

YOM KIPPUR APPEAL

Hello, my name is Maria Schell Hassid, and I have been a member here of Netivot for the past three years. I'm here to ask you today to reflect on this new year and why it is important to support this congregation.

I have been thinking a lot about the meaning of the High Holidays. In most of the US, January comes around, and the Gregorian New Year is celebrated as a time to forget, a slate wiped clean. You buy a new calendar, gym memberships go up, and people try dry January, all in an appealing fiction that if we just reset ourselves to zero, any change is possible.

But for the Jewish people, after the sweet celebrations of Rosh Hashana, the first act of the New Year is Yom Kippur, which is a time to look back and repent. We know that true renewal only comes with reflection. We cannot 'start anew' without understanding the reality of what has been, what we have done, and even how we have harmed those around us. For me, this is one of the most profound parts of being Jewish. I hope to pass the lesson to my children - that we must always look to our past if we want a better version of the future.

So, today, as we begin the new year, I want to share my past with you here at Netivot. We came here to find community because my son wanted to have his Bar Mitzvah in a synagogue - in large part because of the strong Jewish identity he had formed at his school. I was grateful but also a bit trepidacious - when my husband and I first met and decided to get married, we had visited a few different shuls, and people didn't quite know what to make of us. My father, brother, and sister-in-law are all Episcopal priests, and I grew up going to church every Sunday. My husband comes from a large Sephardic Egyptian family whose sense of Jewish identity was extremely strong but whose practices were mostly around family events in his extended family's homes. I wasn't sure there was a place us. We wanted traditions rooted in meaningful practice but didn't like all of the rigidity of orthodoxy. We tried a few places, but the synagogues that we visited seemed to confirm my sense that we would be odd ducks.

But, somehow, Netivot was different. People welcomed us. When I talked about our family or my parents came for services, we were welcomed with curiosity and appreciation. I didn't feel quite so odd, or at least I felt being odd was just a little less odd in this particular synagogue. Still, it took me some time to figure out my place. Sometimes, during services, I would start off sitting in one seat in the back with my husband and children and decide that wasn't right; I wanted to participate! Then I would

move up forward because I didn't want to feel like I was sitting on the sidelines, but then I wouldn't be sitting with my family, and then I would move back. I felt awkward, like a skittish child, not knowing or understanding the services, trying to decide if I should try and follow along with the melodies. Learn and read the transliteration. Contemplate the English translation? Learn the aleph-bet?

As I look back at that time, grateful. Space was made for me, the synagogue, our rabbi, the community, THIS community, was there for me, and met me where I was. Despite my confusions, I could walk in to this place and feel like there was a place for me.

This past year has been challenging, with news coming at us from many different directions. I have struggled to make sense of the destruction and violence of the war now spreading across the Middle East and the bitterness and fear I see all around me. It can be so overwhelming. I have found solace in this place and have time to reflect. These are the times I need community the most. I feel it every time I walk in this place, a place of Shalom.

When you walk through the door, take a moment to understand the thousands of small acts that are required to make this community a reality. Of course, each Shabbat, we thank the daveners, leyners, and greeters, but to make a building a community, so much more is required. The people needed to handle all of the administrative aspects of the congregation, to clean, repairs to the building, and the cost of keeping the lights on. To pay for staff, security, the list goes on and on.

Someone must pay for the toilet paper.

Look back and think, for a moment, on all of the work, effort, time, and money that has been spent to make this moment where I stand before you possible. It's a thousand little things. The gift to us is as we walk through the door and do not notice or consider any of it.

It is easy to come in here, to our spiritual home, and be like children (in the case of my children), sometimes blissfully unaware of the actual cost of making a place a home. At some level, this is what we all want. The freedom to come into a spiritual place and find solace and tradition, to listen and study Torah, to pray and worship together. And let the mundane reality of all it takes to run this place disappear. As someone who works in the nonprofit community, I know this reality intimately.

Netivot's total budget is about \$1.3 million, which may sound like a lot; as someone who runs nonprofits for a living, it's pretty small for a community of this size. I can honestly say it is incredible what the synagogue is able to do with such a small budget.

We are lucky that synagogue dues cover about half that cost. But leave us to raise the rest of the fees, grants, and donations.

There are the ongoing needs of the community, but then there are also the inspiring ways to spend money: new chairs in the library, our impressive adult education program, our youth programming, which both of my children have participated in, including the Amintim program, and our retreat this year, which, like every year, found funds to pay for those members of the congregation who were unable to afford the cost. All of it, inspiring or banal, costs money.

This year's goal is \$115,000. The good news is that thanks to the generosity of a few members of the community, we are almost halfway there. But the goal isn't just about the total amount raised but about participation.

If you've never given before, I ask you to give a little; know that whatever amount you can will mean something. If you have given in the past but stopped for a while, well, it's Yom Kippur. Strike your chest and make a pledge. If you have given in the past and plan to do so again, thank you. We need you, too. All of it counts. Every single penny. Every person here. Each and every one of you.

If this past year has taught me anything, it is not to take anything for granted. We, all of us, in the room today, share a responsibility - to make this place happen. It's a choice we all make. And we can make that choice all together, each one of us, starting today.

Thank you.