

**Installation Speech-- by Richard D. Weiss,
President of Congregation Keneseth Israel
June 17, 2011**

June 17 is a very special day for me. On this day, in 1962, my wife Bobbi and I were married. Now I know that the 25th anniversary is silver and the 50th is gold. I didn't realize until tonight that the 49th is synagogue!

Five months later, on November 17th 1962, Neil Simon's musical comedy, "*Little Me*" opened on Broadway starring the inimitable Sid Caesar. It ran for 257 performances. It then opened at Congregation Ohev Shalom in Wallingford, PA. in March of 1981 and ran for a total of 4 performances. I was a member of that cast, playing the role of Prince Czerny of Rosenzweig, a mythical middle-European duchy opposite the Countess Zaftig. From a friend who knew Ukrainian I learned a few phrases I had to say; in general I had to speak with a middle to eastern European accent. When it was all over a friend approached me and complimented me on my Italian dialect!

Late in the play the scene shifts to a Hollywood sound stage. The cast has sent its lunch-boy to a local deli to get its mid-day meal. He returns, calling out: "*who gets the pastrami on rye—all fat?*". He is not a boy at all, but a formerly world famous, imperious, German movie director fallen from great heights. The powers-that-be see that the production is not proceeding well, so they fire the director and offer the position to the lunch-boy, with the proviso that he drop his

dictatorial methods and come down to earth. “*We want you to be humble*”, said they. Eager to get the job he announces: “*I will do as you say ---I will be humble----I am filled mit humbility*”!

And so tonight I, too, am filled “ mit humbility” as I accept the presidency of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel !

I will try to balance the qualities of humility and self-confidence as I carry out my duties.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the Younger, (please don't confuse him with Seneca the Elder), said that the primary sign of a well-ordered mind is a man's ability to remain in one place and linger in his own company.

I like that very much, and for the foreseeable future you will find me lingering here, in our own company, working and interacting and planning and crying and laughing with all of you.

But there must be more of you----not only in numbers but in participation in all of the things KI has to offer .

In assuming the role of the presidency I realize that I will need the help and the support of everyone. We have assembled a capable, dedicated team of officers to take the lead. We have so many devoted Board members who will pitch in. Our auxiliaries, the Men and Women of Reform Judaism, contribute greatly to our synagogue lives. Our youth groups help us to be young again. And of course, we

have a matchless professional staff, led by Rabbi Sussman and Brian Rissinger.

Those things being said, the most important thing that each of us can do is to be an ambassador for KI. The Passover Haggadah implores us to think that each of us was brought out of Egypt by the strong hand, the strong arm, of God. I want everyone at KI to realize that, in challenging times for us, every member counts. Not only in terms of membership retention, but in terms of obtaining new members. That is our single most important priority going forward and it is of vital, vital importance. So I want everyone to think of himself or herself as a self-appointed ambassador to the Court of Keneseth Israel and produce an ingathering of people. Show those who are unaffiliated just how much we have to offer, not only in terms of programming and professional expertise, but also in terms of human warmth and acceptance. Tell them about our wonderful infant center, pre-school, religious school, and confirmation academy. Let them know that our retention rate after Bar/Bat Mitzvah approaches or exceeds 70%--a truly remarkable figure and a tribute to Rabbi Stacy Rigler's efforts. Among other things, I intend to appoint greeters at every Oneg Shabbat; for months we have been working on membership initiatives at the staff level and events targeted for our different age groups are planned. Our continuance as the shining light of Old York Road depends on it.

I want you to know how well you have been served by now immediate past president Peter Soloff (born in 1962) ; he labored to drive the Shelanu campaign; he worked to begin to re-invigorate the Board, which I will continue; he saw to it that improvements in the building have been, and will be, made. He graciously helped me prepare for this position by encouraging me to attend staff meetings and participate in discussions usually reserved for the president and senior rabbi and executive director. Most importantly, he pumped confidence into my uncertain soul, letting me know that I could do this job. After all, I am the first president in recent memory to be both a senior citizen—and a non-attorney!

I see my role as president as fulfilling three overarching needs: overseeing the administration of the congregation; raising the spirits of the congregation; and helping Rabbi Sussman and our staff to enrich the lives of our congregants and the area's Jewish community.

To paraphrase poetry from another source:

*We owe it to our children AND to ourselves to
help Judaism live and flourish—why should we feel
like spiritual paupers when the riches of a three
thousand year heritage can be ours?*

Finally, let me quote Paula Ackerman whose following statement appears on page 45 of the complete edition of *Mishkan T'Filah*:

We need Jewish men and women to become a Jewishly inspired and informed leadership—not only rabbinical but also lay. We need Jews more conversant with the thought and teachings of Judaism, to whom Judaism is no cold remote theology and Hebrew learning a matter of mystical ignorance, and to whom Jewish culture is no proxied culture. We need a reassertion of faith and a reawakening of interest in a cultural heritage that is all too rapidly being relegated to the exclusive possession of graduates of rabbinical seminaries.....We desperately need such lay leaders today with vision and fortitude.

I aspire to such leadership.

Shabbat Shalom