

Temple Beth El
385 High Street
Fall River, MA 02720
Tel. (508) 674-3529 ✉ templebethel@comcast.net

December 19, 2023

Temple Beth El Congregants and Friends:

After nearly one hundred years of Jewish life in our magnificent building, I am afraid we have come to a crossroads.

Temple Beth El was once overflowing with members, filled with Hebrew school students, and packed for a full calendar of special events. High Holiday services filled the sanctuary, the auditorium, and the vestry! All this in an era when there were as many as seven synagogues in the city.

Those were the glory days, when Temple Beth El was a second home to so many. Sadly, those days are gone. Membership began to decline during the 60's and 70's when the textile industries also declined. Children graduated and moved away to larger cities where better job opportunities awaited them. Then the downward spiral began – losing more members each year than we gained.

So now we are at the point where we must plan for our future. Over the past year and a half, our Board of Directors and our Finance Committee have carefully reviewed many factors. Our declining membership, the annual cash short falls, the condition of our synagogue, the aging of our members, and the necessity to sell off our investments in order to pay our bills.

We have known for several years that we would have to make some major decisions. As our membership shrinks, so does our revenue. As our building ages, our costs, especially for maintenance and utilities, increase. As our expenses outpace our income we must draw on our endowment fund to stay solvent. Each year we require at least \$100,000 from our investments to cover our operating expenses, despite adhering to an extremely tight budget. This year we expect that number to grow. At the rate we are going, without financial assistance from outside sources, our endowment fund will run dry in at most five years, and when we lose our lease with the school it will be drained even faster. We expect that to happen in at most three years.

Even if we were able to last a few years longer, we have to ask ourselves some practical questions, the first being, “For whom would we be keeping this large, expensive building heated and maintained?” It wasn't so long ago that we would see at least two hundred people at our High Holiday services. This year it was really brought home to us just how few people we have who live in the area and attend services in person. The answer is, “Not nearly enough.” Where there were two hundred before Covid, this year there were fifty. Even including those who watched the live stream, there were just sixty-five, in a sanctuary that seats six hundred and fifty.

So, after many meetings and discussions with both the Board of Directors and the Finance Committee, we have decided that our primary duty is to keep Congregation Beth El viable well into the future. As we are the last vestige of Judaism in the greater Fall River area, keeping the congregation alive is more important than ever.

As we know our congregation will outlive our financial reserves sooner rather than later, we had no choice but to discuss what to do about the building. As much as we regret having to find a new home for our congregation, there really is no other choice. The Board unanimously decided that the first step is to search for and hire a property broker experienced in the sale of houses of worship who can help us decide how best to go about selling the building, and perhaps he or she can also help us find a new home. It is imperative that we set this plan in motion as soon as possible, as it will take time to fit all of the pieces into place with no lapse in continuity.

Before we hire the real estate broker, we wanted to lay everything on the table for you, our congregants. We would like you to read everything we have presented here, then let us know how you feel. You may call the office at (508) 674-3529, send us a note to 385 High St, Fall River, MA 02720, or send us an email at templebethel@comcast.net. Please have your responses in by December 31st as we dare not wait any longer to start the process. If you do not reply by year-end we will assume that you understand our position and put your faith in our Board to do what is best for the future of our congregation.

I would like to thank our treasurer, Robert Falconero, for putting together the following bullet points that address the many financial aspects of our situation, including some history and trends.

- From the 1950's to 2023 our membership has decreased from around 600 families to 112. An 81% decrease.
- From fiscal year 2017 to 2023 we have incurred cash shortfalls totaling \$398,885. We are projecting a cash shortfall for fiscal 2023 – 2024 of around \$173,000. (Our fiscal year runs from July 1st to June 30th.)
- The average age of our congregation is estimated to be between 75 and 80 years old, and 35 of our members live out of town.
- The value of our endowment fund as of October 31, 2023 was \$582,167. Five years ago, it was \$812,491. A decrease of 28%.
- We lease space to People Incorporated for their preschool program. That annual revenue represents about 43% of our total revenue. Their contract expires in 2025. They have purchased land and will be building their own facility, which will mean that our deficit will increase by \$91,200 a year.
- Our 95-year-old Temple has numerous building maintenance problems, some of which would require a major investment to correct. We have already spent 55% of our annual maintenance budget in the first three months of this fiscal year. During the High Holidays we had to put three buckets in the vestibule to catch water dripping from one of the towers.
- The annual dues have only been raised once in the last fifteen years. There is no movement to increase the dues at this time. If we were to cover this year's annual cash shortfall of \$173,000, the annual dues would have to be \$1,544 per member. The amount of dues necessary to break even after the preschool leaves will be \$2,348 per member. We recognize that this would be an untenable increase.

We truly understand that this is as much an emotional decision as a practical one, and we wish we could find a way to move forward in our current building, but the time has come to find a new, smaller, more affordable home for our treasured congregation. One where we can come together to pray and celebrate with each other for many years to come.

Sincerely,



Stephen D. Silverman
President

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