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.