

Mark Raffman Kol Nidre Address

I'm Mark Raffman, President of Beth Chaverim Reform Congregation. Welcome. We look forward to a moving Kol Nidrei service with our Rabbi, Linda Joseph, and cantorial soloist, Susan Mandel Giblin, and our musicians.

It is traditional for the President of the Congregation to give a "State of the Congregation" speech on Erev Yom Kippur at the Kol Nidre Service.

As many of you know, I find inspiration from my deceased grandfather, Max Goodman. Max was a tough *and plain-spoken* businessman who brought himself up from nothing to retire to Florida in relative luxury. There he rediscovered his Jewish heritage and faith. I'm wearing his tallit tonight.

I tried to think about what Max would want me to tell you.

And I think he'd want me to remind everyone what is at stake.

He would say: "*Five thousand years and it comes down to you.*"

He would ask: *What kind of example will you set?*

Thousands of years of Jewish wisdom, tradition and culture.

The Lower East side where our grandparents scraped out a living with pushcarts and sewing machines. The modest *shtetl* where *their* grandparents welcomed Shabbat with their families. Dancing at the crossing of the Red Sea. Fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto. We've been through a lot together.

You know, it has never been easier to be a Jew than it is right here, right now, in America in the year 5772.

But - It has never been easier to forget what it means to be a Jew than it is right here, right now. Max would remind me of this.

We're all busy. We don't have the time or the inclination to be "All Jewish, all the time."

But since we're here together, on the holiest night of the year, let's acknowledge: We inherited a legacy that is worth passing on.

The sages teach: You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to set it aside.

From this Yom Kippur to the next, let's each resolve that we will do *something* – something more than we did last year – to make Judaism a "living" part of our lives. To "live Jewish" as the sign says.

So let's talk about what that means for Beth Chaverim Reform Congregation.

What would Max want me to say about our synagogue?

I know what he'd tell me – he'd say, *Tell the Emmis – it's a Florida word for truth.*

And the truth is, we have much to be proud of.

And the truth is, we have much to be concerned about.

What are we proud of?

We have a building of our own and a full-time rabbi with a world of experience and learning.

We have an excellent religious school with a brand new curriculum.

Our Shabbat worship services have never had better attendance.

We keep building our musical talent – our last Jammin' Shabbat had about a dozen musicians.

We brought back the picnic.

We have new festival programs this year – I can't wait for Simchat Torah.

We have some really neat new member families – let's all get to know them.

Tikva, our interfaith organization, is a model for fostering understanding among the faith communities in Loudoun County.

Our congregation is the flagship for Reform Judaism in Loudoun County.

We provide a welcoming and accepting environment for the diverse expression of Jewish values and practice, including for families in which one spouse is from a different faith. I believe we are unique in that regard.

And what are we concerned about? What troubles us? What keeps the President awake at night?

For one thing, our overall membership is down this year. Sure, we're in a bad economy. But that is not all. And so we are renewing our efforts to be the kind of congregation where people feel a connection and want to stay.

Another big challenge is human resources. We don't have an administrative staff. Sometimes our volunteers get burned out. Sometimes we have nobody to answer the phone, or make copies. It is not easy to run a synagogue with an all-volunteer army.

A third big challenge is money. We continue to operate at a deficit. Our cash balances are lower than they were at this time last year. And that is a problem.

The challenges are formidable.

And we are meeting them. We may not complete the work, but we will not set aside the task we have taken up.

We have improved the religious school curriculum and refocused membership efforts. We are undertaking discussions with the bank about restructuring our mortgage. We are looking at other options to reduce expenses.

And we are undertaking a Kol Nidre appeal. Jen Elgin will discuss our appeal in a moment, but let me say a few words about it.

Does our appeal mean we are desperate for money?

Max would remind me that *“everybody does a KN appeal”*. It’s a normal part of synagogue life.

Having said that, if anyone wants to discuss the details of our synagogue’s finances and how your contribution will make a difference, call me and we can go through the numbers together.

“A Kol Nidrei appeal is normal.”

But don’t people get tired of these appeals, year after year?

Max might ask, *“Did you stop feeding your children today because you fed them yesterday? I’m tired of feeding you. Why are you hungry again?”*

Whoa why would anyone think of a synagogue like their own child?

Well, why not? Your child is a projection of yourself into the future. Your synagogue is the projection of our shared culture, our shared faith, our shared values -- into the future.

But Max would say that’s not enough. *“People feed their children because they love them. People will support what they love.”*

What is there to love about a synagogue? Here, I have to speak for myself, but I will speak from the heart.

What do I love about Beth Chaverim Reform Congregation?

I love the joy of worshipping here – with guitars and music and people I want to be with.

I love seeing our kids grow up with a connection to Jewish friends and culture. I love seeing the look of recognition on their faces when they hear a Hebrew phrase or a Jewish concept that they recognize.

I love that this community needs me, wants me, welcomes me, inspires me to participate. I'm more than a phone number and a name in the directory. And it's been that way from the moment I walked in the door ten years ago.

I love the moments of connection with other people – a hug for someone who has lost a loved one, a kind word of thanks, a high five and a beer when the brotherhood finishes building the sukkah (this weekend, boys).

I love that we can be a force of good in our community – delivering food to hungry people, serving as a model of interfaith tolerance.

I love that we can be a welcoming home for diverse Jewish families. People feel comfortable here.

I *want* to support this community.

It know I am not alone. I know that there are others who feel the same way and who will answer the call. And still more, worshipping with us tonight, who would come to feel the same love for this House of Friends, if you will draw closer. Come to services. Participate in a food drive. Come hang out with the Brotherhood or Sisterhood. Join us.

Because together I believe we can make all the difference.

L'Shanah Tovah.