

This is Our Lekh L'kha Moment

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Parashat Lekh L'kha 5786 / October 31, 2025

Next Shabbat, we'll welcome Dr. Elsie Stern to Temple Beth-El, thanks to the Miriam & Moses Center and the generosity of Cindy and Adam Bender.

Dr. Stern is a renowned scholar of Bible and editor of the Reform movement's forthcoming Torah commentary. She's also the granddaughter of Rabbi Jacob Rudin, our congregation's beloved longtime rabbi, for whom this chapel is named.

She'll reflect on her grandfather's legacy in Great Neck and the Reform movement—a story that will illuminate our own.

Rabbi Rudin built Temple Beth-El into one a flagship congregation of mid-century American Judaism. In those years, Great Neck stood at the center of Reform Jewish life, and this temple was among the largest in the country.

His mission—to serve the Reform Jewish community of Great Neck with excellence—has guided us ever since.

Our purpose remains constant. What evolves is how we meet the needs of the people we serve.

For decades, that meant expanding our building to serve a growing population, investing in youth programs, officiating triple-b'nai-mitzvah services every Shabbat, and managing a waiting list for membership.

Today looks different.

We are a congregation of about 400 families. Our average age is 72.

Thirteen children attend our religious school program, which is small but fun and energetic, thanks to Rabbi Megan and our teachers Adam and Karen.

Young Reform families aren't moving to Great Neck in large numbers anymore.

And yet, my family chose to come here, fully aware of those realities.

We came here because of the people. We love this congregation—not for what it was, but for what it is.

I'm energized by helping to lead Temple Beth-El forward, alongside thoughtful leaders who care deeply about our future.

I cherish our extraordinary worship and professional teams—the most collaborative and supportive colleagues of my career.

I love your passion for Judaism and your desire to invest in it. In 17 years as a rabbi, I've never had the resources to create programming of this depth and meaning. You make that possible.

It may not look like it used to but, to my mind, what matters most is how well we serve the community we have. And by that measure, I think we're doing beautifully—and I'm deeply proud of that, and of you.

And I want you to feel proud of it, too.

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Still, we can't gloss over the genuine grief that comes with change.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about William Bridges' three stages of transition: the end of what was, the beginning of what's new, and the uncertain time in between.

That "in-between" time is where we are now—and we'll feel it more acutely as we approach our congregational vote on the sale of our building, likely in January.

The months ahead will bring change. We'll prepare to inhabit a smaller footprint in our historic home—still more than enough space for us, but visibly different, and it will take time to adjust.

And the change isn't only physical. We're also grieving what used to be—here at TBE and throughout Great Neck. I'm a relative newcomer, but I get it.

This transition is an emotional journey: from grief to renewal, from saying goodbye to embracing what comes next. It may be hard to see it now, but I am confident we'll get there—together.

We will navigate this process with intention and care.

We'll begin by honoring our storied past.

Dr. Stern will help us reflect on Rabbi Rudin's legacy.

In December, author Shira Dicker will join us to share her stories of Jewish life in "the before times" of Great Neck.

And in March, historian Dr. Gary Zola will help us think about how we carry Temple Beth-El's proud legacy forward into the Reform Judaism of tomorrow.

This coming week, we will be asking you to send us memories and photos of your times at TBE, and I hope you will.

Along the way, we'll gather to share these memories, to honor our traditions of music and worship in the downstairs sanctuary, to pray before the Nevelson ark, to express gratitude for those who came before us, and to celebrate the vibrant, compassionate congregation we are right now.

We may be smaller in number and more seasoned by age than we once were, but our mission remains the same: to serve the Jewish community of Great Neck as it is today—with the same devotion, creativity, and love that built this congregation in the first place.

Our temple still needs you—and you still need your temple—every bit as much as before. And thanks to the wise and forward-looking decisions of our leadership, Temple Beth-El will continue to be here for as long as this community needs us.

That is our enduring “why.” The “how” and the “who” may evolve, but the purpose first articulated by Rabbi Rudin remains our guiding light.

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Our Torah portion this week, Lekh L'kha, begins with God's call to Avram to leave what he knew behind and follow God to a new land.

What makes Avram's story so powerful is that only by letting go of what had been could he fulfill the purpose for which he was created—to make the reality of the One God known to the world.

His journey was both a leap of faith and a natural step toward becoming his truest self.

In that spirit, I want to close with a poem by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat entitled “First Step”—a poem about Avram, and about us, too:

It's not going to be easy
All of your roadmaps are wrong.

That was another country:
Those lakes are all dried up

and new groundwater is welling
in places you won't expect.

You'll begin the journey in a fog
Destination unknown, impossible.

Don't be surprised by tears.
This right here is holy ground.

Take a deep breath and turn away
from cynicism and despair.

Listen to the voice from on high
and deep within, the one that says

I'm calling you to a place
which I will show you

and take the first small step
into the surprising sun.