



Kol Nidre Address

September 2018

Good Evening and Shana Tova,

In my Kol Nidre address last year, I raised a subject that has special relevance as we approach the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Shaar. It was an invitation to explore what each of us needs from our experience at the Shaar, and to reexamine ways to strengthen our community ties. The question is of equal importance individually and collectively. Sixty-five years ago, a committed group of people came together to create this community in this building. I ask myself, How do we continue their work by engaging current and new members in ways that are meaningful to them –that is, to you--personally? What is our emotional and spiritual connection to wanting to be here, to be a part of the Shaar community? And as important as that is to tackle, as important as it is for us to work together to figure that out later on, I want to talk to you about something else tonight.

One month ago, our son, Yale, became a Bar Mitzvah. It was understandably a meaningful experience for our family but I learned something very powerful from that weekend. Many of those who attended

shared that they were spiritually and emotionally uplifted, but what struck me the most was hearing that for them, witnessing a young Jew embrace his responsibility of engagement was inspiring for them, it made them want to engage.

We are a fully committed Jewish congregation when we make ourselves one, and we do that through engagement with the Shaar and our fellow members. Engagement is vitality, and vitality is the life of our community. As Naomi Rosenfeld noted on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, life (chai) is a central value of Judaism, and Judaism prizes both the life of individuals and the life of community. Together we are always stronger.

Like Naomi, I believe that the Jewish community of Halifax is alive.

Certainly, the community of the Shaar is alive and thriving. We have had a strong year of activity:

-) We reinstated the Breakfast Club, with 3 sessions profiling congregants' interests and expertise over bagels and coffee. An excellent way to get to know each other!
-) We refurbished the library, and the library committee is introducing a Shaar Book Club. You took the time to answer the Library Committee's recent survey, they listened, and some of your requests are already upstairs ready for you.
-) The gift shop has new leadership and has been revamped.
-) The upper floor has been refreshed with new lighting, paint and carpet.

-) Our signature annual events were, once again successful: the Hanukkah sale, the latke bake and the spring yard sale
-) Annual outreach activities continued with the Dr. Saul Green Memorial Lecture and the Shaar Shalom Lecture at Dalhousie University.
-) We updated the office computer system developed and implemented a new security policy
-) Representatives of the Executive attended Sulam Leadership, bringing back valuable, tangible resources for change

These activities involved the resources of many volunteers and board members to whom we are hugely indebted. But what about those members who didn't have the opportunity to engage? We can't afford to leave anyone behind. We need the energy and talents of all of you to keep us moving forward. Some of you volunteer a lot, and we have relied upon you probably too much. Some of you—many of you, I suspect—don't volunteer much because you haven't been asked. Or because you don't know what needs to be done. Or because you haven't considered how you can contribute. Most of the time it's just easier to sidestep the whole issue, but we know in our hearts that withdrawal will not lead us to a more fulfilling Jewish life or more vibrant community.

I believe that each one of us needs to imagine ourselves as part of an "Engagement Team" that can bring us together in newly-creative ways, providing meaningful projects that make us feel connected and at home.

To that end, in 5779 we are launching an exciting new initiative called ReJewVenation, whose aim is to spark even wider volunteer commitment at the Shaar. A Volunteer Questionnaire will go out in the next week or so to help you gauge your interests and skills, and to inform you, if you don't already know, of all the myriad ways you can contribute. I know, I know, it's a questionnaire and nobody likes them. But I ask you to set aside 15 minutes to read the questionnaire—that act alone will get you thinking about what needs to be done and the amazing opportunities in front of us. It's worth your time. You've entrusted us with this job of steering the Shaar. Help us do it better. Talk to us.

Of course, I don't need to remind you these new programs and initiatives will require financial resources. As committed as we are to the spiritual and social life of our shul, we need to be equally committed to its financial good health.

For the past several years I think we've taken our financial health for granted, and we are beginning to see the signs of wear and tear. We learned at Sulam this year that compared to most other synagogues in North America, for example, the Shaar relies disproportionately on dues to underwrite programs and events. With most other synagogues, dues comprise roughly 65% to 70% of annual revenues; at the Shaar, more than 90% of our revenues come from dues. That is not sustainable from any perspective, not the least because it exposes a slackening in the kind of regular programming that can generate, and used to generate, regular

revenue for us. The question arises, where does the other 30% of operating revenues get generated for these other congregations? We have begun to evaluate answers to these questions, looking at endowments, estate planning, and major fundraisers. It turns out that engagement in new programs is as necessary for our financial, as it is for our social and spiritual, health! When each event or program, no matter how small, acts as a fundraiser as well as an engagement tool, the cumulative effect of a year's worth of events will make a huge difference to us.

We have ideas to develop new initiatives, of course, but we need to begin with what we already have in place—Just a few ideas:

- Sponsor a weekly kiddush. It can be a small, regular kiddush or a larger, more elaborate one. Use your sponsorship to mark small events: to celebrate a birthday or the first day of spring; to thank a friend or honour a colleague.
- Use leaves on the tree of life to commemorate a family event; to acknowledge a yahrzeit; to recognize a contribution to the community.
- Increase the donation for Breakfast Club. People have been donating \$5 for more than 30 years. Let's consider inflation? It's time to raise the donation to reflect 2018 values: a \$10 donation, a \$20 donation, and these small changes mean alot.

In this world we are always encouraged to think big. Today, I am encouraging you to think small. In this regard, small is good. Many small things = big cumulative impact.

These are just a few examples for regular ongoing activities. A fundraising committee has been set up to bring new resources to these initiatives and to help them grow and thrive. When you receive and read your Volunteer Questionnaire, keep in mind the need for small-scale fundraising and share your ideas with us.

The annual Kol Nidre Appeal is the foundation of every synagogue's financial health, and the Shaar is no exception.

There is a reason we always talk about money on Kol Nidre. Yom Kippur is the single most important community event attended by Jews. Tzedakah is one of its pillars, one of the three ways to alter our fate and be inscribed in the book of life. Tzedakah begins at home. This year, in the spirit of collective engagement, we ask that every household unit contribute to the Kol Nidre appeal. If every membership unit in our congregation who has not given to the Kol Nidre appeal in the past would give \$36 this year – that is \$3 per month, we would raise almost \$6000 more. Since the appeal is annual, challenge yourself to think of your donation in terms of its monthly cost to you: a \$180 contribution works out to \$15 per month; \$240 is \$20 per month. The request for 100% participation is important: it means that every household, whether they contribute a little or a lot, is showing their

solidarity and commitment to the Shaar. That makes a powerful statement to us as a community. And it will have an equally powerful impact on our financial resources.

This year's Appeal has an important connection to the theme of engagement. If we request full engagement from all members, we must be able to provide equal opportunity for all members to be involved. And that requires equal access to the building and its programs.

The Kol Nidre Appeal is for investment in all our community access points. We don't have all the details yet but have organized some committees to begin examining the issues, and we pledge our commitment to keep accessibility front and center this year.

We will be looking at accessibility

- } to the building
- } to all the building's rooms
- } to the bimah

While the back door of the building has a ramp, the front door remains inaccessible.

The library, for example, is open whenever the Shaar office is open, during Hebrew School hours and during programming BUT it cannot be reached by everyone. In this we are referring not only of the ability of all members to physically enter the room, but also ways in which members can connect

digitally. For that to happen the library desperately needs a computer, as well as cataloging and lending software.

We need to ensure equal opportunity for all members to ascend the bimah to have an aliyah or participate in other honours. What form that will take — or how much it will cost will be decided by a committee to assess the issue and make recommendations.

The bimah itself, that provides the communal backdrop to our weekly and holiday services, needs some beautification. A committee has been looking into ideas and the Appeal will provide the funds.

There are so many exciting opportunities. How will you become part of the Engagement Team? We look forward to ReJewVenation this year, and remember that many small changes can collectively make big differences.

This year, imagine the impact....If Every Household contributes to the Kol Nidre Appeal. If we all Engage and commit. If we all find a home in our community.

G'mar Chatima Tova

Jennifer O'Connor

Chair, Board of Directors