Celebrating Our Rabbi at KH's Chai, 18th Year Anniversary

Speech by Richard Belle from February 2, 2025 Celebration

We have a lot to celebrate today.

- We are 18 years young, having created a beautiful, thriving community that has become a very special home for so many of us. *Eighteen (chai)* is a very special number in our tradition and we celebrate this wonderful "chai" year.
- Congregation Kol HaNeshama has survived disruptions from Covid, devastation from Milton, and uncertainty from fickle landlords. And we are stronger for it!
- We have been blessed with strong and enlightened leadership.
    - In particular, I want to single out my immediate predecessor Donald Baum and my successor Rich Friedman, for their steadfast commitment to both stability and growth in these turbulent times.
    - I salute our dedicated recent and outgoing Boards of Officers and Directors who have consistently shown their commitment to the health of Congregation Kol HaNeshama.
    - And lastly, we will be strengthened and fortified by the new 2025-26 Board, to be led by our soon-to-be-nominated president, Alan Sprintz; his experience as a hospital administrator and organization "guru" will provide the visionary leadership that will usher in a new era for our synagogue.
- And we celebrate the dedication, imagination, vision, and inspiration of Rabbi Sigal. She has already made a huge impact on our special community. She has guided us through an enormously difficult year, with the trauma of October 7 and the pain and dislocation caused by Hurricane Milton. We truly have something to celebrate in Rabbi Sigal.

I probably know Rabbi Sigal as well as anyone here today. I served on the search committee that had the foresight and wisdom to hire her as our new rabbi; I served as Congregation Kol HaNeshama President during her first year with us; and I have remained on the Board and served as Past President and Rabbi's Liaison this year.

I sometimes marvel at the wonder of it all. How did this thoughtful, spiritual soul from Philadelphia by way of Israel find our *little hamish* community in Sarasota? I remember sitting in John and Kayla Niles' kitchen along with the rest of the search committee; we unanimously concluded that Rabbi Sigal was our first and only choice for a new rabbi. We couldn't let her get away! Some might say when she agreed to join us it was a:
"נס גדול "—"a great miracle." How was it that we found such a perfect fit for our unique community?

In searching for a good answer, I draw your attention to two lines in our liturgy that we recite in virtually every service. The first is from Psalm 96: **"שירו לה' שיר חדש**!" or "Sing out to the Lord a new song!" But when I paraphrase Psalm 96 and say "She sings to us a new song--**היא שרה לנו שיר חדש**—I mean more than just Rabbi Sigal's singing ability. Of course, we were immediately impressed with her beautiful singing, and she has indeed taught us many new songs. But the impact of her **שיר חדש** - her new song- goes beyond gorgeous singing. Our time together, in service or study, has taken on a new character, whether it is greeting the Sabbath on Kabbalat Shabbat, exploring Torah teachings Saturday morning, tasting bits and pieces from the Zohar or discovering meditation techniques to usher in the New Year. Rabbi Sigal prays, teaches, and studies with us in synagogue, in the park, in intimate groups, one-on one meetings, and large gatherings. We talk, we chant, we pray, we dance.

Rabbi Sigal has elevated all these religious experiences, emotionally and intellectually. She is a profoundly spiritual and knowledgeable person; ***she sings to us a new song of joyous spirituality.***

But Rabbi Sigal's gift is more than her inspiring worship and teaching. The second liturgical line I bring to your attention is **אהבה רבה**—abundant love. That is probably the best description of Rabbi Sigal in our liturgy. When I think of our Rabbi, I think of her caring, respect, empathy, and kindness. She is genuinely dedicated to offering love, comfort and support whenever possible.

Simply put, our loving Rabbi Sigal radiates love and joy. I need to tell you a little story. I have only occasionally seen the rabbi with a frown, frustrated or concerned. I have only once seen her genuinely annoyed, bordering on angry. This occurred when a member was ill and Rabbi Sigal was not informed, so she knew nothing about it. That meant that she could not offer comfort when it was needed most. She could not offer healing prayers for **רפואה שלמה** . For Rabbi Sigal, providing her **אהבה רבה** -- her abundant love—is not a ***duty*** to be performed. Loving, supporting and providing guidance is who our rabbi is. Making us stronger, making us more comfortable, and making us feel loved comes from Rabbi Sigal's being. That is who she is.

Many of Rabbi's Sigal's efforts go unseen by most of us. She works behind the scenes on all aspects of the congregation's business with both staff and volunteers: in planning, administration, vision implementing, marketing, outreach and relationships building. Our rabbi is carefully outreaching to the many unaffiliated and uninvolved people in our area who have not yet discovered their Jewishness or Congregation Kol HaNeshama. Rabbi Sigal is teaching at public venues like Pelican Cove and OLLI at Ringling College, participating in interfaith events, developing "my✡TRIBE," and creating special holiday preparation workshops. Her goal is simple: using the same spirit of joy and love that we know and love to attract new people to the

wonders of our community. For too long we have been almost invisible here as a congregation. That is changing!

My little talk today has served as almost a mini installation of Rabbi Sigal. So with that in mind, I am delighted to announce that Rabbi Sigal and your Board have agreed on a multi-year contract extension. Rabbi Sigal is staying here at Congregation Kol HaNeshama!

I hope I have given you a deeper appreciation of the depth of Rabbi's Sigal's impact. So, I leave you with my two key characterizations of Rabbi Sigal: she brings us new songs of joyous spirituality and she offers her beautiful love and comfort. For that, on behalf of the congregation, I say:

תודה לך סיגל. הרבה שלנו. המורה שלנו. הידידה שלנו.

Thank you, Sigal. Our Rabbi. Our teacher. Our friend.