

Good evening, everyone. L'shana tova. Happy New Year.

My name is Stan Eichner. My family and I have been members of Kahal B'raira for 11 years, and tonight it's my honor and privilege to share some RH reflections with you. A fundamental concept of RH is the opportunity it provides to reflect on the past year and consider our future actions. This year I celebrated my 60th birthday, and was lucky enough to do so with many members of the KB congregation. As sometimes happens during such "milestone" birthdays, I started thinking about earlier ones, and in particular my bar mitzvah, 47 years ago. Then it occurred to me-- I had an idea that maybe I could now give the Bar Mitzvah speech that I had been unable to give 47 years ago.

Let me explain and provide some background.

Growing up, my family belonged to a very Orthodox synagogue. In that congregation, a speech, in English, by a bar mitzvah boy, wasn't really considered all that significant. Nevertheless, I had actually been looking forward to having my chance to get up on the bima and address everyone. As the big event drew ever closer, however, and I had not been able to produce a good speech, my rabbi was perfectly willing to hand me a "canned" one to deliver.

Historically, "becoming a bar mitzvah" means that you can be counted towards the ten-man quorum requirement (a minion). Traditionally, the bar mitzvah boy would say, "I'm glad to join your congregation." And, typically, in response, the congregation would say, that it was glad to have you as a member. Unfortunately, in my case, neither was actually true.

I was not able to say I was pleased to be part of the congregation, because –

my heart was not into their beliefs, liturgy, or practices, nor could I connect with the rabbi who was quite bigoted in his views. I did wind up giving the canned speech, followed by five more years of having to attend High Holiday services, but without any real choice or love for that community.

Kahal B'raira, means, and we call ourselves, “community of choice,” and in almost every respect, it is the exact OPPOSITE of my childhood congregation, which for me, was just a community of obligation and compulsion.

Why, in modern times, why would anyone join a congregation and attend services? Without words from Mt Sinai to “command” you to attend services, why would someone go? Actually a person would only do so if what is said and done is meaningful.

And that underscores why the idea of being a community of choice is so powerful to me.

CHOOSING a liturgy, that is real and meaningful, one that does not require mental gymnastics; reinterpretations; or tortured reconstruction.

CHOOSING a community to join, because it is rational to connect and be connected to this group of people.

It's been especially wonderful that THIS community of choice, KB, has been such a warm and embracing home, for me and my whole family. Nowhere did this combination of meaningful liturgy and community connection play out more dramatically than in the journey our family made in connection with my daughters becoming bat mitzvah. We had the challenge and joy of designing ceremonies that were wonderfully meaningful in learning, language, and new traditions. We continue to fondly

reminisce about how special my daughters' bat mitzvah ceremonies were and consider that effort to be one of the best things we've done as a family.

You know, if you think about it, there are at least two different meanings to the word "compel":

In one sense, something can be compelling because it fits, it's rational and makes sense on its own value/merit, and therefore is attractive

OR,

-- compelling can also be used in the sense of directing someone to do something, i.e., because you "ought to" or "should" do something,

There's no authority or person to say that you "must" or "should" attend KB,

-- a person would only do so if it were compelling, because it relates to who you are and your view of the world. So that is another way in which KB really only works as a community of choice.

An additional aspect to the notion of choice, is not just the initial question, whether to join a community or not, but also the choice as to the type or level of involvement -- .What level of passion does one bring to a community? Are you able, as the hokey pokey song says, "to put your whole self in"?

Each and every New Year, each of you has a chance to make that choice and decision freshly, and to answer the following questions for yourself:

Is this the community that is meaningful to me, that I want to join it?

If so what is the level of connection and involvement that I want, to be a member in heart and soul? [OR, If that's not how I feel, how can I move towards that?]

Notably, these are the very same questions that we each must resolve, regardless of whether it is our first visit to KB, or we've been a member of KB for over 25 years.

As we celebrate this New Year, and you reflect on the past and look towards all the possibilities of the future, I hope you would answer those questions affirmatively and enthusiastically – YES, to choosing this community, and YES to doing so in as fulsome and robust way as makes sense for you.

. Now, 47 years later, I can TRULY SAY – that I am pleased and excited to be a member of this congregation, that is, it IS compelling to me, not by some ordered/required participation, but instead

--compelled by the liturgy, traditions, and a philosophy that combines rational thinking with a warm celebration of Judaic identity, and

--compelled as well by the community of other people with whom I feel so deeply connected.

As my own personal commitment to grow and do better in the coming year, I pledge to get even closer and build stronger connections between me and other members of Kahal B'raira

As you reflect over this holiday period on what you want for yourself in the year ahead, I hope that each of you will be enriched by your deliberations.

L'shana tova. Happy New Year.