Hi, Everyone and Shana Tova! I'm so very happy and grateful to be here with you today. It's been a long, tough year and I'm glad we have this time together to reflect, appreciate our blessings, and pray for peace in Israel, including the release of the hostages.

This year, I'd like to briefly talk about community. What does that mean to YOU? For some, it might be the TV show "Community". For those familiar with the show, I would probably be the Annie character, but my kids see me as Shirley, the mom figure, which I'll take! Maybe for those who grew up in or near Lincolnwood in the '70s, it might be the store Community (much like today's Target) on Devon and McCormick. Anyone remember that? Or, can community simply be defined by its definition in the dictionary which is "[quote] a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals" [end quote]? Perhaps the answer is all three… but I think what the TV show gets right is that it goes beyond the dictionary definition of feeling of camaraderie and depicts a sense of responsibility to each other and actions taken as a result. They actually *show* what community is. It's coming together to help and support each other, which happens in each episode of the show. And it happens here at Beth El.

Let's dive into this a little bit. While we are all likely part of several communities, whether it's a fraternity or sorority in college, your place of employment, moms and tots class, or being fans of a sports team—there are two communities we all share: the greater Jewish community and the Beth El community.

We've all made the choice to be here today, at Beth El, to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. As you may know, Rosh means "head". But you may not know that In Bemidbar, the book of numbers, "rosh" is used in the context of a census for the purpose of counting troops and details are provided as to how to take one.

In a sense, we have just taken a census of our membership; everyone here today filled out a form for tickets. We know exactly how many families and people are part of our Beth El community. (2,826 people or 1,025 family units). But how does this apply to this holiday?

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, a late sixteenth-century Eastern European sage, explains:

> *"The word rosh, literally head, teaches us the importance of the Jewish people, that* ***each is a head, each is important in herself****. Each Jew must accordingly* ***feel the great responsibility*** *she has for all her actions, for* ***every action***

*of hers **can improve the condition** of the world, or Heaven forbid, **make it deteriorate**."*

This is a really powerful reminder to me. It means that we all matter individually. But, collectively, when part of a community, there's a responsibility to take care of one another and help each other. Beth-el is truly a great example of this, as we're mindful of our actions to ensure we're helping the greater good instead of harming it. As we reflect during the chagim, think about what the greater Jewish and Beth El community means to you. And while we are already incredibly strong as a people and synagogue, are there actions you can take to strengthen one or both?

That said, Beth El is, without a doubt, one of the greatest communities there is.

Nothing showed our ability to unite more than this past year after October 7. Within hours, we came together to celebrate Simchat Torah in a subdued but meaningful way and planned a community-wide event for people to come together, hug, cry, and be pillars of strength and support to one another. We raised more than $200,000 dollars in just weeks to donate two ambulances to American Friends of Mogen David Adom, arranged for buses to take people to Midway to attend the rally in DC in November and then another one in Chicago this past spring. We planned a service trip to

Israel in which 30 Beth El-ers participated in farming, packing food boxes, and supporting soldiers. We cried together when viewing Hersh's funeral and at the rally in Port Clinton Square, and so much more.

But in addition to all of this, our Beth El community accomplished a lot at this past year. We've grown our membership, just about finalized plans on the construction of a new beautiful and secure lobby and remodeled the school wing. We made changes in the front office to make it more efficient and welcomed new people into new roles. Our schools are thriving at every age, from pre-school to adult education. We gave back to those in need via our Social Action initiatives: Hazak, the annual Thanksgiving project, mitzvah day, and work with Maot Chittim. We had more than 200 DIFFERENT people read Torah this year! We engaged with members via a wide variety of programming, including College Connection and our first Snowbird event in Florida. We had 26 b'nai mitzvah, in addition to weddings and baby namings. And our Sisterhood and Men's Club offered engaging and meaningful events – like Dessert Tasting and Steak and Scotch night, respectively.

We also came together to celebrate as a community at the congregational Channukah dinner, at our Israel-themed fundraiser in April, and to celebrate each other's simchas. And you all supported me in May

when I lost my mom. (with meaning!!) **Everyone was so attentive and kind, I literally felt lifted.**

Looking ahead, we have another strong year planned; several Rinat Shabbats (Friday night shabbat with song), Sukkot in our tent sukkah and sukkah walk, and Sisterhood is bringing back the Art Fair in late February. And, Israeli singer-songwriter David Broza will be with us on May 15 for a community-wide concert.

These things can't happen without being in strong financial shape. We have a balanced budget, strong cash flow, a healthy endowment fund, and staff and lay-people committed to managing our monies in the best way possible. Our facilities and maintenance staff are outstanding, as are our office staff, education staff, and clergy dream-team (all of whom are under long-term contracts).

All these actions are the threads that weave the fabric of this thriving, dynamic community. To me, this is personified not just during today's service but each Shabbat as we return the Torah to the ark and everyone's voices come together to sing Eitz Chayim He; the chorus of harmonies wash over me and I feel the power of this wonderful community and communities of the past.

I'm humbled to have the opportunity to serve you and grateful for the passion, dedication, collaboration of Beth El's clergy, staff, lay leaders and

YOU, the congregants, for creating our wonderful community. More thank yous coming before Neilah.

I still have some time left in this “Community” episode entitled “president’, but I can see how it will continue to unfold with fun, friendships, camaraderie, hard work, and care and concern for one another.

Wishing you all the best for a sweet, peaceful, happy and healthy 5785. And praying for the safe return of the hostages. Shana Tova Tikateivu and Am Yisrael Chai.