

Opening Doors
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Temple Beth Tikvah
Yom Kippur 5777
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Shana Tova. What a beautiful sight you are. What a beautiful room this is. How wondrously we fill this room today. A room. A floor, some walls, a window or two, a ceiling. A room. But what makes a room magnificent is all that it holds within. Then it is a sanctuary, a place of refuge, a place of safety, a place to be whole, together. This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of this house, this building, this synagogue. It is worth reflecting upon the history of this particular house, this Jewish home here on the Shoreline, this home we call Temple Beth Tikvah.

If you are here today inside these walls for the very first time -- and God bless you if you are! -- can we see for a moment? Please stand for a second at your seat if you are here for Yom Kippur for the very first time. Thank you. Welcome. You can be seated. You who are new to TBT may not know that we have turned our everyday sanctuary a complete 180 degree-turn to accommodate all of us for this annual holiday of ingathering. We are sitting in our High Holy Day sanctuary, a 180-degree turn from our year-round sanctuary which begins over there. An about-face is good once a year. An about-face is what we do on Yom Kippur, literally and figuratively as we are in the midst of a theological quest to reposition ourselves in life.

This sanctuary has 40 years of memory inside it. Some of us were here, exactly here, 40 years ago. Raise your hands please, stand up (if you can!) that we may thank you for building this house. Please be seated. I imagine you who have been here from the start can still see this sanctuary filled with many who have passed away. You remember where they sat, what they did, how they cared about this place. We all mingle with those upon whose shoulders we stand when we enter this physical space.

All this sentiment and symbolism -- from a room. Virginia Woolf wrote a whole book about the preciousness of rooms, of having a room, a room of one's own, a room in which to be free to be who you are and to do what you do.

It was not long ago that we who are Beth Tikvah did not have a room of our own. The early pioneers remember those peripatetic years of wandering from place to place to place. From the Grove School to St. Andrews Church right up the road, to as far west as Branford, to the 1st Congregational Church on the Green in Guilford, to say nothing of the untold number of living rooms.

And then, like the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert for 40 years, they crossed into the promised land of 196 Durham Road. This home of ours was built, *kena hura*, forty years ago. This was our building, but it ended at what is now the foyer. The classroom wing was an extension, added some thirty years ago.

How does one go about building a synagogue? The rabbis teach us that there are three requirements, and only three requirements, for an appropriate synagogue home. We pretty much fulfill all three. The sanctuary must face Jerusalem. Our permanent sanctuary, in which we gather 355 days out of the year, does indeed face Jerusalem. The sanctuary must have windows through which we can gaze during prayer. Small though they may be, thankfully, a decision was made at the last minute to create windows in our sanctuary.

And perhaps the toughest of all the requirements to meet: the synagogue, the rabbis say, must be situated alongside living waters. Our Shoreline location assures that our synagogue is very close indeed to living waters, which we take advantage of every summer with our Beach Shabbat and every Rosh Hashanah at *Tashlich*. It is a beautiful home that we have, a charming home, not only a room of our own, but a home with many rooms of our own for us to live in, laugh in, and learn in. *It is a home worth caring for and investing in.*

Allow me, then, to take you all on a tour - albeit a virtual tour - of our synagogue home, for each room is holy. And what we do inside those rooms makes them worth caring for and investing in.

First, come into the classrooms where our young children learn. There is so much energy and life here. And joy. You had a taste of it this morning when our children gathered up here on the bimah to sing Oseh Shalom. All that energy and sweetness and youth gather in our classrooms every week where we get a chance to teach our children about who they are. They sit on floor rugs and listen to stories. They write with new letters called "alephs" and "bets." They learn important words like "tikun olam" and "Torah." They sing their hearts out and we are replenished. We teach them about holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the sound of the shofar, and how it calls us to love and cherish one another. And our children, from the youngest Nursery School student to our High School seniors, teach us, all the time.

Here is the Social Hall where we congregate after services. "Oneg Shabbat" is a commandment to rejoice in the Sabbath, and rejoice we do -- by eating together, by visiting with each other, by sharing the news of the past week with people we haven't seen in awhile, by meeting new people who are not really new at all for they share the bond of TBT.

This is the library. Newly reorganized, you can easily find books for adults and for children, all available for checking out. But more than reading takes place in here. This is also where our Lunch and Learns take place, our weekly Seniors study group, and our Shabbat morning Torah Study. And the library is where our mourners cut the *kri'ah* ribbon before a funeral when a loved one dies.

Our Library is also where our Board meetings take place. The leaders of our congregation come here to help steer our synagogue into the future. 'How do we best care for everyone in our congregation?' they ask. 'How do we assure them that they matter and are appreciated? How do we make sure that each member of our congregation has the opportunity to serve? These are the questions that are wrestled with here, in the Library.

Across the hall is the Cantor's office. Inevitably, you hear chanting coming out the door for this is where our B'nei Mitzvah students come to practice their Torah portions and learn the prayers. And if you are really lucky, you may even hear the sweet voice of the Cantor singing as he prepares for Shabbat.

The Youth Lounge, way down the hall, is where our SALTY kids hang out. You can sometimes hear them and their joyful sounds from the opposite end of the hallway.

And this is the Rabbi's office, my office. The most important object inside: the chairs and the couch where people can sit because this is a place where people come to visit. They bring their ideas; they bring their stories. Some are joyful stories filled with rapture. Some are sad stories filled with pain. All are courageous and beautiful stories for they are *our* stories, the stories of our lives.

If our building were an airplane, it is Kim & Bonnie's offices that are the engine. Command Center. The tasks that are accomplished there, just to keep up with our bustling lives, are ongoing and constant.

Here is our sanctuary. We adore its simplicity. Without a doubt the most beautiful sight is the people who fill it. We fill it for Shabbat and we fill it for bar mitzvahs. We fill it to overflowing for our Scholar-in-Residence weekends and for our Musician-in-Residence Shabbat.

Of course the holiest part of the sanctuary is the Torah scrolls themselves. We have been blessed as a synagogue, to add scroll upon scroll to our array of *Sifrei Torah*. Our Founding Torah was given to us by the New Haven Society for the Aged before we had even built an Ark; our Czech Torah was saved from the Holocaust and is always a witness to Jewish survival; our

Sephardic scroll stands upright in its own wood case, and the newest of our scrolls is one that we ourselves commissioned and helped to write.

After many years with a free-standing Aron HaKodesh, we built a permanent one that holds all our Torah scrolls and is adorned with the 10 Commandments carved on its doors. Our High Holiday Aron HaKodesh is only three years old. It was crafted by the same artist as our permanent Aron, but this one, special for the New Year, shows the Book of Life with all of our names on its pages.

The Book of Life reminds us that time does not stand still. It has been forty years and while our building has served us well, we can't afford to allow it to stand still. It must grow with us. It must change with the times.

Permit me to dream with you. Across the nation, synagogues are reimagining what they can be in the 21st century and beyond. The words that keep coming up are words like: welcoming, warm, inclusive, open and accessible. Why shouldn't our building reflect those very same values? Our front door should have an awning, so no one gets stuck in the pouring rain while waiting for the door to open. The doors themselves should open easily; someone in a wheelchair should be able to open them. When you walk into the front foyer, imagine being beckoned in - by a receptionist who isn't separated from you by a wall, by a library that isn't hard to find, by light that draws you towards the sanctuary and the social hall, and where you don't have to be 'an old-timer' to know exactly where the bathrooms are.

One of the best treasures of our synagogue home is the land that surrounds it. The woods and the shrubs, the birds, the sun and the sky. We should take advantage of that fact. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said, "May it be my custom to go among the trees and grass - among all growing things - and there, enter into prayer, to talk with the One to whom I belong." We can make that possible. The rabbis knew what they were saying when they required windows. We need more of them. Windows onto the World. In the Social Hall. In the Sanctuary. A wall of windows.

In fact, without too much difficulty, ours could be a sanctuary where brides and grooms yearn to have their weddings. Surrounded by the beauty of nature without the risk of rain. A more open and warm Social Hall means more families choosing to celebrate their simchas here at the synagogue.

You may recall the sermon I gave before we had our new sign up on Durham Rd. I told the story of my own experience, when I first came to interview here, of missing the entrance, again and again and again. Thanks to some very caring hearts, we now we have a beautiful, well-lit sign. An interesting thing happened after we had that sign for over a year.

Someone who helped to make the sign happen, came to me and said, you know, I never thought we needed a sign. And frankly, I still don't. But I have to admit, something has changed since we put it up -- the people themselves have changed. They are prouder; more ready to say what the sign says: "Here we are." The physical presence of a sign has an impact on our own outlook. If that is true -can you imagine when our building is more open and warm and fully accessible?

The physical environment for human gathering has a profound effect on the quality of human relationship. If the synagogue of the next 40 years is envisioned to be a hub of relationship and connection, of mooring and authentic meeting then we need to invest in making our building conducive to relating and connecting and mooring. The times have changed since first we dedicated this building 40 years ago. We can no longer presume that everyone who walks in our doors already knows everyone else. We can't assume that people know each other, that they know their way around, that they have warm and historic layers of connection to each other.

Today, our congregation as a whole has the responsibility to *create* the bonds of common Jewish experience -- to bring people together for the shared joys, memories, learning and acts of justice that will deepen our sense of commitment to our Jewish heritage and our Jewish future. In other words, we need more comfortable spaces for the sacred Jewish task of *schmoozing*.

And now - I've saved the best for last: all the vital stuff that doesn't show and isn't pretty; the parts we usually refer to as infrastructure. After forty years of wear and tear on infrastructure, we need urgent attention to lighting, heating, air conditioning, insulation, cost efficiency, green efficiency, and more. So why do I call it the best part? It tends to be the part that no one gets excited about. With all due respect to plumbers and engineers, pipes and floor boards are just not the stuff that dreams are made of.

But on Yom Kippur we are indeed reminded that they are the most important thing of all. While the Torah doesn't teach us how to inspect the structural and mechanical features of a synagogue, it does teach us how to make an *Aron HaKodesh*. The Book of Exodus states: "And they shall make an ark...and you shall overlay it with pure gold, *inside and out*." Gold on the outside is understandable, but why, the Rabbis ask, should we put gold on the inside where no one will ever see it? It is because what is on the inside matters most of all. On this sacred day of Yom Kippur, let us commit to what is on the inside, to making it pure and holy, and to build upon it anew; a building that reflects our commitment to the future, our caring for each other, our desire to invest in ourselves and in Jewish life.

As we embark upon this 40th year of celebrating who we are and what we do, there will be many opportunities for each of us to take part in reflecting upon and reimagining, this Temple Beth Tikvah, this House of Hope: our classrooms, our library, our sanctuary, our social hall and all that we do inside those rooms. May we care for our house that all who seek it may enter its wide-open doors and be uplifted by its light, its warmth and its openness.

May all who enter find hope and inspiration, connection and spiritual depth. With Isaiah, we shall say proudly: 'Our house shall be a house for all peoples.' (Isaiah 56:7) May it be a home worthy of our greatest dreams.

-AMEN-