

From the Annual Meeting Speech
Rabbi Andy Koren
May 23, 2016

This past December was truly an incredible time for our congregation. On December 10th, we hosted an historic evening of dialogue which brought together 20 Jewish and 20 Muslim high school juniors and seniors. This extraordinary evening started with Muslim prayers and the lighting of Hanukkah candles in Temple's chapel and continued with a full program of teens speaking with and learning from one another, exploring their differences and similarities. The evening ended with the lighting of lanterns that the students made together, symbolizing that we bring more light to the world through dialogue.

One of the reasons that I love the work that I do at Temple Emanuel and throughout our area is for evenings such as December 10th. Let's remember that last fall was an ugly time in the political landscape. Voices from the halls of power in Washington to the campaign trail were calling for the US to not accept Syrians seeking asylum. Then, the terrible attack in San Bernardino took place. One candidate, Donald Trump, infamously called for a ban on Muslims coming to the US.

Our response was different. Working together with the Islamic Center of Greensboro, especially my dear friend Wasif Qureishi, and the NCCJ, we built a program that focused on building bridges rather than pointing fingers. The Temple teens and their Muslim peers who participated in this timely dialogue called it one of the most important things they had ever done. It was also true for the Jewish and Muslim young adults who served as group facilitators.

For me, it was a reminder why I am so honored to serve as one of Temple Emanuel's Rabbis. It is why I have dedicated extra hours to working on interfaith projects around Greensboro, including serving as one of the chairs of the Greensboro Faith Leaders' Council. It is why when HB2 was passed, I was able to work quickly with clergy colleagues from a variety of backgrounds to draft one of the first broad-based religious statements opposing this discriminatory legislation; it was signed by over 60 local clergy leaders.

Beyond that, at least once a month I have been part of one or another community gathering. I have delivered invocations and blessings for groups as diverse as Reading Connections and the Say Yes! To Education campaign which is part of the Guilford County Schools. I continue to serve on the school system's calendar committee helping to plan and resolve issues on the calendar that might conflict with Jewish holidays. I am also part of the volunteer leadership of the Children's Home Society which not only provides foster care and adoption services, but also works to strengthen families around our state.

These things, in and of themselves, are a full time job. Yet, as this community well knows, I also serve as Temple's Director of Religious Education.

The Talmud notes that "*our world is sustained due to the breath of children studying Torah*" (*Shabbat 119B*). Temple Emanuel's response to this teaching is AMEN. We are dedicated to teaching our youth the fundamentals of Judaism including our basic stories and synagogue skills such as Hebrew decoding and Jewish music. Yet, we do much more. We work with Jewish

learners of all ages to translate Jewish values into real-world action.

Our Early Childhood Engagement Center, School, and mid-week Hebrew program work with approximately 200 youth from pre-Kindergarten through the 12th. Temple Emanuel remains the largest center for Jewish education in our area.

What we have done has been noted as one of the best examples of Jewish education in the Reform movement. Our retention of students in active and meaningful programs from B'nai Mitzvah through the end of high school routinely tops 80%. This past fall, I presented at two sessions of the Reform Movement's Biennial on this topic. Moreover, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, referenced our work in a recent article on Jewish leadership. Rabbis, education directors, and education committee chairs from cities large and small call throughout the year to learn from our example. This year, our 12th Confirmation class of 14 includes 6 seniors graduating from the American Hebrew Academy. Nearly all of our graduating seniors have spent some time in Israel; many have spent at least a semester there. They have been madrichim. They have been to Washington for AIPAC conferences and L'Taken Social Justice Seminars. They have gone on the March of the Living and much more. All the while, they have been accessible Jewish role models for their peers and those much younger.

Having said this, I want to briefly walk through some of the incredible highlights of this past year:

- spent a good deal of time with high school teens in DC this year, leading joint groups from Temple and AHA to both the AIPAC High School Summit in the fall and the AIPAC Policy Conference in March. For the seventh consecutive year, I led our L'Taken delegation which included ten high school teens. Among the issues they lobbied on was LGBT equality. That was in late January just weeks before HB2 would be passed. Among the students who spoke up on this issue was one of the two transgender youth from Temple Emanuel. Friends, these issues are not theoretical for us. They are very real. If we are not teaching about them, reflecting on what the Jewish community has to say, then our silence will be taken as agreement. We can never let this happen.
- our last annual meeting, 14 of our youth have become Bar or Bat Mitzvah; 15 if you include the Bar Mitzvah this coming Shabbat. Our 7th and 8th had a full year, learning lessons about Israel as well as the Civil Rights movement Sunday. They also went on two amazing full-class trips, going Whitewater River Rafting over one weekend in the fall and spending another Shabbat weekend at a challenge course camp in Charlottesville, VA at the end of Passover. Many of our 7th 8th also went to Raleigh for a NFTY middle school retreat.
- of NFTY, we have seen an uptick in youth group activities thanks to the dedication of Nate Litwin who has been advising our high school students. Most of the top leadership of BBYO locally also comes from our incredible Temple teens.
- have continued to lead services Wednesday mornings every other week at the B'nai Shalom Day School. In addition, Temple has teamed with the American Hebrew Academy on a number of initiatives, including High Holiday morning services for high school students. Three of our rising 9th will start at AHA next year; two of our rising seniors will graduate from there next spring.
- Early Childhood Engagement Center led by Louise Van Schaack has 18 children that come to

Temple for pre-school during the weekdays. Many thanks to Louise and all of the teachers and volunteers who make this gateway to Temple life such a big part of our success. Louise's work is much broader than this. She has created outstanding programs for parents to interact with each other and to learn from and with one another. The monthly Wine Havdalah programs with babysitting available are a big hit with parents who have young children.

- past year also featured many opportunities for adults to learn together. Temple's Friendship Circle is more than just a lunch gathering for Jewish seniors; it always features a teaching by at least one of Temple's Rabbis. The same is true for the gatherings we have had at Abbotswood and Well Spring. I want to particularly thank Sue Klau who organized a Purim play at Well Spring and who has recently started tutoring B'nai Mitzvah students assisting them with Torah study. Speaking of Purim, Temple's "Not Ready For Shushan Players" did another great Purim Shpiel this year. They practiced a few times a week and once again filled our celebration of Purim with music and smiles. Thanks to Sam and Cynthia Reichelson for their work as directors and to everyone who had parts in this year's Shpiel. Our very full lineup of adult classes were headlined by Rabbi Guttman's class on Judaism and Jewish Life. He and I also shared a Shepherd's Center Class. Jennie Spallone was instrumental in organizing a Mussar workshop via Skype with Alan Morinis and then taught a Mussar class this spring. Chevrah Torah, our Shabbat morning master class on the weekly Torah portion led by either Rabbi, continues to attract record crowds. I am also very excited about the six students who are currently studying for Adult Bat Mitzvah; we will celebrate as they are called to the Torah this coming Thanksgiving Shabbat.

And if all of this was not enough, in early February I led a congregational trip to Israel. 16 travelers from Temple, including Michal and I, spent an unforgettable week in Israel. Our tour brought us to places both on and off the beaten track in Israel. Shabbat in Jerusalem with Rabbi Susan Silverman and her husband Yossi Abramowitz was something that few tourists to Israel get to do. Susan and Yossi are dear friends whom I have known since the 80s. They opened their home to us and helped us see Israel beyond the headlines, the restaurants, the tour sites, and the hotel lobbies.

I am now completing my 13th with Temple Emanuel. Many of us know that if you take the word for life in Hebrew, Chayim, and add its Hebrew letters it comes to the number 18. What many of us don't know is that if you add up the letters in the Hebrew word for love, Ahvah it comes to the number 13. I love the work that I do. I love being with you during times of joy. I also see it as more than just a sacred responsibility to be with you during the tough times; it is what any of us would do out of love, from the bottom of our hearts. That I get to do so as your Rabbi means so much to me.

—Rabbi Andy Koren