

## **President's Message - Rosh Hashanah - September 7, 2021**

Shanah Tovah and welcome everyone. For those that do not know me my name is Larry Myer. The Myer family has been Beth Torah members for over 20 years. My day job is buying, renovating and selling abandoned houses in the central core of KC, MO. But today I am honored to stand here as the president of Congregation Beth Torah and trying my best not to ramble on for too long. Not to worry, the hook comes out if I run past my time slot.

It's no news that last year was difficult for everyone. Beth Torah was no different. Hats off to Rabbi Cattapan, Rabbi Kleinman, Beth Torah staff, past president Scott Franklin, and last year's board for keeping us moving forward, providing sound management and financial decisions all the while keeping the Beth Torah ship afloat in a very angry sea.

However, time to move forward....

The mission for the new year for everyone at Beth Torah is Renew, Reconnect and Reignite. Let me take a moment to touch on all three.

### **Renew:**

Our building and grounds that make up the Beth Torah campus was in need for some TLC. The most obvious was years of accumulated schmutz on the exterior walls of the building. That was corrected with a total building power wash over the summer.

Many trees across the campus had low hanging, barely hanging on, or dead branches that were removed along with several dead trees. The remaining tree stumps were ground down with new grass going in later this fall.

Outdated evergreens in the front of the building were removed and replaced with day lilies left over from an Eagle Scout project in the back courtyard.

We applied for and received a substantial homeland security grant to address numerous security issues around the building. Upgrades included special security film on the lower windows around the building and all glass doors. New closed-circuit TV cameras were installed. We also have a camera that can zoom in and record a digital picture of your license plate from the parking lot. New exterior lights around the building and alarms on all exterior fire security doors coming this fall. We have been cleaning, painting, and taking care of a long list of honey-do's around the property.

**Reconnect:**

I'd like to think everyone here has their own Beth Torah moments. It could be a life cycle event or one of the many memorable programs from the past, like getting heartburn at the chili cook-off, or planting, painting, or cleaning something at a past mitzvah day.

For me, I stood in this very spot and gave a speech at my son's bar mitzvah, my daughter's bat mitzvah and I stood here and gave the eulogy at my wife's funeral. There were baby namings, shivas, choir, playing in the Beth Torah house band, and many more. For the Myer family, at our best and at our very worst, Beth Torah was the common thread that we could always count on and that would always be there.

I've heard from a number of people: "I just do not have a Connection to Beth Torah anymore. The kids are gone, I only come for high holidays, not sure I can justify the expense." My response is always, "I'm sorry to hear that. But that's a decision that you and your family will have to make." Then I ask, "What have you done to stay connected?" I get lots of different answers. Even used some of them myself because, truth be told, I felt the same way.

Then one Sunday morning a few years back while playing percussion at Sunday school, I watched the kids bouncing around and I started wondering if these kids will have the same great experience growing up at Beth Torah that my kids had? If there is a family crisis will everyone be able to get the same support I had? Will everyone be able to enjoy beautiful music and a wonderful spiritual experience not only at the High Holy Days but every time they walk through the door like I have?

Well, on that morning I found my connection. It is the 350 families that make up this congregation. That's why I am standing here: because I want to make sure we can answer "Yes" to every one of those questions. So...how do we go about this?

**Reignite the spark:**

First and foremost, I am excited to announce that we are rolling out a new Beth Torah app for your Android and Apple phones, and a shiny new website that will follow in the fall. Our new app will have everything Beth Torah at your fingertips: calendars, a direct link to our website, and you will be able to watch a present or a past streamed service or song session on your phone. You can make a donation, pay your dues, and keep up with all of the wonderful new programs and groups coming online. There is even a version for Roku, Amazon, and Apple TV so you can watch it all on your big screen TV. Aviva will have instruction on downloading all of this during her announcements.

We have fresh new programming, but we also like playing the oldies. We have exciting new programs on the horizon and the revival of some from a few years ago: a new social justice/action group, pick-a-parties, an all-star small group lineup that was just announced last Friday night at Shabbat services, and a lot more. Aviva can tell you how easy it is to sign up and get involved.

Covid forced us to become creative on how we presented Shabbat services and other Beth Torah functions. Many thanks to Dave Zucker, who spent countless hours cobbling together what is now a state-of-the-art video and streaming studio located in the back of the sanctuary. Because of a generous equipment donation, we now have a very impressive system that we can use here in the sanctuary or easily roll out to the back yard for outdoor services. Did I mention we have a wonderful new venue in the back yard for services and other outdoor events?

This spring Beth Torah and the Jewish war veterans became co-sponsors of a new Boy Scout Troop, #48. The troop meets in the Beth Torah back yard at the fire pit every Monday night. In addition to their scout activities, they help with a variety of projects around the campus.

We have been making a concerted effort to personally connect with every member in the congregation throughout the year. We reached out to our older congregants to make sure they were ok, and if there was anything we could help them with. At Purim we delivered gift bags to everyone in the congregation. A few weeks ago, Rosh Hashanah goodie bags were delivered to everyone.

I've rambled on for the last few minutes about all the wonderful things going on at Beth Torah and all the building upgrades and projects we've done over the last few months. Some of you may be thinking, "Wow! Beth Torah must be loaded to do all of this! Money for everything!" Not true. The majority of everything I just spoke of were made possible because of grants, donations, volunteers, and a razor thin staff.

The reality is, our budget has no fat and expenses have been cut to the bone. In some areas we even had to start gnawing away at the bone. Every vendor is asked repeatedly, "Is that the best you can do?" and every nickel is pinched so hard it screams.

For those who attended the last annual meeting, our financial position was made crystal clear. However, you can only cut so much before you can no longer provide a quality product. We need to focus on generating more income. Our fundraising committee is very busy creating new programs that will help, but it will not fill the gap we need filled.

So here we are.... The **High Holy Day Appeal**.

I renovate old houses for a living. But my passion is music. I've been in one band or another for over 50 years. There is an old saying in the music business: "If you wanna dance... you gotta pay the band."

Membership dues will never come close to covering all our expenses. That is true for any congregation. The balance has to be made up from fundraising and charitable giving. However, nobody is ever turned away from Beth Torah because of an inability to pay their dues

I can only speak for myself and what is important to me, but I think we all share some of the same wants and desires. I want to make sure the Weiner Religious School continues to be an excellent educational experience for all of the kids there now and in the future. At present the religious school runs at a deficit.

Our building and grounds are getting older. Things wear out, things break, things need to be updated so the building will stay fresh. Limited funds in the budget only cover serious necessary repairs. Yes, we have a building fund but we also have the original ac and heating units, the original carpet in the sanctuary, the original roof and a parking lot that is starting to look like the surface of the moon. The deferred-maintenance-can has been kicked down the road for some time.

I want to make sure our music program stays healthy and vibrant. It is who we are. Lezlie is an extremely talented and accomplished musician and we are so fortunate she is here. However, she has a limited budget and yet we continue to have music programming we can all enjoy and be proud of. Think of what she could come up with if she were fully funded.

So, let's take a moment to reflect on what we have here. We have a beautiful building; great charismatic rabbis; an amazing music program; an overachieving staff; and a dedicated, hard-working board and volunteers. We have a congregation that is big enough that there are always new people to meet and things to do, yet small enough to easily get involved in any area where you have an interest. We have an accepting, diverse congregation where everyone is welcome, everyone feels safe, and everyone has the right to their own opinions.

I am asking everyone to help. Big checks pay the big bills and little checks pay the little bills. But something as simple as an \$18 (chai) monthly auto-pay on your credit card will help Beth Torah remain vibrant and our source of spiritual enlightenment.

Well... out of the corner of one eye I can see the hook coming. But out of the other ear I can hear the band playing. Let's all get up and start dancing.

I hope all of you have a healthy and happy new year.

Thank you.