

Remarks of Louis Bricklin, Beth David Reform Congregation  
Yom Kippur 5779

Gut Yontiff. Before I forget, let me start by thanking everyone who has worked so hard to make these high holidays so beautiful and meaningful. Thank you to Rabbi Kalisch, Cantor Goodlev, Pavel and our choirs. On behalf of the congregation, I want you to know that what you have done matters. Thanks to the High Holiday committee, Dinah Engel, Deb Kaufman, Judy Grinspan and Susan Bricklin for working all summer on the logistics of these services. Thanks to Beth David Men for providing ushers for our services and to our Executive Director, Jill Cooper, and her team, Ned Kripke, Tony Artis, Betty Trolley and Dena Marchiony, without whom none of this would be possible. We thank each of you for enabling these moments of reflection and introspection.

When my parents were members at Beth David back in the late 1950's, synagogues were in what I would call a "seller's market". Open your doors and in they'll come. The United States in the post-war years was a church going nation and Jews were no exception - except of course, they went to synagogue. The parents, grandparents and great grandparents of those of us who are Jewish went to synagogue because in the 1950's, that's what you did. The holocaust was just barely a decade in the past and everyone had been touched by it. And perhaps because in many ways Jews were still outsiders in a predominantly Christian country, once Jews established and joined synagogues the synagogue often became a center for connecting Jews to one another. I cannot tell you how many times over coffee this summer with our more senior members I was told about the early days at Beth David, when everyone knew everyone else, knew their kids, knew their parents, knew their joys, knew their sorrows. The synagogue was very much a community of Jews.

Over the decades much of that has changed. One writer has referred to what we practice now as "bus station Judaism". We come, we have nice conversations with the person next to us and when the bus comes (or the sermon ends) we go on our way. And we don't think of that person again unless we run into him or her in the bus station next time. For Judaism to thrive, this has to change. So let's talk about it.

When I say "for Judaism to thrive" the first question we might confront is what does it mean to be Jewish? My guess is that "Judaism" is probably not the same thing for any two of you out there. Is Judaism the community we offer? Is it the good that

Jews do in the world? The fact that you're part of a group of like-minded individuals who happen to have been around for 3000 years? Is it the spiritual sustenance you obtain from whatever form your worship takes? Is it just the right to say "I'm Jewish"? Whatever it is for you, your presence here tells me that Jewish identity matters to you or to someone you love. And you know what? To me your answer to that question "what does it mean to be Jewish?" matters hardly at all.

What does matter to me is what I have seen happen over the last 50 years. What I have seen is that Judaism – whatever that is to you – thrives when your individual practice – however you personally choose to "do Jewish" is supported by a community of other Jews. And when it isn't, Judaism doesn't matter so much to people anymore. In other words, I fear that being able to say "I'm Jewish" ultimately means little or nothing at all if there's no one else around to say the same thing to you.

And that's why Beth David matters, and it's why I intend to spend as much time as I can during the time I'm president figuring out how to deepen the community among us by strengthening your connections with each other, with Beth David and with whatever Judaism means to you.

As I mentioned, this past summer I invited you to join me for "coffee with the President". I didn't do that because I wanted to compare La Colombe with Starbucks (though having coffee with almost fifty of you, I surely did). I did it because I wanted to get to know you, about your experience with Beth David, how you "do Jewish" and how we might help you with that. I learned a lot, but there's plenty more to learn.

Coffee with the president was just a small first step into an initiative we are calling "Sh'ma Beth David". It's about listening and connecting to each other. Rabbi Kalisch discussed it in her sermon on Erev Rosh Hashanah but I want to review some of that if you missed it, and discuss some other elements as well.

One element, you've hopefully already heard about. We have made it a practice for some years for members of our Board of Trustees to call you at this time of year to wish you a Happy New Year and just "check in". This year we're extending that practice. In addition to a couple of other calls during the course of the year the board member who called you will be your connection or liaison to all things Beth David. If you want to discuss anything having to do with Beth David, give her or him a call or

shoot an email. Any maybe, just maybe, you and your liaison might find time to sit down over coffee and discuss what this place means to you. That's how we connect.

Another means of connecting will be the "Sh'ma think tank" meetings we'll be conducting this year. This fall and winter we have scheduled a dozen meetings of congregants, ten to fifteen people at most, with either the Rabbi or the Cantor in a congregant's home. The host will act as the facilitator. These will be highly structured meetings designed to get to the heart of what's important to you and then when we uncover common interests to use them in the future to establish small groups of our members who want to connect over something important to all of them.

Rabbi Kalisch and before her Rabbi Cohen often quote from Martin Buber and his concept of the I-Thou Relationship: that between any two of us there is something very special. If you connect to others and you and they either identify as Jewish or love someone who does, we have planted the seed for a Jewish community in which you're saying "I'm Jewish" will matter. You can sign up for one of our Think Tank meetings in the lobby or see information in the service handout about how to sign up on line.

Last, we want to connect you by offering you ways to get involved in Jewish life at Beth David. This is not a "we've got a lot to offer, why don't you come join us, you'll be glad you did" message. This is a "Jewish communities don't work if you aren't involved" message. And to that end, I ask you whether you have you seen our Yom Kippur pledge card? When you do, you'll see that this year it's different. We have the chutzpah to ask not only for a donation of your money, but also that you get involved.

You see, as much as we might like to, we can't use donations of money to buy our way into being a Jewish community. We have to be willing to do Jewish as well. Not necessarily by coming to services on Friday night or attending every program we present or lighting candles but in some way shape or form being a participant in a community of Jews.

So this year your pledge card lists a host of ways in which you can get involved. We have split our Board of Trustees into "sub-boards". One will work on increasing engagement with our younger members. One will work on increasing engagement with our older members. And one will work on ensuring our financial sustainability. If you're interest in working in one of those areas or any of the other areas listed on the

card, check it off or go to our website. Look for “Make A Difference” and then “Count Me In”. We’ll be back to you.

Now listen, I’m 68 years old, semi-retired and with some time on my hands. That description does not fit lots of you. There are plenty of other demands on your time. I get it. And if there’s just no way you can change that, I want you to know we absolutely still want you at Beth David. So that we can be there for you when you need us. But if you can find even a few hours to give to us, please do.

I know: “when’s he going to get to the ask for money part”. Well I am, but I want to tie it in to everything I’ve been talking about so far. You see, I believe that if you will get involved in just one or two of those “to-do” items on the pledge card, if you will participate in our “Think Tanks”, if you’ll coffee with us and plan with us and join our small groups of members with the same interests, Beth David will be just fine financially. Why? Because ultimately you make your donations of money to something that is important to you. And if you are a participant in this community then seeing it prosper will rank up there in importance with the success of the colleges and universities and cancer funds and orchestras and art museums and all those other wonderful causes to which you donate your time and your money. And you will give to Beth David, because being Jewish is important to you or someone you love and because communities like Beth David must prosper for “being Jewish” to matter.

Finally, though I know that this process will work, I also know that it won’t happen overnight. So for now, I have to be more direct. This year’s budget at Beth David calls for close to a quarter of a million dollars in expenses to be covered by your contributions over and above your annual commitment. And, it starts, as it always has with the Yom Kippur pledge. It would be presumptuous of me to suggest an amount for you to give but you can do the math with 325 family units and a \$250,000 gap to fill. But whatever amount you choose to give, and I hope you will choose to be generous, please also pay attention to the “do-ers” side of the card and opt to be as generous as you can with your time. I assure you that you won’t be sorry you did.

Please have an easy remainder of your fast. I wish you a sweet, happy and healthy new year. L’shanah Tovah.