



Judea Reform Congregation
President's Remarks
Annual Meeting, May 23, 2021
Ziva Starr Raney (she/her/hers)

Thirty-nine (39) years ago this weekend, I became a Bat Mitzvah. My Torah portion was *Bamidbar* – in the Wilderness. In this portion a census of the Israelites is taken. I wondered, why did we count the Israelites? Rabbi Isaac Arama taught that the census was taken so that Moses would know that each Israelite was not just part of the Jewish people, but that each one had individual worth, each of us counts. Every one of us has something precious inside of us. And through the census, they determined the role each person would play in carrying the Tabernacle through the wilderness. In the wilderness, through these experiences, we become a stronger community, we find each other. In the wilderness we even find holiness (like many of our confirmands said last week).

Look at where we have just been ... in a different wilderness these last 15 months. As we have faced challenges new and old, our community has come together in beautiful ways. We have found deep connections and convictions, despite physical distance. Personally, I have felt an even stronger need to be in this community throughout the pain and the celebrations – the injustice and heartache - our “oys” and joys - and everything in between. I suspect I am not alone.

Well friends, we didn't just survive, we thrived! And, in the coming weeks and months we will be emerging and will come together in proximity to each other to celebrate our journey together, reconnect to our physical space, and to continue building and growing our community. And together we will face the next challenges, even stronger.

Your Judea Reform leadership team has been thoughtful and thorough every step of the way, guided by our Jewish values. Making decisions for a community is very different from making decisions for ourselves or our family. I am so grateful to those that share our commitment to communal well-being. *Together we carried our Tabernacle, our Temple, through this wilderness.*

Our commitment has always been the health and well-being of every one of our members and our staff – and it will continue to be. To that end, you know that we have

had the incredible wisdom of a Health Advisory Team made up of members of our congregation in the fields of epidemiology, public health, governance, etc. We also have the guidance of our Re-Opening Task Force, chaired by the remarkable Gale Adland. And thanks to the generosity of Iris and Steve Weiss, the Daniel Weiss Fund enabled us to pivot gracefully to virtual engagement. And we continue to learn and grow in our technological abilities!

We have reimagined synagogue life and redefined engagement– creating new ways to be in community, new ways to “meet” and celebrate, new ways to worship and observe, new ways to learn.

- We expressed care and concern for one another and engaged together – touchpoints, phone calls, virtual shiva, simchas, meditation, art, and study. *Because every one of you counts.*
- We have been vocal in our commitment to Racial Justice and our new Racial Justice Team formed is gaining momentum. There is so much to be done internally to ensure we are a place of belonging and externally to help our community be a safer place. *Because every human being counts.*
- We remained committed to welcoming the stranger... and continued to fight for Immigrant Justice. *Because every person counts.*
- We have fed the hungry from a distance through our HHD food drive, Meals on Wheels Christmas meals. *Because every person is special.*
- We made sure our Homebound members had special meals to celebrate the holidays.
- We have found ways to make the everyday holy – from our home sanctuaries to the extra time we spent with family, and our appreciation of nature.
- We have shown respect and appreciation for the many first responders; we have prayed for their wellbeing.

It has been a remarkable year. At last year’s annual meeting I talked about planning the return celebration. . . who would have thought. But it is coming!

And there is so much to look forward to in the coming year:

Right now, the board is in discussions with Rabbi Soffer about each other’s intentions regarding a new contract. Following the explicit instructions in both our Constitution and our contract with Rabbi Soffer, we expect to call a special meeting of the Congregation in the coming months, to share the recommendation from the Board of Trustees regarding his re-election (that is the term in our Constitution).

At the end of this year, we say *l’hitraot* to Rena Fraade as our Director of Congregational Learning. This is bittersweet because we are excited to have you join us as a Jew in the pews (outside or inside). Rena, for 4 years, you have been an integral part of our community and our leadership. You have built very special relationships with

our Religious School students & teachers, and been a guide and confidante to our teens. Thank you!

Now, I don't want to steal from the presentations you will hear from Shawn & Emily regarding the capital plans and finances, but I feel so strongly about the key investments we are making in our congregation next year, as reflected in the budget. They are focused on the needs of our members, the growing membership body, and our professional staff who are key to our ability to execute on our mission. It is our time to grow and flourish together – in Jewish education, social justice work, youth engagement, and so much more.

We remain committed to ensuring that the needs of all of our members are met through rabbinic engagement and care. You will hear more about that in a minute from Rabbi Soffer. As you recall, we had intended to begin that search this year, but felt that during the pandemic was not the time to successfully move that forward. But you will note that the costs for a search are again in the budget for next year as we are confident in our ability to move forward in the coming year.

I know you all want to hear about the next steps in re-opening our building: The metrics that are guiding us have been improving steadily for weeks. This is very good news and allows us to move into our Phase 2 mode. I cannot go into the details today, but you can see what the phases are about on our website. I am excited that beginning soon we will be gathering small groups outside for Shabbat services on Friday evenings. This incremental approach will allow us time to prepare our building, including the replacement of our HVAC units for air quality; adjust and get used to the increase in density; and ensure we are successful at multi-access engagement. More will be shared soon about who, how many, how to sign up, etc. because we are developing an equitable way to do that. And, early next week, you will be asked to complete a brief survey that will help us in taking these next steps and in our planning for HHDs (which you will not be surprised has already begun). Watch your email for that survey and please complete it.

To be honest, I am excited to join the ranks of our past presidents. Thanks to each of you for your counsel and insight. I hope that I will continue to be of service to this congregation as each of you have.

As this is my last opportunity to speak to you as president, I have a few personal thoughts I want to share:

- I brought to this leadership role my Reform Jewish upbringing, my love of Judaism and Israel, and my professional career in nonprofit management – my head and my heart. I always came to you and my fellow board members as my authentic self and have tried to lead with integrity and compassion.
- Over the last three years, we have faced many challenges. The leaders with whom I serve have addressed each one with grace and compassion. I am grateful to each of them for their commitment and partnership.

- I feel compelled to boast about the tireless work of our committees and the Board of Trustees. Our Board and Committees have been diligent in the work they have done over the last year, to fulfill their fiduciary duty to the Congregation.
- I have always appreciated that in this community, when people disagree, they still come to the table to hear and to listen to each other.
- I often say that leadership is a team sport. The truth is, in our organization leadership is a sacred **partnership**. Decisions are not made alone; direction is not set by one individual. I always felt it was my role, as president, to ensure we were focused on the mission and Jewish values of our organization, and that the decisions we make are for our collective good. I have had the best partners and will cherish the memories we have made together.

Thank you for the honor to serve in this role, for these three years.

Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek.