

Rabbi Kane, Cantor Shiovitz, guests and fellow congregants, good Yom Tov.

One Rosh Hashanah morning, the Rabbi noticed little Adam was staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the synagogue. It was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven-year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the Rabbi walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good morning, Adam."

"Good morning, Rabbi," replied the young man, still focused intently on the plaque.

"Rabbi, what is this?" Adam asked.

"Well, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in service."

Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Little Adam's voice was barely audible when he asked: "Which service, Rabbi, Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?"

So once again we have come to this moment in our Jewish calendar and somehow I find myself here on this bimah to deliver the Kol Nidre address and you out there obliged to listen to me for a few minutes. Once again I hope this will not be too painful for you. At least not as painful as Adam found the High Holiday services.

May I begin by borrowing a verse from the Haftarah reading tomorrow morning and say, Shalom, Shalom, la-rahok v'la-karov amar Adonai. Shalom, shalom to those who are far off, shalom to those who are near, says Adonai. Welcome, welcome to Yom Kippur 5770 at Congregation Sons of Israel. One day each year we make a journey in the company of the whole community of our synagogue and in the whole community of Israel—all of us together and each of us alone. This is the day, the day of atonement, the day when eating and drinking ceases, our worldly concerns are pushed aside and we are free to uncover the true meaning of our lives.

Tonight and tomorrow we will pray together, as a community. According to one of Conservative Judaism's leading commentators, Rabbi Reuven Hammer, "Prayer recited in a community has a special dimension. Individuals may pray alone and keenly experience G-d. Judaism recognizes this and does not discourage solitary prayer. But Judaism is wary lest such aloneness become the norm and the permanent condition of the human being. Religion is not simply what we do with our aloneness, but what we do with others. Prayer should not isolate us, it should not lead us to believe that we need only G-d and ourselves, but prayer should lead us outward toward the love and care of the world we meet. Through prayer we discover how important the community is for sustaining our own salvation."

It hardly seems possible that it was one year ago that I stood before you on this occasion. On the one hand, the year--like every other it seems--has flown by and it feels as though it was only yesterday we gathered to worship together on this solemn night. On the other hand, so much has happened in the past year that it feels as though many more than one year have passed.

Change was a big word this year. We heard it often in public discourse. First, it was the theme of one presidential campaign and then, another. Indeed, much has changed this past year. In the words of one of our great matriarchs, Carole King, this past year I felt the earth move under my feet.

One year ago, George Bush was still our president. We did not know then that Barak Obama would not only win the Democratic Primary but the national election and become the first black person to hold the office of President of the United States. Many doubted that could ever happen in our lifetimes. Now, we hardly think about it except as an historical event. Last Kol Nidre, the meltdown in our economy not only had not begun but its ultimate severity was foreseen by very few. One year ago, Lehmann Brothers remained a storied investment bank, the collapse of AIG was unthinkable, and the bankruptcy filing of two major U.S. automobile manufacturing companies unimaginable. Nearly one in ten workers unemployed-- never. Today, we have learned that what was once considered impossible may very well be possible.

Last year in this address, I purposely declined to ask for monetary contributions to our synagogue. Instead, I used the opportunity afforded to me to encourage all of you to come to synagogue during the months ahead to partake of the host of offerings here at CSI. It felt wrong to me somehow that no sooner than you had taken your seats, than you are exhorted to dig deep into your pockets and make a contribution to the synagogue exchequer. By making money the centerpiece of the address when there were loftier matters to be considered, the traditional Kol Nidre appeal struck me as unseemly and in poor taste, a rude, intrusive start to what should otherwise be the onset of a period of quiet contemplation and prayer. Instead, last year's Kol Nidre fundraising appeal was conducted solely by letter writing and a message from the president in the monthly bulletin.

Indeed much has changed this year. Yet, much remains the same.

Many of you know that I grew up in the Catskills, South Fallsburg, New York, to be precise. As I am sure is true for all of you, many aspects of who I am today derive from the years I spent growing up in my parents' home there. My father, whom I am so fortunate to have join us here tonight, instilled in me the value of Jewish philanthropy. He never preached a word on the subject. But I remember many a Sunday morning spent with the New York Times and his pointing out to me with admiration an obituary of someone who had devoted themselves to the support of Jewish organizations and the causes they championed. He taught me that people who make a lot of money are fortunate to do so, not because of the houses they could buy, the jewelry they wore or the cars they drove, but only because they were able to contribute so much more meaningfully in acts of tzedakah to further Jewish values. To this day, when he speaks to me of Bill Gates, which he does from time to time, he never mentions how he founded and built one of the greatest companies in American history. Instead, it is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and its work that captures his admiration and respect.

There was and is one synagogue in South Fallsburg. Its membership, which peaked during the years I was growing up there, never exceeded 150 families. As you might imagine, everyone knew everyone else there. And everyone knew a great deal about the personal affairs of everyone else there—from what business they owned, to what type of homes they lived in, to other matters not mentionable from this bimah. And one thing that we here at CSI consider private was entirely public there—how much one donated to the annual Kol Nidre appeal. On this same night we are gathered here, the president of the congregation would stand before the assembled and solicit pledges for donations for the upcoming year, addressing those in

attendance on a first-name basis. Since none of the congregants were permitted to write anything down on yontif, someone from the town who was not Jewish attended that night and made notes on what everyone had pledged. In some ways, this was unnecessary, since a pledge made on the eve of the holiest day of the year was considered inviolable. The public pressure that came with this practice was very effective to encourage the members to do all they were able each year, and if that didn't work sufficiently, the synagogue president would single out those he considered slackers and embarrass them into making a pledge he thought more suitable to their means.

Fear not, we are not intending to institute this practice here at CSI tonight, even though I am happy to know so many more of your first names than I did a year ago. But I would like to implore each of you to search your hearts and consider whether you couldn't do more this year than you did last year to support our Kol Nidre appeal. Significantly more. In fact, twice what you gave last year. The congregants in my childhood shul understood that the survival of their synagogue and their way of life in their small town depended on each of their individual response to this appeal. They were not far removed from their parent's generation, many of whom had barely survived the pogroms of Europe and a perilous ocean voyage to emigrate here. Survival was very much a conscious concern. And that meant the survival of their Jewish way of life and their small shul.

I believe that many of us have become a little too comfortable living in this area and in believing that CSI will go on without our needing to help very much, or with only a token amount of our help. Please understand that our synagogue cannot continue ad infinitum to rely as heavily as it does today on membership dues to continue as the vibrant center of Conservative Jewish life it has come to be in our area.

Countless volunteer hours have been spent over the last year during Executive Committee and Board of Trustee meetings discussing our nation's economic free fall, and the impact we first expected it to make on our community and then the impact it was actually making. The Budget Committee, headed by our treasurer, Ira Eisenstein, brought to bear its Herculean efforts to present a budget for this year which kept all fees unchanged from last year. This would not have been possible except for the extraordinary actions of our professionals. Each of our rabbi, our cantor and educational director waived salary raises to which they were contractually entitled for this year in order to achieve this end. None of the teachers in our school or any of our office staff saw any increases in their pay over last year.

Undoubtedly, not one of us remains untouched by the economic difficulties of this time. There are many of us who have lost their jobs or seen their businesses collapse. Many of us who are still employed are making less than the year before, and are facing at the same time increased expenses—real estate taxes, college tuition bills, and so on. All of us have seen the values of our homes decline and many of our retirement accounts have been decimated.

Here at CSI we have seen the resignation of families who, despite their words to the contrary, left us ultimately because of economic reasons, despite our efforts to reach out to them and offer dues abatement. We are grateful that there are many who are accepting that offer and remaining members even if they cannot afford to pay all of their dues at this time. This year, we anticipate granting membership dues relief of approximately \$75,000, which represents 5% of our total

budget. In addition, thanks to the establishment of the Rhoda and Mel Miller Tuition Fund, help is now available as well for families unable to pay religious school tuition.

Still, many of us are thankfully not as severely affected. To those of you, I am asking you to double the donation that you made last year. Just think of it as two Kol Nidre pledges, one for the fall and one for the spring. This would go a long way towards making up the shortfall caused by the decline in membership dues and in donations by those who are simply unable to do so this year. And to those of you who consider a donation to the Kol Nidre appeal optional and opt not to participate at all, if your circumstances permit, this is the year to begin. Our goal this year as it was last is universal participation. There is no pledge that is too small to be appreciated. Please consider the sacrifices our professionals and staff have made this year on your behalf, and the efforts of our volunteer leadership, and do what you can to thank them by making the most meaningful contribution you are able.

I hope that many of you have had the opportunity to see the film “Defiance” which depicts the true story of a group of Jews during the Nazi occupation of Belorussia who survived the war by living in the forests and engaging in armed combat with the Germans. For me the emotional climax of the movie occurs when the group is forced to abandon its camp because of the approaching German army. They come to a vast, wide marsh. With the advancing Germans to their rear and the water in front of them, and no confidence that G-d will part these waters as the Red Sea, their leader is paralyzed with indecision until his younger brother tells them they have no choice but to march forward. They gather up all of their belts and ropes and tie them together to form a chain linking each one of them to the whole. The collective strength of the community carries them across, the strength of the strong pooled to carry across the old, infirm and weak.

I know that if we here at CSI pool together our collective strength, we too will surmount these challenging times.

Indeed much has changed this year. Yet, much remains the same.

Here we are again on Kol Nidre, many of us sitting in the same seats we sat in a year ago-- whether or not reserved--gathered here to chant the same prayers, thankfully led by our same rabbi and cantor, surrounded by many of the same fellow congregants. In turbulent times such as these, when so much is changing around us and the bedrock of our assumptions about our world is shifting beneath our feet, we need to grasp firmly that which is immutable in our lives, the love of our families and friends, our Jewish values and our Jewish faith. Remember that our synagogue represents all three and we are obliged to preserve it not only for ourselves but for the generations that follow.

Tomorrow we will repeat the prayer we recited on Rosh Hashanah, Unetaneh tokef, the prayer that is a cornerstone of the High Holiday services, and the iteration of one of our central Jewish values. B’rosh ha-shanah yika teyvu, Uv-yom tzom kippur yey-hateymun. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

“How many shall leave this world, and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die.” Will our community be among those that thrive in the year ahead, or will it languish?

Utishuvah, utefilah utzedaka. Maavirin, et roah hagezarah. Acts of atonement, prayer and tzedakah will “soften the severity of the decree.” When these last words are recited, all of us gathered here will declare them in unison, emphatically, our voices united as one. This prayer, so central to the High Holidays liturgy, cannot be said alone, but requires a community to give voice to its fullest expression.

As you recite that prayer tomorrow, please consider how important CSI and this community are to you. Without our fellow congregants surrounding us, these words would ring hollow. Without our shul, each of us would be isolated in our prayer and, as Rabbi Hammer teaches us, our prayers unfulfilling and unfulfilled. As you read that acts of tzedakah will soften the severity of the decree, please consider that your act of tzedakah in the form of a donation to the Kol Nidre appeal will both help CSI to perform its own acts of tzedakah by continuing to provide dues relief to those who need it and who, particularly during these difficult times, need the support that comes from belonging to this Jewish community, as well as enable us to continue to thrive as the shining beacon of Conservative Judaism we have become in Northern Westchester.

Perhaps, my hesitations about dwelling on the subject of money in this address were ill-considered. An appeal tonight for donations to our synagogue is not only appropriate, but resonates with the spirit and meaning of Yom Kippur. And our contemplation of those “loftier matters” I thought more apt a year ago requires each of us to answer this year’s appeal resoundingly.

Some things don’t change. I would like to conclude this year as I did last by wishing everyone an easy and meaningful fast, and a healthy, happy and prosperous New Year, filled with the joy of Jewish life spent here at CSI.