

President's State of the Temple Address

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!

Thank you Rabbi, Cantor, and choir. You have ushered in the New Year with such sweetness and splendor.

It is an honor to stand on the capable shoulders of the presidents that came before me and be your Temple president. With this honor comes a great deal of responsibility and joy, and I feel blessed and excited to be leading our Board of Directors, to be partnering with our excellent professional staff, and to be serving all of you, my fellow congregants.

The financial crisis and demographic shifts are reshaping the Jewish community in ways we could hardly have imagined a generation ago. In an article I read in Reform Judaism magazine, Jonathan Sarna, historian and Brandeis University professor sheds light on what history can teach us about Jewish revival in uncertain times.

Sarna states, "at a time when individual needs are rising and communal means are falling, the Jewish community will have to engage in a kind of organizational triage."

The economic crisis has struck hard at home and deeply touched our Temple Beth Sholom community. You have heard from our Rabbi that congregants have lost jobs and retirement account losses have changed the personal circumstances of many. Other families are underemployed, and their discretionary income is significantly reduced.

Our response? Our pledge? No family will be left without their Temple. We work with people. We do not turn anyone away from this congregational family for the inability to pay.

It is times like these that we need our Temple and our Temple needs us.

It has been an amazing year! Our leadership, staff, and congregants have truly pulled together engaging in our own Temple Beth Sholom triage.

The Board of Directors instituted a **voluntary** dues increase so that congregants can make their own decisions based on their personal

circumstances for this year. Together, Temple leaders and professional staff have significantly cut expenses. By examining each department carefully, we have streamlined our operations, rolled up our fundraising sleeves, and developed creative ways of maintaining and even improving services and programming for our congregants.

One example of this served double duty. Our new on-line Kol Sholom, with the cool flippable pages-have you seen it yet?, brings us up-to-the minute news, directs us to electronic links for further in-depth information, and allows us to include more articles and pictures. We were able to cut out the majority of our printing and postage costs by emailing the Kol to each individual with an email address **AND become greener**. Not to worry, we still mail copies of the Kol to those who do not have email, because our first priority is to communicate with our congregants. My challenge to all of you is to take the time to read the Kol Sholom, as well as the other online communications. Be aware of what is going on here at the Temple.

What has greatly impressed me in these stressful times is the fact that, within this congregation we have seen people reaching out to people, through our business directory, providing and extending job opportunities and leads, and by keeping in touch and supporting one another.

Rabbi Cohen has seen a tremendous increase in need for personal counseling. Temple Beth Sholom has responded with support and compassion. More congregants have turned to our synagogue for comfort and for a sense of stability in this time of chaos than ever before. We are an oasis for many and we continue to strive to be there for each individual in need.

And MANY, MANY in our congregation have been generous with their time and resources! I would like to take a moment to recognize and express our gratitude to Sisterhood, Brotherhood, the Professional and support Staff, and the angels within this congregation and the Jewish Federation of Orange County for their hard work in fundraising and applying for grants, as well as extreme generosity in providing an **absolutely unprecedented** number of scholarships for preschool, religious school, and camp this year. We are extremely grateful to those in our Rabbi's Circle who each year contribute greater than basic dues to help offset those who are unable to pay full dues. All of these angels within our midst have provided the financial triage so that our families and our precious children can have identity-building and memorable experiences in our programs, as well as those in the greater Jewish community.

Each of us has a role and has played a role in the triage efforts at Temple Beth Sholom. PROUDLY, I can stand here and say that no Temple Beth Sholom family has been lost due to financial stress. We have been 100% successful in retaining our membership this year and keeping our family whole. Actually...to be totally accurate, our family has grown a bit. We have increased our net membership count by 10 families to 528 family units. More new congregants have remarked that what attracted them to Temple Beth Sholom is how warm and welcome they felt.

As can be seen within these walls, we are a congregation of great demographic diversity. We continue to attract young families, but we have also appealed to more single young professionals and young married couples than ever. We are overjoyed!

The triage response to this expanded demographic is that we hope to create new programming to engage the interests of this growing group. Additionally, we are beginning to form a task force to better address the programmatic needs of our senior congregants. Daytime programming and field trips are being developed to engage seniors and empty nesters. For example, "Fine Art, Fine Wine, Find Judaism" will take us to a winery in October and an art gallery in November to explore the connections of wine and art to Jewish living.

Interest groups are **hot** at TBS. Among our new ones is our weekend bicycling group. Watch for details on the "Tour de Heidi," not to mention the cool purple jerseys.

This is where I believe Temple Beth Sholom shines.

We are a congregation that loves to have fun and be together. If you have an interest you would like to cultivate with your fellow Beth Sholomans, contact me, or anyone on the Board of Directors, and together with you, we will do our best to get it going.

Continuing with historian Sarna's article, he further relates that during times of economic downturn, Jewish education is in his words "widely abandoned" and "We need to be careful nowadays to avoid sacrificing Jewish education to economic expediency."

Thankfully, our preschool for 2 to 6 year olds, our religious school and youth programs for Kindergarten through 12th grades and our summer camps for preschoolers through middle schoolers **are thriving and vibrant**. All of our programs provide our children and families with a solid foundation in Judaism and a connection to our Temple, as well as our greater community. With 55 preschool students and 230 religious school students during this school year, and 150 campers during the summer, our school building is humming with the happy voices of our children learning about our history and tenets, while doing mitzvot for the community. Camp Sholom had a banner year with 488 camper weeks this summer, a number amazingly higher than ever. Given the economy, these numbers are a testament to the excellence and community need for our Jewish summer day camp.

With a group and activity choice for every child at TBS, there were 170 kids participating in KTY, YTY, BSTY, and OCTY last year. We are excited to announce that this year our youth groups will be led by our own home grown Julie Amster and Jordan Vaughter. I have to tell you, it is the greatest feeling to see your kids and their friends go from attending preschool, religious school, and camp together to becoming the madrichim and teachers in the religious school and the counselors and directors of our camp and other Jewish camps.

L'dor va dor, from generation to generation, is not just a cliché, but is truly alive here at TBS.

When I attended my first parent Hillel event on the day of moving my oldest child to college a few weeks ago, the Hillel director stated something that made an enormous impression on me. He declared that this year's entering freshman are the largest group of students with extensive community involvement in areas of social justice that he has seen in his **20 years of experience**. To me this was a message of hope and optimism ...and we have seen it here at home also. I have to believe that it has to do with how we teach our children and how our parents participate with their children, to teach them the precepts of Tikkun Olam.

As unemployment rises, our trusty historian Sarna anticipates that there will be a new focus on "sweat equity." Jewish leaders are trying to harness the time of the unemployed for the benefit of the Jewish community, and many of those unemployed are eager to be useful. In the absence of start-up money, young, creative, technologically savvy Jews will volunteer their time to causes that inspire them. And so it is at Temple Beth Sholom.

Temple Beth Sholom has seen an upward trend in participation in causes for social justice. On our Board of Directors there are a number of individuals dedicated to organizing Temple social action programs. Last year, we conducted a taskforce looking at ways of unifying our efforts among Temple groups and to harness that energy in a number of directed approaches. For example we've adopted a platoon of 47 soldiers, led by newly promoted Captain Daniel Schilleci, who have been training in Indiana since August and will be deployed to Iraq next week; our school will be exploring the theme of Kibud Zekaynim, honoring the elderly, raising money for senior transportation and multigenerational programs culminating in a Senior Prom at the end of the school year; and of course our ongoing efforts toward addressing hunger through our food drives and consistently providing Sunday night meals at the Orange Presbyterian Church soup kitchen.

For the past couple of years, Temple Beth Sholom has been organizing the lighting of the menorah on each of the eight nights of Chanukah in the Orange Circle. Last year, Orange's menorah was **stolen**, and Temple Beth Sholom was able to provide a menorah substitute to continue the new tradition. We are working towards providing a new menorah to be housed at the Temple and brought out to the community during Chanukah. If you haven't come out and lit a candle out in the community, I encourage you to join us this year. It is truly an illuminating experience.

Speaking of illumination, have you seen our adult education brochure? [\[show brochure\]](#) April Akiva, our new director of religious education, will be guiding us in our personal quests for illumination this year. With 260 people taking classes through our adult education program last year, you could say we are a congregation of life-long learners. No matter what level of knowledge you have or what your background is, there is an opportunity for you to explore the lessons and wisdom that Judaism brings, in a relaxed and enjoyable setting.

We are a congregation of many blessings, but we are not complacent. We are constantly striving to reach new heights. We are fortunate that many of our congregants find great reward and satisfaction in giving back to the Temple and we are grateful. Would I like to see more participation? The answer is of course, YES. Not only does the Temple and our community benefit, it is a way to connect, to make great friends, and have fun.

Jews typically rely on ties of faith and kinship to carry them through the hard times. These values are sometimes forgotten in some circles, during years of plenty. They bear remembering and taking action.

All Jews are a family and responsible for helping one another. There's been no better time in recent memory to become more involved and to experience more of what Temple Beth Sholom has to offer.

On this New Year, shining with the light of renewed opportunities, I challenge each one of us to come to Shabbat services and enjoy the spirit of our Temple community, to volunteer on a project, at bingo, or on a committee here at the Temple and meet new friends, to join our Sisterhood and our Brotherhood, and to invite a fellow congregant to join you for a meal, a bike ride, a class, or just coffee and welcome them into your circle.

That is what Temple Beth Sholom is all about. It is about life, learning, and connections.

Before I close, I would like to take a moment to introduce my family who are here with me this morning: my parents, Dory and Prosper Benaksas, my sister Monique and her sons Jonathan and Daniel, my daughter Juliet, my sons Mark and Jason, and my husband, Mike, without whom I could not be up here. For the past 14 years, my family and I have truly been blessed to be part of this Temple Beth Sholom community.

With appreciation to our volunteers, our professional, administrative, teaching, and custodial staffs, for the sacred work they do every day, With gratitude to the Santa Ana Police Department for providing security for our Temple, and With blessings to you my fellow congregants,

My family and I wish you all a Happy, Healthy, and Sweet New Year.

L' Shanah Tovah!