

Annual Report – Rabbi Ilene Bogosian
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill
May 6, 2018/21 Iyar 5778

Today we mark the end of a year of transition. Today we anticipate the beginning of a year of enrichment and exploration. This is not the first time Emanu-El has been through transition. The congregation has now been serving the Jews of Haverhill for eighty years. If a human generation is twenty years, then our shul has been through four generations. We all know what happens when a new generation takes over! There are changes! The older generations grouse about it. But – they are also proud to see the next generation take the helm. For eighty years the older ones have had the *naches* of seeing all the sometimes-irritating innovations the young ones bring. So, in a way—Emanu-El has not been—and over time—will not be the same synagogue the first generation founded, or the one reinvented by the second, third and fourth generation. Each new Emanu-El has been built on the foundations of the ones that came before. We are about to embark on the fifth generation of growth and change at Temple Emanu-El. You have some wonderful foundation stones to support the next version of our shul. You are building Emanu-El 5.0. How will you build it? You will build it to fulfill the needs of 21st century Jews and their families. And you already have some blue prints. Your first building plan is the Torah. You also have your own statements about what is important for this particular group of Jews. I looked at our web site to see what you have said about how you serve Greater Haverhill's Jews.

Our web site says: Temple Emanu-El is a dynamic Reform congregation with a traditional, yet creative orientation serving a community of diverse needs and backgrounds. Since 1937, members of the Jewish community of Greater Haverhill have joined together to express our Jewish identities through worship, education, social action, friendship, and socialization.

First, I noticed the words "... Reform congregation with a traditional, yet creative orientation." This congregation does not conform to what have been the standard definitions of Jewish communities for the last 70 years or so. We are a Reform congregation, but we are traditional—a word open to a universe of interpretations—and we are creative. In this year 2018 which is 5778 on the Jewish calendar—you need creativity to discern the right mix of Reform, traditional and creative that will serve our present members and our future members—of all ages and stages of Jewish life. Because you have had to be agile to embrace the rich variety of families and individuals in this community, you are better prepared for the 21st century than some more narrowly defined congregations.

Next in your blue print there's a list. You are joined together to express your Jewish identities through worship, education, social action, friendship, and socialization. Your list echoes the Talmud tractate Pirke Avot 1:2 which states "The world rests on three things, Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim". Torah we know about, Avodah is translated as worship, and gemilut hasadim means acts of loving kindness. So again—our current blue prints are strengthened when they rest on the foundations of the ones that came before—in this case thousands of years before.

This year I have witnessed the actions that express the commitments made by your list. It has been my honor to lead worship this year. It has been a joy to share the bima with our Cantor. I'm glad to have continued the relatively newer tradition of Reform services once a month and know that the ongoing conversations about worship style among clergy, the Religious Practices Committee, the Board and the community will be interesting and fertile. I know that you will continue exploration in the area the Talmud calls avodah. Avodah does not only mean worship. That word also means work—and it takes work to plan and lead services that are meaningful for our community. Fred Feldman and the Religious Practices Committee have already begun the conversation.

Next on the list—Education

I've had the joy of both teaching and learning here at Emanu-El this year. You have great strengths and you have challenges. But then, who doesn't in this rapidly changing world of ours. The Religious School, under the leadership of Debbi Levasseur, is a place that our kids like to be. I've enjoyed the time I've spent teaching and kibitzing around with your children. What a varied, talented and curious group! The adults who come to Torah Shiur and Israel Havurah are equally assertive. From them, I have probably learned more than I have taught.

Adult Education here has such rich offerings. Karen Newborn and her committee have brought world class talent to Emanu-El through their annual Author Series. I hear that they have already lined up some exciting authors for next year. I have not attended the Book Group but I've looked in on them through the window of the Mandell Conference Room and seen the energy they bring to their explorations of literature.

And then—Social Action

We are commanded by the Torah to share the blessings we have and to foster blessing for others. Under the leadership of David Belsky and supported by Cantor Broekhuysen, our Social Action Committee has led our congregation in activities that serve others and that support the needs of those in need to Tzedakah—both in the material sense and in the sense that Tzedek also means justice. I hope this arm of our congregational life will continue to grow.

Finally—Friendship and Socialization

This foundation block covers a lot of territory. Our expressions of “acts of loving kindness” cover our Chesed Committee, helping in times of crisis and supporting those who can't get to shul any more. Sharyn Russell and her committee are among the angels of this community. And then there are the more routine acts of kindness: giving someone who can't drive a ride to services or other events, the warmth of your welcome to strangers who come through our doors. Underlying all of these—is friendship. You care about each other and you enjoy spending time together. Sometimes I think that the most important form of worship we have is your enjoyment of each other's company at Oneg or Kiddush, or Paint Night, or the annual picnic and so many more.

Change is a challenge. Even when it is “shul as usual” we all have to respond to changes. People leave, people pass away, new people arrive and need our welcome. The world does not stand still, especially these days. Congregational life is like New England weather. You never know what's next. We always have to expect the unexpected. That is part of the normal rhythm of synagogue life. But you have the tools to navigate whatever the weather of the 21st century may send your way. You have strong foundations. On those strong stones you will build the renovations you need to move Temple Emanu-El into its future. And, knowing you, you will have a wonderful time together doing it!

During this year you gave me a great honor. You invited me to share your lives. I have had the joy of witnessing and participating in our community as we lived out the core values of Judaism. I appreciate all of you. Some are leaders who give hours of time and energy to Emanu-El. Some (often those who are not at a life stage when they have time available) contribute their presence. Every one of you is part of that foundation that I spoke of earlier. May you build a beautiful future for Temple Emanu-El! I'll be watching from a distance to see how it all turns out. I will miss you, but I know you'll be in good hands!