

## Chatan Bereshit Speech – 2014

Birshut Harabannim, hachachazan (Chaim Dovid), The officers, and my co-chatanim –

Before I speak, I'd like to say something! I'm not sure if you're allowed to do this halachically or not, but I'd like to ask for *mechila* in advance for anything I am about to say. Remember I didn't come with the idea of this type of speech, I'm just following what's supposed to be done. And I'm happy I have almost a year until Yom Kippur!

I would like to recognize the presence of my beloved father-in-law, Ron Biloon, who is here for this special event, as well as my beloved wife, Ruth, and my beloved children, Shoshana, Talia & Mordechai – all of whom I hope still have some semblance of respect for me when this is over!

First of all, thank you for this most **undeserved** honor of Chatan Bereshit. And I mean "**undeserved**" in every sense of the word. After all, who really "**deserves**" this honor?

Right after Avi Schwartz announced the chatanim on Kol Nidre night, Yossi Sklarin turned to me & summed it up with 3 simple words: "**What's the upside?**"

And he was right! I mean think about it. You get the privilege of renting a ridiculous looking **morning suit**, which is apparently only to match the silly looking **top hat** you have to wear; and then you get to sit up on the bima where you have to remember not to cross your legs, or to be wearing neon colored socks, or to start to doze off, or to talk to your neighbor (who happens to be one of the Rabbis!); and then you get to stand up here under a tremendous amount of pressure just to make a fool out of yourself. and then the shul charges you money for this 'honor'! "**What's the upside?**" Is this an honor that anyone would really want to pay for?

Let's see, by a show of hands, how many of you would like to trade places with me right now? Or even have this "honor" next year? (I expected only Arthur Degen's hand to go up - to do it a third time! And he can use the same speech a 3<sup>rd</sup> time!)

In any case, I had the same question "**What's the upside?**" in mind when Rabbi Levine first asked me to be one of the chatanim. And my answer was quick, firm and to the point. "**NO!**"

I didn't say "**maybe**" or "**let me think about it**"; Not even "**I'll get back to you**" – but simply, absolutely, and unequivocally, "**No!**"

Now our dear, beloved, Rabbi Levine may "*look*" young, but his age is clearly catching up with him; you know they say your hearing is the first to go. Well a few days after I turned him down, Rabbi Levine sent me a follow-up email. And I quote:

"Hi Joe. I hope you are well. I'm taking the fact that you haven't gotten back to me with a firm "no" as a sign that there may still be hope you will accept."

So since responding "no" didn't seem to work, this time I said "let me discuss it with my wife" – who, I was sure would say "No!"

Much to my shock & dismay, Ruth said: "**Yes!** You should listen to Rabbi Levine".

So that pretty much explains why I'm standing here before you...

So certainly you can understand when I tell you quite honestly that I feel this is not really just "**my**" honor, but it is really more "**our**" honor – Ruthie & myself; and it is really even more Ruthie's honor than mine, since she is really the one who said "yes" - I said "no!"

Therefore, I'd like to stray a little from the norm and do something a little unusual. I already received my honor by having the first Aliyah in Sefer Bereshit last week.

Now I believe it is Ruthie's turn to share the limelight, so I'd like to invite her up to give the speech this afternoon instead of me.

I think that's the fair thing to do. How many of you agree with me? Great, Ruthie – please come up & give the speech – okay? (Many people think they're actually honoring you anyway! You just don't look as good as I do in a morning suit!)

The truth is, I'd like to thank the Jewish Center Rabbis and officers for providing myself and my co-chatanim with so much fodder, er - material to work with here at the Jewish Center. There are simply **too many** things to make fun of here!

So here are **a few topics** that I will not talk about, either because they are taboo, they've been used too many times before, or they're simply not funny:

1. For example, here's one that falls into all 3 categories: I will not talk about **Top Hats!** It's taboo, used by every chasan since Adam was talked into accepting it by his wife, Eve, and simply, not funny!

2. I will also not talk about the traditional Jewish Center greeting – “Get out of my seat!” Because it’s also been done so many times before, it’s also not funny, and it doesn’t even apply anymore!

These days if someone walks into shul and says “May I sit here?” the more usual answer is – “Sit here? Why you can practically lie down here!” The guy that used to sit here died; the next person wasn’t married and switched to the Young Israel; and the next person over never arrives before 11am! You can sit pretty much anywhere you want in this shul!

3. Which reminds me of another topic that I will not talk about is the length of Shabbos morning davening. As I’m sure you know, there are different lengths in different shuls, ranging from just right, to too long, to way too long, and to way, way too long; The Jewish Center, however, has a category all of its own, some of us like to call it **“an eternity.”**

Now, to be fair, this is NOT the majority position in the shul. For example, one member, who will remain anonymous for obvious reasons (but could really have been many people here who said it!), said to me he doesn’t really think shul is too long. Or in his words – “11 to 11:30 is just perfect!”

And he was only half-kidding. Half-kidding, because some weeks he doesn’t even get here by 11am.

4. I will also **not** talk about the newly renovated elevator that cost the shul only-God-knows-how-much to replace. I don’t know how many of you had the opportunity to take a ride in the new elevator already – but it actually talks to you! Pretty cool, no?

It doesn’t say much, but it does say: “Going up!” “Going down!” I mean “Duh!” But I like how the Shul cleverly planned to discourage its members from using it on Shabbos - by installing an elevator that is just ***slightly slower*** than the old one!

5. I will also **not** talk about the upcoming Jewish Center Pesach trip to Israel. I think Rabbi Levine has spoken about it enough already!

But if it’s successful and Rabbi Levine can persuade the 10 or so families who are still on the West Side for Pesach to go with him, I guess the Jewish Center will finally be able to hang up that proverbial sign that he has hanging in his closet upstairs: **“Closed for the Holidays!”**

**(#6 & #7 were left out of the actual speech in the interest of time!!!)**

6. I will also not talk about CSS!

Does anyone even know what it stands for? I don't.

Does anyone know what they do? I do!

There's their real purpose, and then there's what everyone thinks they do -

**Everyone thinks** they stand outside shul every Shabbat morning to protect us;  
(But really! I mean, look at them; do they look scary to you? Because they have something in their ear?!?)

But **their real purpose** is so that they can be called into shul at 9am - in case the shul needs 2 or 3 more men to help make a minyan when services start!

Of course it would make more sense if they came on duty at 9:30am - to help the Young Leadership Minyan. But then they might need 8 or 9 people on guard! (I guess it's good Rabbi Zirkind told me he'd be away this Shabbos!)

7. I will also not talk about one of my most favorite recent Jewish Center innovations which I absolutely **LOVE!** Please thank whoever had the idea to include reading material with every machzor on Yom Kippur!

Now **THAT** was ingenuous.

Did you notice how much quieter davening was this past Yom Kippur? It was almost like entering a library!

And I certainly hope the Shul takes it to the next level. Why just Yom Kippur? I would love it if the Jewish Center provided material to read every Shabbat and Yontov morning. Maybe The New York Times on every seat when we come in? Think of the benefits:

1. People would arrive earlier to Shul on Shabbos mornings; and
2. Guests would know for sure which seats not to sit in!

8. I will also not talk about the strong resemblance between my son, **Mordechai**, and Rabbi Levine's son, **Akiva**.

Ruthie and I don't really understand it, but strangely, there are many people in this shul who have trouble telling the difference between them. And, I must admit, while this can often lead to trouble, it most often works out in our favor. Allow me to explain:

Periodically, my son Mordechai will prance around on the Bima – as 6 year olds are wont to do. And, inevitably, someone will turn to me in shul & say something like: “Is that the Rabbi’s son? Why can’t the Rabbi control his own son in Shul? What does he expect from the rest of us?”

And I will always have to say, “I agree, I wish the Rabbi would do a better job controlling his sons!”

In the converse, there are times when **Akiva** or **Yehoshua** are up on the Bima davening or behaving appropriately, and again, inevitably, someone will turn to me and say, “Is that your son, Mordechai up there on the Bima? Wow! He behaves so nicely!”

And again, I must agree and say something like “Yes, That’s **MY** son Mordechai! We work so hard with him. I just wish he wouldn’t spend so much time with the Rabbis sons – they’re not really the best influence for him!”

9. I absolutely promised myself that I would not discuss this final topic: **Rabbi Swapping!**

For the 1 or 2 of you who were not here on the first days of Sukkot – you’re better off not knowing what we’re talking about here. By a show of hands, how many of you weren’t here the first days of Sukkot? That many of you? Really? It was hard to tell anyone was away on Sukkot!

So allow me to explain. Rabbi Levine and Rabbi Robinson swapped shuls on Shabbos Chol Hamoed Sukkot. Rabbi Levine spoke at Lincoln Square Synagogue and Rabbi Robinson spoke here.

Hence Rabbi Swapping! It boggles the mind over what could be swapped next!

Chazan Swapping? Congregant Swapping? Congregants we’re a little tired of swapping? Anyway, you can see why I will not even touch that topic!

I’ll let you come up with some of your own swaps!

**So Those** are the topics that I will **Not** talk about tonight!

So what **will** I talk about, you ask? Good question! I will limit myself and only talk about 2 Jewish Center topics that I find rather amusing and hope you will to:

1. **Aliyot to the Torah**, and
2. **Basketball**

First, I have a secret; and if you promise me that it won't leave this room – I'll share it with you. This past summer, on **July 19, 2014 – Parshat Matot** - something very special happened to me. I don't believe it is something that ever happened to anyone before in the history of the Jewish Center.

On Shabbos Parshas Matot I got an Aliyah to the Torah - in the main shul!

**Wait!** that's **NOT** my secret – it's what I was wearing, or actually, what I **wasn't wearing** – I wasn't wearing a **tie!** And I wasn't even wearing a **jacket.** And I **WAS** wearing **brown shoes!!!** And I got **Shlishi!**

Unthinkable! Unheard of! A Boosha! A shandeh!

Never in the history of the Jewish Center!!

Now, to be perfectly fair, **Andrew Bordach** was away that Shabbos! If you don't know who Andrew Bordach is – well, you're at the wrong shala seudos! In any case, Andrew, is the Jewish Center reincarnate of Rabbi Jung – he is the guy who doesn't need a membership at a gym – because he runs around the Jewish Center every Shabbos and Yontov morning like a chicken without a head – making sure that everything runs properly and according to protocol! And that no one gets an Aliyah without a tie or jacket!

But there's more!

The very next Shabbos I davened at the **hashkama minyan!**

And again I wasn't wearing a tie. Or a jacket. And I had brown shoes on – and guess what?

I got shlishi again!!! And not only that – they asked me to daven pesukei dezimra! Ok, so it's only the hashkama minyan, and it was summer time – but still! I mean **brown shoes!!!**

Now to be fair, the regular haskama gabbai was away too, and **Avi Jacobowitz** was filling in.

Now I rather enjoyed the Hashkama Minyan – it's no frills – just davening. You're finished by 9:15am! The Hashkama minyan is great!

But I think it's time to also take the Hashkama minyan to the next level. How about a **Hashkama minyan for Rosh Hashana & Yom Kippur?** Now of course there's a little more to say on those days, so we'd have to finish a little later than 9:15. You know, more like **10 or 10:15.** How many of you would be interested in that? Of course you would!

In any case, I enjoyed the Hahkama Minyan so much that the next week I decided to go back again. And this time, the regular **Gabbai, Avi Shreiber**, was there! And I wasn't wearing a tie; or a jacket; and I was wearing my brown shoes.

And despite my protestations that I received an Aliyah for the prior 2 weeks, and that no one has ever received an aliyah 3 weeks in a row at the Jewish Center, and if he gives it to me I'll have a chazakaha and the shul will have to give me an Aliyah every Shabbos from then on – and despite all of that – **Avi Shreiber** gave me an Aliyah again!!!!

Now I must admit, at first I was a little flattered. I felt like one of those Roshe Yeshiva who receive an Aliyah every week. Hmm, I thought – this isn't so bad! I can get used to this.

But then I looked around, And if you've ever been to the Hashkama Minyan here at the JC during the summer, you will notice that there are only about 12-13 people who come on an average week.

So with 15 or so kibbutzim that had to be distributed, you do the math - they **HAD** to give me an Aliyah! It was a case of "ein Bereirah" – there was no choice!

It didn't matter what I was wearing – I could have walked into shul in my underwear and they would have given me at least gelilah!!!

The next Shabbos, Ruthie & I decided we needed a little more spirituality. So we decided to daven with **MJE**. That week Rabbi Wildes was away, but **Rabbi Avi Heller** was running the show.

In any case, as usual, it was summer, so I wasn't wearing a tie or a jacket and I had on my brown shoes and – you guessed it – they gave me shlishi! Now I know what you're thinking – well it's MJE – if you can read Hebrew they'll give you an Aliyah. Even if you can only read Hebrew in transliteration!

That's what you were thinking, right? Well that's not nice!

Then I thought I noticed a pattern, but I couldn't exactly put my finger on it - **Avi Jacobowitz, Avi Schreiber, Rabbi Avi Heller** – Then I figured it out, as I'm sure most of you already did – what's the common denominator? That's right! **Not** one of them is named **Andrew Bordach!!!**

### **3. And finally – Basketball:**

For those of you who don't know me, I am a born & bred Upper West Sider. Now I didn't always daven at the Jewish Center as a kid, but I did come here frequently – to play basketball.

After all, everyone knows that the Jewish Center is clearly **THE** best shul in Manhattan. And that's obvious to all of us for 1 reason and 1 reason only (glance behind me) – we are the **only** shul in Manhattan with a **GYM!**

Different people think different nights in the shul are **the** most important night! For example, some think Kol Ndrei night is **the** most important night; others, think Purim is **the** most important night; some might think **tonight** is the most important night!

For me however, **the** most important night, is a night that many of you are probably not very familiar with - but I'm sure Rachel Levine shares this sentiment – it's the night of the annual **Clergy-Youth basketball game**.

Rabbi Levine went out of his way to hire 3 young rabbis and give them titles like Scholar in Residence, Assistant Rabbi, and Rabbinic Intern. And I know we are all extremely impressed with the vast Torah knowledge and superb vocabularies and speaking abilities of Rabbis Fridman, Zirkind and Lamm.

However, I imagine that Rabbi Levine's interviews had a slightly different emphasis. After each candidate would deliver a beautiful, original, and intellectually stimulating analysis of difficult Talmudic concepts, Rabbi Levine would say something like, "That's very nice, but now let's stop by the gym; my wife Rachel would like to see you take a jump shot!"

One of them said it was the only shul that asked him to come to the interview wearing sneakers and gym shorts!

And amazingly, Rabbi Levine was able to find 3 erudite scholars, who also know their way around the basketball court really well. (Rumor has it that Chaim Dovid almost didn't get the job as Chazan of the Jewish Center because he plays basketball like an Israeli!)

So in the first year of the competition, the team consisted of our 4 rabbis and the chazzan. And the clergy won!!! But that wasn't good enough for coach Rachel Levine. She aimed for larger margins of victory against our youth!

So the next year, the clergy did some ***outreach***, and they added the **MJE** rabbis to the team! But then the clergy lost!

So the next year, the clergy, implemented one of those many “legal loopholes” for which Rabbis are so famous - like “selling” your chametz while it’s still in your cabinet, or “selling” your land in Israel to non-Jews so you can plant during shmittah.

The learned Jewish Center Rabbis used their wisdom and expanded the definition of “**Clergy**” to somehow include the “**Officers**” of the Jewish Center also!

Is it beginning to make sense now how and why Avi Schwartz replaced Virginia Bayer Hirt as President of the Jewish Center? Virginia is a lovely person and was a great President; but I’d give \$100 to anyone who can show me a picture of Virginia just holding a basketball! Nope, she clearly had to be replaced!

On the other hand, just ***look*** at Avi! I mean let’s be real – how many shuls have a president whose **2 best qualifications** are that he’s over 6 feet tall and has a nice outside shot? (His third best quality, of course, is that his name is **Avi** Schwartz - and **not** Andrew Bordach!)

But sadly, even with the MJE Rabbis, and with the officers, the clergy still lost!

What’s in store for **this** year Rabbi’s team - friends and relatives of the clergy? Wives of the Clergy? (some of us think that Rachel Levine could really help this team much more if she was playing than coaching!)

I don’t know that first hand, but my wife plays basketball with Rachel right here at the JC every Wednesday night – religiously. And I mean, **religiously!**).

And while I’m on the topic of clergy vs youth, I’ve been to some of these games, and not only do I not recognize all of the clergy – but who are all these “youth” who show up?!?! I never see them in shul on Shabbos! In fact, I never see them in shul at all! Are they “hired” youth just for the game?!?

I apologize if I’ve been going on for too long, I just wanted to make sure that I never get asked again for another such honor in this shul!

I would just like to conclude with the question that I stated with:.

**What's the upside** to being a Chatan on Simchat Torah at the Jewish Center?

There is a **tremendous upside**. Aside from being able to stand here and make a fool of myself (and everyone here!), I get to tell you how great a place the Jewish Center really is and how much it has to offer.

I would just like to end by making a small appeal – but don't leave yet! The appeal is not for your money, it's for **you**! The more time **you** spend in this shul, the more you will gain from it and the more you'll appreciate it.

We have clergy that are really second to none. And as much as we enjoy laughing and poking fun of ourselves and the Center, there is much to be loved here. And therefore, I appeal to everyone here to make a commitment to spend a little more time in our shul. Don't just come once a week on Shabbos morning.

This shul is very busy and active 7 days a week. So look into the brochure and find one thing, 2 things, that you think you might like to try. A weekday Minyan. A class, a chesed project, a youth activity. There is something here for everyone. The more you put in, the more you will come out with.

Don't wait for Rabbi Levine to call you to try it – because, as I've learned the hard way, he won't take "no" for an answer!

Good Shabbos! And thanks for the honor!