Shana Tova

I'm Jeff Kirtner, President of TBI, and it's my great honor to welcome you to Erev Rosh HaShanah 5780. It feels wonderful to be together this evening. As you may know, Rosh HaShanah has many other names. One is Yom Teruah (Day of shouting or blasting, as in the mighty shofar). From this, our sages deduced that quiet sounds like cell phone ringtones are inappropriate, so I remind you to silence them now. As a final preliminary matter, the safety committee has asked me to inform you that, in addition to the main doors, there are exits on either side of the bimah to the street behind me, and there is an exit through the courtyard off the social hall in back.

Another name for Rosh HaShanah is Yom HaDin (Day of Judgment or Day of the Law). That name is my jumping off point to talk to you briefly about bridges and TBI's new theme for the year, *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* ("Justice, justice shall you pursue").

A week and a half ago, Rabbi Ruhi sent out a link to a song I learned many years ago at summer camp: "*Kol ha'olam kulo, gesher tsar meod. V'haikar, lo le'fached klal.* The whole world is a very narrow bridge. And the main thing is, not to be afraid at all." We'll be singing that song later this evening. The song always grabbed me, and I felt it had a deep meaning, but the meaning always slipped through my fingers. Then one day in law school, a professor (who was Jewish, which is probably relevant) said something that clicked. He asked us what "law" is; and I ask you that now: what is law? My thought then, maybe like yours now, was something like: "Law is the set of rules that, if violated, can be punished by the government."

What my professor said caught me totally off guard. He suggested that law is a bridge from the society we are now, to the society we aspire to be. I have mulled this over often. "Law is a bridge to the society we aspire to be." Let me give you an example of what I think this means.

In 1790, President George Washington was in Newport, Rhode Island, to solicit support for the ratification of the proposed constitutional amendments now known as the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment, concerning freedom of religion. One of the people who came out to greet Washington was Moses Seixas (SAY-shus), a synagogue official from Yeshuat Israel, the first Jewish congregation in Newport. Prior to the constitution and First Amendment, minority Christian groups, among them Catholics, Baptists, and Presbyterians, had been discriminated against in many States, and non-Christians did not have full rights of citizens. In Rhode Island, for example, Jews were not allowed to vote. Seixas read a stirring address to Washington, grounded in Jewish ethics, expressing the congregation's support of the First Amendment and belief that the United States was founded on the principle of liberty of conscience for all citizens. It read in part:

> "Deprived as we [Jews] . . . have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now, with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty . . ., behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People--a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance--but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine. . ."

Washington was moved by Seixas' words, and responded with the famous "Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island," in which he used Seixas' own language to express, more

forcefully than had been done before, that tolerance was now grounded not on the whim of a ruling class, but in the inherent right of all citizens to full liberty of conscience. The congregation's letter, and Washington's response, were used then, and are still used today, to describe our country's attitudes toward tolerance. All citizens, Washington wrote in part,

> "possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.
>
> . . . the Government of the United States . . . gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . . .
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> May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants--while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Sadly, the events of today plainly and painfully show that we have not yet achieved the bold vision of liberty and equality, tolerance and security, underlying our laws and the letters above. And it is also true that we hear in these letters an overt patriarchy, which we've rightly removed from our liturgy, and strive, in fits and starts, to end. And yes, we hear hypocrisy, too, aware that the authors themselves did not live up to the full meaning of their own words.

But though we have not yet attained the 'liberty and justice for all' inherent in our laws and principles, nevertheless we have made progress. Indeed, much of American history can be seen as groups struggling to claim the equal rights the laws promise. And while the struggle continues, progress will continue, too, due in part to the universal language of the laws and principles themselves. All that is some of what I think my professor meant, when he said law is a bridge to the society we aspire to be.

In a similar way, the High Holy Days can be viewed as a bridge from the people we are today, to the people we aspire to become. Our ancestors developed the High Holy Day liturgy to help us connect to, turn to, strive to become, our aspirational selves. If the imagery—a King inscribing judgments in the book of life or death—leaves you unmoved, consider instead what *actions* we asked to *do*. Teshuva, Tefillah, Tzedakah. That is, to strive to treat people in our private sphere with tenderness and respect, and to pursue justice in the public sphere. Cornell West said: "Justice is what love looks like in public. Tenderness is what love feels like in private." Viewed through that lens, the High Holy Days are a bridge to a world filled with more love.

Finally, if I'm not stretching the metaphor too far, TBI can be thought of as a bridge to move our community from what we are now to what we aspire to be. American Jews have felt the winds of hate shift these past few years, and this last year especially the winds have blown cold, and carry with them an echo of boots marching that is familiar down to our bones. We have been heartened by the response of local government and the interfaith community, who have been with us in opposing anti-semitism. But for Jews, it is not enough to be anti anti-semitism. We must be *for* something. That requires us to act together in community. That requires TBI. May the High Holy Days inspire us to build a bridge to the future we want for ourselves, our congregation, our country and our world.

L'Shanah Tova Tikateivu.