

Fifty Years of Building Community
Erev Rosh Hashanah
September 28, 2011 / 1 Tishrei, 5772
Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ
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The year is 1961. If you are older than 50 you might remember this time. If you are a younger member in our community, you can only probably imagine, or perhaps not, what it was like. The Cold War continued to worsen with the former Soviet Union. The Berlin wall was built separating East from West Berlin. Fidel Castro declares Cuba to adopt communism and banned free elections. Somalia suffers widespread flooding after the two main rivers overflowed their banks and merged in a vast floodplain leaving hundreds of thousands homeless.

John F. Kennedy is inaugurated as president of the United States. President Kennedy advises American families to build bomb shelters. The 23rd amendment to the Constitution is ratified which permits electors in the District of Columbia two votes, finally equal to those in the rest of the United States. President Kennedy establishes the Peace Corps. President Kennedy asks Congress for \$531 million to put a man on the Moon. The Soviets put the first man in space, followed by the United States with Astronaut Allen Shepherd.

The United Nations general assembly condemns apartheid. The first direct US military involvement in Vietnam occurs. Amnesty International begins in the United Kingdom. Segregation on railways in the south finally ends. Freedom riders tested the United States Supreme Court decision Boynton versus Virginia by riding racially integrated interstate buses into the south. Some are attacked and beaten by white supremacist supporters of Rachel's segregation.

Texas sales tax is introduced for the first time. The first Six Flags theme parks open at six flags over Texas in Arlington Texas. Believe it or not, in 1961 Pampers, the first disposable diaper was introduced.

On the popular front, many films were in the theaters including: The Parent Trap,

The Absent-Minded Professor, 101 Dalmations, Breakfast at Tiffany's and West Side Story. On TV, people were watching their favorite shows, from Bonanza to Perry Mason to the Andy Griffith Show, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, The Twilight Zone and Mr. Ed.

The most popular songs recorded in 1961 in the US were: Wonderland, Will You Love Me Tomorrow, Pony Time and Surrender by none other than Elvis Presley.

Born in 1961 were Michael J Fox, Scott Baio, George Clooney and your current president Barack Obama. Of other notes, the first in-flight movie is shown on TWA. The first electric toothbrush is produced. Niagara Falls starts producing hydroelectric power and IBM introduces the Selectric typewriter golfball.

In the Jewish world, Israel was celebrating her bat mitzvah year, 13 years young. Of the 180.6 million individuals living in the United States, 5.5 million were Jews. Adolph Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem began before the Jerusalem District Court on April 11, 1961. He was indicted on 15 criminal charges including crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against the Jewish people, and membership in an outlawed organization. The Reform Movement was using the Union Prayer Book, and Camp Harlam was 3 years old. Confirmation classes were very large in Reform congregations, but only handfuls of Reform Jews were celebrating bar let alone bat mitzvah.

The UN General Assembly adopts a resolution requesting the Palestine Conciliation Commission to implement a 1948 resolution regarding repatriation or resettlement of the Arab refugees. Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion has a private meeting with President Kennedy. El Al, the Israel airline, inaugurates the first nonstop service between New York and Tel Aviv. It is one of the world's longest scheduled nonstop commercial flights. Israel holds national elections for the Fifth Knesset, with over a million votes cast.

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And some things change. But so much remains the same. Here we are, 50 years later. 2011 – 5772. The Wall in Berlin has finally been taken down. Cuba is still in the news. And look how many countries have been affected by natural disasters:

flooding and so much more. And 50 years later, the space program has ended, at least for the time being.

The United Nations is still on our minds, having just met to discuss many important and monumental topics. Freedom seekers are still testing and pushing the Supreme Court, from rights for those who are gay and lesbian to rights for those who were not born in the United States, to union workers and much more.

Taxes continue to be on our minds, family entertainment is very much a part of our world, and anyone with a young child of recent knows that Pampers is simply part of every American family. We have seen remakes of our favorite 1960's movies, digitizing and re-mastering of our great Disney films, new music is regularly being recorded, but we still love to hear the oldies but goodies.

Israel is still thriving, more so than 50 years ago, but of course she is still in constant conflict with her Arab and Palestinian neighbors. Prayerbooks have evolved, Jewish camping has become the number one force for building lasting Jewish memories and connection for youth, and we still are concerned about b'nai mitzvah, but more about what happens after our children become b'nai mitzvah, so their Jewish education doesn't end with a 7th grade understanding.

We are still concerned with relationships between US presidents and Israeli prime ministers, and the issue of refugees, who will take them and who is accepted, is still very much on the table.

So, as you can see, as much as the world has changed in 50 years, it has truly just taken on different nuances of the same conversations, debates and dilemmas.

And the same is true for our wonderful community, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. 50 years ago, when Emanu-El began as a congregation, we were smaller, with 90 member families in our first year, and we didn't even have a building, but our founders had the vision of creating a community.

In the first decade of our life, we began a life's journey as a community. A brotherhood and sisterhood were both formed. Rabbi Paul Levenson was hired as

the congregation's first rabbi, there was a focus on our children, Purim carnivals became annual events of fun and celebration, and in our fifth year, we bought the land where we reside today.

Music was always a strength in our community, as was social justice. When Rabbi Alfred Landsberg became the synagogue's spiritual leader in 1968, the first b'nai mitzvah celebrations began what would be a long chain of young men and women coming of age through study and prayer at Temple Emanu-El. And believe it or not, our synagogue was already known, in its early years, as a place where services can rock, literally.

Throughout the next four decades, the synagogue became a beacon of Torah, worship and g'milut chasadim, acts of love and kindness. Much Torah learning and caring has occurred in these past years. Dozens of adults have become b'nai mitzvah. Hundreds have studied in Torah study, scholar-in-residence, Torahthon, lunch n'learns, book clubs, Hebrew classes and so much more. Students have become teachers, and teachers have always been students.

And Torah has been taught to hundreds of children in these past fifty years. Our children have not only learned the language of our ancestors, but they have come to understand it, to teach it to others. Our children joined our youth groups and eventually NFTY and Camp Harlam, the Religious Action Center and Israel became part of their experiences. Many of our youth have grown up and become teachers and leaders, here and in other communities.

Worship and music has continued to be embraced by this congregation. Once a classical Reform congregation, as was appropriate for the time, our synagogue was filled with organ music and eloquent prose. As time passed, and we returned to our roots, our sanctuary is filled with spirit, song and prayer, not only from the clergy but also from many of you. Shabbat has become a day of gathering and community for many of us in our congregational family. Our prayers have been so powerful as we have celebrated together and mourned together, all in this beautiful space.

And throughout these fifty years, the essence of our being has been marked by acts of g'milut chasadim. We have never faltered as a congregation to help those in need – to give to the greater community, to stand up for those whose voices were not heard, to lend a hand to victims of abuse, poverty and slander. Our food pantry has helped hundreds if not thousands of souls who would have otherwise gone hungry. Our mitzvah day has helped hundreds to have birthday gifts who would otherwise have been without a present to celebrate. Our school backpack collections every fall have helped hundreds of children to begin the school year with at least one advantage. And most recently, we are doing our part to protect our environment and make less of a carbon footprint.

So here we stand today, a bit more mature as a congregation of fifty years, perhaps a bit more reflective, but with a lot of life still ahead. We have much to celebrate. We have weathered many storms, celebrated much life, and given the gift of Torah, Judaism and God to thousands of people who have passed through our doors. And, of course, we have created community. We have welcomed many through our doors: Jews and non-Jews, young and old, people of all backgrounds, races, sexual orientation, size, beliefs and more.

Perhaps this wonderful tale will remind us of the importance of creating a community:

Many years ago three soldiers, hungry and weary of battle, came upon a small village. The villagers, suffering a meager harvest and the many years of war, quickly hid what little they had to eat and met the three at the village square, wringing their hands and bemoaning the lack of anything to eat.

The soldiers spoke quietly among themselves and the first soldier then turned to the village elders. "Your tired fields have left you nothing to share, so we will share what little we have: the secret of how to make soup from stones."

Naturally the villagers were intrigued and soon a fire was put to the town's greatest kettle as the soldiers dropped in three smooth stones. "Now this will be a fine soup", said the second soldier; "but a pinch of salt and some parsley would make it wonderful!" Up jumped a villager, crying "What luck! I've just remembered where

some's been left!" And off she ran, returning with an apronful of parsley and a turnip. As the kettle boiled on, the memory of the village improved: soon barley, carrots, beef and cream had found their way into the great pot, and a cask of wine was rolled into the square as all sat down to feast.

They ate and danced and sang well into the night, refreshed by the feast and their new-found friends. In the morning the three soldiers awoke to find the entire village standing before them. At their feet lay a satchel of the village's best breads and cheese. "You have given us the greatest of gifts: the secret of how to make soup from stones", said an elder, "and we shall never forget." The third soldier turned to the crowd, and said: "There is no secret, but this is certain: it is only by sharing that we may make a feast". And off the soldiers wandered, down the road.

We must always pause to count our blessings, to reflect on our past, as it has shaped us to be who we are today. We must recognize the importance of coming together as a community, of creating community. As we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, let us feel blessed by the gifts that daily are our portion. And let the love we feel with one another be contagious so as to fight the poisons and disappointments that may exist in the rest of the world. For in this house, we all come together....., and let our journey continue on.