

President's address – Rosh Hashanah 2013 / 5774

Shana Tova! 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.

It's hard to believe how quickly time goes, and that I'm already more than halfway through my term as President. Last year I spoke, as your relatively new president, challenging all of us to claim our place in the Vassar Temple community ... and how we all need to work together to maintain the special atmosphere that we've created among the temple congregation.

Everyone brings their perspective. You bring new ideas on how to approach old tasks at our temple, whether it be planting the beautiful flowers around the building, helping to run a fun program event, making your favorite dish for a Temple dinner, or sharing knowledge that you possess which others are anxious to learn, or even redecorating inside the building. Everyone brings the gift of their friendship, and their perspective, both of which enrich the lives of others.

We have had a number of challenges this year at the temple, and I can truly say that we've overcome many of them! Tasks such as launching the Hebrew School, dealing with religious education matters, and transitioning the office personnel, are just some of the challenges that we've had to deal with. Regardless of the challenge, though, it's remarkable how many Temple members work together to resolve matters. We have an outstanding network of committees that attend to different aspects of Temple life, each

doing their part to ensure that Vassar Temple continues to be a thriving organization.

We've also had a number of joyous occasions. We held a very successful Gala, co-chaired by Jen Dahnert & Andi Ciminello, which funded the Hineni Fund, for Jewish education, for the Seth A. Erlebacher Religious School. A few months later, Linda Lant organized the innovative Flexible Feast fundraiser, a creative variation on the previously successful "Moveable Feast". 12 temple families hosted dinners with a wide variety of delicious-sounding and sometimes exotic menus at their homes occurring during three Saturday evenings in April. Sandra Mamis and her crew hosted the very popular Passover Seder. Sisterhood organized dinners and the twice-annual rummage sale raising funds for the Temple. Bob Ritter and several others organized this year's After Hours event, featuring live music, tasty food, and beer generously donated by Alan Daniels.

Thanks to a contribution from Mark and Kate Metzger, we have introduced the use of Visual T'filah at some of our services this year, enabling us to enhance many of our Shabbat services with art and other visual imagery.

Additionally this year, there have been a number of improvements around the Temple building. You may have noticed the front walkway as you walked from the street to the building in addition to a recently painted classroom and Religious School office. Many thanks to our Men's Club members who lent a hand in the sidewalk and painting projects, and to Mark and Elaine Plansky for donating the carpeting in those rooms. We have one more room to go - the main temple office - which we weren't able to complete in the summer months.

In addition, many of our members enjoy Adult learning, including Torah Study, a book club, and a schedule of interesting adult education topics.

At the same time, we continue to be challenged by water issues caused by the affects of the last big storm, dampening the downstairs classrooms and the social hall. You'll hear more in the coming weeks about the need to finally replace our aging boiler, which has long survived its Bar Mitzvah, perhaps four times over!

Our biggest challenge is to increase temple membership. Membership is the lifeblood of our congregation and the key to a thriving temple community. New members bring new ideas and new faces to the many events that are offered by the temple. Membership is also important for increasing income allowing the Temple to offer its many religious and social programs as well as to keep our 60 year old building operating smoothly.

This year we launched a new marketing drive to bring visibility to the Temple and its education offerings, as a way to attract unaffiliated area Jews to Vassar Temple. Jewish education for all ages is available, with Religious School offered free this year to member families. We also introduce the new Hebrew School program, based on a cutting-edge curriculum introduced by our Education Director, Dr. Joel Hoffman. The program offers a streamlined program for children to learn Hebrew and to prepare for Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

But what draws potential members is their interest in all of the things that we do well at the Temple. Many families who have recently joined the temple

were attracted by the Religious School, adult education programs and exciting events such as the Purim Spiel and the Hanukkah candle service.

Everyone in this room is a member of the Membership Committee. Most often, people investigate Vassar Temple when they are ready to enroll a child in the Religious School. However, many of us tend to know Jews in the community who are unaffiliated with any temple. Invite them to join you for a Friday Night Shabbat, to attend a family dinner, or any of the adult education classes. If they have young children, encourage them to check out our Religious School, or Tiny Temple for the very little ones. One of our biggest assets is having the child of a prospective member attend a Religious School class and enjoy it so much that the child wants to return.

But what people value most about synagogue membership is the personal connection. They feel that they have a place in the organization, and that they are needed. They feel valued. The best thing about participating in Temple events is the interaction and the camaraderie that takes place.

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So, let's shift gears for a moment and consider the future at Vassar Temple. In 2008, a Long Range Planning Committee did a thorough examination of Vassar Temple and offered recommendations for changes. I'm happy to see that over the 5 years since that time we have improved in areas like education for our children, Adult Education and new ways to celebrate certain holidays together. Many of the recommendations contained in that report remain relevant today, such as in areas related to membership, spiritual needs and the Temple building. I plan to work with the Board and

committee chairs to review the recommendations, and perhaps add a few of our own to implement.

My vision for Vassar Temple includes continuing to be a welcoming congregation while increasing our membership to a level that enables us to continue offering activities that satisfy our needs for education, worship and fun social events. We also need to continue to draw from members of the congregation as resources for adult education.

I envision Vassar Temple as a place that embraces, welcomes, and educates interfaith families, and provides an environment that allows our children to participate in Jewish activities. They should be challenged to apply Jewish values to situations that affect them in every day life, with the hope that they continue to seek Jewish involvement after graduating high school.

We need to continue to leverage technology in areas that will improve social and ritual aspects at Vassar Temple. For example, we've gotten a great start with the creation of a new web site hosted by the URJ's RJWeb initiative. Visual T'filah is a simple technology solution, and we should further develop its use to produce a beautifully-flowing alternative type of Shabbat service. We've considered streaming our services to members who cannot get out of the house, using technology that is within our reach.

But most importantly, we need to continue to offer social events that bring congregants together. The Purim Spiel is a superb way to celebrate Purim. The Hanukkah lighting ceremony is truly captivating, along with the involvement of the confirmation class. Guest speakers and panel discussions are a nice addition to our Shabbat Service schedule. Let's continue to define

creative ways to celebrate Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. Imagine all the ways that we can utilize food, such as bake-offs, a kugle contest, Rugalah or Matzah Brei's, just to name a few.

We need to find ways to keep our services fresh, vibrant and engaging. We occasionally have speakers and themes, such as the very popular Shabbat Noach at Fri night Shabbat services. Perhaps we should have a monthly themed service.

These are all things that are within our reach, with the goal of making Vassar Temple a place where people enjoy coming and participating, as well as a place to worship.

So here we are, in the 165th 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.

On behalf of the Trustees and my fellow officers, and on behalf of my family, may the year 5774 be a year of peace and security in the world over; and for all of us, our families, and for the Jewish people everywhere, a very happy, healthy, and sweet new year.

L'Shona Tova.

Bob Abrams, President
