

Four years and seven weeks ago our mothers brought forth in this village, a new congregation, conceived in Halacha, and dedicated to the proposition that all men and women are entitled to participate in joyful tefillah.

Now we are engaged in a great davening marathon, testing whether that congregation, or any congregation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.

Many have come before us and consecrated this congregation through their participation, hard work, and monetary support.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us that we here highly resolve that this work shall not have been performed in vain -- that this congregation, under God, shall have a new birth of kavanah -- and that Kol Sasson Congregation shall not perish from the earth.

So can you tell that this is my fifth year in a row doing this? I am getting a little batty. But, I hope that this facile conflation between the Gettysburg Address and our own vision statement demonstrates how important ideas are.

The United States of America was founded on great ideals. We are a country that unites its people, not based on ethnicity, but on adherence to an idea - the idea that all people are created equal and thus endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. Our country has served as a beacon to all peoples who cherish freedom.

Just as we live in a country based on ideals, so too Judaism is a religion based on ideals. It wasn't our might or power, economic dominance or great road building, or artistic achievements that caused Judaism to have an outsize influence on history or the peoples of the world. No, it was an idea. The idea of ethical monotheism – that we live in a moral universe where God takes an active role in history. There may not be a lot of Jews in the world, but there are certainly a lot of ethical monotheists. It didn't have to be this way, but as the polytheistic Roman Empire collapsed this powerful idea nurtured by a small group in the middle east exploded outward to encompass the whole world.

Like the United States and Judaism, Kol Sasson was also founded on an ideal – the idea that one could have an observant, halachic congregation that actively looked for ways to involve women instead of looking for excuses not to include them. It didn't have to be that way. Many congregations are founded on more practical considerations – the beauty of a building, its closeness to homes, whether the congregation is made up of German vs. Russian Jews, or even whether the men wear top hats or straw hats during services. But we are about something more. Our adherence to important ideas results in dedicated participation, joyful tefillah, and a cohesive community.

And it is not just happening here. Kol Sasson got its start when Rochelle and Jane wanted to repeat what they had experienced at Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, and there are currently Shira Hadasha type minyonim throughout the world. I am told that at the University of Michigan the Shira Hadasha style kabbalat Shabbat service is the best attended - attracting 300 students. How's that for a shared community and a legacy that we are a part of?

Now these important ideas serve as a seed for growth, but they are not enough alone to get the job done. It takes actual hard work, effort, and money to do that, and we have done so. Thanks to our dedicated volunteers, we have weekly Shabbat services, services for every hag, and this year our fourth High Holiday service. Each service requires laying, davening, d'var torahs, set-up, and clean-up. These sacred tasks coupled with our ideas results in joyfull tefillah.

But there is more. We have kiddushes, children's programs, and seudot shlishit, and we celebrate life cycle events together. All of these things take effort and planning and together with our ideals builds our cohesive community. Make no mistake, this community is not just an abstraction. I see this community here when our teenagers eagerly anticipate being able to leave the service and spend some time with the younger children. And I see this community distinctly when I leave Kol Sasson. Just this past summer, Rochelle and I went to Camp Ramah for Shabbat and held a Kol Sasson Kiddush in our guest cabin. It was heartwarming to see how eager and enthusiastic our Kol Sasson children were to join with each other as a community. In fact, I have an idea for you. Take a few minutes this Yom Kippur to ask your children how they feel about their Kol Sasson community. I think that you will be surprised to find out how deep those feelings run.

So what does it take to further strengthen our joyful tefillah and cohesive community? It takes three things – participation, leadership, and money. And while our dues pay for the minimum things that we undertake, there is so much more that we could do. We could have a congregational retreat, upgraded scholar-in-residence programs, and expanded social programs. We could buy more of the ritual objects that we need to further beautify our service.

All of you by definition participate because you are here today, most of you take leadership roles in the congregation, and many donate extra money to Kol Sasson. Ideally, I would like to see each and every one of you resolve to participate more, take on a leadership role, and give money. But I understand that it is not possible for everyone to do all of these things. Please do what you can, but please do something.

Yom Kippur too is about ideas. It is about the idea of yourself, and what you can do to improve your character. Tonight and tomorrow when you are meditating on your self-improvement, please also consider how you can improve your character by helping Kol Sasson Congregation.

Here is your first opportunity for self-improvement. It's very easy. I'll walk you through it. Take your pledge card; consult with your spouse; bend back the tab for the amount that you want to contribute; put the card back in the envelope, and return the card to one of my helpful assistants. For those of you who did not take your card, they are in the back on the card table with your name on it. There are extra cards in case there is not one with your name on it. You can bring those home, and turn them in later. Gmar Chatima Tova to each and everyone of you.