



**Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5772/2011**  
Rabbi Amy Schwartzman  
"The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Temple Rodef Shalom"

I imagine that there was a great deal of nervous energy in the room. It was, after all, their first time. There was no question in their minds that this was the right thing to do but they were inexperienced and everything was new. It was... Rosh Hashanah. They had always spent the High Holy Days in another congregation, an established one with a rabbi, a president, a religious school with classrooms, plaques on the walls and a standing order for the same pink, purple and white bema flowers. But this time they were on their own - no permanent rabbi, no cantor, no tickets (or name tags) but an enormous amount of enthusiasm and hope for their new community. A congregation they would call Temple Rodef Shalom.

50 years ago, 36 families gathered in the meeting room of the Fink office building in Falls Church and made a commitment to one another, and to their children, and to their children's children and to all of us sitting in this room, to establish and sustain a new, dynamic, forward thinking Reform Jewish community. It was an historic event. Our founders could not have imagined the fruit that their little seedling Temple would yield. It was also an act of vision and bravery, for the journey of a new Jewish community in Northern Virginia was not without its challenges. But here we are - the inheritors of their dream, the trustees of their commitment, the recipients of the dedication, generosity, creativity and hard work of those 36 families and the hundreds of families who would join them in the years to come. Just ten days ago, we initiated our 50th anniversary year and for the next 12 months we will honor, celebrate, remember and thank the people who have made these 50 years not only possible but also successful. We will revisit some our proudest moments and reflect on our greatest challenges. There will be reunions, and special dinners, historic moments captured in each bulletin, photo displays and even an anniversary DVD. Our members who were present on that first Rosh Hashanah – the Cohens, Davidsons, Epsteins, Lindes, Lowensterns, Mellens, Olams, Proctors, Rudins, Schmucklers, Seiffs, and Silversteins will tell us their favorite stories of the

early days. Dozens more have stories of the middle years, and we, of course, are the story of today. It will be uplifting, educating, inspiring and fun.

I hope you'll plan to join many of the events of this special year and add your own enthusiastic remembrance to the occasions. Our profound thanks go out to Susan Weinstock and Michelle Sandler, the chairs of this year's festivities, for all that they done and will do, along with their huge team of volunteers – Todah Rabbah L'kulam.

You may be surprised and excited to learn that observing a 50-year milestone is actually one of the 613 mitzvot or commandments in the Torah. Sometimes I make jokes about the fact that everything significant we do is rooted in the Torah, but this one really is. The book of Leviticus states: "Count off seven Sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven Sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the shofar sounded everywhere throughout your land consecrating the fiftieth year. Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. This shall be a Jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. Do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself. For it is a jubilee and it is to be made holy for you."

Isn't it remarkable and convenient that the Torah talks about the Jubilee year --- but it doesn't sound like much of a party! In truth Judaism's idea of the observance of the Jubilee, in Hebrew the Yovel, is not expressed in a celebration but is rooted instead in commandments that rebalance society.

There is much debate about whether these laws were ever followed in full or at all, but from them we do understand that the 50th year is a time of reorganization. The Yovel calls us to regroup and focus not on our own success or material wealth, but on the wellbeing and sustainability of the community for the future; it is a time to proclaim our values and to make the necessary mid-course corrections that enable a society to remain viable. To a large degree we've been making mid-course corrections for 50 years, but today we accept this, an actual commandment. While it's true that many things here are working quite well, it is also true that the fundamental structure of our congregation reflects the needs and visions of a Jewish

community from the 1960's. We are built on a model that is 50 years old. And while that model still serves us relatively well, many of us are aware that the synagogue of yesterday will not and should not look like the synagogue of tomorrow. The Jewish community that our founders were part of is very different from the community of today and even more different from the community that is coming of age right now.

In thinking about our founders, I imagine my own parents. Just about 50 years ago they joined a temple in the suburbs of Philadelphia. They joined out of loyalty; to some degree out of expectation; they did it as a way to become more grounded in their community, and of course, to give my brothers and me a Jewish education. Their congregation had a story to tell which was familiar to them. It included experiences of immigrant parents, deep connections to Jewish customs and a familiar feeling of belonging.

Today, the landscape of Jewish life is very different. Younger Jewish adults are not in search of community in the same way that their parents or grandparents were. Community is no longer locational – that is - it is no longer linked to a fixed place. Technology has moved communities into the ether or the e-waves or the i-cloud and so being together like this may no longer be a priority. More significantly, connecting with the story of the collective Jewish people is not often on the agenda of younger Jews. Theirs is a personal journey, an expression of self. The story that brought our founders to the Temple 50 years ago is for them a borrowed script not a personal narrative. Today, the sense of loyalty to an organization or institution is palpably different than it was in the past.

Some people are very, very worried about these changes. They think that Judaism is no longer a growth industry and that our weakening ties to tradition will lead to our demise. They see that fewer men are involved in Judaism and at any given time more than half of the American Jewish community is unaffiliated. Indeed these are issues of great concern. But those of you, who know me, know that I am very much a glass half full kind of person. I don't see this era as a time of crisis. Rather it is, for me, more of a great opportunity. While I'm not a historian, I sense that no other era of Jewish history has seen the creativity, innovation, resources and even prosperity than our community enjoys today. Not only that, but during the past 50 years we, Reform Jews, have been the fastest growing theologically

liberal denomination in America. I am convinced that modernity needs Reform Judaism. It needs our deep commitment to social justice, our critical reading of texts and our ability to integrate science into tradition. It needs a dynamic model where God and the soul are part of the conversation. We need to believe in ourselves as the vanguard of a sustainable Judaism of the future and not just the orphans of the Jewish past.

As we begin our Jubilee or Yovel year, we have to embrace Judaism's expectation that we plan for the future. This is a time for bold thinking and new ideas and even a time to take risks. It is a time to consider how to best remain relevant and how to reissue our most valuable and compelling messages. It is a time to respond to new ways of thinking about community, allegiance, affiliation and denomination.

To me this is really exciting stuff. Call me a little bit crazy, but the thought of all of us rethinking how our congregation might renew and recreate itself in the next 50 years gets my heart pumping. What would it take for us to experience the same nervous energy that our founders felt on this very day 50 years ago? Our records show that while the congregation formed in July, by Rosh Hashanah it had almost tripled in size and nearly 100 families attended that historic New Year's service. Imagine the electricity in that room. The fact that these people were engaged in something entirely new must have been thrilling and scary. Our founders knew that they were taking a risk; they were sticking their necks out a bit and each individual's involvement really mattered.

Today we are 1500 families. It's difficult in such a large environment to get that kind of buzz going. It's not only because of our numbers but also because, when you are big, taking a risk is bigger and there is more to lose. It's easy to become entrenched and climbing out of our deep grooves takes real work.

Today, as we initiate a new year, that is also our 50th year, I'm here to assure you that we, on the staff side of the Temple family, are doing that work. From technology to membership, new programs for the 20 some-things to new services for the 70 some-things, we are on it. Our projects continue to grow, as does our commitment to ensuring that our sacred relationships to one another remain at the core of this Temple. We continue,

as well, to create new opportunities for us to play an active role in the larger community, to fulfill our religious obligation to Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. New things are coming, new things are here! Our 50th year is calling us to take a new look and create a new a dynamic Jewish world and we are doing just that.

It is clear that our future, indeed, depends upon our ability to be nimble and adapt. But let's be truly honest with each other. It's not just the synagogue that needs to change. To continue to be a sacred community committed to our future and central to the future of Judaism itself, we need to change as well. Our Jubilee text from Leviticus calls upon us to rebalance our lives, to affirm our priorities, to reflect and then create a more responsible and fulfilled society. Of course we must begin with ourselves. I love this famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi. He said; "You must become the change you wish to see in the world." Change to protect the future of Judaism, must not only take place in our institutions, it must happen in us as well.

This challenge resonates deeply with me. For some time now, I have been thinking about my own path forward as a rabbi and simply as a Jew. I have been on a wonderful and fulfilling journey, but I sense my spiritual growth has slowed down considerably. Has my own Jewish observance become routine? Is there a new way for me to experience God's presence in my life? How can my Judaism direct me to do more for my community?

The texts of the Jubilee have highlighted my own need for my personal rebalancing. I'm thinking about enrolling in a two-year Jewish spirituality institute. It's a big time commitment but I feel the need to jump-start that dimension of my life. I'm thinking of learning to make hummus from scratch. I've tried before but never got it quite right, but I love the stuff. I'd love my grandchildren to talk about my fabulous hummus. I think it will be good for the future of the Jewish people.

And what about you? You are here and I know you care about this community and the broader future of Judaism. Many of you are committed to life long involvement in our Temple and more broadly to Jewish traditions, institutions and Israel. If only we could clone you! But if there is going to be a dynamic future for our Jewish community all of us need to be involved.

While our Jubilee text is clearly about resetting our priorities did you notice that it is initiated by the sounding of the Shofar - that piercing and shrill blast? We will hear it tomorrow and its sound will course through our entire bodies, shaking every cell – I love that! The rabbis say that the purpose of the shofar is to wake us up – not only physically but also spiritually and Jewishly. For 50 years we've been humming along, doing our thing, challenged at times, changing now and again – and then 'tekiah' !!! We are jolted and we wake up and see that we are in new territory. There are new, unfamiliar roads ahead and we had better figure out which direction we are going.

I will suggest that our ability to get good traction as we move forward depends on our capacity to deepen our commitment to the group with whom we are traveling. Not only that, but all of us have to be invested in the task and all of us must make some contribution to the journey. What has your contribution been thus far and what are you planning for the future? Are we all really ready, poised, and prepared to take the next step?

A few questions come to my mind, maybe a bit uncomfortable questions, that I hope you will consider answering for yourselves ...are you happy with the amount of Jewish knowledge you have? If your kids or our temple kids were to observe your daily or weekly Jewish life, what would inspire them to commit to Judaism for themselves when they are adults? How does your Judaism direct your actions at work, at the mall, on facebook? If someone asked you how you have contributed to a growing and changing and blossoming Judaism, what would you say?

Ok, enough questions – I think you get where I am headed. You know I love this congregation and I believe that we are indeed a wonderful and joyful Jewish community. But if there is going to be a next 50 years, we cannot leave it up to anyone else. No one is contributing to our future but us. Just the people in this congregation. No one gives to Jewish charities but us. No one thinks Jewish thoughts but us. Let's face it, a great deal is riding on our choices and our commitments.

In Leviticus, the Jubilee year was like a sabbatical. People could not farm their land, the land had to rest. This gave our biblical ancestors some well deserved time. Time to do things that they had always wanted to do – like

learn to make hummus, or read the book of Psalms, or construct a sukkah. They may have tried a new custom or traveled to a new community. I imagine it was an exciting time and as it approached there was a certain nervous energy in the community. Who would do what? What new things would be established? What established things would change?

I am certain that all of us would benefit from a sabbatical. Our lives as so busy and overstuffed with activities and responsibilities, we all need a break. Imagine what you might do if you had even a bit of that newly found time? What might you do that would excite you, and enrich you and the future of Judaism, at the same time?

Would you like to learn Hebrew? That would be sababa... cool! Have you ever made your own challah? It's so fabulous to have the smell fill your home – you'll never go back to the Giant. What if you subscribed online to the Jerusalem Post? I read an Israeli Newspaper each day and even if I only read one article, I feel much more confident with my understanding of what is happening in Israel. Better yet, take a trip to Israel (Cantor Shochet and I will lead a 50th anniversary trip this summer.) Become an adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Join a mitzvah team and volunteer one day a month or one weekend a year to serving others. Change your family calendar, the one that hangs in the kitchen where you write the soccer games and birthdays, to a Jewish calendar, where the Hebrew date is listed alongside the secular date, and the holidays and Torah portions are there - feel the power of Jewish time.

This year we are commanded to reorient ourselves in order to ensure a vibrant future. I'm asking you to personally fulfill this mitzvah, I'm asking us to stretch ourselves and deepen our commitment to our congregation and our tradition and their intertwined futures.

One of my favorite stories from the Talmud is about a man named Honi. When Honi was 70 years old he was out in his yard planting fruit trees. As he was digging holes for the saplings, a Roman soldier passed by. Laughing at Honi he asked, "Why are you wasting your energy planting fruit trees old man? You'll never enjoy the fruit of your labors." With sincere commitment Honi responded to the soldier. "I care about the future. Just as my ancestors planted trees for me, so too must I plant for the generations to come."

As Jews who care about Judaism and its future, our obligation is clear: we must plant new seeds and make space for new saplings. The trees we nurture by creating a new personal dimension of Judaism and a new model of synagogue life will enable us to carry on Judaism for ourselves and for generations to come.

Tomorrow the shofar will be sounded and we will be called to step up to the task. Let us say 'yes!' Let us say 'hineni!' Let say 'I do!' and 'I will!' And 50 years from now, when our children tell the story of this Jubilee year, let them be inspired by our energy, our deep commitment and by the change we embraced for ourselves as well as for our community. Our future and theirs depend on it.