

New Beginnings

Rosh Hashanah 5783 // 2022

Rabbi Jeremy Simons

One of the first classes we take in rabbinical school is called homiletics. Homiletics is a fancy word for sermon-giving. One of the first instructions we received in one of our first classes was “do not start your sermon by talking about how hard it was to write your sermon.” It’s good advice. With that in mind, I’d like to start by telling you all how hard it was to write this sermon. A first High Holy Day sermon is a tricky thing to pull off. On the one hand, I, along with Rabbi Wohlner, have been here since July. There are some of you who have heard plenty from me – more than enough. You’ve heard all my good stories and both of my jokes. On the other hand, there are some of you who are hearing me for the first time. You have absolutely no idea who I am, what I’m about, and you almost certainly don’t care what I think about some controversial issue for the next 15 minutes. On the other hand (the third hand), as my homiletics teacher would remind me, the most important part of writing a sermon is figuring out what message the congregation needs to hear.

Again, I’ve been here since July. I literally don’t know how to get downtown without GPS. How do I know what you all need to hear? But I do know a sermon needs to be longer than this – and ideally should have a point – so here’s the plan: I’m going to do two more things my teacher would advise against: I’m going to tell you about myself, and then I’m going to tell you about you.

My first Rosh Hashanah as a rabbi, in 2014, was at Congregation Anshe Chesed in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Like synagogues everywhere, the largest crowds came for the High Holy Days. In their case that meant 29 people. Two years later I’d be back to lead them in celebrating their anniversary. 175 years. Anshe Chesed was founded in 1841, two decades before the Civil War battle that’s the only reason most people have heard of Vicksburg. I spent four rounds of High Holy Days at Anshe Chesed. During the break in Yom Kippur services where people would go home and take a rest, I would stay in the synagogue and explore. One year I opened a door and discovered the synagogue had a religious school wing. Classroom after classroom, some still with posters on the wall or even the day’s schedule on the blackboard. Written for children who were now older than me. Another year I explored the library – kept in perfect condition with cabinets full of synagogue newsletters and youth group flyers meticulously organized and looking as if left the day before, except some were from 1975, others from 1950.

The last time I was a guest of the congregation, for my last set of High Holy Days, things looked different. The library was empty, those classrooms blocked off. The

synagogue had finished transferring the property to the National Parks Service, where it was about to start its new life as an office building. I was standing in what had been the rabbi's study, when Vicksburg had a full-time rabbi. Almost everything had been moved out. Standing with the president, he pointed to the closet. "You should take that," he said, pointing to the *tallis* that looked like it had been sitting on the same hook since before I was born. I demurred, saying I really didn't know what I would do with it. "Rabbi," he said, "you'll have more use for it than any of us here." Keeping one of the few ritual objects that remains from a 180 year old congregation is both an honor I did not deserve, and an obligation I could not forsake. So when I gave my first sermon a few years later in Memphis, I wore it. And, I wear it tonight.

It's a strange feeling helping a congregation celebrate 175 years when you know there will not be a 200th anniversary, when you know a congregation is, after witnessing most of America's history, closing its doors.

Closing doors. A year ago, I was standing on the bimah in Memphis, closing the ark doors at the end of Neilah, along with Rabbi Wohlner. We knew it would be the last time. We knew, standing on that bimah, that we would be somewhere else the next year. We just had no idea where.

And here we are. This is where I'm going to talk about you.

When a synagogue needs a rabbi, they submit an application. Some of you know this and know it well since you helped make it, but some do not. CBH's application was 25 pages. That's a lot. You have all probably seen a word cloud before. It's a graphic representation of a given piece of text, with words displayed larger or smaller depending on how often they are mentioned. So here are those 25 pages distilled into a word cloud. The most common words are "congregation," "partners," and "community." Let's put aside "congregation" because it's over-represented since it's included in "Congregation Bet Haverim." That leaves partners and community. That's what the application focused on again and again. And it caught our interest. It's what we were looking for. We put CBH on our list.

any I had seen before. As Rabbi Wolfe explained, partners submitted pieces of fabric meaningful to them that a team headed by Diane Moore and Meryl Rappaport stitched together. Rabbi Wohlner said it would be amazing if there was some record of what the fabrics meant to the people. And Rabbi Wolfe said the congregation had made such a record, because of course they had. Which is how we know that this Torah cover has pieces of maternity dresses, clothing worn for first visits to the Western Wall, scarves of deceased parents, ark curtains from CBH's previous home.

What followed were two days where we did more than we normally do in two weeks. But it was looking at this cover, hearing its story of stories, where we stood – with tears in our eyes – and decided this is where we wanted to be.

So what does this Torah cover tell us? It tells us this is a community with creative ideas and a willingness to try new things. It tells us it's a congregation where – when asked – partners will literally give something of value. Where volunteers will take whatever time it takes to turn scraps of cloth into a Torah mantle. And it tells us it's a congregation where leadership hears a proposal for a new Torah cover with the explicit warning that we have no idea what this will look like and understands that this product, regardless of how it turns out, will be infinitely more holy and beautiful than anything any one artist could create. Bet Haverim: this is who you are. I'm not here to tell you you're special, because every synagogue is special. I'm here to tell you this is *how* you're special. There is no other synagogue that has a Torah cover like this or has the culture that would make a cover like this possible. This is who you are. And this is why we're here.

And that leads to the question: now that we're here, now what? I'll end by breaking one final rule of homiletics and share a rather bleak prediction. These days remind us of our own limited time but it's not just humans that die. Just as Anshe Chesed is now an office building, that will be our fate as well. Not because of anything unique and certainly not anything bad about CBH, but because of the nature of institutions. Every synagogue will one day close its doors for the last time.

A great synagogue isn't one that plans for perpetual existence. To be clear, it must have some vision of the future and some plan for sustainability. A great synagogue is one that does the most for its people every day that it is here. And how does it do that? We are a communal enterprise. We are all partners. CBH thrives and will thrive when we give of ourselves. When we show up, when we volunteer our time and our gifts, and yes when we renew our partnership agreements.

For those that are here for the first time and not planning to come back until 5784: first, no judgment. But second – if you're willing to share – Rabbi Wohlner and I would love to

know what CBH can offer that might add meaning to your life. Reach out, schedule a time to meet – maybe after Yom Kippur – we would love to get to know you.

I speak on behalf of Rabbi Wohlner when I say we are so grateful to be beginning 5783 here in this community with all of you. We pray 5783 is a good year for us, all of us, and our community. *Shana Tova u'metuka.*