

BEKI President Yaron Lew

Kol Nidre 5780 – 2019

Good evening and Shana Tova

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Yaron Lew and I'm the current BEKI President. I would like to start by conveying the collective thanks of the entire BEKI community to our outgoing president Harold Birn for leading our congregation for through past three years with dignity, wisdom, compassion and a great sense of humor.

A little-known fact is that Harold and I had a succession agreement. One of the central points was that I will assume the presidency, but Harold has to write my Kol Nidrei speech. Since only one of us fulfilled his end of the bargain, you will notice a marked decline in eloquence during today's speech. I'm sure that Harold will find time to ask for forgiveness for this during Yom Kippur.

I would like to speak to you today about my personal journey "From the Beaches of Sdot Yam to the Shores of BEKI".

Some of you know that I grew up in Israel in a Kibbutz called Sdot Yam which literally translated means Fields and Sea. The Kibbutz is perched on a beach along the Mediterranean Sea in what I consider to be the prettiest place on earth. The Kibbutz I grew-up in was a totally secular community with absolutely no place for god in daily life. There was no synagogue, no prayer room, no mention of god in school and in most cases, Shabbat was just another working day. As kids we didn't live with our parents, we grew up in children's homes. And when we were teenagers, as long as we went to school every day and put in a few hours of work in the Kibbutz every day after school, we were left alone to fend for ourselves. The only indication that Yom Kippur came was that the communal dining hall was closed and didn't serve any meals. So, as resourceful teenagers we developed our own tradition on Yom Kippur.

On the eve of Yom Kippur in the afternoon, we would go down to the beach and pitch our tents. Before sunset, we would row our little fishing boats out to sea and cast our fishing nets. We would then come back to our camp and have a lively sing along around the bon fire until the wee hours of the night. When we woke up the next day, we would go out to retrieve our nets that were laden with fish and grill it on the remnants of last night's fire to sustain and nourish us through the day. That was my Yom Kippur tradition growing up.

At about the same time that we went down to the beach on Yom Kippur eve, a lone figure of a short man wrapped in a Tallit would emerge from the gate of the Kibbutz and start walking through the fields. That person was my father and he was the only member of the Kibbutz who insisted on participating in a Kol Nidrei prayer. Since there was no synagogue at the Kibbutz he

would walk to the nearest town of Or Akiva, which was about 10 kilometers away, or a two hour walk through the fields. As soon as services were over, he walked the two hours back and at about the same time that we went out to retrieve our fishing nets the next day, he started walking again for the daily and Neila services. As he grew older and walking became a little difficult, the Kibbutz was kind enough to get him a bicycle to make the trip on the road. For those of you having visions of my dad racing on the road to Or Akiva like Michael Winters zooming through the streets of New haven at 6:00am, that was not the case. His bike was the adult version of a tricycle and it would take him just as long to make the trip. My family was only content with him doing it because in Israel there are no cars on the roads on Yom Kippur so there was no chance of him getting in an accident. Much later in life, when he was approaching his eightieth birthday, my father finally won the battle with the Kibbutz and convinced them to designate a room for religious observances. Every year after that he would go to the same Ashkenazi synagogue in Or Akiva and borrow a Sefer Torah for Yom Kippur so he and a few other believers could have Yom Kippur services at the Kibbutz.

By that time, Liora and I were already in the US and started our new life in New haven. Liora, my beloved wife, who grew up in a somewhat conservative home started looking for a synagogue. I wasn't thrilled with the idea and asked her why we should join a synagogue. She replied that a synagogue is much more than a place for prayers. It is a community to belong to in a place where we had none. In all seriousness I asked her if she thinks any synagogue will actually accept me - an agnostic Kibbutznik who's never attended services in his life. Liora said that she heard of this synagogue called BEKI and that "at BEKI they accept EVERYONE". So, we came to BEKI for what was the first time I ever attended Shabbat services. Like a good Israeli I sat in the last row near the door, preparing my escape route. My first impression was that either the seats here are very uncomfortable, or the people came in for their morning workout, because they kept standing up and sitting down all the time and I wasn't sure what that was all about. With time, I got the hang of it and I even found out that it can be fun arguing with my good friend Steve Rothman about Yankees vs. Red Sox between prayers or listening to the endless stream of bad jokes coming from Robert Lettick.

As time went by, I started to feel more comfortable and moved forward in the rows. When I reached about the third row from the back, Yom Kippur came. I wrapped myself in my father's old tallit and came to BEKI for my first ever Kol Nidrei service. The service was beautifully led by Allen Lovins and was a wonderful spiritual and moving experience. But then something very strange happened, and some of you might still remember it. They stopped the service and started asking people for money. I was so appalled by this that I told Liora I will never set foot at BEKI on Kol Nidrei until they abolish the Kol Nidrei Appeal. For the next few years we had an agreed upon family separation on Yom Kippur. Liora would come to BEKI and I would go to Battell Chapel at Yale, the only place in the area which was not doing a Kol Nidre appeal.

Years went by and the girls grew up. We celebrated Daphne's Bat Mitzvah at BEKI and then Dana's. When it came time for Maya's Bat Mitzvah, I asked Liora if I could speak on behalf of

the parents this time since she spoke for both of us on the previous two Bat Mitzvahs. To which she said “of course, I thought you’d never ask”. When the blessed day came, I stood in front of the congregation with my prepared speech and instead of speaking I pretty much cried tears of joy the whole time. Part of what I was trying to tell the congregation was how lucky we were to have found BEKI because it became our family and our community where we had none. To this day, I think that one of the only people who understood what I was trying to say was Carole Bass, who called shortly after Maya’s Bat Mitzvah to ask if I was willing to join the Board.

As I joined the Board, Carol sent an email to all Board Members asking them if there is any issue they want to bring up for discussion in the coming year. I immediately answered that I would like to find a way to abolish the Kol Nidrei Appeal and Carol, who never shied away from a challenge, said “Yaron, if you’re willing to lead this effort, I’ll support you”. I still remember the words of Mark Oppenheimer after the first Kol Nidrei service without an appeal who came to me and said “Yaron, there’s no going back”. Indeed, there is no going back.

I want you to take two lessons from today’s speech. One – if you stand up and openly cry in front of the whole congregation, there’s a very good chance that you’ll end up on the Board and maybe even become President. Selfishly speaking, I hope quite a few of you take this to heart and try it because we are always looking for new Board Members and I am still looking for the next President. Just so you appreciate the transformation, this is coming from a man who used to celebrate Yom Kippur with a fish barbecue. For the second lesson I need to go back to that old man walking through the field. My father fought many battles in his lifetime. He fought on the battlefields of World War II, he fought in the shadows in defense of the young Jewish state of Israel, he fought political battles in his public life and personal battles in his private life. My father always told me “Yaron, you have to find a cause you believe in, be passionate about it, fight for it and make a change”. So, if you are passionate about something you want addressed, please bring it up to the Board. I can’t promise you that we will accept every idea, but I do promise that we will give every idea a very serious consideration.

In closing I would like to say that even though I’m standing here alone, there is an army of invisible volunteers right here behind me. I want to take this opportunity and thank the countless volunteers who make BEKI the wonderful place that it is. The High Holidays committee, the Kiddush Teams, The Minyan Captains, the House Committee, the Programming Committee, the Membership Committee, our committee of one – the website committee, the Hesed committee, Social Action Committee and all the other dedicated volunteers. You make this place work and you keep this place going for all of us to enjoy. If anyone in here today has any free time and is willing to volunteer, we will find a place for you to volunteer here at BEKI.

Last but not least, I’d like to thank our two dedicated employees. Our office manager Peggy Hackett who makes sure that things here are done when they should and whom I believe manages us more than we manage her. And our tireless and dedicated Facilities Manager Michael Barrone for whom no job is too small or too big and he does it all with that nice big smile on his face. Thank you both from all of us for your great service.

On behalf of the entire Board, my family and myself, I would like to wish all of you an easy and meaningful fast, Shanah Tova and G'mar Hatima Tova.