



Congregation Ahavath Sholom

The Creative Spirit Dwells Here

THE CAS NEWSLETTER

October 2026

Upcoming services and events

Friday, October 2 at 5:00 PM: Simchat Torah: The Rejoicing of the Torah (with libations)
at Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire (UUMSB)

Saturday, October 3 at 10:00 AM: Simchat Torah (with caramel apples) at UUMSB

Wednesday, October 7 at 10:00 AM: Café Kehillah with Rabbi Jennifer Rudin via Zoom

Monday, October 12 at 4:00 PM: CAS Board Meeting at UUMSB

Wednesday, October 14 at 10:00 AM: Music in Our Prayer: A Community Conversation on Zoom

Thursday, October 15 from 3:00-5:00 PM: Poetry Workshop with Jayne Benjulian at UUMSB

Friday, October 16 at 5:00 PM: Kabbalat Shabbat at UUMSB

Saturday, October 17 at 10:00 AM: Shabbat Service at UUMSB

Sunday, October 18 from 11:00-12:30 AM: Honoring Our Torah Scrolls on Zoom

Monday, October 19 at 12:00: Memoir Workshop with Barbara Janoff via Zoom
at 7:00 PM: Photography Workshop with Arthur Hillman via Zoom

Wednesday, October 21 at 10:00 AM: Café Kehillah with Rabbi Jennifer Rudin via Zoom

Thursday, October 22 from 3:00-5:00 PM: Poetry Workshop with Jayne Benjulian at UUMSB

Wednesday, October 28 at 10:00 AM: Café Kehillah with Rabbi Jennifer Rudin via Zoom

Thursday, October 29 from 3:00-5:00 PM: Poetry Workshop with Jayne Benjulian at UUMSB

The Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire (UUMSB) is located at 1089 Main Street, Housatonic

This month's newsletter features

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The High Holy Days at Congregation Ahavath Sholom

This year's High Holy Days with Congregation Ahavath Sholom resulted in many "firsts." It was our first time at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire's spacious and welcoming space. Services were shared by our permanent Rabbi, Jennifer Rudin, and Rabbi Jeff Eisenstat, a member of the congregation. All services were open to everyone who registered, free of cost. A professional security team watched over the proceedings. Music accompaniment was included throughout the holidays. Zoom was available for the first time for those who could not attend in person. The list goes on...



Congregants and guests were greeted on Erev Rosh HaShanah by a parade of lanterns leading from Main Street, Housatonic to the building entryway, where the sanctuary was energized by our Decorations Committee through beautiful drapery and plants. Joan Burkhard, a member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors, welcomed everyone, as she did at the beginning of each service. Throughout the holidays, all services were enriched with prayers, readings, poetry (both traditional and original) and music. Many congregants received honors and aliyahs. Our two rabbis delivered meaningful insights throughout the holidays (see transcripts of Rabbi Rudin's sermons later in this newsletter). A gathering of over a hundred congregants and guests were in attendance for the first day of Rosh HaShanah, where services included Marie Rudden's thoughtful d'var torah. For the second day of services and Tashlich, many congregants gathered at the home of CAS member Susan Weinstein.



Yom Kippur began with a memorable Kol Nidre. The initial rendition of the three recitations was played by Philip and Meredith Thompson, the grandchildren of CAS member Carol Cirigliano, on cello and piano. This was followed by the congregation reciting the English translation. Finally, Rabbi Eisenstat sang a powerful version in Hebrew. Yom Kippur morning services were conducted by Rabbi Eisenstat with Linda Geffin delivering a moving d'var torah. Morning services concluded with the reading of our Yizkor list accompanied by a series of short readings. Neilah services were conducted by Rabbi Rudin with John Slote giving his yearly interpretation of the messages within the story of Jonah.

The Break Fast was held in the UUMSB social hall, which allowed all our guests to this annual feast to dine at one of the many tables set up by helpful congregants and our reception crew of energetic volunteers. As always is the case at a CAS

event, an impressive array of delicious traditional dishes was joined by a selection of surprise food offerings. This was a time for sharing delightful conversations; a community gathering of great warmth.

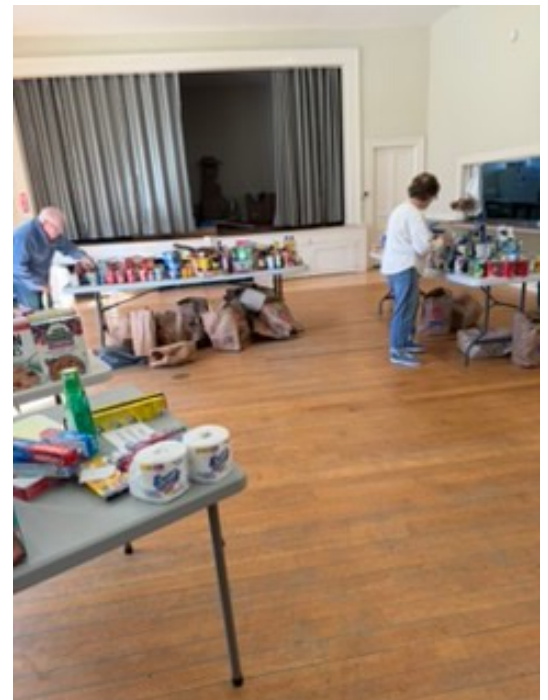
As is our annual tradition, a stream of members and guests brought donations for the People's Pantry. Rabbi Eisenstat aided the cause from the bimah with his suggestions of specific items in response to sections of the service.

None of these High Holy Day services and events would have been possible without the intense work of our Board of Directors, our two wonderful rabbis, many committees and a slew of congregants, who collectively and individually, devoted their insights, their time, and their energy to making this a highly successful and uplifting period in the life of our congregation! Thank you to everyone!

Yom Kippur Annual Food Drive for the People's Pantry

This Yom Kippur, as congregants and visitors to the High Holy Day Service conducted by Congregation Ahavath Sholom entered the UUMSB building to worship, they were greeted by a large white pickup truck with a sign indicating "Food Donations for the People's Pantry." At our Rosh Hashanah services, all members had received shopping bags in which to donate non-perishable food items, and most attendees, fulfilling their wish to engage in tzedakah, brought with them several filled bags to donate. Within minutes, the truck was completely full.

The People's Pantry in Great Barrington at St James Place serves 4,000 people each month and is the largest rural pantry in Berkshire County. Ahavath Sholom congregants bring food for this pantry as often as possible, and since 2023 have collected a substantial number of food items during the High Holy Days. This year, we were able to bring 500 jars of peanut butter, cans of beans, boxes of spaghetti or cereal, jars of tomato sauce and more to the food pantry. Special thanks go to Alison Adams-Weinberg, Dan Burkhard, Linda Geffin, Barbara Janoff, Pete Lazes, Marie Rudden and, especially, Susan Weinstein, for their work on this project. Donating the money or food you miss during the Yom Kippur fast to a charity is a deeply meaningful tradition rooted in Jewish values of social action and tzedakah.



In response, Laura Gratz, President of the Pantry wrote to us:

"The People's Pantry is so thankful for the continued support of The Ahavath Sholom Congregation. Every week we distribute healthy food to all who need it with no questions asked- on average, 240 families, representing 640 people. We couldn't do it without your help... During the High Holy Days, thank you for thinking of the People's Pantry."

The Pantry will soon be relocating to a new building which they purchased at 783 South Main St, Great Barrington, in order to continue serving a large number of our local residents.

Celebrating Sukkot

Our sukkah was assembled after Yom Kippur by John Slote and friends on the grounds of the UUMSB building and decorated on Thursday, September 24th by another crew of CAS members. Sukkot was then celebrated on Friday, September 25th, along with a Kabbalat Shabbat service.



Poetry Workshop

A writer is, first and foremost, a reader.

-Patricia Hampl

Readers & Writers: You're invited to a live & in-person introduction to poetry

Jayne Benjulian's poetry workshop for writers and readers of poetry begins Thursday, October 15 @ 3:00.

The workshop will meet @ UU South Berkshire Meeting House in Housatonic from 3:00–5:00 PM October 15, 22, 29 and November 12 & 19.

This innovative workshop brings poets and readers of poetry together to examine the bones of poetry. We will read the work of admired poets and explore the elements that make them rich and meaningful. Each meeting we'll talk about creative strategies used in poems we've all read and then, we'll turn to the poems our poets have written. If you are writing poetry or want to write, we want to read your poems.

One specific protocol applies to our conversations: When we talk about the poems of our fellow participants, we will pose questions of the poem and the poet—we will not offer advice on what to write.

Details:

- ⇒ Everyone is welcome, as long as you commit to reading and/or writing.
- ⇒ Maximum number of participants is 10.
- ⇒ The contribution to CAS is \$10 for each meeting, payable on the donation button of the Website.
- ⇒ To sign up, please send email noting you'd like to register by Wednesday, October 2 to Jayne: jaynespage@proton.me Those registered will receive poems for the first meeting.

Include your telephone number and note whether you are a CAS member.

Simchat Torah: *The Rejoicing of the Torah*



A festive graphic for Simchat Torah. At the top, a string of colorful triangular bunting (red, yellow, blue, green) hangs across the width. Below it, the text 'CAS INVITES YOU TO CELEBRATE' is centered. The central illustration features a large, unrolled Torah scroll with Hebrew text, flanked by two red apples on sticks. To the left of the scroll is a blue flag with a yellow Star of David, and to the right is a yellow flag with a red wavy line. Small colorful dots are scattered around the central elements. Below the illustration, the Hebrew title 'שִׂמְחַת תּוֹרָה' is written in red, followed by 'Simchat Torah' in large blue letters. Underneath, 'The Rejoicing of the Torah' is written in a smaller, italicized font. A paragraph of text follows: 'Come sing, dance and celebrate as we unroll the entire Torah around us and begin the story once again!'. Below this are two large colored boxes: a blue one for Friday evening (October 2, 5:00 PM) and a red one for Saturday morning (October 3, 10:00 AM). Each box contains an icon (a chalice and an apple respectively) and the text 'with libations' or 'with caramel apples'. Below these boxes are three yellow circles with icons: a musical note for 'Song', a star for 'Joy', and an open book for 'Unrolling the Torah'. At the bottom, a yellow rounded rectangle contains a location pin icon and the text 'Universalist Meeting House, Housatonic, Massachusetts'. Finally, the Hebrew phrase 'שִׂישׁוּ וְשִׂמְחוּ בְּשִׂמְחַת תּוֹרָה' is written in blue, followed by its English translation 'Rejoice and be glad on Simchat Torah!' in a smaller font.

CAS INVITES YOU TO CELEBRATE

שִׂמְחַת תּוֹרָה
Simchat Torah
The Rejoicing of the Torah

Come sing, dance and celebrate as we unroll the entire Torah
around us and begin the story once again!


FRIDAY EVENING
October 2
5:00 PM
with libations


SATURDAY MORNING
October 3
10:00 AM
with caramel apples


Song


Joy


Unrolling the Torah

 **Universalist Meeting House**
Housatonic, Massachusetts

שִׂישׁוּ וְשִׂמְחוּ בְּשִׂמְחַת תּוֹרָה
Rejoice and be glad on Simchat Torah!

Music in Our Prayer: A Community Conversation on Zoom

CAS

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON ZOOM



Music in Our Prayer

Should musical instruments be part of our Shabbat and holiday services?

CAS is considering whether to include musical instruments in our Shabbat and holiday services. Members hold deep and differing feelings about this question, rooted in tradition, memory and meaning. Every one of those perspectives belongs in this conversation.

אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים

"These and these are the words of the living God." Eruvin 13b

GUIDED BY VALUES-BASED DECISION MAKING, TOGETHER WE WILL

1 Listen

Hear one another's experiences, hopes and concerns with openness and respect.

2 Learn

Explore what Jewish tradition and history teach about instruments in worship.

3 Name our values

Identify the shared values that matter most to us as a community.

4 Look ahead

Consider how different paths might honor those values.

WEDNESDAY

October 14

10:00 – 11:30 AM Eastern

 Join on Zoom

us06web.zoom.us/j/6378313156

Come to listen, to share and to be heard. All voices are welcome.

Honoring Our Torah Scrolls

CAS

INVITES YOU TO A COMMUNITY LEARNING GATHERING ON ZOOM



עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה

"It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it." Proverbs 3:18

Honoring Our Torah Scrolls

An open gathering to explore the laws, rules and traditions surrounding Torah scrolls, and to reflect together on the memories of the scrolls we hold.

SUNDAY

October 18

EASTERN TIME

11:00 - 12:30

Join us on Zoom

us06web.zoom.us/j/6378313156

Our congregation will soon decide the future of our damaged Torah scrolls. Before we do, we want to hear from you and learn together.



Share

Speak about what our damaged scrolls mean to you: memories, attachments, grief and hopes.



Learn

Discover what Jewish tradition teaches about unused, repaired, transferred and retired Torah scrolls.



Ask

Bring your questions. No prior knowledge is needed, and no question is too small.



Prepare

Ground ourselves in shared values as we approach our congregational decision.

— All are welcome —

Notes from the September Board Meeting

- Membership dues have been coming in, creating a temporary surplus in the synagogue's finances that will be spent down as the year goes on. We currently count 41 regular memberships (both single and family), 9 *chai*, and 2 double *chai*.
- A number of issues connected with High Holy Day services were discussed, including assignment of honors, decoration of the sanctuary, parking, food pantry donations, and security. Plans were also made for setting up the *sukkah* and inviting members of the UU congregation to a Sukkot service.
- Discussion of the revision of the synagogue's bylaws will be continued to the October meeting. Ongoing concerns include the location of the synagogue's original articles of incorporation (probably dating back to the 1920s) and a clarification of the requirements for membership.
- The dead tree in front of 15 North Street has been removed. Plans to shutter the synagogue for the winter were discussed. The Board will also review our current insurance coverage on both the building and the contents.
- Eric Bass was welcomed as a new Board member. Eric and Marie Rudden have been appointed to fill the two vacancies caused by the resignations of Deborah Slater and, most recently, Barbara Janoff. The Board wishes to recognize Debbie and Barbara for the many contributions they made during their terms of office.

Our new Board Members

About Marie Rudden

I am a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who retired after seeing patients in New York City and here in the Berkshires for over 40 years.



Attending Yale from 1969-1973, I did pre-med and an Intensive Anthropology major, then attended medical school at NYU from 1973-1977. I did a residency in psychiatry at Weill Cornell/New York Hospital, which included a rotating internship in pediatrics and neurology and medicine. After graduation, I became an instructor and later an assistant clinical professor at Cornell, ending in 2024. I also did psychoanalytic training and was eventually certified as a training and supervising analyst.

I have continued to be on the editorial board of two psychoanalytical journals and have co-authored and edited five books and have written papers about panic disorder, depression, trauma, and regressive group functioning.

Having founded the Berkshire Community Diaper Project in 2014, I was the Board President for eight years and continue to be an active Board member. We have given out over 3 million diapers to food banks, pediatric or OBGYN offices, and parent child centers during this time.

I began attending Congregation Ahavath Sholom several years ago, and converted to Reconstructionist Judaism in January 2026, after studying, first with Rabbi Barbara Cohen, and then with Rabbi Jennifer Rudin.

I have been married to Peter Lazes, a clinical and industrial psychologist, for 40 years and have two children, Daniel Levy and Adrienne Lazes, both high school teachers, and a wonderful stepson, Andy Lazes, as well as four delightful grandchildren, ages 7-23.

I love hiking in the woods with my rescue dogs and riding my mare Jasmine - with my donkey Teddy happily tagging along.

About Eric Bass

Eric Bass is a longtime business leader, advisor, entrepreneur, and nonprofit volunteer who has spent much of his career helping organizations work through periods of growth and change. He has more than 30 years of experience in financial services, consulting, and technology, including senior leadership roles with organizations such as IBM and Grant Thornton. Eric is particularly experienced at bringing people with different perspectives together, asking the questions that help clarify difficult issues, and turning ideas into practical plans. He earned his MBA from New York University's Stern School of Business and his undergraduate degree from the University at Albany.



Community service and mentorship and Jewish organizations have also been important parts of Eric's life. He served as a board member of the Jewish Community Center of Central New Jersey, and in 2023, he founded the Neurability Foundation, a nonprofit initiative exploring how new technologies can help people with ADHD navigate everyday challenges and live more independently. As the son of a Holocaust survivor, he brings to board service both a commitment to Jewish virtues and ideas, and a combination of practical business experience, financial understanding, familiarity with emerging technology, and a strong interest in helping mission-driven organizations plan for the future.

Eric lives in Berkshire Otis, Massachusetts with his wife Lisa Thomas and has three adult children living in New Jersey.

An important note about our 15 North Street synagogue

The shul has been winterized. The water was drained, antifreeze added, and the town removed the water meter as required. The refrigerator has been emptied and is unplugged. The lawn has been mowed and the knotweed treated.

Many, many thanks to everyone who has lovingly cared for the building during this time of uncertainty.

Rabbi Rudin's High Holy Day Sermons

Rosh Hashanah Sermon: Hashiveinu: Renewal, Not Restoration

There is a line in the siddur recited by many communities every week, almost without thinking about it. The Torah is lifted, carried back toward the ark, and these words are sung:

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah, chadeish yameinu k'kedem.

"Bring us back to You, Adonai, and we shall return; renew our days as of old."

It is sung so often that it can become almost automatic — a melody more than a prayer. But I want us to sit with it today, on the eve of a new year, because I don't think there has ever been a year in which this congregation needed these words more than we do right now.

Here is something worth knowing about this verse: it doesn't come from a moment of comfort. It comes from the Book of Eicha — Lamentations. It is nearly the last line of the entire book, spoken by a people who had just watched their Temple burn, who had been driven from their home, who had lost the physical place where they had always gone to meet God. They did not write these words from strength. They wrote them from rubble.

I tell you that not to be grim on Rosh Hashanah, but because I want you to know: this text was written *for* a community like us. A community that has been exiled from its sanctuary. A community in-between. This text has always belonged to people in exactly the position we are in.

Look closely at the grammar of the line, because it is strange, and the strangeness is the whole point. *Hashiveinu — bring us back. V'nashuvah — and we will return.* We ask God to turn us, and in the same breath, we commit to turning ourselves. Not one or the other. Both, together, meeting somewhere in the middle. Teshuva, return, was never meant to be something done *to* us, and it was never meant to be something we could accomplish purely alone, either. It's a partnership. God can open the door. We must still walk through it.

And then: "renew our days as of old." *Chadeish — renew, make new. K'kedem — as of old, as it once was.* Read quickly, these sound like they contradict each other. Are we asking for the past, or for something new?

I don't think it's a contradiction. I think it's the truest description of what real renewal actually looks like. We are not asking to rewind the tape. We are not asking to wake up and have this year not have happened. We are asking that the *spirit* that animated our best days — the warmth, the belonging, the sense that this was a place where we were known and where we mattered to one another — find its way into whatever comes next. Not restoration. Renewal. Those are not the same thing, and I think this year is asking us to understand the difference.

Before I go any further, I want to say something clearly: it is not weakness to miss the way things were. It is not disloyal to the future to grieve the past. I just want to name it.

Some of you miss walking into a sanctuary that was simply *yours* — not a space we are grateful to borrow, not a room we set up and take down, but a building that knew us in its walls. You miss knowing exactly which seat was yours, and who would be sitting beside you.

Some of you miss a rabbi whose voice you had thirty years to learn — whose style was familiar, whose melodies were etched deep into your hearts. That is not something a congregation loses without **real grief, even** when the parting is a loving one, **even** when it comes wrapped in retirement and blessing.

None of that longing is silly. I want you to know that I understand it and feel some of it myself. This congregation has been part of me for a very long time too. *Hashiveinu — bring us back —* is, in part, exactly this ache. It is human, and it is honest, and it belongs in this room today.

Here is the harder truth: this year did not ask us to face one loss. It asked us to face several, stacked on top of each other, with no space between them to catch our breath.

Our building — the physical space we have loved for generations — was damaged, and we do not yet know its full future. We are, even as I speak these words, still in the process of discerning what comes next: whether we will one day walk back through those doors as a renovated space, or whether our path leads somewhere new entirely. I want to be honest with you — I do not know the answer yet. None of us know yet. And I think part of what has made this year so hard is that we have had to grieve a building whose fate isn't even settled — an ambiguous loss, which is its own particular kind of difficult to carry. Losses are cumulative, they don't exist alone in a moment, they bring us back and those losses are relived in the context of the new and current loss.

And into all of this arrived me — a new rabbi, with a different voice, different instincts, different ways of doing things, asking you to adjust to someone new before you had even finished grieving who came before. I know that has been disorienting. I know it has asked something of you that maybe nobody asked whether you had left to give.

Is it any wonder that we have struggled? Is it any wonder that relationships have been tested, that there have been moments — more than a few, if we're honest — when we have not been our best with each other? Grief makes people short-tempered. Displacement makes people brittle. Add up loss after loss after loss, with barely a breath between them, and often simultaneous and of course we have felt challenged. Of course, patience has worn thin. None of that should surprise us. I don't say this to excuse harm we may have caused one another this year — we owe each other real repair, and that work matters. I say it because we owe ourselves a little compassion and grace before we can do that work honestly. We were not simply cranky. We were grieving, we are grieving, all at once, in public, while trying to keep a congregation running.

There is a legend, told in different versions across the Chasidic world, and passed to many of us through Elie Wiesel. I want to tell it to you this evening, because I think it says more than I could say on my own.

When the Baal Shem Tov saw that his people were in danger, he would go to a certain place in the forest, light a fire, and recite a particular prayer — and the danger would pass. A generation later, his student, the Maggid of Mezritch, faced the

same kind of danger. He went to that same place in the forest and said: "I no longer know how to light the fire, but I can still say the prayer." And it was enough.

A generation after him, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov faced trouble of his own. He went into the forest and said: "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer. But I still know the place." And it was enough.

And finally, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin. He could not light the fire. He did not know the prayer. He could not even find the place in the forest anymore. So, he sat in his chair, put his head in his hands, and said to God: "I cannot light the fire, I do not know the prayer, I cannot even find the place. All I can do is tell the story." And it was enough.

I think about this congregation in that forest. We have lost the fire — the building as we knew it. Some of us feel we have even lost the place — whether we will return to it at all is still unknown. What we still have, what nothing can take from us, is the ability to tell the story. To sit together, as we are sitting right now, and say to one another: this is who we have been, this is what we have loved, this is what has carried us. The legend does not promise that telling the story is the same as lighting the fire. It promises that it is enough. I believe that. I am asking you to believe it with me this year.

If it helps to know this: we are not the first Jews to be caught between a building we loved and an unknown future. In some sense, this *is* the oldest Jewish story there is.

Abram is told, at the very start of everything, *Lech lecha* — *go for yourself*, out of your land, away from your birthplace, from your father's house, "to the land that I will show you." Not named yet. Not visible yet. The whole covenant begins with someone walking toward a destination he cannot see, trusting the walking itself before the destination makes any sense. That is where we are. Mid-journey. Still walking. Not yet able to see where we land.

And after the Exodus, when the people needed a sacred space, God did not ask for a permanent structure. God said: "Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell *among them*" — not *in it*. *Among them*. For forty years in the wilderness, that sanctuary was a tent. It was taken down and carried and put back up, campsite after campsite, and the holiness never depended on the ground beneath it. The holiness travelled with the people, because it was always theirs to carry, not the building's to hold.

I want to say this to you as plainly as I can: whatever we decide about our building — whether we return to it renewed, or whether called toward something we cannot yet see — the holiness of this congregation was never in the walls. It was always in us. It is currently, for now, pitched in Housatonic. It may one day be pitched back in Great Barrington. Either way, we have been carrying it the whole time, whether we realized it or not.

And there is one more figure worth remembering this morning: Jacob, alone at night, wrestling with a stranger until dawn, refusing to let go until he receives a blessing. He walks away renamed — Israel, one who has struggled with God and with people, and prevailed. But notice: he also walks away with a limp. The struggle leaves a mark. Change costs something real. Jacob does not emerge from that night unscathed. He emerges different — blessed, yes, and also changed in a way he will carry in his body for the rest of his life.

I think that is honest. We will walk with something like a limp for a while. But a limp is not the opposite of a blessing. Sometimes it's the proof that the struggle was real and that we are still standing. Grief inevitably changes us.

So here is where I want to leave you, on the eve of the first day of 5787.

I don't know yet whether we will return to our building, renewed and repaired, or whether this congregation's path leads somewhere altogether new. I want to honor both of those possibilities honestly, because I think trying to force clarity where none yet exists would be its own kind of dishonesty. What I do know is this: the sanctuary was never only the building. It was the people who gathered in it — the people gathered right here, right now, in a room that is not ours, praying words that are entirely ours. If we go back to 15 North Street one day, we will bring this year with us, and it will be a journey worth having. If we build something new instead, it will still be built by the same hands, the same hearts, the same story that has carried this congregation for generations already.

Chadeish yameinu k'kedem — renew our days as of old. Not identical to what came before. Not a rewind. A renewal, carrying forward what was best in us — the warmth, the belonging, the fierce love this community has for each other even when sometimes we have not shown it well this year — into whatever comes next, wherever it turns out to be.

This prayer already exists. We practice renewal all year, every Shabbat, without fully realizing how much we would need it. Rosh Hashanah simply asks us to say it out loud, together, on purpose, and to mean it.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah, chadeish yameinu k'kedem.

Bring us back to you. And we will return. Renewed — together — whatever that renewal turns out to look like.

Shanah tovah.

Yom Kippur Afternoon Sermon: How Do I Show Up?

In just a short while, we will rise for Ne'ilah — the closing service of this holy day. Traditionally, Ne'ilah is imagined as the moment the gates of heaven swing shut, our last chance to slip our prayers through before judgment is sealed. I hold that image more as metaphor than as literal transaction: Ne'ilah is the closing of a gate within us — the last stretch of a day we've spent trying to see ourselves honestly, before we step back into ordinary time. It is less about a verdict being handed down from above, and more about a door we get to walk through on purpose, carrying with us whatever clarity today has given us.

So, the words I am about to share are an invitation to come back to ourselves, before that gate closes, and ask: What is my role in co-creating this world in which we live — this world we will leave to future generations?

I want to start with a phrase we've chanted many times this holiday season:
U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'a hagezeirah.
Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving avert the severity of the decree.

We say this line as though it's a magic formula — as if reciting it three times fast will change our fate, will guarantee us a good year, will keep illness and heartbreak and loss away from our door. But we know it is not a magic formula. We know that because we all know people who repented sincerely, who prayed with a full heart, who gave generously — and the imperfect year came anyway. The diagnosis came. The loss came. The disappointment came. If teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah were a shield against all of these things and more, reciting this line would be for nothing. So, what exactly does "U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'a hagezeirah" mean?

Before we dive into that question, I need to reframe the verse, because I personally do not believe in a supernatural, interventionist God who alone makes decisions about our lives. As my personal theology grows, I find myself aligned with the Reconstructionist movement and Mordecai Kaplan's thinking. Kaplan understood this verse to mean: life is inherently uncertain and often harsh, and things happen to us that are not in our control and are not punishments or rewards — but teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah change how we meet what happens. So, let's reconsider the verse. It doesn't say teshuvah — returning, tefillah — reflecting, and tzedakah — renewing our commitment to ourselves and others — will avert the gezeirah, life's harshness. It says they temper its ro'a — its harshness, its severity, the way it lands on us and moves through us and the world. We don't get to choose everything that happens to us. We get to choose how we meet it. We get to choose whether we meet a hard year with despair or with prayer. Whether we meet scarcity with hoarding or with tzedakah. Whether we meet our own failures with shame that closes us down or teshuvah that opens us up.

That's not a small power. That is, in fact, the only power some of us will ever fully hold: not control over what happens, but authorship over how we show up inside of it.

And this — I believe — is where we live out our part in co-creating the world with each other and with God. Not in some far-off, cosmic decision that happens above our heads. But in the accumulation of a thousand small choices: the words we choose to say to the person across from us. The attitude we carry into a hard conversation. The energy we bring into a room before we've said a single word. Every single one of those is a moment ripe for creation. We are, each of us, constantly building the world — brick by brick, breath by breath — whether we mean to or not. The only real question Yom Kippur puts in front of us is whether we're building it on purpose.

There's an old Chassidic story that's been told and retold in story and song. It's said that in a small shtetl, there lived a poor shepherd boy. He had no education. He had never learned to read Hebrew, had never learned the prayers, didn't know an aleph from a bet. But he had one gift: he knew how to whistle, the way only a boy who spends his days alone in fields with sheep learns to whistle — clear, unpretentious, full of feeling.

One Yom Kippur, his father brought him to shul, because that's simply what you did. The boy sat through the long service unable to follow a single word. He watched the learned men around him — the ones who could read every line of Kol Nidre, every stanza of the Amidah, every confession in Ashamnu — and he felt his own emptiness. He had nothing to offer. No prayer. No learning. No words.

As Ne'ilah approaches, the gates of heaven beginning to close, something in him broke open. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the little whistle he used with his flock, and — right there in the middle of the sanctuary — he whistled. Loud, clear, and from the very center of himself.

The congregation gasped. Some were horrified. The rabbi, though, sat very still, and then he began to weep. When it was over, he turned to the room and said: All day, our prayers have been trying to reach the gates of heaven, and they have been struggling to get through. But this boy's whistle — his whole heart, offered without a single word of pretense — broke through when nothing else could.

I love this story not because it says learning doesn't matter, or that our prayers don't matter — they do, deeply. I love it because it insists that the smallest, most honest offering of ourselves counts. Co-creating the world has never been reserved for the people with the most words, the most credentials, the most visible power. It is available, every single day, to a shepherd boy with a whistle. It is available to us in a hallway conversation, a text message we send or don't send, the

tone we choose when we're tired and short-tempered, the five minutes we give someone who is struggling. These are not small things. They are, in fact, the only things.

Which brings me to a story I read and haven't been able to stop thinking about.

A few years back, a group of middle schoolers — kids, thirteen years old — showed up at a skate park in New Jersey. The park was empty except for one little boy, five years old, there with his mom to celebrate his birthday. His name was Carter, and Carter is autistic. Big groups of older kids can be overwhelming for him, and his mother, watching this pack of teenagers arrive, braced herself to pack up and leave.

But one of the older boys, thirteen-year-old Gavin, walked straight up to Carter instead of past him. He started giving him tips on the ramps. His friends followed his lead — not into mischief, but into kindness. When they found out it was Carter's birthday, the whole group broke into "Happy Birthday," right there in the middle of the park. One of the girls gave Carter a mini skateboard she happened to have with her. Carter's mother said it was unlike anything she'd ever experienced — that she just wanted to see kindness in the world, and there it was.

Here is what strikes me most: nothing about that moment was extraordinary in its ingredients. A skate park. A birthday. A group of kids who could have easily just kept to themselves. What made it extraordinary was a single choice, made by one boy, in one moment — to show up differently than he had to. Gavin didn't organize a fundraiser. He didn't give a speech. He simply decided, in real time, what kind of energy he was going to bring into that space, and his friends followed him into it. That one decision rippled outward: a police department heard about it and threw them a pizza party. A friendship began that continued long after the cameras left. A five-year-old boy got to see, on his birthday, exactly what it looks like when someone shows up for him.

That is what we are capable of. Not because we're extraordinary people, but because ordinary people, showing up on purpose, create extraordinary ripples.

So here is what I want to leave you with today, on this holiest of days, as the light begins to change and Ne'ilah draws near.

How are you going to show up tomorrow? Not next year. Tomorrow. What tone will you choose with the people in your home? What will you do with the very human, very daily power you have to make someone's day a little lighter or a little heavier, just by how you walk into the room?

And beyond tomorrow — where are you choosing to put your time, your talent, and your resources this year? Not in the abstract "I should volunteer more" way we all default to, but specifically. Is there a place — this congregation, a cause, a neighbor, an organization doing work you believe in — where your particular gifts are needed, and where you have been holding back? Yom Kippur doesn't ask us to fix the whole world today. It asks us to look honestly at the piece of it that is actually within our reach, and to choose, on purpose, to show up for it.

We are not passive characters in the story of this world. We are, each of us, co-authors. The words we speak, the attitude we carry, the energy we bring, the places we choose to give our time and our care — these are not small footnotes to some larger divine plan. They are the plan, unfolding through us, one ordinary, unremarkable, essential day at a time.

May we leave this day with the courage of a shepherd boy who had only a whistle and offered it anyway. May we leave with the instinct of a thirteen-year-old who chose kindness before he even had time to think it through. And may this new year find us showing up — again and again and again — as the people, and the co-creators, we are capable of being.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May we seal ourselves for good.

October Yahrzeits

Much of our experience of divine goodness, grace and love has come to us through those whose lives have touched our own.

	Hebrew Date	Secular Date	This Year
Mark Cohen	Tishrei 20 5778	10/10/2017	10/1
Nettie Eisenstein	Tishrei 20 5769	10/19/2008	10/1
James Mitsuda	Tishrei 22 5769	10/21/2008	10/3
Harry Aaron Orenstein	Tishrei 25 5757	10/8/1996	10/6
William Sandler	Tishrei 25 5775	10/19/2014	10/6
LeRoy Brecher	Cheshvan 1 5750	10/30/1989	10/12
Solomon Clarin	Cheshvan 3 5743	10/20/1982	10/14
Joseph Kogan	Cheshvan 10 5752	10/18/1991	10/21
Harold M. Rudin	Cheshvan 11 5785	11/12/2024	10/22
Henrietta Slote	Cheshvan 20 5775	11/13/2014	10/31

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In memory of Gail Dubrow, beloved aunt
of Rabbi Rudin & Family
Susan Hicks

In memory of Bruce Panock
In memory of James Mitsuda
Arthur and Louise Hillman

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