

Submitted by Bob Ritter

Shehecheyanu.

I have some good news, and I have some bad news. The good news, is that I am your last speaker. The bad news, is that I am your last speaker.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “In the long run there is no more liberating, no more exhilarating experience than to determine one’s position, state it bravely, and then act boldly. Action brings with it its own courage, its own energy, a growth of self-confidence that can be acquired in no other way.”

During my years as an officer of VT, I have taken the approach of “discern, decide, do.” And tonight, in my final president’s report, I would like to tell you about our results and also the unfinished work we have.

Let me start by stating everything that your board has accomplished, we accomplished together. Even those things which may seem like an effort of just a few people would not have been possible without others!

There are five central themes that I concentrated on:

1. HaMakom
2. Recognize and Meet Fiscal Challenges:
3. An External/Community Perspective
4. Onward & Upward
5. Look to the Future

1. HaMakom:

Our temple is a holy place worthy of our care and respect. Starting with just keeping it clean. We have dealt with many difficult facility challenges these last few years. A boiler replacement with a conversion to less expensive natural gas. We abated mold in our lower classrooms and installed a new tile floor. We took

measures to reduce flooding with heat tape, a new gutter, installed additional B-dry drainage and new sump pumps, removed a concrete obstruction to drainage in the rear, and made significant improvements to our roof and chimney. We did an asbestos abatement and refurbished our balcony and east chapel. We refurbished every classroom upstairs, and the three offices for the RS director, Sherrie, Rabbi Berkowitz, replaced our lobby, hall, and stairwell carpeting, and did what we could with our sanctuary carpet. Thanks to our Sisterhood we replaced our kitchen cabinets which were literally falling apart and our put up new blinds in our social hall. We repaired and replaced some AC units. We added security cameras. We converted to energy efficient led lighting. Even little things like a mailbox, a sign on our front door, and organizing our bulletin boards all make a difference. We painted the portico pillars, roof fascia, and front doors. And thanks to generous donors, we refurbished our beautiful stained glass windows and constructed a lovely new patio.

Vassar Temple has received a lot of needed attention. And we did all this without raising our dues, which leads me to the 2nd theme.

2. Recognize and Meet Fiscal Challenges:

We are not here to make a profit, but we have a responsibility to operate in fiscally proper ways. It hasn't been easy to prepare a budget that reflects both our financial realities and our values, and it didn't help not having a treasurer for a year. But we were determined not to raise dues!

While we were making significant capital investments, we were also making adjustments to bring our operating costs down to a more sustainable level. We've achieved savings in salaries, heating, and electricity expenses. Unfortunately, because of city building requirements and the needs of our building we have also picked up major costs. But despite our burdens we still managed to operate below our budget for expenses. And while dues revenue was down, we have managed to raise funds and income in other ways.

Fund raising resulted in significant support for ritual, operations and building. We began with a hugely successful gala. We had an installation dinner (\$10K), Fiddler trip (\$800) (I hear the play was great), a Wine & Cheese (\$500), a Movable Feast/Jewish Deli Night (\$1500), plus nearly \$30K in gifts which made our Patio and Windows restoration possible. And there have been other individual acts of generosity. We also tried something that is significant psychologically – we made HHD tickets for non-members a voluntary donation and we raised more money and received no complaints. Scrip profits continue to be crucial to temple finances, and we have faith that it can contribute even more in the future.

We have set out to leverage our social hall, refurbished kitchen, and volunteers to make special occasions work better financially for the temple. You saw how we transformed our social hall for Rabbi's installation dinner. We showed the social hall and kitchen is a viable venue for some special occasions. We urge our members to consider it for significant life cycle events! You can help the Temple, save money, and tie Rabbi Berkowitz's blessing in with your occasion. What could be more perfect? Seriously ... Think about it!!

Staying with finances, because we must, we sought more opportunities for support from outside the temple. We received \$1700 in grants from the Schlossberg Family Fund and the Poughkeepsie Library District for today's showing of *Complicit*. And \$2500 from the Federation for an Israeli Day project. We can do better! We must leverage the resources of other organizations in the community through partnerships on projects, special events, and initiatives, like we are doing to put on programming at the Adriance Library and with Vassar College and other faith based groups for the Vassar Solidarity Initiative.

Our involvement with various social action projects, such as those on Mitzvah Day, Cereal Counts, Can Jam, Turkey Trot, Tzedaka collections and other projects all help heal the world without putting a financial strain on the temple.

Vassar Temple is small, but we have been blessed in big ways over our many years as evidenced by our Special Funds. Jen Dahnert prepared a sheet about our many Special Funds and what they are each for which is posted to the temple blog. [Link to list of funds.](#) These funds are meant to be used! Use brings benefits to the temple, to you, and is a blessing as well to the donor.

Use of those directed funds encourages further giving. Giving for a specific purpose is another way to give which the older generation are familiar with but had gone a bit dormant. We are bringing that back. Thanks to the Robert Lipshitz fund we were able to purchase an electric piano and percussion instruments and take our musical experience to new places. It is a special feeling which I am sure Elaine will attest to, to see your money go to something so personally meaningful. Another example of making a gift for a special purpose is the Erlebachers' gift of funds for a new building sign which we are planning and need to get approved by the city. And there are those who give just to sustain us. Like the Seligmans. Gilbert and I were talking about the patio while it was under construction. Gilbert asked me, what did it cost. I told him, \$15,876.00. He asked, did you raise that much. I said no, we received \$15k from Emily and Howard Himelstein. He said then, "I want to give the remaining \$876.00, but I want it to be anonymous. I want the Himelsteins to get all the credit." After thanking him, I said I want to ask you a favor. I want to tell people about your gift. Because it may motivate others. We need that. He said, "if it will help, then OK, but I only want their name on it!"

Yesterday I got a call from my friends Michael Arnoff, and his father Richard Arnoff to tell me about trees and flowers he was planting by the gates he installed at our Route 44 Cemetery. He also hired a person to power wash the grave stones. He just did it – because it needed to be done!

In the near future we are going to try crowd funding to raise money for the new projector the temple needs. If people can raise thousands this way over the

Internet, why can't we? We shall see ... we can too!

Let me foreshadow another wonderful way we can fund raise. This idea came from Alan Kaflowitz. The same guy who gave me the idea to raffle off the contents of the safe. So, are you feeling lucky? Here is sure way for everyone to be a winner! We need to purchase the new HHD prayer books which Rabbi wants us to have. Instead of the temple spending thousands of dollars we frankly do not have, we can each purchase our own books, and our Temple will inscribe them as you wish. So on the holidays, when you sit down and open your prayer book you will see a name of a member, and hopefully a friend, and if you're lucky, your own name. So, are you feeling lucky?

Right now we need to purchase a new religious school curriculum. And Rabbi and Julie would love to have people consider a gift of books for our students – a gift that will get used for 5 or even 10 years! Maybe that's right for you or someone you love.

Some people get uncomfortable when a temple or church talks about money. Don't be!! Because sustaining Vassar Temple is the only way we can be Vassar Temple – it's the only way we've made it 168 years!

3. External / Community Perspective:

We know Vassar Temple is wonderful. But our future depends on our ability to let the population in the Poughkeepsie area know this. There is a fundamental marketing principle referred to as AIDA, which stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. Before you can expect action, let alone trigger desire, we have to catch people's attention and interest.

The unaffiliated population in our area is the key to VT's future. Some are Jews who've turned their back on all temples, but not on Judaism. Some have turned their backs on their Jewish roots, but want to find their way back. Some have a

tiny bit of Jewish ancestry. Some have none but are searching, and may do well to discover Reform Judaism. The motivations for engaging with a temple run the gamete. Reform belief system and openness make Vassar Temple especially suited for Interfaith marriages, Jews by Choice, and those are Jew curious! Our ritual and Torah study is no less Jewish, it is just more accessible. And our efforts to heal the world are compelling.

The greatest days, from a membership standpoint were also the greatest growth years of the Poughkeepsie area, after which, since the late 80's Poughkeepsie began a long slide! The past years, the USA had a great recession and the slowest recovery on record. But the days of a vibrant economy in the Poughkeepsie area have started, and they will bring greater prosperity to our temple.

A rising tide lifts all boats. The Buzz is Back in Poughkeepsie, and as Poughkeepsie gets its mojo back, Vassar Temple will benefit. We've seen how demographics can change everything in Beacon. It can and will happen in Poughkeepsie, the Queen City, too. And thanks to much of the work we've done as a board and organization at Vassar Temple, we're ready! Bring on the Buzz!!

The community is our future so we're doing things to make the connection. Here are examples:

We've developed ties with Adriance Library. We caught people's attention and interest with Music in the Torah, and Dueling Rabbi's and a film about the first woman Rabbi, Regina Jonas and her fearless pursuit of the Torah right up to her murder by the Nazis.

The Sukkah open house introduced the new city of Poughkeepsie Mayor to Vassar Temple.

Our Torah To Go activity has given us a very unique and powerful way to introduce ourselves while we introduce the Torah and Judaism to the

community. God works in mysterious ways and I personally believe we can not calculate or foresee all the amazing possibilities this program can lead to! If Vassar Temple leads with the Torah, God will carry us the rest of the way!

This morning we had the Complicit Film Screening with Long Island Temple Educator and attracted 140 people to our Sanctuary on a Wed. morning!!

There are more examples such as:

- Our return to Gesher where we join the community to educate our high school children in ways that take a community.
- Our Social Media Presence with the use of FB, our blog, and growing YouTube Channel.
- Field Trips are another way we can go out into the community such as (Fiddler) . And we tried with RS but weather required us to postpone that.
- Support a refugee family in cooperation with VC and other faith groups
- Our Shabbatons with other temples
- The interfaith march
- We're working with Half Moon Theater and hopefully their will be an interesting theatrical event with a uniquely Jewish theme.
- Advertisements in both the Half Moon and Vassar Powerhouse theater programs.
- Our hands came together with the community on several amazing Mitzvah day projects.
- And, let's never forget our involvement in the Lunchbox!
- Our numerous Social Action gifts help heal the world and expose people to the very best about Vassar Temple. As they bring out the very best in us.

The Buzz is Back in Poughkeepsie ... and the Buzz is Back at Vassar Temple.

4. Onward & Upward:

A temple is never done. Especially not a Reform Temple. We're always adapting

and these last few years have been filled with transition. Transition requires an openness to change and a willingness to do the hard work it takes! It took countless hours and huge effort to change our Office Manager, and Education Director, and replace Rabbi Golomb so he could take retirement. The Nominating committee has to replenish our Board and Officers,

We even changed our cleaning service and other contractors

We've transitioned our Committee Chairs, for the RS, Ritual, Music, and Sisterhood. With all these changes, leadership and staff have been open to change in their areas of responsibility. For example, our Ritual Chair, Sandra, worked with Rabbi to go to one HHD evening service; our Religious School Chair Shaari Roland and Rabbi are integrating the Geshher program; our new religious school education director will work with Rabbi to make our school even better with a new curriculum and teacher development;

Onward & Upward means exploring how we could use music to further enhance our ritual experience – starting with a piano and percussion. We have more exciting things in store for our members because we love song.

And, Sherrie, in our office has done a lot to improve our back-off with systems.

Onward & Upward includes enacting By-Laws amendments that make sense and are needed to right size our board, affirm our acceptance of the LGBT community, comply with new laws for non-profit organizations.

While we must remain open to change, we must also preserve the traditions we've come to cherish and which work. Like our community Passover Seder, Hanukkah celebration, and Purim Spiel.

5. Looking to the Future Aware That we have Unfinished Business.

(Avot 2:21) attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, says "It is not incumbent upon you to

complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.”

Every President leaves unfinished business. I'm no different.

We've done a lot to get ready to grow membership – and now we have to concentrate on that. I've already described a lot of the things we need to do to increase membership.

At my first HHD President's speech, I said, “The only thing that matters is if being A Jew Matters To You, then this temple does too.” Our leadership and membership stepped up and proved being a Jew and VT do matter! And, for the last few years we have drawn on the strength of our congregation. From strength to strength – we are stronger together!

Now the question is not internal question directed at you. It's an external question directed at people in our community. “Is there a little bit of Jew in You?” For literally hundreds of years our people have been separated and diluted. Out of fear and necessity many Jews lost touch with their roots. We faced stifling anti-semitism that lead us to change our names and our religion. And yet, I'm convinced that the image of Judaism has never been better or more desirable! According to Pew Research, Judaism has an extremely high favorable rating. Nearly twice that of either political candidates. (Had to through that in. Notice how I have balanced my criticism.)

People who have a little bit of Jew in them are curious. So are those who've become disenchanted with other religions. Some are going through significant life cycle moments for which a temple can help. And, because Reform Judaism is such an amazing path, and we are such a lovely temple, I'm convinced that all we need to do at Vassar Temple is help them to find us.

Drawing on the strength of our past we can build a stronger future. And, when we do, it will take care of our other needs, finance, building, social benefits, social

action, and more!

When we grow our membership back to 250+ we'll be able to build a entrance circle with handicap parking and drop off spaces. We'll be able to repair the retaining wall and side entrance. We'll be able to refurbish our sanctuary and build a handicap accessible restroom and changing room on the first floor. We'll be able to install better storm water drainage. We'll be able to give our social hall a face lift.

This final fifth theme, looking to the future, is the perfect place to end this meeting. Because we are never done, thank God. This is why VT has survived 168 year years, through the civil war, WWI, the great depression, the Holocaust and WWII, and why the Torah the and Jewish people have lasted. Because we are never done, we are forever transitioning onward & upward. And the reason we are able to do that is because of people like those who are serving on our new board of trustees who said Heneni! And because you, our fellow members and friends, who ask how can we help? How can we be a part of this community – our Jewish village.

The answer is simply this! Be on the team – the membership team. You can be a player, you can be a fan. They're both important. Pick a position you feel comfortable playing on the membership team. And join the fun – and cheer!
L'chaim!