

## **Fifty Years Young**

Rosh Hashanah Evening - September 28, 2011  
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California  
Rabbi Avi M. Schulman

Over the course of my years here at Temple Beth Torah, I have seen one phenomenon repeated time and again. When young adults in their twenties and thirties come to Temple, whether it's for a relative's Bar Mitzvah or a return visit here during the High Holy Days, I see these young adults drift over to the Social Hall wall where their Confirmation photos are hung. Standing in front of the wall, they eagerly search for their year's picture and point out with a smile their Confirmation photo. Often there is laughter and mock embarrassment at how they looked at the tender age of 16. But you can tell that these young adults also look at their Confirmation photo with pride knowing that they are still a part of our congregation.

I can identify with this experience of what it is like to return to your home congregation and see a part of yourself still present. The same phenomenon happened a few years ago when I visited Temple Israel in Long Beach. Once, while visiting my parents, we went to a Friday night service. Though the Shabbat service was lovely and the new rabbi of the congregation was warm and friendly, what was really important to me that night was that I go downstairs and find my Confirmation picture. It did not take me long to find my class which in 1970 consisted of 70 students. And there, on the end of the second row, was a curly haired teenager dressed in a blue choir robe like all the Confirmands and by gosh, there I was! I left Temple Israel that night feeling a sense of satisfaction that a part of me still lives on at the synagogue that has meant so much to the Schulman family.

Photographs can encapsulate a time and a place. They express a snapshot of a moment, a compressed depiction of history. If, as Rod Stewart sings, "Every picture tells a story," then a multitude of Temple Beth Torah pictures tell many stories about what it means to belong to our congregation.

Right now, a large number of Temple Beth Torah photographs are being gathered in anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary. These photos will

help us tell our story about how we have come to be the congregation we are today. These photographs span the course of the fifty-year history of this Temple Beth Torah. Some photos depict the founding members of this synagogue, some are sitting in the congregation right this moment. You can see the pride on their faces, back in the day when the congregation was young. There are photos of Temple Beth Torah when it was located in a house on Mission Street. The garage was converted into a sanctuary. Back in those days everyone pitched-in to get things done. There was no custodian, so everyone had to do everything including set-ups and clean-ups. Parents served as volunteer teachers and the classrooms were bursting with youngsters.

There are photos being collected that depict the dedication of this facility in 1978. I can scarcely imagine the pride everyone felt as they marched with the Torahs from Mission Street to this new home for the congregation. People must have thought to themselves, "We are a real shul now, with our own building and a rabbi." The future looked so bright.

Other photos tell similar stories of communal rejoicing. Photographs of the junior choir pictured dozens of children. The strength and energy of their singing must have been remarkable. There are photos of classrooms filled with students, and other photographs depict temple events that drew hundreds of people.

Looking at photographs that depict the history of Temple Beth Torah, there is every reason for Temple members, especially those who have been congregants for decades, to take pride and pleasure in the accomplishments of this synagogue. The dedication of members, who have contributed their time, energy, and resources over the course of so many years is laudable.

But when you linger over the photographs of the past fifty years and you see the energy and dedication and number of synagogue members, it is only natural for questions to emerge. When we look at the photos of Temple Beth Torah that cover our fifty years of existence, we may ask: At the age of 50, are our best years already behind us? Have we already reached the peak of our vitality as a synagogue? Are we now on a slow, downward slide of diminishment?

If we go strictly by numbers, there is cause for concern. Where once Temple had a membership of over 350 families, we have hovered around the two hundred mark for some time. Where once there were over 150 students in our Religious School for ages K-7, this year we stand at 40. Where once there were dozens of B'nei Mitzvah in a year, we now average around five.

These are legitimate areas of concern and we would be hiding our heads in the sand if we pretended that our congregation does not face significant challenges. We face the difficulty of growing and retaining our membership; we face the problem of recruiting our members to serve in voluntary and leadership capacities; and we face the quandary of engaging younger Jewish adults who often see the synagogue as an outmoded and unnecessary means for expressing one's Jewish identity.

I have been involved in synagogue life for more than twenty-five years, and let me tell you why I do not believe Temple Beth Torah is headed for extinction. First and foremost, our congregation is blessed to have wonderfully talented and dedicated leaders. I mean this with all seriousness. I have been in other congregations where boards were torn apart by dissension and meetings would last for hours on end with no resolution in sight. I have sat in on board meetings where board members would literally pound the table, yell at one another, and behave irrationally – why it was practically like witnessing the Israeli Knesset in action – or a session of Congress!

Yes, I have heard stories of past times in this congregation when such things happened. But it is to the great credit of the immediate past leaders of the board, especially in the past four years when Pip Ziman was president, that calm and order were established after the painful departure of Rabbi Kaplan. Those who served on the board these past four years have helped steady the ship. I continue to see the same calm and resolve to work constructively on the challenges facing our congregation with Dan Strauss and our current board.

Speaking of leadership, it is a remarkable quality of this congregation that past presidents of the synagogue remain engaged in Temple life. In many congregations, the general phenomenon is that once a president finishes his or her term, he or she hands over the reigns to a successor and then, exhausted and frustrated, disappears. Not so at Temple Beth Torah. Our past presidents care deeply about our synagogue and are more than willing to serve in many ways to keep Temple a vital community.

There is another primary reason why I am confident about the future of our synagogue. Here at Temple, a true sense of joy permeates our being together. One of the real strengths of this congregation is that members enjoy Jewish times of celebration. Yes, many of these celebratory moments are associated with joyous holidays like Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Purim, and Passover. But joy also happens at many other times. Take ShaBBQ's – when on warm balmy summer evenings,

people sit and schmooze and open-up bottles of wine and share homemade dishes. At other times, you can see joy in the faces of our choir who love to sing. You can experience outright hilarity during the performance of our Purim Shpiel (which by the way, promises next March to be full of Glee!) You experience the joy of Jewish living in Herman Rosenbaum's adult Yiddish class. Is there anything more lovely than Herman playing his mandolin and the entire class singing together a Yiddish song?

Our children experience joy here at Temple Beth Torah. Smiles glow on the faces of preschoolers at Gan Sameach as they frolic outside. Kids in our Religious School grin whether it's playing a game of Hebrew Hangman or proudly displaying their artwork. Walk through the classrooms as I do on Sunday mornings and Tuesday afternoons and you will see children learning and exploring Judaism in creative and imaginative ways. Come here on a Thursday night when our Mar-Win BBYO teenagers are together and you will experience amazing energy, enthusiasm, and laughter.

Another reason I have confidence in our congregation is that our members have demonstrated time and again their commitment to caring for one another. This congregation is like an extended family, and in times of need, people reach out to help. The Chevra Chesed committee, chaired by Gail Epstein, performs the mitzvah of providing meals to those who are going through a hard time; and the mitzvah of visiting the sick or those who are isolated at home or in a skilled nursing facility and are unable to come to Temple.

At Temple Beth Torah we have a long and proud tradition of practicing Tikkun Olam, of bringing healing to our world where so many suffer. For many years, on the first Sunday night of the month, members have served meals at the Abode shelter. We have collected hundreds of cans of food to donate during our High Holy Day food drive; donated generously during times of disaster such as after the earthquake in Haiti or the more recent devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan. We have held an annual blood drive in March coordinated by Christina Broadwin and we have helped to build homes through Habitat for Humanity. Our schoolchildren emulate their parents, bringing tzedakah to Religious School. We take special pride in the decision by each of our B'nei Mitzvah classes when they collectively give tzedakah to a worthy charity organization like Kiva, which makes microloans, or raise funds for the Ronald McDonald House which serves families with an ill child. Our Temple leaders and our synagogue members of all ages give me

confidence for our future. There is one other key reason why our Temple at its core is strong – and that is due to the character of our staff. We could not ask for a better Temple Administrator than Jill Ziman. She is warm and friendly to everyone. She never gets frazzled by unreasonable requests, remaining even keeled and capable of handling any problem. We are fortunate to have Andrea Fleekop as our Education Director. With her training at the Hebrew Union College and her accreditation as a Reform Jewish Educator, Andrea brings professionalism and skill to our educational programs. I also want to acknowledge Beth Miller, our long time Director of Gan Sameach. She has cared for our littlest students with genuine love and affection. Her delight in fostering curiosity and wonder in preschoolers is infectious. In addition to our full time staff, you should also know that our Gan Sameach teachers and our Religious School and Hebrew School faculty are wonderfully talented and dedicated, from Cheryl Cohen who has taught at Temple Beth Torah for over seventeen years to one of our newest teachers, Nina Tabrizi, who is just now embarking on a career in Jewish education.

Our Temple leaders, our members, and our staff make Temple Beth Torah a special place to be. These are our core strengths that will sustain us in the future. During this fiftieth year of our existence, we have every right to celebrate our many accomplishments. However, in order to be a vital and dynamic congregation, we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot be afraid to take risks. Indeed, the greatest risk we face is not changing anything, but simply doing the same thing year after year.

There is always a risk when you launch a new initiative at Temple. We fear change and we dislike the thought of failure. But the benefits of new initiatives can be so rewarding. When last Yom Kippur morning, I announced that I was planning to lead a congregational trip to Israel, I had no idea whether we would succeed. Who knew if we would get at least fifteen people to commit the time and resources to travel to our people's homeland? But as you all know, we did succeed. The nineteen of us who traveled together last June to Israel share a camaraderie and sense of adventure that still fills us with joy months after our return.

In the coming year, we should not be afraid of new initiatives such as offering alternative ways to worship; establishing innovative Social Action programs; or trying out new programs through our Brotherhood, Women of Temple Beth Torah, and Shalom Aleynu. We should not hesitate to experiment with creative ways to engage our youth and our adults in Jewish learning. These initiatives need to come not only from the elected leaders and staff of our congregation but from everyone who belongs to

Temple Beth Torah. In this, our semi centennial year, let us rephrase John F. Kennedy's famous quotation from his inaugural address fifty years ago: "Ask not what your Temple can do for you, but what you can do for your Temple!"

On this night that begins a new Jewish year, we should not fear taking risks, nor should we avoid asking ourselves challenging questions. When we turn our attention to the state of our facility, we should not be hesitant in asking, is our Sanctuary a place that enhances our worship? Are we inspired by its design? Does this sanctuary, created more than thirty years ago, need to be updated to reflect the aesthetics of a different generation? Is our Social Hall a modern looking structure where we look forward to gathering for communal celebrations? In what ways can we foster more intimacy and warmth, creating a sacred space in our sanctuary and our Social Hall that inspires our worship and serves as an inviting place for newcomers to join us?

Speaking of newcomers, we need to find new and stimulating ways to engage a younger generation of Jews. For most Jews in their twenties and thirties, our web page is the first place that they encounter us. We are grateful to members like Abe Mazliach who have maintained our web page over the years. It is now time to refresh our web site, to make it more inviting, more visual, and easier to find information. Our Temple web page needs to be a portal for inviting others to learn more about who we are and how open and inviting we are to people of all generations.

On this night of Rosh Hashanah, when we begin the Jewish year of 5772, I do not believe that the best days of Temple Beth Torah are behind us. I look forward to a new year of continuing to be a warm, supportive, and caring congregation. I welcome our striving to bring new programs and energy to our community. Together we can through initiative, creativity, and determination lead our congregation into a new era of vitality.

Confirmation photos are proud markers of a time and place, of a group of students and teachers linked together for a year of study and celebration. Let us join together in this New Year to create many new joyful moments that will be displayed on our walls and streamed on our website. Let us share our joy with one another in order to lift each other's hearts and inspire ourselves to deeds of kindness and generosity. Let us together bring forth a New Year of joy and celebration and fulfillment. May God bless us as we usher in a Shanah Tovah U'metukah, a good and sweet and peaceful New Year.

And let us say together, Amen.

