

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January - June, 2016

Interfaith Message

on Wednesday, 16 December 2015.

On Tuesday afternoon, Congregation Emeth hosted a “steering committee” of interfaith clergy in South Valley. We came together, to form a response from faith leaders to the current climate in our country regarding people who are “other” – in particular our Moslem neighbors. When we decided to have our next meeting, they requested returning to Emeth because of the special feeling of meeting in our library. I wanted you to know that!

Until becoming part of this community I had little knowledge and even less interaction with people of different faiths. My father always taught me, “There are many mountaintops and all of them reach to the stars,” and taught his children to respect differing beliefs. Even growing up in Texas, we knew that discrimination was wrong and each of us stood up to it in our own way.

But I had few friends who were not Jewish. This current opportunity to learn from my interfaith families as well as the clergy in our community has enriched my rabbinate and my own personal opportunities for growth. Our “steering committee” has plans for future activities that will soon be announced; in the meantime put on your calendars: January 18, Martin L. King Day, 7:30 PM, Advent Lutheran Church, for a social interfaith gathering.

To our non-Jewish members, you are a blessing to my life. 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, ethnic culture, socio-economic standing. We all pray for peace. As I’ve come to know you, 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. During the season of light may you experience God’s Light shining upon you, and may you experience the love of family and community.

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

The Light of Chanukah

on Tuesday, 08 December 2015.

I wanted this week’s message to be filled with joy and happy notes about Chanukah. However, I had a true case of writer’s block after hearing the racist and xenophobic language from someone who wants to be the leader of this great nation, and then watching his favorable ratings improve as a result. How do I speak of the joyous event that happened more than 2000 years ago, led by the brave Maccabees, when today we are looking for true

leadership and seeing none? How can one talk about miracles and faith when the fear of terrorism is dragging people to stores to purchase guns?

And yet, this is the perfect holiday for these times. When some would say that we should bar a particular religious group from immigrating into this country and spew slurs about our Islamic brethren, this is the time to observe the holiday that celebrates religious freedom and be inspired by it. When we are feeling hopeless and helpless, this is the time to observe the holiday that teaches us the true meaning of faith. When we feel like we are wandering in the dark, our candles are bringing light.

“22 centuries ago in Israel, after the public practice of Judaism had been banned, Jews fought for and won their freedom, and these lights were the symbol of that victory,” wrote Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. During these nights of Chanukah we pray that our candles will inspire within us the determination to insure the public practice of all religions, not only our own.

Again, using the words of Rabbi Sacks, “Chanukah candles are the light Judaism brings to the world when we are unafraid to announce our identity in public, live by our principles and fight, if necessary, for our freedom.” Today, let us bring that light into the public square and fight, if necessary, for the rights of everyone to live in this great land, unafraid.

May the lights of Chanukah bring you faith and joy, and may you have a week of gladness and a Shabbat of peace.

Miracle of Chanukah

on Tuesday, 01 December 2015.

In the Jewish world there have been studies, reports, and books, all describing the ideal synagogue. In all of these studies, on page after page, we see a pattern that people need spiritual connection, growth, and transformation, and that only synagogues can provide it.

We have created that spiritual connection at Congregation Emeth and share it with all spiritual seekers. We welcome the believers and non-believers, religious and non-religious, singles, families, empty nesters, intermarried families, GLBTQ and their families. Our doors are open to all, and we are always striving to improve and expand. The communal commitment to Jewish life, to the pursuit of holiness, transforms a synagogue from being just another building into being a place where G-d dwells, a sacred space.

As Chanukah approaches we remember at how important the Holy Temples in Jerusalem were to the Israelites, and how the memory of these sacred institutions stirs our hearts. Chanukah means “rededication”, and reminds us of the time that the Assyrians defiled our Temple - and we remember the brave Maccabees who fought and won the first war for religious freedom in world history. The first thing the Maccabees did after entering the defiled Temple was to sanctify it by lighting the Menorah with ritual oil. We focus on the miracle of Chanukah – that the ritual oil lasted eight days, giving the priests time to prepare enough oil to keep the Menorah burning without interruption, as commanded in Torah. The Jewish people came together in that Holy Temple and restored it as a sacred space.

We are blessed to experience the sacred every time we enter our beloved Congregational home. On December 11, when we light our Chanukiah (Chanukah Menorah) in our sanctuary, we will remember our heroic ancestors and recognize that we are the ones who now are keeping the blessed flame of Judaism burning. And that is the real miracle of Chanukah.

Thanksgiving Prayers

on Wednesday, 25 November 2015.

The ancient Rabbis taught that the most important prayer in Jewish liturgy is the Modim prayer, the prayer of thanksgiving. The first line begins “We gratefully acknowledge.” This prayer is said every day, three times daily – because it is part of every T’filah or Amidah, the “standing prayer”. In fact, many Jews start their day using similar words: modeh ani lefanecha – I give thanks before You (God).

Acknowledging or praising God is the central idea of psalms. In fact the word “modem” is used 67 times, in phrases such as: “It is good to praise Adonai...”; “Give thanks to God ...” We see that praising God is fundamental to prayer.

Every day, at least three times a day, we are taught to take a moment to say, “Thank you God, Baruch HaShem. I am grateful. You have given me so much and I am so filled with gratitude to you for your miracles that surround us every day.”

Sometimes it is hard to say thank you. Sometimes life can be painful and it’s hard to find something that calls us to praise God or thank God. But our tradition teaches us that we continue to praise, we continue to thank, even when it is difficult, even when we don’t want to. The Rabbis taught us that we should find 100 opportunities when we can say thank you. Now they didn’t tell us to say thank you 100 times – they said find 100 opportunities to say thank you. When we are looking for opportunities for thanking God, blessings appear before us. 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.

During this season of Thanksgiving, be conscious of all you have in your life. That little voice will start reminding you of your troubles and try to stop your gratefulness. Shush it away, and just this week, try to acknowledge all of the reasons you have to say: Modim Anachnu Lach – I give thanks to You.

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

FROM THE RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER OF THE URJ – please take action now!

As we mourn the recent loss of life in Paris, some have called for a slowing or halt to the entry of refugees into the U.S. Such steps would not honor our history as a haven from those seeking persecution; we can keep our doors open and maintain our national security.

Please consider [signing our action alert](#) and sending it to Senators Boxer and Feinstein. Additionally, because many Senators will be home for Thanksgiving recess, now is a great time to call Senator Boxer's and Feinstein's district offices or set up an in person meeting.

Here is the number for Senator Boxer's State office: (916) 448-2787

Here is the number for Senator Boxer's Washington, D.C. office: (202) 224-3553

Here is the number for Senator Feinstein's State office: (415) 393-0707

Here is the number for Senator Feinstein's Washington, D.C. office: (202) 224-3841

The Senate is expected to vote next week on a bill similar to The American Security Against Foreign Enemies (SAFE) Act of 2015 (H.R. 4038) recently passed by the House and which would effectively stop all Iraq and Syrian refugee resettlement. We oppose this legislation and by raising your voice to your members of Congress, you can help ensure that the United States remains a safe haven for the many fleeing violence and persecution.

"The whole world is a very narrow bridge..."

on Wednesday, 18 November 2015.

*Kol ha-o-lam ku-lo gesher tzar me'od
V'ha-i-kar lo l'fached klal*

The whole world is a very narrow bridge;
the important thing is not to be afraid.
-Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

What does your Rabbi say to you in light of recent massacres in our precious world? You have politicians and journalists - and let's not forget FaceBook - all eager to tell us what to think and how to react to the horror that has befallen our precious world. Paris was not the only city under siege; during the same week there were killings of innocents in Kenya, Lebanon, and Israel as well.

Committing these atrocities are extremist Islamic terror organizations. Their objective is worldwide dominance, with the absence of the West and western ideas, a world without Jews and without tolerance for any other religion including Christianity. They are called ISIS, the Islamic State, Hezbollah, Hamas, Al Qaida, Muslim Brotherhood – different names but they are all related, funded by Iran, Qatar, and other extremists. In more than 100 countries the victims are Christians. They are part of the refugee group that is fleeing Syria, driven out of Mosul, removed from Afghanistan, butchered, beheaded and terrorized elsewhere.

We must realize this is not the work of faithful Muslims, for they are the victims, perhaps most of all. "Hundreds of Muslims are dying daily, 90 per cent at the hands of fellow Muslims. Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs have all suffered their own tragedies. Yazidis are on the brink of the abyss." (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

Which brings us to the issue of refugees. In my opinion we must not, cannot, close our doors to the "huddled

masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse..." (Emma Lazarus, poem on the Statue of Liberty) As Jews, we know better than anyone what it is like to be exiled or to try to take refuge from a persecuting country, only to have the metaphoric doors shut in our faces by nations of the world. If fear causes us to act inhuman, the extremist murderers have won.

Take comfort in knowing, as I am convinced, that the 18-24 month tedious vetting process refugees must endure to enter this country will only be made more difficult, in light of the Paris massacre. Who are these refugees? They are people, families, who are trying to escape the very extremists who attacked Paris.

The Chassidic master Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlov said, "All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all." But, Rebbe Nachman, I would ask: how do we conquer our fear? I imagine Rebbe Nachman answering me, b'col zote, in spite of all this, we must find the opening in our hearts for the Light of the Divine to help us maintain our faith in the future.

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

I'm Back!

on Wednesday, 11 November 2015.

I just returned from the Biennial Convention of the URJ (our "parent" organization, unifying all Reform congregations) in Orlando, Florida. The convention was only a few days after my return from two weeks in Israel. There were many highlights from both experiences that I want to share with you, but I haven't yet had time to organize my thoughts (or many notes!). But there are three themes from the convention that stand out:

The first is the theme of the convention, Audacious Hospitality. Almost every speaker and program included this theme in some way. This is the world in which Congregation Emeth lives, but nonetheless I learned much about audacious hospitality and ways that we can incorporate it even more than we already do. And how proud I was to be part of the landmark vote that stated our support and welcome for all transgendered people.

The second is the theme of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. This is an area that our congregation is primed to explore, in my opinion. Kathy and Rick Coencas are considering projects and Curt Palm has volunteered to coordinate this year's efforts for the Lord's Table Christmas meal and donations. I believe there are many of you who would like to get involved in a variety of ways and hope you will let Kathy, Rick and Curt, as well as our President Becky Neto know your social justice priorities so that we can frame a significant tikkun olam agenda. We are part of a community of caring, contributing, active, socially conscientious members of our greater society, and there is so much "repairing" that awaits us. Let us begin.

The third area is in Ritual practice, particularly our Shabbat observances. I've been told that one of the highlights of any Biennial is the Shabbat experience and this year did not disappoint. Singing prayers with 5000 other souls was spiritually transformational. Dancing around the large "sanctuary" of the convention hall was uplifting. Being exposed to new melodies for prayers raised my consciousness and alertness, while I took comfort in the melodies which were familiar. And yet, there is something comforting and assuring about prayer in our own Emeth sanctuary. In our small group our voices can be heard and our spirits can find a natural resting place. The

Biennial inspired me to think of ideas which I hope will attract more of you to attend our services. We have significant participation for a congregation our size, but I want to bring the beauty of Shabbat rest and joy into more of your lives. I will be speaking with the Ritual Committee about this, and I am also eager for YOUR ideas and feedback about what would enhance your Shabbat experiences at Emeth. And now, I am home! I missed all of you and look forward to seeing you this Friday night at our community dinner and Shabbat Short N Sweet, and next week at our Shabbat of Gratitude services.

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

Chag HaSimchah

on Thursday, 08 October 2015.

We are nearing the end of our Jewish holiday season! From the prayers for a blessed New Year; to the joyous experience of having been forgiven on Yom Kippur; to Sukkot, the biblical, agricultural and historical festival, which is also called Chag HaSimchah, the joyous or happy holiday; to Simchat Torah, the celebration of ending and then beginning again the reading of the Torah, which we will observe this Friday evening.

Some people are “synagogued-out” by this point, meaning they have had “enough” of synagogue services. To me, that’s like saying I’ve had the entrée, who needs dessert? Simchat Torah is the culmination of this great joyous season. We end the cycle of Torah readings by chanting the last words in our Holy text. Then, just we start reading Torah over again, from the beginning, as if we never read it before. This is not hard to imagine because scholars, rabbis, and sages study Torah their entire lives and always discover new insights and understandings. I encourage you to come to Emeth Friday night to complete the holiday cycle by sharing a Beit Sefer (Religious School) sponsored dinner in our sukkah for the last time, and later services and celebrating and dancing with and around the Torahs. (Edited from a message sent in 2009)

Have a week of blessings and a Simchat Torah of great joy!

Sukkot Message

on Wednesday, 30 September 2015.

Judaism is based on our ancient history but it is relevant in every way to modern times. Sukkot is the perfect example of that. When we think about the sukkah (“hut”), we remember the time we lived in temporary huts in the desert, as we wandered on our way to the Promised Land. We may also remember that a sukkah is a symbol of biblical times, when farmers would live in huts in the fields as they collected their fall produce.

But the deeper message of the Sukkot holiday is its reminder of those who are homeless, for whom living in a temporary hut would be a luxury. Who is not moved by the thousands of refugees searching the world for nations who will accept them and house them, and provide safety for their families? Who is not moved by the children washed up on the shores as their parents put them in insecure boats in the hope they and the entire

family will make it safely across bodies of waters? How many hundreds of refugees, people of all ages, have drowned as they try to escape war, terrorism, and slave traffickers. Some are LGBT asylum seekers, escaping from Africa and the Middle East where they are persecuted because of their sexual orientation.

The great interpreter and commentator Maimonides wrote that the sukkah is built to remind the rich of the needs of the poor. The harvest festival reminds us that there are people who are hungry, homeless, or poor.

Our High Holy Day liturgy and our Sukkot holiday reminds us that we cannot stand idly by. To make it easy for you, I am starting a separate fund in the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund. Send your tax deductible donation addressed to me at the Temple. Make the check payable to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund and on the subject line write Refugee Relief. I will add to your donations, any amount you can spare, and send a check from our Congregation to one of the many fine organizations working to provide safety and security for these refugees.

May the holiday of Sukkot bring you great joy. It's a mitzvah - commandment - to be happy on Sukkot! And may we celebrate it together, under the stars this Shabbat.

Shana Tova!

on Wednesday, 16 September 2015.

Our congregation had the opportunity to be inspired on Rosh Hashanah, using our new machzor (High Holy Day prayerbook). I've heard from many of you that you appreciated the inspiring poems and readings included in the machzor. Being together as a community is always moving for me, and I hope it was for you as well. If you were unable to attend our services, I hope to see you Tuesday evening and Wednesday for Yom Kippur.

This Shabbat is called Shabbat Shuvah, literally the Sabbath of Return, because it takes place between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This Shabbat gets its name from its special Haftarah (readings from Prophets). The Haftarah has two themes, taken from two places in the Bible. One comes from Hosea 14:2-10, and is about the importance of sincere teshuvah, repentance. The other, from Micah 7:18-20, praises G-d's attribute of compassion and mercy. The restfulness of Shabbat should give us an opportunity to think about atonement, and the process of teshuvah in which we should be engaged.

Now is the time to make that phone call you've been putting off – to an estranged family member or friend, or even the clerk in the grocery store down the street to whom you've been rude. This is the time for the work of repenting, and Tuesday evening and Wednesday is the time when we come before the Holy One to ask for forgiveness. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, former Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, taught that “repentance is the healthiest experience of the soul.” It is the opportunity for a spiritual cleansing.

When approaching those from whom you are seeking forgiveness, you might say: I apologize if I have hurt you by what I have done, or have failed to do, by what I have said, or what I have failed to say, since last Yom Kippur. I ask for your forgiveness as we enter Yom Kippur. Try to be specific in your apology – I am sorry I didn't call you as I said I would, I'm sorry I offended you when I _____, I'm sorry I (fill in the blank).

May you experience a hard week of introspection, followed by a meaningful fast. May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

Turn and Return

on Tuesday, 08 September 2015.

Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.
Return to who you are, return to what you are,
return to where you are born and reborn again.
(Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach)

This Sunday evening, the month of preparation ends and Rosh Hashanah begins. We speak of the Holy Days before us, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the ten Days of Awe in between, as opportunities for *teshuvah*, repentance, or more literally, return. In the lyrics above, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach beautifully captures where it is we are returning. We are not returning to a place, or to a time. We are returning to ourselves, to our souls, to who we know we have the potential to be.

For the past year, we have been observing the Year of Living Jewishly, expressed by a *mitzvah* (commandment) of the week. I hope your year of living Jewishly only just began and you will continue to incorporate the rituals and activities you learned about this past year. A refresher course is always available to you (you can even start over!). Each message from the past year is posted on the Rabbi's Blog on Emeth's website, <http://www.emeth.net/news/rabbis-blog-sp-994>. While the Year of Living Jewishly officially ends with this Rabbi's Message, living Jewishly is a day-to-day, year-to-year part of who we are.

May you be blessed in the coming year with peace, happiness, health, and the love and support of family, friends, and your Emeth spiritual home.

Shana Tova,

On Rosh Hashannah it is written...

on Tuesday, 25 August 2015.

“On Rosh Hashannah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die...Repentance (Teshuva), T'filah (Prayer), and Righteousness (Tzedakah) avert the severe decree.” (Unetaneh Tokef prayer, High Holiday Machzor/prayer book)

We have less than three weeks until Rosh Hashanah, followed 10 days later by Yom Kippur. Three weeks! During this Hebrew month of Elul, we have been considering areas that we need to repair our inner spiritual lives and do the work of repentance, prayer, and righteousness.

This week, we will focus on tzedakah – righteousness - for our mitzvah. In English, the word we use is charity. Charity implies kindness and compassion. The wealthy open their wallets to the poor; a good deed. But tzedakah carries a different implication. Coming from the root word for righteous, it tells us that giving to the poor is an act of justice. In Judaism, we don't give because of our open heart; we give because we are obligated to do so.

It is Jewish practice to give tzedakah during this time of Elul. The obligation to fulfill this mitzvah can be made in several ways: gifts to the poor, gifts to the temple, or gifts to educational institutions. Congregation Emeth has many opportunities for you to fulfill this mitzvah; I am happy to guide you. This is another good time to empty your tzedakah cans/pushkes and bring the coins to the temple before the onset of the Holy Days. High Holiday donations are often made in memory of a parent or loved one, and donating a new High Holiday Machzor in a loved one's memory fulfills that purpose.

May you find spiritual enrichment through your High Holiday preparations, and may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Psalm 27 - A Psalm of David

on Monday, 17 August 2015.

Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear? Adonai is the strength of my life. Whom shall I dread? When evildoers draw near to slander me. When foes threaten – they stumble and fall. Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear. Though wars threaten, I remain steadfast in my faith. One thing I ask of Adonai – for this I yearn: To dwell in the House of Adonai all the days of my life – to behold God's beauty, to pray in God's sanctuary. Hiding me in God's shrine, safe from peril, God will shelter me beyond the reach of disaster, and raise my head high above my enemies.

Adonai, hear my voice when I call; Be gracious to me, and answer. It is You whom I seek, says my heart. It is your presence that I see, Adonai. Do not hide from me; do not reject your servant. You have always been my help; do not abandon me. Forsake me not, my God of deliverance. Though my father and my mother leave me, Adonai will care for me.

Teach me your way, Adonai. Guide me on the right path, to confound my oppressors. Do not abandon me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses have risen against me, purveyors of malice and lies. Yet I have faith that I shall surely see Adonai's goodness in the land of the living. Hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.

I enjoy reading psalms. I've learned to appreciate them as metaphors for my life, as poetic expressions of the difficulties human beings encounter. One of the psalms that gives me the most comfort is Psalm 27, a very personal intimate psalm, which is traditionally read daily during month of Elul until end of Sukkot. The connection between this psalm and the High Holidays was interpreted by the Sages this way: "Adonai is my light" (Psalm 27:1) – on Rosh Hashanah, the day of judgment; "And my help" (Psalm 27:1) – on Yom Kippur, when God saves us and forgives all our sins; "And God will hide me in God's tabernacle..." (Psalm 27:5) – on Sukkot.

I find myself in this psalm – it reflects my anxieties, my ego, my fears. At a time when I felt estranged from friends, the line "false witnesses have risen against me, people who breathe out lies," assured me that God would

ultimately protect me. “Though my father and mother leave me, God will care for me” assured me that I was not alone. “Oh God, hear my voice when I call be gracious to me and answer” spoke of my trust that God was listening to the cries of my heart. When I was frightened by illness, the enemies and wars in the psalm was infection attacking me.

For your mitzvah assignment, read the psalm several times (daily?) during this week.

Try to let the words really speak to you, see if you can find one truth for yourself. Be mindful of a word or a phrase that resonates with you. Accept that this psalm, like the other psalms in the Book of Psalms is a metaphor and poetry. Go beyond the literal and find the deeper meaning for yourself. It is read during this month of Elul because it will prepare you for the Holy Days ahead.

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

Prepare Yourself

on Monday, 10 August 2015.

“Every person must prepare oneself for 30 days before (Rosh Hashanah) with repentance and prayer and charity for the day to appear in judgment before God on Rosh Hashanah.”
(Mateh Moshe, a work of Jewish law published in Krakow in 1591.)

The Hebrew month of Elul begins this Saturday night. Just as we kiss Shabbat goodbye, we usher in the Month of Preparation, the Month of Introspection, the Month of Repairing, the Month of Transformation. This is the last month before the Days of Awe, the High Holidays.

Rabbi Alan Lew (of blessed memory) wrote a book entitled, This is for Real and You are Completely Unprepared; the Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation. Using Rabbi Lew’s book as a guide (as is my annual custom), our Mitzvah of the Week during the month of Elul will follow his suggestions for proper preparation for the Holy Days.

To begin (though Elul begins Saturday night we can begin now!), this week’s mitzvah is prayer. The Hebrew word for prayer is l’hitpalel, to judge oneself. Through the process of prayer, one has the opportunity to examine oneself and come to know both one’s strengths and weaknesses. This gives us insight into the purpose of Jewish prayer, which is to judge ourselves in order to lead us make appropriate or needed changes in our behavior, especially in relationship to other people. Now, one would expect the word for prayer to be the opposite – to reflect a reaching outward towards the One to whom prayer is directed. But it is not God who changes through our prayer—we don’t influence God; the act of praying, of speaking honestly about ourselves and our lives has the potential to guide us to make changes. Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish.

The Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov instructs us to turn everything over to God. Anything you want, ask God for it. Anything you need, ask God. Anything that concerns you, that keeps you up at night, tell God. Rebbe Nachman says, talk to God and tell God everything that is in your heart. You will experience a kind of

spiritual cleansing and a motivation to repair relationships as a result of this process, and you might find peace inside when peace was absent. But you may ask, when are you going to squeeze time for prayer into your already busy life?

During the month of Elul, Congregation Emeth offers you many opportunities for communal prayer. I urge you to make this prayer experience a priority in your lives for the next 30 days. You will arrive at Erev Rosh Hashanah “warmed up” for the prayers of the Holy Days. It will make a big difference in your holiday experience because you will have already begun the process of transformation.

See you at services – get a head start this Friday night! May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Do Not Stand Idly By

on Wednesday, 05 August 2015.

Do Not Stand Idly By...

Leviticus 19:16

What a difficult week this has been. We read about a 16-year-old girl attending a gay pride parade in Jerusalem who was stabbed to death, along with five others who sustained less serious wounds. We read about a baby in the West Bank who was burned to death by Jewish terrorists; the surviving parents and siblings are in critical condition. And lest we think those things only happen in “other places”, we read about the child in Santa Cruz, living in a peaceful art community, who was kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and murdered by a 15 year old neighbor whom she knew well. And in a Louisiana movie theater, a gunman shot and killed 2 moviegoers and wounded 9 others before taking his own life.

“Do not stand idly by” is actually a Talmudic interpretation of the admonition in Torah, which actually states: “Do not profit by the blood of your fellow.” The commandment in Torah could be interpreted to mean do nothing that endangers another at the expense of your own well-being.

For your participation in this week’s mitzvah, I direct you to two specific issues. The first is “Do Not Stand Idly By: A Jewish Community Pledge to Save Lives”, the first campaign in the Jewish community to draw attention to homophobic and transphobic bullying. On the keshetonline.org website, you will read of a pledge to stand up against demeaning or bullying treatment of anyone due to real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. For more information, go to: www.jewishcommunitypledge.org/.

The second issue is reducing gun violence. The URJ is supporting the campaign to press gun manufacturers to create safer dealer networks and smart gun technology. For more information about this campaign, check out www.donotstandidlyby.org and/or http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/?syspage=article&item_id=1982.

Of course, these are not the only areas where this mitzvah applies. We have many opportunities to help others in need: poverty, hunger, and the environment and more. There is much to be done, and we are obligated to do what we can.

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

You shall have no other gods...

on Tuesday, 28 July 2015.

*You shall have no other gods beside Me.
Deuteronomy 5:7*

This week's long and complex Torah reading includes the Shema and a repetition of the Ten Commandments, including the Second Commandment, "You shall have no other gods beside Me". The chapter also includes many admonitions against worshipping idols, spirits, angels, pagan deities, spirits of the dead, stars, images of nature, and "false gods."

In our modern sensibilities, few of us would consider bowing down to a tree or worshipping a pagan deity. However, my clergy colleagues had an online discussion of modern false gods, beginning with this question posed by Cantor Paul Buch: "Are not the true false gods in today's world money, power and the many other selfish pursuits which deny the interconnectivity of all of creation and the responsibility we have to be the stewards of our environment and each other?"

This is not a simple question to ponder, but it is an important one because it speaks to and of all of us, in some degree. The mitzvah of this week is honestly recognizing our own false gods and beginning the difficult process of confronting and wrestling with our priorities.

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

Do Not Hate

on Wednesday, 22 July 2015.

*"You shall not hate your kinfolk in your heart."
(Leviticus 19:17)*

Loving one another as expressed in Torah is an example of our obligation to be kind to each other. In this quotation, however, Torah takes the rare step of commanding an emotion: Do not hate!

This week, Saturday night and Sunday, we observe the tragic day on the Jewish calendar when the First and Second Temples were destroyed. The date for both was Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av,

considered the darkest day on the Jewish calendar. (This year, the date falls on Shabbat so it is purposely pushed up a date to avoid communal mourning on Shabbat.)

Tradition teaches us that the destruction of the Temple was the result of “causeless hatred”. Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, Director of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem (and my teacher) wrote, “...Historians confirm that disputes within the Jewish community inside the besieged Jerusalem, including violence and the destruction of property, were major factors in the city’s downfall.” He notes that the destruction of Jerusalem is not only a historical episode but is also “a paradigm of the Jewish people as a whole and indeed of each subgroup and community, as applicable today as it was in 70 CE. We do not always have control over the circumstances and values in the greater society/world, but we should try to influence those within the Jewish community, as these can play a critical role in its ultimate strength or weakness...Society must be based on respect, integrity and a willingness to compromise personal interest for the welfare of the community.”

During this time of mourning, how can you integrate the mitzvah of the week, “Do not hate”, into your own life? Is there someone in your family, your congregation, your community who riles up such negative feelings, even if you wouldn’t assign such a strong word as “hate” to describe it? How can you reconcile your feelings so that you can improve your relationship? Oftentimes reconciling these emotions requires one to look to the good instead of focusing on those aspects that offend us.

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

P.S. How Should Reform Jews Observe Tisha B’Av? Rabbi Stephen Lewis Fuchs asks and answers this question on the Reform Judaism’s blog and I encourage you to read it. His viewpoint represents my own. Go go: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2015/07/20/how-should-reform-jews-observe-tishah-bav>. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at rabbidebbieisrael@gmail.com.

Shalom uv'racha - peace and blessings,

Save a Life

on Wednesday, 22 July 2015.

Piku'ach Nefesh – Save Lives

“Neither shall you stand by the blood of your neighbor...”

(Leviticus 19:16)

The Talmud and rabbis through the centuries understood this verse to mean that a person must do everything possible to save another’s life. For most of us, this means:

Sign up to be a blood or bone marrow donor

Make sure fire alarms are in working order and purchase fire extinguishers

Report suspicious persons

Make sure pathways are clear so people won’t trip

Drive carefully and don’t text and drive!

At Congregation Emeth, we have another way for you to perform this important mitzvah. At its July meeting, the Board of Directors unanimously agreed that Emeth would be “Nut Free” at all events at the temple, as well as any event sponsored by the congregation, even if it takes place at someone’s home or the park, to accommodate those with life threatening nut allergies. (We are not making guarantees, but we hope everyone will heed this policy and be conscious of what you are bringing into the temple, even for your own personal use.)

Personally I had little understanding how my eating nuts caused a life threatening situation for someone else whose food might not contain nuts. I confess to being confused and often (on an airplane for example) unsympathetic because of my ignorance.

Here’s what I’ve learned: Nut allergies can cause a severe, potentially fatal, allergic reaction (anaphylaxis). The only way to prevent a reaction is strictly avoiding nuts and nut products. Tree nuts include walnuts, almonds, cashews, pistachios and more. In addition, peanuts though they are technically a legume and not nuts. There is a real danger of cross contamination also, which is why we are attempting to make our events nut free. We know we have congregants, including precious children, for whom this applies!

We will soon be removing all nuts from our kitchen. (Yes, my candy stash will be emptied of nuts too!) When you bring food contributions to potlucks, please be conscious about avoiding peanuts and nuts, including nut oils, and other contagions. This is the real meaning of pikuach nefesh, saving a life.

Now, think of this and other things you can be doing to observe this mitzvah of the week!

Have a wonderful week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Do Not Judge

on Wednesday, 22 July 2015.

Moses spoke to God, saying: “Let God, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community...” (Numbers 27:15)

A few weeks ago, we read in Torah when Moses learned that he will die before the Israelites enter the Promised Land. In this week’s reading, God instructs Moses to go up Mt. Abarim and see the land; soon after, Moses will die.

Moses’ response to God, when asking the Holy One to appoint a successor to lead the Israelites, is to acknowledge God as the Source of everyone. This is a reminder that we are all were created by God, even though we appear differently to one another. We have different characteristics, values, appearances, and qualities. Because God gave each of us life, we understand that God values each of us. Stop and think about that; it is a powerful recognition of your worth!

Because each of us is created by God and therefore equal before the Holy One, who are we to judge, evaluate, and criticize one another? Pirke Avot (Sayings of the Ancestors) teaches us, “Do not judge others until you are in the other’s place.”

Our mitzvah of the week is: do not judge. For many of us, this will be a difficult mitzvah! Be conscious of your critical analysis of friends and family, and how often you are tempted to judge their behavior, clothes, mannerisms, political ideologies, opinions – you name it, we tend to judge it! This week, struggle to accept one another's differences without judgement! See how your conversations improve! Notice how your relationships benefit.

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