Senior Rabbi’s Remarks for Congregational Meeting  
Sunday, March 14, 2021  
Rabbi Meredith F. Kahan

Thank you, John [President John Cobey], our Board of Directors, Abby [Schwartz] and Aaron [Herzig] and the Senior Rabbi Search Committee, colleagues, and my Rockdale Temple Family.

I’m grateful to be joining you from the bima in our congregational home, the Messer Chapel, here at Rockdale Temple. This bima is the center of our congregational community, connecting us to sacred time, sacred space, and sacred community. It’s the place from which our worship is led, our sustainers are remembered, our B’nei Mitzvah students ascend. It’s where we mark lifecycle events, build community, and celebrate holidays and holy days. The bima is where we read and speak words of Torah, connecting us to the story of our people. Rockdale’s bima belongs to us all, occupying a special place in so many of our own stories. It holds a special place in my story, as well. I am the daughter and granddaughter of longtime members. I was consecrated – by my predecessor, our Rabbi Emeritus Mark Goldman - on this same bima where my parents were married in 1983. I returned to Rockdale’s bima as a songleader for B’nai Mitzvah services while in college at Ohio State, and began leading the Rock Shabbat Band and monthly service as a 2nd year rabbinical student. Ten years ago, I started ascending the bima on a weekly basis as your rabbinic intern. We received a wedding blessing here and our older children were welcomed into the covenant. Now, I am home on this bima many times a week (though currently, our bima is virtual) to lead our beloved congregation in worship, lifecycle moments, and learning.

My presence on Rockdale’s bima over these many years has resulted in a precious gift of deep and enduring relationships with all of you. I have celebrated with you at baby namings, B’nei Mitzvah, and weddings. I have welcomed new Jews into Am Yisrael and our congregation. I have taught our youngest children and our most senior learners. I have prayed at hospital bedsides and held the hands of those whose lives were ending. I have mourned and cried with you at your – and our – darkest moments. The greatest privilege of my rabbinate has been building relationships with each person in our community, and I am
so grateful to become your Senior Rabbi. With that role comes the opportunity to continue these holy partnerships into our bright future.

For a decade, I was fortunate enough to work in holy partnership with my teacher and friend, Rabbi Sissy Coran, of blessed memory. Rabbi Coran guided me as a student and then as a new rabbi, giving me the skills, opportunities, and confidence to lead. She trusted me to design much of our congregation’s weekly worship, direct our religious school and youth programs, reach out and built community for young adults and families, and innovate beyond our walls with shabbatCTY. She gave me the chance to work with rabbinic fellows and interns, youth group advisors, and religious school teachers, growing into an experienced supervisor. Rabbi Coran embraced me as her rabbinic partner, and we were united in the sacred work of moving this congregation forward towards our 200th year and beyond.

This was not the rabbinic transition anyone wanted nor could have imagined. I miss my mentor every day and I almost can’t believe that I am becoming Senior Rabbi of Rockdale Temple without her here to celebrate with me. Still, I draw strength from our years of shared partnership, friendship, and sacred service to provide rabbinic leadership to Rockdale Temple.

Since May I have had the bittersweet privilege of leading our congregation during this period of both personal and communal change. We have had to mourn the dual losses of our beloved Rabbi Coran and life as we knew it. We have had to meet both the opportunities and challenges of congregational life in transition and remote operation. We have had to adapt and innovate beyond our wildest dreams. I am grateful for your trust and confidence these past ten months; it has been my distinct honor to lead Rockdale Temple through this difficult time.

Tonight, I am pleased to have the opportunity to share my vision for Rockdale’s future, a vision I believe we are well positioned to implement as we move through this transitional time and into our bright future:

*Strengthening Rockdale by Connecting*

Rockdale Temple is a pastoral congregation, putting people and relationships first. We have carved out a unique place in the Cincinnati Jewish community because of our
emphasis on connection. We are known as the “warm and welcoming” congregation, and we embody that description. To carry this special identity forward, and to strengthen our future, we will continue to reach out to those outside of our community as well as reach inward to deepen relationships with those who are already members of our congregation. As your Senior Rabbi, I will model extending warmth and welcome to a diverse community. I will continue engaging in the broader Cincinnati community, and together with staff and lay leaders, create opportunities for the unaffiliated to experience the Rockdale we know and love. Our community will be enriched and strengthened by making sure that anyone who identifies as Jewish or part of a Jewish family, including Jews by choice, individuals with disabilities, Jews of color, interfaith families, LGBTQ+ people and families, single adults, and beyond, feels included and welcomed, celebrated and affirmed.

As Senior Rabbi, I will also build upon my work over the past ten years, which has been focused on strengthening connections within our community. Along with a dedicated group of lay leaders, I created FoRT (young Families of Rockdale Temple), our intentional community of families with children under the age of six. FoRT is a template on which we can build more of our affinity groups into intentional micro-communities, based on relationship building and meaningful, relevant Jewish engagement.

*Securing Rockdale’s Future by Sustaining*

Rockdale Temple is dedicated to sustainability, to securing our future through financial health and stable leadership. Our leadership has built a solid foundation through the Create Your Jewish Legacy program, rapid growth of Rockdale’s Bene Israel Fund, investment in a stable rabbinic team, and steady, inspired governance. As Senior Rabbi, I will help strengthen that foundation by investing in the growth and development of both professional and lay leadership, as well as the satisfaction and fulfillment of our membership.

Sustaining Rockdale Temple for the future requires a deep understanding of the wants, needs, and vision of you, our members. We have undertaken surveys and listening campaigns to hear the varied voices in our community, as well as completed data analysis and benchmarking against which to measure our efforts. Our next steps would be to engage
in regular evaluation of our efforts, learning from both challenges and successes, and utilizing our findings to set goals and plan for our future.

My appointment as Senior Rabbi also will have a sustaining impact and would further the values of continuity and consistency that the Board prioritized eight years ago when I was invited to join the clergy team. That vision was realized during the past eight months, as my longstanding relationships within the community enabled me to help nurture, stabilize, and lead Rockdale through global, communal, and personal loss. As your Senior Rabbi, I will continue to provide stability, give comfort and consistency to our congregation, and allow our Rockdale Temple to continue moving forward.

*Leading Rockdale Through Transforming*

When we celebrated Rockdale Temple’s 190th anniversary, our tagline read, “190 Years of Forward Thinking.” Rockdale Temple has stood the test of time because we have always been eager to look ahead. At Rockdale, we are excited to experiment and change because we understand that congregational life must be meaningful to the Jews who are living it today. As Senior Rabbi, I will continue to innovate in order to meet our mission. Two years ago, we introduced shabbatCTY, a joyful, musical Shabbat experience held in unique locations in Cincinnati’s urban core. shabbatCTY is already changing the way our congregation thinks about Shabbat and has challenged the traditional models of worship and gathering in our community.

Our intentional work on shabbatCTY also made us better prepared and ready to transform Shabbat when the pandemic hit. As you all are well aware, we have for many months been operating a virtual congregation – though as I said on Shabbat, we ourselves are not virtual, we are quite real! The world we live in is changing and will continue to change, requiring us to lead both intentionally and innovatively at every turn. Even in a post-pandemic reality, the future of Jewish life will be hybrid, providing a new set of challenges and opportunities. Our learned experiences, continued consultancy work with UpStart and collaboration with talented partners, and rabbinic vision will allow us to look ahead to new ideas and grow and change as we embrace the future. This pandemic will have a long-term effect on Rockdale Temple; we will need to take the lessons learned to move forward successfully through this time of transition and into our future.
On Rosh HaShanah, I spoke of our shared grief and invoked a message of hope. As I taught at the dawn of the new year, the prophet Zechariah (9:12) so believed in Judaism's embrace of hope that he coined the phrase *asirei hatikvah*, captives or prisoners of hope. In calling Am Yisrael *asirei hatikvah*, Zechariah asserted that we are a people who are required to hope. Hope is central to what it means to be Jewish; the recently departed Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explained that "hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better [...] it takes a great deal of courage to hope." (*To Heal a Fractured World*, p.165-166)

I believe that the courage to hope this past year has come from the power of our sacred community. We have made meaning this year - and we have always made meaning - by relying on Rockdale Temple the congregational institution and Rockdale Temple the congregational family. In just a few short years, we will celebrate two hundred years of Kehal Kodesh Bene Israel, this holy congregation. The courage to hope throughout difficult times coupled with the ability to make meaning as a Temple family has surely made this milestone possible. It is my distinct privilege to accept the honor of serving as your Senior Rabbi on the eve of our bicentennial. I look forward to many years of continuing my sacred work as a rabbi of Rockdale Temple. I thank you for once again renewing our covenantal relationship, and for having the courage to hope, make meaning, and now, look forward to our bright future together. *Chazak, chazak, v’nitchazeik* – we are strong, we will continue to be strong, and we will always strengthen on another.