

Community Synagogue of Rye
Rye, New York
President, Susan Adelman Rudolph

ANNUAL MEETING – MAY 2008

I am now standing, figuratively at least, where every one of my predecessors over the past 60 years has stood. I suspect the thoughts and range of emotions for most of us have been similar: excitement, gratitude, enthusiasm, and, yes, even uncertainty.

In fact, last year, our Immediate Past President David Hessekiel delivered a talk to the congregation and said, “How nice it would have been to have a book of Instructions for the President of Community Synagogue.” So, David, now that you will have all this free time, I eagerly await your new book.

As congregants who have just voted in a new President it's understandable that you might have questions. What's her story? What got her here today? What's her journey?

Here are the answers. I was born and grew up in Mars Hill, Maine, a town with a population of 1500, located in northern Maine two miles from the border of New Brunswick, Canada. The Jewish population was comprised of my grandparents Hiram and Katherine Adelman, 2 aunts, 2 uncles, 8 cousins, my parents, Yale and Mary Adelman, my older brother David and me. Our family businesses were potatoes, Maine potatoes, of course, while one Aunt and Uncle ran the dry goods store.

I suppose that living in a small rural town as a distinct minority is unusual. But it was a healthy lifestyle, based on hard work and family activities.

In all, there were about 30 Jewish families in northern Maine and the neighboring communities of New Brunswick, Canada. The closest synagogue and rabbi were located 150 miles south in Bangor, Maine.

Our family home had mezuzahs on the doorposts; we celebrated the holidays at my grandparents table; and we contributed to Jewish causes. I knew I was Jewish, but had no formal Jewish instruction.

I learned about Judaism by attending a camp for Jewish children. In fact, I went to camp for 8 weeks for 14 consecutive years, first as the youngest camper, (I was 6 years old!) and later as a Senior Counselor and, of all things, archery instructor. Camp Lown was a co-ed not-for-profit camp located on the Belgrade lakes in Oakland, Maine. It was there I met and socialized with other Jewish children besides my brother and cousins.

Summers at camp were in sharp contrast to being the only Jewish child in my public school class of about 20 children. At school, each morning started with reading from the Bible, saluting the American flag, and singing *Jesus Loves Me*.

The School year began early in August, which meant I always missed a couple of weeks of class because I was still in camp. Schools started so early because during the potato harvest season known as Digging, the public schools would be closed for most of September and October. At that time children and adults would work for the local farmers, including the Adelman Brothers, picking potatoes.

Years later, the Jewish families living in the northern tip of Maine bought land in Presque Isle, Maine a larger town 14 miles north of Mars Hill, where we erected a small building called the Aroostook Hebrew Community Center. (For clarity, I should tell you *Aroostook* is not a Hebrew word....rather it is a native-American word meaning *beautiful river*, and is the name of this northern most county in Maine.)

I assure you, farming is hard physical labor. But the most challenging time of the harvest season was during Rosh ha Shanah and Yom Kippur. We all went to services, but I knew it was a difficult time for my father and uncle. They had to concentrate very hard during services, for while they were in shul, their entire year's work and the financial security of our family was for that time in the hands of the foreman and the hired hands. That took real faith.

And now I'll fast forward to 1977. That was the year the Rudolph family moved from a Chicago suburb to Rye, New York and immediately joined this congregation. There was not a moment's doubt about becoming members.

In fact, the reason I shared with you a chapter of my youth was, among other things, to highlight an important self-realization. Growing up without a synagogue close by and not having Jewish friends and schoolmates have emphasized the importance of belonging to a community of Jews. To this day, I do not take that for granted.

Each of us, I know, has a unique story that eventually includes Community Synagogue. Just as we must remember our personal journeys, similarly we must not forget this congregation's journey from the founding years to the present time, namely the beginning of our 7th decade of existence.

As I started to think of the implications of a congregation entering its 61st year, I realized there's really more to this than 60-plus years. In fact, we could legitimately put on our new electronic display unit a message that says:

Under same management for over 5,768 years.

I would like to talk for just one moment to those of you elected and appointed to office this evening. And for all of you participating in this our Annual Meeting – I think it is important that you hear this, too.

The writer and educator Leonard Fein, who is also the founder of *Mazon*, the Jewish Response to Hunger, wrote: "Religion does not come to answer questions we cannot otherwise answer; it comes to insist on questions we might not otherwise ask." Here then, he says, is a most insistent, a most urgent question: **"What will you do?"**

The question of What Will You Do has been answered admirably by all of you who cared enough about the synagogue to be here this evening. In particular, the question was well answered, by those who at some point in the 60 years of our existence said "yes" when asked to serve on a committee or the Board of Trustees.

To my colleagues who are making such a commitment this evening, I am grateful, and I look forward to working with you. Above all, I encourage you to bring forth your own

unique perspective as we do the work of this congregation. Others have served before us, others will follow, but this is our time to contribute, and what an exciting time it is.

While we recognize our Synagogue is built upon rich traditions, we also recognize there are always new challenges we must face.

- The aging of our members means we must focus on attracting and maintaining younger congregants who will be our future leaders, donors and volunteers while at the same time encouraging our seniors to maintain their commitment to Community Synagogue.
- As a Reform congregation, we must offer members of all ages unique opportunities to learn and to grow Jewishly. That means we must provide a warm and nurturing environment for our toddlers in the Early Childhood Center; challenging and appealing classes and learning experiences for our young people and teens; and stimulating and caring programming for our adults.
- We must keep in good repair our physical plant and revisit the needs of our synagogue. We must carefully explore and consider the possibility of renovating the structure that houses our sanctuary, social hall and Oneg Shabbat room in order to provide communal space that is more multi-functional; and worship space that is flexible and appropriate for each occasion.

A more imminent matter concerns the covers of our Torah scrolls. While I personally find beauty in things old and a little faded, our Torah covers are looking lifeless and worn. We know that a **Torah cover** serves to protect our sacred text while at the same time enhancing the beauty of the scrolls. How wonderful it would be to launch Community Synagogue's next decade by providing new covers for our Toratot!

- We must share in the life-cycle events that are so important to our members and act on the principle of *Community* that is articulated in our Vision Statement which says, *"We cultivate an environment that is built on mutual expectations and responsibilities to one another."*

Just as one example, this might mean supporting and encouraging our students in the confirmation class by attending the Shabbat service that they lead, even though we may not have anyone in that age group in our immediate family. It means breaking out of the routine and attending an event or service that might not normally be put on your calendar and doing so just because you are a member of this community.

- We must encourage our members to see the Synagogue as one of their most important and critical philanthropic destinations:

and

- We must collectively create and maintain a culture that honors its past yet at the same time is not timid about exploring new approaches to learning and to worship.

I think we all remember when life was a lot simpler; when an activity at synagogue was the highlight of the week. Today that volunteer time is challenged by an incredibly demanding work obligation, school, sports, television, email, Blackberries, Pod casts. Ipods, iTunes, and ... I can't begin to list them all.

We are so busy these days and there are so many choices to make. You can almost feel your brain cells crackling to keep up with the choices - trivial and profound - that confront us at every turn ... selecting the best cell phone plan, finding the best mix of investments in a 401(k) or the right health plan or just knowing which eggs to buy ... White? Brown? Cage free? Organic? I went to the drugstore recently for a box of band aids and was confronted with five shelves from which to choose. Hey, I just needed something for my finger!

But take away the fancy electronics and shelves inundated with product variations, and what you have left is community. In other words, all we have is each other.

The reality is unless we are willing to give of our time and energy to do our part to insure that this synagogue is here for our children and our grandchildren, it will not happen. And frankly, as entertaining as it might be, I'd like to believe, there are more important reasons for being on this earth than knowing who will be the next *American Idol*.

I am honored to be entrusted with this leadership position, and look forward to working with Rabbi Gropper, our new Cantor, Dan Mutlu, and the entire professional staff. In addition, I am comforted by knowing that we have so many active and involved Past Presidents to whom I can go for advice and counsel. And sadly while we acknowledge that Cantor Comisar has but a brief time remaining with us as part of our clergy team, it is clear that he has contributed to the beauty and quality of life here at Community Synagogue. He knows we will miss him.

The thought of serving as President of this congregation is exciting, yet, I must confess, at moments when the reality of the responsibility hits me, it is a little daunting. In fact, one recent Shabbat morning during the silent meditations, I read a prayer in our new *Mishkan Tefila*. At that time my thoughts were turning towards the realization that very soon, I would be assuming this position.

From the section called T'filat ha Lev, prayers of the heart, these phrases captured the essence of my thoughts that day and even more so as I stand here this evening.

*Endow me with perception and courage
that I may serve others with compassion and love.*

That is my prayer.

Thank you all for this great honor.