

Rabbi Rebecca Pomerantz Shinder
Temple Beth Shalom, Florida

Quite often a rabbi can deliver a sermon and illicit a variety of responses from the congregation. In fact, the very same sermon can be viewed by some as either too political or by others as not taking a strong enough stand on a particular issue. However, the sermon I preached this past Yom Kippur morning has been met with overwhelming uniformed emotion from the moment I delivered it.

Heroes in our Midst – Yom Kippur Morning 2006

Today I want to recognize and publicly acknowledge for the first time some very important people in our congregation. They are part of Temple Beth Shalom because, somewhere along the way, they happened to fall in love with a Jewish man or woman, and that decision changed their life. I want to let you know in advance that in a few moments I am going to be calling up all non-Jewish spouses to come to the bima for a special blessing of thanks and appreciation.

I hope that you will not be embarrassed or upset that I am singling you out in this way. The last thing I want is to make you feel uncomfortable. What I do want is to tell you how much you matter to our congregation, and how very grateful we are for what you have done. You are what Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, calls Heroes in our Midst.

You are a very diverse group of people. Some of you are living a Jewish life in virtually all respects. Some of you are devoutly committed to another faith. Some of you do not define yourselves as religious at all. You fall at all points along this spectrum, and we acknowledge and respect your diversity.

We want to thank you today for your decision to cast your lot with the Jewish people by becoming part of this congregation, and for the love and support you give to your Jewish partner. Most of all, we want to offer our deepest thanks to those of you who are parents, and who are raising your sons and daughters as Jews.

In our time, which saw one-third of the world's Jewish population destroyed, every Jewish child is especially precious. We are a very small people, and history has made us smaller. Our children mean hope, and they mean life. So every Jewish boy and girl is a gift to the Jewish future. With all our hearts, we want to thank you for your generosity and strength of spirit in making the ultimate gift to the Jewish people.

Please, please...do not be shy and do not feel uncomfortable. It is important that we show you and your children how much you have our love and respect, and there is no better time to say that than on the most important day in the Jewish year. Please come up now, and receive the heartfelt gratitude of your congregation.

(The following was addressed directly to our “Heroes”)

You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool and bring the refreshments to and clean up after the oneg. You help explain to your kids why it's important to get up on Sunday morning and to learn to be a Jew. You read Jewish books to deepen your own understanding, so you can help to make a Jewish home. You learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish; you learn to put on a Seder; you learn to put up a Sukkah. You join your spouse at the Shabbat table – maybe you even set that Shabbat table and make it beautiful.

You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing at first. You hum along to those Hebrew songs, and some of you even learn to read that difficult language. You come on the bima side by side with your children on the day of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and tell them how proud you are and how much you love them, and how glad you are to see them grow into young Jewish men and women.

We know that some of you have paid a significant price for the generous decision you made to raise Jewish children. You have made a painful sacrifice, giving up the joy of sharing your own spiritual beliefs and passing your own religious traditions down to your kids.

I hope your children and your spouse tell you often how wonderful you are, and that their love and gratitude, and our love and gratitude, will be some compensation, and will bring you joy. I ask our congregation to rise in your honor now, as we offer you this ancient blessing from the Torah... (Ark is opened)

Please repeat these ancient words of blessing after me:

May God bless you; may God keep you;

May the light of the Holy One shine on you;

And may God grant you the precious gift of peace. Amen.

Temple Beth Shalom is a special community. We are enriched by Jews by Birth, Jews by Choice, and “Jews” by Association – you, the “Heroes in Our Midst.” We all to join together to create a *kehilla k’dushah*, a holy congregation. One in which the threefold teaching of Shimon the Just comes alive. *Al Shlosha D’varim*, through **all** of our efforts, our world and our temple are sustained by Torah, Prayer, and Acts of Loving Kindness.

As this new year of 5767 begins, may God’s presence shine on us all.

And together let us say: Amen.