

Rosh Hashanah Presidential Appeal

Shanah tovah. On behalf of our officers, Board of Trustees, and Past Presidents, I'm honored to welcome you to Temple Beth-El.

Whether you're joining us here in the Wulfe Sanctuary or from your own sacred space, we're grateful to have you with us as we usher in the New Year. We are also honored to welcome Mayor Jones and Councilwoman Kaur as our special guests this evening. We're grateful for their presence and for joining our community as we celebrate the New Year together.

When a synagogue president stands up during the High Holy Days, people usually know what comes next: an appeal for support. So let me acknowledge that up front.

Temple Beth-El depends on the generosity of our members, and if you are moved to give financially, we welcome that support with gratitude.

But this year, I'm asking for something just as important: your time, your attention, and your voice.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. It is the moment in our calendar when we pause, give thanks for what brought us here, and take responsibility for what comes next.

Earlier tonight, Rabbi Nathan spoke about the ties that bind us to Jewish life. She reminded us that every generation inherits something sacred and then helps shape what comes next.

As I listened, I couldn't help but think about Temple Beth-El at this moment. This congregation is here today because generations before us chose to invest themselves in it. They taught Hebrew classes. Served on committees. Led youth groups. Made phone calls. and Welcomed newcomers. They didn't just inherit Temple Beth-El. They built Temple Beth-El. And now it is our turn.

Toward the end of this month, we will launch a congregational survey.

Now, before everyone gets too excited about receiving another survey, let's address the obvious.

We live in the age of surveys. Buy a hamburger? Survey. Stay at a hotel? Survey. Call customer service? Survey. Somewhere right now, a company desperately wants to know whether your fries deserved four stars or five. And yet, once in a while, a survey actually works. I learned that after staying at the same hotel several times. I responded to the survey that a few breakfast items had disappeared — including the Greek yogurt, which apparently mattered to me more than I realized.

The next week, when I checked back into the hotel, the Greek yogurt was back not at the breakfast buffet but stocked in my room's refrigerator. That stuck with me. Not because yogurt changed my life, but because someone asked, listened, and acted.

That is the difference between a survey that gathers information and a survey that builds trust.

That is our commitment here. We are not asking for your time just to collect responses. We are asking because we intend to do something meaningful with what we hear. And my hope is that, someday, each of you will look back and feel like you got your own proverbial Greek yogurt.

But I also want to be clear: action will require more than a Board decision or a staff plan. It will require all of us. Rosh Hashanah is not just a time to think about what should be different. It is a time to decide what we are willing to do differently.

The same is true for Temple Beth-El. If we hear that people are looking for deeper connection, then some of us will need to help create those moments of connection. If we hear that families need more support, then some of us will need to step forward to support them. If we hear that people want Temple to feel even more welcoming, then each of us has a role in making someone feel seen when they walk through the doors. Listening is where this begins, but action is how we become the congregation we say we want to be.

I promise you now, we won't be asking about your French fries. We're asking bigger questions: Do you feel you belong here? Do you feel welcomed and valued? What helps you connect to Jewish life? What gets in the way? And all of those questions lead to one larger one: What should Temple Beth-El look like in 2050? What kind of Jewish community do we want our children and grandchildren to inherit? What traditions must remain at the heart of who we are, and what needs to evolve?

The Board cannot answer that alone. Neither can the clergy, the staff, or the president.

As Rabbi Nathan reminded us earlier this evening, Hillel teaches: do not separate yourself from the community. Community exists because people choose to be part of it.

Which means the future of Temple Beth-El belongs to all of us as well.

This survey is one way we do that work together.

We will listen to people who have been here for decades and people who are still deciding whether this feels like home. We will listen to parents, grandparents, young adults, empty nesters, those who show up every week, and those who wish they could. And then we do the harder part: we decide what we are willing to do with what we hear.

The High Holy Days call us to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh* — an accounting of the soul.

As individuals, we ask ourselves:

Who have I been?

Who do I want to become?

This year, we have the opportunity to ask those same questions as a congregation.

Who have we been?

What are we doing well?

Where are we falling short?

The answers won't all be unanimous.

But they will help us begin to shape the future with honesty and care.

So tonight, my appeal is simple.

When the survey arrives during the week of September 28 from Lee + Associates, don't set it aside and don't pretend it is spam.

Don't assume someone else will fill it out.

Don't wait until you have more time.

Take a few minutes and share your perspective.

Tell us what matters.

Tell us what's working and where we can improve.

Tell us what kind of Temple Beth-El you want your children, grandchildren, and future generations to experience.

In my installation speech, I asked each of you to show up one more time than you planned and say yes to one more thing.

This is that moment. Take the survey. Share your perspective. Help shape the Temple Beth-El future generations will be proud to inherit.

As we look ahead to Yom Kippur, please continue our tradition of supporting the San Antonio Food Bank by bringing non-perishable food donations to Yom Kippur morning services. Grab a brown paper bag on your way out today, fill it with donations, and bring it back with you on Yom Kippur. Collection will take place in the San Pedro parking lot and at the Belknap entrance. You can also donate online through our weekly email or website, or by check made out to the Temple Beth-El Hunger Drive. Last year, this drive helped provide more than 21,000 meals in our community.

Tomorrow morning, we'll begin with our Rosh Hashanah Family Service at 9:00 AM, followed by our Morning Service at 10:30 AM in the Wulfe Sanctuary. Following services, join us at Woodlawn Lake Park for Tashlich. Our clergy will lead a brief service, followed by a personal moment to symbolically cast away our sins using bird seed. We'll conclude together with the sounding of the shofar.

Then on Sunday, we invite you to join us for our Kever Avot Cemetery Memorial Services.

After tonight's service, please leave your prayer books at your seats. On your way out, we invite you to pick up a complimentary copy of *Heart of a Stranger*, the New York Times bestselling book by Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, this year's featured rabbi for the Rabbi Samuel Stahl Lecture.

Thanks to the generosity of the Rabbi Samuel Stahl Lectureship Fund, these books are available at no cost. Please take one copy per household while supplies last, and we hope you'll join us on Monday, December 14, to hear from Rabbi Buchdahl in person at this year's lecture.

From all of us at Temple Beth-El, we wish you and your loved ones a sweet, joyful, and healthy New Year. Shanah Tovah!