

Erev Rosh Hashanah – 5768
Howard Glicksman, Co-President

L'Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year. My name is Howard Glicksman, one of your co-presidents, and I am honored to say a few words this Rosh Hashanah.

On behalf of your lay leadership, staff, and the Board of Directors, I welcome you to the Chapel Hill Kehillah as we gather together to celebrate the beginning of the New Year 5768.

In July, we conducted our second annual orientation session for our Board of Directors. To begin our orientation session, I asked every Board member to briefly speak about their Jewish journey. I asked them to describe the path that has taken them to where they are now. Although not prepared for this question, it was fascinating to hear what members of our Board described. They talked about their childhood, how they felt about Judaism growing up, about their spouses, their children, where they've lived, and what brought them to the Kehillah. I appreciated everyone's openness and willingness to discuss very personal details of their Jewish identities. We left for another time the discussion of what are our personal goals as we continue on their Jewish journey. We also began the discussion of our goals for the Kehillah to move it forward on its Jewish journey. Tonight I'd like to speak about where I see the Kehillah today and how we're striving to put together a mission, vision, and a set of goals to carry us forward on our Jewish journey.

I believe the strength of the Chapel Hill Kehillah flows from our core values. As Reconstructionists, we continue to work to understand tradition and make it relevant today. Our actions and activities demonstrate our beliefs in egalitarianism (a belief in human equality), inclusivity (striving to be accessible to everyone), mutual care, mutual respect, and wanting some form of Kedushah (holiness). I believe we have evolved into a strong, Jewish community. Therefore, our name, Kehillah, represents who we are today.

During the month of Elul, which is the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, psalm 27 is recited every day. This prayer is an “antidote to our recognition that we are unable to live up to the ideals and goals that we have set for ourselves”. I had an opportunity to think about this prayer when I attended the Bar Mitzvah of Ben Rapp on a Thursday in August. In this prayer there is the following:

כִּי אָבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי,
וַיִּשְׁאַפְּנִי.

Which is translated in our Saturday morning siddur Eit Ratzon as “Though my father and mother will leave me, You will always gather me in.”

We've been studying this prayer throughout the month of Elul discovering many interpretations. Eit Ratzon points out: “this is a striking reality – ultimately you cannot rely on any person, because even the people who are most assuredly and reliably on your side, your father and

mother, will in the end abandon you, because they will die. G-d, on the other hand, is not going anywhere and will always be a sheltering presence.” These words troubled me. I didn’t want to accept that ultimately we will be alone with only G-d there to comfort us. I think that having a strong connection to a community can help protect us from this feeling of being abandoned and alone. I then remembered how the Chapel Hill Kehillah, my community, came forward earlier this year to provide comfort to Lois and myself, and to Elaine and Bert, Lois’ parents.

In January 2007, Bert, Lois’ father and my father-in-law, got very sick with a urinary track infection which spread throughout his body. We found out about this a day after Lois and I arrived in St. Martin in the Caribbean for our annual week long vacation. After hearing of this serious illness, several people from the Kehillah, including Rabbi Jen, contacted us in St. Martin (which was no simple feat) to let us know what happened. We cut our vacation short and came back to help tend to Bert. Bert died on February 25.

Members of the Kehillah helped in the care and comfort of Bert during his stay in the hospital and in the rehabilitation facility. They came to visit with us, give a break to Elaine, or just hold Bert’s hand. Rabbi Jen visited often and even sang to Bert which, although he was no longer opening his eyes, deeply connected with him on a spiritual level. After Bert’s death, members of the Kehillah provided food to our family, and Rabbi Jen wrote a lovely burial ceremony that we used when Bert was buried at the Veterans’ cemetery in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Many, many people joined us in prayer during the several days of Shiva. Our community greatly comforted us by demonstrating that we are a part of this community that so highly values *Gemilut Chasadim* (mutual care) and *Kehillah* (community).

I often think about the response of our community during this difficult time for our family, and how it has affected my Jewish journey and my own thinking as I lead us in our strategic planning effort. It has been about a year since we began the strategic planning process. We put together draft versions of a mission, vision and our core values to guide us towards a 5 year strategic plan. Since we value Reconstructionist value-based communal decision-making and are led by volunteers, the process is taking us a while. We now have a draft of our mission, vision, and a set of goals and are working on action plans to achieve these goals. These goals include becoming financially stable, improving our community’s Shabbat experiences (as a community, how do we want to celebrate Shabbat?), and improving our community’s life-long Jewish learning for tots, children, and adults of all ages. We want to retain current members, grow our membership, and upgrade our aging facility. Over 20 people have been working to draft a strategic plan. After the holidays, we’ll summarize what’s been done so far and begin to prioritize goals and actions. These will be listed on our web site and special emails and flyers will be sent to everyone.

To set priorities, we need your input. All members should have received the invitation to fill out our online survey. We’ve had an outstanding response already with more than 90 submissions the first week. If you haven’t gotten to it yet, please take a moment to give us your opinions and feedback.

I’d like to encourage you to find time to join us for any of our many events. Attend a Tot Shabbat service where you can experience Shabbat as a two year old, a Friday night service full

of song, a Sat. morning service to experience Torah, an adult education program to expand your mind, or one of the many Jewish holiday celebrations that bring our community together. Come to all of an event or just a small part of it. Join us for the D'var on Friday or Saturday or just come for the Kiddush. Join us at a B'nei Mitzvah even if you don't really know the family or the young adult. This great *Simcha* (which we translate as *Joy* in Jewish practice in life) is not just for the family, but for our whole community to join with the family to celebrate this life event. What I ask of you is to provide feedback to me. What do you like and what can be better for you? These experiences will prepare you to help the Kehillah's leadership craft our 5 year strategic plan.

On November 3, we will be having our first Shabbat B'Yachad (which means: Shabbat Together). Our religious school students and teachers will engage in a Shabbat learning experience instead of attending Sunday school that week. We will not be having regular religious school classes at all. What we will have are special age appropriate and intergenerational study sessions related to the themes of Shabbat. These will be followed by age appropriate services and then full community learning and a communal meal. Our whole Kehillah will come together to celebrate Shabbat by learning together, praying together, and enjoying a meal together. Please join us. This will be a great opportunity to further our values of Kehillah (community), Kedushah (holiness), and Talmud Torah (life long Jewish learning).

I'd like to close by reminding everyone that our congregation was founded in 1996. We're in our 11th year which means we have 2 years before our Bat Mitzvah. This will be a great milestone for us. As our religious school families know, this is the year when we get the date for our Bat Mitzvah and start focused preparations. Just like our members and B'nei Mitzvah kids need help with their preparations, the Kehillah needs help. If you would like to help plan this major event, please contact me. This will be an opportunity to show the community-at-large who we are, where we've been, and where we're hoping to go. I'd like to see us include as many people as we can who helped move us along our Jewish journey.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for us to engage in self-examination, reflection on the past year, and think about changes we might want to make in the coming year. During this Rosh Hashanah, consider thinking about your Jewish Journey. Consider thinking about the events in your past that have affected your Jewish identity, Jewish practice, and what Judaism means to you. As you continue on your journey, think about setting goals for yourself and about how the Kehillah can help you. Reflect on how you've helped our community. Think of how you can help the Kehillah as we set our strategic goals and how you can help move us along our Jewish path.

May this New Year move our community and ourselves along our Jewish Journey so that we strengthen our ties to Judaism and to each other.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, officers and staff of the Kehillah, I thank you for your support and involvement and I wish you and those close to you a sweet New Year. L'Shanah Tovah!