

CONGREGATION B'NAI ISRAEL

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Kol Nidre Appeal 2007

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Woody Allen ended his magnum opus to love lost *Annie Hall*, with this voice-over postscript of an old Catskills joke.

"This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." And the doctor says, "Why don't you turn him in?" And the guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs."

Then Reb Woody adds a commentary.

"Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd....but I guess we keep going through it because, uh, most of us need the eggs."

Well, I guess that's pretty much how many of us feel about Judaism. It's compelling and demanding and loving and smothering and exhilarating and exhausting and brilliant and neurotic and..., the list my friends, goes on and on.

What Woody described in his film about love lost ...and found, and his specific choice of ending this film by resuscitating an old Borsht Belt one-liner is, I believe, a profound sense of longing. For Allen it is love, for others something else, but it is longing, nonetheless.

And longing I believe, is what brings many of us here this evening. The Yom Kippur prayer, Ya-aleh Tahanu-Nenu is imbued with longing. Its author begins each line with a fervent plea, "May our delivery..., May our cleansing..., May our remembrance..., May our knocking at Thy gates be heard at evening time," express a longing for both a site specific and an ongoing relationship with God.

However that relationship is defined by any of us tonight, the environment in which that relationship begins, at the nexus of this New Year is here, in this synagogue and on this evening. Because somehow, we hope that whatever our longing is, God is closer to us here and now. Tonight is Prime Time Prayer and we are God Central Terminal. Location. Location. Location.

As a congregation we care that you renew this connection at B'nai Israel. Whether you come three days a year, or each and every Shabbat, you need to know that we care that you consider this synagogue the place where each year you begin the renewal of your relationship with God, how often and how ever you may define it.

And *you* care enough about this congregation that whether three days a year or each and every Shabbat, you take your seats here and not elsewhere. And you chose well, for as I have said before, look around, for you are seated among some of the very finest, most caring, and committed members of our community.

We won a national award for synagogue excellence not only for what we've done, but for whom we've become.

The late great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov was asked to write the introduction to an anthology of Jewish fantasy and science fiction. Totally nonobservant, but nonetheless proud, Asimov titled his intro, "Why Me?"

To answer his question, Asimov told the story of accepting a speaking engagement in Boston on Rosh Hashanah, a job he admitted he would have taken, even if he had realized that it fell during the High Holy Days.

The next day, he received a phone call from a stranger who said he was Jewish and demanded to know why Asimov had agreed to appear on Rosh Hashanah. Asimov explained that he was nonobservant, but received a serious tongue lashing on his responsibilities as a Jew. The caller ended by accusing Asimov of trying to conceal his Jewishness.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," Asimov countered. "You know my name. I don't know yours."

The irate Jewish caller answered, "My name is Jackson Davenport."

"Really," Asimov countered. Well, my name, as you know, is Isaac Asimov, and were I trying to conceal my Jewishness, the very first move I would make would be to change my name to Jackson Davenport."

Asimov concluded his essay by saying, "The reason I am writing this introduction (to a book of Jewish science fiction and fantasy) is that, despite my infidel ways, I am Jewish *enough*."

"Jewish enough." What does it mean to be Jewish enough?
If you ask me, my family thinks I am Jewish *too much*.

Perhaps I am *Jewish too much*. It is an obsession and like all obsessions, not necessarily a healthy one. It's like the character of George Costanza in the TV sitcom Seinfeld, who despite his vaguely Mediterranean-sounding last name, we all knew was really Jewish, once remarked, "I'm so psychosomatic that it makes me sick just thinking about it."

Perhaps that's why I became a synagogue president. I figured if that doesn't cure me of my obsession with Judaism, nothing will.

The role of the Kol Nidre speaker, I'll admit, is to make money for the shul. A rainmaker, so to speak. It's like that TV commercial for the credit card company Capital One, which asks, "What's in *your* wallet?"

But tonight I ask you, "What's in *your* heart?"

My heart is filled with longing this evening. Not for love lost, for I am blessed to have the love of Barbara, Lia, Jessica and Joe and of my mother, but for opportunities lost; to have been a better husband, father, son, friend, boss and yes, even synagogue president.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said that "The unexamined life isn't worth living." The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides said that the three stages of T'shuvah, the repentance that comes with the earnest examination of one's life are regret, rejection and resolution. Summed up by Rabbi Jonah of Gerona, "One must ask oneself: What have I done? What have I become?"

So despite my fixation with the frustration of being a Jew, upon earnest self-examination, I very clearly recognize why *I* am here tonight.

I need the eggs!