

Yom Kippur Speech: Sustaining Community Through Shared Responsibility

Andrew Stavisky, President — Temple Emanuel | 10/2/2025

G'mar Chatima Tova, everyone.

Last week on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about moving beyond transactions to create a community where we can hold complexity together—where someone can say, “I’m struggling,” or “I’m concerned about the world,” and be met with care, not judgment. Today, on Yom Kippur, I want to talk about what it takes to **sustain** that kind of community. Creating authentic relationships is only the beginning; keeping them strong—through storms and seasons—requires something more: **shared responsibility and honest commitment**.

Like many of you, I’m a federal employee who is unsure when my next paycheck will arrive because of the government shutdown. I’m also wrestling with the direction of the country and the conflicts around the world. Through it all, Temple Emanuel has been invaluable to my family—Brotherhood and WRJ gatherings, thought-provoking speakers like **Ahmed Alkhatib** last month, the joyful Global Mitzvah sock hop, and, yes, the pure fun of our Purim Shpiel. That’s what community feels like when it’s working. Today, I want to discuss what it takes to **keep** it working.

From Kindness to Action

The poem I shared on Rosh Hashanah reminds us that kindness often begins in loss and sorrow. It’s not just beautiful language—it’s a call to action, and our congregation has answered it.

For example, we recently launched the **Flax/Adler HOPE Fund—Help Our Public Employees**. When federal employees, government contractors, and others in our community began losing work or facing

uncertainty, we didn't stop at thoughts and prayers. We repurposed two dormant funds—seeded with a total of about **\$20,000**—to provide **\$1,000 grants**. If you've been affected, please apply. Already we've received grant requests and new donations to replenish the fund. This is what it means to be more than a place where we simply sit side by side.

The shutdown isn't a news headline for our **kehillah**; many of us are living it. If you need to **suspend tuition or membership commitments** because of the shutdown, please reach out to our Executive Director, **Alissa Miller**, or our Financial Secretary, **Mollie Katz**. Forbearance is available now, though we expect full repayment eventually. This is community in action: recognizing that our futures are intertwined and that when one of us struggles, all of us have a role to play.

The Financial Reality We Must Face

I also need to be candid. Temple Emanuel is facing a significant budget deficit, driven primarily by subsidizing **more than \$500,000** in below-sustainable membership contributions. Our sustaining level is about **\$4,000 per family, plus a \$300 security fee**. More than half of our families contribute below that level; about **10%** contribute under **\$1,000** annually; and about **10%** contribute **above** the sustaining level.

These aren't just numbers—they're the gap between the community we want and the community we can afford to sustain. Every dollar we subsidize is a dollar we cannot spend on programming, support in crisis, building maintenance, fair compensation for clergy, staff, and teachers, or the security that keeps us safe. While forbearance is the right response to hardship, it cannot be our long-term business model.

This is not about judgment. Some families cannot pay more right now, and they will always have a place here. But in many conversations this

year, I've also learned that some can do more—if **we make it a priority**. That's what I'm asking us to wrestle with today.

Beyond Transaction to Investment

Last week I urged us to move beyond a transactional mindset. That remains true: community can't be reduced to "I pay; I receive." But community also **cannot exist** without a strong financial foundation. The programs that have sustained us—adult learning, speakers, support groups, youth programming, **Torah** study—exist because we and prior generations **invested** in them. The building where we gather, the clergy who care for us, our teachers and staff, and the security we rely on—all require **consistent, sustainable** support.

The paradox is real: authentic community **transcends** money, but it **cannot survive without it**. So, let's shift from "What do I owe the Temple?" to "What is this spiritual home worth in my family's life?"

And investment isn't only financial. It's volunteering. Serving on committees or our lay leadership. Offering professional skills when members are struggling. There are many ways to invest in Temple Emanuel.

The Path Forward

I'm not here to shame anyone or to say money is the only measure of commitment. I'm asking for **honest self-reflection**: What can each of us do to ensure Temple Emanuel not only **survives** but **thrives**?

If you're facing hardship, please speak confidentially with **Alissa Miller**, **Mollie Katz**, or with me. No one in genuine need will be turned away. If you can do more, please increase your membership contribution toward the sustaining level or beyond, and support our **Endowment**, **Chai** initiative, or targeted funds. Most importantly, invest your time: show up, volunteer, mentor, lead.

This is Jewish values in practice. **Tzedek** (justice) isn't only what we pursue outwardly; it's taking responsibility for the institutions that make justice possible. **Kehillah** (community) is more than companionship; it's ensuring the community can sustain itself for future generations. The Talmud teaches that whoever sustains a single life sustains a world; I would add that whoever helps sustain this community sustains the many lives that draw meaning, connection, and hope from this place.

A Blessing for the Year Ahead

On Yom Kippur we practice **teshuvah**—turning and returning. Part of that work requires honest accounting of where we've fallen short, individually and collectively. Today, I'm asking us to turn toward a more honest relationship with our congregation's finances. And I'm asking us to recognize that sustaining community is itself an act of kindness—the kind our Rosh Hashanah poet Naomi Shihab Nye describes, that “goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.”

I see greatness ahead for Temple Emanuel—but only if we build the foundation that greatness requires. We are an amazing community. Now we must ensure we are a **sustainable** one.

As we enter **5786**, may we be a congregation that doesn't just create beautiful moments, but ensures those moments remain possible for our children and their children. May we move from “What can the Temple do for me?” to “What can we build together that will outlast us all?”

May our commitment this year be measured not just in words but in **action**—not just in presence but in **investment**—not just in taking but in **sustaining**.

G'mar Chatima Tova—may we all be sealed for a year of wisdom, courage, and shared responsibility.