**Rosh Hashanah 2014:**

Just short of five weeks ago Matt & I dropped our eldest son off to college for the first time. I am sure this is an emotional milestone for many families, but the fact that Muhlenberg is our alma mater seemed to lend itself to an additional layer of nostalgia, as I found myself immediately transformed back to 1987 when I first arrived on campus.

It was NOT an easy day. I can still recall my separation anxiety, which proved especially heavy, because my father had had a heart attack the previous week, the night before I was supposed to head out for freshman orientation. Having missed the admittedly corny yet seemingly effective team-building activities, and not having my parents there to separate from, made for a bittersweet beginning. I could have also used their help unpacking my belongings (which, if you were wondering, did not include a cell phone or computer, let alone an organic, hypo-allergenic, bedbug protecting, memory-foam-topping mattress encasement). Despite the day’s challenges I remained eager to begin my journey. Having the wisdom and foresight that comes exclusively with being 18, I was sure of my path and had declared my major without hesitation.

Fast forward just a handful of weeks… and reservations had crept in – in part due to the grueling curriculum (which interfered with my newly found social life) and in part because I was not finding the learning fulfilling and suspected my true passions might be realized on a different road.

When I returned home for High Holy Days, however, I kept my concerns hidden and never hinted that I was already seriously questioning the academic path of which I had been so certain.

But before 2nd semester was over (and before grades were sent home), I knew the conversation was inevitable so I invited my parents for brunch. Over pancakes accompanied by an array of syrups one can only find at a Lehigh Valley Perkins, I told them that the pre-med major was not for me. (For the record, it was not until later that I told them the prospect to Jewish doctor-hood via marriage was also looking grim, though by this time I was, while maybe not yet “head over heels,” certainly overjoyed that I had found someone with whom I could comfortably wear heels!)

The brief silence was broken by my father, who was by this time looking stronger and healthier, “It’s all good Jenny, but what are you planning on studying instead?” “Well, I am thinking of a major in Psychology, a minor in Religion and a concentration in dramatic studies.” Dad followed up by asking what job might enable me to eventually put this odd cluster of educational pursuits to good use. Well Daddy, as I begin my second year as synagogue president, I think I may finally have your answer!

All kidding aside, it has been a wonderful year and I continue to feel honored to serve this community. I did not know when I took the position that we would be entering into a unique arrangement with Rabbi Mosbacher to expand our social justice efforts toward the reduction of gun violence. Nor did I know we would be hiring an Assistant Rabbi for the first time in our congregation’s history. I could not have predicted how moved I would be by the speeches offered by our adult B’nei Mitzvah class or the ethical wills which were so eloquently expressed by our confirmands. I did not know that this year we would have a record high of 50 new member families joining our community and due to that growth would be planning in the year ahead to take a serious look at our physical building, to ensure that continues to accommodate our growth, adequately serves our purposes and sufficiently reflects our spirit. I also did not anticipate how much snow removal would cost last winter… In synagogue life there are always twists and turns and the presidential path is ever-changing. But some things are constant: I have never felt as if the job were thankless. And I have never felt alone, or on my own. With our clergy, staff, lay leadership and community I am confident things will continue as such in my second year.

As many of you know, I stayed on the psychology track. I am often asked what *kind* of clinical psychology I practice. I used to hesitate to answer because I felt like “eclectic” sounded a bit like a copout, but I have grown more comfortable with this description. While there is often “buzz” about a new technique that promises a better “cure” to all which ails us emotionally, the empirical studies on therapeutic effectiveness have repeatedly shown that, with the very few exceptions, the theoretical orientation of and techniques employed by the clinician make very little difference. The majority of people improve from psychotherapy, yet their progress does NOT seem to be attributable to those factors. So what is responsible for the improvement? Most speculate that it is the common factors across treatment modalities that are palliative: Namely, the desire to improve, the commitment of time and money, and most importantly, the relationship.

I recently terminated treatment with a client. She came to me with significant impairments secondary to traumatic brain injury. Many times our sessions were frustrating for her and sometimes left her in tears. She did not always like what I had to say, and at one point we even discussed if she would be better served by a different therapist. But we wound up making it work. In the end, she expressed gratitude. Despite our ups and downs, she said, week after week, whatever the issue, she always knew that “we” would tackle it together and thanked me for being a part of her “we.”

I also stuck with Matt. Met him that first day freshman year and he has been a part of my “we” since. The Talmud teaches that each person has been ordained by God to have a soul mate, a connection referred to as *bashert.* This notion would have appealed to my romantic 18 year old self. But my 45 year old self finds the *bashert* idea slightly less palatable, as I fear it suggests that if we are just able the “right” match, our lives will be heavenly. I do not believe that in marriage our biggest challenge is finding the one perfect match that is out there, but rather cultivating the one chosen relationship. Don’t get me wrong, I consider myself blessed to have found an amazing life partner *and* I also know that we have both worked to protect this blessing. There are days when I teasingly lament that my *bashert* could have been a more skilled handyman (or for that matter, Jewish!)…to which Matt typically responds, “my second wife will definitely NOT be temple president!”

So what does all this have to do with BHSS?

As Reform Jews, we embrace informed choice as opposed to being bound to the accumulated decisions of our sages. We think of ourselves as actively adopting Jewish practice, rather thanbeing born into it or obligated to it by default. And we know from the Pew studies that these days more and more Jews are electing to be “unaffiliated.” But there is an alternative - we *can* *choose to be obligated to each other.* We can choose to understand ourselves as co-creators of something intricate and beautiful. We can choose to show up to celebrate and mourn with one another, support and learn from each other, sing and bake and read and plant and stack siddurim and polish silver and of course pray, together.

No religious community is perfect...including this one. You may find that there’s something we do here which you wish we didn’t, or something we don’t do which you wish we did. There may be someone here who pushes your buttons, or some*thing* that doesn’t quite meet your expectations. Maybe when you walked into BHSS for the first time you were instantly sold, and knew that this was the perfect place for you. But maybe you came from something quite different, and miss the melodies of your youth or prefer the music-free service or organ of your upbringing over our guitars and piano.

Regardless of whether the path that led you here was a straight or winding or circular route, being part of a congregation is like being in any relationship. What matters is that you choose the relationship and cultivate it. I truly believe that, as in any relationship, the blessings you receive in return will be proportional to the amount of your investment. And I am not talking fiscally (although that will come). Today I am talking about soul and heart.

In preparing my remarks I read many perspectives on these holiest days of the Jewish calendar. In one response a woman deconstructed the name “Days of Awe” into “Days of “A”/”WE,” referencing the fact that during the high holiday we are reminded that we are not alone, but in intimate conversation and connection with God. This morning/afternoon, I am struck by a slightly different perspective (or some might argue not so different perspective). That is, our community, Beth Haverim Shir Shalom, is a collective, and very impressive, “WE.”

Of course our smaller, more intimate gatherings of congregants -whether in our classrooms, the garden, the library, the Youth Lounge, at Wanaque or Children’s Specialized hospital, at Ramapo reservation or in Israel, or in homes of fellow congregants are all special in their own right…BUT there is something even more powerful, and more AWESOME when we all gather together here, as we do today, in our sanctuary. As I stand here this morning/afternoon I am reminded that my choice, my affiliation with BHSS, is indeed a connection to something larger than myself. And for that I am grateful.

Matt, Aidan, Garrett, Brady & Emily join me in wishing you all Shana Tovah! May this be a year full of connection – a year, for each and every one of us, of being a part of our “we” and in that “we” may we find joy, comfort and abundant blessings.

Thank you, once again, for listening.