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.