

Shana Tova. Before I start my Kol Nidre speech, I want to make my customary brief announcements. First, I want to thank those who made this service possible – our gabbaim Jane Shapiro and Steve Steinberg who organized this service as they do all services during the year. I also want to thank them for their participation today – Jane for Kol Nidre, and Steve for Maariv. We will meet here again tomorrow morning at 9 and we will be providing childcare - along with food for the children - from 9:30 until 1:00.

Kol Nidre marks the beginning of the end of our period of t'shuva – a period of self-reflection and repentance. It is also a time when synagogues traditionally reflect upon their past year and ask the congregants to help them with their plans for the future.

Last year at our first High Holiday services I spoke to you about Kol Sasson as a concept. I spoke about why the ideas behind Kol Sasson should be important to you, and why they deserve your support. Obviously, you listened well. We have grown and developed beyond anyone's expectations.

So this year I want to go beyond the concept and talk with you about the reality of Kol Sasson. But because we have many new members here, I hope you don't mind if I briefly revisit the ideas behind Kol Sasson.

Kol Sasson is part of a wider international movement that began in Jerusalem in 2001 with the goal of creating an inclusive, halachic synagogue community. In order to be inclusive, the movement had to confront a major halachic stumbling block. This stumbling block is Kavod Hatsibur, or congregational dignity. Some years ago, several orthodox rabbis ruled that, in this era where men and women are equal in all areas of civil discourse, and are even equal in religious learning and understanding, a countervailing halachic principle of Kavod Heberiyot, or human dignity, may trump that of congregational dignity. This means that women are allowed to lead those parts of the service that do not require a shaliach tsibur. They may read Torah, have an aliyah, and lead kabbalat Shabbat, pezukei d'zimra, and the Torah service. I've taken the liberty of simplifying these issues. If you're interested in a more detailed critical analysis, please visit our website, kolsasson.org, where we have posted relevant articles by the rabbinic authorities.

Although satisfying halachic principles is necessary for us to exist as an orthodox congregation, that alone would not allow us to thrive as we have. Kol Sasson also stands for spiritually significant tefillah marked by enthusiastic singing. As I stated last year: By empowering women, we have encouraged them to raise their voices in song along with the men. We have created a virtuous cycle – when women feel more spiritually involved, they express this feeling publicly through song, which enriches all of our tefillah, and everyone becomes spiritually closer to God.

Several years ago, before Kol Sasson even began, we were just a twinkle in the eyes of Rochelle and Jane. They established Kol Sasson because they wanted to fill a spiritual void in their own tefillah. What we have found over the past couple of years is that there is a like-minded community of people for whom Kol Sasson has become a significant part of their religious observance and identity. So we have grown.

We started with periodic Friday night services supplemented with Purim megillah reading and a rare Shabbat morning service. Last year after our first High Holiday services, we were struck by both the beauty of the service and our facility in bringing it to fruition.

We quickly built on that success. In short order, we incorporated as a not-for-profit, began meeting every other Shabbat morning, and met for all the Yizkor services while still continuing to meet for Purim and occasional Friday nights. As we meet here tonight, our paid membership for this High Holidays is over 50% greater than last year, and we have reservations for approximately 120 men, women, and children.

As you can see, the reality turns out to be even better than the concept. But our growth, which is a blessing, also imposes certain responsibilities on this institution and on each of us.

We have already begun to address one of our responsibilities – the need to provide first class childcare and children’s programs. But there are others. Many may seem like a pipe dream, so I hope that you will forgive my exuberance, but as Theodore Herzl said, “[i]f you will it, it is no dream.” Now, it is time to dream.

Wouldn't it be nice to have more members who can layn, and lead the services – people who will commit themselves to learning to do those things for us; wouldn't it be nice to have a rabbi who could lead us halachikally and serve as our teacher; wouldn't it be nice to meet every Shabbat; and as generous as Temple Beth Israel has been because without them we would not have had the financial strength to get to this point, wouldn't it be nice to have our own space?

Now comes the hard part – making these dreams into our new reality. To a great extent that is what Yom Kippur is about, turning dreams into reality. We dream of being better people both as individuals and as a community, and we use this time of reflection to figure out how to do so.

It occurs to me that in the machzor our dreams, our aspirations, are addressed in a somewhat peculiar way. Instead of focusing on the big picture, we spend much of Yom Kippur dwelling on minutiae. We enumerate our sins both individually – there are 44 different sins expounded in al chet, and we enumerate our sins categorically – there are 8 different sin offerings and punishments mentioned immediately afterwards. We speak of reward and especially punishment for these sins in graphic detail.

The unetana tokef concludes with a discussion of who shall live and who shall die, and the various methods of death to the point where we even distinguish between those who will die by strangling and those by stoning. Is there really a difference, does it really matter? What's the lesson here? Some might say that the purpose of the prayer is to convey that we are rewarded for good behavior and punished for bad. However, our personal experience tells us that life doesn't operate that way; and even King Solomon says that he has seen a righteous man perish for all his righteousness, and a wicked man endure for all his wickedness

So then, why does the machzor have all this elaborate detailing of sin, reward, and punishment? I believe that the sages who wrote this prayer book were trying to teach us a moral lesson - the lesson that what we do in this world matters. Even the little details matter. And though we may not be able to appreciate how it matters, it does, and it matters in the here and now – not just as some unknown reward or punishment in the world to come. I believe that the sages were trying to teach us something beyond the theological: in a world where we cannot really know our purpose for being here, we can gain meaning in our lives by attending to the small details in our lives – by working to make the world a better place.

What I want you to think about tonight and tomorrow is how what you do matters to Kol Sasson. We are a small and growing community with limited resources. And as we learn on Yom Kippur that everything that we do matters - - for a small organization like ours, everything you do really does matter. So think about what you can do to turn our dreams into a reality. Will you commit to laying one aliyah every other week? With 14 such committed people, we could meet weekly. Will you commit to learning to lead a part of the service that you don't already know? Will you commit to helping with children's programming? Or maybe you will come up with a new and exciting program on your own initiative? And finally, are you able and willing to commit the kind of funds our congregation needs to have a rabbi and our own place?

If you've answered yes to any of these questions, take out the little pledge card in your brain, and fold over the appropriate tab. We won't collect the cards, but I trust that you will follow through.

In the haftora for parshat Pinchas, Eliyahu is trying to understand how one furthers God's purpose. He experiences a powerful wind, an earthquake, and fire -- but God is not in any of these. And then he hears a Kol D'mama Daka – a still, small voice and there he finds God's purpose. This is the same Kol D'mama Daka which the unetana tokef prayer says heralds the day of judgment. It is time for you to **hear** that still, small voice and for you to **be** that still, small voice. Help us in any way that you can, and realize that whatever you do it is appreciated and has real consequences for you, your children, and the world at large.

Gmar Tov