

Kol Nidre Speech 2010
Warren Silbovitz

Shabbat Shalom and L'shana Tova.

I want to first thank Rabbi Jen for her wonderful abilities to lead us in prayer and learning during these High Holy Days and throughout the year. We are also grateful to Yoni Fischer for once again leading us in prayer. Thank you.

For those who don't know me, as Rabbi Jen said, my name is Warren Silbovitz, and I am President of the Kehillah. I'm the guy you often see taking out the rubbish. Being President isn't as exciting as you might think.

Susan and I have been part of the Kehillah for a relatively short time, only four and a half years, but almost from day one we have involved ourselves as active congregants. We were equally active in our prior synagogue so to involve oneself in a new synagogue seemed to me to be a very normal thing to do. I have always felt that to belong to a synagogue should include some level of involvement. So I joined the Ritual Committee, then the Board, then became VP of Ritual.

At some point last fall Howard Glicksman, our past President, asked if I would be interested in being considered for President of the Kehillah. Having been President of our former synagogue for a number of years, I had a pretty good idea of the time and responsibilities that were involved. I also was aware of how much time and energy Howard put into the job. It took me many months before I gave Howard a response; I did a lot of thinking. On the one hand, Susan and I were at a point in our lives where we were finally looking forward to reduced responsibilities and increased travel. I felt that I had the right to say no. I was already heavily involved in the Kehillah, I had been very active in our former synagogue for many years, and therefore I should have been able to say no with a clear conscience.

Unfortunately or fortunately, depending how you look at it, Susan and I were in the second year of a two year Melton class last spring, (Melton is an adult Jewish school), and one of our classes on Jewish ethics was entitled "Individual or Community: All for One, or One for All." Well, quite frankly, when I walked out of that class I knew what I was going to do. The Melton Ethics course, which I

highly recommend, is a powerful presentation of ethics in Jewish living. That night I realized that, if I were in a position to do so, then I had a responsibility to be one of the many people who work to support our synagogue to carry on the work of those who have preceded me and those who will follow. Each one of us has that responsibility to those who came before us and to our children who will follow.

I would like to tell you a personal story of our recent travels that led me to another “aha” moment. During this past summer Susan and I were fortunate to take a cruise to Alaska. One of our ports was Juno, where the Mendenhall glacier, a really **big** glacier, is located. The glacier is accessible in only two ways, by helicopter and by hiking seven miles. We were not going to take the **easy** helicopter ride; we signed up to take the hike, not really knowing what we were getting into. I kept telling Susan that it was no big deal and that we could do the hike, that it is not every day that you get the opportunity to hike to and on a glacier and that our age should not stop us. We were in reasonably good shape, we exercise regularly and we live rarely letting an opportunity pass us by. This opportunity might not be available again.

We arrived at the beginning of the hike and we were outfitted with backpacks, pick axes, and crampons used to walk on the glacier. It was a three and a half mile hike through a rain forest to the glacier, the last two and a half miles of which were on barely visible paths, scrambling up and down rocks and shale, crossing streams by balancing on rocks so as not to fall in. Oh, did I mention that there were five others in our group and two guides, all of whom except us were in their thirties? We get to the glacier two hours later. We are sitting on the edge of the glacier getting ready to go on it and I'm tired, but thinking, wow, we made it here which is good, but we have yet to hike on the glacier. I'm also thinking we have to go back the same tough three and a half miles and I'm already tired. After resting we put on our crampons and use our pick axes to help us hike on the glacier. It is an incredibly beautiful experience. We walk over crevasses of blue ice and we look down between them. It involves a bit of danger, but it is exhilarating. Just when it was time to leave, our guide asks if we have time to see one more thing which will take a walk of another ten minutes. I'm thinking again I'm tired and we still have to go back three and a half miles. But we all agree to go, and a good thing too, as we get a chance to explore some incredibly beautiful ice caves inside the glacier. All of this is an experience we will never forget. Eventually we take the three and a half

mile hike back, happy that we went the extra mile, so to speak, and challenged ourselves.

Now to the “aha” moment. I realized after taking the hike and standing on and inside the glacier, that what we did was put ourselves in a position where we could have failed. The hike could have been too difficult and we would have had to turn around at some point and miss the glacier. But had we failed, would that have been so terrible? Hadn't we at least tried? Sometimes you make a decision where the result might be failure, but on the other hand the result of that decision could be success as exhilarating and beautiful as it was on that glacier. If you fail, as they say, you just dust yourself off and start all over again. I would like to see our synagogue go into the New Year not being afraid to fail. If we fail we will learn from it and make better decisions in the future. Being afraid to fail inhibits growth, and we need to grow. The result can be exhilarating and beautiful.

As I wrote in the recent newsletter article, there are many ways in which we would like to improve our facilities and provide better for our congregation and community. Since the sure way to help us realize these goals is through moderate growth, one of our major goals this year is to commit ourselves as a congregation to the growth of the Kehillah by providing communal support to the Membership Committee. Our Membership and Marketing Committees are working on an outreach program and they will need help from all of us. A successful membership drive will require some degree of involvement from our entire congregation. We belong to this congregation because of the values we share towards inclusivity, egalitarianism, Jewish education, participation, social justice, and community involvement. Our membership committee needs your help to relate these values to the greater community.

There are various ways you can help. You have strong convictions about why you find the Kehillah appealing, and we need you to be emissaries of the Kehillah and explain to your friends and acquaintances the values of belonging to our community. We would like to be able to ask on occasion that you make a phone call to a new family in town, perhaps one that has young children as yours might, or they might be a newly retired couple as you might be, or they might be single as you might be. A welcome call from a congregant is a wonderfully warm way to connect to those who have just moved to town. Please say yes if asked to make an

occasional call. We would like to ask you to take part in a new matching program where families are especially needed to extend dinner invitations, play dates, coffees etc. Doing so will be your contribution to carry on the work of those who have preceded us and will provide for those who will follow us. Each one of us has that responsibility.

As you may recall when I spoke on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I talked about the need for synagogues to be visionary, to offer the opportunity for more meaningful religious vision, serious prayer, learning opportunities for all and a means to engage in acts of kindness. Being Reconstructionist, we are clearly situated as a value-based communal decision-making synagogue which allows us to be that visionary congregation. There is, in my opinion, a large segment of the Jewish community who want to be part of a visionary congregation such as ours. We just need to do a better job communicating to them.

The word “Kehillah” can be defined as a face-to-face community; we are a group of people who feel a sense of belonging and responsibility to one another. We are about community building and social action and social justice. Our previous synagogue leaders certainly got it right when they chose the name Kehillah for our synagogue. Our Friday night and Saturday morning Shabbat services are delightful, and we should be very proud of them, and we are seeing significant increases in attendance. All of these attributes are powerful assets and we need to communicate them to the greater community. We cannot be afraid to market ourselves to the community and it needs to be a priority of our activities in the coming year.

Because we are a Reconstructionist synagogue, we have the ability to determine for ourselves what we want our prayer services to be. We can be creative and innovative. We cannot be afraid to use this ability to determine what works best for our community. The Reconstructionist movement speaks to how to live as a Jew in modern society and we need to continually reassess how our services can be more meaningful for us all. We need to be constantly aware of the needs of our community and respond to those needs and we cannot be afraid to try new ways of doing things.

One area in which we have done just that is the very successful Shabbat Shira Service which takes place approximately once a month. Some of us, myself included, worried over whether this was the right thing to do. The service is a little different, but it is joyful, uplifting and still very meaningful. I and other long time service goers have watched with amazement at how we have all learned to understand and enjoy Shabbat Shira. It is well attended by families, especially by so many young families. We can have change without going away from our traditional values. We cannot be afraid to embrace change as long as it is done thoughtfully and with consideration of all.

I appeal to you all to give some thought to what your responsibility is to all those who have preceded you and to those yet to come. Maybe you will arrive at your “aha” moment as I did.

We are still a very young synagogue and we sometimes forget that and we are too hard on ourselves. Many of you, being new to our community, are not aware of the many accomplishments of the Kehillah.

We were the first synagogue in Chapel Hill

We were the first Reconstructionist synagogue in Triangle area

We have a full time rabbi

We had generous congregants which allowed us to purchase this building shortly after the synagogue was founded

We created the chapel with the generosity of the Weldon community

We started a religious school which we are all proud of

We started the first Jewish preschool in Chapel Hill (which is very successful)

And more currently:

We have an active Kehillah Youth Group and 20/30's Group

We have a quality adult education program

We are a founding member of Justice United (which is a local social justice organization)

We are an active supporter of the Inter Faith Council for Social Services for which we help in the kitchen every month, participate in Crop Walk, and donate food

We help build Habitat for Humanity homes with other local religious organizations

We co-sponsor a refugee family from Burma

We have accomplished much in this short time thanks to all of the great leadership that has preceded us, yet we have so much more that we can do. I am grateful that you have listened so attentively to this point and I ask for your patience for one other very important point.

We have had some significant fundraising in years past which allowed us to purchase this facility and help pay down the mortgage. We are grateful for those who have provided for that. Aside from that we have been a community which has been very sensitive to asking for needs beyond that. Those of us who frequent the Kehillah and even those who may be here occasionally know that the Kehillah needs improvements and additions. Generally, on the High Holy Days, you are accustomed to a low key approach to fundraising. This year we would like to be more specific about the Kehillah's needs. It really is appropriate for a synagogue and its leadership to ask for help when it is needed.

You should have a gold colored brochure entitled Chapel Hill Kehillah Gift Opportunities. As you can see, there is a listing of specific needs. The list was determined as a result of a survey by the Fundraising Committee to those committees who are involved in the day to day operation of the Kehillah which allows them to be aware of the needs of the Kehillah. Although our budget provides for maintenance and operation of the facility, there is little money available for the items and improvements listed in the brochure. Our hope is, that with this brochure, you will have a better understanding of our needs. The items listed will create an even more beautiful Kehillah, and an attractive synagogue

goes a long way to helping attract new members. We want our children's classrooms to be an even more inviting place of learning and I **know** each of you would like to be sitting in a more comfortable chair. As you can see, there is much that we still need and the Fundraising Committee realized that if we did not ask, we are not going to get, so we are asking; I am asking. Look at the brochure and you will see that **you** can decide where you want your donation to go. **You** can decide what the most important need of the Kehillah is and the money you donate will go only to that. I urge you to please take this brochure home with you, give it some thought and, if you feel so inclined to help, indicate on the brochure where you want to help and mail or bring it back to the Kehillah. I thank you for your consideration.

I will leave you with this. During the festival of Sukkot, a special ceremony took place every day in the Holy Temple, known as the Festival of the Water Libation. Each morning of the festival, water was poured onto the altar in a special joyous service. The teachings of 3rd to 6th century scholars in Babylonia taught as follows: they said, when Hillel the elder would rejoice at the "Joy of the Water Drawing Place," he said, "If I am here, everything is here, but if I am not here, who is here?" The message from this: if we are not here for our children, who will be?

We each have a unique mission that only we can do – no one will do it for us.

Thank you so much for listening and Susan and I want to wish you all a happy, healthy, and sweet new year.