting for and working so hard for that next autumn perhaps we can be a tiny bit closer to the kind of planet, the kind of nation, the kind of community, even the kind of synagogue we know we have the capacity to be.

We pledge ourselves to look at this tent, to see it as good, to see it as holy, because communities like Bet Am Shalom make psychic spaces in which we do incredibly important and sacred work in healing ourselves and the greater world.

We as a community are flawed. We have made mistakes. We have left people out. We have failed sometimes. We may even have failed you. And yet here we are. If you're here tonight, you're part of this community. We belong to you.

We strive together, first and foremost, to make the world better. We prop one another up in times of need. We teach our children how beautiful a Jewish life of connection can be. We comfort and strengthen each other

when the world leaves us full of dismay. We celebrate our good times. We urge each other to do the difficult work that we have to do. We laugh a lot. We make a safe space that gives us the strength and the courage to go out and try.

We help families bring the beauty of our ancient traditions into their own homes in their own ways, with no guilt. We look at Judaism as a gift that we can give and regive and regive to one another every day. We don't demand a particular belief – or any belief. We want you here because--you belong here.

The opportunity to help create a better and more aware and more loving world has never been better – the chance to use what we have and what we know for good. People I know and love stand on both sides of various political and religious and social issues and I hold those people dear partly because this shul allows me to.

Our big tent means that no one is going to be happy all the time. But it means we are engaged in a deep and meaningful struggle with God and with ourselves, and that struggle itself just might be the whole point.

We are undertaking new initiatives here at Bet Am Shalom that will help build a better tomorrow, a future where we will be better able to support one another as we create sacred community here, and as we go out into a broken world to help repair it.

We have new marketing efforts, a new way of looking at how we do outreach and welcome new members, a new focus on young families, couples and singles, and new ways of approaching how we financially sustain our great enterprise. On March 9 we will celebrate 30 years of our community's good fortune to have our wonderful Les and Benjie as our Rabbi and Cantor. And far from looking back, (they and) we have our eyes firmly on the future.

So tonight I have the sacred task of asking you to help sustain us with your time, your love, your skill, your passion, and yes, your money. Because this beautiful tent, not the literal tent – although that costs money too – but the sacred shelter of Bet Am Shalom, where young kids say the motzi and couples study together, where people help immigrant families, and someone teaches someone how to light candles on Friday night, where people show up by the dozens at a shiva to give strength to a congregant they've never even met before – all this -- in our hearts it's free because it's freely given, but oh my it's so far from free.

These beautiful grounds and gardens, this calming and gracious building, our extraordinary, learned menschlich rabbi and profoundly gifted and spiritual cantor, our highly skilled and dedicated staff – these things that are our pride, they cost money. It's the way it is. Dues cover about 62% of our costs. That means we have to raise more than half as much again as our dues. And we know that some of us in this tent, maybe someone right down the row, some don't have the capacity. And we welcome everyone, regardless of their ability to give, that's wonderful, that's Bet Am.

And yet that means that for those of us who can – if we want our sacred community to be here next year, and the year after, to change for the future, to be here for us in times of sorrow, to be here for that person who can afford nothing -- those who can need to really help.

I have the privilege of being president of the most extraordinary shul. Bet Am Shalom actually is trying to be what a synagogue has the capacity to be. We dare to try. Are we perfect? Far from it. If something is bothering you, I am asking you to tell me. If you have advice to give, I want to hear it. If you feel confused or worried – or pleased! – I'm asking you now to share that. And have a little faith. Lean in. This place is special – and we need your fullest, deepest commitment if we're going to continue to thrive.

We are engaged in an enterprise that goes against what a lot of American culture is about – it's us-oriented, not me oriented. It's future looking, not trying to turn a profit today. It's rooted deeply in a past and a heritage that is rich, and yet we know we need to keep moving in new ways. Balancing all this is Herculean. And if anyone can do it, it's us.

It is my holy task tonight to ask you to give, and give more than you did last year. Because although Bet Am will never be ABOUT money....we still do need money. In a moment, we will sing and while we sing you can pull out your pledge card and fold down a flap, and hand it to a member of the Executive Committee who is coming through the aisles.

If you gave last year, perhaps you can find your way to giving 10 or 50% more – you will see an optional row of tabs on the top of the card allowing you to do that – or fold a tab at the bottom for a specific 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. Even a small donation is symbolic to me and to this congregation and it's deeply, deeply appreciated. Of course if you can't, we understand. And if you can, we know you will try. If you are a guest, we love that, we want you here. Your voices are beautiful to us. Help us be here for you. Take a guest form before you leave and do your best. Know how much we appreciate it, and I encourage you to contact

us, or call me personally, and become more engaged with our community over the coming year as well.

As you turn down the flap, write your check, become a member, help at Shorashim, bring food to the homeless, sing in the choir, study Bible or Talmud, eat dinner together, participate in interfaith activities, bake hamentaschen, work at the craft show or come to a Friday night or Shabbat morning service with us, you are building something. Your energy is laying the bricks and the setting the windows in place, and hanging the doors through which we will welcome the next generation of Jewish families, who will be more diverse than ever, and who are liberal Judaism's greatest asset and hope. I ask you to step up and take up the mantle. Know how unusual and special this place is, and help us build our future. Look around this tent. We are yours. We are literally open to you.

Tonight, we sit under those thousands and millions of stars and I ask you to help us reach for them. Thank you for the extraordinary honor and privilege of being your president. I wish you an easy fast, a meaningful Yom Kippur and a sweet and healthy new year.