

## **Why I am Proud to be a Member of Congregation Beth Israel**

Shanah tovah everyone. Isn't this wonderful? Our whole community is gathered together to celebrate the New Year in prayer and song. We are in our new building which soon enough won't be considered new anymore. Our membership continues to grow. By the looks of it, Beth Israel is in a good place. And from the inside, I can tell you that it certainly is.

My friends, two years ago I spoke about why I am proud to be a Jew and last year I delivered a sermon on why I am proud to be a Reform Jew. Tonight, I would like to complete this theme of pride by getting even more specific and discussing why I am proud to be part of the Beth Israel community.

Think about it for a moment. Why are you proud to cast your lot with this community? I realize that some of us here are simply attending at the bequest of a loved one or friend. Thank you for showing up and joining us this evening. Most everyone else, however, has been coming for as short as a few weeks to a whole lifetime and everywhere in-between, donating valuable time and money along the way. I am sure some of our friends here joined because there just aren't that many other options for synagogue affiliation. Others fell in love with Beth Israel right away. Yet, here we all are. So, I'll ask again: What makes you proud to be a part of Congregation Beth Israel?

I have had the greatest honor of serving as your rabbi for the past 7 years and in this time I have come up with my own list that I would like to share with you this evening. As you may have noticed, there is a board in the foyer with lots of sticky-notes and pens. Sometime during the High Holy Days, I would love for you to write your own thoughts to share with everyone in our community. Some businesses have suggestion boards. Ours is more like a gratitude board. I hope this board will inspire you and make you feel proud to be connected to this community.

I remember interviewing for this rabbinic position back in early 2012. At that time I had never heard of Bellingham. What I did know was mostly historical information about the community from Rabbi Lenny Thal, a homegrown

celebrity whose family goes back generations. Rabbi Thal told me about how Beth Israel began as an Orthodox shul, founded by Lithuanian immigrants after the turn of the century. Immediately, I felt a connection as my maternal ancestors are also from Lithuania and my family helped build a shul in Fargo, North Dakota around the time CBI was founded. Over the course of nearly 100 years, both synagogues went through transitions and now affiliate with the Reform movement. Yet, because of the history of our community and our relative isolation to other epicenters of Jewish life, we have chosen to open our doors as wide as possible in order to accommodate varying degrees of Jewish practice and engagement.

The first reason I am proud is because Beth Israel is a model of Big Tent Judaism. While we are a member of the Union for Reform Judaism, we do our best to cater to Jews from all backgrounds. On any given Shabbat you might find yourself at a Renewal style service in the round or a Conservative lay-led minyan that uses our old Sim Shalom siddurim. On select weekdays you might hear congregants *davening* mincha before studying Shulchan Arukh. And on other days you'll hear the Social Action committee planning for upcoming events. If you attend our sukkah raising event, you'll even be able to taste Sephardic cuisine.

Believe me, trying to find just the right balance between more traditional and contemporary practice, between Conservative and Reform worship, has been and will continue to be a challenge for us. Yet, look at what we have been able to accomplish. We are a model of how a diverse community can co-exist and thrive despite all religious or cultural differences.

There's a joke I heard years ago that underscores the exact situation we have been blessed to avoid. Some years ago a young rabbi came to his new congregation filled with ideas and enthusiasm. At his first service, he spoke movingly about the power of Shabbat. The shul president complimented him on his talk but added that maybe he shouldn't talk about Shabbat too much. After all, the president said, we have storekeepers who are open on Shabbat and doctors with office hours that day. The rabbi listened carefully. The following week, the rabbi spoke insightfully about kashrut. Again the president complimented him but cautioned against another sermon on food rules. After all, lots of people don't keep kosher, and kosher

meat costs too much, as do four sets of dishes. Once again the rabbi signaled his assent. The third Shabbat the rabbi spoke about the beauty of Sukkot. Again, after praising the rabbi, the president suggested that his spiritual leader remove sukkot from his sermonic plate as well. People he noted have just taken off work for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; it would be hard for them to give up more days. Finally, the rabbi's frustration came to a boil. "What do you want me to speak about?" he exclaimed. "That's easy", the president replied, "talk about Judaism!"

Somehow Beth Israel has learned to play nicely in one sandbox. And this is one reason that makes me proud to be a part of such an inclusive and big tent community. We have figured out how to meld different traditions and customs under one roof. I can certainly talk about kashrut one evening and criminal justice reform another. Thank you all for understanding that everything we do is Jewish and that all expressions of Judaism found here are 100% authentic.

Secondly, I am proud of how our community is not afraid to push ourselves to change. We recognize that Judaism is an ever-evolving tradition and with each generation come a different set of priorities than the previous generation. Yet, what connects one era to another is its engagement with Judaism and more specifically, their steadfast commitment to building a stronger Beth Israel.

A couple generations earlier, Beth Israel, under the leadership of Rabbi Fred Gartner, included women in a minyan and allowed all genders to sit together. Several decades later the once Orthodox shul officially affiliated with the Reform movement. A decade after that the community voted to allow family members who were not Jewish to be buried alongside their Jewish loved ones in our cemetery. Eight years ago the Board voted in support of same-sex marriage. Five years ago we marched for the first time as a synagogue community in the Bellingham Pride festival. Three years ago our Chevra Kaddisha, or Jewish burial society, decided in what I consider a landmark resolution, to offer *tahara*, the ritual washing of a body in preparation for burial, to those whose wishes are to be cremated. And finally, just over a year ago, the Board overwhelmingly passed a vote on allowing CBI's clergy to officiate at interfaith weddings in the synagogue.

My friends, none of these decisions were easy to make. That might just be the understatement of the year. Many in this room fought diligently in support of, or in opposition to one or several of these decisions. Some will argue that Beth Israel today might not resemble the Beth Israel of yesterday, but I would argue that it most certainly does. From the time we built our shul—with no debt—on Broadway street many years ago, we have continued to adapt and widen our tent while fostering a membership of committed and caring individuals, who collectively honor our many traditions in the multitude of ways they are practiced. We are constantly trying to find that sweet spot of Jewish connection with our membership and in doing so, change happens.

The third reason I am filled with pride is that our community is driven by committed lay-leaders. Sometimes when I speak to my colleagues I am envious of their large temple staffs, including full-time maintenance and security crews, programming and engagement professionals, marketing departments and even assistants for all of these positions. Just imagine for a moment how lovely it would be to not be responsible for cleaning up after every event. I'm sure I could get an "Amen!" from all the b'nei mitzvah families. However, it is specifically at times like these, or in setting up for programs, that community is created. We come together, not just for services and classes, but to maintain our holy space. In working together we strengthen our congregation by the relationships we make in the process.

One of the best examples was the recent building of our new Gaga pit, located on the grassy knoll next to the patio. Last year's 7th grade families came together, along with other congregants and built this structure from scratch. We relied on the professionals in our own community and in doing so, members of all ages had a part in making this dream become a reality. And now we have this shared memory.

Of course doing everything ourselves can turn some people away. And many people who are in positions of leadership have full-time jobs when they are not occupied with synagogue needs. Fostering the kind of community Beth Israel is used to takes a lot of sweat and dedication and I am in awe of how so many of you have stepped up to the plate time and time

again. My hope is that you feel appreciated and energized to keep moving forward. And I also hope that more people in the coming year will count themselves amongst the committed lay leadership. We need your participation and we value every bit you can give us.

Recently, I asked our Facebook community why they are proud to be part of Beth Israel. The first response that came in was: "I am proud to be a part of the CBI community because of all the caring, loving folks." That's really it, isn't it? This is what makes our community so incredible. Not only do we have many volunteers who provide support to those experiencing illness, loss, or other challenges in life with home visits, meals, rides, and emotional support, but they also offer celebratory cheer. One of the first things I noticed soon after I arrived was that b'nei mitzvah services were not private events, but whole community celebrations. We rally around our friends and community members through all of life's ups and downs.

Over the last 7 years I have seen our Care Committee expand in scope and practice. Our membership numbers are still on a steady incline, much of the reason is due to first impressions when guests step foot in our building and are greeted warmly by our membership team, board members and each of you.

A couple of weeks ago I had a meeting in my office with a young woman who's expecting her first child in November. She was accompanied by her father who was there to offer his support. After we spoke about the baby naming and brit milah, I had them follow me into the Beit Midrash where a group of women come together every Tuesday afternoon and knit or needlepoint. After introducing the group to the young woman, a congregant said, "There are many grandmas in this community who love holding babies." I can see right now, as I look around the room, older congregants who have "adopted" young families and become surrogate grandparents.

And this is my fourth reason why I'm proud to be part of Beth Israel: we are a community of caring and loving folks.

I would like to close by reading the last sentence from our synagogue's mission statement as I think it sums up the work we are doing and why it is

so crucial to participate and cheer on those who have taken on added responsibilities.

“As inheritors of a rich past and creators of a future full of possibility, we continually seek new opportunities to support each other in participating and growing Jewishly.”

I hope you join me in feeling a strong sense of pride as both an inheritor and creator of Congregation Beth Israel.

As we enter the Jewish year of 5780, may each of us lean in just a bit more and connect or re-connect to our *kehillah kedosha*, our holy community. May doing so bring us profound fulfillment and most of all, joy. Shanah Tovah.