

Kol Nidre

September 27, 2020 | 9 Tishrei 5781

Congregation Rodeph Sholom

Peter H. Ehrenberg

### High Holy Days Remarks

Thank you, Rabbi.

G'mar Tov, everyone. I hope that you are all well and able to meet the challenges that we are facing in dealing with the pandemic.

As this is my first opportunity to address the entire congregation as your President, I wanted to spend a few moments at the outset introducing myself. My pronouns are he, him, and his.

My wife Camille and I have been members of CRS for approximately 25 years. Our two adult daughters, Hannah and Zoe, celebrated their B'not Mitzvah at Rodeph Sholom, and Camille and I both had the wonderful experience of participating in the Adult B'nai Mitzvah process at CRS, albeit ten years apart. While Camille and I regularly pray and study at Rodeph Sholom and joyously participate in the Minyan program as Shamashim, our primary connection to CRS has been through social action, Camille through her leadership of our e-advocacy initiative and me through my involvement in Backpack Buddies and the Homeless Shelter. I also find my role as a regular volunteer at our Shireinu services to be an important part of my relationship with the Synagogue. I have been a member of the Board since 2013 and an officer for the past four years.

I also have two children by a prior marriage, each of whom celebrated their B'nai Mitzvah at a synagogue in New Jersey, and I am delighted to be "Poppy" to my two loving grandchildren.

My personal torah has been an ever-changing one. I am a Baby Boomer. While I was born at a time when the Allies had already defeated Hitler, the newsreels of the unforgettable and unforgiveable atrocities of the Holocaust were ever-present as I grew up. How could there be a God if the Nazis did what they did?

When I was nine years old, on a Sunday as sunny as September 11, 2001, my mother sat down next to me and told me words that I will never, ever forget. She said "Son, you will never see your father

again. He died two nights ago and we buried him this morning. I thought it would be too painful for you to attend the funeral.” How could there be a God who took my father from me and did not even let me say good-bye?

I wrestled with these questions for decades, largely going through the paces of being a Jew without full conviction, perhaps living some Jewish values but without a real connection to my Jewish roots. Things changed for me about 15 years ago, when I read Rabbi Levine’s third book, *What God Can Do For You Now*. In that book, he addresses my fundamental question about God. Rabbi Levine explains that the existence of evil and profound personal tragedies does not prove the absence of God. Instead, the existence of evil and personal tragedy demonstrate that God cannot do things alone, but instead needs our help in order to repair the world. As I read those words, a light bulb went off for me.

For decades, I was searching for a covenantal relationship. Thanks to Rabbi Levine and all of the other wonderful clergy at Rodeph Sholom, I have come to learn that through connections with other members of the synagogue and by praying to God, I can lead a purposeful life as a believing Jew.

As a believing Jew, I face Kol Nidre each year with awe and, frankly, with a significant degree of trepidation. For me, considering the Book of Life each year reminds me how precarious and precious life is. Each year, we ask ourselves what the next year will bring, without really knowing.

That uncertainty is exacerbated for us this year as we face the pandemic. Just as one year ago none of us could have foreseen the coronavirus, today none of us can be certain how this awful virus will evolve and how we will be able to get to the “other side” of the pandemic. With such uncertainty comes a level of anxiety and perhaps even darker thoughts that pervade our lives.

In periods of great uncertainty, we look for places that enable us to feel secure, safe and loved. In this regard, we are extremely fortunate to have our synagogue as our mainstay, our bedrock, our second home. As I wrote recently, while our sanctuary doors have been closed, our synagogue continues to be open to us in so many ways.

Our clergy spent their summers envisioning and then filming the extraordinary High Holy Days services that we are now participating in, while at the same time continuing to lead us in services,

officiating in life cycle events and providing us with the pastoral care that defines them. They have responded to amazing challenges—just imagine delivering an emotion-laden sermon or singing the poignant melodies of the High Holy Days, in each case to an empty Sanctuary. In more normal times, our clergy are able to look in our eyes and respond to our expressions. This year, they had no such prompts, and yet have imagined a remarkable and meaningful set of services for us.

Perhaps not as evident to you, because so much of their work is not out in the open, you should know that our staff has worked tirelessly to make CRS available to each of us throughout the pandemic. When I assumed my role as president, one of the first things that I did was to interview each member of the senior staff. I observed three constants that have become more and more evident to me as I interact with them—each member of the senior staff is a true professional in what they do, each of them takes great pride in their work, and each of them is passionate in their love for the synagogue. Those qualities then are passed on to the rest of our staff, who reflect similar qualities while at the same time fighting the personal struggles of the pandemic.

We have not tread water since this past March. Nor have we limited our focus to what life will look like on the other side of the pandemic. Our synagogue has evolved in so many different ways to assure that we each have access to all aspects of our Jewish identity. Our Shabbat services enable us to separate from the work week, connect with other members and experience the joys of Shabbat through the words and songs of our rabbis and cantors. As you view our website, you will see that we are re-envisioning education for all ages—in our remarkable schools and for pre-school and post-school learners—so that Jewish learning can continue to flourish. Even though we can't yet operate our homeless shelter or deliver backpacks, our social action teams continue to explore ways that we can make a difference in this fractured world. And, both fortunately and unfortunately, life cycle moments will go on; with our clergy, we will surely mark our joy and our grief in new but meaningful ways.

Of course, all of this comes at a significant cost. This year, we feel that cost in two additional ways brought on by the pandemic. First, there are expenses that we must incur this year to make sure that our building is safe for those who pass through our doors—our clergy, our staff and, on a limited basis, our members. We are graced by a wonderful building, but certainly not one that was built with the coronavirus in mind. We must remain ever-vigilant to assure our safety, albeit with additional costs. Second, we know that this year there are many within our midst who are being challenged

financially in ways that they could not have imagined, resulting in lost jobs and diminished businesses. What does this mean for the rest of us? As you have heard from my predecessors, we are only able to turn the lights on, pay our dedicated clergy and staff, and conduct our diverse and meaningful programming through the generosity of our members. We count on our annual membership dues and our Yom Kippur Appeal to meet our operating expenses. In a year when we are challenged by new expenses and when some among us cannot contribute to the extent that they have contributed in the past, it falls upon those of us who are able to support our wonderful Congregation, to pay our membership dues promptly and make our YKA pledges and contributions in order to sustain all that we do, so that we may continue to pray with each other, learn from each other, and heal the world together.

We, as a people, have risen to the occasion so many times in the past. We have met adversity with dedication. We have met challenge with commitment. We have met crushing blows to our daily lives with both passion and compassion. I have no doubt that this wonderful community will continue to live its Jewish values and will help to sustain this synagogue that we love, our second home.

May God bless you and keep you safe.