Gerald Gamm Rosh Hashanah Speech

Gamm, Gerald

Thank you for accepting the honor of offering greetings from the officers and board on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Monday, September 26. Your honor will take place just before the ark is opened for the Torah service on page 96 of the High Holy Day prayer book.

When did Jews become an urban people? If I think today of my four great-grandfathers, all of them immigrants, I count a cobbler, a rabbi, a tailor, and the owner of a small general store on the Boston Post Road in White Plains. In the still-gendered world of my grandparents, I count a lawyer and the manager of a shoe heel factory. My father is an orthodontist and my mother was trained as a teacher. No one in my family was a farmer. I could go back many generations, to shtetls in Eastern Europe, and there's not a farmer in the lot. All of them lived in towns, working at some trade or another.

It's not just my family! This is true of every person in this sanctuary, or at least nearly every person. Okay, some of us may keep the occasional chicken coop or tend a small vegetable garden, but Temple Beth El is not a congregation of farmers. If we suddenly need a doctor or a lawyer, we are flush. Ask if there's a doctor in the house, and a quarter of this congregation will respond, and we'll start sorting people by specialty. And we're pretty solid on the attorney front also. But if we need to find someone who woke up today milking cows or someone who yesterday was harvesting an apple crop, we're out of luck. And I'm willing to guess that, in all the synagogues in all the countries in this world, we will find only a small number of farmers gathering today.

And yet: listen to our prayers, heed our holidays. We pray for rain, so that our crops might flourish. We recall our pilgrimage festivals, timed with the rhythm of the seasons. In our prayers and in the sacred texts we cherish, we plant, we sow, we harvest, and we bring our produce to the Temple in Jerusalem. We still count the omer, sheaves of corn, to measure the time between Pesach and Shavuot? Still? As if we couldn't just count out the days for weeks. That's how we measure time, by counting grain? Apparently, we even have goats readily on hand. Some we sacrifice to thank God for our bounty. One, in ten days, we will send out to the wilderness with our sins.

So how did it come to this? How is that we and our ancestors, a people rich with accountants and teachers and merchants and doctors and nurses and bankers and human resource professionals and corporate leaders and factory owners and scholars, how is it that we still situate of ourselves, in our prayers, as a nation of farmers? When did we stop being an agrarian people?

In a brilliant book, two economists, Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, offer a startling answer to this question. Until they began their research, there was a standard answer out there, which I'm sure many of us have heard: Why weren't Jews farmers in Eastern Europe? Well, the standard answer is that they were forbidden to own land. So they were forced to take up other professions, such as finance or trade or medicine or scholarship.

But Botticini and Eckstein find that the evidence doesn't support that thesis. Instead, they trace our drift from agriculture to urban life to a seismic event 2,000 years in the past: the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. In that moment, the old religion died. Our leadership shifted from priests to rabbis, from the mystery of animal sacrifice to a religion centered on reading, story-telling, sharing praises of God, community, and memory.

The writings themselves—the stories of our past and the lessons within them—became sacred texts. And we built an entirely new religion around these sacred texts. As Botticini and Eckstein argue, Jews remained farmers at first, but their religion now demanded literacy. And sending a son off to school meant losing a farmhand. So many Jews—those who prized their son the farmhand over the demands of this strange new, literacy-based faith—drifted away and were lost to Judaism. Over time, the Jews who remained were fewer in number, but they had become a literate people. And, as cities grew, in ancient times and medieval times, Jews found their ability to read, which, if anything had gotten in the way of their farming, gave them an extraordinary tool to flourish in urban centers.

And read they did! For the last 2,000 years, this urban people has gathered to tell their stories and remember when they were an agricultural people. These stories became our sacred texts.

It is one of the great unheralded miracles of Judaism, that our people continued despite the great rupture 2,000 years ago. That the farmers became teachers and doctors. That the memory of the past, and the stories we carry from generation to generation—l'dor v'dor—shape our present.

This was a great rupture, but what both eras had in common was that they took for granted the ability to be Jews together in person. Whether it was the Temple in Jerusalem, or their village synagogue, Jews have always come together, in person to worship, to celebrate, to grieve, to remember. When we confess our sins, we confess in the plural. When we traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem, we found crowds. Whether it is a time for grieving or a time of joy, we Jews travel in packs.

All this ended abruptly in March 2020. When the pandemic began, we locked this building and allowed no one to enter. Think about that for a moment. A grand structure, at the corner of Winton Road and Hillside Avenue, the home of a congregation that had just celebrated its centennial and had, only months before, inaugurated its beautiful new sanctuary, was shuttered. We told one another that we could not enter because it was not safe for us to be together.

With no guidebook and no precedent, we had to invent a Judaism when we couldn't be together. If the destruction of the Temple was a rupture, this pandemic was equally a rupture, a moment when technology allowed us to do something previously unimaginable.

Many of these days were profoundly lonely. For Pesach in 2020, Charles and I sat alone in our house, in front of a Zoom screen, with each of the households in my extended family sitting in their own small box on our computer, scattered from

Providence to Seattle. One family member, who lived by herself in Manhattan, started sobbing when we went around to ask how people were doing. My sister got married on Zoom that summer. My nephew was bar mitzvahed on Zoom that fall.

But, at a time when we couldn't come to temple, Temple Beth El came to us. Rosh Hashanah came into our homes, and we heard the shofar, socially distanced, in the temple parking lot. There was Hannukah at home, with those hot toddies. Holiday after holiday, Zoom Shabbat after Zoom Shabbat, this synagogue did not slow down. In the many long months when we couldn't celebrate kiddush together, we had kiddush to go. And when we returned, tentatively, to this sanctuary, in still-small numbers, we welcomed participants in the room alongside virtual participants.

In the last great rupture, 2,000 years ago, we never lost our ability to gather together as a community. Today, in this Sanctuary, we return, in nearly full force, after another great rupture, and this time we do not take for granted our ability to be here in person—or our ability to livestream the service if we are still at home. We have been making history of our own these last three years, and I am grateful for all the innovations that these times have spurred and also for the privilege of being here, in this room, with all of you. Look at the Kol and see all that is going on in this building and through this congregation, through these holidays and in the year to come. Being present with all of you, in this magnificent space on this holy day: I will never take this for granted again.

We are an urban people who tell stories of our agrarian forefathers. Telling stories is what we have been doing for 2,000 years. So let us now tell stories of our resilience, of our ability to transmute ancient practices into modern rituals. And let others in the future recall our time—the time when we stopped taking one another for granted—as the landmark that it is.

On behalf of the officers and the board of trustees, I am privileged to be here today and to welcome you on this day filled with hope and trembling. Shana tova u'metukah. May we all have a sweet and good year ahead.

Gerald Gamm Kol Nidrei Speech

Gamm, Gerald

I stand here tonight with a simple question: Why are we here, on this night and in this Sanctuary? Why are you here? Or maybe, for each of us, the right question to ask is, Why am I here?

We have busy lives. The world, frankly, is a mess right now. There is so much work out there that we need to do, and yet we are here.

No one made us come. On the contrary, getting here, on a weeknight, after a workday or a school day, rushing through dinner before the sun began to set, is a genuine inconvenience. I was teaching a seminar this afternoon—on race, history, and urban politics—and didn't get to leave campus until after 5:00. Driving home, my mind was racing. What would we eat? How much time would I have to get this suit on, bowtie and all? But we are here. We made a choice to be here.

It's an odd choice, if I look at the numbers. Most of my siblings aren't in synagogues tonight. Most of my Jewish friends aren't in synagogues tonight. Large numbers of our fellow congregants aren't here tonight or even watching the livestream at home.

Each of us chose freely to be here, and each of us came to this decision in our own way.

So why am I here? I offer three answers, really three variations on the same question.

Why do I need to be in a synagogue on the high holy days? I'm a creature of habit, so that's part of it. I appreciate the role that institutions—rituals, holidays, synagogues—play in our lives. I value community.

But a big part of my answer is personal. Being in a synagogue on the high holy days connects me with my past. It makes me feel like I'm part of something bigger than me. When I was a child, in Sharon, Massachusetts—my childhood rabbi was Shamai Kanter, who will be familiar to many in this room, since he moved west somewhere, to

Rochester it turns out, after his years in Sharon—the high holy days were a family affair. My mom's parents lived a few houses down the street from ours, on the way to our synagogue, so the six of us would walk together to temple—my mom, my dad, my three siblings, and me—and we'd pick up my grandparents as we continued the walk. Once we made it to the temple, we were all fidgety, all three generations of us. My grandmother kept candies in her purse, which she'd unwrap and dole out as the services went on (only on Rosh Hashanah, of course). The four of us would run in and out of the sanctuary, playing with our friends in the hallways and in the parking lot.

I remember, as a young child, walking into the temple one Yom Kippur and hearing a radio. It was startling—a radio, in a Conservative synagogue, on Yom Kippur. As we all learned that morning, Israel had been invaded by Egypt and Syria. I remember another Yom Kippur when we suddenly thought my father was having a heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital; he turned out to be fine. I remember a Kol Nidre service where our rabbi gave us constant updates on the progress of a Red Sox playoff game. This was the music of my childhood.

In our temple, we sat in old-fashioned wooden pews. We were there for each of our four bar and bat mitzvahs.

My mom died when I was 26. She had just turned 50.

That August, when I was in graduate school, we were back there as a family for my mom's funeral. All of us were there, including my four grandparents, sitting in those same pews. Three weeks later, we were all back in those pews for the high holy days. When our rabbi delivered his sermon that year for Yom Kippur, I was certain he was speaking directly to us and our grief.

The last line of Aveinu Malkeinu—from the Yom Kippur liturgy—brought me comfort in those years. I would sing the line to myself, in consolation and sadness, in the months

before and after my mother passed away, walking each evening back from campus to my room.

Those memories, those bonds with the past, that sense of community and the passage of time: that is why I am here.

But why Beth El? At first, I was a stranger in a new city, and I was an outsider in this synagogue. But my old memories, from a distant synagogue, brought me here. I wandered in and out of this congregation for years, even found a home for a time at the University of Rochester Hillel, then came back here.

Why am I here, in Beth El, on this day? So many of you are the reason why. When I first moved here, Anita and Fred Dushay, parents of a college friend, made sure to include me in their high holiday traditions. Other members brought me into their homes for Shabbat dinners. Year after year, for the last twenty years, two families in this congregation have welcomed me, and now my husband, into their homes for Rosh Hashanah lunches.

I am here today because some of you paid attention to this stranger. You texted me on erev Shabbat to ask if I'd be at services, and you never judge me if I show up late for services but linger for kiddush. When Charles and I prepared to get married, and the congregation had never announced a same-gender wedding or an interfaith wedding in its emails, you smashed precedents and made us both feel welcome. And Irwin, Irwin Goldberg, how can I not show up for Shabbat services when you're the one greeting me the moment I walk in the door? I dare any of you to come on Shabbat, to be greeted by Irwin, and to not feel immediately at home. And how can I not cherish a congregation that followed us home, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and Chanukah and so many other occasions, during the worst of the pandemic? Where so many, above all Debbie Zeger, never stopped believing in this community?

So why are we in a synagogue for Kol Nidre?

And why are we in this synagogue, Temple Beth El?
Those are two variations of my question.

But there is a third variation, and it is existential. Why are we here? Here, on this earth? Here, in this life?

That is the central question of Yom Kippur.

The paradox of Jewish prayer on Yom Kippur is that we are reminded constantly of our insignificance, of how small our existence is next to God's majesty. Listen to the U'natene Tokef:
Each person's origin is dust, and each person will return to the earth having spent life seeking sustenance. We are compared to:
A broken shard
Withering grass
A shriveled flower
A passing shadow
A fading cloud
A fleeting breeze
Scattered dust
A vanishing dream.

And yet, on this day, on Yom Kippur, these broken people insist on their dreams and have faith in the redemptive power of t'shuvah, t'zadakah, and t'fillah. We realize that we have no idea what the next year will bring, even whether we will see another Yom Kippur. We trust our God to hear us. We gather together to worship and to share stories, to repeat the same prayers year after year, and to be reminded why, truly, we are here.

To be together, to comfort one another in our grief, to cry as we remember the women and men of this congregation whom we cherished and whose seats are now empty, to

smile at the children running around the room, and to sit up, straight and at attention, when we read haftarah on Yom Kippur morning.

The words of that haftarah come from Isaiah.

The people Israel, we discover, are fasting, but God does not hear their prayers.
“Why, when we fasted, did You not see?” they ask.
“When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”
Because, God answers, on your fast day
You see to your business and oppress all your laborers!
Because you fast in strife and contention!
Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast?

No, this is the fast that I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly.
Your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard.
Then, when you call, Adonai will answer.
When you cry, God will say: Here I am.

To reckon with our own selves, to stir those better angels of our nature, to be reminded that we are knit as one as a community, is why, I believe, each of us is here tonight. At

some level, conscious or not, that yearning is what brings us together on this solemn day.

On behalf of the officers and the board of trustees, I am privileged to greet you all. G’mar chatimah tova.