

Installation 2025 – January 23, 2025

Stacy Rosenthal, RJE

All of you is welcome here.

As I stand here today, I am humbled and deeply honored to step into the role of president of this extraordinary organization. I am overwhelmed with emotion as I look around the room at those who held this role before me, those who contributed to this organization and strengthened it, and on whose shoulders I stand.

As Jewish educators, we are tasked a with the sacred responsibility of nurturing, teaching and inspiring our learners, regardless of our work in a congregation, camp or communal Jewish educational setting. Over the years, the ARJE has evolved into an organization rooted in passion and commitment to not only our rich heritage, but to our hope for future generations of lifelong Jewish learners. We find inspiration and energy when we gather together in spaces such as these.

As Joe and Ellen shared this morning, this week's Torah portion, Va'era, gives us insight into our sacred work. God promises to redeem the Israelites, but Moses has a crisis of faith and struggles with belief that God can deliver this promise, and also with feelings of self-doubt over being

chosen as the leader of the Israelites. In Exodus, Moses, states, “The Israelites wouldn’t listen to me, how will Pharoah listen to me?” Moses felt like an outsider amongst his own people.

How often have we also experience these feelings? Perceived or actual, these feelings lead to barriers to connection and formation of relationships that come from shared experiences and vulnerability. When Moses feels most isolated, God says, “I have established my covenant with them. . . I will take you to be My people and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:4, 7).

God’s promise is about liberation, but also about relationships and belonging.

In 1977, a fifth grade Baptist girl boarded a bus for church camp, knowing no one, but with dreams of a camp experience like the one she had read about in books. At the first lunch, she sat down at a table and was told by the other girls, “you can’t sit here. We’re saving that spot for someone else.” She reports this as her first memory of feeling like an outsider. 47 years later, she still remembers the ache of not being included.

A Jew by Choice mother of a kindergartener asked a Religious School Director if she could volunteer on Sunday mornings to learn more about

Judaism so she could be a better mom of a Jewish child. “We don’t do that here.” The director replied. What the mom heard was, “You are an outsider. You don’t belong here.”

An EMA student in the first cohort of the program feels like an imposter because she never went to Religious School or Jewish summer camp. She stays up late at night translating texts. She is surrounded by people who believe in her and makes friends who become like family. The message she internalizes is, “You will have to work twice as hard, and you to belong here.”

A proud member of the ARJE, whose leadership trajectory is certainly unlike anyone else’s to date, stands before a room of colleagues and friends and becomes the President of an organization she loves. She has worked as a board member and officer to foster a community where everyone feels that they are included, they fit in, they can come as they are, and they belong. She helps lead the efforts to work against the-insider-outsider culture. Here, the various identities we bring to this organization and this gathering become a beautiful tapestry, made up of different

strands of thread. Together, she knows, we are able to create something beautiful.

It is my wholehearted wish that the ARJE cultivate spaces where each member feels they have a place in our ever-changing story as it is being written. But what does belonging look like and what is my vision for actualizing these aspirations? All of us have experienced the exhilaration of feeling part of something. And I think it's safe to say that most of us have felt the sting of not belonging. As Jewish educators, we are partners in this sacred work of creating belonging through our words, our actions and our open hearts that communicate that "We see you. We value you and this organization is one where you belong."

That vision includes times like this - This conference itself is about the spirit of belonging. Everything has been carefully curated to create spaces for all to connect and be inspired. We continue to broaden our reach as we imagine the possibilities.

It means having a budget that allows us to offer a culture of experimentation and provide new types of professional development to meet the needs of all our members. Your donations and membership

contributions have allowed us to offer our new mentorship program, regional days of learning and scholarships. Belonging is the flexibility to create what you need and to bring your ideas to fruition.

The vision includes highlighting the diverse career paths and career trajectories of our members, such as those of the now grown camper, the rejected volunteer, the Jew by Choice EMA student who is offering these words to you now. Each of us brings our multiple identities and life experiences to the work we do as passionate Jewish educators. No one's story is the same and yet, when we strengthen our connections and elevate each other's voices we transform our ARJE into a living, breathing model of Jewish community.

There are a few people I need to thank for being here tonight. My dear friend and rabbi, Rony Keller. Thank you for always encouraging me, never wavering from your proclamation that "one day you'll be President." My EMA bestie, Dana Prottas and of course my family. Greg, you have always supported my ARJE work, and quite frankly, anything that I have ever been passionate about. Alex, Benjamin and Annie, you cheer me on and inspire me every day. Stacy, Joe, Missy, Marisa and Beth. And so many others. I

am incredibly grateful that ALL of you are here tonight and that I can share this moment with you.

I started by stating that, “all of you is welcome here.” You might have wondered if I had asked anyone to proof read my speech or if grammar is challenging for me. Let me explain. While it is true that all of you, collectively are welcome here, I mean something more specific, individualized and deeper. All of you, magnificent, wonderful, uniquely you and all that led up to you being here today, is welcome here.

All of you. Is welcome here.

May you and we continue to go from strength to strength, ensuring that no educator feels alone in their work and that every member can say they are named, noticed and known by the ARJE. We have much work to do together, so come join me. Join me in creating a community of belonging plus.