

Shanah tovah. I'm honored to talk to you this evening as the president of the board of this holy and wholly engaging community. I have some remarks as we close the gates on 5778, a year which I'm certain to keep writing on checks for the next few weeks.

Song is one of the ways we create our community at Shir Tikvah, the song of hope. At many of our services we sing

מה טובו אלהיך. יעקב: משכנותיך. ישראל.
Mah tovu, ohalecha yaakov, mishkenotecha yisrael

This opening phrase is often translated as “How great are your synagogue building funds, O Jacob, your suburban conference centers, O Israel!” Or, perhaps more accurately, “How great are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” The words are attributed to a stranger, Balaam, who, upon seeing the camping Israelites stretched out before him on the plains of Moab, is driven to praise Israel rather than fulfilling the enemy king’s mission of cursing it.

Another part of our rich tradition comes from [Dave Buskin and the musicians Rocky Mountain Jewgrass](#). Although I won't, Mr. Buskin sings:

Well now it's really quite simple, a part of my tradition
Taught to me in my youth
After forty years in the desert the eleventh commandment says
Go to bed under a roof.
I'm pretty certain I could live without real bear hugs,
Ain't keen to be cuisine for half a million bugs
And ten times out of ten I pick bagels
over berries and roots.

That's why I gotta say...

[Jews Don't Camp](#),
If it hasn't got a kitchen and it isn't air conditioned,
where's the exit ramp?
Get my walkin' shoes, cause
Jews Don't Camp.

But I know many of you Shir Tikvah-ites, you do sing your songs of hope around the fire pit, you do camp. And, in fact, for those of you who, like me, share Mr. Buskin's view of the horrors of ticks and sleeping bags, we too belong to a long line of campers and we do, metaphorically, camp.

Jews have long been campers; we've been itinerant, setting up homes where we could—often homes we loved—and moving when we had to. The journeys of the Jewish people that may come most easily to mind may be reactive ones driven by persecution. A physical rootlessness created in response to exiles and pogroms and holocausts, or the fear of them, is part of our religious and cultural inheritance.

But it is worth noting that our first journey as a people began with Abraham and Sarah, who left behind land that was dear to them and moved to a new place because of their faith in God, and for this love found themselves rewarded as the parents of a nation. It is worth noting too that we get married under a *chuppah*, tent-like and open on all sides, in order to welcome those of our kin who have journeyed and, perhaps, to remind us of the transience of physical space as set against the intended permanency of our holy vows. Our spiritual selves are deeply rooted—thousands of years of wisdom and teaching, this ancient rite of moving through the Days of Awe that we begin tonight; we are rooted even as our homes have moved.

We are a people who move and, in particular, we at Shir Tikvah are a people who move food shelf donations and *shiva* prayer books and donated school backpacks and Pride banners down Hennepin Avenue. Shir Tikvah shouts Black Lives Matter and encircles ICE buildings and delivers meals to the homes of ailing congregants. Shir Tikvah extends its compassion and care wheresoever Shir Tikvah members may be found.

With our demands for justice and dignity, we move politicians and minds and hearts and spirits and souls. Because here is the thing about Shir Tikvah: it is wherever **we** are, in all of those places we are. I can truly say, from this makeshift *bimah* in Brooklyn Center: welcome to Shir Tikvah. Because you are here, Shir Tikvah is here.

We are here in Brooklyn Center because our no-tickets-ever policy, our radical hospitality, our living into the synagogue's mission, our infectious joy in our religious observance and community-building—well, last year it stuffed our usual sanctuary to the gills and our clergy and board worried about people feeling rejected by a full building.

On July 1st, I began my three-year term as President of the Board. My family's bond with Shir Tikvah was cemented during the Vote No campaigns, which harmonized with my professional life as one of the volunteer lawyers for Minnesotans United for All Families. We have celebrated a bat mitzvah, a bar mitzvah and a conversion with Shir Tikvah and marked many quiet moments too. I am grateful to Luke Weisberg and the leaders before him for setting a high standard of productivity and professionalism. I have come to know our board as dedicated, insightful, bright and fearless. Whatever successes we have had and will have as a board can be credited to the sense of teamwork and concern for mission that has been a part of the board's culture since long before I joined. This is a group of people who take the work of helping to create and lead a holy community seriously and with great love.

On nearly every paper we distribute at a board meeting, we inscribe our vision statement:

Shir Tikvah is a *kehillah kedosha* (holy community)
joyfully revealing the intersections of *talmud torah* (lifelong Torah study), *t'filah* (prayer),
tzedakah (justice), and
hachnasat orchim (radical hospitality).

We creatively wrestle with tradition and innovation as we invigorate Jewish spiritual life and transform the world.

Because our success has challenged how we use our most frequent home at 1360 Minnehaha Parkway, two years ago, the Board created the Facilities Assessment Group and asked it to start to answer this question: “What facilities do we need to do our work in the world?” After more than a year of work, the group reported back to the board and then to the congregation. There is much more nuance in the [report](#), but its researched and thoughtful conclusions about the positive things about 1360 Minnehaha Parkway might be summarized this way: “That intimate building, which we own, in its convenient leafy neighborhood, houses joyful and profound memories and supports a participatory style of worship.”

The Facilities Assessment Group also examined in depth some of the challenges and shortcomings of, if you will, the tent we pitched at the corner of 50th and the Creek. A simple summary might be: “That aging building does not embody our commitment to radical hospitality and speaks to who were rather than who we are becoming. It constrains our creativity in our programming. It has very limited access for those with mobility issues and there are not enough restrooms. It packs us in the sanctuary and on the *bimah* and in the classrooms while stacking our staff in their working spaces.”

The board accepted the Facility Assessment Group’s observations and authorized some strategic spending to explore three options at once: remodeling the current building, acquiring new space, and co-locating with another organization. The report was published and [made available to you](#), our facilities became a topic of conversation on the *bimah* and at the *oneg* table, a congregational meeting was held in November 2017. In April 2018, we held eight open sessions to help communicate what the board was working on and to learn from you about what was important in your synagogue. These responses help guide our efforts. And in between all of those moments, the committees and people leading exploration into those options worked and worked.

We looked at remodeling and started with an assessment of the significant deferred maintenance expenses in the building. We retained an [architect](#), who did some preliminary design work about possibilities for upgrading at 1360 Minnehaha Parkway. We received two construction-cost rough estimates for remodeling. We have retained a [realtor](#) to show us what’s out there in the market. And we have looked at two co-location options with some seriousness. We have recently hired a [consultant](#) to tell us about our potential reach in a capital campaign, which is required to support any of these options. There has been a great deal of information gathered internally and externally, on each of these options, and much reflection by thoughtful people on how best to serve our congregation’s mission going forward. I want to update you tonight on some progress on one of those options, the one the board has determined merits our current attention and efforts: co-location with [First Universalist](#) at 34th and Dupont Avenue South.

At the board level, we have had specific discussion and debate about First U stretching back some three months. And as an organization, we’ve spent more than two years talking with First Universalist at various levels and with growing intensity.

First Universalist is ready to remodel that building and we have an opportunity to expand its square footage to create some of our own space and share the rest of the building. In fact, First

U's board has agreed to slow their remodeling process to allow us both to consider co-location. I'll repeat: there's an opportunity to expand the square footage to create some new space for us, including designing our own new separate larger Jewish worship space, and to share the rest of the building.

The board believes there is great potential in this co-location opportunity, both in serving our mission as a *shul* and in fulfilling our fiduciary obligations to our future. At the board meeting just a few nights ago, the board passed a motion that Shir Tikvah advance our discussions with First U about co-locating at 34th and Dupont. We will bring this option to the center of our focus now. But to be clear, the Board's commitment is to engage ourselves and with First U, with open hearts and hard work, to see *if* we could co-locate to the mutual benefit of both congregations and their unique missions. This is not a decision to do so.

Breathe.

The possibility of co-location raises many questions and the Board has identified many of them, questions whose answers will shape whether we proceed to co-location. For the next ten days our focus is on the great spiritual journey of the High Holidays - the prayer, the music, the camaraderie, the self-reflection. After the holidays, we will share more detailed information about the work that has been done and remains to be done. Given how fresh the decision to proceed in this exploration is, we have not yet designed the arc of and all of the aspects of congregational engagement, but it will happen; we want to hear your questions, your excitement and your worries. And we hope you will share in our spirit of curiosity, possibility, and good-faith discernment as we go forward.

In a few weeks, we will have more to share but while we are all assembled, I wanted to give you a quick sketch of the landscape before us, of what our tents look like stretched out, not on the desert plains of Moab but on the blooming prairie of Minnesota. How great and how beautiful!

As I look at Shir Tikvah's success, over the past 30 years, the past 10 years, and perhaps freshest in my mind, over the past 3 years, where we have grown by almost 100 households, I am quite aware that our success is due to the people who have helped create, guide, and live the synagogue's mission. In a word, it is due to you. You who moved from an idea to a [Green Mill](#) to a JCC to the banks of Minnehaha Creek. You who started as barely a *minyán* and who now number nearly 550 households. You who took a persistent little tune and turned it into a profound orchestral composition. You who have given yourselves to this song of hope these past 30 years, you have done so much. We will continue to sing loudly and proudly, in our hearts and in our halls, in our souls and in the streets. Let us continue the work we have long done: of fiercely and fearlessly finding and building and making and re-making ourselves and the world.

Great work lies ahead for us in the year to come!

Shanah tovah and todah rabah.