

Bob Abrams - Rosh Hashanah Speech - 2012 / 5773

Shana Tova! This is my first Rosh Hashanah speech as president of Vassar Temple. I want to welcome all of you ... temple members and your families, and all of our guests, here to observe with us. On behalf of myself, Marianne and our daughters Jen and Danielle, I want to wish you all a sweet, healthy and prosperous New Year.

Many of us feel that September is really the beginning of a new year. Not just in the Jewish calendar, but in our secular one as well. September is when the kids go back to school, and when we return to our busy lives after enjoying summer vacations. We look at the world we live in as having a fresh start; we cast away our sins, and we vow to make small (or significant) changes in ourselves for the upcoming year. September is also the time of year when many of us renew our ties to the Vassar Temple community. The High Holy Days are the time for us to remember, and to reflect on the past as we plan and build for the future.

Speaking of the past, Marianne and I joined Vassar Temple in 1987 ... 25 years ago! It just doesn't seem like that long. Our first activities at Vassar were having both of our daughters named by Rabbi Arnold. When the girls became a little bit older, we took them to Cradle Roll (now known as Tiny Temple) where we met other parents, some of whom continue to be our friends today. We increased our involvement little by little. The Religious School was on a split session schedule on Sundays back then, and I got to hang around the Temple building at times, chatting with other parents. It was around that time that I became interested in the idea of publishing the Bulletin in-house, as a way to reduce a regular monthly Temple expense. Just to give you an idea of how long ago this was, we didn't have Windows on the computer yet, and most computer software ran on DOS, including our computer at the Temple! What was then an interesting idea became a hobby for me, leading to my publishing the Temple Bulletin for about 10 years. Marianne also became involved, helping the Sisterhood by purchasing staples for the temple kitchen, and she took a strong interest in the Lunch Box-either contributing food or working or both. She had also worked with one of the Lunch Box executives to develop a manual of procedures.

About 11 years ago, I took a more active and regular role as an officer on the board and handed the bulletin over to Marianne, who's been publishing it ever since. People, seeing her talents, asked her to work on larger projects, including ad journals and brochures, which she excels at. She also enjoys working on the Purim shpiel, applying her artistic and creative ideas. Does everyone remember the white spaceship flying overhead during the last Purim Shpiel?

Over the years, we've both enjoyed the friendly sense of community at VT. Even Marianne's parents, who were not easily impressed, marveled at how friendly the congregants were to them, and how nice it was that people baked for the Shabbat Oneg!

Our sense of community becomes very apparent in times of joy, and sadness, as we have seen over the years. It's a critical element that makes our Temple strong. Our Temple community really came together upon the untimely passing of our past President, Seth Erlebacher, of blessed memory. It took everyone by surprise, and we were all saddened by it. Nevertheless, the Reyut committee was up to the challenge, coordinating an amazing reception at the Temple following Seth's funeral. A number of temple members also ensured that Melissa, Rachel and Brianna were well taken care of. There's probably no better example of how our Temple community shines than with the overwhelming support of the Reyut committee. The Reyut committee itself is fairly small led by an efficient and compassionate Susan Hecht, but it grows by leaps and bounds as needed, reaching out to congregants who experience illness or bereavement, or to visit elderly members. We have all witnessed how the Reyut committee expresses the Temple's sense of Hineni ... here we are ... as a community ... to share in our happy events and help our families at times of need.

Our vibrant Social Action component focuses on ways for Vassar Temple to have a positive impact on the greater community; addressing food supply issues such as the Lunch Box, spearheading food drives to benefit a local food pantry, the Souper Sale, Can Jam; *(starting to see a theme?)* Housing issues such as support for the Hillcrest emergency overnight shelter, and the Talking Books project. For Talking books, people record themselves reading a children's story and donate the recording along

with the book for a child to enjoy. This project inspired other community groups to undertake it as well!

Education activities flourish at Vassar for adults and children. I encourage you to check out the exciting new set of Adult Education mini-courses published on the Temple's web site, featuring topics such as: culture and politics of Israel's neighbors, and Jewish visions of Afterlife.

The Board of Trustees recently renamed our Religious School to be the Seth A. Erlebacher Religious School, in memory of Seth. The renaming establishes a permanent recognition, at the Temple, of Seth's passionate belief in religious education and youth programming, as a cornerstone of living a meaningful Jewish life. We also want to ensure that future generations of Temple members are able to honor and celebrate Seth's legacy.

One of the goals of Reform Judaism is to encourage Jewish youth to stay affiliated with our Temples beyond Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Over this past year, our Religious School Director, Joel Hoffman, has been improving the curriculum of the school and encouraging teens to participate as teachers and aides. Hopefully everyone has heard about the new Wednesday evening program developed for grades 8 thru 12. The new Religious School program is aimed at encouraging **our Jewish youth** to stay affiliated with Vassar Temple beyond their Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

When rehearsing my torah portion for today's torah reading, the word "Hineni" jumped out at me. In this particular context, God calls to Abraham, and Abraham answers God by saying "Hineni," after which God tells Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt-offering. The term Hineni means being ready to respond regardless of the nature or difficulty of the request. Hineni is about the very essence of our relationships, not only with God, but with other human beings.

Within our Temple community, we say "Here I am" so many times, to be there for our Temple friends, to improve Temple life, education, youth programs, adult social events ... all focused on improving the strength of our Vassar Temple community, in areas that benefit all of its members.

Similarly, our Hineni Fund campaign is being rolled out, thanks to Jen Dahnert and Andi Ciminello. The fund has been established to support the religious school and youth programs, recognizing how Seth gave freely of his time and wisdom as he served our Temple community. The campaign culminates with this year's Gala, "Bright Lights and Miracles", planned for Saturday December 1st, honoring longtime temple members, Lou Lewis, and Art and Carol Menken, along with a tribute to Seth.

Another area that affects many members of our community is the challenging time we face at the end of life. The *Nachamu* committee was formed almost two years ago to support and give comfort to our congregants and their loved ones during a terminal illness, when a funeral is being planned, and during the time immediately following a death in the family. The committee produced a new trifold brochure giving basic information that will be helpful at the time of a death, as well as a booklet of meditations and prayers to comfort those facing a terminal illness and for their loved ones. Look for the upcoming Bulletin announcement of this important new Temple focus, as well as a list of services being offered by the *Nachamu* committee.

So here we are, in the 164th year of our Vassar Temple community. These High Holy Days are the time for us to remember, to reflect on the past as we plan and build for the future. It's a time to recognize and celebrate our Vassar Temple community.

I would like to end my remarks today with a very famous and short quote from Hillel that I hope will challenge you to **claim your place** in the Vassar Temple community. The quote simply goes like this, "do not separate yourself from the community." At Vassar Temple, don't separate yourself from the congregation. But more importantly, reach out to a friend or a recent acquaintance, even someone sitting next to you, and invite them to join you in some activity.

Thank you, and may you all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Shona Tova

Bob Abrams, President