

High Holiday Remarks, 2008

David Pollack, MD, President Congregation Ohev Shalom

L'Shana Tovah

Before I begin my remarks, I want to extend my heart to the entire Starer and Rudman families, on the passing this Sunday of Larry Starer, one of our synagogue patriarchs and a pillar anchoring so many different community circles. He was a dear friend and role model to so many of us from different generations; we will miss him terribly, and Ohev Shalom will never be quite the same without his wisdom, humor, commitment, and love for our members, so many of whom were part of his own family. As I begin my Congregational address this morning, I really hope that he's listening, not only about our vision and mission for the Ohev of the future, but hopefully to enjoy some of the nonpartisan political banter which was another of his great pleasures.

Rabbi Robbins, Cantor Acker, esteemed former First Ladies, friends, guests, family, mom, and my fellow Ohevians,

Due to the serious nature of the issues which are confronting us, this morning at 7:30 I phoned Rabbi Robbins and asked that he join me in postponing Day 2 of Rosh Hashana this year.....In this highly charged political season I am not certain whether this speech should serve as an Inaugural, a State of the Synagogue, or maybe just a flat out endorsement of one of the Presidential candidates. Then I realized that this year I could easily leave that forbidden job to Rabbi Robbins, who now is probably thinking "what the hell anyway?" Regardless I must begin by saying how truly humble and proud I am to serve as your President for the next two years. It will be both an honor and challenge to follow our beloved Doris, whose out-of-the box approach to her Presidency enabled us to tackle and accomplish so many wonderful initiatives. What a real maverick! Her term will be forever remembered as one of great spirit, purpose, and leadership by her very generous and balanced example. I am grateful that she remains deeply committed to our community, as engaged in our synagogue life as ever. Her passion for Ohev is contagious; she is always seeking to applaud and expand our circle of volunteers; she continues to accept new challenges and leadership responsibilities; and this year especially her guidance on our

Board will be invaluable as it prepares for a truly transformative 5769 on behalf of everyone who dwells here in our Spiritual Home.

Politically speaking, talk about this season's September surprise! I really needed to make some serious 11th hour speech re-writes after receiving the Rabbi's letter this month. All kidding aside, I do sincerely hope that everyone will take the opportunity during these High Holidays and the weeks to follow to thank Rabbi Robbins for his years of devoted service to our community. I for one will miss you tremendously, and from the buzz of the last week, I know that so many of you will as well. Rabbi, you will always be remembered as a truly ethical and spiritual role model, passionate about enriching and preserving our ritual life, committed to teaching and prayer, caring deeply about each family on a personal level. If any of us actually had political aspirations, we would be proud calling you our pastor and confident placing your davening on YouTube. You had a unique ability to connect and comfort especially during our times of greatest pain or grief, when we truly needed you most. Through Amy, Adina, and Caleb, your beautiful family became such a vibrant and integral part of our synagogue life, and we could all empathize with the immense challenges of balancing parental and professional responsibilities. To your entire family, Yasher Koach on pursuing and fulfilling your lifelong dream to dwell in Eretz Yisrael. I continue to look forward to collaborating with you throughout this upcoming year, greatly appreciate your enthusiasm to facilitate our leadership transition, am inspired by your love and optimism for our community, and hope that we will be reunited often on our future journeys back and forth from Wallingford to your Promised Land. On behalf of the congregation, please allow me this communal hug which I hope you will share with your family off the Bimah and away from the spotlight.

Shortly after JFK's inaugural address, his Republican opponent Richard Nixon generously told Ted Sorenson (Kennedy's aide) that there were certain things in the address which he himself would like to have said.

"Do you mean the part about 'Ask not what your country can do for you'...?" Sorenson asked. "No," Nixon replied, "the part beginning 'I do solemnly swear'..."

I imagine that each and every one of you were among the 40 million who watched a convention speech, probably as consumed as I have been by the twisting and fascinating campaigns, Friday's debate, and the choices which will confront us on November 4th. This year in particular the candidates and their positions seem so divergent, the contrasts are so stark. In any case regardless of my personal leanings, I consistently find myself relating so much of this national process back to our own governance here at Ohev, including many of the slogans and issues which each party brings to the table. After serving for six years as VP in our leadership path under Jerry (may his memory be a blessing), Andy, and Doris, I have observed, and powerfully believe, that Ohev's President can have a similarly profound impact on the synagogue's spirit and direction. The buck definitely does stop here. I fully appreciate and am prepared for this exciting responsibility, clearly aware that our membership has always been filled with its own reporters and pundits. With several major decisions confronting us, my vision for the year ahead is that our internal press will be unified, the spin consistently positive, conversations and debate always respectful, and that all our constituencies will come together, involved and engaged with a common focus and purpose, enabling us to thrive and endure in the years ahead..

OK, so let's begin today's Straight Schmooze Express: What are some issues which I can take off the table quickly? How about.....

18 million cracks in our ceiling? Well that's certainly better than in the roof, and I can promise you they will be repaired immediately

Faith-based initiatives? Even our Rummage Sale had to answer to a Higher Authority

Playing the race or gender card? Let's all simply stick to bridge or Mah Jong

Reaching across the aisle? Please, everyone; try at least once to sit on the opposite side of the sanctuary

Earmarks? I'd be happy to refer you to a really good Dermatologist

Bridge to Nowhere? Have you ever seen what's actually on the other side of the Commodore Barry

Lobbyists? Hasn't the Beautification Committee done a great job sprucing up our hallway and atrium?

Pork barreled spending? The Rabbi would never allow it

Now what about some of our more serious, big ticket issues? Friends, the historic path of Ohev Shalom truly now stands at a crossroads, especially following the Rabbi's dramatic announcement. During the past decade our demographics have considerably changed, membership has slowly declined, fixed costs continue to rise, and we are facing a Rabbi search and two other professional contracts which will expire simultaneously in June 2009. For that reason in July I convened a Strategic Planning Committee, our first long range planning project in twelve years and my first Presidential initiative of consequence. Meeting regularly since the summer, this group is wrestling with an incredibly complex set of issues, and I am indebted to them for the time and dedication it continues to invest in this six month project. Led by Chairs Rich Kaplan and Donna Cohen, the committee is exploring the direction which our congregation must take in order to meet the many challenges of staffing, membership, finances, communications, marketing, services, programming, and ritual life in the years ahead. Its focus will be to plot a course for Congregation Ohev Shalom, not to simply survive, but to thrive and endure. Through a series of focus groups and surveys, they are determining a vision of Ohev which is truly **your** vision for our community and spiritual home. Ultimately it will be the job of leadership and the Board of Directors to implement these recommendations, turning their work and your hopes into reality.

How about if we now turn this into a Town Hall meeting and open the floor up for some questions? Although the Rabbi has repeatedly refused to participate with me in such events, I would nevertheless like to further explore some of the issues on your minds.

1) Has the committee addressed, or do you have any specific ways for us to energize our base?

(MARTY)

Energizing the base, excellent! Thank you, Marty. Now who precisely would that be? Is it our members who founded the congregation? Is it our Past Presidents and former leadership? How about the Empty Nesters who have become less active and visible as their families have grown? Is it our current

Board members and volunteers? Our Interfaith families raising Jewish kids? Perhaps those who are generous financially? Or those who participate only ritually, or only socially? Of course our base is everyone, all of these constituencies, young and old, veterans and rookies alike. Whether you are in our building daily, weekly, or only once a year, your voice must be heard, your wishes welcomed and considered, and your feelings understood and appreciated.

But unfortunately the base is definitely dwindling. Can you remember when the parking lot at the funeral home next door was filling up by 9:30AM on these HH days? Can you remember when not only the chairs but people extended to the back of the auditorium? Can we reverse these trends? We must give it a serious shot.

Last year the Board of Directors began this process by hiring Mark Sykes as our new Executive Director. Already he has brought such a positive and proactive approach to his job, even volunteering to fill the indispensable tasks of Honey Jar Editor and Jr Congregation coordinator, which are such essential entry points into our community. Please take the opportunity during these High Holidays to meet, greet, and warmly welcome him to our family.

In addition we must bring more energy and spirituality into our ritual life

We must fill our sanctuary and entire building with music as often as possible

We must better coordinate with our professionals, on a common mission to inspire and connect with our members.

We must consistently be fiscally responsible, always living within our means. In other words, no bailouts!

We must create Shalom Bayit (Peace in the House) and work to mend fences with members which may have been broken along the way

We must eliminate Lashon Hara (evil and idle gossip) which is divisive and hurtful

We must bring more laughter and humor into our synagogue lives

We must welcome and embrace all Interfaith families, stretching the bounds of membership and participation which are dictated by United Synagogue

We must expand our circle of regular participants and active volunteers, enlarging the ranks of the doers on committees, in Sisterhood and Mens Club, in leadership positions for events and programs, in daily synagogue life

Finally we must make our governance as transparent as possible. To this end beginning in October, every congregant will be electronically mailed the agenda and summary of our monthly Board meeting, which we are planning to publish in the Honey Jar as well. We hope to have everyone as informed and involved as possible. During the year I also expect to hold several Congregational meetings, not only to present the recommendations of the Strategic Planning Committee to our entire community, but also to engage and commit as many of you as possible in our comprehensive search for a new Rabbi.

2) Will the congregation be able to balance impending change while maintaining our traditional Conservative principles at the same time? (SUE)

Yes We Can! And I'm definitely talking about "Change We Can Believe In!" Sue, your husband serves on an incredibly diverse, dedicated, and engaged Board of Directors which takes it responsibility to represent our congregants' interests both seriously and passionately. I am constantly amazed by the volume and scope of work which is accomplished by our volunteer leaders. As a team, they recognize our challenges and remain focused on maintaining our Ohev Shalom and Conservative traditions in the context of membership's changing demography, backgrounds, and lifestyles. In addition I could not possibly be surrounded by three Vice Presidents with more wisdom, energy, and balance. Not only are Frances, Matt, and Bonnie extremely wise, loyal, and prolific, but each of them can state with certainty the fundamentals of the Pollack Doctrine: consensus, teamwork, achievement, and anything cold on draft. I guarantee you that the Board and leadership are all on the same page, **your page**, ready to turn the challenges which lie ahead into tremendous opportunities for our congregation.

Foremost on this monumental path will be the selection of our next Rabbi. With gratitude it gives me great pleasure and confidence to announce that our Search Committee will be co-chaired by Louis Stesis and Doris Elofer, two of our most respected and admired congregants. They were ready on Day 1, **veterans** in all facets of the synagogue's ritual, administrative, and social life, and each one has the **knowledge and experience** to lead this mission successfully. In fact they really made it easy for me, not having to look beyond my top two choices to fill this daunting but pivotal project, graciously accepting with enthusiasm and definitely acceptable to our base. As they begin the earliest stages of their planning,

please offer them your support and encouragement, and be ready to pitch in, participate, and contribute if called upon to help in any way.

3) When you speak of having more music in our building, exactly what kind do you mean?

(Richard)

Well of course I am referring to chanting/singing/praying, and yes even dancing during minyan, Shabbat, and holidays in the chapel or sanctuary; with lots of our blended voices, including our smallest children

It should include contemporary interpretations of traditional melodies, including Jewish Rock

There should be the music of Jews from around the world, including the many different cultures of the diaspora

We should highlight music by American Jewish musicians and composers, like Gershwin, Berlin, Bernstein, Dylan

Wouldn't it be wonderful to hear instruments like the Shofar, tambourine, harp, mandolin, cymbals, trumpet resonating from classrooms, into hallways and meeting rooms

Hatikvah should be sung at every appropriate opportunity

We should hold lessons for the teaching and learning of melodies/songs/prayers.....so that everyone may be comfortable participating in every conceivable style, including Judaic, Israeli, Yiddish, Carlbach, Klezmer, Mizrahi, or Ladino

But I suppose for whatever reason, if none of that can happen, I would probably choose Country First.

4) Have you really been fully vetted? (Mom)

Great question, mom. I guess you really have not forgotten about the time you caught me in the garage putting lipstick on our puppy.

Some of you may know about my fascination with autographs and celebrity. Well during these days of atonement and reflection, today I feel the need to come clean with the congregation. Now before this photo actually appears in next week's Swarthmorean, I wanted to admit this questionable association

from my past, ask your forgiveness, and hope that you can still put your trust in me to lead us in the right direction.

5) In carefully reviewing the schedules for the High Holidays, it struck me that there would not be separate speeches for the High Holiday Appeal, Israel Bonds, or The Building Fund. My parents were very disappointed. What was the logic behind this change? (Talia)

Well, Talia, the strategy is called deregulation, and we were trying to avoid sanctuary meltdown by the afternoon. Think of it as part of our overall Campaign Finance Reform. Let's consider each of those causes:

Funds for Israel Bonds are used to support the State of Israel, helping her to reach the next level of economic achievement and security.

Contributions to the Jack Swerman Building and Architectural Fund are targeted for the purpose of preserving and enhancing our 45 year-old plant and facilities

Our High Holiday Appeal is one of our two major fund raising efforts during the year, generating essential dollars in our Operating Account, used to support the fixed and unexpected annual expenses of running our building, staffing, and programming needs. In recent years we have begun this drive many weeks before Rosh Hashana; and I am so pleased to report that we immediately gained 100% Board participation and have thus far raised nearly \$21,000 of our \$30,000 target.

Though we tend to use the word "tzedakah" in a very broad sense to mean "charity", according to the sages it is truly understood to be an act of generosity and an obligation. Tzedakah is derived from the Hebrew root meaning righteousness or justice, and is often used synonymously with truth, kindness, ethical conduct, help and deliverance, all qualities which make the world a bit more fair for everyone. Since it must be performed regardless of financial standing, even by the poor, after yesterday's news, today seems like an especially good day to ask you. Through this appeal we should inspire each other, creating a momentum which makes us feel part of something larger than ourselves. Participating today not only strengthens us as individuals and families, but as members of our local Ohev and broader world

Jewish communities as well. And this year there are so many reasons to give generously to every one of these causes. You may:

Honor our congregants who traveled this summer to Israel on Ohev's historic first community trip to Eretz Yisrael

Mark a decision to make a change in your life; simply welcome the New Year

Honor the Robbins family who will make aliyah there next summer

Honor a special friendship or teacher; give thanks for recovery from an illness

If you are still craving to support a woman candidate, consider making a donation in honor of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who will likely assume the role of Prime Minister in the coming months

Go Green, and recognize the natural beauty around us; give gratitude for all of life's gifts

Pay homage to our 5769 Award winners, Larry Lipton, Romie Griesmer, Louis Stesis and Lorraine Gross

Celebrate family and recognize the talents and achievements of your kids and parents; memorialize other life-cycle events

Honor one of our many special synagogue programs, like Shabbat Echad, Taste of Shabbat, the Womens Spirituality Group, Social Action, Chesed, Youth, Softball, School, your Havurah....any one of our varied activities which has touched your family's life in a positive and meaningful way

Remember, this campaign is about building a different kind of synagogue. We do not take money from lobbyists or special-interest PACs. Instead, our broad base of individual donors ensures that this appeal answers to no one but our own congregants and their collective vision for our community.

For all these wonderful reasons, in support of our Jewish community here in Wallingford as well as the greater one around the world, this year Amy and I are upping our pledges and Tzedakah across the board. So c'mon, everyone, "Up Yours!" Information about all these opportunities is provided in your folders. If you haven't made a pledge to our High Holiday Appeal this year, Mens Club members are passing through the aisles to collect your cards. Please be as generous as possible.

Thank you so much for your support and encouragement, L'Shana Tovah to you and your entire families in 5769 and for many years to come, and please remember to vote on November 4th.