

May 27, 2022

Before I share the upcoming events at Temple, I want to share a realization I had last Friday night as I gripped the railing and made my way down the bimah stairs. I realized I was squandering the precious public time I had to do what I do well: lead and help create vision. So for a few weeks, maybe more, I'd like to briefly channel Dr. Martin Luther King and share some dreams or possibilities I have for Temple in the hopes that maybe you share them or perhaps they inspire some dreams for you.

Here's my first: I have a dream that one day we have a sanctuary and a bimah where there are no stairs and that our ark and our Torahs are easily accessible by the young, the old, the able-bodied and the physically challenged. That is just one of my dreams for our synagogue.

June 3, 2022

Last week, I shared the first of a series of dreams that I hold for Temple in the hopes that maybe you share them or perhaps that they inspire your dreams about our beloved congregation.

My second dream actually requires a little audience participation. I'd like to invite those of us in the sanctuary to turn around, look up and wave to our fellow congregants joining us on LiveStream and other tech platforms.

Now I'd like our fellow congregants joining us virtually to wave to those of us in the Sanctuary.

We're waiting. Did you catch that? What? No? Me neither. But I know you waved, and I know you're there. And darn it, I miss seeing you.

My second dream, therefore, is to unite our congregation in our sanctuary regardless of where people physically are. Technology and some changes to our sacred space would allow us to see the faces of our now invisible congregants while bringing additional benefits like screen displays of Torah, songs and prayerbooks. While I would love to fill our physical seats every Shabbat, I love even more our congregation's ability to rise to the challenges of the day and re-form itself to remain relevant to today's possibilities.

June 10, 2022

This is my third week of dreaming and so far, I've been dreaming about our magnificent sanctuary. To date I've envisioned a space without these steps and a place where we can be united, physically and virtually, thru screens and additional technology. My third dream was inspired as I returned to my seat last week. My backside was met w what I would call the feeling of my great grandmother's mattress. The springs were subtle for sure, but I couldn't stop feeling them especially as I adjusted myself along the puritanical wooden backrest to find a comfortable spot. Let me be clear: this is not a maintenance issue; this is just our chairs.

Of all the amazing things in our sanctuary, I have never heard anyone rave about our chairs. With that said, I am sure I have inadvertently offended a portion of my congregation. My sincerest apologies for that is not my intention. My intention is, however, to help us all envision what is possible and that is this: beautiful, worship-inviting chairs that are appropriately sized and that can be configured such that you might be able to see your friends' faces across the room vs the backs of their heads or just their profiles. Now that's comfort and community. And yes, no springs.

If stairs or screens don't inspire you, maybe chairs do. So, I ask you sincerely: what are you dreaming about?

July 22, 2022

Thus far I've spoken about some of my dreams for Temple, and most recently about current events including safety. For a bit I'd like to be a little more philosophical and introspective. Specifically, tonight I'd like to share some thoughts about our Temple's purpose.

A few moments ago, Rabbi Yergin read the name of my grandfather, Henry A. Cohen, during kaddish. He died when I was 3 or 4 years old. It's shocking to think his name has been read at a Shabbat for 50 years, and will be, God willing, for countless ones more. Recently, I've thought a lot about the power of kaddish as 50-60+ names are read each week, remembering those we've loved and lost. I'm unclear whether other faith traditions have anything similar in their rituals; lacking data, I've chosen to believe we Jews are unique.

This tradition does not make Temple Beth-El unique by any means. However, our lists are unique because they contain our ancestors, our benefactors, our loved ones, our history which therefore makes Temple Beth-El unique. But what does that have to do with Temple's purpose? Everything. Part of the synagogue's sacred purpose is to provide perpetual communal memory. Temple is here so we never forget, so our loved ones are never forgotten.

Another part of Temple's purpose is to provide the space for homecoming. The theater, social engagements, and sporting events are often tabled when a loved one's name is to be read. Temple Beth-El is the chosen venue for this sacred moment in a congregant's life, even if they never venture here any other time of year.

Kaddish can be painful, particularly for those of us traveling the first year of mourning. But even more painful would be forgetting how we got here and lacking a beautiful community to support and comfort us. Temple Beth-El, therefore, as part of its unspoken purpose, is both an eternal historian and the magnet that brings us back to the most important things in our lives.

July 29, 2022

Last week I began sharing some thoughts about the purpose of synagogue. Along those lines, I've recently been thinking about our Temple's founders, many of whose names are reflected around our building. I wondered who they were that they were so inspired to establish Temple

Beth-El. Lacking their rationale, I wondered what would make me stand up a congregation. I determined it would obviously include sharing a similar faith-based outlook. A common affinity to the Reform movement, our style of worship and traditions would be central to my work. I also considered people I liked – friends, family, friends of friends and family. Jews are tribal to some degree, so I'd be happy to be among "my people" even if I don't know all of them quite yet.

That seemed to be enough until I realized that our "little tribe" would want to be identified uniquely even amidst the greater community of Jews. We'd want to answer the question "what makes us different than that group of Reform Jews over there?" Naming our tribe would help answer that question. Building and decorating our religious home would further refine our answer. Once my friends and family and friends of friends and family built this organization, we'd want to nurture it and protect it because now it had a name, a space, and people relying on it.

As I walked through my own founding of a Temple, I realized that part of the purpose of Temple Beth El is to create Jewish community, to unify like-minded Reform Jews under one roof, and repeat the process from generation to generation. Temple Beth-El isn't just a building – it's a process and an energy that ensures the perpetuation of our people l'dor v'dor.

August 19, 2022

A few weeks ago, I started talking about the purpose of Temple Beth-El. I had another thought about it this week as I learned more about a new friend. This friend found Temple and more specifically Judaism, as many of us do, not by birth but by conscious, intentional choice. This intentionality made me consider my own affiliation to both Judaism and this synagogue. I realized in college that I would never be anything but Jewish but was never quite sure how Jewish I would be – that is, would I affiliate, would I attend services (little did I know), would I celebrate the holidays. And candidly, Marty and I weren't married at Temple, but Rabbi Stahl was kind enough to co-officiate. But choosing Judaism as I did, and subsequently choosing Temple – like my friend did – has actually shaped my identity – not just my Jewish identity, but my full identity: who I am as a complete human, under this dome and beyond. Knowing who you are, what you believe in (even if that changes or is challenged), knowing what you stand for and who stands with you, knowing that you have a name and are not a number... that's key to our identity. And that, I think, is key to the purpose of Temple Beth-El.

August 26, 2022

Communal memory. Space for homecoming. Community. Identity. These are some of the key reasons I have shared why I believe Temple Beth-El uniquely exists. As we celebrated Shabbat tonight and honored Amy Benedikt, I realized another purpose that Temple Beth-El holds in its rich arsenal of reasons for being: friendships. It seems so simple, but Temple Beth-El created the place, space, and opportunities for me to develop and build a relationship with the person we recognized tonight. While we spent two years working as leaders for the congregation, we learned about each other's lives, our kids, our husbands, our strengths, our vulnerabilities, our

senses of humor and our aspirations. We laughed a lot. We cried a lot... often because of the laughter. It is my true pleasure to call Amy my friend. And it is because of Temple that it happened.

My relationship with Amy is exemplary, no doubt of how many of us feel. On one hand, we have our Temple friends – those we are excited to see at services, an event, or while dropping kids off at Religious School. But the friendship is somehow contained to the realm of the synagogue. On the other hand, there are those friends who extend beyond the dome. You may have been “set up” by Temple, but the relationship is universal, crossing easily between Temple and secular life. Both types of friendship are necessary as they build the human support system we so desperately crave. We are communal beings, we humans, and friendships are the glue that tell us we belong, that someone has our back, and that we are not alone. Temple Beth-El can help make this can happen.

September 9, 2022

I was caught a bit off guard as I read yesterday’s beautiful Elul writing by Ann Winer. She described her comfort in knowing that whatever else was happening in the world, “Rosh Hashanah will always fall sometime in September and Yom Kippur 10 days later.” It caught me off guard only because I had been thinking the same thing myself.

Like clockwork, we travel time, no pun intended, religiously. Rosh Hashanah. Ten Days later Yom Kippur. Five days later Sukkot. Seven days later Simchat Torah. In a few months we will count the 8 days of Hanukkah. In the spring we eliminate leavened bread from our diets for 7 days, and then we will Count the Omer – the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot. And weekly, we work for 6 days and rest on the 7th. I could go on and on, and I’m sure I’ve missed a whole bunch of holidays and days, but you get the point. We Jews are fastidious counters and time managers.

The question is: why? Perhaps the answer lies in the calming nature of cadence. Humans are attracted to rhythm more than to discord. The calendar and the counting provide a metronome of sorts when the in-betweenness of life is messy, chaotic, out of control or even just boring. Temple, for its role in this time management process, helps orient us, providing the sacred space that says YOU ARE HERE. Temple – the building, the people, the experiences that occur within – therefore, functions as the great timekeeper for our heritage and even our humanity.

September 16, 2022

The last couple of days I’ve had a chance to call dozens of our congregants in our Board’s annual High Holiday Call effort. I won’t lie – as a former telemarketer in my late teens, this project initially gives me a little PTSD. But then I get to chat with members, and I am bountifully

rewarded rather than unilaterally rejected. Some of my calls are to current friends, so these calls are easy, familiar, and fun. Some of my calls are to long lost friends – folks who've touched my life a year, a decade, a lifetime ago -- and I get the honor of reconnecting with them. These calls make me realize how precious life is and how quickly time passes. Some of my calls are to answering machines. These are fun because it tells me so much about the generation and technological environment of our membership. Some of my calls are to digital voicemails. I'm trying to sort out the difference between AT&T, Verizon and the rest, but my experiment is not going so well.

My favorite calls are to those members who are new to me and who actually answer. Most of them are understandably hesitant. In this day and age, everything is spam or telemarketing. Shocking! Today I spoke to a member who grilled me before validating me as "real." After graciously receiving my greetings, she shared with me how she toys with telemarketers, often telling them off in Russian or Hebrew, but only after they won't take a polite "no thank you." I have a future call set up with her to learn some of these Russian phrases. I also spoke with a gentleman who'd lost a family member this year. We spoke briefly about the difficulty of the past year and the empty chair that will exist at this year's services. Holding space for him as he reflected for a moment and prepared himself for the upcoming holidays was an honor.

Most of these calls last no more than 60 seconds. It's not a huge investment. It is a kindness that is provided by our Temple and our Trustees. If Temple is not a place that shows, models, and delivers even just the smallest touches of kindness, then what are we? When each of you get your call, as I know you will, I encourage you to pay it forward – call one or two of your friends in our Temple family, just to wish them a Happy New Year. I promise you the payoff will be much greater than the 60 second investment.

September 23, 2022

Today I was graciously invited to attend the annual Planned Parenthood luncheon, chaired by our own congregant Danna Halff. I was extraordinarily proud of my friend for overseeing this 1500-person event in support of such a heart-centered organization. I was also overwhelmed by our turnout. When I say "our" I mean both the Jewish community and our Temple Beth-El community – clergy, staff and members. Please understand that I am an introvert so the idea of this mass of humanity was NOT appealing prior to arrival. But face after face of people I hadn't seen in a week, a month, a year, three years transformed my dread into sheer joy. And to know we were all there fiercely passionate about this organization, about the issues it supports, about the causes it defends, about the people it serves – I won't lie, my "allergies" may have gotten to me couple times today.

As I was reflecting on the day, I became a bit jealous or perhaps wistful or maybe even just curious... I'm not sure which emotion it is. I dream this same passion for Temple Beth-El all the time. I dream the multigenerational power that I saw in the room today that staunchly believes we are worth fighting for. I dream of this very room being packed to the rafters with people who are passionate about the organization, about the support it provides, about the causes it defends, about the people it serves. Candidly, I dream of raising over \$200K in a matter of

minutes. We have a lot of work to do, but I believe this dream is possible because I so often see glimmers of it. I see it here tonight and I saw it today because our members showed up. If they can show up at Planned Parenthood, they can show up at Temple Beth El. While this president will not preach the Gospel of the Temple the way today's luncheon speaker did about her organization, I will echo her mantra: while there is a lot of work to do, we will not back down.

September 30, 2022

On this Shabbat, in the midst of what might be considered the "super bowl" of Jewish events, I want to take a moment to pull back the Temple curtains and thank some of our staff for their work that is done so well that it often goes unnoticed, but without whom, everyone would notice. Specifically, I'd like to recognize our core custodial staff: Mike, Sonny Jr, Alan, Bert, Daniel, Janie, and Priscilla. There's so much that they do, that I can't actually do justice to their portfolio. But I know without them, we wouldn't have candles or wine on our kiddush table for Shabbat, apples and honey after RH morning service, there wouldn't be prayer books in the pews, microphones for our choir wouldn't be set up, dinners and meetings would be missing their tables and chairs, and our nearly 100-year-old building would not be in its top-notch state of repair. These folks work before hours, during hours and after hours on our congregation's behalf making sure Temple looks, feels and is as beautiful as it can be and can be our sacred religious home.

I am honored to be getting to know each of them, week by week, month by month. They make my job easier and frankly a lot more fun. I invite you to introduce yourself and thank these amazing folks. They are the part of the magic that makes Temple Beth-El Temple Beth-El.

October 14, 2022

Let me start by saying, my father is one of my favorite humans ever. But when I was young, he was oblivious to most "small" things: a new dress, polished nails, a rearrangement in furniture. He was oblivious and easy going until the one day he wasn't. My mother thought I, at age 4 or 5, should get my very long (but very stringy) hair cut into the style of the day: a shag. For those of you blissfully unaware of what that is, think bad boys cut. My father was no longer oblivious. He loved my long hair. And he now had an opinion about how it should look.

Why am I talking about this? Because some of you have noticed the small changes in our building as you made your way to the oneg or to the sanctuary. Thanks to members Deborah Miller and Aliza Cantu, some of our walls are sporting new art and the Stahl Gallery has gotten a bit of a makeover. For some, this may feel like "a shag," for others it may feel like a refresh, and for others you have no idea what I'm talking about – I'll be happy to introduce you to my dad.

Like the tabernacle, it is our duty to keep our sacred space beautiful. Our building gets lots of use, and it's been 20 years since our last major renovation. Enhancements like these are good and necessary to keep our home inviting, warm, and relevant. While I promise you there won't be any neon lights or exposed pipes introduced to our design, over time you'll see some subtle

changes to refresh and reform some of the tired, outdated, or unfunctional aspects of our building.

Equally as important to the changes themselves is that this work is done by members offering their time and talent. Our members' expertise gets things done at Temple from the obvious stuff like this interiors refresh to the less visible stuff like architecting our security and supporting out marketing. We are reliant on engineers, lawyers, writers, accountants, artists, teachers, and myriad others to fill in the threads of our congregational tapestry. If you have special gifts, or are just a good human, please help us out. Unlike my father, I am not oblivious and am a Jewish mother – the power of guilt is not lost on me! I love seeing our members' fingerprints in Temple life... just maybe not on the newly hung art!

October 29, 2022

Two Friday nights ago, I was sitting next to Rabbi Yergin at our Sukkot dinner. She abruptly stood up as a young woman with a suitcase appeared. Rabbi Yergin was momentarily dumbfounded and then overjoyed. She embraced her childhood friend who had traveled from Chicago, neither of them letting go for a very long time. In that moment, Rabbi Yergin was simply Marina – taking in the surprise, the disbelief, and happiness of having this person who shared stories and experiences well outside of our dome standing in her presence.

Relatedly, in August Cantor Berlin shared with us a Sermon in Song at the Friday night service that fell on Tu B'av, a holiday we might equate to Jewish Valentine's Day. She selected beautiful and applicable music, explaining how the songs applied to the holiday. But one stood out: a love song that was specially written for and sung by her in honor of her wedding. In that moment, Cantor and Rabbi Berlin were simply Julie and Alan – the bride and groom.

This Shabbat our synagogue welcomes many guests who've arrived to celebrate Miriam Nathan's bat mitzvah. And in so doing, Rabbi Nathan will simply be Mara. She'll be the daughter, the sister, the aunt, the friend, the wife – roles filled with the humor, history, and chaos that we all find ourselves in in these reunions. And most importantly, she'll be the proud mom who'll cheer on her daughter as she takes her place among our Jewish people in one of our most sacred traditions.

These moments - the delight of an important friendship, the love of a life partner, the joy over family and a sacred milestone - draw our professionals closer to us as congregants as they illustrate our sameness despite our clergies' ordination. Our shared life experiences grant us an opportunity to strengthen our sacred partnership as we get to see our clergy as people, not just as the roles they've assumed. The clearer we see and understand one another as humans, the stronger our congregation can be. It is my hope on this Shabbat, that we each have these human moments and can share them freely, comfortably, and joyfully with those in our Temple community.

November 4, 2022

On Tuesday, November 8, Marty and I will have been married 25 years. Three amazing kids, three houses, and a treasure trove of experiences later, I would do it all over again, but boy I'm just not quite sure how I'm 25 years older. As Rabbi Nathan said, we were married up the road a bit at Agudas, under the joint blessings of Rabbi Spiegel and Rabbi Stahl. But it didn't take long for us to find our way back fully, and apparently permanently, to Temple Beth-El. How we got here wasn't terribly complicated: we were simply invited. For those of you who've been around a minute, I'll give you one guess as to who opened Temple Beth-El's doors. Yes, Rene Wender. While I could speak for hours on our Temple icon, it was the simplicity and sincerity of her ask that pulled us under the dome.

I was reminded of this experience a couple of weeks ago during an exchange with a fellow Temple President who lives in Seattle. He'd copied me on an email he'd sent to some of his friends, with a follow up explanation. He'd just invited 85 people to join him at Shabbat services, and he was filling me in on the context. I was simultaneously overjoyed and somewhat salty. The idea was brilliant. How easy was that: "would you like to join me at Shabbat?" My saltiness arose because my friend and I are likeminded, which means we are slightly competitive. So I was kind of mad that I hadn't thought of it first!

Rest assured, I am never embarrassed to steal a perfectly good idea and perhaps expand upon it. Yesterday I engaged 25 people I knew (as an introvert, I'm not sure my rolodex is quite as large as my friend's) to see if they'd like to attend Shabbat services with Marty and me tonight. I had conscripted our son Cole, but he conveniently got the flu and is home far far away from all of us. I also invited my dad, his wife, and my brother, his wife and their dog, who all live out of state, but who enthusiastically accepted my invitation. Others were on our wedding guest list, and it just seemed appropriate to reach out. Still others are people that we know simply because someone asked Marty and me to come to services 25 years ago.

For the record, I think there are 5 folks here because of my simple ask. I am thrilled you came. And how amazing it is that we beat my friend's percentage? But I also got a lot of rainchecks and please ask agains... and I promise you, I will. I think this idea is brilliant. So I put it out to all of you. What would it take for you to ask 1, 2, 5, 25 people to services next week or next month? You might just change someone's life and impact the history of our congregation. Your email or call might be the first brick in the road for a new choir member, a beit midrash teacher, a ba'al tekiah, or even our future President. Either way, I can't wait to meet your invited guests!

November 11, 2022

On Wednesday, I attended the Texas Conference for Women. Thousands of women and some very brave men filled the Austin convention center. The final speaker was Brené Brown, professor, author, consultant, and podcast host. She is also one of today's greatest thought leaders on people, organizations, and leadership. Her following is as extensive as any international sports figure or pop star. I am a Brené Brown aficionado. Said differently, she's my hero.

Brené's research, her storytelling, and her models have saved my professional and perhaps personal sanity. Her work has been my Rosetta stone for so much of the human behavior I experience daily. But on Wednesday she was asked a question from the audience that left her stone cold silent for a good 60 seconds. The question, posed after Tuesday's election, seemed painfully unanswerable. After careful consideration and a very deep breath, she said two decisive things: "Use your voice. Speak out." Her vulnerability coupled with her courageous leadership reinforced my own resolve on difficult topics while reminding me why this woman had reached hero status in my book. She inspires me to use my gifts to their fullest.

Heroes. Not all of them are celebrities. Frankly, most of them are not. They sit here among us. They are, as singer-songwriter Debbie Friedman said, just people that we call another name. It's the faithful daughter who visits the aged father in the retirement community, ensuring his days are full of love and care. It's the twinkly eyed man who meets the buses and the airplanes full of terrified immigrants, welcoming strangers to our land, for we were once strangers in a land. It's the retired teacher who enthusiastically said yes to co-chairing a committee that's way bigger than anything she's ever tackled before. It's the poll worker who, despite the risks and his family's concerns, proudly helped protect our democracy by ensuring the vote. It's the kid who saves the seat in class for their friend so they both know they fit in, they belong, they are enough. Heroes ARE just people that we call another name. And these people are here, under this dome.

Heroes exist at Temple Beth-El. It's just one of the countless reasons that this place is special. I cannot express the overwhelming sense of awe I have for the heroes in our community. While I may have traveled to Austin to see my celebrity hero, the epicenter of the greatest heroes is literally in my own backyard. I invite you to look around for a minute. We are sitting among greatness. WE are Temple Beth-El – home to heroes.

November 18, 2022

My dad told once me there were three jobs to never take: school board president, President of the homeowners' association, and you guessed it, Temple president. I've been in the role 6 months and will say this: I now get my hair colored every four weeks instead of every six, I have a ton of Temple meetings, and I lose quite a bit of sleep thinking about, strategizing, and yes, praying about this incredible congregation of ours. However, it is far from the worst job I have ever had. That's reserved for my telemarketing days!

Six months in there are some amazing subtle shifts in our massive organization. Since May we have welcomed 30 new member families to our Temple community. Relatedly, our religious school is teeming with more kids than expected. A few weeks ago, I attended the consecration of Trustees if not the Temple President of 2062. And for the first time in years, Temple is seeing a slight uptick in overall commitment dollars.

These indicators are favorable signs that the sleeping giant that is Temple Beth-El is reawakening. It is exciting, but we also have a lot of work ahead of us. Member engagement glues people to Temple and makes the congregation the vibrant home of Reform Judaism. WE are the fun, the intellect, the spirituality, the social action of this place. That engagement takes so many forms: volunteering to help with an event, signing up for a program you might never have considered before, inviting a friend to Shabbat. I challenge you to glue away. Connect with Temple in one unique way this next month and see what impact that has.

On the other side of the ledger, 46 member families have generously increased their commitment pledges this year. Yet over 900 families have said nothing – yet. Okay, I'm not very subtle. If you have not yet considered your commitment gift or you lost your letter or your dog ate it, I invite you to consider Hillel's wisdom: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?" WE are Temple Beth-El so our collective financial support comes from those of us in this room, on livestream and those on our Temple roster. Please know Michael Ringel, our controller, would love to talk to you on Monday. Please know our Treasurer, Bregger Garrison, would love you to talk to our controller Michael Ringel on Monday.

Before I began this job, people shared condolences with me about "having" to attend Friday night services each week, as if it was a penance for accepting the role. Six months in I look forward to coming. I look forward to seeing my Temple family, some whom I've known for years and some who've kindly adopted Marty and me. I appreciate the embrace of being in our spiritual home, especially after a challenging week and look forward to the deep breath I know I will get to take once the sabbath spirit has settled in. If this is the punishment for being president, I wish it on all of us.