

50th anniversary sermon - First Day Rosh Hashanah 2017

Start with blowing shofar all around the room and calling tekiah

Lev 25:8-9 (*may skip first pasuk in hebrew*)

וְסָפַרְתָּ לְךָ שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָע שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וְהָיָה לְךָ יָמִי
שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָע שָׁנִים תִּשַׁע וְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה:

You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years.

וְהֶעֱבַרְתָּ שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבַעִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים
תִּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל־אַרְצְכֶם:

Then you shall sound the shofar; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land.

Beth Shalom was born in February 1968. We have now counted seven sets of seven years and sounded the shofar in this seventh month throughout this sacred space, proclaiming our 50th year.

As we proclaim reaching 50, let us begin with expressing our gratitude for reaching this age in health and strength, grateful for our blessings, through reciting *sheheyhanu* together.

Say bracha

50 years ago, on the 1st of Tishrei, 5729, this community met for its first high holidays. Congregation Beth Shalom was founded a half year prior with Herzl's decision to leave Seattle's central district and move to Mercer Island. With that decision, the dream to create a Conservative shul in North Seattle was launched. Not just any shul, but one from the beginning

with a vision of a community built and driven by its membership, with priority placed on learning, services and educating her youth.

Norm Rosenzweig, Beth Shalom's first president wrote and delivered many of the community's divrei torah during the shul's first decade. Norm articulated the vision of the founders of Beth Shalom in an early ruach article from June 1970:

“When we began, we wanted more than just another congregation, more than just a ‘North End’ shul. We wanted a Beth Shalom. We wanted a congregation of friends, of brothers, each caring for the other, each concerned with the other, each entitled to his share in the running of the congregation and in the work of the congregation, regardless of his station. We wanted more than a house of peace, we wanted a house of love. We wanted the kind of congregation in which we could grow spiritually and which would inspire our children to work and grow sharing this ‘Ruach’.

Thus the dream of Beth Shalom began, and thanks to much sweat and hard work, took off and flourished.

Our first high holiday services were held in a hall near Northgate with a choir from the new membership. To meet the shul's fundraising needs, members operated a fireworks stand, the shul president standing guard through the night to protect the fireworks. (ah - the never ending tasks of a shul president) That first Rosh hashanah, there was no ark, and the borrowed sifrei Torah rested on a table decorated with table cloths from Edith Horn and Dorothy Becker's homes. Everyone helped - men and women, adults and kids, whether you read torah, led services, cooked, taught Hebrew school, set up the chairs, helped with kids' programs, operated the mimeograph machine or gave out makzorim. The shul was initially entirely lay led. It met for its first two years in the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church. And in the fall of 1970, we moved to our current location, initially renting it from the Unitarian church and purchasing it in 1973. And in 1979, 11 years after her founding, Rabbi Ira Stone was hired as the first rabbi of Beth Shalom.

By the first high holidays, hard working founding families managed to recruit 48 member households willing to give this new start up a try. We are fortunate today to have in this sanctuary a number of those original members and their children who were present that first Rosh Hashanah: Dorothy Becker and her daughter Arlene (Becker) Azose, Edith Horn, Sylvia Stern and her daughter Hilary Stern, Doris Stiefel her son Mark Stiefel, Inna Lacker and her daughter Gail Lacker, Betsy Schneier, Marvin Stern, Mark Isaac, Rick and Frank Kustina.

Some of you here today remember first hand 1968, and others like me, have learned about it.

Indulge me in reminiscing about our founding with memories from then.

The radio blasted top music hits Light My Fire by the Doors, Respect by Aretha Franklin, and All you Need is Love by the Beatles. Pink Floyd had their first American tour and the musical Hair opened on Broadway. In the world series the Saint Louis Cardinals playing the Detroit Tigers and Haight-Ashbury hippies throwing a funeral in San Francisco to mark the end of "the summer of love".

Also that month, tens of thousands of anti-Vietnam War protesters marched on the Pentagon and the world worried about a series of nuclear tests performed by the USSR. The first successful human liver transplant took place and the city of London saw the installation of the world's first ATM.

Israel and the Jewish people were in the midst of experiencing a period of national euphoria following the unbelievable military victory by the Israeli army in the 6 day war in June 1967, when East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and the Sinai desert were captured from Jordan, Egypt and Syria. With their capture, a large number of Palestinians fell under Israeli rule. A new unified and enlarged Jerusalem was created, including both east and west Jerusalem and the old city. Jews returned to visiting the Kotel, the old city and travelled freely in these newly conquered

areas. Jews experienced their first Rosh Hashanah in 1897 years with Jerusalem under Jewish sovereignty.

The Six Day war created a tremendous increase in pride in the Jewish diaspora and excited Zionist passions with record numbers of Jews inspired to make aliya and move to Israel from all over including Jews in the Soviet Union, who subsequently applied for exit visas and began protesting for their right to immigrate to Israel. At the same time, there was a rise in Anti-semitic sentiment and purges in communist countries and the entire Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe (with the exception of Romania) broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. And the Jewish populations in Arab countries faced persecution, mob attacks, seizing of property, house arrests and expulsion.

The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 242 which suggested a land for peace formula and recognized the right of "every state in the area to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force."

Much has changed and much has remained the same over these past 50 years:

The songs All You Need is Love, RESPECT and Light My Fire continue to be popular. Rapid advances in science and technology continue to transform our world.

We continue to worry about foreign nuclear ambitions, weapon testing and Russian military power and expansionist intentions.

We still face frightening manifestations of terrorism, Anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment and UN resolution 242 is still the basis of conversations about a permanent peace agreement.

Protests and marching in Washington remain an important means of expressing dissent and opposition. And we too have a high level of frustration with policies and leadership of our presidency.

And our world has changed with the introduction of the web, smartphones, Amazon prime and advances in technology that have allowed increase access, possibilities and communication all over the globe.

Israel has gone from being a source of universal Jewish pride to a much more complicated subject that is often is a source of tension within the Jewish community and progressive communities.

Here at Beth Shalom, the original vision of the founders is very much still the heart of our community:

Our strength and success is built on our foundation of tremendously dedicated lay leaders and volunteers. Our members are active in every aspect of our congregation - we are the envy of many communities with our huge number of Torah readers, shatzes, minyan leaders, mitzvah corps volunteers, students of Torah, and helpers for whatever our community needs. Volunteers continue to cook shabbat meals and honey cake for the shul in a very small, busy kitchen, each with their own different menu. And we share our love and caring through delivering homemade food from sending a cookie campaign to Jewish servicemen stationed in Vietnam in our first year, to the loving meals of our mitzvah corps, and participation in a number of programs providing food for Seattle's hungry.

We prioritize caring for each other and supporting one another in the face of the loneliness and harshness of life with an active mitzvah corps and our members actively supporting and celebrating with one another.

We seek to grow and learn Jewishly at every age and try to instill within our children a passion for Judaism. We believe Torah, our calendar and system of mitzvot are intended to anchor and guide us, providing meaning and redirecting us when we have strayed from our calling to be ethical, compassionate, justice driven human beings.

We strive to be a house of peace and love - a place where all our welcome, treated with respect, seeing the spark of the divine inside each individual and working to bring more peace and healing to our world.

And we too have seen changes.

We have gone from 4 families at our founding, to multiply ten fold by the first high holidays to multiply another almost tenfold now at our 50th anniversary.

With the busyness of many dual career households and longer commuting times, volunteer time is more limited and we have added staff to help with tasks and run our larger, more complex organization.

We have opened up an early childhood center and expanded to have our own teen learning program. We continue to research and seek to practice the most impactful ways to educate our youth.

Our community has become more diverse with our members coming from a variety of backgrounds and spanning many different demographics. The variety of Jewish choices being made by our community is staggering.

And our lunches have gone from classic ashkenazi Jewish cuisine with kugel, herring and pickles to include fair trade coffee and tea, compostable lunches, and much more quinoa, kale, and gluten free fare.

What does turning 50 means to us - personally and communally? What should we be doing at this point in our communal life?

Many of us see 50 as a significant milestone - sometimes in positive anticipation for this next stage of life, excited for new possibilities. And sometimes in dread that it's all decline after 50. And sometimes realizing it has passed without much fanfare or change.

Pirkei Avot, in a description of the different stages of life, suggests

בֶּן חֲמִשִּׁים לְעֶצְרָה

At age 50, we have reached the time of advice. We have lived enough, studied enough, worked enough, succeeded and failed enough to be able to have greater self-reflection and understanding. We are able to look back over our mistakes and use our wisdom to teach others.

So CBS - What have we learned from our self-reflection? Where have we lived up to our potential and where have we missed the mark or fallen off the path? When have we not dreamed enough or dreamed too much? What mistakes have we made? And what is the reason for our successes? What have we learned from our 50 years that can be of use to ourselves, our community and our world?

Where do we need to be guided back to our core values? And how do we institute this rebalancing?

The Torah built in a system to reset the equilibrium and give the land a rest every seven years, with the sabbatical or shmita year. And after seven sets of these seven year cycles, we have a major reset beginning with announcing the 50th year with the blowing of the shofar. We are called to sanctify the 50th year, and returning to the divine egalitarian vision of balance in this world, proclaiming liberty to all the inhabitants of the land, freeing them from debt slavery and financial bondage, with people able to freely move about and return to their lands and families. The land is given

a year left in its natural state with no cultivation, with all having equal access to eat of its fruit and we are commanded not to wrong one another but fear God.

The laws of the Jubilee year detailed in chapter 25 of the book of Leviticus are intended to be a correction to the regular occurrences of displacement, corruption, injustices and wandering off the path that has taken place in the process of living during the other 49 years. This reset was intended to go beyond the 50th year and influence how we live in the remaining 49 years. The Yovel year is about a system of speaking and practicing divine truth in the face of those who hold power by recognizing the essential liberty and freedom of every individual person and undoing the power dynamics of one or a few individuals having control over others.

וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל
 יוֹבֵל הוּא תְהִיָּה לָכֶם וְשַׁבְתֶּם אִישׁ אֶל-אֲחֻזָּתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל-מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ
 תָּשֻׁבוּ:

“We shall make holy the 50th year and Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all inhabitants thereof. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to your family”
 (Leviticus 25:10).

As Americans we know part of this verse from its inscription on the liberty bell. The bell was commissioned on the 50th anniversary of the passing of William Penn’s Charter, Pennsylvania’s original constitution. The bell was designed to represent the freedoms valued by the Pennsylvania colony with its novel ideas on religious freedom, granting religious liberty to all its inhabitants, and citizen participation in government.

This vision from the mitzvah of the Yovel year has been a rallying call throughout generations to bring greater liberty to inhabitants in this land. The abolitionists adopted it as a symbol to end slavery and changed it’s

name from the “state house bell” to the name “liberty bell”. A replica of the bell with its clapper chained to its side and silenced travelled the country to promote women’s suffrage until women won the right to vote.

But as we know having the bell on display is not enough. We need to heed its call to pursue liberty for all the inhabitants of the land.

וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל-יֹשְׁבֵיהָ

The Torah place the obligation of practicing the laws of this year on all of us - we are to proclaim liberty to all the inhabitants of this land, not just to the slaves, not just to the citizens, because in a state where there is no freedom, for even a minority of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are affected. The Torah teaches that everyone’s fates are tied up with one another, and that lasting security and sufficiency on the land depends on everyone being free and the land being left alone for a year.

What does it mean to have dror - translated as release or liberty? Different commentators suggested it means herut - freedom (RH 9b) or the ability to live (medayyer) in any dwelling (dayyra) and engages in commerce in any country (Rabbi Yehuda) under no one else’s authority (Rashi). Or perhaps the word dror is connected to the hebrew word dor which means generation, as when we practice dror we create security for the generations (Nahmanides).

Commentators noticed that this same word - dror, is also used in the Tanakh for the name of a bird, the swallow, which was seen to fly and move around without limitation and free from authority (Rava bar Rav Huna in Shabbat 106b). The commentator Ibn Ezra explains that this bird, the dror, will not sing unless it is free. And this bird is not alone in only singing when it is free.

But practicing this biblical commandment and ideal is no easy task - it always was and will be challenging.

Indeed, we don't know if the jubilee year was ever practiced. The rabbis later limited the mitzvah's application to a time when all of the tribes of Israel lived in the land of Israel and from the beginning of entering the land of Israel in the book of Joshua, this did not happen with some of the tribes lived outside the land (and have now disappeared).

Today, we have lost count of the yovel - not knowing when the 50th year is. This is in contrast to the shmita (sabbatical year) every seven years which we continue to count and observe every seven years in the land of Israel. While the actual practice of the Yovel would be challenging to implement, our world is less just and more precarious without this visionary system of repair.

But must it be lost? How might we implement its vision as a paradigm for our community and our engagement with the world?

We have an opportunity to ask ourselves what a 50th year should mean and accomplish and be guided by the mitzvah of the yovel which teaches it is upon all of us to make this year sacred:

וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה

You shall sanctify the 50th year - You - plural, not an individual, not God, but all of us.

So how do we sanctify the year?

On the Beth Shalom front, we have chosen to sanctify our 50th year through a series of opportunities that showcase and exemplify our communities core values, and celebrate our past and help secure our vision for the future. Our celebrations have been designed to reflect our core values with opportunities to build community through 50 gatherings of Pleasure of Your Company, to celebrate Shabbat with our night of 50 shabbat dinners, to increase our involvement in chesed with our 50 acts of

chesed challenge, to increase Torah study with our special opportunities to learn Torah, to deepen our religious and spiritual practices with a 50 day challenge over the Omer, to financially securing our future with our Gala in February and culminating celebration in May, and participate in many acts of tzedek - justice and involvement in the greater world.

We hope all of our community will participate in many of these opportunities, challenges and programs throughout the year.

But this is only the start. We have lost the practice of the Jubilee year, but not the need. With the losing of the biblical count of the Jubilee year, our own CBS community count of the 50th year is an opportunity to reinstate the values of the Jubilee year. We are to sanctify the year. There is much self- reflection and action to take. How do we make each and every person, not just many of us, but all of us, feel truly honored? How do we practice peace - rodef shalom with people whose ideas are different from our own? How do we practice the precepts of the Yovel in our community: ensuring liberty and respecting the land's need for rest? How do we make manifest the divine vision both within and beyond our sanctuary walls. The biblical prescription calls for proclaiming dror throughout the land throughout the United States, and throughout the globe. Our nation is full of individuals yearning for liberty and to sing freely their song. And the numbers multiply exponentially around the globe. How do we help make the vision of the Jubilee year possible? And within the Jewish community, we have people who feel they too do not have full dignity and respect - perhaps some of you here in this room feel this way or your loved ones or acquaintances do. How do we shift the way we see, treat and protect everyone so that every person and the land enjoys this utopian ideal of the Yovel?

We're embarking on our 50th anniversary. Let us celebrate and sanctify this milestone and not let it pass us by. Let us be inspired by the significance of 50 years in Jewish tradition, engaging in self-reflection and using judgement to share advice wisely at this time of eitzah. Let us heed

the rallying call of the shofar ushering in the charge of the Yovel, each of us responsible for sanctifying the year.

In a few seconds, we will blow the shofar again as a way of proclaiming our 50th year. As the shofar is sounded, consider how you will sanctify this year, and proclaim liberty to all its inhabitants, allowing all to sing as the song of the dror, the free swallow.

Tekiah Gedola. Shofar is sounded