

Good Evening. My name is Alan Kline, and I serve as president of the board of trustees of Har Sinai Temple. This is the third time that I have had the honor of addressing you at Kol Nidre. In past years, I have focused on the long history and proud traditions of Har Sinai Temple. But today, I would like to discuss the future of Har Sinai Temple, the future of our congregation, and the need for change.

As many of you know, I have been associated with Har Sinai for my entire life. I was consecrated, bar mitzvahed, and confirmed at Har Sinai. My three children were bar mitzvahed at Har Sinai, and at the end of this school year – they will have all been confirmed at Har Sinai when my son Henry graduates from our religious school this spring. My grandparents and parents, were lifelong members. And my fervent hope is that my children and their children will be able to continue the tradition of being proud members of Har Sinai Temple.

During my lifetime, Har Sinai has followed what many describe as a “traditional synagogue model,” common throughout the United States in the 20th Century, where the congregation owned its own building and land (usually subject to a mortgage), with a large ornate sanctuary such as we had on Bellevue Avenue, along with classrooms for a religious school, and offices for our clergy, professional staff and teachers. The traditional temple model supported a full-time Rabbi, Cantor, Temple Administrator, Director of Education, and maintenance staff. This model was financially supported almost exclusively by the dues paid by the Temple’s membership and by an endowment. And that membership was generally quite large – anywhere from 500 to 1,000 families, sometimes even more. This has been the model of most congregations across the country and in our area, and has been the model followed by Har Sinai for as long as I can remember. It worked, and it thrived for a long time because there was either growing membership or at least a stable membership to provide financial support to the Congregation’s operations. As older members passed on, there would always be younger members to replace them. That traditional model was successful in the past, but today, and in recent years, that model simply does not work well for most congregations. The high cost of maintaining membership makes younger people, just starting new families, reluctant to join congregations.

For our congregation, the cost of maintaining a large building, on a large parcel of land makes no sense. This is especially true since most of our land and most of the space in our building goes largely unused. It is wasteful and inefficient. The price we have paid for maintaining our land and building has been substantial. It has resulted in a large mortgage with payments that drain our Congregation and our Endowment of large sums of money resulting in higher membership fees, which in turn results in fewer members and a reduced enrollment in our religious school.

We bought land in Pennington back in 2006 with the laudable goal of expanding and invigorating our congregation. The plan was to first build a school and smaller sanctuary, with the idea of eventually putting up an adjoining sanctuary and social hall in future years – creating a small Temple campus. And all of this was to be supported by increasing membership over time. It was a fine idea, but it was based on a Temple model that worked in the 20th century – but which is no longer practical in the 21st Century. We must begin to think anew and act anew. We must be flexible and adapt to our changing times and to our changing circumstances regarding how we offer and deliver services to our members and our community. Not based on what we would like things to be – but based on reality - how things actually are.

Although we must adapt to changed circumstances, we can never, ever change the basic content of what we offer our members, what we have offered in the past, and what we must continue to offer in the future. And what does Har Sinai offer? Why is it still relevant and important in today's world?

First, and most significantly, we offer a quality Jewish education to our children so we can pass on our traditions and history and the timeless tenets of Reform Judaism to the next generation. Education has always been of fundamental importance at Har Sinai, and must continue to be our number one priority. Due to recent changes in our school's tuition structure and scheduling, making it more affordable and convenient for families to enroll their children in our school, we have enrolled six new students over the summer, which is an example of how appropriate changes can stimulate growth in our congregation. Second, we offer comfort and support to members who have suffered tragedies, bereavements, and difficult times, to bolster their spirits and give them a renewed appreciation

of life and the world in which we live. Third, we offer the joyous celebration of lifecycle events – weddings, b’nai mitzvahs, brises and baby namings, consecrations, confirmations and the celebration of the Sabbath and holidays. Fourth, we offer tzedakah - assistance to our community through our social action committee providing food, clothing and assistance to those who need help. And for those who question our relevance in the world today, we offer hands on support in protecting the interests of Jews right here in our community.

Not too long ago, there was an incident of anti-Semitism in the Hopewell Schools involving a child of one of our members. It was our Rabbi, Rabbi Pollack, who went to the school where the incident occurred. He met with the superintendent, teachers and others involved in the incident. The Rabbi not only counseled the victim, and demanded that the perpetrators be disciplined, but met with the students who carried out the abhorrent act, talked to them, and made them understand how wrong their actions had been and their implications. And it registered with these kids, it caused them shame, and hopefully changed their perspective and conduct for the rest of their lives. That is just one example of how this Temple is relevant and contributes to our community.

So do not doubt it – Har Sinai Temple is relevant, it is important, and it makes a difference in the lives of our members and our community. So we, the people in this room, must do everything we can to insure Har Sinai Temple remains a vibrant and important part of our community. And that is why we need to change.

The details of how we plan to change our model, the structure of our Temple – this is the subject on which our board must labor this year. It is a work in progress. It may mean eventually, a few years from now, selling our current building and land, and beginning to lease space for our sanctuary, school, offices and meeting rooms. Or perhaps purchasing a smaller property more appropriate for our congregation’s size and needs. Some will argue that leasing or relocating is not the way we should move forward. But I would remind you that where we are meeting tonight is a leased facility. And I have heard, overwhelmingly, that the Mayo Center here at TCNJ is a wonderful, inspiring place in which to celebrate the high holidays. And I will also remind you that while we were in between space when we moved from Bellevue Avenue to Pennington, we leased space at

the Stoney Brook elementary school in Hopewell for classroom space. The Mayo Center is an excellent facility. At the time, Stoney Brook Elementary School was an excellent facility. Both satisfy the needs of our Congregation. And as long as the quality of the facilities we use are good, and meet our needs, it should not matter whether we own or lease those facilities.

We need to be practical and smarter with our membership's resources. We need to leave behind the traditional Temple model with its high expenses and overhead that result in deficits and higher membership fees. We must go in this direction because if we do not we could go the way of other congregations who have passed into history. Many of you recall the Ahavath Israel Congregation in Ewing. It was for many years a vibrant, thriving, active conservative congregation. Back in the 1930's, my mother's father (Dr. Harry Berger) served as president of that congregation. And from time to time, when we were moving from Bellevue Avenue, we held our services at the Ahavath sanctuary. Ahavath is an example of a congregation who repeatedly refused to depart from the traditional temple model. The old guard at Ahavath stubbornly held on to that traditional temple model and refused to make changes until it was too late and it was forced to close its doors – its handful of remaining members being absorbed by another congregation. We need to learn from this example. There is still time for Har Sinai to change course and make the necessary reforms to insure that we remain strong and vibrant in the years ahead.

Over the past few months the Board and Executive Committee have streamlined personnel. Rabbi Pollack now serves not only as our Rabbi, but as our Director of Education. And we have reduced our administrative staff. That streamlining now needs to be applied to the overhead on our under used building and property.

Some will argue that if we leave our current building, we will lose our identity as a synagogue. But Har Sinai Temple is not just a building. We proved that when we moved from Bellevue Avenue to Pennington 12 years ago. The core of our Temple, its essence, its heart and soul is our members, our people. And whether we meet here at the concert hall of TCNJ, or at our current home in Pennington, or somewhere else, we are a congregation not based on the space we occupy, but on our people – our members.

We are beginning a transition. And during our transition, we will be facing difficult financial challenges. But they are challenges that can be met and overcome – if you are willing to help, contribute and get involved. It is up to all of us to make sure that our 162 year old Temple continues into the 21st Century – renewed, refreshed and restructured to meet the needs of our membership today and in the years ahead. And therefore this High Holiday Appeal is more important than ever. Please give as generously as you can so that Har Sinai can continue its mission of supporting Reform Judaism, Israel, the Jewish people in our community, our members and their families.

Let us welcome change and embrace change – not fear it. Let us strengthen our resolve to make the changes that are needed. And let us walk together, united as a congregation with renewed energy, vigor and confidence to continue and to build upon the proud traditions and history of our Temple, and to commit ourselves to the proposition that Har Sinai Temple's best days are yet to come.