

## **Rosh Hashanah Speech: Building True Community**

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Shanah Tovah, everyone.

This is my second—and final—year speaking to you on Rosh Hashanah as President. I stand here in a different place than last year, both as your president and as a person. A year ago, I shared plans and hopes for what we might accomplish together. Today, after a year of unexpected turns, I want to speak from what we've learned: the wisdom that comes from weathering challenges as a community.

This year brought both accomplishments and difficult transitions. We conducted an Executive Director search after the passing of our beloved former director, Dianne Neiman. We undertook a cantor search with Cantor Lindsay's departure. These were not just administrative changes— they were losses that required us to come together and support each other through uncertainty.

Beyond our walls, many of us have faced turbulence—especially those who work in or around the Federal government. We've tried to meet that reality with targeted programming, community, and financial support. And we are nearly two years removed from the horrors of October 7 and the ongoing war in Gaza—an ever-present source of pain, disagreement, and soul-searching for many here.

Continuing a tradition I began last year; I want to share a poem that points us forward by Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye called "*Kindness*."

*Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth.*

*What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you arrive at a different understanding of what is valuable.*

*Then kindness will change your hands and feet and the old painful heartbeat until you rest assured that there is nothing you can do that is wrong, that every gesture, even the smallest, is cradled.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.*

*You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you find you are lifting up the burial songs of your fathers and mothers and the one song they keep singing in you despite everything.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.*

This is what I want to explore with you today: what it means to be in community when we carry both sorrow and joy, certainty and confusion, hope and struggle.

For more than 20 years, Temple Emanuel has been my family's spiritual home. As an empty nester whose kids went through religious school, B'nei Mitzvah, and Confirmation—and with two daughters who have worked here (Devorah as Youth Director and Eva, who's now in the ECC)—I experience Temple primarily as **kehillah**: relationships that shape my Jewish life and connect me to something larger than myself.

Last year I spoke about how my interfaith, blended, multi-ethnic family is a microcosm of our congregation. This year, my daily concerns as a

federal employee and my inner conflict over Israel and the Palestinians also feel like a microcosm of what many of us are living.

Like many here, I've long identified as a liberal Zionist. I lived in Israel in my early 20s and even considered making Aliyah. Israel has been a central pillar of my identity, alongside the conviction that a two-state solution—two peoples, equally legitimate and equally indigenous—is the only just end to the conflict. Since October 7, I have not wavered in that belief, but I have struggled with what it means to support Israel today. I'm grateful that our community makes room for that struggle by hosting voices that challenge and deepen our thinking.

Our programming this year reflects that commitment. Recently we welcomed Ahmed Alkhatib, founder of the advocacy group *Realign for Palestine*, to speak at Kabbalat Shabbat and a post-service dinner. Not everyone agreed with everything he said—and that's ok. We're building a space for hard conversations, not manufacturing consensus. We're also launching a monthly book club—something Rabbi Adam and I hoped to start last year. Our first discussion is this Saturday on *The Gates of Gaza* by Israeli author Amir Tibon, a first-hand account of the October 7 attack on Kibbutz Nahal Oz, set within a broader historical narrative. Future selections will bring both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. I hope to see you there on Saturday and at future discussions.

This is what genuine community looks like: a place to explore difficult questions together—even when we don't have all the answers—where we keep asking, kindly and honestly, alongside others who care and share our concerns. Imagine a Temple where someone can say, "I'm struggling with my feelings about Israel," "I'm worried about my job," or "I don't know how to talk to my kids about what's happening in the world," and be met not with judgment but with care. Many of us carry complex feelings—about politics, about Israel and Palestine, about our roles in an uncertain country and world—and the *kindness* Nye

describes recognizes that shared weight and binds us to one another. True connection grows from shared vulnerability and understanding; we recognize kindness in others because we have wrestled with these issues ourselves. As the poem reminds us, authentic community is not transactional—it springs from our fundamental human need to belong and to share our lives with one another.

Jewish tradition has always known this. **Kehillah** isn't just people in the same room; it's people who take responsibility for one another's well-being. **Tzedek** isn't an abstract principle; it's justice we pursue together because our futures are intertwined. **Tikkun Olam**—repairing the world—begins with repairing the tears in our relationships and creating spaces for honest conversation.

### **So, what does that look like in practice?**

It starts with moving from transaction to transformation—from “What can the Temple do for me?” to “What can we create together?” This New Year is not only for personal resolutions; it's for renewing our commitments to each other.

Here's my ask, for myself, and for all of us:

- **Show up—with your whole self.** Bring your questions and your hopes, not just your polished moments.
- **Choose one stretch.** Attend a program outside your comfort zone—the book club, a speaker, a service you don't usually try.
- **Bridge one relationship.** After services, introduce yourself to someone new; follow up with a text or coffee.
- **Practice one concrete kindness.** When someone asks, “How are you?” answer honestly—and listen the same way in return.
- **Stay with it.** Building authentic community takes time. We will get it wrong sometimes. We'll apologize, adjust, and keep going.

As we enter 5786, I return to Nye's image of *kindness* that **"goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend."** May we become that for each other—not perfect, but present; not certain, but faithful enough to sit with the questions together. Whether the struggle is about Israel and Palestine, work and financial insecurity, family or faith—let those be the very places where connection deepens, and engagement grows.

Community isn't a program we attend; it's a choice we make every time we gather: to see one another not as strangers who happen to share prayers, but as people whose stories matter, whose burdens we can help carry, and whose wisdom we need.

May this be a year in which we continue to grow as a true **kehillah**—held together by kindness, anchored in **tzedek**, and committed to **tikkun olam**.

**Shanah tovah u'metukah**—may we all be inscribed for a year of goodness, sweetness, and genuine connection.