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JUDAISM

Synagogue Resource Center

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Rabbi Moshe Edelman

From: "Carol Sarafconn" <csarafconn@mediaone.net>
 To: "Rabbi Moshe Edelman" <edelman@uscj.org>
 Sent: Sunday, January 13, 2002 7:48 PM
 Subject: speeches

Rabbi Edelman,
 I have often chosen to be very personal in my remarks to the congregation, but I hope these speeches will be helpful nonetheless. Below you will find two High Holiday addresses and my acceptance speech.

Carol Sarafconn
 Congregation Agudat Achim (155)
 Leominster, MA
 sulam grad

YOM KIPPUR ADDRESS

On a September day in 1924 the Jews of Leominster dedicated the first synagogue, Congregation Agudat Achim. This trowel was used to place a cornerstone at the building they had purchased on Pleasant Street. There is still a little cement on the tip. The dedication ceremony included a ribbon cutting too--here is the satin ribbon and the scissors. The importance of the day must have been clear to those founding families at the time because these items were labeled and stored and preserved as a physical legacy of the occasion. I am grateful that they were; but I am more inspired by the spiritual legacy of those founding families.

In 1924 there were just twenty-eight Jewish families in Leominster and yet they purchased a building large enough for a religious school and social hall in addition to a sanctuary. They hired a full-time rabbi. They demonstrated faith and confidence that their numbers would continue to grow.

Going back even further, we are told that in 1915 there were only eight Jewish men in town. One of them, David Malchman, purchased a sefer Torah for the community. They hired two Jews from Worcester to come to Leominster, all expenses paid, to make a minyan so they could hold High Holiday services here. I wonder how many of us, were we to find ourselves in similar situation, would find a way to hold services--or would we shrug and say, "too bad there isn't a synagogue here". The founding families of Agudat Achim have left us a legacy of commitment and faith.

The oral histories of the early years are replete with stories of the close social fabric of the community. There are stories about nightly get-togethers and regular penny-ante poker games as well as tales of annual dances at Mt. Wachusett. The founders left a legacy of community spirit.

This year as we celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of Congregation Agudat Achim we would do well to take stock. Since this time last year we have a new rabbi. We welcomed Rabbi Alan Alpert to our pulpit in November. He seems to have eased very smoothly into the many roles that a rabbi plays--teacher, counselor, scholar, advisor, and, of course, spiritual leader. Rabbi, on behalf of the entire congregation I would like to thank you for a series of lovely and meaningful High Holiday services. And Meryl, I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to formally welcome you too. The warmth of your smile has already become part of the fabric of our

community.

This year our sanctuary is improved by the new landscaping outside the windows, the new sound system, and the striking new white Torah mantles. The landscaping was provided by HealthAlliance in an effort to minimize the impact of increased hospital traffic on our synagogue experience. Included in the landscaping are five large hemlock trees. We would like to offer these trees as living memorials. For a donation of \$1000 a tree can be dedicated to the memory of a loved one. Sunnie and Irving Epstein have already dedicated the first of these five trees to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Money donated to this project will be used to help us maintain the new plantings and the synagogue grounds.

Last year many congregants had difficulty hearing the cantor and rabbi at holiday services and more and more often we were getting a buzzing noise from the speakers. So just two weeks ago we replaced the building's original sound system with a new Bose system. The old system still operated with vacuum tubes. Now we have state-of-the-art microphones and speakers and have been able to eliminate the big arm that stretched over the reader's desk. The system is brand new and this week the technicians came back to make some adjustments based on our experience with it at Rosh Hashanah. A new system takes a little fine tuning but overall I am delighted with the sound quality and I hope you are too. We need additional donations to help cover its cost. The Board of Trustees felt that installing it in time for the holidays was important so we have placed our faith in you and hope that you will make a gift to help cover the cost of the new sound system.

In general the building and grounds are in good shape, but we have Sisterhood to thank for the extra touches that make the place beautiful. This High Holidays the Torahs are dressed in fresh, white mantles thanks to Sisterhood. All year long the women of Sisterhood work on rummage sales, the gift shop and other fundraisers so that they can provide us with special items like these Torah covers that are beyond the scope of the synagogue's operating budget but add a richness to our experience.

Sisterhood is perfect example of the important role that volunteers play in the life of the synagogue. Our community enjoys a broad range of programs and activities with a very small paid staff. We can do that in part because our professional staff demonstrates remarkable flexibility. And because volunteers perform many important functions--often behind the scenes and with insufficient recognition. Mens' Club provides us with interesting speakers at their Sunday breakfast meetings, runs the Holocaust memorial candle program, and recently has undertaken some hands-on projects like painting the new garage at the parsonage and building the sukkah. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ushers whom I recruited at rather the last minute I'm afraid and who have kept services running so smoothly: Barbara Friedman, Bill Friedman, Milt Kline, Ken Hanson, Glen Davis, Mark Goldstein, and Barry Lew. One area that needs one or two committed volunteers is the synagogue library. Let me know if you can give some regular time to this project and I will see that you get the training you need. Another major volunteer effort coming up is the Diamond Jubilee celebration next month. Judy Schatz is chairing that event and would love to hear from you.

The Diamond Jubilee dinner on October 30 promises to be a very special evening. Judy has put together a talented committee of longtime members and

brand new members all putting their heads together to plan an event that has something for everyone. Her volunteers are doing the cooking, providing the musical entertainment, decorating the room, and displaying the memorabilia in an effort to make a very festive occasion of our seventy-fifth anniversary. I hope all of you will plan to attend.

Finally I would like to mention the new Simcha Tree in the lobby. We launched this project on the occasion of the diamond anniversary with blind faith that you would respond. And respond you have! The tree is glittering with leaves and stones that congregants have donated to mark special events, milestones, and joyous occasions. I had hoped to have all the engraving done before today so that you could see every leaf that has been dedicated but they are coming in so steadily that the engraver can hardly keep up! To date 40 leaves and 6 stones have been purchased. The Simcha Tree project is unique because of a matching grant that Ron Ansin has given us. Ron has generously offered to match all the donations made before the Diamond Jubilee Gala on October 30 with an equal gift to the Endowment Fund up to ten thousand dollars. In this way your purchase of a leaf contributes to the synagogue today and tomorrow. What a fitting way to mark this anniversary--by noting the many happy occasions we have shared as a community over the years and meeting the needs of our synagogue now as well as into the future.

May we all share many, many more simchas together. And may we uphold the legacy of our founders--demonstrating commitment to Judaism, confidence in the future, and dedication to the community of Agudat Achim.

L'Shana Tova.

May we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.

Carol Sarafcon

Yom Kippur, 5760

YOM KIPPUR ADDRESS

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Carol Sarafcon
Yom Kippur, 5760

NEW PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO ANNUAL MEETING
JUNE 6, 1999

Thank you for entrusting me with the office of president. I hope that I

will do it justice. Permit me to make a few personal remarks.

As you know I am a Jew by Choice. About twenty years ago I stood on the bimah in the sanctuary and recited the Sh'ma for the first time as a Jew. My conversion followed a year of study with the rabbi. I learned a great deal from that rabbi and I have continued to learn from each of our rabbis over the years since. What you may not realize is that I've learned from all of you too. Wittingly or not, you have all been my teachers. From the rabbis I learned what I need to do to be a Jew. From you I have learned how to do it.

I keep a Passover file in among my cookbooks. I learned from the rabbis that we do not eat anything with leavening or anything made with certain grains during Passover. And somewhere in the back of that file folder is a photocopied list of the restricted and permitted foods according to the Conservative movement. But that didn't help me know how to feed my family for eight days. The rest of the folder is filled with handwritten recipes—in many different handwritings, your handwritings. The recipes are worn now and I should probably copy them over or type them onto the computer, but I am reluctant to because I enjoy thinking about the person who shared the recipe when I make it. The rabbis taught me what to do. You have taught me how to do it.

Judaism is more than a religion; it is a culture. It's hard to learn to feel comfortable in an unfamiliar culture. It takes more than studying with a rabbi and more than living with a Jewish spouse. It takes a community of Jews who are willing to share and guide and overlook blunders. The community of Agudat Achim has accepted me from the beginning and for this I am most grateful.

While I have learned a great deal from all of you, there is one value in particular that I learned from my family long before I chose Judaism: service. Service to the community was modeled for me by my parents and grandparents. All four of my grandparents served on church committees, taught Sunday school, and gave time generously to their communities. Every Sunday my grandfather, Harold, was half an hour later than the rest of us getting home for dinner because he stayed after church to file away the choir music. My grandfather was a quiet and careful man, devoted to detail. Each week for the thirty years that I can remember, he stayed to put away the music. The rest of us waited for him to get home so that Grandma could serve dinner. My grandmother did not show impatience during this wait. We accepted that Harold had taken on this duty and the choir relied on his service. Today my mother volunteers for several organizations. My father is a deacon at his church. I came to see service as an obligation and a responsibility. I have always regretted that I cannot give more money to the synagogue, but I can always find a little more time to give. I hope that as president I can give something back to the community that accepted me so readily and continue a longstanding family tradition of service.

I am looking forward to the coming year. There are a number of programs planned that I am excited about. As you know we're celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the congregation and Judy Schatz and her committee are planning a gala celebration for Saturday night October 30th.

I have been having fun exploring the files of old newspaper clippings, photographs, and documents. I have been displaying a few at a time in the lobby but we will have a more complete display the night of our celebration. Rabbi Loel Weiss will be our keynote speaker that evening and Mim Linsky is preparing some dramatic entertainment. It should be a memorable occasion. I am also looking forward to a series of special Friday night services we are calling "social action Shabbats". About once a month, beginning after the holidays, we will honor a member of the congregation who performs social action in the community. These services will be an opportunity for us to learn more about and recognize the wide variety of social action projects our members are involved in. Vivienne Jones is organizing this project. The Jewish and secular calendars intersect very conveniently next year so that many of the holidays fall on the weekend. This provides us some unique opportunities to draw our school children and their families into the celebration of Succot and Simchat Torah. Ruthe Lew and Nancy Hanson are working with the rabbi to plan family-friendly observances for those days. Our new Simcha Tree is up and glittering with leaves and stones marking happy occasions in the life of our community. Many of you have responded very promptly and generously to our invitation to give to this project. The Simcha Tree project took on a new twist last week when Ron Ansin offered us a matching program. He has agreed to match every gift between now and our Diamond Jubilee celebration in October with a matching gift to the endowment fund. So for the next few months any gift you give to inscribe a leaf or stone is doubled. I hope that our community will celebrate many more simchas together and mark the occasions this way. While the anniversary year was the impetus to mount the tree now, this is a fundraiser without time limit, my favorite kind.

I am honored to accept this position. I know that I will have shortcomings as president, but I have a strong board and a committed vice president to work with me. I hope that my weaknesses will be made up for by my passion for Judaism and my devotion to this congregation.

--Carol Sarafcon

YOM KIPPUR ADDRESS

This is my L'Shana Tova book from last year, 5760. In the address listing there are 13 handwritten entries. These are the names of thirteen new member households who joined our congregation last year. Sadly there are also some names crossed out. These are members who moved away or passed away. Overall we had a net gain last year.

This is my new L'Shana Tova book, 5761. It already has four handwritten entries and I know that there are two more new member applications in the office for me to take to the next Board meeting. So since I spoke to you last year we have welcomed nineteen new members to our congregation.

I'm thrilled. I told my daughter, Robin, that I had decided to speak to you today about new members. She said, "New members--got some, need more, right?" That's exactly right.

New members are essential to the health and well being of our congregation.

For one thing a larger membership means we share the financial burden among more families. Our largest expenses are the salaries of our staff and the upkeep of our building. These expenses stay the same whether we have 140 families or 160 families or more.

More members also mean more people attending services and programs, which enhances the experience for all of us. More people means more ruach, more spirit, and more voices joined in singing. More people means more provocative discussions and more students in our classes.

Many of our newcomers have already contributed volunteer time. They have helped in the kitchen, collated bulletins, pitched in on work crews, and provided rides to the doctor.

So who are these nineteen new households and where did they come from?

Well, they are diverse--as diverse as we are. Some are singles, some couples, some families with children. Some are interfaith couples and some are single parents. Some of our new members just moved to this area, usually for a new job, and looked us up in the phone book or on the Internet. Others have been in the area for a while but did not affiliate with a synagogue until now. In other cases we have welcomed back former members--people who used to belong to our congregation, but left some time ago (for a variety of reason) and are now rejoining us.

New members contribute to our community; that's evident. But, what do we give them in return? During this season of reflection I have thinking about what we have to offer to our new congregants and to prospective members. I have been thinking about what a synagogue is.

A synagogue is a place to pray with the Jewish community, of course. First and foremost the synagogue is a beit tefillah, a house of prayer. Indeed that is brought us here today, the impulse and need to pray together as a community on Yom Kippur--our hundreds of voices raised together in song and prayer. The rabbi is in the pulpit, the cantor is at the shulhan, the baby-sitting, the junior congregation, the ushers, the honors--everything has been planned and orchestrated to provide our members with a pleasing and meaningful day of prayer. And of course on a smaller scale we do this year round, every Shabbat, every holiday, every Thursday morning minyan the synagogue is a beit tefillah.

The synagogue is a beit midrash, a house of study. Indeed it is our religious school that attracts many new members, Jewish parents seeking a religious education for their children. I think it is important that we also provide opportunities for adult study. This past year the rabbi has offered two classes each week, an adult b'nai mitzvah class and the perek yoni Bible study discussion group. This year Rabbi Alpert will add a new class, a sort of Judaism 101--an introduction to the basics of Judaism. The target audience for this one will be Jews who want a refresher course--perhaps after some time away from synagogue, non-Jewish partners in interfaith relationships who want to learn more about the religion, and any of our gentile neighbors who are interested in Judaism. We try to provide learning opportunities at a variety of levels to meet the needs of as many of our new, and old, members as possible.

Congregation Agudat Achim is more than a place to pray and to study. It is a place in north Worcester county where Jews get together--to tell Jewish jokes, eat Jewish food, to celebrate simchas together, to mourn together, to debate Israeli politics, contribute to Jewish causes, hear Jewish music, and

to dance horas together. New members have told me that all these things matter. One newcomer told me that here people seems to appreciate her sense of humor. Someone else expressed the feeling of being able to "let her hair down" among other Jews. Several people have remarked how nice it is to have a place to talk about events in the Middle East or Senator Leiberman's nomination. Not that we agree on any of these things--God knows we wouldn't be Jewish if we did! New members who have suffered a loss or an illness have been touched by the support that they received from the rabbi and the community. Parents have been pleased to see their children included so readily. The synagogue is a place where we connect with klal Yisrael, the Jewish community.

Today I invite all of you to join our efforts in Outreach. This area is experiencing a building boom. New housing developments, crowded schools and commuter traffic are evidence of the number of new people moving into the area. We need your help to find the Jews among them. We need your help getting the word out there is a synagogue in town ready to welcome them. I suspect that there are unaffiliated Jews in the area who might appreciate an invitation. If you know someone who might be interested, please call the office or call a Board member and give us the name. We can send them a brochure and offer to put them on the mailing list. We can make a telephone contact. New members are important to the community and I believe the community will become important to them. Please help me to fill my L'Shana Tova book with new names.

On your way out of services today, I hope you will each greet someone you don't know. May the new year be one of health and happiness for all of you. May you each make a new friend this year. And may 5761 be another year of growth for our community. Shana Tova!

Pres Carol Sarafcan