### RABBI PROSNIT SHARED HIS VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR SYNAGOGUE.

Six years ago, I shared these words… “This is not the sermon I hoped to preach for my first Shabbat at Temple Emanu-El.” You may remember, war had just broken out in Israel. Rockets were being launched from Gaza. So, instead of giving a feel good, “get to know me” sermon, I preached about the unfolding violence in Israel.

Now, as I appear on your computer screen this evening, I share these words as your incoming Senior Rabbi…. “This is not the Senior Rabbi’s report that I imagined sharing at my first congregational meeting.” I would much rather be with all of you in our chapel sharing my vision for the future of our synagogue.

However, I would be remiss if I didn’t take time tonight and reflect on two history-shaping events that are impacting our community, our country and our world: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Black Lives Matters Movement.

It’s hard to fathom that just three months ago we hosted a raucous Purim Carnival. Since that time in early March, COVID-19 has deeply affected our congregation. Many in our community became sick with the virus, were bedridden for weeks, quarantined from the families, and admitted to the hospitals for care. Some of our congregants are still suffering today trying to regain their strength. We continue to pray for a Refuah Shleimah, a complete healing of body and spirit.

Many in our community lost loved ones to COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, we officiated at many funerals for those who died of the virus. For everybody who has experienced a loss during this pandemic, mourning rituals have been upended, as we have been unable to gather in our traditional ways. We continue to send our love and strength to those who are grieving and want you to know that we continue to be here for you and your families.

Many in our community have been on the frontlines of this pandemic. We offer our gratitude to all of the essential workers who have and continue to work tirelessly supporting patients, families, and our communities to give us strength and fortitude moving forward.

Many in our community have lost jobs and experienced financial setbacks. During these challenging times, Temple Emanu-El remains a place where anyone can turn, regardless of finances. We are your home.

Throughout these three months, all of us have felt a sense of loss. We have missed college or high school graduations, delayed weddings and B’nai Mitzvahs, re-planned family vacations, experienced isolation while quarantining in our homes and missed celebrating holidays with our family. This has been a challenging and unprecedented time, and our Temple community continues to learn, vision, and plan so that we can provide comfort, connection, and comraderies.

No doubt COVID-19 will shape our Judaism and Temple community going forward, both on a financial and on a programmatic level. But, instead of ruminating over the losses, I want to spend a few minutes talking about silver linings of this pandemic, one of which has been the creativity that our synagogue have implemented to remain relevant and connected. To me, that is the very essence of Reform Judaism. We adapt to the changing times to ensure our Judaism can thrive. In the coming year, we will continue to be creative with our services, with our educational offerings, and with our social connections.

We are planning the reopening of our building and we expect to pray in person this summer first outside and then moving back into our sanctuary. We are busy dreaming and designing our high holy days, they will look different than past years but we will make sure to capture the essence of the Days of Awe. We are updating our live-streaming technology so that all of our services, learning, and events have the option of being both in person and virtual. Our YLE team and our Early Child Center team are scenario planning so that our learners can continue to learn and celebrate their Judaism. There are many unknowns but I’m confident that in partnership with our lay leaders and our professional staff that we will make decisions that continue to make our congregation thrive.

And now, I want to turn to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Before the Coronavirus pandemic hit, fifty congregants gathered in the Chapel to watch the documentary about Rabbi Joachim Prinz: “I Shall Not Be Silent,” as we prepared for our Civil Rights Journey Trip to the South, which is now rescheduled for May 2021. One line from the film continues to resonate with me… *“The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”* Rabbi Prinz shared these words on August 28th, 1963 at the March on Washington. At the time, Rabbi Prinz was the president of the American Jewish Congress and rabbi of Temple B’nai Abraham in Newark. Prinz came to the podium right before Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I have a dream speech.” Prinz challenged the Jewish community and all Americans “to work together – for it is not enough to hope together, and it is not enough to pray together, but to work together to become a glorious, unshakeable reality in a morally renewed and united America.”

As a Temple community we must address the racism that is plaguing our country. Rabbi David Stern of Dallas urges, “The God who heard the cry of the oppressed requires us to listen – to narratives of racism, to exposures of white privilege and educational inequities and mythic meritocracies. We do not need to agree with everything we hear, but we need to hear it. And when that hearing produces pain, then we need to feel it. And if that pain motivates us to create a more just and safe society instead of silencing the truths that disturb us, we will know that we have broken through the silence towards hope.”

So that is how our congregation will start. We will listen, we will learn and at times, I am sure we will be uncomfortable. We our forming a team of lay leaders to help develop our racial justice work so we can begin these conversations first within our community and then focus outwardly. We are committed to deepening our relationships with Black churches in our area as well as the MLK Association of Westfield and the Social Justice Matters group in Scotch Plains. We hope that many of you will be integrally involved in this work.

During the rabbinic search when I was asked where I saw Temple Emanu-El in five years, I responded that I hope other congregations, the Reform Movement, and the larger Jewish and non-Jewish world look at our congregation as a visionary synagogue. I believe we will do this through our work impacted by COVID-19 as well as our partnerships and actions addressing Racial justice. To me a visionary congregation is one that demonstrates a sacred purpose, a holistic ethos, a participatory culture, meaningful engagement, innovative disposition and reflective leadership. To become a visionary synagogue, both outreach and inreach are crucial. The single biggest reason why people don’t get involved remains that they were never asked. We need to ask, “What are your talents? What are your gifts? What does a new generation want of its synagogue? What are you concerned about? What are the pressures that impact on you and your family? What keeps you up at night? How can we, this Temple community, help?”

The strength of Reform Judaism has long been its ability to recognize and willingness to respond to the changing trends in our society. We don’t create the trends but we do synthesize effective responses and bring the changing fabric of American society into the framework of Jewish life and tradition. That’s what Reform Jews did in the 19th century, that’s what was done throughout the 20th century and that of course is the challenge for today as we enter our 71st year as a congregation.

I feel confident that our community is up for this challenge.

Before I conclude my remarks this evening, Annual meetings are good times to take stock of all that we have done this past year and express gratitude to those who dedicate so much time and effort on the business and welfare side of our congregation. To the outgoing Board and executive committee, the past presidents and others who are still engaged I express my thanks. A special appreciation to our soon to be past president Marc Epstein – who I interviewed with six years ago and he shared with me how engaged and warm this community is. He was not wrong! Marc you have been so dedicated to this congregation. Thank you.

I look forward to working in partnership with our incoming president Terri Klass and our incoming board as we carry out our sacred vision together.

I also feel blessed to be part of such a team. First of all to Chuck Kroloff, my teacher and my Rabbi, who has taught me and guided me so much over the past six years. A very special acknowledgment to Bennett Miller for your mentorship, your wisdom, and helping with this smooth transition. We will have the opportunity to thank Rabbi Miller next Friday at Shabbat services, I hope you can join us.

I’m thankful to my colleagues – Martha, Michelle, Abra, Jill, Alice, Mike, Kathleen, Samantha, Aaron, Jackie, and Becky who have created a space to dream and be creative and I look forward to welcoming Rabbi Victor Appel, Cantor Anna Ott, and Samara Schwartz who will be joining our team on July 1st. To all the administrative and support staff who make the synagogue run on a daily basis we could not be here without you.

To my family – Arielle your support and your guidance is unmeasurable and Caleb and Zoe this experience is even richer with you by my side or popping into services.

And most importantly – I want to thank you, our Temple Emanu-El family for your support, your commitment, and your connections to this congregation. I’m confident that in five years because of your energy, participation, and dedication people will be talking about this visionary synagogue at 756 East Broad Street in Westfield, NJ.