

BJC PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

MAY 17, 2007

Thank you all for coming to our annual Congregational meeting. We've enjoyed some wonderful moments in this room and in this building during the past year, and we'll enjoy many more, due to your dedication and the strength of this spiritual community.

It has been an honor and a pleasure to serve this congregation as its Board of Trustees President. It has been a particular pleasure to work with the wonderful BJC staff. Hazzan Schnitzer, our indefatigable leader and guide, has been an inspiration. He is a consistently intriguing source of spiritual and intellectual guidance and challenge, and I value every conversation we've ever had, particularly the ones where we may have changed each other's minds – and you can guess which way that has gone most of the time.

To Adrian and to Roz, I extend my warmest thanks for jobs so well done, and for your unswerving dedication to what is best for BJC, as a congregation and as a community. You are two who do the work of many more. You keep us together, you educate and inform us, you organize us, you care for our children, you make sure we are where we need to be, and even that we clean up after ourselves when we leave. That's versatility!

And to my fellow Board members, my deepest gratitude for your commitment as volunteers to the governance and betterment of BJC. To Karen Jerome, thanks for taking on the job of vice president and for working with me so productively this year. I pledge my full support to you in the years ahead, and I eagerly look forward to your leadership.

To Warren Farb, who could not be here tonight, I want to express my great appreciation for a job extremely well done over the past several years as our treasurer. We may not be rich yet, but we always know where we are and where we need to go, thanks to Warren's staunch efforts.

And what can I say about our secretary and my wife, who has dutifully, accurately, and charmingly recorded our history for four years now, except "I love you, and you take great minutes."

Our committee chairs have once again done a bang-up job in leading our internal activities and community efforts, often with limited fiscal resources and maximum volunteer service and help.

We said at last year's annual meeting that we were looking for new leadership and wider participation. We have been successful in this quest in several areas. Most notable, I think, is that we were extremely fortunate to be able to enjoy outstanding new leadership this year in our social action committee, thanks to Steve Turov and Linda Blumberg. They have levered the foundation built by our previous social action leadership into expanded involvement and award-winning community service on so many fronts. And the terrific volunteer members of this committee deserve our admiration for really "*tikhunning*", if I can coin an inelegant term, for the environment, for the homeless, for poor and neglected children, for the victims of genocide in Darfur, and for HIV/AIDS victims (what a concert – thanks so much, John Warshawski and others, for spearheading it). There were so many worthwhile and noble endeavors well beyond what the committee's too-limited budget would imply they could do. My special congratulations and heartfelt gratitude to all of you. As I've said before, you represent the best of BJC and of our dedication to Jewish values.

Our education committee, under the renewed leadership of the first BJC religious school grad to head this committee, Rachel Mosher-Williams, has worked closely and efficiently with Adrian, to provide another year of fulfilling education for over 120 young people. And here another word of thanks to Adrian for making so much happen in the education of our kids, and to all the school faculty members and adult education volunteers, and of course to the Hazzan. You all dedicate yourselves to the most important thing a Jew can do (to quote an eminent congregation member who is here tonight), which is to study.

And kudos to Donna Cohen and the program committee. You have successfully introduced our new program concept - of events that add to the pure fun of coming here. Among other things, we have danced and cooked and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves under BJC auspices. This enervates our spirits and builds our sense of community. Well done.

And high praise to Steve Chiaverini and the membership committee, who have generated so many new BJC memberships. None of that would be at all possible without the work of the Hazzan and Adrian and Roz, who make every prospective member feel as welcome as those already in the fold. While in so many places it's a vacuous cliché to claim to be welcoming, at BJC it's as true as true can be. Great work everyone.

And so much praise is due to so many who volunteer quietly all the time. Some of you do so behind the scenes and unceremoniously, such as the folks who help Roz in the office or who help Adrian with the many daily tasks involved in running the religious and Hebrew school programs. Our deep appreciation to all of you.

I also salute those of you are out there communicating and leading. How about Joan Wolf Chiaverini, whose talent as an impresario and director and singer is demonstrated to us year after year?

And our newest board member, IPPIES liaison Gary Sampliner, who has taken it upon himself to spearhead a journey through sometimes very confusing and muddy waters to establish a line of communication among BJC, Bradley Hills and the local Muslim community. Nothing is easy about this foray into cross-cultural relationships, as we continually find. We need always to be sure that we are taking the right path for our institutions and communities, but many of us would argue that this effort, as difficult as it is and will continue to be, is necessary in some form, and can be very important and fulfilling. We must act responsibly and with our eyes open, and we may have to change course from time to time. But we do live in interesting times, and we need to engage.

Similarly, our congregation again owes a debt of gratitude to all those who annually work with the staff to make the High Holy Day observances the great experience they always are. Thanks as ever to chair Bruce Minkoff and to everyone else involved, including our spectacular choir. And the Hazzan's ever creative approach to the High Holy Days is of inestimable value. We are blessed to have you.

And more kudos to our volunteer communicators and organizers: to Anita Farb, who publishes the BJC monthly newsletter with impeccable timing and style; to Marla Hewitt, who generates our ever-informative weekly email, to Bruce and Wynne Busman, who make sure the Oneg roster is covered so we can fulfill other appetites besides the spiritual on Friday evenings, and to the omni-present Gary Ratner, who this year served as our liaison during the process that culminated in the presentation of the fascinating artwork that now graces the Gathering Space, and to all of you who supported these efforts.

For a small community, we do a lot of great things. I am so proud to be associated with all of you.

Having had such a fulfilling experience being your president, do I have any disappointments or concerns? Well yes, if you will allow me, there are a couple. On a fiscal basis, I am disappointed and I regret that we have not yet reached that point of membership income where we are protected from having to raise synagogue support and tuition to meet even the most disciplined projection of cost increases for the next year. There is great value to being small and close-knit, but we still have room for growth within that comfort level. I pledge to continue to work with the new Board leadership to help make this happen, through renewed member recruitment and fundraising efforts.

We will launch our long-term capital campaign starting this fall.

It's called "Enhancing the Flame," as it builds on the first campaign, "Celebrating the Light" that we conducted with Bradley Hills church to build covenant hall.

"Celebrate the Light" was predominantly about physical space, and by enabling us to build our own worship space, confirmed our congregational identity.

But that was quite some time ago, and we are now in a very different place. We are focused now not on bricks and mortar, but on enhancing our congregational life – providing meaning and experiences that build community at BJC.

The first question you will be asking is: what do we need funds for? Our first reality is that we're in tight fiscal times. We simply must build up our reserves, which are depleted. This is just a fiscal necessity. But this is not the main thrust.

More substantively, we see enhancements falling into several broad categories:

First: education, scholarship, and culture. We would like to fund more visiting scholars, provide for multicultural programs, create an endowment for speakers, facilitate life-long learning, provide primers on being Jewish, and ensure that we can bring you more distinguished guests, both religious and secular.

Second: we want to focus on our teens and youth and be able to nurture their Jewish identities, and help them stay connected.

Third: we want to be able to continue and expand our international activities and interests, particularly related to Israel, Cuba, and Darfur.

Fourth: there are still many physical things we need to do: We'd like to explore a real library, enhancements to our sound system, a minivan - for field trips, to run shuttles from metro for Shabbat services, to visit the elderly. There are other ideas, too.

We are just now assembling the various committees who will help shape and drive enhancing the flame. There are plenty of opportunities to help – even many that don't involve asking others for funds.

We hope you will volunteer to help and be there to support Enhancing the Flame.

There is one other personal point, on a different matter, that I would like to make, speaking as a BJC member, if you will indulge me for just a moment. This is on my mind as Gail and I and many others look forward to what we are sure will be an inspiring BJC trip to Israel next month. It is my personal perception, which is perhaps wrong, that our congregation can at times seem somewhat reticent toward what I know is our deeply

felt support of Israel. I sense that our admirable approach at BJC to protecting and acting upon Jewish values, and the need we all acknowledge to recognize and try to ameliorate the suffering of all peoples, *can* at times lead us to downplay the deeply and uniquely troubling circumstances under which Israel exists. There is, of course, the ever-present context of existential, even genocidal threat, that Israel as a nation faces. This threat is repeatedly articulated and documented. It is not imaginary. But the context in which Israel requires our support involves more than trying to explain why violence occurs on all sides of this terrible divide. I saw a piece in this past Sunday's New York Times magazine, by an Israeli writer, David Grossman, whose son died last summer in Lebanon. He describes his struggle to write meaningfully under the circumstances that affect everyone there. He says, in part:

“ and I write the life of my land, Israel. The land that is tortured, frantic, drugged by an overdose of history, excessive emotions that cannot be contained by any human capacity, extreme events and tragedies, enormous anxiety and paralyzing sobriety, too much memory, failed hopes and the circumstances of a fate unique among all nations, an existence that sometimes appears to be a story of mythical proportions, a story that is ‘larger than life’, to the point that something seems to have gone wrong with the relation it bears to life itself. A country that has become tired of the possibility of ever leading the standard, normal life of a country among countries, a nation among nations.”

And, I would add, despairs of ever being accepted as “a people among people.” This is the terrible challenge the people of Israel, and by extension, Jews throughout the world, face. Dealing with this, with their very humanity, is the true context wherein the people of Israel desperately need the help of their brethren everywhere. And providing the people of Israel with this human level of understanding and sympathy still leaves ample room for our continued and essential humanitarian insistence on peace and justice for everyone. Please let us continue to support Israel in its quest for justice and peace for all its citizens and for its neighbors.

May I conclude by once again saying how proud and happy I am to be one of you, to be a member of this honorable and spiritual and charitable community of Jews. To echo the Hazzan's oft-used closing, “many blessings” to you all.

Shalom, and thank you very much.

David Weiss, President
Bethesda Jewish Congregation Board of Trustees