

2014 HHD President's Speech Bob Ritter

Shehechyanu, V'kiyemanu, V'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.

It was hard to imagine standing before you today as your President. So years ago, when Ed Garber called me on behalf of the Nominating Committee, I did what one with my middle and Hebrew name, Jonah, would do. I tried to run away. But I soon discovered, you can't run away. From Ed.

Abraham Hershel said, "Life is people. " And there are many people to thank. Perla Kaufman for all she does organizing these HHD. Sandra Mamis for creating the wonderful break fast which awaits us. Ron Rosen, our Ritual Chair, Rabbi Golomb, Elisa and Joe for their time and tremendous musical talents. To all who make this HHD experience beautiful and satisfying, thank you.

There are many others to thank for contributions throughout the year. Our past presidents, fellow trustees and officers, the many committee chairs and volunteers, especially Sisterhood, Men's Club, and Rabbi Search. Sherrie and Alvin who run the office and take care of our building, and Dr. Hoffman, our education director, Olivia for music, the teachers and aids. To the numerous volunteers who feed meals to the hungry, and bake for the elderly, perform other social actions, pitch in to repair the building, and setup for all our occasions. To everyone for large and little mitzvot. Many anonymously. And to all of you, our members and congregants for sustaining our Temple. "Life is the actions of many people." Thank you all!

Now THIS!

Being your temple president is an honor. But that is not the reason I accepted. Heaven knows ... it's not the compensation either. I accepted it because a voice in me, that was loud enough for my wife to hear too, said, "you have to do this." But what, I asked myself, is "this?" What is the "THIS" the voice is telling me to do?

Here is what I think THIS is. Do you remember the movie City Slickers with Billy Crystal and Jack Palance, who won his only Oscar for his part as an old cowboy named Curly? Billy plays Mitch. Mitch, along with his buddies, are searching for meaning in the throws of a mid-life crisis. Mitch asks, "Have you ever had that feeling that THIS is the best I'm ever gonna do, THIS is the best I'm ever gonna feel... and it ain't that great?"

Curly offers, "Do you know what the secret of life is? He holds up his one finger, and says "This."

A finger? Mitch quips.

Curly goes on, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and the rest don't mean shit."

Mitch asks, "But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly smiles and says, "That's what *you* have to find out."

What does THIS have to do with my message? Everything! Because I believe Vassar Temple is going through a mid-life crisis of its own. And the answer to it is right under our nose. Or I should say, right under our Temple's name on our website and our stationery. It says "Where YOU belong."

But it is up to YOU to "explore this sanctuary" and ask one thing, what does "belonging" means. It is up to each of us to find out what THIS is. In Psalms 27:4 it says, (A-hat sha-al-ti, mei-eit A-doh-nai, O-tah a-va-kesh.) One thing I ask from Adonai, one thing I seek:

A valued friend of mine said to me recently, "I have three homes. My house, work, and temple."

As temple president I will tell you my opinion about what THIS is for Vassar Temple. It is one thing ... being a temple where you belong. Each of you, BUT for reasons that are meaningful TO YOU. That could be ritual, prayer & song, OR Torah study, OR to develop your children's Jewish identity, and life cycle events, OR lifelong learning in our adult education classes, OR social action, OR social relationships, OR even a sense of obligation to the Jewish people and to maintaining our Jewish community right here for future generations. These are ALL reasons to dwell in this house, and why THIS place, THIS tent, THIS temple is here!

Allow me to return to Jonah, as we all do every year in this season because it is the story we read on Yom Kippur. And my son's birthday, the only legitimate

excuse I ever had for missing YK services. Like Jonah, I wanted to run from Ed's call. Who was I to help people to find THIS. Rabbi Jack Riemer, the founding chair of the National Rabbinic Network, known among his colleagues as the "rabbi's rabbi" said,

"When God finished creating the world, he had to find a place to hide the Primordial Light that is meant for the righteous. God knew that there was one place humans would rarely look. He decided to hide it inside every single human being."

That was Jonah's challenge. He couldn't imagine the people would look. Why should they listen to him?

But maybe they were ready to look. Maybe God knew the people were ready to look. Sure in the story of Jonah, God put a great threat in front of them, but the people could have chosen to ignore it. That would have been the easier thing! So maybe it wasn't the threat so much as they were ready. Maybe they were looking for that one thing too, for THIS, and Jonah just happened to be the person who was asked to tell them where to look.

My lesson from Jonah is that we can't run, from God. From being a Jew. Especially not now, when our temple needs us! It doesn't matter if we feel up to the task. It doesn't matter if we are confident. It doesn't matter if we have all that it takes. It doesn't matter if we have the time or the money. It doesn't matter if you have other priorities. It only matters; it ONLY matters, IF being a JEW MATTERS TO YOU! You stick to that, and the rest don't mean shit."

This place, this tent, this temple, matters. It has mattered for thousands of families, and this community, since the civil war. And if after nearly 167 years we are having a mid-life crisis, that, should be considered a blessing.

Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Says, "Our synagogues ... strive to be "Mishkan" vehicles to bring the Divine Presence into our lives.

But we all know Jonah wasn't alone. He couldn't be. Where do we draw our strength? Rabbi David Saperstein said, "In Jewish tradition, each time we finish reading a book of the Torah, we rise as a community and declare chazak chazak v'nitchazek, "Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened." This seems to suggest that our personal strengths are inextricably bound with those of the community: as we individually strengthen ourselves, the collective is subsequently fortified. The command may be in the singular, 'Be strong, be strong, ... ' but the result is in the plural." And we will be strengthened.

In summary, WE can do THIS!

On behalf of the Vassar Temple officers, trustees, and staff, I wish you
L'SHANAH TOVA!