

Parting Words for Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley
June 16, 2018
Rabbi David B. Thomas

I am overwhelmed with gratitude for this congregation and the many people who made this weekend of celebration possible. In particular, I want to thank Ken & Lisa and the entire Rabbi Acknowledgement team.

I am grateful beyond words for Lorel – the best partner a rabbi could ask for.

Judy Goldberg for being exactly the president Beth El needed this year and next.

My deepest gratitude is to the congregation. I grew as a rabbi and as a Jew in no small part by my engagement with all of you here at Beth El.

When I think back to my engagement with the Rabbi Search Committee, 18 years ago, I remember making the following observation at lunch just before returning to New York after my November visit: I said, “I have a good feeling about this, and I hope you do as well. And I know that if it will work out, it will only be because the congregation is willing to invest in my growth and learning as I invest in the growth and learning of the members of this congregation.” It made sense then and it certainly has been the case throughout my tenure here.

I’d like to take this last opportunity to reflect on the core teachings I’ve tried to share with you over the years. There are (of course) seven:

1. Embrace and celebrate diversity. Beth El is as diverse as Jewish congregations get. We come from all branches of Judaism and other faith traditions. We are geographically and economically diverse. And this is good because pluralism is essential to Judaism. *Eilu v’ eilu divrei Elohim hayyim* – Both these and those are the words of the Living God. An infinite God cannot be limited by one correct point of view. Even contradictory positions can both be true.
2. As Rabbi David Stern said last night – Support for Israel used to be the one thing North American Jews could agree on. Now it’s the one thing we can’t agree on. Over the years, I tried to encourage

you to forge and deepen personal relationships with the land and people of Israel, even at a time when it has been difficult or impossible to support the policies of Israel's government. The pluralism I just spoke of is best served by shifting our debates about Israel away from the political and instead to engage in values-based discussions. We do best when we explore the way our values inform our perspectives, experiences and connections with the land and people of Israel.

3. Judaism recognizes and affirms a broad spectrum of beliefs about God. For some, God is a transcendent being who exists outside of nature and sees what we do, rewarding and punishing human behavior. For others, God inheres in all being. God is radically immanent. God is the life force that animates all existence. Others embrace different ideas about God – including radical doubt. I have tried to invite you to adopt an authentically Jewish theology that works for you and not to worry too much about being consistent. In theology, consistency is not much of a virtue.
4. The job description of the Jewish people is, to quote Genesis, “to follow the ways of God by doing what is just and right.” As Jews, we are called on to be iconoclasts – defying power, wealth and status to establish justice in a world typically governed by the few who control the many.
5. As Jews, we are called on to respond to the needs of the immigrant, indeed everyone who lives on the margins of society, and to do it now with particular urgency. The purpose of our enslavement, bondage and cruel oppression in Egypt was to sensitize us to the pain of others. God did not redeem us from Egypt just so we would testify to God's power, or arrogantly claim status as God's chosen people. God redeemed us from Egypt so that we would understand and use redemptive power to free others from their bondage. As Jews – Orthodox, Reform or secular – we carry the historic trauma of Egyptian bondage so that we will never become inured to the pain of others.
6. A word about adversity. Sometimes shitty things happen to us. We don't get much control over what comes our way. But we do have ultimate control over how we react to it. When adversity confronts you (and it will) you have choices. You could get angry

and blame God. If that makes you feel better, fine. Don't worry, God can take it. Better would be to try to embrace the notion that not everything happens for a reason. God did not give you cancer, and God does not dispatch populations with plague, mudslides or storms. Shit happens and it comes our way simply because we are mere mortals. When you suffer a loss it is natural to want to know where God is. Look towards those around you who are giving you comfort. You'll find God in them. God is also in the memory of the people whom you loved, and God is in the hope and the certainty that their lives have meaning. God is also in the gratitude you feel for having enjoyed their love.

7. Finally, just because things don't necessarily happen for a reason, doesn't mean that life has no meaning or purpose. Know that every human being that ever was, or ever will come into being, was created unique for a purpose. Never has there been anyone on this planet exactly like you. For if there had, there would be no reason for you to exist. Our job is to figure out why we're here, what we can uniquely contribute to the redemption of all humanity, and then to do that with all our might.

My friends, it has been the honor of my lifetime and my deepest privilege to be your rabbi and serve this sacred community for these 17 years. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to serve you, the Jewish community and God. May you all be blessed as you continue your journey as individuals and as a community. Thank you.