

September 4-5, 2013 1 Tishrei 5774  
Andrew Joskow, President, Temple Rodef Shalom

## **ROSH HASHANAH REMARKS – SEPTEMBER 2013**

Shanah Tovah!

Last Rosh Hashanah, I related a family story about the great Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem.

Well ... this year I have another family story to tell.

The time period is the late 1940s.

During this time my mother was teaching English in the New York City public schools.

She was often invited to certain evening meetings by other teachers. It seems that these were union meetings – it's a little unclear in the telling.

Anyhow, one evening she returned home with a gift.

I recently rediscovered that gift.

And I have it right here:

*The Short Novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky.*

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Not your ordinary gift!

As the story goes – it was given to her from her “*comrades* in the teachers’ union.”

My father looked at the book, thought about it a bit, and said --- “Maybe you shouldn’t go to those meetings anymore.” Apparently, he thought these might be communist gatherings, not just union meetings.

Maybe wise counsel given the climate of fear and finger pointing that was going on during what some called the “red scare.”

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It is hard to imagine living in this world – fearing saying the wrong thing; not wanting to help others out of fear of association.

Was a friend really a friend, or was a friend really an enemy?

This story makes me think about the importance of community and what the world can look like when we don't have it.

I know for sure that my parents and most people did not want to be in this kind of position.

They did not want to fear the community at large, but wanted to help the community at large.

What I have witnessed during this past year as President of this congregation is how at TRS we are blessed that this type of fear is not part of our reality.

We should be so proud of what we do for each other and the larger community. And I know it takes work to achieve this.

I have seen some amazing things over this year:

I have seen scores of congregants come out to volunteer through the Shalom Corps to help us be a more welcoming congregation – not just welcoming to new members but to each other as well.

Our congregation even won an award for this work – with other congregations around the country now able to follow our lead in this effort. And our teens are getting involved too.

I have seen calendars for helping families in need filled for weeks in the future – driving, making meals, mowing lawns, and more.

I have seen our clergy, our staff, and our fellow congregants working together to help other congregants that are in dire circumstances – even

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potentially homeless. It's hard to believe but it's true – even in this part of Northern Virginia.

I have seen us turn out in large numbers to recognize the military service of so many of our members – from World War II to Iraq.

Our interfaith get-togethers with members of the Muslim community just continue to grow in size. When we get to know each other, the potential for dialogue is so much greater.

Congregants use their precious time to write blog posts on our web site that express their innermost thoughts, helping us to learn from each other.

And we celebrate together and work together – at holiday time, on mitzvah days, during Shabbat dinners here and at each other's homes, through the music of our many choirs, and even in bittersweet moments – like our farewell to Cantor Tracey Scher.

And of course, we bring our children together as a community, giving them the experience of Jewish engagement in our Religious School, Nursery School, Summer Camp, and our Youth Groups.

It may be hard for any one individual to see, and we may call ourselves members, but this is NOT just a membership organization. It is a COMMUNITY, where in many ways, both large and small, we are all rowing together –

expressing Jewish values and making our lives and the lives of others just a little bit better all at the same time.

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As part of empowering this community I want to make sure that our members are getting the help that we can provide.

What is clear from my observations over the last year, and from the results of our recent congregational survey, is that we must focus even more on member services.

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As our Temple grows within its various cohorts, including young families and retirees, we should be able to provide better support for our diverse membership.

As a result we have created the position of Director of Membership Services – with Anita Thornton taking on that role.

With a full time position devoted to membership we can increase our attention to the important services needed by our congregants.

At the same time, we are paying attention to Jewish engagement in our programs.

Thus, we have expanded the role of our specialist focusing on Jewish engagement initiatives – Dara Holop – to include Temple wide events and committee programming.

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But ultimately the driving force and inspiration behind much of what we do as a community is our Clergy.

This year Rabbi Schwartzman, Cantor Shochet, and Rabbi Saxe are being terrifically supported by our adjunct Rabbi, Stephanie Bernstein, and our student cantor, Sarah Hass.

But we have a membership of 1560 families – over 5000 adults and children – covered by three full-time clergy, with part time assistance.

In the time since we first added a 3rd full time clergy member, TRS has grown by over 500 families.

There is no problem with growth. We continue to bring young families into our congregation that sustain us and bring joyful noise to the hallways. But we also see more retirees staying in this area. Our clergy must attend to all of our populations.

Simply put, we need more clergy to continue to be the kind of community that congregants have said we should be. The necessary

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liturgical, musical, pastoral, and educational duties can easily overwhelm 3 full time and some part time clergy members.

And the congregational survey has told us that one of the most important desires of congregants is to have more access to the clergy.

Consequently we must think in depth about the appropriate clergy structure for our future – while keeping an eye on budgetary constraints.

Our current clergy and our Temple lay leaders have already begun work together to help develop this plan for our future.

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On this Rosh Hashanah, our Temple is strong.

And unlike the experience I related in my opening story, I know that our community is strong.

It is my heartfelt hope that we can sustain and enhance our community for a long time into the future.

I look forward to being TRS Temple President for another year. It has been a tremendous honor to serve in this way.

I wish ALL of you a sweet and happy New Year.

Shanah Tovah!