

# Rabbi's Weekly Message

July - December, 2014

## Rabbi's Message to Our Interfaith Families

on Tuesday, 23 December 2014.

One of the many blessings I have experienced as your Rabbi has been the opportunity to get to know and to serve the non-Jewish partners of our interfaith families. You have enriched my own religious experience by giving me opportunities to look at Judaism through your eyes. In so doing, I am struck more by our similarities than our differences. We all want a world that is filled with acts of lovingkindness, a world which offers opportunities for all, regardless of religious belief. We all pray for peace.

As I've come to appreciate you more each year, I especially am grateful to those of you who trust us with your children in our religious school. Your support and encouragement helps us to transmit the words of Torah from generation to generation. In return, I hope you are experiencing warmth and companionship, and even a spiritual closeness to the Holy One of all of us by being part of the Emeth family.

During the season of light may you experience God's Light shining upon you, and may you experience the love of family and community. I am privileged to be your Rabbi.

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## Witness Honestly

on Tuesday, 16 December 2014.

This week's mitzvah (commandment) comes from the Ninth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness. Included in this prohibition is all forms of sins relating to speech. The commandment implicitly means that we have the responsibility to tell the truth at all times.

In reporting truthfully, we must avoid exaggeration or leaving out important details. Many of us (all of us?) have at some time spread gossip that we didn't know to be true but we reported it as if it were true. We spoke as if we were a witness when really we were passing on information given to us without verification.

This is a simple commandment for each of us to do or so it seems. So I am going to complicate it a little. Think back to those times you spread rumors, or those times you blamed someone else for something you did or neglected to do. Children are notorious for passing blame to a sibling. So think back to those times in order to make this commandment concrete for you. Then, if possible, find one person you harmed with your false testimony and apologize. Often the mitzvah of the week brings an ethical or moral characteristic or quality to one's consciousness so that we can be attentive to it in our future interactions.

I will be on vacation until January 1 but I hope you continue selecting and performing a mitzvah of each week! Remember, lighting the Chanukah candles is a mitzvah too!

*Chag Chanukah sameach* (happy Chanukah)!

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# Pursue Justice

on Wednesday, 10 December 2014.

*Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly -  
Mitzvah of the Week\*: Tzedek Tirdof – Pursue Justice*

“You shall not judge unfairly; you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice shall you pursue... (Deuteronomy 16:19-20)

This chapter of Torah is actually addressed to the judges who will be appointed, limiting their power. But the instruction to pursue justice, is not limited to judges – this is an essential obligation for each of us.

The Talmud expanded on our obligation to distribute justice equally by stating: “Whoever can stop one’s household [from doing something wrong] but does not, is punished for [the wrongdoing of] one’s household; if one can prevent fellow citizens, but does not, that one is punished for the sins of the fellow citizens; if the whole world, one is punished for the sins of the whole world.”

The Talmud is claiming that our obligations don’t stop at our door, or even one’s community, but rather we are obligated to pursue justice throughout the whole world. It is teaching that we are responsible for the actions of those we know well and those whom we don’t know personally, wherever they might live. What a huge responsibility is placed on our shoulders!

Of course, I selected this mitzvah because of issues raised by the recent events that question the equality of justice in our country. John Powell, Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, wrote, “What we are witnessing is a reflection of a systematic failure in our society that is revealed wherever we are willing to look — schools, health care, employment, housing, life expectancy, poverty, and the list goes on. The problem is persistent, cumulative, and deeply debilitating.”

Regardless of your point of view about Eric Garner, Michael Brown, the grand jury failures to indict, the resulting protests (and the list goes on), I am going to call on each of us to do something very different from previous Mitzvot of the Week. This week, search your own heart for your areas of prejudice, racism, closed ears, and defensiveness. To end bigotry, we must start with an honest assessment of our own, sometimes hidden, attitudes. Before we can change society, we must change ourselves. Take a few moments, maybe right now, and honestly search your heart. What do you expect when you encounter “others” in our society? When you hear the news, who do you expect is at fault, before hearing the story or all the facts? Do you rush to judgment, to form an opinion? Do you assume you know all of the facts, or that some of the facts are sufficient? We all have prejudices. Can you honestly discover your own?

Gandhi said, “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man (sic) changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him... We need not wait to see what others do.”

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

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## Attitude of Gratitude

on Wednesday, 03 December 2014.

*Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly -  
Mitzvah of the Week\*: Gratitude – Hikarat Hatov*

*Who is rich? One who is happy with what one has, as it says, "When you eat what your hands have provided, you shall be happy and good will be yours." (Pirkei Avot, 4:1)*

After the Thanksgiving weekend, are you filled up, not with turkey, but with gratitude? Thanksgiving gave us an opportunity to realize how "rich" we are. The experience of richness comes from being satisfied, from being happy with what one has. And the way to actually experience that richness is by expressing gratitude, thankfulness.

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarot hatov*, which means, literally, 'recognizing the good.' Dr. Alan Moranis (author of the Mussar book our adult education class is using) teaches, "Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours."

The quality of expressing gratitude, of saying thank you, to the Source of all that is ours is a fundamental Jewish value. We express it every time we say the *Amidah* (*HaTefilah*), the central personal prayer in our worship liturgy, when we chant, "*Modim anachnu lach*": "We thank You." Our Rabbis taught us that we should find 100 opportunities to say thank you every day, not only on Thanksgiving – every day!

For our Mitzvah of the Week, look for opportunities for gratitude: food to eat, water to sustain us, a home, family, friends, a beautiful tree, a rose, a scholar...we thank God for our lives which are in God's keeping. Try to be conscious enough of your environment to see if it's possible for you to find 100 things during this week to be thankful for. Take a note card and number it up to 100. See how far you get on the first day, then the second day. Be conscious of all you have in your life. Now that little voice in your head will try to stop your gratefulness. Shush it away, and just this week, try to acknowledge all of the reasons you have for *hakarot hatov*, 'recognizing the good.'

*May you become conscious of your many blessings, and may you have a Shabbat of peace,*

(Note: Portions from this message were reprinted from a 2009 Thanksgiving message. The Jewish year 5775 is [Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly](#).)

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## Shalom Bayit

on Tuesday, 25 November 2014.

SHALOM BAYIT – Create Peace in the Home  
Undertaking conscious acts of self-restraint, love and  
generosity may yield greater peace at home.

The source for this week's mitzvah of the week comes from Genesis 18:13. Three mysterious guests visit Abraham, 99-years-old at the time, and foretells that Sarah, who is about 10 years younger, will have a child. Sarah, outside the tent, overhears the promise and laughs, just as Abraham had laughed when he heard it. Sarah laughs because, "...am I to have enjoyment, with my husband so old?" However, God paraphrases Sarah's words, intentionally misquoting her for the sake of peace between husband and wife: "...Shall I in truth bear a child, as old as I am?"

Sarah's words reflect on Abraham's age; God's retelling draws attention to Sarah's age instead, so that her husband would not be offended. The Talmud, using this passage as a proof text, teaches that one may even speak an untruth for the sake of peace.

Creating and maintaining peace in the home, peace in the family, is an important mitzvah. Often we are most sharp with family members, presumably because it is safer to speak our minds. Some of the things we say to loved ones we would never consider saying to friends and colleagues. To be able to be so comfortable with loved ones is a blessing, but it can't be at the expense of their feelings or well being.

At this time of Thanksgiving, when many of us are challenged by familial relationships, we must be especially conscious of this mitzvah. Pursue peace we are taught, in all spheres, and let it begin at home!

May you experience a Thanksgiving that lives up to its name – being conscious of the blessings we are so fortunate to experience. We live in a community of generosity and calm, we have sufficient food to eat, we feel secure in our homes. We are truly blessed. Happy Thanksgiving and may you experience a Shabbat of peace.

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## Do Not Place A Stumbling Block...

on Wednesday, 19 November 2014.

*Mitzvah of the Week:*  
*You shall not insult the deaf,*  
*or place a stumbling block before the blind.*  
*You shall fear your God; I am God. (Leviticus 19:14)*

This week's Mitzvah Card instructs us to resist setting up environments and situations in ways that trip others, literally and ethically.

This is a truly remarkable commandment that extends to all facets of our lives. The literal implications are obvious. We are prohibited from insulting anyone, especially those with physical or mental disabilities. We know that sticks and stones do injure us but the greatest harm is inflicted by offensive language.

Also, this mitzvah teaches us that we must not create situations where we tempt others to misbehave or go astray from proper conduct – metaphorically creating a “stumbling block before the blind”. For example, leaving our purse or wallet in full view in our locked cars would lure a passerby to break into the car to get the wallet. Would the robber be innocent? Of course not. But we would share blame for the obvious temptation.

Chumash Etz Hayim notes that this prohibition includes giving bad advice on purpose! Think of examples when you might have done so, or be tempted to do so. Perhaps to a business competitor or a classmate?

Lastly, this mitzvah calls us to clean up our yards and homes to be sure that we are not leaving items in our spaces that might cause harm to another.

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

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## Preparing for Death

on Wednesday, 12 November 2014.

*Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly*  
*Mitzvah of the Week\*: Preparing for Death*

This week's *mitzvah* comes from the Torah reading, *Chaye Sarah*, the “life of Sarah.” In truth, it is about the death of our Matriarch Sarah. It begins with a statement about the span of her life, and then tells us about Abraham's mourning and burial of his beloved wife.

This week's *mitzvah* focuses on burying the dead and comforting the mourner. Here are suggestions for fulfilling this *mitzvah*:

1. On Emeth's website, find the copy of our Rachamim Guide (<http://www.emeth.net/community/rachamim-guide>). The Guide gives instructions on all aspects of confronting death, including concerns that adults of all ages should be considering. For some of you, the issues may be regarding elderly relatives or those confronting end of life matters. Some issues are true for all of us and are best considered while we are in good health – wills, living wills, end of life decisions, etc. Please review the Guide – at a minimum you will be learning about Jewish considerations regarding death and burial.
2. Regardless of age, one expresses love to those who survive us by preplanning. This week's Torah portion teaches us how Abraham made arrangements to bury Sarah. You could fulfill this week's *mitzvah* by having a conversation with Grant Gordon about pre-purchasing a cemetery plot in Gan Emeth, our Jewish section in the cemetery.
3. Attend a funeral or visit a house in mourning. God willing, you won't have the opportunity to fulfill this *mitzvah* this week. But during the past months, you probably know someone who endured a loss. Call them and see how they are doing. In the time immediately following burial, the survivor receives attention, but the pain continues beyond the week of mourning. Reach out to those who experienced a loss during the past year.

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

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## Be A Blessing

on Tuesday, 04 November 2014.

*Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly*  
*Mitzvah of the Week\*: Be a Blessing*

Last week's Torah reading was our introduction to our first Patriarch, Abraham. As I explained in my Dvar Torah ("words of Torah, sermon) at services last Shabbat, the Torah reading began with these words:

God tells Abram, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you. And all families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." *Bereshit* (Genesis) 12:2-3)

In those 3 sentences, the word "bless" is used five times. But why? In Chumash Etz Hayyim, the commentator Hirsh explains that this statement, "you shall be a blessing" is not a promise but a commandment! Abram was commanded, as are we, to live our lives so that we are a blessing to the world. Our task is not to merit blessings but to be a blessing to others.

In other words, we acquire blessings by being a blessing to others. To perform the *Mitzvah of the Week*, practice being a blessing to others and to this world. Acts of loving kindness is one way to be blessing. Being politically active and standing up for causes you believe in is another. Activities to protect the environment might be another. Be conscious of the ways you are a blessing to your family, your community, our congregation, our environment. Make "blessing" not only a noun, but also a verb.

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

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## Prayer of your heart

on Tuesday, 28 October 2014.

This new Jewish year of 5775 is [Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly](#). (If you missed last week's explanation go to Emeth.net, and click the button on the homepage for Rabbi's blog.)

Here's this week's *Mitzvah of the Week\**: *Find the Prayer of Your Heart*

This *mitzvah* comes from *Bereshit* (Genesis) 24:63. Rebekah has agreed to be Isaac's wife, and follows Abraham's servant to meet Isaac. The text says:

Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. The Talmud comments on this line by taking the word "walking" (the Hebrew word is *ya-zeh*, to go out) to actually mean Isaac was praying. From this, they taught that Isaac instituted the afternoon daily prayer service.

Now how do we find the prayer of our heart to fulfill this mitzvah? Find a prayer in the *siddur*, prayerbook, and rewrite it, put it into your own words. Remember the prayers in the *siddur* are like poetry. Some can be taken literally and others are meant to inspire you to find your own prayer. Many were written thousands of years ago. Since then many of our ideas about God and the universe have evolved or changed. How can you make those prayers your own? Two suggestions: first, rewrite any prayer(s) that could resonate with you or be meaningful to your hopes. Put the prayer(s) into your own words, words that have the potential to speak from and to your heart. Then, bring the prayer to the temple for our next prayer service, and when we are praying from the siddur, pray your own prayer.

*May you find your own voice to speak to the Holy One, and may your conversation bring you peace,*

\*The “*mitzvah* card” comes from the packet of *Mitzvah* Cards, produced by Reclaiming Judaism ([www.reclaimingjudaism.org](http://www.reclaimingjudaism.org)) Each week, our oldest students in the *Amirim* class – bar/bat mitzvah and pre-bar/bat mitzvah – pick a card for Emeth’s *Mitzvah of the Week*.

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## G'milut Chassadim

on Wednesday, 22 October 2014.

Here's this week's *Mitzvah* of the Week\*:

*G'milut Chassadim* – Give of your time: Engage in deeds of loving kindness and volunteer service.

This *mitzvah* comes from Deuteronomy 11:22: "If you faithfully keep all these *mitzvot* (plural of *mitzvah*) that I command you, loving *Adonai* your God, walking in all of God's ways, and holding fast to God..." The text continues with listing the rewards to the nation.

The key phrase for our purposes is "walking in all of God's ways", which is interpreted to mean, imitating God. How do we imitate God? The *Talmud* teaches the following: these are the ways of the Holy One: "gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness..." The *Talmud* further teaches: The *Torah* begins with deeds of lovingkindness and ends with deeds of lovingkindness..."And God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21, the beginning of *Torah*). It ends with deeds of lovingkindness: "And God buried Moses in the valley in the land of *Moav* (the end of the *Torah*)." (Deuteronomy 34:6).

Performing acts of lovingkindness is an easy *mitzvah* to perform. Opportunities abound for us. The discussion about the Smile card we distributed on *Rosh Hashanah* is a good place to start. What simple acts of lovingkindness can you perform this week? A card to a sick friend? A visit to an lonely elderly person? Speaking to someone at services or sitting next to them so they won't be alone? You get the idea – not only is this simple but it should be part of our regular way of living Jewishly!

May you have a week surrounded by acts of lovingkindness and a *Shabbat* of Peace,

\*The "*mitzvah* card" comes from the packet of *Mitzvah* Cards, produced by Reclaiming Judaism (www.reclaimingjudaism.org) Each week, our oldest students in the *Amirim* class – *bar/bat mitzvah* and pre-*bar/bat mitzvah* – pick a card for Emeth's *Mitzvah* of the Week.

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## Pursue Justice

on Tuesday, 14 October 2014.

This new Jewish year of 5775 is Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly. (If you missed last week's explanation go to Emeth.net, and click the button on the homepage for Rabbi's blog.)

Here's this week's *Mitzvah* of the Week\*:

Pursue Justice: Work relentlessly for all and for each to live in dignity, and with equal opportunity for safety, food, education, healthcare, religion, culture, and more.

This *mitzvah* comes from Deuteronomy 16:20 in Torah, in the chapter named *Shoftim*, Judges. The opening paragraph of this chapter tells the people that judges need to be appointed, and those judges may not show impartiality and accept bribes, which will influence their decisions. Then the core *mitzvah*: "Justice, justice shall you pursue!" Pursuing justice is different than simply being just. The word pursue tells us that we must chase after justice, and we must do so eagerly and actively.

How can we – ordinary citizens – perform this *mitzvah*? We must be advocates for those who aren't in a position to advocate for themselves. We must make sure that everyone gets what s/he needs to live – housing (shelter), food, clothes.

How can we as individuals "pursue justice"? A few ideas for you to consider:

- There is an election coming up. Are there candidates you can support who understand *distributive justice* (a socially just allocation of goods)? Support those candidates and/or work on their behalf.
- What can you do to make sure people get what they need to live justly? We still did not collect the amount of food donations compared to previous years. It's not too late to bring food for Emeth's food drive. Put clothes in our clothing collection bucket. Work on a Habitat for Humanity house.
- Protest businesses whose practices are not just. An unverified web search (reported on multiple sites) revealed: there are an estimated 200 children, some 11 years old or younger, who are sewing clothes for Hanes, Wal-Mart, J.C. Penny, and Puma at the Harvest Rich factory in Bangladesh. Hershey's produces its chocolates from cocoa beans picked by child slaves. Victoria's Secret, Forever 21, Aeropostale, and Urban Outfitters use cotton picked by child laborers. And so much more! Do your own web search and see if the stores you frequent use child labor. Write the corporate headquarters and complain – and stop shopping there until they become just corporations.

What will you do this week for your *mitzvah*? Write in your journal and report back on the Rabbi's blog! You will give others ideas!



*May you have a week of joy and a Shabbat of peace,*

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## Mitzvah of the Week

on Tuesday, 07 October 2014.

This new Jewish year of 5775 is our year of personal and community engagement in doing *mitzvot*, commandments. In other words, this is Congregation Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly.

What does it mean to "live Jewishly"? The answer is found in Torah, our contract with God. Under the terms of the contract, we are told to behave in an ethical, moral way, to interact with others in a way that acknowledges that they, that every one of us, were created in the image of God.

I will guide you in your steps toward Jewish living. In my weekly message in HaMadrish, I will share a *mitzvah* of the week, teaching you the background of the *mitzvah*, where it is found in Torah, and give you examples of how you might perform the *mitzvah*. You can do this as a family or with a few friends, or by yourself. Please keep a journal of your experiences. Let's share our *mitzvah* journey together; just leave a comment below to post your experiences online.

Here's our first *Mitzvah* of the Week\*:

### FEED THE HUNGRY

Organize and assist in providing shelter and nourishing meals for those in need. (Isaiah 58:7)

The Haftarah (message from Prophets) on Yom Kippur, challenged us to consider the real purpose of fasting and included these lines: "Is this the fast that I have chosen?...Surely it is to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house..." (58:7)

This is the perfect *mitzvah* for the week of Sukkot, a time for celebrating the successful harvest. We sit in our temporary shelters and celebrate God's grace, thankful that we have permanent shelters and enough food to nourish ourselves. But this holiday reminds us of our obligation to the needy who don't have sufficient food and who don't have a permanent roof. In America in 2013, the official poverty rate was 14.5 percent!

This year, the response to our annual High Holiday food drive was much less than usual. This mitzvah card is a reminder that it's not too late. Fill a bag of non perishable food items and bring it to the temple any day of Sukkot, especially when you come to our Pizza in the Hut this Friday evening.

What else can you do to fulfill the *mitzvah*? Go back and read the *mitzvah* card again. I look forward to hearing your responses!

May you have a week of great joy, celebrating Sukkot!

*Chag Sameach, happy Sukkot holiday!*

\*The "*mitzvah* card" comes from the packet of *Mitzvah* Cards, produced by Reclaiming Judaism ([www.reclaimingjudaism.org](http://www.reclaimingjudaism.org)).

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## Smile!

on Sunday, 28 September 2014.

We are in the middle of the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we are to focus on three primary activities:

- *Teshuvah*, asking for forgiveness and returning to our true moral and ethical selves by correcting our behavior.
- *T'filah*, prayer.
- *Tzedakah*, giving charity to those in need.

When I spoke on Rosh Hashanah eve, I added two more values to this list: *rachamahn*, compassion, and *gimilut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness, which are really part of both *teshuva* and *tzedakah*. At that service, I asked everyone in attendance to participate in *rachamahn* and *gimilut hasadim* during these ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Doing so would help to form the habit of showing compassion, loving kindness and mercy so that this behavior would become second nature to us.

At the end of services, I distributed a card that said, "Smile. You've just been tagged! Experiments in Anonymous Kindness is the name of the game and now you're it!" On the other side of the card it said: "Someone reached out to you with an anonymous act of kindness. Now it's your chance to do the same. Do something nice for someone. Leave this card behind and keep the spirit going."

If you missed the opportunity to take a card, more will be placed on the table at the entrance to the sanctuary. If you took one, used it, and want to take another, help yourself! Everyone, children too. Use the cards to remind yourself to act with *rachamahn*, compassion, and also to perform simple acts of kindness. These acts don't have to be anonymous and they don't have to involve money, or be expensive. You don't have to give someone a smile card. If you prefer, just put one in your wallet or pocket to serve as a reminder.

And I would be so grateful if you would email to me your experiences ([rabbidebbieisrael@gmail.com](mailto:rabbidebbieisrael@gmail.com)). I may report on them to the congregation, but it will be anonymous of course.

May these smile cards inspire you to follow the path of *rachamahn*, compassion, and *gimilut hasadim*, lovingkindness, and *tzedakah*, charity; to open your own heart and lead others you encounter to pay it forward. *Shana tovah* – may you be written in the Book of Life.

## Fresh Starts

on Tuesday, 23 September 2014.

An angry reader stormed into a newspaper office, waving the current edition, and demanding to see the editor of the obituary column. Finding the responsible party, the reader shouted, "Do you see my name here? Obviously I am very much alive! I demand a retraction!"

The editor responded, "It's against newspaper policy to apologize for a story. I tell you what – I'll include you in tomorrow's birth announcements and give you fresh start!"

As we approach the Jewish New Year, each of us have been given the opportunity for a fresh start, a do-over. Let us be aware of this precious gift, a chance to be grateful for what we have and the possibility of doing better in the year to come! May the sound of the Shofar awaken in us a longing for repentance and change. May we be stirred to improve our world, beginning with the words, "I am sorry."

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## Where there's life, there's hope...

on Wednesday, 17 September 2014.

My father, may his memory be a blessing, always told his children: Where there's life, there's hope. (Jerusalem Talmud). As we near the end of 5774, and reflect back on the year soon to be over, we also look forward with confidence. There's hope in our hearts for the new year!

A football coach who was known for his confidence, entered the locker room and told the team: Here we are! We're unbeaten, untied, and unscored upon – we are ready for the first game of the season!

We are getting ready for our new "season", but first we need to prepare ourselves! If you were a marathon runner (and some of you are), I expect that you stretch before you begin to run. To prepare for the Holy Days, we all need to do some metaphoric "stretching". This includes a mental review of our behavior during the year, and then taking the first steps to repair our failings and engaging ourselves in the process of repentance.

This Friday night, Congregation Emeth will help each of us "warm up" spiritually. As part of our Erev Shabbat (Friday night) experience, we will include a Selichot (s'lee-khot) Service. The Selichot Service includes our Prayers of Forgiveness, the core prayer service of Yom Kippur. It serves the purpose of infusing us with the spirit of this holy season. We will begin the Selichot Service by changing our Torah covers to the traditional white in honor of the holiday. I encourage all of you to attend this new addition to Emeth's High Holiday experience.

*Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova,*

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# Shed the old - Put on the new

on Wednesday, 10 September 2014.

*When a person who lived in a small village came to the city for the first time, everyone stared at him because his clothes were shabby. So he bought a new suit, thinking that when people saw him in his new clothes, everyone would admire him and wish him well. However when he returned home and put on the suit, it did not fit and it looked terrible. The dissatisfied customer rushed back to the store full of angry complaints. The clerk began to laugh and said, "Of course it doesn't fit! You put on a new suit over your old clothes! You have to take off the old before you can put on the new!"*

The countdown to the New Year continues. We are two weeks away from Rosh Hashanah, which begins Wednesday evening, September 24. During this period of introspection, we are shedding our "old clothes" – we are throwing off our hurts and angers and past mistakes. We are in the process of forgiving and asking for forgiveness. We are in the process of disposing of our disappointments and frustrations.

Only when that is done can we put on our new clothes – dream new dreams, make new plans, restore old relationships and make new ones. (Inspired by a teaching of Rabbi Bernard Raskas)

Continue to do the work of preparing for the New Year. I am here if you need help!

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## Good change!

on Wednesday, 03 September 2014.

Caterpillar: "...and who are you?"

Alice: "I...I hardly know Sir, just at present – at least I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then."

- Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

We are in the second week of the Hebrew month of Elul, the season of our transformation. It is hard to focus - and for some, hard to accept - the need to change. We procrastinate, not wanting to face ourselves. "Oh we have time – 3 weeks until Rosh Hashanah – and then ten days more until Yom Kippur." I'll think about it next week, later, another time.

Confronting ourselves and the errors of our ways is difficult, sometimes painful. We look at relationships in need of repair, we look at mistakes we've made – some big, some small – and we look at our apathy at the big issues in our world. So many things need our attention, so let's start small. Pick one aspect of your life you are going to consider this week, just one aspect. Me? Every year I start at this same place, and this year is no different: patience. Finding patience with others, and patience with myself. I'm working on it, but I'm impatient to master it. Which is why I have to face it year after year.

The Hebrew word for year, shana, actually means to change, to alter. When we say Shana tova, we are saying, "Good change!" What a perfect greeting for the season!

May you change for the good, or do a good job changing. And may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

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## It's Elul!

on Wednesday, 27 August 2014.

Depending on when you read this, the Hebrew month of Elul will soon begin or has already begun (actually sundown, Tuesday, August 26). The days of this Hebrew month are the "countdown" days before the High Holy Days. During Elul, we are instructed by our Sages of old to begin our preparations for the Yamim Noraim, which are literally the "Days of Awe" of the High Holy Day season.

One of the ways we prepare our souls for these days is to do a spiritual checkup – to look at our behavior during the past year and consider self-corrections. One person posted the question on Facebook: "where to begin?" I will make it easy for her, and for you: let's start with arguably the most common activity most of us engage in – lashon harah, literally "evil tongue", meaning gossiping and especially spreading falsehoods. During these days, let us be conscious of how tempted we are to talk about other people, and let us use these days to practice holding our tongues as our first step of teshuvah, repentance, during this holiday season.

Now that it is Elul, may I be the first to greet you with: Shana Tovah.

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

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## "If only you would listen..."

on Wednesday, 20 August 2014.

*Vehaya ekev tish-m'un et ha mishpatim ha'eleh* – 'and it shall be (that) you will obey (*tish-m'un*) these judgments (laws, rules)...'( Deut 8:12). That was the opening sentence of last week's Torah reading. The word used for "obey" is *tish-m'un*. The root of *tish-m'un* is *sh'ma*, listen! Many translate *tish-m'un* as obey but since its root is *sh'ma* it might mean, "If you listen" or "If you hear"...

But it is clear that the intention of this sentence is obedience. Using the word "*sh'ma*" makes me think of the colloquial expression, "listen up", pay attention. The phrase "if only you would listen..." appears no less than 92 times throughout this last Book of Torah, Devarim (Deuteronomy).

To really confuse us, this week's Torah portion begins with the word, "*Re'eh*" – See or look! In preparing for his *d'var Torah* (words of Torah) for this Friday night, Mel Weisblatt asked me about this word and I continued to wonder about it, because it comes right after *tish-m'un* in last week's portion. Last week it was listen, this week it is see – what are we to make of this?

I think the lesson is that Torah recognizes that some of us need to see to believe, and others can be convinced by hearing – or in modern jargon, some of us are auditory learners and others learn visually! Whether you must *sh'ma*, listen, or *re'eh*, pay attention, to learn, the message is consistent. God has given us commandments on how to live a life that is ethically and morally pure, and this is the pathway to a life of blessings.

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

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## Robin Williams, Rest in Peace

on Wednesday, 13 August 2014.

The loss of a celebrity, at any age, from any circumstance, affects us in different ways. The reaction to the death of Robin Williams, may his memory be a blessing, surprised me. This beloved actor and comic touched so many of us in so many personal ways that I have seen remarks, with favorite Robin Williams quotes and clippings, all over Facebook, my private emails, even on the Aish website (Aish is a Jewish Orthodox organization and yeshiva, far to the right in religious practice). The Aish contribution was written by Rabbi Stuart Weiss, a Modern Orthodox Rabbi living in Israel whom I admire, whose message inspires me each week (go to <http://www.aish.com/ci/a/Robin-Williams-and-Us.html?s=show>). The contributions that Robin Williams has made to us reach deeply into our very core.

The idea that such a beloved person, a person who made us laugh, was so severely depressed that he committed suicide is difficult to accept. Didn't he know how much the world appreciated him? Didn't he know how this would hurt his wife and children? Why couldn't he be saved?

In *traditional* Judaism, suicide is considered a grave sin. Many of us remember a time when a suicide would embarrass a family so much that there was a reluctance to admit publicly that a loved one died of suicide; this was certainly my parents' reaction when my oldest brother took his own life in 1970.

But we now recognize that suicide is a result of serious mental illness. Suicide prevention takes the intervention of trained medical experts. And it takes each of us to recognize when someone is clinically depressed and needs professional help. To better educate yourself about depression and suicide, go to [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/suicide\\_prevention.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/suicide_prevention.htm). If you or someone you know needs help, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). And do remember that I am here to help you and your loved ones.

Robin Williams, rest in peace. As Rabbi Weiss teaches, "One who makes others smile and laugh is secured a place in the World to Come (the Talmud)."

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

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## Today is Tisha B'Av

on Tuesday, 05 August 2014.

Today is Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av. On this day, we remember a list of catastrophes that occurred on this date, especially the destruction of the 1st Holy Temple in 423 BCE, and five centuries later on the same day, the destruction of 2nd Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Each time the Temple was left in ruins, the Jews were exiled from the land, first by the Babylonians and later by the Romans in the year 70 CE. The Roman Revolt, and the continuous revolts that followed, resulted in the greatest catastrophes in Jewish history prior to the Holocaust. Some say that more than a million Jews were killed, and the remaining Jewish population of Judea (Israel) was exiled, most of them sold into slavery.

This is the beginning of the Diaspora, the forced expulsion of our people from our land that continued until 1948, when Jewish authority in the sovereign state of Israel was returned. From the time of our expulsion until 1948, our people dreamed and prayed and longed to return to the Land of Israel.

In a sense, that longing begins with this week's Torah portion, Va'Etchanan (though the events in this Book of Torah took place more than 1500 years before the destruction of the 2nd Temple!). The chapter begins with Moses telling the Israelites, "I pleaded with God...let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan." This was the first report of thousands of years of pleading by our people to go to our Promised Land.

The timing of reading this chapter in temple, and commemorating Tisha B'Av, and the war in Israel is especially poignant. How do we observe Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning, during these days of war, when Israel is fighting to defend our people?

JJ Goldberg, a frequent writer for The Forward, offered this thought for this year's Tisha B'Av: "...the best way to reach across that empty space and fold myself into the of the Jewish community, transcending the rancor and reaching back over the generations, is by prayer...When we speak together in unison, we become joined in spirit in a way that transcends differences of the moment."

I agree with the power of prayer, and I urge you to join with our people around the world and pray for the welfare of Israel sometime on Tuesday, Tisha B'Av: These prayers are from our prayerbook, Mishkan T'fila:

### A PRAYER FOR PEACE

May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease, when a great peace will embrace the whole world. Then nation will not threaten nation, and humankind will not again know war. For all who live on earth shall realize we have not come into being to hate or to destroy. We have come into being to praise, to labor, and to love. Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations with the power of compassion. Fulfill the promise conveyed in Scripture: I will bring peace to the land, and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you. I will rid the land of vicious beasts and it shall not be ravaged by war. Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.

Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea. And let us say: Amen.

#### A PRAYER FOR THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Avinu She-ba-sha-ma-yim, Rock and Redeemer of the people Israel: Bless the State of Israel, with its promise of redemption. Shield it with Your love; spread over it the shelter of Your peace. Guide its leaders and advisors with Your light and Your truth. Help them with Your good counsel. Strengthen the hands of those who defend our Holy Land. Deliver them; crown their efforts with triumph. Bless the Land with peace, and its inhabitants with lasting joy. And let us say: Amen.