

## Installation and Fulfillment

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Installation/50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration / December 1, 2023

Shabbat shalom, everyone. This whole experience is absolutely incredible.

I am deeply touched by the outpouring of love from this congregation that I'm feeling tonight and that, in truth, you've shown me from the very beginning.

I have said this before, and I'd like to say it again: I feel so incredibly blessed that you chose me to be your rabbi. Temple Beth-El is the perfect fit for me in every way, and I am so incredibly happy here. It's like they say about true love: "when you know, you know."

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for giving me this opportunity, and for welcoming me, Karen, Lindsay, and Zachary so warmly into the TBE family. I feel truly honored, blessed, and grateful to be here.

I want to say a special thank you to Jordana Levine and Ron Epstein and the Rabbinic Search Committee for bringing me here, and to our outstanding lay leadership and professional team for making TBE such a warm, caring, thoughtful, and inspiring place to serve.

Thank you also to the wonderful volunteers who worked so hard to put this celebration and service together: Shelley Limmer, Leslie Abrams, Nancy Lowenkron, Jordana Levine, Barbara Podwall, Sherry Goodman, Ron Epstein, Larry Siegel, Elaine Springer, Gary Slobin, and my wife, Karen—along with my incredible colleagues Joy Allen, Stu Botwinick, Rabbi Megan, Cantor Adam, Joy Palevsky, Stacy Poehmel, Fredda Schildt, Sheri ArbitalJacoby, Cari Horn, Karen Wasserman, Danny Alvarez, and our dedicated maintenance team, who make our building run.

And, of course, I want to thank my amazing family: Karen, Lindsay, and Zachary.

We clergy do not make life easy on our families. We work crazy hours and late nights, we move around from city to city, we rely on our spouses to do much, much more than their fair share of the housework, and financial management, and life management than they should have to.

Karen, you do all that and more for our family. I cannot adequately express the extent of my gratitude for all your love and support, but please know that I know that, without you, the chances of me functioning as a human being in this world would be basically zero.

I love you, Lindsay, and Z so much.

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Although this installation officially, if somewhat belatedly, marks the beginning of my tenure here at TBE, in many ways standing here this evening feels to me like a fulfillment.

There's a *Seinfeld* episode where George coins this phrase: "worlds colliding." It's when people from different parts of your life come together in the same room.

Tonight, my worlds are colliding in a profound way, and I find it exhilarating.

- My parents, Joe and Jeanie Stoller, are here. They gave me life 50 years ago and have encouraged me the whole way. They are my confidantes and my biggest supporters.
- My best friend since second grade, Ben Walter, and his wonderful family are here. We basically grew up in each other's houses, but we hadn't lived in the same city in 30 years until I moved to Great Neck. Now we get to hang out again, and our children get to be part of each other's lives.
- My mother-in-law, Joanne Flayhart, is here. She has always gone out of her way to support our Jewish family and ensure that we have everything we need to celebrate Shabbat and holidays when we're with her. She's had more meals in a sukkah and attended more rabbinic installations than any other devout Methodist I know.
- I am blessed that my great friends Andy, Marcus, and Gary—otherwise known as Soul Zimra—are here. They've been inspiring me with their music since I was the associate rabbi at their congregation, BJBE, in Deerfield, IL.
- And my beloved friend Sally Kaplan from Temple Israel in Omaha is here, too. She, more than anyone, has helped me enlarge my perspective as a rabbi and a team leader, and is one of my closest confidantes.
- In March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, I started a daily virtual morning minyan that today brings Reform Jews from not only Great Neck, but also Chicago, Omaha, New Jersey, and elsewhere. Anita Dansker, who lives in Indiana, has been one of our regular participants since almost the beginning, and she's here tonight representing our minyan community.
- I am so grateful to have Rabbi Jerry Davidson here tonight. Rabbi, thank you for your kind and generous words. In your four-plus decades of service to TBE, you built a truly inspiring congregation, and I feel humbled and privileged to be charged with helping to carry your legacy forward.
- And, finally, I am so honored to welcome our esteemed teacher Dr. Andrew Rehfeld.

I have the privilege now of serving as an adjunct member of the faculty at Hebrew Union College, where he is the president.

David Epstein, who is one of my students and a child of TBE, is also here.

Thank you, Dr. Rehfeld, for this incredible opportunity to teach and mentor the future clergy of the Reform movement. It is such a joy in my life and a fulfillment of my academic aspirations.

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I admire Dr. Rehfeld for many reasons, but chief among them is for how he is leading HUC through this time of rapid change and major disruption.

The present moment demands a wise and visionary leader who is willing to make tough decisions to secure the long-term future of the college and of Reform Judaism, and Andrew Rehfeld is that leader.

It hasn't been easy. But he's led the whole way by looking beyond the horizon of what others can—or *want*—to see, and an unwavering commitment to doing what needs to be done.

As the strategy guru Simon Sinek puts it, "Great leaders set up their organizations to succeed beyond their own lifetimes."<sup>1</sup> This is what Andrew is doing.

HUC is blessed to have him at the helm, and I look to him as a role model of courageous leadership.

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We at Temple Beth-El can learn a lot from what Dr. Rehfeld and HUC are doing.

The landscape of Reform Judaism is in the midst of a tectonic shift, and both our institutions are experiencing the effects of it.

We feel it every day here in Great Neck.

*One* response to our changing environment is to lament the fact that our community isn't what it was back in the day.

But we're not going to do that. We're not going to dwell in the past.

Instead, we're going to honor this congregation's proud legacy by embracing the challenges of the present and making bold decisions that will ensure a vibrant future.

Since our founding in 1928, each successive generation of congregants and lay leaders and clergy has contributed its own chapter to the profound story of TBE. Our responsibility to *them* is to write the next chapter in a way that advances the story in a coherent and exciting way.

To succeed, we have to be willing to see today's challenges as incredible opportunities.

*We* are the ones who get to decide what the future of Temple Beth-El and Reform Judaism on the North Shore of Long Island will be. And *we* are the ones who get to make that vision a reality.

From the first time I met with the Rabbinic Search Committee, it was clear to me that TBE is a congregation of smart, serious people who are deeply in love with this community and who are ready to act courageously for its future.

In October, we launched a strategic visioning process spearheaded by some of our congregation's most thoughtful and dedicated leaders with deep knowledge of TBE and of Great Neck. This group will chart our course for our next chapter with love and consideration for all of us.

We are in great hands, and I am confident this process will lead to amazing things for our community.

The chance to do this kind of work—and to do it with such wonderful people on behalf of a caring, devoted, and actively involved congregation like ours—is what made me want to come here.

In so many ways, being the rabbi of TBE is a professional, personal, and spiritual fulfillment for me.

And I am eager to help lead our congregation in fulfilling the next stage of its destiny.

Thank you for this incredible opportunity and thank you for putting your trust in me.

Shabbat shalom.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, xiii