

Remarks to Congregation Temple Beth Ahavath Shalom, Brooklyn, New York

(the old Beth Shalom Peoples's Temple,
Benson Ave and Bay Parkway)

Saturday June 8th, 2002

Michael E. Brandt, Ph.D.

1. Shabbat shalom – I can hardly express to you how I feel to be back in this marvelous sanctuary again after 30 years. It is a very special sort of homecoming 3 times over – the other day I celebrated my 25th college reunion at Polytechnic University – the old Brooklyn Poly in downtown, and today I not only am blessed to return to this special place, but I get to return to the street I grew up and lived on for the first 22 years of my life! (The old college which dates back to 1854 was hardly recognizable as it and the whole area has undergone an astounding transformation since I graduated in 1977.) And it is so wonderful to see that this congregation has not only survived but is flourishing with many wonderful transformations of its own. Today I am a professor of biomedical research at the Texas Medical Center in Houston where I have lived since 1979, but I still consider this at core my home. I am forever a Brooklyn, New Yorker!
2. I am the product of mixed religious marriage – my mother being raised in an orthodox household, my father raised Catholic. My sisters and I were raised Jewish. My older sister attended Hebrew school in a local orthodox shul, but unfortunately this did not work well and today my sister and her children are not practicing Jews. My mom fortunately recognized the problem and enrolled me, and later my younger sister Madeline at BSPT. Both of us are so grateful that mom put us here! Even my mother's mom, whose father was a rabbi, loved this Temple – my grandparents adored Rabbi Schenk as I did and still do. It was a friendly and nurturing place. I cannot remember a bad word from anyone here although you didn't want to get on Rabbi Schenk's bad side. He was tough, he challenged you – yet he was a big teddy bear of a man – a man of great compassion, wisdom, and caring. His influence on me was profound and I was blessed to be able to speak with him one last time when I was married in 1990. I remember many of his lessons, bar mitzvah and Saturday morning services. He was also pretty hip! – he would tolerate our jokes– up to a point – he gave us just enough rope before he reigned us in. I also remember that he loved the NY Knicks in the years that they won 2 championships (yrs '68 – '73). It was not until his passing in 1991 that I learned that he was the chaplain in Gen. George Patton's army in Europe and had witnessed first hand the horrors of the holocaust.

3. BSPT had a substantial influence on my commitment to Judaism today. The blessings of Reform Judaism are manifold – women have a strong place here, if the father is Jewish then the child is Jewish, the embrace of intermarried couples, and the relatively recent embrace of more traditional aspects of Judaism (e.g. in our day, only Hebrew prayers were taught, not the language itself. Now the language is taught). It's ok now to be kosher and reform, and Shabbat is very much the centerpiece of Reform Judaism in many respects.
4. Growing up in Bensonhurst in the 50's, 60's 70's was a wonderful experience in a difficult, turbulent time in our nation's history and our people's history. There was the cold war and the threat of nuclear annihilation from the Soviets. There were fallout shelters and get-under-your desk bomb drills! Then there was the Vietnam war – a war which nearly tore this country apart; there was the civil rights struggle and race riots which also threatened the very fabric of our republic. And there was the Arab-Israeli conflict (6 day war, Yom Kippur war), the threats to Israel's existence and the ever-present scourge of our people: anti-semitism.
5. Our generation in Bensonhurst took Judaism for granted. Most of the kids couldn't wait to be through with their Bar Mitzvah. Many of them pretty much disregarded their religious upbringings, mostly those who went to orthodox shuls. But even my friends who went to BSPT strayed. I did this too, even though it was delayed until after Hebrew HS graduation. I had little to do with Judaism for 8-10 years after. But moving to Houston – the Bible belt - changed that for me.
 - There were about 35,000 Jews in Houston in 1979 in a city of about 2.5 million! Compare to NY!
 - Houston is in the Bible belt where most gentiles don't know what a Jew is or much care.
 - Jews are more prone to anti-semitism in direct and subtle ways.
 - There are now 60k Jews in Houston – a vibrant lot.
 - Yet there are now about 90,000 Moslems in Houston and growing fast!! Houston has the second largest Moslem concentration in US cities I believe.
6. The challenges of today for Jews, New Yorkers and Americans are tremendous. Terrorism has changed the world, America, and New York in profound ways. But if we look back at history we can see that Jews have always been challenged in every age and have always risen above them to survive. We are the all time underdog of underdogs, but this doesn't mean we should say “we've survived all this before and we'll survive everything thrown at us.” We cannot afford complacency. I recall Rabbi Schenk's concern and admonishments about this – in particular the issue of assimilation – that we tend to take on (too much) the characteristics of the society around us and forget that we are Jews – a people chosen by G-d for a sacred mission!
7. We have spent a good deal of our time trying to blend in to societies that have never accepted our way of life and our ideals – and have in fact hated us for them. Perhaps

to survive as a people we have had to make certain tradeoffs and given up parts of who we are. Or at other times we have lived secret lives and have been shunned or shunned others.

8. Yet we must continually renew our faith and re-remind ourselves of our mission. We cannot afford to be a people where only about 8% of us attend regular services to pray together (1 in 12). We can't afford to be just secular Jews, or Jews who have little or no relationship with G-d. We can and must do better. Reform Judaism has a special place in this I believe and G-d willing will continue being innovative and growing. We have always learned lessons from the gentiles and there's more we can learn. Examples: how are the large churches in Houston getting this way and retaining enthusiastic members? Marketing! Selling! Being proud of who they are! Espousing their specialness! Being neighborly and doing anything to help others! Being inviting! Having faith! The Moslem community is growing very fast – how are they doing it while our numbers are not growing nearly as fast?
9. There are things we could be doing and we must do as a community to ensure a vibrant Jewish community for the next generations. There is nothing wrong with selling ourselves! There is nothing wrong with being thrilled to be a Jew! We have so much to offer the world and a responsibility to do so. Let's be inviting to new members. Let's help families in need. Let's form welcoming committees who will help new members and encourage others. Let's be more open to the ideas of our membership and be respectful of their expertise! Let's expand adult education – teach Hebrew, teach Torah, teach about the awesome gifts G-d has blessed us with. Do this for the children as well as the adults. Judaism is grand! Why aren't we more proud?
10. Do more to help people understand the power and benefits of prayer, both personal and communal. Are we doing enough to teach children what it means to forge a personal relationship with G-d as our great sages taught us? Are we encouraging/teaching the practice of prayer in Hebrew school? If prayer is about talking with G-d, let's give time to the practice of Jewish meditation – the art of listening to G-d's voice. These are powerful tools G-d has gifted us with to be used not just for our spiritual welfare, but for our physical and mental welfare just as importantly. (Temples are definitely in the business of health!). And who knows these things better than us?? We have all the tools and we had them first! We have the gift of Hebrew – more than an ancient language – it is G-d's toolbox of creation, and ours as partners with Him in the continuing ongoing creation! So teach Hebrew! Don't be embarrassed – be excited. Be thrilled to be Jewish and thankful to have been given a Jewish soul. Project G-d's Light outward in all ways and always – to help all others, to truly share that Light with the world (pay G-d's gifts forward!), and do all that you can to repair the world (tikkun olam). We have the free will and the power to save worlds or destroy them. Choose Life, be aggressively strong, have certainty - the certainty of knowing that the most awesome Power of all is with us. May this congregation continue to be a “house of prayer for all the people” and a “house of love and peace.” I want to thank you Rabbi Lieber for your graciousness and kindness in inviting me to address your congregation today.