

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January - June, 2015

You Shall Not Bear a Grudge

on Wednesday, 24 June 2015.

Lo tikom v'lo titur

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge...

(Leviticus 19:18)

In this week's Torah reading, we read that the community was without water and they complained bitterly to Moses. God instructed Moses to take his rod and speak to a certain rock, ordering it to produce water. Instead of following God's command, Moses struck the rock with his rod, not once but twice, provoking God's anger. (Meghan will tell you more in her dvar Torah – words of Torah – at her bat mitzvah this Shabbat morning!)

In Judaism, anger is considered a negative trait and restraining oneself from anger is a mitzvah. In Ethics of the Ancestors, Ben Zoma said, "Who is strong? One who subdues one's evil inclination..." In its section dealing with ethical traits a person should adopt, the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (summary guide to Jewish law) states: "Anger is also a very evil trait and it should be avoided at all costs. You should train yourself not to become angry even if you have a good reason to be angry."

What pushes you to extreme anger? What are your trigger points and what are your coping mechanisms? Being conscious of both your triggers and your coping skills help you to manage your anger. Your mitzvah of the week is to discover those internal traits and begin working on improving yourself in this regard.

Do Not Destroy

on Wednesday, 24 June 2015.

Bal Tashchit

Do not destroy (Deuteronomy 20:19, Genesis 2:15)

The mitzvah (commandment) of protecting nature is central to ecological concern for the environment. We are commanded to protect the environment, protect all life, and conserve resources. This Mitzvah of the Week has been presented before, but I am offering it again for a specific reason:

This coming Thursday, June 18, Pope Francis will send forth to the world an encyclical he is naming "Laudato Sii: Sulla Cura Della Casa Comune – Praised Be the ONE: Concerning the Care of our Common Home." The first

two words are a quotation from a famous prayer created by St. Francis of Assisi – – the prayer in which he praises the Creator for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and all the other beings on Earth and in the universe...

In that light, The Shalom Center created a Jewish analogue to the encyclical, a Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis. As we prepare to receive the encyclical at noon Roman time on Thursday (6 AM EDT), more than 340 rabbis from every stream of Judaism have signed. The full text of the Rabbinic Letter and a list of signers is at <https://theshalomcenter.org/torah-pope-crisis-inspire-300-r...> (Edited from the message from the Shalom Center, Rabbi Arthur Waskow.)

I signed this letter, and urge you to read its contents and consider what action you can take to fulfill the mitzvah of the week. One consideration: when our outgoing President, Susan Meyers, introduced our Capital Campaign, she explained that part of the money raised would go toward the “greening” of Emeth, including a new roof of “green” energy efficient material and solar voltaic panels. Contributing generously to our campaign will definitely be a positive action toward preserving the environment.

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

The Names of Shavuot

on Wednesday, 24 June 2015.

Shavuot, The Feast of Weeks, Exodus 34:22

Chag Matan Torah, Exodus 20:1-5

Chag ha-Katzir, Festival of Reaping (the first harvest), Exodus 23:16

Chag HaBikkurim, Festival of the First Fruits, Numbers 28:26

Congregation Emeth will observe the Festival of Shavuot this Shabbat morning, May 23. The Festival actually begins at sundown and continues until sundown May 24 on the Israeli and Reform calendar.

This festival is a harvest festival as well as a celebration of receiving the Torah, specifically the Ten Commandments. Unique to this holiday is that there are no specific mitzvot (commandments) associated with it, other than the Temple sacrifices which of course ceased with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. But there are customs:

- We decorate our temple and homes with bright greens and flowers, recognizing the springtime harvest aspects of the festival.
- We abstain from eating meat, and many people traditionally eat blintzes and other dairy products. Among the reasons for this tradition is the comparison made by King Solomon, writing in Song of Songs, "Like honey and milk, it (Torah) lies under your tongue."
- We study Jewish texts. Many participate in an all night study program. The origins for this practice seem to be a midrash found in the Talmud, stating that the Israelites overslept in the morning they were to receive Torah, and Moses had to awaken them because God was waiting to give them the Ten Commandments. So we stay awake, studying, to be ready to receive Torah early in the morning.

- We read the Book of Ruth, which takes place during the harvest time. Ruth converted to Judaism, and Shavuot is a remembrance of all Jews entering the covenant.

For the Mitzvah of the Week, observe Shavuot in one, some, or all of these ways: Attend services this Shabbat morning (and have the double mitzvah of celebrating Jason's bar mitzvah with the Valentine family), where you will hear the Ten Commandments read from the Torah; decorate your homes with lots of flowers and greenery; eat a dairy or vegetarian meal in recognition of the holiday, and study the Ten Commandments (<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/artic.../the-ten-commandments/>).

Chag Shavuot Sameach (Happy Shavuot)!

Ometz Lev – Courage

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" — Be strong, be strong, and of good courage (literally: may we strengthen one another)

June 3, 2015

Remember the childhood book, *The Little Engine that Could*? "I think I can, I think I can..." This book teaches the value of ometz lev - courage, perseverance, and positive thinking.

In this week's Torah reading, Moses sends twelve spies to scout out the Promised Land and report what they find there. Ten report that while the land is flowing with milk and honey, the people were stronger than the Israelites and would "devour its settlers." Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, nonetheless encouraged the people, realizing that they would be protected by God. They told the Israelites, "Have no fear..." But the people lacked the courage to listen to Joshua and Caleb and instead railed against Moses and Aaron.

This week's mitzvah is ometz lev, literally courage of the heart. Ometz lev requires us to find within ourselves the courage to face our fears. This week's Torah portion teaches us that God is our Divine partner in getting us through those difficult times we all face in life. Some choices require us to summon the courage to do what we know we should: making that doctor's appointment we've been putting off, because we fear the report; making amends with an old friend or relative; sometimes simply doing the right or moral thing, even though it would be easier or safer to make a different choice.

What risks will you take this week? What will require courage on your part - in your communal responsibilities, hope and optimism at home, or your interpersonal relationships? Look for opportunities to make the courageous choice.

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

Security

on Wednesday, 24 June 2015.

“You shall eat your fill and dwell securely on your land.”
(Leviticus 26:5)

This week’s Torah reading includes a series of blessings and curses. The blessings are the rewards for following God’s commandments. The curses are the punishments for disobeying.

What are we “moderns” to make of this pronouncement of reward and punishment? We surely see that bad things happen to good people, and that the reverse is also true. We must read the blessings and curses as an ideal vision of the future. Looking at ourselves as part of a group, part of the greater society, all of us benefit when we live a righteous life.

“You shall eat your fill and dwell securely on your land.” What brings us security? The Torah is not talking about soldiers or police or TSA agents at the airplane gate. Interestingly, food insecurity is the term used in our country to describe those who lack “consistent access to adequate food, limited by a lack of money and other resources...” Therefore, by this definition, security is the result of people having enough to support themselves and their families...so that no one lacks for food.

Therefore, our Mitzvah of the Week is to share our food with those who are in need. Bring generous supplies of food to our food barrels, located in the temple Social Hall. Help the poor on the street with their hands out with gifts of food or money to purchase food. I used to keep lunch size paper bags of food to give to those with signs begging for help on the streets. In each bag I placed a small easy-open can of tuna, an individual fruit cup, a box of fruit drink, some crackers, and a fork. Almost every time, the person receiving the bag stops at that moment to sit on the curb and eat. A friend regularly buys a giant container of toasty crackers with peanut butter and gives several packages to each homeless person she encounters. These are especially appreciated because they stay good in their individually wrapped packages for long periods of time.

However you choose to fulfill this week’s mitzvah, may you find yourself blessed for your lev tov, your good heart. May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

The Priestly Blessing

“May God bless you and protect you.
May God deal kindly with you and be gracious unto you.
May God grant you favor and grant you with peace.”
(Numbers 6:22-26)

May 27, 2015

In this week’s Torah reading, we read one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, the Priestly Blessing. God instructed the priests to offer this blessing to the Israelites in 1446 BCE.

This blessing was found on silver amulets dating from the late 7th century BCE, southeast of the City of David. According to Chumash Etz Hayim, it is the only known inscription with a biblical text that predates the Babylonian exile.

You hear these words - first recited 3461 years ago! - often in temple rituals. I place my hands on the head of each bar/bat mitzvah and recite them in front of the open ark; the blessing is said on behalf of every new baby and every bride and groom.

There is a tradition for parents to say these blessings for their children every Friday night, after lighting the Shabbat candles. At Emeth, near the beginning of Short N Sweet Services, we have the custom of asking all children to stand under a large tallit while we as a congregation bless all of them together.

For your mitzvah of this week, think about the ancient words of the 3-fold blessing and what it means to you. Put the blessings in your own words – or create three statements that reflect the prayers of your heart for your loved ones, of any age. Find times during this week, especially on Shabbat, to say the words out loud to the person or people for whom you are offering the blessings. Even if they live far away, share these words with them – by letter, email, phone call. And in return, you will be a blessing to them.

May this week be a week of blessings and Shabbat a day of peace.

THE NAMES OF SHAVUOT

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May 13, 2015

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Shema Part II – Hear/Obey

on Wednesday, 24 June 2015.

Last week's Mitzvah of the Week was Shema – Listen. Prayer books sometime translate Shema as “listen” and other times as “hear”, as if the words are interchangeable, at least in the context in this mantra.

In our culture listening and hearing can be passive. Hebrew is different. In English, listen or hear can be passive words. In Hebrew, shema is an action word, an imperative word. Shema not only includes hearing but also perceiving and taking heed of what one is hearing, doing what is asked. Perhaps a better translation would be “active listening.”

Last week our Mitzvah was to listen to the still small voice of our own souls. This week's Mitzvah is to hear the voices of others crying out to us. Some of those voices cry silently and it is easy for us to pretend we don't hear. Others shout and yet we still find a way to ignore them. The voices I have been hearing lately are the voices of more than 9000 people who were injured in the recent earthquake in Nepal, which left nearly 5000 people dead (at this time). I am hearing the voices of eight million souls affected by the destruction. I am hearing the voices of one million children urgently needing our help.

Who else are you hearing, crying out to you? Some, like the people of Nepal, are needing urgent financial aid. Others, perhaps closer to home, are needing words of comfort or other kinds of assistance for less devastating reasons – a sickness, a loss of a loved one, a dissolving marriage, a lost job. This week, hear those voices and be moved to make the Shema in your life an action verb rather than a passive noun.

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

Shema – Listen

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

April 28, 2015

A few years ago, the famous Jewish director Steven Spielberg taught a lesson about the Shema, to an “Inside Actors Studio” audience. Here's his lesson: “I was taught by my mom and dad that in Judaism the most important prayer is Shema Yisrael, ‘Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One.’ And it was taught to me in childhood that the most important thing I could do is to listen. And that wasn't a way for a parent to say, ‘I know more than you; I'm the boss; I'll do all the talking...’ It wasn't that way at all. They meant, listen to yourself, listen to the little whispers that we don't want to hear because they're too soft. We somehow tend to listen to the shout, not the whisper. And so listening – carefully – is what I was taught all my life. It's just that when people don't listen, it's not that they don't learn. They just deny themselves tremendous opportunities and glorious choices...”

This week's Mitzvah is to listen to yourself at the end of each day. Listen to your soul reflecting on your thoughts, your dreams, your hopes, your plans, your disappointments, your achievements, your pain, and your happiness. Take time every day to do this, preferably writing these reflections in a journal. Either before or after reflecting, chant the Shema.

May you have a week of blessings as you learn more about yourself and a Shabbat of peace.

Shmirat Ha'Guf (Care of the Body)

on 22 April 2015.

Mitzvah of the Week
Shmirat Ha'Guf (Care of the Body)
(sh'mee-RAHT ha'GOOF)

“For in God's image – b'tzelem Elohim – did God make humankind.” (Genesis 9:6)

To be conscious that the Holy One created humanity in God's own image adds a special sanctity to our lives. The Talmud describes God using a mold to create each of us, and therefore we should all be “stamped” the same. Yet each of us is quite different and unique, one from the other.

Being made in the image of God places on us a special responsibility to treat oneself with kindness and care. We must eat right, exercise (yes, I am listening to myself and am committed to doing better!), get enough rest, nurture our souls, and create loving relationships with others. We must check our homes to be sure they are safe (when's the last time you checked the batteries in your fire alarms?). Are you prepared for a natural emergency – have you made a plan? Do you text and drive?

This week, pay close attention to how you are taking care of yourself, and resolve to make changes to improve your health and welfare. This is not a New Year's goal; this is a mitzvah!

A Good Heart

on Saturday, 02 May 2015.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, an important Jewish sage and a disciple of the great Rabbi Hillel, was a leader of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple. He had five primary disciples. He told them to go out and see “what is the proper way to which a person should cling.” The students answered:

Rabbi Eliezer said, "A good eye." Rabbi Yehoshua said, "A good friend." Rabbi Yose said, "A good neighbor." Rabbi Shimon, "One who considers the outcome of a deed." Rabbi Elazar said, "A good heart."

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, "I prefer the words of Rabbi Elazar because your words are included in his." Rabbi Elazar's answer, a good heart, includes a good eye, friend, and neighbor, and someone mindful of the future.

How do we get a good heart, a *lev tov*? You have to make it yourself. You have to train yourself to look for opportunities. You can't get it all overnight. It takes a little work every day. Just a little. Every day. It's why I started our Year of Living Jewishly, so each of us can add another new mitzvah each week, little by little building for ourselves a good heart. Your mitzvah of the week is to consider what it means to have a *lev tov*, a good heart. You might think of your role models – what have they done to make you think they possess a *lev tov*? What can you emulate from their behavior or learn from them? A starting place to consider (from an article in a past issue of Reform Judaism magazine), complete the following: "I am demonstrating a *lev tov* when I..."

(This message was inspired by a message written by Jordan Block.)

Make you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of Peace,

Express Love

on Thursday, 09 April 2015.

MITZVAH OF THE WEEK

Express Love

"I am my beloved and my beloved is mine." Song of Songs

Near the beginning of the Passover seder, right after eating the parsley, the Haggadah (text for the seder) draws our attention to passages from the *Megillah* (biblical book), *Song of Songs*. This book is read because the festival comes at the beginning of springtime, referred to *Song of Songs*:

"Arise my dear one, and come away! For now the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of singing has come; the song of the turtledove is heard in our land..."

The book is seen as an allegory of the love of the Jewish people and God, a love that was born and nurtured during the Exodus experience. As we experience the joy of the Passover festival, we are moved to not only express our love for the Holy One of blessings, but also the love we have for one another.

The *Mitzvah of the Week* is to reflect upon those in your life who you love and to express that love. These expressions of love and affection is an opportunity to also speak of your appreciation for the special people in your life.

This upcoming Shabbat morning we will include a *Yizkor* (Memorial) Service during our prayers. This service gives us the opportunity to acknowledge those with whom we had a special relationship, who died in years past,

who contributed to our lives, and who we lovingly remember. This remembering those who are no longer with us is also part of expressing our love as the *Mitzvah of the Week*.

May you have a continuing joyful Passover week, and a Shabbat of peace.

Why is This Night Different?

on Thursday, 02 April 2015.

Mitzvah of the Week:
Why is this night different from all other nights?

Pesach (Passover) begins this Friday night, and continues until sundown next Friday, on the Reform and Israeli calendar. (Orthodox and Conservative denominations outside Israel celebrate the holiday of freedom for eight days; Reform and Israeli Jews celebrate for seven days.)

This holiday has four names (when reading the names, note that the “ch” is the guttural “ch”, pronounced like the “ch” in *l'chayim*):

- *Z'man Cherutaynu* – Time of our Freedom
- *Chag HaPesach* – Festival of the Paschal Sacrifice
- *Chag Aviv* – Festival of Spring
- *Chag HaMatzot* – Festival of the Unleavened Bread

The *mitzvah* of this week is to observe the festival of the unleavened bread, in a upgraded fashion from your usual practice. If you usually eat only *matzah* (no bread) but you eat other forms of *chametz* (pasta, for example), your *mitzvah* of the week is to reduce your consumption of other forms of *chametz*, with the ultimate goal being to eat no *chametz* not only at the seder but the entire week of Passover.

But the *mitzvah* is not only about increasing your observance. It is also about increasing your consciousness of the personal *chametz* (unleavened grains) in your life. “Where applied to the human being, the Sages teach that the ‘puffed up’ nature of *chametz* (bread that has risen, for example) symbolizes the character trait of arrogance and conceit. The flat, unleavened *matzah* represents total humility. Humility is the beginning of liberation and the foundation of spiritual growth. Only a person who can acknowledge one’s shortcomings and submit to a higher wisdom can free oneself from one’s own limitations. When we eat *matzah*, we internalize the quality of humility as the essence of faith. By not eating *chametz*, we rid ourselves of arrogance and self-centeredness.” (Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, http://www.aish.com/h/pes/t/g/the_inner_meaning_of_matzah.html)

May you have a liberating and joyful Passover festival!

Tell the Truth!

on Thursday, 02 April 2015.

Geneivat da'at – Avoid Deception
Tell the truth! (Leviticus 19:11)

Six months have passed since we began Emeth's Year of Living Jewishly. Since Yom Kippur, I have presented to you a "mitzvah of the week" to teach everyone that living Jewishly occurs every day, throughout the day. I've presented simple activities for you to do as you practice each week's mitzvah. Hopefully when the week is over, you don't stop engaging in that mitzvah, but rather you are accumulating ways to enhance your Jewish life and bring you closer to the Holy One. I am curious – have you been engaging in these mitzvot (plural of mitzvah)? What has been your experience? If you haven't, it's not too late to start, with these week's mitzvah. (To see our past mitzvot of the week, check the Rabbi's blog by [clicking here](#).)

I think it's a safe assumption that all of us intend to tell the truth, every day, all day, all the time. But how often do we tell that little white lie, or exaggerate the truth, or "bear false witness" by claiming something that isn't so? This week, the b'nai mitzvah class who drew this card* are keeping a list of every opportunity they encounter every day to tell a lie, and when they give in to the temptation and when they overcome it. They are also reporting on when they decide a "white lie" is better than telling the truth. I encourage you to do the same thing. Write it down, every day, and at the end of the week look at how easy it is to exaggerate the truth.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of Peace,
Rabbi Debbie Israel

* Each week the students pick a card from Reclaiming Judaism's pack of Mitzvah Cards. By an amazing coincidence, Truth is also the topic of the adult study group's Mussar class. So here's an opportunity for the entire congregation to be engaged in truth-telling!

Visiting the Sick

on Thursday, 02 April 2015.

Mitzvah of the Week:
Bikur Cholim
Visiting the sick

One of the lessons of the Rabbis is to "follow God." (Talmud, Sotah 14a) What does this mean? How can we, mere mortals, follow God? Surely we are limited, but God provides us by example of values and qualities. One of those examples is *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick. In Genesis 18:1, we read that God visited Abraham. At the end of the previous chapter, Abraham performed the mitzvah of circumcision, so the interpretation of this visit is that God's

visit came as Abraham was recovering. This is the traditional explanation of the mitzvah of visiting the sick: just as God visited the sick, so too should we visit the sick.

There are of course many ways to fulfill this mitzvah. Often people who are sick do not want visitors, and our visits should be guided by the desires of those who are sick. Expressions of concern by phone, letter – even an old fashioned get well card! – are ways to perform this mitzvah. Our bnai mitzvah class is creating a “thinking about you” gift basket for one of our congregants. We have several congregants who would benefit from a visit or attention and even if you don’t know them, your attention would be greatly appreciated. If you would like the name of a person(s) to visit or send a card, email me (rabbidebbieisrael@gmail.com) and I will share an appropriate name or two with you.

In addition, when we are ill, we receive comfort knowing we are in someone’s prayers. You don’t need to be sitting in a temple service to whisper these words of prayer to the Holy One of blessings:

May the One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bless and heal _____. May the Holy One, blessed be God, be merciful and strengthen and heal him/her. Grant him/her a complete and speedy recovery—healing of body and healing of soul. And let us say: Amen.

This week’s *mitzvah* is to perform the act of *bikur cholim*. And if you are a person in need of healing of body or soul, and I don’t know, please call (or ask someone to call) so that you can be included in our prayers of healing.

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

Savor Sacred Time

on Tuesday, 10 March 2015.

Mitzvah of the Week:
Sh'mirat Shabbat

Guard the Shabbat – Savor Sacred Time

For many of our congregants, chanting *V'shamru* (And you shall guard...) is a favorite part of the service. We stand, and rise higher and higher on the “*eh-eh-et Ha-Shabbat*”. The words come straight from Torah, Exodus 31:16 and Deuteronomy 5:12, when the words inscribed on the Ten Commandments are read: “The people of Israel shall keep the Shabbat...”

What does it mean, to keep or to guard the Shabbat? “While Shabbat occurs every Friday evening and Saturday, it is more than simply another day of the week. It is a special day and we invest it with specialness. Friday and Saturday come automatically, but Shabbat takes place only when we make it happen. We prepare for Shabbat by the clothes we wear, by the meals we eat, by the lighting of Sabbath candles, and by chanting the *Kiddush* over wine to set apart this special time...Rest, worship and study are essential elements of Shabbat observance. The principle of Shabbat is to sanctify time. The whole of Shabbat is greater than the sum of its parts. It is more than lighting candles, drinking wine, or attending a service. We sanctify Shabbat by setting it apart, making it distinctive, and differentiating it from the rest of our week.”

This week's *mitzvah* is to observe the Shabbat. Find a way to make Friday night and Saturday special and sacred. Of course, attending our community Shabbat dinner with Shabbat rituals, followed by Short 'N Sweet Services, is a perfect way to enter into the spirit of the day!

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

Mitzvot for Purim

on Wednesday, 04 March 2015.

MITZVOT FOR PURIM

1. Reading the *Megillah*, the Scroll of Esther
2. Rejoicing
3. Delivering *Shalach Manot* (gifts)
4. Giving money to the poor (*tzedakah*)

Last week I told you about two of the four *mitzvot* associated with Purim, delivering gifts of food to family and friends, and giving money to the poor.

One of the remaining *mitzvot* is telling the story of Purim, through a public reading of Megillat Esther, or the Scroll of Esther, found in the Hebrew Bible. The highlight of the storytelling is drowning out the name of the villain, Haman, whenever his name is read. We'll tell the story two ways this Friday night – first, we will read the story from a scroll, and then our teenagers will act out the story, always the highlight of our Purim celebration! The other remaining *mitzvah* is being happy! We express our happiness two ways: attending a carnival or party, and participating in a festive meal. Wearing a costume is an important part of the celebration because being hidden is part of the Purim story. Esther hid her Jewishness, and God's participation in our salvation is also hidden. We can treat Purim as a children's holiday, or we can participate with great joy – and one way to do that is to dress in a costume, or at least wear a mask.

You can perform both of the remaining *mitzvot*, reading the *Megillah* and rejoicing by attending our Purim Carnival, BBQ dinner, and Short 'N Sweet services this Friday afternoon and evening! Has the "mitzvah of the week" ever been so fun?

May you have a week of great joy,

Purim Gifts

on Wednesday, 25 February 2015.

MITZVOT FOR PURIM

- Reading the *Megillah*, the Scroll of Esther
- Rejoicing
- Delivering *Shalach Manot* (gifts)
- Giving money to the poor (*tzedakah*)

Next week is Purim! We will celebrate it Friday night with our annual Purim Carnival and Short N Sweet Service (details can be found under announcements). There are four *mitzvot* (commandments) associated with this holiday! This week I will tell you about two of the *mitzvot*, and next week we will continue with the other two. Here are your *mitzvot* of the week:

- Remember the poor: On every holiday we are asked to remember the poor in our community, but on Purim it is a requirement to gift a gift to at least two poor people. This gift can be anything: food, clothes, or money, or whatever the poor person needs. Every poor person is supposed to give a gift to someone else. At Emeth, we collect clothes and food for the poor, and one way to fulfill this *mitzvah* would be to bring items for those buckets (located in the social hall). And of course, fill your *tzedakah* cans and bring them anytime between now and Purim to the temple. Find additional ways to help the poor in celebration of Purim.
- Gifts for friends and family: While we are asked to give gifts to the poor, we are also instructed to deliver *Shalach Manot* baskets. These gifts are designated for friends or relatives and should contain food or drink. Most baskets include hamantaschen, the triangular shaped cookies associated with Purim. The gifts should be prepared before the holiday, so this week is the perfect time to begin assembling them. If possible, the gift is delivered by a “messenger” because “*shalach*” comes from the Hebrew word “to send”. Often one’s children are the messengers. If no messengers are available it is permissible to bring the gift in person.

Next week we’ll add the other two *mitzvot* for Purim for the *mitzvah* of the week!

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

Enjoy Peace With Everyone

on Tuesday, 17 February 2015.

"One shall not exact revenge or bear a grudge" (Vayikra 19:18).

“Bear in mind that life is short, and that with every passing day you are nearer to the end of your life. Therefore, how can you waste your time on petty quarrels and discords? Restrain your anger, hold your temper in check, and enjoy peace with everyone.” (Rebbe Nachman of Breslov)

Last week, our congregation was honored to host Ruth Steinfeld, who told us her painful story of being a hidden child during the Holocaust. Ruth ended her presentation by talking about how she came to forgiveness, admittedly unusual among Holocaust survivors. Ruth emphasized that holding on to anger and resentment did her harm - physically, emotionally and spiritually.

After hearing this gentle woman speak, who could not look at those people in each of our lives who have caused us pain and to whom we are holding onto anger and resentment? For many of us, some of these experiences happened years ago and yet we cannot let go. Don't wait for Yom Kippur; now is the time, as Rebbe Nachman said, to "enjoy peace with everyone."

The mitzvah of the week is for each of us to spend some private time thinking about those who are recipients of our anger. If there is someone who needs to be forgiven, do so. If there is someone who you need to make peace with, there is no better time than now.

May you experience a week of peacemaking and a Shabbat of peace,

Bless & Know You Are Blessed

on Tuesday, 10 February 2015.

*"When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God, your God,
for the good land which God has given you."* Deuteronomy 8:10

This verse from Torah is the source for the *mitzvah*, commandment, to thank the Holy One for our food, specifically the *Birkat Hamazon*, Grace After Meals. According to Chumash Etz Hayyim quoting Menahem Mendel of Kotzk: "(Grace After Meals) is the fundamental *mitzvah* because all people should be capable of feeling grateful that the earth has produced food for them to eat."

When we perform some *mitzvot* we feel like we are being of service to others. But this *mitzvah* serves us. How much more satisfying our food would be if we ate with a consciousness of gratefulness! How long does it take to end your meal with a word of thanks to the Holy One? For your *Mitzvah of the Week*, take a moment after eating to express your appreciation for having "eaten your fill." Here is a very abbreviated English version of the Birkat Hamazon, a good place to start:

Blessed is our God, Sovereign of the universe, who sustains the entire world with goodness, kindness and mercy. God gives food to all creatures, for God's mercy is everlasting. Blessed is our God, who provides food for all. For all these blessings we thank our God with praise, as it is written: When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to your God for the good land which God has given you. Blessed is God for the land and its produce.

May you experience and express gratefulness this week, and may you have a Shabbat of peace.

Gift of the Heart

on Monday, 02 February 2015.

Mitzvah of the Week:
A Gift of the Heart

"A time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance"
(Ecclesiastes 3:4).

This Shabbat has its own name: Shabbat Shira, the Shabbat of Song. Its name comes from this week's Torah reading, B'Shallach, as we read of the Israelites' miraculous escape from Egypt. When they arrive on the other side of the Sea of Reeds, Moses sings "the Song at the Sea" – *Shirat HaYam* – followed by Miriam leading the women in singing and dancing. Even the Haftarah this week is a song, the poem of Deborah, the prophet and judge.

Most of us experience music as entertainment, but in Judaism song is "the loftiest level of spirituality, for song can inspire joy and joy causes the Divine spirit to manifest itself." (Shabbos 30b, the Talmud, Torah.org)

Last week, we experienced that lofty level of spirituality at Congregation Emeth, when we were led in song and prayer by Craig Taubman and his band. Before services, Craig asked me why it was so important to me to bring him here, both in terms of expense and effort. I didn't get to answer him, but I want to tell you:

Nothing lifts my soul and brings me closer to the Holy One of blessings than Jewish music. When we sing together as a congregation, I am moved. When I hear cantors and beautiful singers of Jewish prayers, I get lost in their song. I've been blessed to be in Craig's company, and with Debbie Friedman (may her memory be a blessing) many times. I've heard and learned from some of the greatest cantors of our generation. I just wanted you to have that opportunity too. It was a pure gift, from the heart.

Your mitzvah of this week is to discover your own passion and share it with another. The sharing may come as a physical object, or it may be a story, or yes, even a song. Is there someone in your life who is ill, or lonely, or just needs cheering up? What is your gift that might lift their spirits? Find your gift, and share it.

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

Sing Unto God

on Thursday, 22 January 2015.

*Sing unto God a new song;
Sing unto God, all the earth! (Psalm 96:1)*

This week, Congregation Emeth has the extraordinary opportunity to be led in "singing unto God," by world-renown composer and singer, Craig Taubman. I am bringing Craig here as a gift to you, Congregation Emeth, so that you have the experience of finding that voice inside you that sings to God. The intention is for it to inspire you, to awaken within you the ability to sing with joy the words of prayer.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "There is an inner connection between music and the spirit. When language aspires to the transcendent and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Music, said Arnold Bennett is 'a language which the soul alone understands but which the soul can never translate.' ... Tolstoy called it 'the shorthand of emotion.' ... Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul."

When we are in prayer, we do not read; we chant and we sing. Every generation has found its own way to express our deepest emotions through song. Craig Taubman is one of the contemporary musicians who took the words of the siddur and made them accessible as prayer, transforming the prayer experience for our generation.

The mitzvah for this week is for you to listen to Jewish music (youtube, CDs, whatever sources you have) and allow it to penetrate into your soul. And of course, to experience our own Friday Night Live this Erev Shabbat, this Friday night, 7:15 PM, in our sanctuary.

Walk the Talk

on Tuesday, 13 January 2015.

We stand in solidarity with the international community as we renounce the Islamist terror attacks on a French magazine which left 12 dead, and a second terror attack against France's Jewish community. We stand in solidarity with France and its Jewish community at this difficult time. We pray that the outrage of the people of France and good people across Europe leads to an awakening of the dangers of Islamist extremism. May they be guided by the wisdom to implement policies that protect the Jewish people in their lands.

Mitzvah of the Week:

"Walk the Talk"

*Engage each aspect of human nature – your own and others –
in ways that make you a source of blessing.*

Each service, when we chant the Prayers for Healing, we sing this line: "May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing." What does it mean to make our lives a blessing? In Genesis 12:2-3, God tells Abraham: "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..."

In the last book of Torah, we learn that walking in God's ways is the pathway to becoming a blessing. In Deuteronomy 26:17, Moses tells the Israelites: "You have affirmed this day that Adonai is your God, that you will walk in God's ways, that you will observe God's laws and commandments, and you will obey God." In other words, by observing the ethical teachings of Torah – how we treat one another, our environment, the stranger, the poor – is how we become a blessing.

Most of us behave this way. We are kind to those around us, we attempt to bring comfort and joy to those in our lives, we are generous to those in need. So what would change if you were *consciously* doing these things rather than automatically doing them? I expect we would be doing more and better.

This week may you consciously "walk the talk," leading you to a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.