

ROSH HASHONAH SPEECH 2011 5772

Welcome to 5772---and I say that on behalf of the Trustees and Officers of REFORM Congregation Keneseth Israel.

After all of the years serving as a committee member, committee chairman, trustee, and officer of several congregations, I have come to realize that synagogue life is like a Broadway musical, sometimes a drama, sometimes a melodrama, replete with its cast of characters, its moments of exhilarating highs and devastating lows, its excitement and its boredom, all enhanced and made more poignant by its beautiful music and its lead actors and actresses.

One of my heroes is Stephen Sondheim, and in a moment I will explain why. He is Jewish and he is a genius of a REFORMER.

My brother-in-law, who shares my affinity for the great lyricist and composer, presented me with a gift of Sondheim's recent book, *FINISHING THE HAT* last January, shortly after I was asked to become the president of KI. It was about that time I began asking myself—"what am I going to say to the congregation at the High Holidays?"—something which I have been thinking about since! And as I wrestled with this

dilemma over the intervening months I tried to find a way to connect the work of this man who REFORMED the Broadway musical scene more than anyone else in recent memory with the work that we do at KI to REFORM Jewish practice so that it can resonate with our 21st century lives.

In the preface to his book Sondheim wrote: *There are only three principles necessary for a lyric writer, all of them familiar truisms----they underlie everything I've ever written. In no particular order, and to be written in stone:*

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

CONTENT DICTATES FORM

LESS IS MORE

All in the service of

CLARITY

without which nothing else matters.

If a lyric writer observes this mantra rigorously he can turn out a respectable lyric. If he also has a feeling for music and rhythm, a sense of theater and something to say, he can turn out an interesting one. If in addition he has qualities such as humor, style, imagination and the numerous other gifts every writer could use, he might

even turn out a good one, and with an understanding composer and a stimulating book writer, the sky's the limit.

But we're here at KI and this guy who calls himself your president is talking about lyrics and writing and Broadway---what gives?

Here's the connection.

The first of Sondheim's conclusions is GOD IS IN THE DETAILS. The surge of emotion one feels when observing the children of our religious school during their afternoon minyan, the joy of seeing the b'nai mitzvah display with comfort and confidence their mastery of the service and their Torah and Haftorah portions, the wonderful realization that our Confirmation class students are really on their way to becoming thinking, feeling, knowledgeable Jewish adults---all of these things confirm this Sondheim basic principle.

Another of his truisms is CONTENT DICTATES FORM---when we examine and study ancient texts, as in our wonderful Torah study sessions on Shabbat mornings, or when we evaluate a new prayer book for possible inclusion into our rituals, or when we experiment with musical or electronic services----it's the fundamental

concepts of Judaism which dictate the ultimate forms. And the beauty of REFORM Judaism is that we are free to alter the form just as long as we are guided by the underlying principles of life-long learning (*Torah*), prayer and observance (*avodah*), and deeds of loving kindness (*gemilut chasadim*).

Finally, he concludes, LESS IS MORE—I'll let you grapple with that one. Certainly, it is not true that the less you participate in the life of KI the more you will gain!!! My fellow officers have suggested that the less I speak tonight the more successful our High Holiday appeal will be!!!

Sondheim also said that the writer needs an understanding composer and a stimulating book writer--- and if the team is in place, the sky's the limit. Well---- that directly relates to us.

It would be impossible to find a better professional staff—we've got the writers, the composers, and let me add---the director—who have seen to it and will see to it that REFORM Congregation Keneseth Israel has a long, long run on the Great White Way which is the greater Jewish community of the Delaware Valley and the

Reform Movement. You know their names-----you know their faces.

With our new lay leadership team and our professional and support staff we are poised for a new day---the completion of a successful capital campaign, a new membership initiative, an expanding pre-school enrollment, the prospect of opening up our doors to a neighboring congregation, a new choir director, a new organist---in short a renaissance. Stephen Sondheim said it better than I can in his song *Our Time* from his 1981 production *Merrily We Roll Along* and Cantor Levy can sing it so beautifully:

Something is stirring

Shifting ground,

It's just begun.

Edges are blurring

All around,

And yesterday is done.

Feel the flow

Hear what's happening,

Don't you know?

We're the movers and we're the shapers.

We're the names in tomorrow's papers.

Up to us, man to show 'em.

It's our time, breathe it in.

Worlds to change and worlds to win.

Our turn coming through

Me and you, man

Me and you!!! Me and you!!!

Me and you.

The operative lyrics Cantor Levy just sang are ME AND YOU—we—the community of Keneseth Israel—can continue to make this congregation sing and continue this drama which has been presented on the Jewish stage since 1847 and will continue its long, long run.

The ME part is obvious---staff and lay leadership will continue to function at a very high level. The YOU part is also obvious to me. Take advantage of all that KI has to offer, attend classes, attend services, take part in social action projects, help out wherever you can—and the rewards will be so gratifying.

And, of course, since a theatre troupe, like an army, travels on its stomach, please contribute to our High Holiday appeal, so that the music will never end.

From my family to yours, from the officers and trustees, from the staff—may this year be filled with drama and music and poetry and lyrics and art and stories and prayers in your lives-----Shana Tovah.