

**Emanuel: Our Name, Our Community, and Our Destiny**  
**Remarks for the Temple Emanuel Annual Meeting**  
**Andy Koren**  
**Senior Rabbi**  
**May 21, 2023 ~ 2 Sivan 5783**

Emanuel comes from the Hebrew *Imanu-el* which is the way we say “God is with us.” Built into our Temple’s name is the idea that God is always a presence, there for us no matter the situation.

Our tradition teaches that in any relationship, there is always one additional Partner, with a capital P. God’s sacred presence.

Emanuel – *Imanu-el* – God is with us.

I often have that feeling here at Temple. I feel it quite deeply right now, as I speak about the past year and look forward to the future. No matter the size of the gathering, or the occasion, Emanuel – God, however we understand God, is with us and there for us.

On that note, I want to speak to three trends from this past year at Temple.

Trend #1 – Further Restoring The Fullness of Our Congregation – in other words, returning some of the things that we so treasure to our toolbox. So many answered our call to return and be back together at Temple for the fall holidays. Our spaces were full, and so were our hearts. To add to this, I am so grateful to our leadership and Temple that, after an understandably long wait, we were able to celebrate Rabbi Guttman’s service to Temple and retirement at a gala event last summer. He was so deserving of being this year’s Book of the New Year recipient.

But that’s not all. Our signature Shabbats such as MLK Shabbat were back in full swing. We were able to host the new Superintendent of Guilford County Schools, Dr. Whitney Oakley, for a memorable Friday night service.

Moreover, our educational and experiential programs are back in their fullness. For the second year in a row, we highlighted a book for us to read and discuss as a congregation. This year's title was Yossi Klein Halevi's *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*. Thanks to the Sisterhood's Book Club and to the Sisterhood for all that you do and for hosting this initiative and event.

Adult education and Chevrah Torah remain robust! Rabbi Fisher will touch on these aspects of Temple life, and also speak to our Keshet education program as well as other teen initiatives in her remarks.

Here's what else returned: group travel to Israel. I want to give kudos to the five Temple high school teens who spent the summer of 2022 in Israel! You were an inspiration to the 25 adults who went on Temple's congregational trip to Israel this past February. We were there at a very important time for us and for Israel. Check out or revisit Temple's Facebook page from later February if you want more details. Thank you to Amy Epstein for your vision, your leadership, and your work planning this trip and thanks to everyone who made this experience so memorable.

We also brought back our involvement in the March of the Living this year. Six Temple juniors and seniors, plus Dr. Kendra Ross, together with extended connections from throughout the Mid-Atlantic, took this life-impacting Jewish journey. For my part, I was honored to lead a March of the Living for the first time, bringing a group from our area for the first time since 2019. I am so grateful to Rabbi Guttman for his work, and for teaching me how to do this, as well as to the individuals and to the Greensboro Jewish Federation who have supported this program for so long. Please continue to be generous in your support in the future, as we not only sustain this effort, but grow it going forward.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the full return of the Jewish Festival this spring. Barry, Erika – even the brief rain couldn't stop the successful re-launch of our full Festival. You and your team were awesome!

Trend #2 – Not only have we as a Temple restored elements of our past, we have also continued to be an Innovating Congregation.

I love how we re-configured Simchat Torah last fall so that we could celebrate simchas that were muted during the early years of COVID. We have also innovated Lag BaOmer, formerly a little-known moment on the Jewish calendar. It is now Temple's cookout night. Thank you, Temple Brotherhood members, for your role in that gathering and a long list of other ways that you have enhanced Temple life! We truly are grateful.

Let me quickly mention a few more of the many innovations that are growing at Temple: the Aviv group, the Cooking Club, and our newest entry: Trivia Night.

And let's not forget that we were essential in the founding and funding of the Shinshinim program in Greensboro, something that Rabbi Fisher will address in greater detail in her remarks.

Trend #3 that I want to mention is in the area of Caring – for others as well as for our people. There are big issues in our world, in our state, and even in our own backyard. Thanks to all who have been involved in our Temple's efforts on behalf of new immigrants, especially our Welcoming Team. Josh and Cathy have done such a great job for so long. Terri Goldberg has been our point person on a wide range of issues, including Criminal Justice Reform and Affordable Housing.

As Reform Jews, our congregants take Tikkun Olam seriously. So do Rabbi Fisher and I. We know that we have serious work ahead of us. I know this as Temple's Senior Rabbi; I feel even more so in my role as co-chair, together with Rabbi Judy Schindler of Charlotte, of the recently-formed North Carolina Jewish Clergy Association.

We care for others and we also care for our own. That is why Rabbi Fisher and I continue to make well and caring visits to you and your families. That is why we are there for you as we celebrate life's greatest moments – a new member of the family, a conversion, a wedding, and so much more. God is

with us then. God's presence also comforts us, as happened so many times last year, when a love one passes. That is why I am so thankful to Temple's Chesed Committee and to our Chevrah Kaddisha. That is why I am also so grateful to Renee Miller and Wendee Cutler for the Advanced Care Planning session that we held this year. That is why Brenda Henley, we all lift up what you do for Temple.

There is one more element of Caring: we have to care about ourselves, especially in light of the rise in antisemitism here and abroad. As Hanukkah approached, I reached out to local church and community leaders. Send me two brief sentences, I asked them. Each night of Hanukkah, I wanted to put a new statement on one of the branches of our outdoor menorah. I figured we'd get eight, maybe fewer, responses. But Greensboro never disappoints. Not only did we fill all of the branches of that menorah once; we ran out of room.

Those are the big trends. We have brought back most of what was paused due to COVID, we have innovated, all while continuing to care for others and ourselves.

We are now a congregation of 584 member families, including affiliates. How does that compare to the last few years? Simply stated, we continue to grow. That name Emanuel reminds us that no one ever truly operates in isolation, and that is true for Dr. Jerry Plovsky and Sharon Moran who head our very dedicated Membership Committee.

My sense is that we as a Temple will continue to grow. To do so, we cannot rest on what we have done in the past. I am hoping to stand here next year to tell you about a few new trends.

Here is what they will likely be:

- 1) A renewed focus on family gatherings. We will be taking next steps in this area that has always been a point of Temple's strength, building upon time-honored ideas while also moving forward and changing, as we should.

2) Attracting the next generation. Many of the young adults and families living in our area grew up at Temple. But even if they didn't, let's make sure that we are with them as they chart a path forward for themselves, their friends, and their families. If we do our jobs right, Temple members in the mid-2050s will be talking about this community the way that those today talk about what they were doing back in the mid-1990s.

3) Partnership. Don't be surprised if we pioneer a trip to DC for Jewish juniors and seniors and their non-Jewish African American peers in the coming Spring. That is something we are working on.

But there is more. The stability that we have at Temple is so important, especially as our area will be welcoming new Jewish professionals including a new Senior Rabbi at Beth David and a new Federation Director in the coming months, something that hasn't happened in over 35 years. I want to see further productive partnerships together with new ways to support what we value most: promoting Jewish education, involvement, and growth.

My closing words are words of gratitude to our Temple Board and to our amazing staff. Paul Benson, your first year as Temple's President has been instrumental in everything we have done this year and so much more. Thanks to you, to Temple's Executive Committee, and to everyone on Temple's Board. And thank you to our Past Presidents for continuing to be a source of encouragement, dedication, and support.

Every congregation should have a staff like ours. Please join me in thanking: Cassie Silverman for adeptly leading our Early Childhood program; Shira Snyder, our highly-talented Program Associate; Natasha Kobleva, our trustworthy comptroller; Dima and Lorena who maintain our facility with an extra measure of TLC; Bob Bonasia and so many other for having our backs and providing us with security. Brenda Henley – I know that so many join me in thanking you for all that you do and have done for so long. Thank you to Thyra Dye, my Administrative Assistant, who is somewhat new to our staff, but has quickly risen to the occasion. Thanks to Brooklyn Flatt – in addition to her invaluable work with Keshet, she took on the administrative details essential to the smooth running of the March of the Living and I am so grateful. Thank you to our Cantorial soloist Mitchel Sommers; to CJ for his

accompaniment during services and to Dana Bederson, now a college graduate and on her way to realizing her dream of becoming a Cantor. And to Jacob Gers who is the master of making sure that week-in and week-out, we sound good in Temple and reflect that in our livestreams.

Laura Denhardt – I am not sure that I have ever met anyone who is as dedicated to Jewish life as you are. We are so blessed that you continue to share your expertise, and your goodness, with our community as our Executive Director.

Being a Rabbi is a high calling. It has its share of challenges. There are those who see Rabbis as being in competition with one another. Then, there are those of us who prefer a model of collaboration and cooperation. Rabbi Libby Fisher is a collaborative and cooperative Rabbi. She is as smart as they come, cool as can be, and a truly accessible Jewish role model. We are so blessed that she is here in Greensboro. *Today rabbah* to you for making all that we do, individually and collaboratively, emanate goodness and blessing.

I always reserve my last words of gratitude for Michal, who has known me forever and is my source of ongoing renewal and inspiration. Thanks to her, and our adult children Avishai and Shiri, I am in the position to do what I do, and love doing, every day. We thank you so much for letting us be part of your lives. It means so much to us.

What an amazing year it has been! May God continue to be a presence in our community and our lives, blessing us as we take our next steps towards ever-better and brighter moments, together. AMEN