Good morning, Shana Tovah.

My name is Michelle Cassel Siegel. When I was first asked by our President, Jen Cole, to be this year’s speaker, my first thought was “WHAT? WHO, ME?” and to borrow a line from a song by one of my favorite 80s bands, Talking Heads, “HOW DID I GET HERE?” So when I thought about what to say today it really just came down to one word: LOVE.

You see, a little over 20 years ago I met this terrific guy named Ben – and fell in love. At the time I was personally sort of indifferent towards religion, and I generally avoided the issue. So when Ben and I were married, we had a civil ceremony. A fun fact here – we were married on the Eastern Shore of Maryland where the movie “Wedding Crashers” was filmed, by a Justice of the Peace who was a dead ringer for the Wizard of Oz. All that was missing was the Lollipop Guild.

At the beginning of our married life, like most newlyweds, we were invited by our respective families to gather for the holidays.

This is where I was introduced to Jewish traditions. You see, I was not raised as a Jew. So, Ben’s grandmother, Shae Goldberg, would take me into her kitchen in Pittsburgh and teach me how to make her famous lemon chicken and roasted eggplant for our holiday dinner. They were both delicious.

I enjoyed celebrating the Jewish holidays with family. But despite Shae’s cooking, I remained lukewarm towards religion.

All this changed on April 23, 1999 when our daughter Madisen Summer was born. We did not – to quote another 80s song - “Party like it’s 1999. ” Instead, like all new parents, we were both exhausted and full of joy - - and LOVE.

Now we had a decision to make – would we raise our daughter to be a Jew?

Like all questions that pertain to anything Jewish, as the Rabbi would say, the answer was “It depends.”

It depended on our commitment. And it depended on finding a temple that felt right, just like Goldilocks finding that “just right” bowl of porridge.

So Ben and I began searching for a Reform Temple. Why a Reform Temple? Ben suggested it, since he grew up going to a Conservative Temple, he thought it would be an easier transition for me. Like all good husbands, he thought of me first. Good choice Honey!

We found a small temple in Mahwah, about 20 minutes North of our home in Glen Rock. It was called Beth Haverim at that time. Rabbi Rembrandt was the spiritual leader then. She was just so kind, and agreed to perform the naming ceremony for our daughter Madisen.

So there it is, the decision was made in the Fall of 1999 to begin my Jewish life. I made the commitment to raise Madisen as a Jew.

Fast forward to the always memorable toddler years. For convenience, we enrolled Madisen in our local Glen Rock Jewish Center for Sunday school, it was less than 1 mile from our house. We even attended a few holiday services from time to time – but it just didn’t feel right.

So when it was time for religious school in 3rd grade we began to rethink our decision. And we decided to go back and check out that temple all the way up in Mahwah – Beth Haverim. I could only think about making that 20 minute drive for the next 5 years – at least until Madisen’s Bat Mitzvah – I couldn’t get that out of my mind, since I would be doing the driving.

So we came for a family service. And we met Rabbi Mosbacher. And we heard one of the many stories about Minsk and Pinsk. And people were friendly and wanted to meet us and talk to us. And we knew. We knew that this was the place for our family. We felt like we belonged from Day One – we felt the LOVE, the LOVE of community. And THAT was what had been missing from the other places we had visited.

We had finally found a community that was welcoming and would help our family to embrace a Jewish life. And I can tell you, 8 years later, that I’m glad we drove the 20 minutes to return to Beth Haverim.

Since then, our family has made so many wonderful memories here. The family services, religious school celebrations, Family School, Simcha Torah celebrations that were as exciting as a rock concert, nature walks with the Rabbi in the snow, Ben chanting Torah. I love living a Jewish life, and finally found my religious home, and it was here, at Beth Haverim Shir Shalom, where I became a Jew.

Some of our best family memories have been created here, with you. From our daughter’s Bat Mitzvah, to her leading a lay Shabbat service with her good friend Sammi Lamster, to her participating in the Junior Choir, to the awesome 2nd Night Seders. Needless to say, our BHSS membership has had a profound impact on our family.

When I stopped to think why, why has BHSS had such a profound impact on our family, this too comes down to just one word: COMMUNITY. A community that truly cares, one that is with you in both good times and not so good times.

Two years ago, I had two emergency surgeries back-to-back - - who knew that an appendix could go without warning at age 50? After my late night surgery, as I lay the next morning in my very unfashionable Valley Hospital gown, who was my first visitor - - who else, Cantor Perper. Boy did I feel like a rock star. I couldn’t believe he had come to see me. Our BHSS community really knows how to show its LOVE through the Caring Committee - - the card and flowers really did the trick. And I was very grateful for all the prayers and support that I received. Beth Haverim Shir Shalom was there for me when I needed it.

You know what they say about LOVE – it’s complicated. Last year our family was faced with a dilemma. Our then 14 year old daughter was headed off to boarding school just as the High Holidays were beginning. Panic set in as I was packing, I did not want our family to be separated for the High Holidays. I didn’t know what to do, I was frozen. So I called the one person who I knew for sure could help - - I called Iris. And she said those 4 little words that we all like to hear – “Don’t worry about it!”

Iris, with Rabbi’s help, located a Reform temple in Springfield, Massachusetts, a half hour from Madisen’s new school, and arranged for us to have tickets, so we could be together as a family on Yom Kippur.

We attended the service – which was nice – but when we broke the fast we found ourselves at dinner saying – the singing was fine, but it wasn’t our Cantor Perper. The sermon was meaningful, but it wasn’t our Rabbi Mosbacher. Most of all, we missed YOU, our friends, our COMMUNITY, the hugs and kisses, we missed our BHSS family. You know how sometimes you don’t know what you have until it’s gone? Well, that is how we felt. And we understood how lucky we are to belong to as wonderful a COMMUNITY as BHSS.

So, now I am asking you, for the LOVE of our COMMUNITY, our Rabbi and Cantor, and on behalf of all those here who make Beth Haverim Shir Shalom a special place. Please join me in contributing to this year’s High Holy Day Appeal. It is through our collective efforts that we as members make it possible for all of us to continue to enjoy a vibrant temple life.

Currently, we have 435 member families; 360 children enrolled in religious school; 100 students enrolled in Kadimah; over 100 people attended the 2nd annual inter-generational retreat; 85 people attended the Second night Seder last year; and 25 students attended the Religious Action Center’s RAC trip to Washington, DC to lobby our government representatives.

We are growing, we are vibrant, and we are strong. But we will ONLY remain that way with your support.

Finally, another 80s reference. As Huey Lewis so eloquently sang, “That’s the power of LOVE.” It is with YOUR help that BHSS is able to share the LOVE with everyone in our temple COMMUNITY. Please make a contribution.

Thank you. Shabbat Shalom. Shanah Tovah, and I wish you all an easy fast.