

Before I begin my remarks, I want to share something very personal. You may not know this, and given Avery is my daughter it may come as a surprise, but I can not carry a tune. No really. It's not pretty. That's why when I come up to light the shabbos or yom tov candles, I say the prayers rather than sing them. When I am in the pews, surrounded by my Judea Reform community, I am able to sing with confidence. Allan starts the tune, and you help keep it centered in my mind. And together we lift our voices in prayer. **I am stronger because we are one community. We are stronger because of one other.**

Oh, how I miss being together.

But here we are online, and because of the strength of our community, we are making the most of it. This evening, I am inspired to speak about gratitude and recognizing the good that surrounds us -- Hakarat HaTov. Despite all the bad that continues to flood our lives, there is so much good to lift up. I choose to remain focussed on all the bounty that comes from being a part of our Judea Reform Community.

I know I speak for all the members of Judea Reform when I say - thank you - Ho da'ah - - to Rabbi Soffer and Allan Friedman for creating something that you were not trained to do, and for helping us make sense of things that we were not prepared to understand. In real time, as you were processing personal grief and emotions and keeping your families safe, you were reimagining how to deliver meaningful Judaism directly from your hearts through a computer and into our homes.

Thank you to Executive Director Emily Young and her capable team for doing, undoing and redoing as things rapidly changed. You found creative ways to lift our spirits and hearts all while keeping the ship sailing forward despite whatever storm was brewing. At a time when all of us could have felt isolated and alone, the professional team of Judea Reform kept us connected, engaged and hopeful.

I also want to thank each of you -- the beloved congregants of our sacred community. Thank you for your patience and forgiveness as we found our way. Hard decisions were made easier as you offered grace and understanding whenever we had disappointing news to deliver.

And immense gratitude to Gary, my partner in life, who stands by my side regardless of the volunteer role I commit us to.

The strength of connection and belonging to our sacred community inspires me daily and guides me through both simchas and tzuris. I hope we all continue to turn toward

one another for strength and fortitude despite the many political, environmental and hateful plagues that continue to inflict us in 5782. Being Jewish is about being together as one people. It is this sense of peoplehood and emphasis on community, since the beginning of our time, that defines us as Jews.

According to the most recent Pew Study on Jewish Americans in 2020, an overwhelming majority (83% or more) of respondents attend services because they find it spiritually meaningful, because they feel a sense of belonging or they feel connected to their ancestry or history.

One of the most cherished lessons that I've learned in 5781 is that even when the ways in which we come together as a community are so radically different - we are still ourselves in the depth of our caring for one another. We are uniquely Judea Reform Congregation, whether on Zoom or on the Vine Terrace or in the Sanctuary.

We are A Sacred Community - A K'hillah K'doshah - a community where everyone **cares** and is **cared for**. **Judea Reform's gates are wide open for anyone wanting to learn and/or support living Jewishly.** The vision and generosity of the generations who came before us - who invested time, creativity, love, and philanthropy in Judea Reform is what has allowed us to thrive. Our congregation is the legacy of our founders, our early members, and each of **you**.

I am so grateful for the vision and investment made by our founders 50 years ago to create this sacred community - the legacy of which we are still benefiting from today.

Our legacy is strengthened each time the rabbi delivers the d'var, a b'nei mitzvot teaches the weekly torah portion, the sick receive care and the bereaved receive support. Our legacy thrives when we make the commitment to support one another through good times and bad. Our legacy endures because we invest in our rabbis and professional staff and maintain our sacred spaces. Gratitude -- Hakarat HaTov -- to each of you for giving of yourselves so generously - be it your time, your intellect, your skills or your philanthropy to strengthen our community.

My hope is that 50 years from now, the future members of Judea Reform can look back at today's congregation and feel gratitude for the legacy we are building.

I have some ideas what belonging to Judea Reform may mean to each of you, and I also know, according to the Jewish for Good survey in 2018, our Durham/Chapel Hill community is expected to grow by up to 1,000 Jewish identifying households by 2035. As the only reform congregation in our community we will feel firsthand the growth of our larger community.

The planning must begin now so that we are in the ready position to welcome and serve these families when they join our community.

When I started these remarks, I shared with you how very much I miss being together. I especially wish I could be with you in PERSON now, not over a screen, so that I can see your faces when I share some thrilling news: just last week, we learned that Judea Reform is receiving an unprecedented investment of \$750,000 in our beloved community. This one-time unrestricted gift will be used to propel JRC's efforts to expand our clergy team, deepen our impact on our members' connection to Judaism and expand rabbinic reach into our community. And it will leverage so much more: this gift will be the cornerstone of a fundraising campaign to secure an assistant rabbi for generations to come. I can't wait to share our plans for a path forward in the coming months.

These are deeply challenging times for our world; but the future of our congregation has never felt brighter. I am so moved by what our Judea Reform community can accomplish, when we join together.

Gary and I wish you a sweet and good New Year - Shana Tova Umetukah.