**KOL NIDRE 2022 – President’s Address**

Welcome. New members, lifelong members, and everyone in between. Welcome, Jews by birth, Jews by Choice, and all non-Jewish partners and family members. Welcome, LGBTQ members, and others marginalized in the past. It is a simcha, a joy, to be together in community.

Many of you know of my lifelong intellectual fascination with Christianities as a Professor of American history and religion at Trinity College, functioning as a nice Jewish boy teaching Protestantism to Catholic Women. And, yes, as the punchline goes, it was a living for 20 years!.

Intellectual curiosities aside, for me, this synagogue, this house of assembly, symbolizes the primacy of the heart. Eight days after my birth in 1953, I was welcomed into this congregation, when Isadore Kropsky, Rose Pels’ father and Rob Pels’ grandfather, generously insisted on paying for a bris at OZ that my parents, newcomers to Burlington, could otherwise not afford. Membership was likewise offered, with the gentle assurance that while my parents could not afford dues, the leaders of this congregation were confident Milt and Ellie Potash could and would pay their fair share when they were able. And they did. For my parents over the next five decades, OZ became a home filled with lifelong and devoted friends. And when my mother passed away, my father created the Ellie Potash Fund, which my siblings and I renamed the Milt and Ellie Potash Fund upon his death. Its intent, quite simple: to uphold a most fundamental Jewish value, that their memories live on as a blessing, and their good works continue to inspire and shape the future. Here at OZ, my parents are very much alive in their ongoing dedication and support of education in the preschool, in NADAV, in their support of social action activities (social action fair), the preservation of Jewish culture in the mural, the renovation of this joyful space….

But tonight is not about my parents and certainly not about me. It is about us. Our gathering tonight marks the 137th year we, as Vermont’s longest standing and largest congregation, come together to attest to our shared and heartfelt sense of Jewish identity and Jewish values that continue to shape our lives. On one level, we challenge ourselves as individuals to accountability, in correcting for errors in judgment and flaws in our personal actions, as we remember those in our families who inspired the best in us. Yet, at the same time, as is the core communal basis of Jewish practice, we assemble together as a collective to pose an equally profound question: How can we as a community do better in the year and in the years to come?

Over the past two and one half years during a global pandemic, Ohavi Zedek has been tested on a scale of seeming biblical proportions, our congregation’s very survival called into question amidst our self-imposed isolation and legitimate fears for individual well-being. For two and one-half years, those fears promulgated grave uncertainties over when or even if we might reassemble in full and meaningful community. And, yet, here we are. Tonight, we gather together, proof of our resilience as a community and our dedication to one another. Fears have been supplanted by hope.

While I have the privilege of standing before you, the fact is that the joy in OZ’s rebound reflects the heartfelt outpouring of love and commitment that so many within our community feel. Far from waiting for others, they have led us in action.

This action began with the many of you who inspired the board to develop Imagine 2025. It was your energy, passion and heartfelt support for OZ that is the foundation for our forward momentum. I have been overwhelmed by the number of congregants who have stepped up to partner with the board as we have emerged from this very challenging time. And if I have one message I want to leave you with tonight, it is that your involvement, small or large, is making a dramatic difference by strengthening our community.

Joining all of us in creating our future is our staff. I, and the full board want to express our deep gratitude: :

* To Rabbi Amy, in this, her final High Holidays with us, for her leadership during these very challenging 2 and ½ years. Rabbi Amy has worked closely with us as we follow the blueprint of Imagine 2025 and meet the needs and wants of our congregation during this time of change that we and so many other congregations in America are working through.
* To our extraordinary staff, Raul, Erika, Naomi, Andie, Karen, and our newest member Sophie. Through your collective effort, we are providing a rich and diverse set of religious and spiritual services, life-cycle and teaching programs and the many Jewish programs and events that are growing our community. We have an exemplary preschool (now completing its 5th year), a growing and vibrant Hebrew School, a NADAV program and newly funded social program that allow our post- B Mitzvah teens to belong in meaningful and important ways; a Shuk that continues to express our unique vision for fostering social justice.
* And finally to Cantor Steve, who has brought such joy and light to many of us, especially our children. May his smile, song and prayer return to us soon.

So, too, we are blessed by literally dozens and dozens of OZ members who have stepped up and on OZ’s behalf. Members who are both thinkers and doers, working hard:

* To design and fundraise for our new sanctuary space.
* To help us rethink how we can create a more welcoming environment throughout our whole space.
* To welcome an ever growing number of new members.
* To expand our learning and social programs for adults.
* To re-energize our social justice commitment through outreach to other organizations.
* To create a positive work environment for our staff.
* To offer a nightly minyan service so that we can acknowledge Yahrzeits.
* To upgrade our Patchen Road cemetery. One of our most sacred of spaces.
* To our new Rabbinic search committee, made up of a dozen members reflecting the diversity of our community.

The magnitude of these commitments parallels that of a full-time team. We are collectively in their debt.

I could easily go on and on. But you grasp the point. We are vibrantly alive, thanks to our volunteers, our donors, and our visionaries. And we are flourishing.

But we are far from done, we will never be done. As a congregation, we can and must aspire to do better to make our home fully welcoming and supportive of our community’s future.

In a very real sense, our Lost Mural exemplifies our dedication to embrace our past AND frame our future. All the while our synagogue was closed, the Friends of the Mural serendipitously mounted a campaign, to which so many of us contributed, to complete the full and final restoration of what Madeleine Kunin called a unique “international treasure in Vermont.” In its full and vibrant color scheme and its three dimensional depiction of the biblical Tent of the Tabernacle (the earliest spiritual gathering place that served our people’s needs during the 40 years in the desert and well beyond). Ben Zion Black’s 1910 depiction, painted in the joyful style of synagogue art that once proliferated throughout Eastern Europe, offers the opportunity to literally walk through the mahogany pillars of the outer green tent and the outer courtyard into the Holies of Holy space containing the ark and the 10 commandments.

We consciously selected the Royal blue in the mural for our carpeting and the richness of mahogany (already present in our extraordinary ark) to rededicate this sanctuary. It marks the start for what we’re calling a work in progress in the upgrading of our facilities. In the immediate term, we MUST complete the ramp to render this space fully welcoming and accessible. So, too, there are issues of lighting, of paint and updated audio/video capacities both here and in our small sanctuary.

In 1952 this building captured and communicated the modern vision of Rabbi Max Wall and this congregation to leave behind our small shtetl shul on Archibald Street and to construct a modern Jewish community center. There were two sanctuaries for prayer, one small and traditional, the other open and modern; a self-contained school consisting of 6 classrooms; a kitchen and multipurpose social hall that could host weddings and large social gatherings, staged events, and a full sized basketball court to inspire our fledgling Wizards of OZ basketball teams.

Today, it is time to revisit and update our vision for a modern community center that services our needs in 2022 and for decades to come.

We have begun and must continue to update our two sanctuaries to allow us to offer our congregants religious and spiritual options – traditional services, family services, musical service, tot shabbots. And we must improve and update our online capacities to serve everyone.

Likewise, we must revisit our commitment to education. We all understand the value we place on education for empowering youth in our community. While we have created a truly outstanding preschool, it needs to grow to accommodate the needs of current and future members. You will be hearing soon about our plans for expanding and modernizing our preschool facilities as well as updating our Hebrew school facilities. And like my parents, I hope many of you will seize the opportunity to inscribe your name upon our educational future.

But there is more. Understand, as we approach 2025, we imagine many changes in the manner in which our building can address the future needs of this congregation. There are plans to transform the office into a Little Jerusalem museum with which to vastly increase visits from near and far; to relocate our offices to the new north entry, to improve that entry, to modernize our hallways and classrooms, to add technology, to create a more welcoming lounge and coffee shop with knosherie from our kitchen.

In the weeks and months ahead, you will also be hearing about plans to generate new supplementary revenue from our property behind this building with which to support the future needs of this community. We were gifted this extraordinary building and charged with maintaining it as a modern center for Jewish prayer, for education, for socializing and schmoozing, and for rededicating ourselves to our name, as “Lovers of Justice.”

A building, a campus, a Jewish community center, is only a home if we collectively believe and support it to be our home. These are very exciting times. We encourage you, we welcome you to join us on this journey of bringing to life our vision for the future.

At this sacred time, as we reflect on how we as individuals, can be and do better, contribute, participate and help more, let us too reflect upon our capacity to use our hearts to build a Jewish community for which all of us can be proud. Let us set our collective aspirations high. In the language of Imagine 2025, let us strive together to foster the spirit of relational Judaism, grounded **Belonging – Through Welcoming, Meaningful and Joyous Jewish Experiences.**

**I**f we are to be remembered, we must do our best, individually and collectively to leave our lasting mark. Please join me in being here, now. In the true spirit of community, you will receive far more than you give.

A Sweet and Good New Year for all of us.