

RH DAY 1 – PRESIDENT JAY COHEN’S ADDRESS

Thank you Rabbi Josh. Shanah Tovah to our congregants, your guests and all visitors.

You know, let me just start out by saying that yesterday morning Cheryl, my wife and speech editor, and I were walking on the beach. It was a bright, beautiful day and the ocean water temperature was in the 70’s. Actually 76 degrees. Saturday afternoon and evening had been a washout, with much needed rain, so we really wanted to stay. And so we discussed as Reconstructionists, why can’t we celebrate the new year in the colder, darker, less busy times of the year? Why do we do this when it’s still the summer? What is it with this Hebrew calendar anyway? Aren’t we progressive enough to consider changing this....Rabbi??

But seriously, I want to talk today about progressive Judaism. What I think it may be and what does it have to do with us?

This term has arisen in the context of the discussions that Or Hadash’s Strategic Planning Committee is having. This committee is looking at all aspects of our congregation. Its purpose is to seek to improve all aspects of our congregational life. As a part of this we are probing our communal identity. This also relates to marketing ourselves. Yes, these days synagogues have to market themselves as the synagogue “market” has drastically changed. Especially in this geographic area.

One of the questions is whether Reconstructionism is “different enough” from the Reform and Conservative movements so as to make our community unique enough to attract new members. I honestly don’t know if I have an answer to that question, which makes it quite likely that anyone not belonging to a Reconstructionist shul may not know the answer either. So, I pose this hypothetical question: what if we changed our name from Or Hadash to “The Center for Progressive Judaism” and explained the goals of such a center. In trying to answer this question, I’m going to use a top 9 list. No, this bears no resemblance at all to Rabbi Josh’s top 10 lists, which of course never bore any resemblance to David Letterman’s top 10 list. Here’s my top 9 list of what I think it means to be a “progressive Jew.” With a little help from Leo Rosten and his book “The Joys of Yiddish.” Of course, keep in mind that these are in no way mandates—there is always room for variation, flexibility and creativity - key elements I think to being progressive. And so, the 9th way to be a progressive Jew:

9. Not be a knee jerk anything A progressive Jew strives to think through their allegiances, alliances, politics, social views and all ideas and theories. It means to try and not be prejudiced or to prejudge anybody, anything, or any idea. In other words, no one can say, least of all me, that this is what you have to BE, to BE a progressive Jew. The number 8 way to be a progressive Jew:

8. We are not the one chosen people on the face of this earth While we are not God’s chosen people, we can choose to do anything that will make this world a better place. Unlike some, we do not use our religion to justify killing or criminal behavior. But we are entitled to defend ourselves. All Jews are “mishpocheh” which means we have an “intense feeling of

common heritage, common obligations, common values” and common tragedies. As intermarriage continues and is a fact, our concept of mishpocheh will broaden and non-Jews will come within our family. The world may one day be one mishpocheh - what John Lennon was really trying to say in his classic song “Imagine” - a brotherhood of man- he just didn’t have the Jewish words for it. Which leads to the 7th way to be a progressive Jew:

7. Work with other religions to benefit all people As a corollary to not being chosen, we need to try and recognize that people of all religions deserve our respect and assistance. The 6th way to be a progressive Jew may resonate with some of us more than others:

6. We should not feel guilt for not following or liking ritual Everyone can attain spirituality and the sense of calm this brings to the soul in their own way. The Yiddish word “pilpul” is an “inflated form of analysis and debate used in Talmudic study, i.e., unproductive hair splitting that is employed not so much to advance clarity or reveal meaning as to display one’s own cleverness.” A folk saying: “If you insist long enough that you’re right, you’ll be wrong.” The “balbatim” is Yiddish for the board members of a synagogue. A story: “Young Rabbi Shulman finally summoned up enough courage to say to Mr. Benenson, one of the balbatim of the community, ‘I trust you won’t mind my mentioning it, but I can’t help noticing that you always fall asleep when I’m preaching.’ “Why not?” replied Benenson. “Would I sleep if I didn’t trust you?” Number 5:

5. We abhor extremism in any cloak Extremist Jews are no better than extremist Muslims or extremist Christians or extremist atheists. Number 4 is a favorite of mine:

4. Religion should not be a barrier but a gateway “Love conquers all” is a cliché that I like because a religious intermarriage can help to lead society to continue to break down the religious and cultural barriers that divide us. The Yiddish words “Goy” and “shikseh” and shaygets” should have no place in our vocabulary. A story: A young priest sees a sign over a hardware store that reads Pincus and O’Toole. The priest goes in and is greeted by a man in a yarmulke. The priest says, “I just wanted to let you know it’s great that your people and mine have become such great friends and business partners-it’s such a surprise.” The man in the yarmulke says, “I have even a bigger surprise, I’m O’Toole.” The 3d way we can be progressive Jews:

3. We do not just fight for justice for ourselves but for all people Can we be truly free if there are people who are not? Can we be satisfied with our lives if we are doing well but others are not? That’s a hard and troubling question. “Tzedaka” is from the Hebrew tzedek meaning righteousness. A story: First day of school and the teacher asks each student to give their name, age and hobby. Sally Farnsworth stood up and said, “I’m 10 and I like to roller skate.” James Burns stood up and said, “I’m 9 and I collect stamps.” Morris Wexler stood up and said, “I’m 10 and I pledge \$5.” With Tikkun Olam a progressive Jew gives of their time and of their money to help others less fortunate. The yiddish word “chachma” means wisdom. In Jewish thought, wisdom does not involve knowledge or intellect alone, but moral and character attributes, the highest is being righteous and spreading loving kindness-doing good. “Money can buy anything [except seichel] - common sense.” The number 2 way to be a progressive Jew:

2. We forgive, but do not forget “Rachmones” means mostly compassion. A progressive Jew should work hard on this. Sometimes easier said than done. This is a hard one to master. Which leads to the number 1 way to be a progressive Jew:

1. We are always open to learning Just when you think you get it, you realize you don't. We are seekers of the truth, but don't always know how to get there. It's a journey for us.

Well, it's clear to me that this room is full of progressive Jews. Why do I say that? How do I know? Because most of you did not walk out on my speech or fall asleep yawning. If you did that's okay because it means you trust me. In Yiddish you have done me a “mitzvah.” You are kind, patient and considerate. You are all “menches”-upright, honorable and decent!

So I guess by this time you who are familiar with Reconstructionist Judaism may see parallels between progressivism and Reconstructionism. Why? Because we strive to move forward and change with the times. Stagnation is the opposite of progression. There are those who may argue that orthodoxy is on the rise, in Judaism and other religions, and that is the way to go to preserve religion in general and Judaism in particular. But is that really what we are here on this earth for?

Maybe most important, we are “haimish.” We are: unpretentious, put on no airs, are unspoiled by office or honors, we are informal, cozy, warm, giving of our time and love, and have the kind of rapport that exists inside of a happy, loving home.

My wish is that everyone tries to do their best this year to progress.