

Rosh Hashanah 5774
“More Than a Synagogue”
September 5, 2013
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Shalom

Welcome

It is nice to see you

I am so glad you are here

I am so glad to be here...with you

Wow, it has been quite a year.

Remember back in 7th or 8th Grade when we read, “A Tale of Two Cities”? “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. I know Dickens was writing about Paris and London circa 1776 - -but it sure felt like New York 2013 to me.

Maybe every era is a time of contradiction and contrast – but there was something about this past year – the stock market has never been higher, yet so many continue to face real and serious economic challenges.

So much of the world is in turmoil. The Arab Spring turned into an Arab Winter – and Iran on the verge of nuclear capability threatens to annihilate Israel. And here in America, our politics are politics of division; our movies are apocalyptic and with forest fires out west and hurricanes in the east we come to shul and wonder, like Dickens did so long ago – whether it is hope or despair that best captures our mood.

Less than one year ago – 11 months to be exact – on October 29 we were struck by hurricane Sandy – one of the deadliest and most destructive storms ever to hit our area, leaving \$65 billion of damages in its wake. Most of us have stories of how our lives were disrupted by this terrible storm. Trees were felled, homes and cars were damaged, most of us lost power for many days, in some cases we had to make do for almost two weeks without electricity.

But if it was the worst of times for so many of us, as a community we were at our best. We reached out, we supported one another, we shared what we had with each other – yes, it was a struggle but it was also a time of caring and sharing.

When the storm reports were clear that it was going to be bad, we were told to remove furniture from outside our homes, anything that could be lifted by the strong winds. We at Temple Beth Shalom began to reach out to you – we used our email blasts, we used our telephone dialer and we said if you need help, let us know. If you are older or infirm and need help to move things, we'll send our maintenance staff or get some young people to help out. And a number of you did call us and we were able to help you secure your homes. For those who were afraid to be alone, we offered for you to be hosted by others and gladly made those arrangements. During the worst part of the storm we had to cancel minyan – something we almost never do! But, in this case we felt it would be irresponsible to encourage people to come out in such dangerous conditions. One of our members expressed regret that they would not be able to say kaddish – to observe a Yhartzeit – so during the very height of the

storm - -we called around and got a minyan *in their home* – made up of neighbors who lived next door or a few doors away.

And then came the aftermath of the storm. It was far worse than anything any of us could have imagined. Most of us lost power. Our homes were cold and dark. Our refrigerators and freezers were useless. Remarkably there are two electrical feeds to this building and one of them was restored quickly. Like the ancient Jews in Egypt – while the rest of the land was covered with darkness, we had light, and warmth, joy and friendship. So we sent out emails and spread the word to let you know that your shul was open as a refuge. And what a response!

It was truly the worst of times *and* the best of times.

Some of you slept here, many of you ate here – we started by putting out cookies and soon began emptying our refrigerators of anything we had, hamburgers and hot dogs, challah, tuna fish and egg salad – it all came out. You came to hear the news and keep up with developments or just to watch TV. You came to recharge your phones and computers, some just came to get out of cold, dark and lonely homes to be in a place that was bright and filled with people – with human and physical warmth – it was a remarkable few days.

I remember one woman came in and asked “I heard what you are offering, we are not members, we are not even Jewish – do you think it might be ok if we stayed a little, had something to eat?” “Of course,” I responded, “Let all who are needy come and eat!”

A woman called me from out of town and said her 90-year old mother, a member of ours, was trapped in her cold and dark home with her aide. The daughter had secured a plane ticket to fly her mother to be with her but the aide said there was no gas in the car and the lines at the stations were hours long, they would miss the flight. She tried to get a car service but they just laughed at her. Was there anything I could do? So I called one of our members who owns gas stations and directed the aide where to go, and we got them gas and to the airport on time.

What a sight it was to see people watching movies in the Pikus Center for Lifelong Learning, or playing cards in the Auerbach Merkaz hallway of our Ostrow Center; sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor of the Rubinstein Auditorium, hanging out in our Wingate Center. I suspect that if you are one of those who stopped by in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy you will never forget those days. In all my years as your rabbi – I don't remember a period of time when I was prouder to be your rabbi than during those difficult days before, during and after Hurricane Sandy when we truly were a *kehila kedosha*, a sacred community: loving one another, caring for one another-- when we needed it the most.

Eventually the crowds began to diminish as people slowly got their power back, got their lives back, and after a couple of weeks life, for most of us, went back to “normal.”

It saddened me to realize that “going back to normal” was another way of saying: going back to being preoccupied with our own lives, our own needs; going back to being less concerned, less caring and less loving of one another. I think I liked us then, a little more than I like us now. I liked me then more than I like me now. I liked us more when we cared more.

A story

A famous story from our tradition, a sweet story, – many of you may already know it – it is a story of how King Solomon chose the site to build the Temple.

Today that sacred spot is a source of such tension and dispute between Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, Ultra-Orthodox and the rest of us – today we fight and argue over that spot – but it wasn't always so – in fact far from it. According to this story, that spot which today seems to bring out the worst in us, was chosen because it once brought out the best in us, it once represented the antithesis of strife and argument –yes, it was originally chosen because it was a place where people cared about each other – a lot.

Once upon a time, there lived a farmer who, upon his death, left his farm to his two sons. These two brothers lived on either side of a hill. One brother was married with many children; the other one lived contentedly on his own. One night, the married brother lay awake reflecting on his blessed circumstances, and his thoughts turned to his brother whom he loved very much. "Here I am, blessed with abundance, a beautiful family- a wife, children, and my brother, born of the same household, is all alone. I must share some of my bounty." Which is exactly what he did. In the dark of night, he climbed up his side of the hill and down the other side carrying a sheaf of wheat and left it for his brother to find when he awoke.

Unbeknownst to him, his brother also lay awake that night, thinking how much the Lord had blessed him. And he thought, "I have so much, and it is just me. My brother, born of the same household, has a family to feed, children to raise. Surely I can share some of my plenty with him. Which is exactly what he did. Up the hill he climbed that night and down the other side, leaving a sheaf of his own harvest by his brother's farm so he would find it when he awoke. When each brother awoke the next morning, you can imagine his surprise upon discovering that he had the same number of sheaves as he had the previous day. So the next night, up and down the hill they went – filled with a sense of kinship and gratitude for their own blessings – only to wake up, once again, to the same number of sheaves as the day before.

Unbeknownst to both of the brothers, King Solomon was also having a difficult time sleeping that week. Night after night, the King was roused from his sleep, seeking a sign as to where he should build the Holy Temple that God had commanded.

On the third night, the brothers went up the hill once again, only this time it happened that they went at exactly the same time. At the top of the hill they bumped into each other, and there they stood, face to face, each holding a bundle of wheat. They realized what was taking place, they smiled and dropped their sheaves and hugged – grateful for their blessings, most of all grateful to have a brother filled with such love and concern.

King Solomon, again unable to sleep, witnessed the entire scene from afar and knew this was the sign he was waiting for. Here in the place where two brothers put concern for each other ahead of their own wellbeing – here was where the Temple should be built. And that is exactly what he did. On that sacred spot the *Beit Hamikdash*, our Holy Temple was built and all around it – the holy city of Jerusalem.

That is where a temple should be built – in a place where people put concern for each other as their highest priority.

Isn't it interesting that this most sacred *religious* site was chosen – not because it was filled with God – but because it was filled with human love and concern – it was chosen not because it was the godliest place on earth – but the most humane place on earth. It is as if God were

saying “You want to find Me? You are searching for Me? Be kind to each other and that is where you will find ME. Be good to each other and that is where I will choose to dwell.” People like to tell me, “You know rabbi, I find it hard to believe in God.” To which I like to respond, “I don’t find it so hard to believe in God – it is mankind that is testing *my* faith!”

Don’t you find it just a tad bit ironic that *Har Habayit* – the site of the Holy Temple, whose foundation was built on brotherly love, that was chosen as a symbol of love and concern for one another – isn’t it terribly sad that specific spot – is now one that has become filled with anger and strife and a symbol of insensitivity? Many Muslims focus their hatred of Jews there. Some Jews focus their hatred of Muslims there. Ultra-Orthodox focus their hatred of other Jews there. How did that happen?

Many people go to the *Kotel* hoping to find God there. Not me - -I don’t believe God would hang around a place filled with such animosity and strife. Maybe we will find God’s tears there – but not God. My God search takes a very different form. I know many people spend their time looking for proof of the existence of a loving God, not me—I spend my time looking for proof of the existence of a loving mankind – for I know that where I find people loving one another, caring for one another, that is where God will be found.

And my search has not been easy.

How is it possible that a man in Cleveland could hold three woman captive and for more than a decade abuse them, rape them and beat them – and no one knew? He didn’t abduct them and take them to some remote spot in Utah – he was living right in the middle of Cleveland and no one knew? For more than ten years?

How is it possible that a man could walk into a classroom in Sandy Hook elementary school and shoot 20 innocent children and six adults – and in the end – we shed a few tears, and did nothing. Not a single gun control law was passed because we didn’t care enough to demand it.

Let me teach you a phrase from the Talmud. If you already know it – great – let this serve as a refresher. It is from the tractate of Shevuot 39a: the rabbis teach: *kol yisrael areyvim zeh lazeh*, which most translate: All Jews (*kol yisrael*) are responsible (*areyvim*) for one another (*zeh lazeh*). Jews are expected; Jews are required, to care for each other. There is an alternate version of this quote which goes *kol yisrael areyvim ze bazeh* - instead of *zeh lazeh* – the difference of one letter may mean nothing or might lead to a very different meaning: All Jews are mixed up with each other. *Areyvim* can mean “responsible” or “mixed up” – they are synonyms. So which is it? Are we Jews supposed to be responsible *for* each other – or mixed up, involved *with* each other?

I would suggest these alternate versions are not unrelated because the more we are involved *with* each other – the more responsibility we will accept *for* each other.

It is easier to ignore people you don’t know. Apathy is in direct proportion to the distance traveled from another human heart. The more someone becomes a stranger to me, becomes strange to me, the easier and more tempting it is not to care.

I remember a few years back on a family trip to Israel; I walked with my son Ari to Mea Shearim to have his tefillin checked. As we walked the narrow streets of that bastion of Ultra-

Orthodoxy, I casually asked Ari if he felt that he had more in common with these black coated, black hated, long bearded Jews – or with his non-Jewish friends back on his college campus. He gave my question a lot of thought and then responded, “In so many ways I feel closer to my non-Jewish friends back at school, but I also know that if Hitler had his way, I would be on the same cattle car with these Jews and my non-Jewish friends would go their merry way.”

Kol Yisrael Aryvim Zeh Lazeh, Zeh Bazeh

We were both quiet for some time after that contemplating how much we were mixed up with these Jews – and troubled by how we had allowed ourselves and to become distant from them and how they had allowed themselves to become distant from us.

A woman comes to the Kotel to pray with a tallit and to read from the torah. She is met by the angry taunts and insulting shouts of Ultra-Orthodox fellow Jews and it is my contention that this confrontation is not because they don't agree with us – but because they don't care about us. And that is very sad.

Politics in America has reached such a sad state. And I contend that the dysfunction in Washington is not because the two sides disagree *more* than they used to but because they care for each other *less* than they used to. And that too is very sad. It is hard to build a country with people who don't care for each other.

When a young person tells me they no longer wish to be involved in things Jewish, they don't have time for Hebrew School, or a family tells me they no longer wish to be a member of our community – I don't believe they are making an intellectual statement about what they believe. I believe they are saying - -we have grown distant from this place, this people, this tradition – distant enough that we no longer care to be *areyvim* – *mixed up with you, responsible for you.*

In 2013 it is not that Judaism has a less compelling argument to make to you
In 2013 it is that Judaism has become a less compelling presence in your lives.

It is the distance that is killing us.

Distance is killing our nation, our world, our families and our faith.

Isn't it ironic we speak of the world getting smaller and yet I speak of how we have become more distant from each other?

How did this happen? How did apathy become the new normal? It is my contention that apathy is an acquired trait. That indifference is a learned skill.

3200 years ago, two brothers instinctively felt compassion for each other as they stood in a Jerusalem field, and today we don't know what to feel when we look at our Israeli brothers, our Ultra-Orthodox sisters, our Arab cousins, our right wing or left wing political friends.

I'm not sure how it happened – but, oh it has happened.

Contrast those scenes of the caring community we were after Hurricane Sandy with the following scene that also occurred here at TBS. It took place just outside this sanctuary. We had just finished Services for a Shabbat afternoon Bar Mitzvah. As I exited the sanctuary, my arms filled with books and papers, the lobby was filled with people young and old – waiting to get into the Ballroom. I worked my way through the crush of people trying to get to my office – and then as I approached the entrance to the office, right by the museum cases there was a crowd of 13 year olds – so tight and dense there was no way for me to pass. *Some* of them saw me trying to maneuver through the crowd, arms loaded with stuff – *none* of them made any effort to let me pass. “Excuse me,” I said, “can I get through here?” A few more looked at

me – still none made *any* effort to part. “I need to get through here” – I said in an even louder voice – more of them looked at me – but none of them paused for more than a second and none of them made any effort to help.

Maybe they did not realize I was the rabbi, although I doubt that was the case- after all I had just conducted the Service that many of them had spent at least a few minutes attending. But, all of them could see I was an adult, struggling a bit under my load, and all of them could see I was another human being in need of a little consideration – but none of these things registered sufficiently to cause them to treat me with kindness or concern.

Were these young people born inconsiderate? I don't think so – I think they learned this indifference from us.

I read a book this summer titled, “The Little Way of Ruthie Leming: A Southern Girl, A Small Town, and the Secret of a Good Life.” It was a simple book, but it stayed with me because I think it did offer the “Secret of A Good Life” – and it was found in “Ruthie's Little Way” – which we would do well to consider.

The book is about the life and death of a remarkably kind woman named Ruthie Lemming, the sister of the author. She is a model of self-sacrifice and simple faith. And as you read her story, you go through the childhood of Ruthie and her brother Rod, the author, in the small, rural Louisiana town they grew up in and which she never left. We also go through the touching, sometimes exhausting struggle of Ruthie against her cancer – a struggle she ultimately loses. The community of this small town is amazingly good to her and her family through it all.

The meaning of the story has to do with community, with the special nature of this small town community that promotes the kind of life where people care about each other – a lot like we did during Hurricane Sandy. The book is written from the perspective of Ruthie's brother Rod who couldn't get far enough from this little town fast enough when he was young. Back then he felt hemmed in, constrained, claustrophobic. He was attracted to bigger cities, a more cosmopolitan way of life – a bigger world with bigger ambitions. But as Rod returns to the town he spent so much of his life trying to get away from, being embarrassed by – he, and we, can't help but wonder what was lost and what was gained in his move from small town to big city, from Ruthie's little ways to his big and famous life.

As we read the book through Rod's eyes, we watch an entire community rally to love one of their own. Meals are brought, lawns are mowed and prayers are said. At one point Rod observes: “The bad news is that in a small town everyone knows your business; the good news is that everyone knows your business.” I think I understand how he felt, the rabbis would have said, they were *aryvim ze bazeh* – they were all mixed up in each other's lives. As they struggled to recover from the devastation of Ruthie's death a friend says, ‘We're leaning, but we're leaning on each other.’”

And that too is what I felt last October – we were leaning on each other. We were all *areyvim ze lazeh*.

As you might guess, spoiler alert - – the author moves his family back to the small town he thought he had so successfully left behind. He moves back because he can't find the kind of selfless caring in the big cities and the big life where he lived and worked. Had someone seen us, as a community during those weeks of Hurricane Sandy – I think they might have said –

this is really a nice place, I could see living here, raising my family here – in a community where people care for each other the way these people do.

But then I wonder about the people who might have been standing behind me, in the lobby of this same building – after that Shabbat afternoon Service when those kids treated me with indifference and I worry that they might find us less than inviting, not so much the kind of place they might like to raise their kids.

There are a lot of articles and books that are being written that young adults aren't moving out to places like this any more, or at least as much as they used to – because they don't like the kind of communities we have become – “The End of the Suburbs” one book called it – I'm not so sure.

When this shul was founded in 1951 – Roslyn was a very different kind of a place. It was very much a small town even though it was near a very big city. Many of us can still remember growing up when the suburbs were a place where kids roamed the streets, evenings were filled with games of hide and seek and mothers shouted from the back porch to come home for dinner. Some of us can remember a world where it was natural for kids to just wander into their friend's homes like it was their own, and to have neighbors sitting on the porches discipline us as if they were our own parents.

Most of our children did not grow up in such a world – theirs was one of much more isolation, of McMansions and play dates and video games mostly played alone. And it is no wonder that many of our children, as they mature are reluctant to move back to that kind of suburb, and at the very least they are demanding more from them as they do move back.

I don't know if I, if we have the power to transform the North Shore of Long Island into the kind of place Ruthie's brother moved his family back to with a little town feel – but I think we can make Beth Sholom that kind of place – just as we did during Hurricane Sandy.

I think the creation of a caring community it is not only the secret to a good life – it is also the secret to a good synagogue. Our new president Richard Levine – likes to talk about Beth Sholom as being, “more than a synagogue.” Maybe this is what he means. I'm proud we have such a fine Religious School and have invested so much time and effort in making it so. I am proud of the daily, Shabbat and holiday Services we experience here. I am proud of all the things we do so well – but the secret to a good shul is one where *kol yisrael areyvim ze lazeh* – where people care for each other and take responsibility for one another. I too want us to be more than a synagogue. And to achieve that we are going to need your help.

So here is how I am going to end this sermon- I am going to invite everyone to stand up, (not yet, let me finish) I am going to invite you to introduce yourself to someone in front of you or behind you that you don't know – (don't cheat and speak to your wife or husband, or a friend) Ask them how long they have been coming to TBS
Tell them you are really happy to meet them –
And then take these sheets that were left at your seats – the ones that say High Holy Day Appeal to Care – and tell them what you think you might want to do to make this a more caring community and ask them what they plan on doing.

When I ask you to stand up – please don't use it as an opportunity to walk out – good God that would be the worst thing you could do –too many Jews are walking out, no, I want you to stay and show that you care.

3200 years ago King Solomon saw two brothers demonstrate that they cared for each other and it changed the world. I believe that if we can show that we care more – just a little more – we can make our lives richer, become a worthy model for our children and we will build a community that people will rejoice in – we will become more than a synagogue, we will become a place where God will delight to dwell.

So *now* you can stand up and show someone you care.

Temple Beth Sholom
Roslyn Heights, New York
High Holy Day – Appeal to Care
לכ לארשי מיברע הז הזל
“All Jews are Responsible for each other” Shevuot 39a

Rabbi Lucas, you can count on me to help create a caring community at TBS

Name: _____ Telephone # _____ Email: _____

_____ I commit to attending our daily minyan once a week on _____ (mornings 6:45 AM, evenings 7:30 PM) Being a part of this special community that meets every morning and every evening and being there for other's who need me to help make a minyan is one of the ways I want to show I care

_____ I commit to helping our Hesed volunteers - I am willing to help by delivering a meal to a family in mourning or driving an older person to a doctor or to shul, or the countless other acts of kindness they do and that needs to be done if we are to be a truly caring community – you can call on me to help!

_____ I am willing to be a Shabbat buddy to someone who is homebound- I am willing to call this person every Friday and make sure everything is ok and they have what they need and know we care.

_____ I commit to joining Rabbi Lucas & Cantor Barnoy March 2-4, 2014 in Washington DC at the AIPAC Conference where we will join with 15,000 Jews from all over the United States to demonstrate our commitment to Israel demonstrate our solidarity and the true meaning of being responsible with the fate of Jews around the world.

_____ I want to be involved in our Mitzvah 613 project – as we write a new torah It's not too late! I have heard how touched and moved so many have been when they sat and helped write our torah. I heard about these family moments, these sacred moments and I want to help as we finish the writing and dedicate and celebrate our new torah on Sunday October 20, 2013. I want to commit to study torah and find a class or opportunity to learn more about Judaism in the year to come.

_____ I want to help with our membership outreach - I want to help us reach out to other families in our area and tell them we want them to become part of our caring community - - if we are going to reach the next generation– and teach them the joy of caring we will need them and their families to be a part of a community like ours. I am willing mentor and guide a new member family and help them get involved.

_____ I want to make a contribution of \$50 or \$100 to help sponsor TBSNYC- As Rabbi Lucas reaches out to our 20 and 30 *some things* who are living and working in Manhattan and Brooklyn. It was a great success last year – and on Tuesday, October 22 we will be doing it again at the Traffic Bar – 2nd Ave btw 52 & 53rd. Make sure we have the names of your 20 or 30 year old so we can be sure to invite them to this and to our Shabbat dinner in the city Friday night December 13, 2013 hosted by Rabbi & Edy.

_____ I want to be or help get sponsors for the Kiddush luncheons after Services every Shabbat and holiday. The special feeling of community as we sit together following Services each week is wonderful but it is expensive to feed hundreds of people week in and week out. I want this to keep happening so I am willing to be a sponsor or help get sponsors for anniversaries, birthdays, to mark a *Yahrtzeit* or just because we are glad to be part of this wonderful community.

_____ I will join our wonderful Shabbat morning community by attending Shabbat Services more often or coming with my kids to our youth Services, or joining the Sukkah hop on September 21 or to welcome New Members on the Shabbat of October 19 – all wonderful ways to build a *kehilah kedosha* – a sacred community that cares. I am willing to be a parent volunteer in our kid's Services on Shabbat and holidays.

_____ I commit to having a Shabbat dinner at home (every week, once a month) where we will try and invite family and friends and try to begin with Kiddush and Motzi and try and put away our cell phones and turn off the TV and talk to our children and try to just share the warmth and love of being with people we like.

Since you cant fill this out until after Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat – feel free to take this home and mail it back to us at Temple Beth Sholom 401 Roslyn Rd., Roslyn Heights, NY 11577 – or email your commitments to: mainoffice@tbsroslyn.org or call us at 516-621-2288.