

**Eliot Swartz, President**  
**Rosh HaShanah Morning**  
**September 30, 2008 / 1 Tishrei 5769**

I have had the honor and privilege of being the President of Temple Beth El for 4 short months. I could probably take the next few hours sharing many things with you, from all the wonderful events and programs we have planned for the coming year to the aging building that is in constant need of attention and repair. I could spend time thanking the many volunteers who help when called upon and even when not. I could fill your heads with a lot of data. I could emphasize the need for your personal volunteer efforts in all areas of temple life.

Instead, I have chosen to share with you my personal story of Temple Beth El and why and how I came to join our beloved temple. Before I do, however, I want to take you back to a time that changed my life – a time where I questioned my belief in my faith and whether or not there is a G-d.

I was 15 years old and my mother was diagnosed with what was referred to back then as the big C. My mother had stomach cancer. She needed surgery and was to go through chemotherapy. Everyone talked in hushed tones, so I knew that it was not going to be an easy time.

My mother spent the next two years in and out of the hospital. She had her good days and her difficult days. I was very close to my mother and I spent as much time sharing and listening to her as possible. On her challenging days, she would go to bed early after dinner while the rest of the family watched TV. I would sit on the edge of the bed as she told me she did not want me to cry after she passed, that I needed to take good care of my dad and younger brother, and not to fight.

I spent the next two years having a heart-to-heart with G-d. I asked G-d to free my mother from pain and make her healthy again. I made a pact with G-d that, if this would happen, I would do what ever I could to make this a better world. I spent many nights crying myself to sleep waiting for a new day where my mother would be her old self.

On Friday night, I looked forward to my mother lighting the Shabbat candles. On this particular Friday, she was in the hospital. We were waiting for my father to bring home dinner. The phone rang and my younger brother, Joe, answered it. A moment later, he came out of his room and told me that the hospital called - Mom had passed a few minutes prior. I was devastated. At the same time, I was scared, as I knew I would now need to share that same news with my dad.

Things went in slow motion after that call. Somehow, other calls were made to my older brother and sister, who were asked to come home. I was very angry. I had shed most of my tears in the previous two years and did not have any left. I guess my dad felt the same way I did. He was also angry and stayed that way for a long time. I also made a choice at

that point - I was still Jewish, but I did not feel the connection to G-d. I stopped talking to G-d directly, as it was too painful not to get the answers I so desperately sought.

Fast forward to 1997. Late one night, I decided to go on the computer and try out this new thing called AOL, where you could (believe or not!) send in real time messages to other people who are also up at two in the morning. It just so happened that I went in to a Jewish Chat Room. I began to have a conversation using this remarkable tool called IM, instant message, where you can talk to one other person while in the chat room, but no one else can see it.

Well, to make a long story longer, I fell in “like” with this one lovely lady, who seemed to be very intelligent and funny, all at the same time. After 3 hours or so, with my fingers going numb, she gave me her phone number. We spent the next couple of hours chatting. We met 4 days later and had a wonderful date. However, she decided that she was not sure we should see each other again and left it at that.

Not in the habit giving up so easily (at least without one last effort!), I decided that I must try one more time before the final answer. She had told me that she was in a choir at a temple in San Pedro for High Holy days. Eureka! This was my chance. I got into my car and drove to San Pedro in search of this temple. As I arrived, I was very excited to see her, but, at the same time, was hesitant to be back at temple. I entered the building and asked for tickets to all of the services. I went to the back of the room, in front of the TV, and waited for services to start (or really to end) so I could see her.

Then, it happened completely unexpectedly - a voice, a beautiful voice...from whom and where was that voice coming?? It touched my heart and for a moment, I forgot why I was there. I would later learn that this man, who had reached my soul, would become a good and dear friend and I would return the favor by introducing him to his *bashert*. With my heart open by the joy of song and prayer by Cantor Ilan, I began to look around the room and realized these were the faces of people I wanted to know. They did not look like strangers, but family. The room was filled with warmth and love that I had not experienced for a very, very, long time. I was home in a town that I barely new existed.

Then, Rabbi Lieb spoke. He was not how I thought I remembered a rabbi should sound. He was funny and seemed to enjoy being on the Bima. In his sermon, he would repeat some lines a couple of times and put his hand to his chin, touching his lip with his finger, as if to say “Here comes the good stuff, don’t miss it.”

I had never even been in a synagogue that had a choir, so I was wondering “Is this really a temple?” It was wonderful, they sounded great, and my Gale was part of this. The night ended and it was time to find Gale. I hoped she would not be upset with me for attending without letting her know in advance. I first made sure to meet her parents and sister, thinking that if they liked me, she might believe this could work. Her family was very nice to me and Gale, after getting over the initial shock, introduced me to some of her friends.

When I got home that night, I went on the computer in hopes Gale would do so, as well. Happily for me, she did. Before we began to chat, I asked her if she would mind if I joined the temple, even if the relationship did not work out. Her words were: "I would never prevent you from following your spiritual path and Temple Beth El is a wonderful place to renew your connection."

Gale and I were married six years later at Temple Beth El.

The warmth and love that is Temple Beth El continues to grow each and every day. We are blessed with a community who chooses to embrace a culture of inclusion and caring. I have had the opportunity to explore my Jewish heritage and have learned from Rabbi Briskin that, as the Red Sox have shown, sometimes your prayers *are* answered. As we embark on another year, I feel it is my responsibility to ask you, not just as your president, but rather as someone who has been able to go home again, to keep Temple Beth El in your prayers.