

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January - June, 2014

Moses hit the rock...

on Wednesday, 25 June 2014.

"The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. . . The Presence of the Lord appeared to [Moses and Aaron], and the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. . . "

We know what happened next. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses hit the rock. As punishment, neither Moses nor Aaron was permitted to enter into the Land of Israel.

This isn't the first time the Israelites complained about their lack of food and water; it happened 40 years before this episode. And what did God tell Moses to do then? God told him to "smite the rock and draw forth water." And Moses did as he was told.

In this chapter, the instructions changed. Moses was told to speak to the rock. But didn't Moses listen and instead hit the rock, as he had done 40 years before. The first time, no water came out. It was God's message to him that hitting won't work this time. At that moment Moses had the chance to reconsider and to perhaps think about what God had actually told him. But Moses didn't. He hit the rock again. Moses, like so many of us, was set in his ways. He had hit the rock 40 years earlier. Why change? It worked this way before. It will work this way again.

But maybe God's message is that it doesn't always work the same way. "Listen, Moses, there might be a different way of doing things. Try something new." As a leader, Moses failed to realize that the current generation needed something different than the previous one. From this God understood that Moses was not the person to lead the Israelites, this 2nd or 3rd generation of free Israelites, as they settled in the Promised Land. They needed a new leader, someone who understood this generation.

Many of us find ourselves stuck in old ways of doing things. There's a positive way to use our past experiences, to help us grow. But when we find ourselves trapped in the past, we stymie our potential and hold ourselves back. The ability to change with the times is an important gift we give ourselves – the ability to learn from our past and grow toward our future – that's the lesson from this parasha. Respond to the yearning within us to grow and expand our insights, our interests, our goals.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Our hearts are with kidnapped students...

on Wednesday, 18 June 2014.

This week, our hearts and attention are in Israel, where three Israeli yeshiva students were kidnapped on June 12, while hitchhiking in the West Bank. No group has taken responsibility for the kidnapping and no demands have been made. The entire country has been shaken by this, and Jews around the world are praying for their safe return. On Sunday, police estimate that 30,000 people came to the Western Wall in Jerusalem to pray for the teens' safe return, but as of this writing their whereabouts remain unknown.

We join our brothers and sisters around the world, as we pray for the safe return of Eyal Yifrah, 19; Gil-Ad Shaer, 16; and Naftali Frenkel, 16 and an American citizen.

We are reminded of the kidnapped Nigerian girls two months ago, who have not yet been rescued. Kidnapping of anyone, especially children, is deplorable at any time, there is no good reason!

People who wish to show their support can sign the JFNA's letter at: <http://bringbackourboys.net/>. At services this Friday evening, we will join with the Jewish community of Silicon Valley, and all around the world, in prayers for the safe return of these three Israeli teenagers.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Celebrating B'not Mitzvah

on Monday, 09 June 2014.

This Shabbat, Congregation Emeth's members and guests will have the privilege of witnessing the *bat mitzvah* of five adult women: Susan Braun, MariaElena Jarson, Marby Lee, Susan Meyers and Aileen Teren-Foster. These women have been studying with me for the past two years, meeting every week, in preparation for this extraordinary day. (*Bar mitzvah* means "son of the commandment", *bat mitzvah* means "daughter of the commandment". *B'nei* means sons or children, male and female; *b'not* means daughters, female only. *Mitzvah* means commandment; *mitzvot* is the plural form, commandments.)

Usually a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* occurs when a child reaches the age of 13. This time was selected because of a section of *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Ancestors, or Sages, a section of Talmud):

At five years old a person should study the Scriptures, at ten years for the Mishnah, at thirteen for the commandments, at 15 for the Talmud, at 18 for the bridechamber, at 20 for one's life pursuit, at 30 for authority, at 40 for discernment, at 50 for counsel, at 60 to be an elder, at 70 for gray hairs, at 80 for special strength, at 90 for decrepitude, and at a 100 as one who has already died and has ceased from the affairs of this world. (Pirke Avot, Chapter 5)

In Jewish tradition, any person reaching the age of 13 is a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, meaning they are now responsible for observing the *mitzvot*, or commandments.

While the beginnings of the modern *bar mitzvah* ceremony appeared as early as the sixth century C.E., it was not until the Middle Ages that a fully developed ritual emerged. By the 13th or 14th century, the custom of calling a boy up to the Torah was established as the way of recognizing entry into manhood. (ReformJudaism.org) In 1921, the first known *bat mitzvah* celebration took place.

Our five *b'not mitzvah* celebrants did not prepare for this day because they suddenly have reached the age of *mitzvot*. One doesn't need a ceremony, only a 13th birthday. So why did they do it? Some will share their journey to this decision when they speak on Shabbat morning.

I celebrated my *bat mitzvah* at the age of 35, the first adult woman in my Conservative synagogue. A radical idea at the time, the Rabbi and I weren't sure how it would be received so we kept it a secret. To ensure its secrecy, it took place on the second day of Passover! I only invited my family and a few close friends. Afterwards, the secret was out of course, so I was asked to write about it for the synagogue bulletin. I don't have a copy, but I remember what I said: for me, the *bat mitzvah* ceremony represented a completion, not in the sense of being finished but rather being whole, complete. I was *shalem*, complete in my Judaism, and felt fully satisfied, if you can imagine the metaphor.

I am so proud of these women and what they learned and accomplished. Are they finished as learners? Not by a long shot. But I think all would agree that they feel *shalem*. I hope you will be present to witness their accomplishments and to share in their joy.

Torah is a guide to ethical and moral living

on Wednesday, 04 June 2014.

Near the beginning of our daily and Shabbat morning services we read this prayer: *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot (commandments), commanding us to engage with words of Torah.* One might expect the wording to be "...commanding us to study words of Torah." Or even thanking or praising God for giving us the Torah.

But the prayer clearly states *la-asoke b'divrei Torah*, to engage in the words of Torah. Torah is not meant only to be read or studied. Engaging in the words tells us that we are to participate in the words, to be involved in the words; the words should lead us to action. Torah is a historical and legal document to be sure, but more than that, it is a guide to ethical and moral living. Reading or studying how to behave must lead to action. Torah teaches us to treat one another as we wish to be treated – now go and do it.

This week we celebrate the festival of Shavuot. Part of the holiday is celebrating the gift of Torah. As the prayer book teaches us, "Torah is our life and lengthens our days." But only if we engage in its words. It is not a gift to be hidden in the closet; it is a gift that leads to noble and righteous living.

Chag Sameach – Happy Shavuot holiday! Make you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

May God bless you and guard you

on Monday, 26 May 2014.

When I was a child, there was one tradition that was urgently important to me. On the evening of Kol Nidre, just before the beginning of Yom Kippur, my father would gather each of his children, put his hands on our heads one by one, and say the priestly benediction:

May God bless you and guard you;
May God show you favor and be gracious to you;
May God show you kindness and grant you peace.

Whenever my father did this, I felt not only blessed but especially loved. His hands were gently placed, his voice barely above a whisper. It is a tradition I followed with my own children. If we can't be physically in the same place, we speak on the telephone on the day of Kol Nidre; I ask them to close their eyes and imagine my hands on their heads, and then I bless them as my father blessed me. Even as adults, I offer this blessing and while doing so, I feel my father's hands on my own head once more.

This blessing links our generations for 3000 years. In this week's Torah portion (Numbers 6:22-26), the first High Priest Aaron, first spoke these words. From the language we understand that the priest – or our parents – are not blessing us but rather asking God to bless us.

I don't know why my father only said these words on Erev Yom Kippur. In traditional homes, which ours certainly was, the blessing is recited every Friday night, right after candlelighting. It is not just a blessing to bestow on our children. These beautiful words can be offered to all of our loved ones, asking the Holy One of blessings to find favor in them and grant them peace. If not all of the words of this blessing, a simple, "God bless you!" will do just fine.

May you have a week of many blessings and a Shabbat of peace. And God bless you.

No one is just a number...

on Wednesday, 21 May 2014.

We have now begun the 4th Book of Torah, called Numbers in English and Bamidbar in Hebrew. Like all Books of Torah, the first chapter carries the same name as the Book, in this case Bamidbar, meaning "in the wilderness." It is called Numbers because the chapter begins with a census of the Israelites.

This census, commanded by God, is beautifully constructed in the Hebrew. In English, the translation is "take a census..." but the literal translation of the Hebrew, suh'oo, is "lift" or "raise." I learned from my teacher, Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, that each Israelite's head was lifted so that Moses could look each in the eye as each was counted. Moses saw each Israelite's face. No one was just a number, merely a statistic.

The purpose of the census was to take an accounting in preparation for the Israelites to do battle, as they wandered through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. But the language – lift the head – assured them that they mattered, that each was an individual.

As Congregation Emeth grows, we welcome and appreciate each membership unit, for what they contribute to the total. At the same time, we recognize each person's individual attributes which are important to creating and sustaining our holy community. Each person brings a different perspective, vitality, interest, and way of contributing that make our congregation such a vibrant mosaic of Jewish living. Each is valued and all are welcome.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

This week, we finish reading the Book of Leviticus

on Monday, 12 May 2014.

This week, we finish reading the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Leviticus could be seen as a "training manual" for the Israelite priests. Though the Book included many laws and instructions to the Israelites as a whole, the general tone is toward the Levites and the Kohanim, the priests.

The priests of Israel were unique to the ancient world. The responsibilities of the priests of Israel were radically different from the priests in pagan religions. Up until this point in human history, the priests of other cults were considered magicians, with special powers. They foretold the future, reading signs in acts of nature, interpreting omens, and even performing divination by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals. Our priests did not tell the future, did not heal, and did not intervene with God. Rather, our priests were instruments of God. They did not heal; they prayed to God for healing. They weren't able to purify one who had been defiled; rather they had instructions on how to recognize and judge when the impure one had become pure. While pagan priests claimed to speak with the dead, "The Israelite priest deals only with the living, never with the dead." (Rabbi Reuven Hammer)

And most notably the priests did not bestow blessings. Just as we do today, we ask for God's blessings. The words of the priestly benediction are perfect examples: May God bless you and keep you; may God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may God lift God's face unto you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26) In each case, the priest (or Rabbi, or parent!) calls upon God to bless. We have no intermediaries, no one with supernatural powers.

In Rabbi Hammer's words, "The Torah created a revolutionary new type of religious authority, one who had no magical powers and who was not in possession of secrets or esoteric knowledge. The priest was rather a person who related to the masses and who imparted knowledge to them...this represented a major step forward in the development of rational and humanistic religion and paved the way for the democratization of religious leadership." (The Torah Revolution)

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...

on Wednesday, 07 May 2014.

The month of May has begun! I see on the roads heading to the beach that vacation is already on many minds! We are ready to wind down, to relax and to refresh! Ask any teacher and they will tell you the children are already zoning out, counting down the days until vacation. Perhaps you are the same at your own place of work.

We humans need a break! We take it when we can get it! In the Jewish cycle of life, a day of rest is built in every seven days. For those of us who observe Shabbat as a day of rest, to be refreshed both spiritually and physically, we know its importance. (I used to have a bumper sticker that I put on my calendar notebook: "Hang in there – Shabbat is coming!" It gave me strength throughout the week!)

This week's Torah reading tells us that humans aren't the only ones needing a rest. The land needs to rest as well:

The land shall be sanctified through the shemittah, the Sabbatical year, of agricultural rest. (Leviticus 25:1-7)

This idea, just like the idea of a day of rest, is unique in the ancient world. However, we learn from Ecclesiastes, that "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven..." Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote, "Thousands of years of Jewish experience about these matters is embodied in the wisdom of Shabbat and the sabbatical year - a time to work and a time to rest, a time to build and a time to heal - so our work does not destroy us." (*Moment*, June 1992)

The commandment for the sabbatical year only applies to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. But we take to heart the message of rest as well as the reminder that the land does not belong to us, no matter what our deed of sale says; ultimately it belongs to the Holy One, the Source of all blessings.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

"These are God's appointed holy days that you shall designate as holy occasions..."

on Tuesday, 29 April 2014.

Our daughter gives me a special Chanukah gift every year. It is a new calendar and every month has wonderful happy photos taken during the past year, mostly of our grandchildren. As I turn the page each month, I see the highlights of the month noted on the proper days – birthdays, anniversaries, special occasions. These calendars become scrapbooks when the year is over, filled with visual reminders of happy memories. But they begin as a promise of a year of celebration as we look ahead.

This week's parasha (Torah reading) is like our annual calendars. It is aptly named Emor, which means "speak." I didn't count the number of times we read in this chapter "God spoke to Moses, saying...", but it is repeated very often throughout the reading.

In the middle of the parasha, we read, Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: these are God's appointed holy days that you shall designate as holy occasions..." (Chapter 23:1) God tells Moses to tell the Israelites about the festivals of the Jewish calendar, beginning with Shabbat, then Passover, Shavuot, a "remembrance of the shofar blowing" (Rosh Hashanah), Sukkot, and finally at the end of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret. A year of celebrations! Missing of course are those holidays that are historically based after the conclusion of the Torah, including Chanukah, Purim, and Tisha B'Av.

After the establishment of State of Israel, four other days were added to the holiday calendar: Yom HaShoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day; Yom Ha-Zikaron, a memorial day for those who died in defense of Israel; Yom Ha-

Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day; and Yom Yerushalayim, the day celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967.

These modern holidays, while not ordained by the Holy One in Torah, resonate with us. Many of us lived during the time the holiday was created. For that reason, they have a special relevance that we relate to differently than Sukkot or Passover. They are the holidays of our generation, or our parents' generation, demonstrating the relevancy of Judaism to our own time. Chag Sameach as Congregation Emeth celebrates Yom Ha-Atzmaut, the 66th birthday of the State of Israel, this Friday night!

Monday night we begin the Festival of Freedom

on Monday, 14 April 2014.

Dear Friends,

Monday night we begin the Festival of Freedom and have a week of celebration! Passover is a holiday that looks backward at historical events and the liberation of our ancestors; and forward at the possibilities of our own lives if we truly abandon whatever imprisons us in our own day – our addictions, our pursuit of the material at the expense of the spiritual, our pride, our ambitions.

It has become the custom in many households to place an orange on the Seder plate. My colleague, Rabbi Cheryl Weiner, wrote, "Symbolically, the orange represents the Jewish people as a community, whole but made up of many sections...When peeled, the orange is made up of many sections, each of them representing aspects of the Jewish people. In addition, the seeds inside represent the multiple seeds that can give birth to new ways of expressing our Judaism. In its original form, Susannah Heschel told the story of how gay and lesbian people should be included in our traditions. Later, this concept was expanded to include all marginalized people, those who are denied access. Their juiciness and seeds contribute to nourishing each new generation with the richness of our traditions."

At Congregation Emeth, we come from many different backgrounds. We hold different memories and approaches to this and every holiday. As our name Emeth implies we represent many truths, and all of them are welcomed here. May you experience and appreciate the differences represented by each of us in our precious congregation. (Emet literally means "truth" in Hebrew)

May you experience the joy of this holiday, truly appreciating the simple yet powerful words of the Haggadah: Once we were slaves and now we are free! Chag Pesach Sameach – Happy Passover! I look forward to sharing it with you.

May you have a joyous, liberating week of Passover!

“May the Fours Be With You”

on Wednesday, 09 April 2014.

Rabbi Yocheved Mintz shared with me a Passover skit that she had written with her son, titled, "May the Fours Be With You." The title represents the core number of Passover, our Festival of Freedom.

The number four is repeated throughout the Seder – four times! We have four questions (Ma Nishtana), four cups of wine, four children (representing four types of people and how each should be taught the story of our freedom), and God's four promises, which are the basis for our repetition of the number four ("I will rescue you, I will bring you out, I will redeem you, and I will take you to be My people").

Just as we ask four questions at our Seder, the Rabbis of the Talmud taught us that God has four questions for us. The Rabbis speculated that when we die and are brought before the Heavenly Court, God will ask us four questions, representing what is most important to the Holy One.

1. Did you conduct your business affairs honestly? This question probably surprises you more than the three that follows. The question tells us right away that life's priority should be about how we treat others, exemplified by being honest in our dealings. God is less impressed with ritual observance than with behavior!
2. Did you set aside time to study Torah? The prayer for studying Torah thanks God "who gave us the mitzvah (commandment) to engage in words of Torah." Engaging in Torah means that we not only study but then we apply the lessons we learn there: how to lead an ethical and moral life. By studying Torah we learn how to properly respond to the moral challenges we encounter.
3. Did you devote yourself to family? In our quest to enrich ourselves, even if it is for the benefit and support of our family, we often neglect them. One way we devote ourselves to our family is by transmitting to the next generation (which includes not only our children and grandchildren, but also all children we encounter) the very values we learned because we set aside time to study Torah!
4. Did you have hope in redemption? Redemption is a core Jewish value. It returns us to our exodus from Egyptian slavery, where God fulfilled the promise to redeem us. The response to our own redemption is our obligation to tikkun olam, repairing the world. We are obligated to make this world a better one, and in doing so we bring redemption for ourselves and all humanity.

As we contemplate the Four Questions at our Passover Seder, may we also take to heart God's Four Questions for us. Let us use our freedom to improve the world through study, the performance of deeds of loving kindness, and our devotion to our intimate family and our communal family as well.

Chag Pesach Sameach – may you have a weeklong joyful Passover celebration!

“Something like a plague seems to be in the house.”

on Wednesday, 02 April 2014.

When you enter the land of Canaan, which I give you as a possession, and I inflict the plague of leprosy on a house in the land you possess, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, "Something like a plague seems to be in the house." (Leviticus 14:34-35)

This Torah chapter begins with teaching the priest how to purify a person who has recovered from the disease called tzora'at, or leprosy. When the priest sees the disease is gone, the person must go through an 8-day period of purification in order to be made clean again.

Halfway through the chapter, we read that even a house could be stricken with the disease and needs to be made clean again! But the Talmud (writings of the rabbis to expound on laws and lessons from Torah) teaches, "There never was a house with plague. It never happened and it never will." (Talmud, Sanhedrin 71B) So what's going on here?

Hopefully, most of us live in homes that are filled with love. In a sense, one could say that a home is a reflection of the people who live in it and almost has a life of its own. When there is an atmosphere of shalom bayit (peace in the home) and when there are expressions of caring for one another, the spirit and moral climate in the house is nurturing and loving.

But every household experiences, from time to time, jealousy, rivalries, anger, and disappointment. In those times, we could say that the home has tzora-at, disease, and needs cleansing.

I don't believe it is a coincidence that this chapter is read just a few days before the Passover holidays. We clean our homes in preparation for the holiday. Last week, I encouraged you to search for your personal chametz as a metaphor. This week, look for the chametz in the interpersonal relationships in your home (which extends to your work place, neighbors, friends); what relationships need cleansing, need repairing? Now set to work to do so.

May this season of spring cleaning bring you and those you love interpersonal purification and shalom bayit. May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Shabbat HaChodesh tells us it's time to purchase special foods for the week of Passover

on Wednesday, 26 March 2014.

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat HaChodesh, the "Shabbat of the Month", the Shabbat just before the new Hebrew month, Nisan. Shabbat HaChodesh tells us it's time to purchase special foods for the week of Passover, and to begin the process of ridding our homes of chametz, unleavened bread, and foods that we are not permitted to eat during Pesach.

The beginning of Nisan has much in common with Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the "head of the year", what we commonly call the Jewish New Year. Nisan is the beginning of the calendar year, the first month of the Jewish year. Each is observed in its own special way.

On Rosh Hashanah, we take a spiritual accounting of our souls and look for ways to change our behavior; we repent for our sins and misdeeds. On the first of Nisan, as we begin the process of preparing for Pesach (Passover), we not only clean our houses of chametz; we also rid ourselves of chametz, a metaphor for a personal ethical and moral cleansing.

During the next two weeks, as you think about Passover foods and seders, take this opportunity to sweep away the "chametz" in your relationships. Empty your cupboards of behaviors that are hurtful. May you celebrate your own

liberation from destructive behavior and may your preparation for Passover be spiritually rewarding. The work begins now.

(This message is an edited and revised version of a message sent in 2008.)

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

This week's Torah reading includes a discomfoting episode, the deaths of Aaron's sons

on Tuesday, 18 March 2014.

Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before God, which had not been commanded of them. And there went out a fire from God, and devoured them, and they died before God. (Leviticus 10:1-2)

This week's Torah reading includes a discomfoting episode, the deaths of Aaron's sons. The Torah never says exactly what they did that was so terrible that God would strike them dead. The episode begins with the installation ceremony of Aaron and his sons as kohanim, priests. Soon thereafter, Nadav and Avihu make an improper incense offering resulting in their death.

Over the centuries commentators have speculated, "What was the sin they committed that was so terrible?" Was it because they went into the inner room of the Sanctuary which only the High Priest was permitted to enter? Because they offered a sacrifice that God had not commanded? Was it because they did not work together as partners, but each did "his own thing"? Had they had too much wine; were they intoxicated?

One of the challenges and great pleasures of studying Torah is finding within it lessons for today's living, so I must ask: what is the lesson to be derived from this strange and terrible episode?

What we do know is that Nadiv and Avihu made up their own rules about serving God and did this without consulting with their leader and teacher, Moses. Not only were they arrogantly changing the rules without consulting Moses, they were also publicly shaming him. Shaming a person in public is a very serious offense in Judaism, so much so that it is considered to be the equivalent of murder! The rabbis of the Talmud taught: "Whoever shames another in public is like one who sheds blood." (Bava Metzia 58b). This is the rabbis' way of teaching that shaming another is one of the most serious sins one can commit.

Often Torah's stories offer exaggerated punishments for a person or people's sins, making the punishment so severe that one would not sin! If the great sin of Nadav and Avihu was being so arrogant that they would bring shame to Moses, as some commentators suggest, then their terrible punishment is a warning to all of us.

Purim! What a wonderful holiday!

on Tuesday, 11 March 2014.

On Purim we are told to celebrate by giving gifts and giving charity. We are told to make Purim a day of feasting and happiness! On Purim – and throughout the Hebrew month of Adar (and in this leap year we get two months of Adar!) – we are commanded to be happy! We read the story of Esther, eat hamantashen (triangles of filled cookies), twirl our noisemakers, and have a great time!

There's another way of "making merry" on Purim! We put on a Purimshpiel. Shpiel is the Yiddish word for a play, so a Purimshpiel is a play about Purim. The Purimshpiel was usually about the Purim story or the Purim characters but the actors did their best to make the audience laugh – because afterall we are supposed to be happy, right?

The Purimshpiel became popular around the middle of the 16th century when it became the custom for Jewish children to dress up in costume and go house to house, singing jingles and asking for Purim gifts or refreshments. They made up poems about the Purim story or made fun of prayers or Bible stories. Sometimes they imitated the rabbi (gasp!) or people from the synagogue.

Purim teaches us that good will win over evil, just like it did for Esther and the Jews of Persia. In the meantime, on Purim we laugh at ourselves and have fun.

This year, Congregation Emeth's Purimshpiel will be performed by the EDK players, the teens in our youth program who are putting together the carnival, running the games, and working hard to provide a fun evening for all of us. All proceeds from the Purim carnival will benefit youth programs, so the camaraderie can continue after Purim is over! I hope you'll be there and really hope you'll be in costume!

(Purim takes place Saturday night and Sunday; Congregation Emeth's Purim celebration precedes an abbreviated Shabbat Service Friday evening. See announcements for complete details!)

May this be a week of blessings, happiness, and laughter, and a Shabbat of peace,

The English translation of the first sentence of Vayikra is “And God called to Moses and spoke to him.”

on Wednesday, 05 March 2014.

The very first word of Vayikra, the third book of Torah (commonly called Leviticus), demands our attention. If you are reading the words in English, you wouldn't give it a second glance – the English translation of the first sentence of Vayikra is "And God called to Moses and spoke to him."

In Hebrew, in Torah, the word is written with the last letter, the Hebrew letter aleph, made smaller than the rest of the word. (Written with English letters instead of Hebrew, the word would look like this: VAYIKRa. So of course our rabbinic sages had to assign meaning to this anomaly.

In the previous chapter, Moses and the Israelites completed the work of building the Mishkan (portable sanctuary). Moses thought perhaps his job as leader was also completed. But in the next sentence God tells Moses, no, your job is not over. Now it's time to teach the Israelites about their spiritual life.

So Moses is standing outside the Tent of Meeting when God "calls" to him, vayikra. This is not the first time God called Moses. In Exodus 3:4, at the Burning Bush, God calls Moses to be a leader, but that "vayikra" is written with all letters the same size. In this chapter, God is calling Moses to give instructions to the Israelites for making sacrifices. The Sages teach us that Moses was so humble about this role, accepting the sacrifices and atonements of others, that he needed the final letter in vayikra to be small, to demonstrate his humility.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses was called to be a leader, requiring courage and strength, not humility. In his role as a priest and counsellor, Moses is required to be humble. Rabbi S. Weiss taught, "The lesson here, of course, is obvious. When a person is humble, modest, unassuming; when he tries to limit his stature rather than promote it...the end result is that he becomes even greater!" So it was for Moses, modeling a lesson for all of us.

May this be a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

In this chapter, the building of the Tabernacle in the desert is completed.

on Tuesday, 25 February 2014.

The chapter begins with Moses' accounting (the meaning of "pekudei") of what was collected and what was used in building the Mishkan, the Tabernacle.

One thing has been true about me all of my life, ever since Miss Turner tried to teach me how to add in first grade: my eyes glaze over when I hear numbers. Give me a word and I'm intrigued. Give me a number and I think of other things. So my first inclination in this Rabbi's Message would be to write about something other than the treasurer's report Moses is now going to give to the Israelites.

A modern midrash (story to explain a Torah text) is that when the Israelites began building, Moses overheard them speculating that Moses would become wealthy from the project. The leader was hurt that they could imagine him using their donations for his personal gain. From the beginning of the construction, Moses intended to keep his own careful records of each donation, the giver's name, how the gift was used, and a total accounting of all donations and expenditures. Instead, to be sure that he was not accused of an impropriety, he appointed leading members of the Levite tribe to keep the records of exactly what was done with the community monies, from start to finish. Moses wanted to be sure no one could accuse him of any wrongdoing.

Any organization holding community funds must use this Torah model. At Emeth, as at most religious and non-profit institutions, all checks are signed by at least two signatures. Every month the treasurer gives a full accounting to the board. And any member of the congregation can see the budget, with full transparency.

This is the lesson of Pekudei – "leaders of a community must be above suspicion of personal aggrandizement." The family that prepared the incense for the Temple services would never let their relatives wear perfume, lest some people suspect them of using Temple incense for their personal benefit. The official who supervised the shekel (money) offering would wear a special garment with no pockets and no long sleeves when he did so, so that no one could suspect him of pocketing public funds (Song. R. 3:7, quoted in Etz Hayim).

Pay attention to the treasurer's report.

May this be a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

Moses assembles the Israelites and announces that they've got a job to do...

on Tuesday, 18 February 2014.

In this week's Torah portion, Moses assembles the Israelites and announces that they've got a job to do - building the sanctuary in the desert - and everyone is needed to participate. The text actually says:

This is what God has commanded: Take from among you gifts to God; everyone whose heart so moves them shall bring gifts for God: gold, silver, and copper... And let all among you who are skilled come and make all that God has commanded... And everyone who excelled in ability and all whose spirit moved them came, bringing to God, their offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments... Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that God, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to God.

This Torah portion teaches an important lesson – value can be found in not only the gold and silver but also in the copper or brass. In every community there are individuals who can donate more and others who are able to give less. Their open heart determines their level of tzedakah, donation of money. One of the cherished characteristics of our sacred Emeth congregation is that we are an open-hearted community where the norm is to ask "What can I do?" Just as Torah doesn't set an amount for a heart-felt offering, we at Emeth recognize that some of us can give more and some of us struggle to support our families. All are appreciated in our holy community.

The same can be true of volunteer time. Some people can take the lead, those "who excelled in ability," but there is still a need for others to contribute their efforts. In our Torah portion, Bezazel is described as a person whom God endowed with exceptional skill, ability, and knowledge of every kind of craft. Therefore, he is designated as the lead architect, the master craftsman, in building the Mishkan, the sanctuary. But he doesn't work alone; he supervises others. There is a role for everyone, "who spirit is moved".

My beloved Rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Moshe Cahana (may his memory be a blessing) taught: "It is not only what we say that matters, it is also how we say it. It is not only what we give that counts, but also how we give it."

May this be a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

You must keep My Sabbaths...

on Tuesday, 11 February 2014.

And God spoke to Moses: Speak to the Israelite people and say: nevertheless you must keep My Sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages...Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest..." (Ki Tissa, Exodus 31:12-15)

The Torah often refers to the obligation to observe the Shabbat, frequently partnering the commandment with a reminder to perform six days of work first. In order to understand what it means to observe Shabbat, we need to look at the other six days of the week, Sunday through Friday.

The work we do on those days are, in one fashion or another, related to activities which are called in the Torah melachot, labors, referring to the 39 kinds of labors or their derivatives which were involved in the building of the mishkan, the tabernacle or sanctuary that our ancestors were instructed to build in the desert. The melachot included planting seeds, preparing foods by fire, washing wool to remove dirt, sewing, igniting or extinguishing fire, erecting or demolishing a building, and moving an object from one domain to another.

Even though we seldom if ever consider them "holy", much of our weekday activities are very holy, because they are related to the work our ancestors were instructed to do to build God's dwelling place. During the week we constructively and creatively engage in those actions. Thinking of our weekday as filled with sacred acts has the potential to transform Sunday through Friday from days of toil to days of holy ventures.

So then, if that is the weekday, what is Shabbat? Many people think of Shabbat as the day of prohibitions – the day with a long list of things we may not do. But Shabbat frees us of those workday responsibilities, giving us the opportunity to refresh ourselves, to reflect on our tasks, and to consecrate ourselves to begin anew. Shabbat represents an end-point. The week is a period of working, building, creating; Shabbat is the cessation of that building. It is not simply rest, inactivity. It is the celebration of the work which has been completed - the idea is that Shabbat occurs only after, because of, the work.

Whatever one's level of Jewish observance, these freedoms are available to each of us. Consider Shabbat a day of freedom rather than a day of prohibitions.

May your week of holy activities be fruitful and may you be rewarded with a Shabbat of peace.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidim, told this story:

on Wednesday, 05 February 2014.

Once there was a lonely king who longed for his people to come close to him. But the people were too busy with their own lives and their work.

One day, the king had an idea. This king was an illusionist, who could make people see things that weren't there. So he built an illusory castle and then invited all the people to come and find the king, who would be hidden in the castle. Whoever came to see the king in the castle would receive a large sum of money and be given a high rank in the king's service.

The people liked the challenge and hurried to participate. But when they arrived they found the walls too high, the windows barred, and the gate locked. There was no way in! So one by one, the people gave up and went home.

One of the people who came was the king's own son. He approached the wall and found no way in. He cried to his father, "Father, have pity on me! Don't keep me away from you!" His father, the king, heard his son's cries.

Instantly he removed the walls and the father, the king, was right in front of the son, sitting on his majestic throne. Then the son realized that the obstacles were just an illusion and his father had been with him all the time.

The Ba'al Shem Tov went on to teach that, just like in the parable, there are no barriers between us and God.

Last week, this week, and in the next several weeks to come, we read of the Israelites following God's commands to build a Mishkan, a sanctuary in the desert. This week, we will read about the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Flame, and the instructions for the priests. All of this is to establish a place to experience God's presence in the midst of the camp.

In truth, God is always present. The tabernacle, the Eternal Flame, and all of the rules associated with them, were created as a comfort to the people who were looking for a physical representation of God. But there are no walls separating us from the Holy One. Like the people in the Ba'al Shem Tov's story, we often think it is too hard to climb the metaphoric walls to find God. We give up.

The Kotzker Rebbe* asked, "Where is God to be found?" Answering his own question, he explained that "God is found wherever we let God in." (*Menachem Mendel, known as the Kotzker Rebbe, 1787-1859, was a Hasidic rabbi from Poland.)

May this be a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

This week's Torah portion is called Terumah, which means both gift and elevate.

on Monday, 27 January 2014.

We are about halfway in the second Book of Torah, *Shemot* (Exodus) and you will notice the narrative changes now. The remaining chapters in Exodus are about the building of the *Mishkan*, the portable shrine which will hold the Ark and Commandments (with the notable exception of the Golden Calf incident).

This week's Torah portion is called *Terumah*, which means both gift and elevate. The chapter begins with God instructing Moses, "Tell the Israelite people to bring me *terumah* (gifts or donations)" which will be used to build the *Mishkan*, tabernacle.

The purpose of the Mishkan is to offer a dwelling place for the Holy One, as a comfort to the people, who were used to idols and temples. As the Israelite nation matures, we come to understand that God cannot be found in a building. My teacher, Rabbi Mordecai Finley, taught that on the surface level it appears that the *Mishkan* is being built from donated materials. But there is a deeper level, where the *Mishkan* refers to the dwelling place we shape for the Divine within us, by raising up – or elevating – aspects of our own being.

The *Mishkan* – like our own temple – becomes a holy place because of the hearts and souls of the people who occupy it. You sanctify Congregation Emeth; you make it holy – through your prayers, your devotion, your care for the well being of the property and the well being of the people. Through your *terumah* – your gifts of time and labor and money – this holy community is elevated, creating a sacred space.

This week our Torah reading is Mishpatim, which means laws or rules.

on Wednesday, 22 January 2014.

If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them. (Shemot/Exodus 22:24)

This week our Torah reading is Mishpatim, which means laws or rules. The chapter teaches us how to live in a just and caring society, a text book for judges and lawyers in civil and criminal codes. One of the mitzvot, commandments, of Mishpatim, is to lend money to the poor without charging interest.

The law is listed here, and again, in a different way, in Vakiyra (Leviticus) 25:25:

If your kinsman is in straits and has to sell part of his holding, his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his kinsman has sold...(The paragraph continues with instructions to rescue the poor person.)

Both of these commandments teach us the importance of helping people help themselves, the highest form of tzedakah (charity, righteousness), as taught by Maimonides, one of our most influential Torah scholars and sages.

Sometimes we read commandments in Torah and wonder how they are applicable to our modern lives. Sometimes it is obvious; sometimes more obscure. This one is obvious!

The implementation of this commandment has been part of American Jewish life for more of than 100 years, in the form of the Hebrew Free Loan Association (HFLA). HFLA provides loans to those in need, including education, first time home buyers, adoption, debt consolidation, unemployment and small business. The loans are 100% interest and fee free. They are not grants, and are expected to be repaid; the repayment rate is over 99.5%, enabling HFLA to make new loans. Throughout their history, they have assisted people in helping themselves.

This Shabbat is Hebrew Free Loan Shabbat. I encourage any of you who may benefit from this service to go to <https://www.hflasf.org/>. If you want or need my guidance and/or assistance, please do not hesitate to call me in confidence.

To this day, Moses is called Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher, our greatest teacher.

on Tuesday, 14 January 2014.

When Yitro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel God's people, and that Adonai had brought Israel out of Egypt, then Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back, and her two sons; and the name of one was Gershom...and the name of the

other was Eliezer...And Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses into the wilderness, where he encamped at the mount of God... (Exodus 18:14, abbreviated)

In this parasha (chapter) the Israelites will stand at the foot of Mt Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments. But it begins with a brief insight into the private life of Moses. His wife and sons had been staying with his father-in-law while Moses was in Egypt, and now they are coming to join him with the Israelites. We will hear about Moses' wife mentioned only once more in Torah, in a sentence in Numbers 12:1, and not by name. But this paragraph is the last mention of Moses' sons in the Torah!

Centuries later, the Rabbis of the Talmud wrote that Moses asked God to appoint one of Moses' sons to succeed him as leader of the Israelites, but God did not feel either to be worthy and selected Joshua instead. Moses' brother, Aaron, was appointed as High Priest and Aaron's sons did succeed their father, but this was not the case with Moses. (Rabbinic understanding is that Moses' direct descendants will serve in the Temple as Levites.) In a later chapter in Torah, Numbers 3:1, we will read, "These are the descendants of Moses and Aaron..." but only Aaron's sons will be listed.

However, Moses' influence was felt by his nephews, as were all of the children from that generation to this one. We can connect this message to the Ten Commandments, read this week, specifically the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother..." The Midrash (stories by the Rabbis to help us understand deeper messages of Torah) teaches us that the relationship of a teacher to his/her pupils is just as important as that between a parent and child. Though Moses' sons did not succeed him in leadership, he was succeeded by his students, the generation that survived the wilderness and entered the land, led by his most noteworthy student, Joshua.

To this day, Moses is called Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher, our greatest teacher.

This Shabbat is called Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song

on Tuesday, 07 January 2014.

This Shabbat is called Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song. The Torah reading includes the Song of Moses (Az Yashir) and the Song of Miriam (Shiru L'Adonai), followed by the Haftarah (readings from the Prophets), the song of the prophet Deborah. All three of these songs praise the Holy One for rescuing our ancestors.

Moses' and Miriam's songs occur after the miracle of the Red Sea splitting, allowing us to pass across in safety. Once on the other side, after Pharaoh's army drowned in the raging, closing waters, the Israelites sang and danced in praise of God, after witnessing the great wonders leading to their freedom.

This miraculous event is so important in our national history that we remember it at every service, whether weekly, Shabbat, or Holy Day. In the service, it comes just before the Amidah (T'fila), the central prayer service. As Chumash Etz Hayim teaches, the message of its placement is that "prayers may well be answered (in our own time), as they were for our ancestors at the shores of the sea."

These songs, including the poetry of the prophet Deborah, emphasize both the power and the closeness of God. God is portrayed as a Warrior, fighting off our enemies. For those feeling weak, sick, or vulnerable, the image of the Holy One as "my strength and might" brings comfort.

The core chant (in my opinion) of Moses' song is the line, "Alohei avi v'ah-ro-m'mehn-hu", "God is my Parent, whom I will exalt." When we chant this line, we aren't speaking only of the past. Every generation must discover God's presence in our own lives, and notice the daily miracles God still works in our lives.

This week we begin the Book of Exodus

on Tuesday, 17 December 2013.

This week we begin the Book of Exodus. The first chapter, Shemot (Names), includes the oppression of the Israelites, the birth of Moses and his rescue, his emergence as a protector of the Israelites, his escape to the land of Midian, his first encounter with God, and his meeting with Pharaoh, demanding "Let my people go!"

In the middle of the chapter (Exodus 4:24-26), we read a short, strange story. As Moses is heading to his first meeting with Pharaoh, we read, "At a night encampment on the way, God encountered him and sought to kill him..." What? Kill whom? What's this about? It appears that our newly appointed leader, Moses, failed to circumcise his first newborn son, Gershom. Who was attacked, the baby or Moses? The narrative doesn't identify the victim, stating only "he".

But in response, Moses' wife Zipporah immediately responds by to the attack by taking a flint and circumcising the baby. Here we understand that the infant, child of the new leader of the Israelites, had not been circumcised. (The commandment of circumcision occurred during the time of Abraham.) Zipporah understood the threat to her son and took it upon herself to circumcise Gershom. Doing so, she protects her son and the crisis passed.

Zipporah is the daughter of a Midianite priest and was not an Israelite, but she performed the mitzvah, commandment, that Moses had failed to do. Zipporah, whom today we would identify as a non-Jew, took upon herself the responsibility of ensuring that the covenant is passed on to her child.

Zipporah represents many people in our own Emeth community, individuals who support our Temple, trust us with teaching their children in our religious school, and like Zipporah, pass on the traditions of their spouses' ancestors to these same children. As we near the season of Christmas, I want to thank all of our interfaith families and non-Jewish members for the many contributions you have made to the well-being of our congregation. Not only do I sincerely thank you for your support of this sacred institution but I also thank you for sharing yourselves with all of us. You enrich our community by your participation.
