

Good Evening & Shana Tovah

I asked a Rabbi I used to know... is synagogue a good investment?

He said, 'It's like a gym membership.'

You pay hundreds and hundreds of dollars, go twice a year,

feel terrible about yourself...

and then you tell everyone,

'This year? Oh, this year I'm gonna be more committed.'

Meanwhile you're still winded from the constant up and down!"

I had to start with a joke because, let's be honest, anyone who knows me knew I had to open with a joke...I know this is a serious night, but that doesn't mean we can't smile.

It's a reminder that Jewish tradition has always balanced solemnity (suh lem nuh tee) with joy, reflection with humor.

Why Am I Up Here?

Many of you might be asking that question ...why am I the one standing here tonight instead of someone from my family who is much more involved at Beth El? However, I do have some street cred here. For one, I'm one of the stars of the Men's Club Softball team, my favorite band is 62.5% Jewish and if it were up to me Larry David would be President.

All jokes aside...and to answer my question, though, I'm really just a member...like most of you. I sit in these seats. I go through the same busy weeks and make the same decisions about how much (or little) time to devote to synagogue life. And in the past few years, I've come to understand something that I hadn't fully appreciated before: Beth El really isn't just a synagogue. It's an investment. An investment in our Jewish journeys, in our families, and in our future. Just like that, gym membership is actually an investment in your health. Now before you roll your eyes (Which I would do if the roles were reversed), just hear me out...

When my youngest son had his bar mitzvah about 20 months ago, I thought, Yes! I'm done. I'd put in my years of Hebrew school drop-offs, Purim carnival volunteering, Tu'Bishvat forest building and Sunday mornings where I was mostly here to make sure someone else was here. Sure, I'd still come for the High Holidays, maybe show up for a few big events, but in between? Ha!

Except, I found myself here just as much, if not more. And I started asking myself... why?

At first, I thought it was because of October 7th. That day created a deeper emotional connection to Israel for many of us. It made us feel more vulnerable, more connected, and more in need of community. But for me, I already had a strong connection to Israel...especially through my wife and definitely through my in-laws, who are both from

Netanya or from Itay, an Israeli shin-shin who has been a part of our family now for nearly a month. FYI, ShinShin is a program supporting Israeli teens for a year of service after high school before joining the IDF.

As I thought about it. It wasn't about Israel or prayer or even our amazing clergy. It was about my kids. It was about my wife. It was about what I wanted this place to be for them, and, maybe more surprisingly, for me.

In our home, we celebrate Shabbat. We keep Kosher. We do all the things that define us as Jews. But what I've come to appreciate is that being Jewish...not just being a Jew...is something that's much easier to embrace when you're surrounded by friends and peers who share in that journey.

It really became clear as my oldest, Sophie, and I started visiting colleges or even last year when we were in Montreal for the F1 race and we saw firsthand how different universities were responding to antisemitism on campus. It made me realize that those years between 14 and 18 aren't just about academic success or extracurriculars. They are critical in cementing Jewish identity, I may argue even more than everything one does prior to turning 13.

For Sophie, that has meant stepping up as USY Co-President and working as a Madricha in the Hebrew School on Sundays...roles she chose on her own, not because we nudged her. For my son, Noah, it's coming to Shabbat services not all the time and

not necessarily because he's looking for a spiritual experience, but because he enjoys hanging out with his friends, and, let's be honest, playing cards with Hazzan Sandler during Kiddush. They're each following their own Jewish paths or journeys, journeys that were shaped right here at Beth El.

And then there's my wife, Ronit. Her journey looks way different from mine. I don't have enough time to list her involvements, but let's just say if Beth El had a Ms. Beth El pageant, she would absolutely be a finalist.

As for my own journey, I read Torah for the first time since my bar mitzvah right here in 2019, and I've done so at least once a year ever since. As you hopefully heard by now, Beth El offers a cookie as a reward for Torah readers each year. I didn't start doing it for the cookie...but I didn't turn it down either.

Also, the clergy were instrumental around my mom's passing nearly 10 years ago. I'll never forget Rabbi Schwab reaching out from an RV maybe in the middle of nowhere while on sabbatical to check in just hours of her passing. That kind of presence and care stays with you.

Over the years, Ronit encouraged me...sometimes gently, sometimes less so...to get more involved. Join a committee, host an event, step up beyond the occasional volunteer shift. And for a long time, I said no.

But this past year, I finally said yes...to being one of two couples to host the David Broza event. Why did I say yes?

Because I want Beth El to be there...not just for me, not just for my family, but for all the future members who haven't yet found their path or their Jewish journey here.

That's what makes Beth El special. It doesn't prescribe a single way to be Jewish. It doesn't say, this is how you have to engage with your Judaism. Instead, it provides opportunities. It creates moments that inspire. Whether through prayer, learning, social events...or yes, even softball...it meets us where we are and helps us take the next step when we're ready. That's why I see Beth El as an investment. It's not about what I need today. It's about making sure this place is here when I, or my family, or someone else, needs it in the future. That's it.

So tonight, as we reflect on the year behind us and the one ahead, I ask you to think about your own investment in Beth El. What we put into this place...our time, our support, our presence...determines what it will be for each of us when we want it, or when we need it.

For me, Beth El has been an unexpected part of my journey. And I suspect, if you take a moment to think about it, it's been a meaningful part of yours too.

Tonight, I'm investing the old-fashioned way...no app, no clicks, just a folded tab and an envelope. Friendly reminder that the dues do not cover the full budget so whether \$18, \$180, \$1,800 or more, every donation makes a large difference and it takes all of us to invest to build the synagogue we want and because some returns you don't measure simply in dollars.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah—may we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a year filled with meaning, connection, and new Jewish journeys.