

ROSH HASHANAH 5768  
YEHI – LET THERE BE  
RABBI ELIOT ISAAC MALOMET

We used to do a deep cleaning of the building at Rosh Hashanah. We would steam clean the carpets and spray a foam polish on the brass banisters on the sides of the Bimah. We would check the sound system, and make sure that the 800 seats we had set up for yontiv would fit in a space that was only designed for 400. Everything in the shul gleamed. The freshly polished silver on the Torahs, the golden letters on the ark curtain. I just remember the feeling of light everywhere.

During this past year we wandered like ancient Israelites in the desert. We lived out the most often repeated phrase of the Torah: VAYISU VAYAHANU, “And they traveled and they encamped.”

VAYISU ME-SOUTH THIRD AVENUE,  
VAYAHANU BE-SOUTH ADELAIDE AVENUE

VAYISU ME-SOUTH ADELAIDE  
VAYAHANU BE-RARITAN AVENUE

ELEH MASEI ANSHEI HIGHLAND PARK  
CONSERVATIVE TEMPLE – CONGREGATION  
ANSHE EMETH.

These are the travels of the Highland Park  
Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth.

We are back in the Temple now, but not completely back. We have created a beautiful temporary space in the shul, but we miss the old space. We are thankful for the spaces for where we were over the year. The ‘Y’ was always adequate. If it needed paint, we painted it; if it needed some color we gave it some art. Sometimes it was very hot in there, and sometimes it was very cold, but when it wasn’t too hot or too cold, it was just right.

And we enjoyed our time on the Avenue. We loved the idea that everyone could Stop and Shop, and Stop and Pray, and Stop and Visit us, and then browse in the toy store next door. There was a great comfort being in an old space. There was something authentically Jewish about having a storefront shul in a small town.

And for larger events we were here, at the Highland Park High School, and here we are again. And it is good to be back here after a year of wandering, in this beautifully lit space.

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When you go to the shul the damaged part is sealed off. The signs on the double doors leading to the Temple say, WARNING: DO NOT ENTER. But I stand next to those doors, and I close my eyes and give myself permission to enter the Temple of my imagination.

I am listening to a board meeting. Not a recent board meeting, but an ancient one, with the Harry's and the Irving's and the Lou's and the Abe's, and the Issie's and the Sam's, and the whole cast of interesting characters that founded the shul. They are sitting around a table, and they are talking about building a new building. I hear their voices. They are saying, "Let there be this and let there be that."

*"Let there be a Bimah at the front. Let it be five steps up. Let there be wooden pews and an ark that is not too big but not too small, just right for 8 or 9 Torahs."*

They are talking about what it's going to cost, and how they are going to pay for it.

*"Let there be a campaign, and let there be a mortgage."*

Let there be. Let there be.

*"It should be dignified, this building."* Says one.

*"It should be a building that fits into this town, the way we fit into this town. The building has to show that we belong here."*

*"It has to be functional."* Says another.

*"It doesn't need to be ostentatious or showy, it doesn't need to be anything that we are not. It has to be like us. It*

*needs to be first and foremost a shul for people to come into and be with each other.”*

*“It’s got to have room.”* A member pipes up from the back.

*“How much room do we need?”* Another answers.

*“Well, how many do we get on a Friday night? What? About a hundred? We don’t get much more than that. We get less on a shabbes morning. Maybe we’ll get a couple of hundred on a Bar Mitzvah, tops. We only need two hundred fixed seats.”*

*“What about the holidays? How many do we get for the holidays?”*

*“What, four, five hundred? Four, five hundred. Tops.”*

*“What about the kids? We should make space for the kids, no?”*

*“In the basement!”* Says an older member, angrily.

*“And we should make a place where they can play shuffleboard.”*

*“Oh, they like shuffleboard.”*

*“And they could have services down there, and maybe socials.”*

*“Oh, they like the socials.”*

*“And we should have a library and space for offices; we need two offices, maybe three: one for the bookkeeper, one for the director, and one for the rabbi, but the rabbi doesn’t need a big office because he works mostly from home.*

*“If he works at all!”* They all laugh.

*“I think we need a gym.”* Says one. *“You know Kaplan, Kaplan from the Seminary? Mordecai Kaplan? He says that Jews in America should build a center. A synagogue center.”*

*“Who is this Kaplan?”*

*“You know, the famous Kaplan, from the Seminary. He wrote the big fat book, Judaism the Civilization, whatever it was called, he says a shul should be more than a shul. It should be a community place, a center, for arts, and for sports, and for everything.”*

*“I heard there’s a shul in Brooklyn that’s building a pool. They call it the ‘shule with the pool.’ But we have no room for a pool here. We should build a gym instead.”*

*“A gym is a good idea, the kids will have a nice place to play basketball.”*

*“The kids should be in the basement playing shuffleboard!”*

*“Let’s build a gym. And when we’re not using it as a gym, we’ll use it for Kiddush. Who’s going to mind a basketball net when we’re busy eating.”*

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In another life, I would like to write a play called, “The Committee,” which is about the arguments and discussions a shul building committee in Central New Jersey. The play is set in 1947, two years after the war. There are GIs and refugees and Holocaust survivors coming to live here. A couple of young people are going off to Palestine to fight for the Haganah. The committee is made up of good men, family men, some who are just slightly larger than life, and extremely passionate. The committee is split between those who want to build a fancy building and those who want to take all the money and smuggle arms to the Haganah instead. They have a terrible ideological fight. They insult each other and accuse each other of not being loyal enough either to Israel or to their own community’s needs. And in the end, they do what shuls do: they decide that they have to raise more money. They need to build a shul for here, and they need to send the arms to Israel!

This shul was built in that era. It was built by Jews who came through Ellis Island, and Jews who were first generation Americans. These were Jews, who, when you look at them in photographs, had an air about them, they had a lot of determination. They had a lot of character. They knew they were creating something out of nothing.

They knew that they were inventing something here, a shul that wouldn't be like the ones they grew up in on the Lower East Side, or like the ones that they left behind in Europe. They wanted it to be modern and they wanted it to be American.

It was an era that many of you lived through and some of us can only imagine. The war was over. The men had returned from all over the world. Some were already in college, on the GI Bill, some were starting families. Sex had just been invented and the birth rate soared! The late forties, the fifties, the mid-century, these were unprecedented times. There were new housing developments all over the country, people were leaving the cities for these new communities, and there was massive economic expansion, an unbridled optimism in America coupled with a lingering anxiety and fear of a possible nuclear war.

And Jews? Jews at the time were doing what Jews have always done, which was figuring out what it meant to be Jewish. They were asking new questions though. How do you live as a Jew and as an American? What does it mean to live in an open society? What are the consequences and responsibilities of wealth and influence? What is the place of Judaism in a Christian culture? How do we help Israel without jeopardizing our place in America? And what kind of community do we want to build here?

And all of this got expressed in architecture. How do we build a shul? Where do we build it? Do we build it in

town, or do we find a large piece of land far away so that people will have to drive on Shabbes to get there? Do we build it in a classic style or a modern style? Do we want to tell people where we came from, Eastern European, or do we want to abandon that and build something uniquely American? Do we want Modern or Moorish? Art Deco or Arte Moderne? Do we get a good local architect or do we go for a big name, a Frank Lloyd Wright, who is going to make a “statement,” a cultural contribution not only to Jewish history, but to American architecture.

And behind the sealed doorway, our Jews, our founders discuss all of that. And we, their descendants, talk about that too. What will it look like? What will it be? Let there be this...let there be that.

Architecture, the architecture of sacred space, synagogue architecture is the concretization of a set of values. It is making a physical shape out of a set of clarified priorities and values. A discussion over a shul building is at its very core, a discussion of priorities and values.

What did it mean that the building faced north and not east? What did it mean that it was shaped in a long rectangle, and that the Bimah was at the front and five steps high? And what did it mean that there was a gym and there was a place for shuffleboard, and there was a library and classrooms, and at one point, not a terribly large office for the rabbi?

They valued simplicity and they valued function and they valued modesty, and they valued a classic style, and they valued the modern. They created something that was as close a reflection of who they were at the time, what they could afford and what they aspired to be as Jews in America.

And the truth is, they had little or no idea what would become. Who knew? Who knew that the community would double or triple in size? Who knew all of the demands we would put on that space?

The founders wanted it to be a dignified place of prayer that they could take pride in. They wanted it to be a beautiful sanctuary. And they were also attuned to a sense of progressivism at the time, that it would have mixed seating for men and women, that it would have art, that it would have enough space for many different kinds of functions.

But there were things that they didn't see or couldn't imagine. They weren't attentive to the needs of the handicapped – who was at the time? – and they weren't concerned about the consumption of energy, or the environment, or the variety of programming that was possible, and they probably didn't spend much time talking about the quality of movement in the building and things like “narrative” or “meaning.” They built a building that was functional and beautiful and sturdy, a building that in the end turned out to be a perfect example of mid-century design, but a building that would, in time, need to be re-

imagined. They didn't use the costliest materials, they didn't go for fancy masonry or woodwork. They made it simple, and beautiful, and functional, and American, and modern with its own signature elements, a panel of windows here, straight lines, brick façade, a set of tablets over a star of David on the outside, and a classic inscription, antique English: Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.

And their conversations are our conversations. They were saying "Let there be..." and we are also saying, "Let there be..." They were clarifying their values and priorities then, and we are clarifying our values and priorities now. They lived in that incredible era, an era of unprecedented growth and expansion, and we live in this extraordinary era, of technology, information, of wealth and power.

We live in an era of Jewish diversity, which includes those who have a deep personal yearning for more Jewishness in their lives, those who have a deep alienation from anything in organized Jewish life. We have a state of Israel. We have a strong identity as Jews in America.

They had their conversations and we have ours. They asked how can we create a place that will function as a shul, and we ask how can we create a place that will transform peoples lives by being here? They asked, how can we create a place where we will feel comfortable as Jews in America, and we ask, how can we create a place that will help us deepen our souls with yearning and fill us

up with the sacred experiences of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish knowledge? They said, “Let there be,” and we are saying, “Let there be...”

In the mid century, they had this incredible spirit of possibility, and frankly, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so do we.

When I stand at the steel doors that have the sign “WARNING: DO NOT ENTER,” I honor the letter of the warning, but I enter the space anyway in my imagination.

Come with me. We walk through a gallery that is filled with natural light. We open the door to the sanctuary. In front of us are the old windows, the blue and the grey tinted windows, with the texts and the pictorial narrative of the Jewish people. We are facing east, in the direction of traditional Jewish prayer, towards Jerusalem. We are seated in a pattern that is not narrow but wide; we are not sitting frontally in rows, but on angles that allow for people to see each other’s faces not their backs, and most importantly, allows for them to be closer to the bimah. The Bimah itself is two steps from the floor, which means that it is easier to get to, it is closer, and that a ramp for the handicapped can be traversed easily. There is a proper balance in the way the bimah presents itself, a balance between formal and informal teaching, a balance between discussion and formal presentation which is the way we teach Torah here.

And the ark is at the front. And it is beautiful. And in my imagination, it is gleaming, there is light pouring in from everywhere. It is radiant and warm.

For a text today, we will have to go into that imaginary ark and pull out one of the many sifrei torahs and open it to the beginning. To Bereshit.

BERESHIT BARA ELOHIM ET HASHAMAYIM VE'ET  
HAARETZ.

VEHAARETZ HATYTA TOHU VAVOHU  
VERUACH ELOHIM MERAHEFET AL PENEI  
HAMAYYIM

When God began to create the heavens and the earth,  
the earth being formless and void,  
and a wind of God hovered on the surface of the water,

VAYOMER ELOHIM  
YEHI OR, VAYEHI OR.

and God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Let there be. Let there be. Let there be.  
YEHI. YEHI. YEHI.

Three times God says "let there be," and three times God unleashes the creative forces within the universe. God allows for creation by saying "Let there be!" God says "Let there be light," and there is light.

YEHI. YEHI. YEHI.

Creation is the perfect text for what we are embarking on.

Creation is the perfect metaphor.

Even in the Bible, creation is the metaphor for holy space.

In the Torah, Moses creates the sacred space as a mirror of God's universe, so therefore, embedded in all synagogues is the idea of creation.

And creation is the theme of Rosh Hashanah and creation is central theme of our lives, because what are we, who are we, if we are not creating? What are we, and who are we if we are not adding to God's creation? To be fully human, to be a full human being is to be like God, a creator.

So we are in our sanctuary filled with light, and we are taking the Torah from the ark, and we are reading the first lines of the Torah, and we are learning that we too must say "Let there be..."

Let there be openness, to all who yearn for Klal Yisrael and for coming close to the sacred dimension of life and to Torah.

Let there be warmth for all who enter.

Let there be a spirit of welcoming.

And let there be poetry.

let there be a sense of the transcendent

let there be a sense of mystery, of the ineffable, of what can't be translated into words or symbols

let there be a sense of sanctity  
let there be holiness.

And let there be learning, life long learning for every single person who comes into this building and for every member of Klal Yisrael who wants to make contact with Jewish life in any way.

And let there be contact with the world here through information and technology and all kinds of media. Let there be a place for people to come and congregate and engage with each other, and even bring their laptops and blackberries and sit with each other and learn, and be with their kids and be by themselves, and sip coffee or tea and meet and plan and participate in the ongoing drama of Jewish life.

And let there be a place for kids in our community to come for school and after school and be in a safe environment, and learn and participate in the arts and be kids and have fun.

And let there be tradition  
and thoughtfulness and wisdom

And let there be memory.  
Let there be represented in this shul the stories of two congregations coming together as one. Let there be a place

for the story of Anshe Emeth of South River, who no longer have a building of their own, and no longer have a regular visual and physical encounter with their story on a weekly basis. They have leapt into solidarity with our community in Highland Park, and let there be a way to have their narrative in the building we create together, because it now belongs to all of us, as the Highland Park narrative belongs to them.

And let there be lots of stories in this new shul.  
New characters, as interesting as the old ones.

And let there be joy  
and the fullness of life experiences  
which will include all the comfort that comes from being in  
a familiar space  
during the most difficult times of life.

And let there be the generosity of spirit  
and the virtue of sacrifice to make all that possible.

YEHI. LET THERE BE...  
YEHI OR. LET THERE BE LIGHT.

That is my text this Rosh Hashanah. It's the first thing that God says to the universe, the first thing uttered to that singularity of infinitesimal matter/energy that allowed for the instant of creation.

It is a fitting and proper text. It is about creation. It is about bring forth things that are not here. It is about giving permission for risk and it is about possibility.

A mid-century writer named Stella Terril Mann said “Every time we say ‘Let there be!’ in any form, something happens.” I think about that line all the time. If we just say, YEHI, “Let there be,” something happens. We can unleash all the energy of the universe; we can open the floodgates and sluices of all human creativity. We can do the impossible, we can dream and accomplish what we set out to do, if we say, “Let there be.”

Anyone who has ever done anything creative, from artists to architects, to poets, to imaginary playwrights, knows this.

YEHI is about possibility.

And YEHI is what we can say at this time of the year too, to ourselves.

If we repeat that word to ourselves, we have the possibility of renewal.

If we say YEHI, Let there be, we can repair a relationship that needs to be repaired. We can correct a trait or a flaw; we can re-orient ourselves in the direction of our lives. We can calibrate ourselves to new goals and to the things that we know we want to achieve.

If we say YEHI, Let there be, we can fix our lives the way our tradition teaches us to fix our lives during this time.

If we say YEHI, we can open the Gates of Teshuvah, the steel doors of repentance, which we are afraid of some times. Some times they say to us: WARNING, DO NOT ENTER. But do not be afraid.

Let there be a new shul.

Let this new shul build on the legacy of the founders and create a new legacy for our descendants.

And we hope, in the not too distant future, we will be able to open the doors that say, “WARNING: DO NOT ENTER” and begin a new journey as a renewed and reinvigorated congregation.

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This has been a year of wandering, and a year of learning.  
YEHI, let there be gratitude,  
Let there be gratitude to God for all the experiences of this past year,  
a difficult and challenging year,  
a year of growth and a year of change;  
a year that enriched us and invigorated us.

And YEHI SHALOM, let there be peace  
Peace in our homes, peace in our community, peace in Israel, peace in the world.

And YEHI, let there be a sweet new year.

YEHI RATZON, and let it be your will, God,  
SHETAHEDESH ALEINU SHANA TOVAH  
UMETUKAH

that the new year ahead of us, be renewed for us,  
as a good year,  
a sweet year,  
a beautiful year,  
a year of health,  
a year of growth,  
a year of learning,  
a year of saying LET THERE BE...  
and unleashing all within us that is possible.

BARUCH ATA ADONAI ELOHEINU MELEKH  
HAOLAM SHEHECHEYANU VEKIYEMANU  
VEHIGIANU LAZMAN HAZEH.