

RABBI CONN'S SERMON  
ROSH HASHANAH 5770 DAY 1

I have been looking forward to this day for a long time. Today, I am standing in front of you, nearly the entire membership of Plainview Jewish Center, as your new rabbi. Today, my relationship with the congregation really begins. I am elated and excited to be sharing this day with you and looking forward eagerly to the days to come.

There couldn't be a more appropriate time for a new beginning than Rosh HaShannah. When we hear the shofar sounded tomorrow, we will proclaim, "Hayom Harat Olam". We usually translate this phrase as "today is the birthday of the world". Indeed, we treat Rosh Hashannah as if it were the world's birthday. We begin counting the new year, 5770 today, marking the occasion with song, the sound of a ram's horn and a gathering together of our entire community. It's a dramatic beginning to a brand new year. What better time to celebrate other important beginnings as well?

There's only one problem, "Hayom Harat Olam" doesn't really mean "today is the birthday of the world"—not exactly. If you know a little bit of Hebrew, you will recognize the word "hara" as "pregnant". I have vivid memories of traveling all over Israel with Illyse, my wife a few years ago, yelling at every cab driver and waiter—"ishti b'hera'on"—"my wife is pregnant"—when I needed to get her a quick glass of water or get someone to turn down the air conditioner. Hayom Harat olam, then, really means "today the world is pregnant". Today is a day, in other words, on which the New Year that we will share together is about to come into being. What we have today is anticipation, excitement, uncertainty. The future is about to begin unfolding before us, it is expectant with possibility.

So too, what we share today as a rabbi and congregation is anticipation, excitement and uncertainty. Our future together has begun to unfold. Our hopes are high. I hope to be able to forge a relationship with each and every one of you. I hope to be able to support you in times of need and celebrate with you in times of joy; to share bonds of friendship and affection. I hope to work with you to lead our congregation into the future; and to make that future a bright one for PJC. I also hope that not only will I help our numbers to grow, but also that I will be able to help the members of our PJC family continue to grow as Jews in the years to come. Ultimately, I hope to strengthen our shared sense of kehilah kedusha, holy community that brings each one of us closer to God through prayer, through study, through friendship and through service to others.

I know that all of you have high hopes too. That's one of the reasons I was so drawn to PJC. After a few weeks here, I think I can say at least two things about the members of our PJC family it is this: First of all, we love PJC. I don't think I've ever met a group of people more devoted to a congregation. Second, we are never satisfied with things as they are. Believe it or not, that's a good thing—or at least it can be. Complacency inevitably leads to mediocrity. On the other hand, if we channel our dissatisfaction into constructive action, we can learn and grow, and make things better for ourselves and others. From that perspective, I can say that I have met a lot of people with high hopes here so far; and I want to encourage everyone here to continue to share these high hopes—and to help us work to make these high hopes a reality.

Which brings us to the central question we have to ask ourselves at this time of the year: as individuals standing before God and as rabbi and congregation. How do we make our dreams a reality? How do we move ourselves from where we are now to where we want to and know we can be? How do we take advantage of this new beginning to move in a new direction; to change what we need to change and hold fast to all that is good about us?

Our tradition provides us with two important concepts that can guide us as we attempt to answer these important questions. Both concepts are central to our High Holiday observance. I want to focus our attention today on the idea of berit—covenant. Tomorrow, I will ask us to turn our attention to the idea of cheshbon hanefesh—of taking stock of ourselves; reviewing the lessons of the past, assessing where we are in the present, and looking proactively toward where we want to be in the future.

In our Torah portion this morning, we see that the idea of brit governs both our relationships with God and our relationships with each other. God makes a brit—a covenant—with Abraham and Sarah. If Abraham and Sarah will follow God's ways and teach the world the truth of the one God, then God will make them the founders of a great nation that will become as numerous as the stars in the sky and inherit the land of Israel. Being a party to this berit is not exactly a bed of roses for Abraham and Sarah. They have to leave their homeland and their family and settle in a new land hundreds of miles away. They need to wait twenty five years before their first and only descendant, Isaac, is born and, they need to make the painful decision to cast out Abraham's son, Ishmael, in order to ensure that Isaac will survive to carry on the covenant into the next generation. We can only imagine that the berit is not that easy for God either. Abraham can be obtuse, cowardly and argumentative at times; Sarah can be petty and cynical. Yet, God, Abraham and Sarah hold fast to their commitments to each other.

In the second half of our Torah reading this morning, Abraham makes a brit with Abimelech. This brit establishes the basis for these two very powerful men to live together in the same land. They come to an agreement about how to share the scarce water resources in their area. More important, Abraham and Abimelech model the kind of dialogue and give and take that make it possible to maintain a brit.

In truth, all of our relationships are governed by one kind of brit or another. In some relationships, there are detailed formal agreements. In others, the brit is more informal, but clearly understood by both sides. Still other relationships involve both formal and informal covenants. Marriage is one such relationship. As a part of every Jewish marriage, a ketubah spells out the obligations of groom to bride and bride to groom. Civil law also sets forth its own rules and laws. Yet, there is also in every marriage, an unspoken covenant. My friend Rabbi Brad Artson once described to me some of the features of the unspoken covenant that governed his marriage. For example, he was bound by his unspoken covenant with his wife to always screw the cap back on the tube of toothpaste they shared. Moreover, he was duty bound to always leave the toilet seat down when he left the washroom. I believe there was also something about replacing the paper roll when he used the last sheet. Those are just the parts of the covenant that cover the bathroom. I didn't ask how many other rooms Rabbi Artson had in his house, but, I am sure that, like most of us, the list of unwritten rules and commitments would have been a long one. It takes a lot of give and take to make a marriage, or any other relationship governed by a brit, work.

That certainly includes the relationship between a rabbi and a congregation. As I pointed out during my first Shabbat at PJC, we have a nine page long brit—a contract that spells out our obligations to each other. But, that document does not begin to cover the all the give and take, all the commitments we have to make to each other, to make our relationship thrive. As wiser people than I have said, the relationship between a rabbi and a congregation is like a marriage in many ways: it is emotionally intense, involves us in some of the most intimate aspects of our lives, and requires a high level of collaboration, selflessness and shared goals. We have to show consideration for each other on the same level as the husband who makes a commitment to replace the cap on the toothpaste tube and leave the toilet seat down in order for us to thrive and find fulfillment in the relationship.

I wouldn't even try to spell out all the unspoken commitments we need to make to each other as a part of our brit. But I think on this day of beginnings, it is worth highlighting a few. Let me start with my side of the brit, the commitments I make to you. In a few minutes, I will cover the commitments that I would like to ask you to make as a part of our covenant.

First and foremost, I commit myself to being available for each and every one of you. Many of you who have visited PJC over the past six weeks have seen a blue Honda parked in the spot marked “Reserved for the Rabbi”. That’s my car. I spend lots of time in our building. And during a good portion of that time, my door is open for anyone to walk in and say “hi”. I have met quite a few members of our congregation that way, and I am looking forward to meeting many more. When I’m not in the building, or performing a lifecycle event or making a hospital visit, I’m out in the community representing PJC. I have become involved in the Long Island Board of Rabbis, sounded shofar for the preschoolers at the Y, and committed myself to become active in our local interfaith council.

Thanks to technology, I am also available in lots of other ways. My email address is listed on the front page of our website and in the Orbit—and I’m pretty good at answering my mail. At the risk of getting myself in trouble, I am not getting enough emails right now—except from Joel Hauptman. You can always get my cell number from the office. I will probably post that number soon as well—as soon as I am living somewhere with better cell reception and I have formed a Facebook group just for PJC members. I have 27 friends and would be happy to have more.

Most important of all, I am trying to make a concerted effort to learn your names, your kids’ names and your grandkids names. It’s not an easy job. But every day, I add a few more. No matter what, I will try to greet you every time I see you at PJC. These days, I may still need your help reminding me of your name, but if you are willing to remind me a few times, I hope to surprise you one day by not just greeting you, but greeting you by name.

Of course, I will make myself available to you when you really need me; whether you are—God forbid-- sick in the hospital, or dealing with a family tragedy—or you are overloading with the stress of your son’s upcoming Bar Mitzvah, or in the throes of a spiritual or existential crisis. The only commitment I ask in return is that you let me know—by phone, by email or in person. Just let me know and I will be more than happy to be available for you.

Beyond being available, I also commit to listening to what you have to say. I know that I can serve our congregation best when I get lots of constructive feedback. I do want to hear from everyone; from the youngest members of our congregation to the oldest, from the most active to those who only walk through these doors three times a year. I have been here long enough to know that you all have

opinions. I invite you to share them. I will take your input seriously. I may not always agree. But you can count on me to listen respectfully to whatever is on your mind.

As I think you already know, I am going to share with you from the heart the things that are most important to me. Illyse, Dalya, Yoni and I came to Plainview to be part of the community, to be part of the PJC family. Being the rabbi at PJC is not just a job to me, it is a commitment and a life choice. You will meet the real me here at PJC. I will share with you from the pulpit and in the Kiddush room what comes from my heart. I will talk about my life experience and try to share what I have learned not only as a rabbi, but as a Jew and as a human being. To a great extent, as Illyse can attest, what you see here is really what you get.

Finally, I commit myself to taking responsibility for what I do here at PJC, and in partnership with our staff and our membership, for the direction and the development of our congregation. As the rabbi, I am fully aware that there are certain areas of PJC life where the buck stops with me. And that's the way it should be! . I will accept the yasher koachs—or the tov, tov, tovs-- when things go well. And when, as inevitably will happen, I make mistakes, I will be the first to accept the responsibility for what I have done. I am a fallible human being just like everyone else, I have my strengths and weaknesses. Throughout my life, I have tried to become the kind of person that owns his mistakes and learns from them. To the extent that I have been able to do that, I think I have become a better person over time. I do not aspire to be the perfect rabbi, the perfect Jew or the perfect human being. What I hope to model for our congregation is a leader who is always learning, always growing; who is more concerned with finding a way to do what right than admitting that I am wrong.

Now, I would like to turn to you, the members of our congregation, and your part of our unspoken covenant. There are some things I would like to ask of you that I think will make our relationship more beneficial for all of us. First of all, I would like to ask each and every one of you to keep the lines of communication open. I need to hear your input and feedback. I need to hear when things are going well. I need to hear when things are not going well. We all know that Plainview is a small town. We all talk to our friends and neighbors about everything—including PJC. Talk to me too. Tell me what's on your mind. Tell me if you have an idea for a new program or group. Tell me if you need help, tell me if you know somebody is in the hospital. Tell me even if you think I already know. As we all know, healthy relationships require frequent and constructive communication.

I would like to ask each and every one of you to be patient. I know it's not easy to be patient—especially for New Yorkers. We have a lot of challenges to address as a congregation. But addressing these challenges is going to take time. I need to develop my relationships with our staff, our leaders and the members of our congregation. I need to understand better how we do things and how we have done things. I need to get a better handle on the Plainview Jewish community. Only then can I really begin to share with you lots of specific ideas for how we move our congregation forward. In the meantime, I don't plan on making many major changes. Having a new rabbi for you and a new congregation and community for me is a big enough change for us to digest for a while. In the long run, I know that our patience will be rewarded and that, when we do take bold steps forward, we will take these steps together, based on a shared understanding of our community, our goals and our needs.

Finally, I would like to ask that all of us, at this time of new beginnings, reaffirm our commitments to each other, to PJC and to Jewish life. We are all in this together, together, we have built and maintained this wonderful congregation and community. We have done so not by thinking only about what we need, or what our demographic groups needs, but also by thinking about what our congregation needs to thrive and to meet the needs of the many diverse groups and individuals that make up the PJC family. Now more than ever, we need to commit our time, our energies and our resources to maintaining and growing our congregation; so that we can keep God, Torah and Israel on the agenda of the many different kinds of Jews who make up our community here in Plainview.

Today is the birthday of the world. Today everything seems pregnant with possibility. Today we affirm the brit—the covenant, both spoken and unspoken---that binds us together. May this covenant guide us in all that we do. May it guide us toward a long and productive relationship. May this covenant help us to enhance the holiness of this sacred community. As the excitement of this new beginning gives way to a sense of normalcy, as it inevitably will, may it be replaced by a deep sense of commitment, love and trust. May we always work hard to hold up our end of the covenant and may God grant us the insight and the wisdom to build together the future of Plainview Jewish Center; that we might be a powerful source of caring, inspiration and Torah for many years to come.