

# Rabbi's Weekly Message

January - June, 2016

## Love Your Brethen

on Thursday, 16 June 2016.

Only a year ago, exactly a year ago, we were stunned by the Charleston Church shooting. The shooter had hoped to incite a race war. Nine lives were lost that day. And only days ago, our country was shattered once more by an attack by a deranged terrorist whose motives are still not completely known and certainly not understood, 49 precious souls lost.

We know only one thing for certain: this cannot continue! As ABC's Matthew Doud said last Sunday, "Hateful thoughts become hateful words, and hateful words become hateful actions."

"Love your brethren as yourself."

Please join me this Friday evening as Congregation Emeth recites the *kaddish yatom*, memorial prayer, for those who were the victims of this heinous crime as well as the Charleston Church shooting.

In spite of the news, may we find our hearts still open to receive God's blessings during this difficult week.

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## The Soul of a Butterfly

on Tuesday, 07 June 2016.

This past week, the death of Muhammad Ali dominated our news. He was a multifaceted personality (aren't we all?) and his philosophies and attitudes evolved and matured over years. After aligning himself with the radical Nation of Islam Ali was known to make anti-Israel and anti-Jewish declarations. In 1980, during a visit to India, it was reported that Ali charged that Zionists "control" America and the world, according to an interview reported in a leading publication in India.

However, Ali mellowed in his later years. In 1996, before lighting the Olympic flame at the Atlanta games, he stated: "My mother was a Baptist. She believed Jesus was the son of God, and I don't believe that. But even though my mother had a religion different from me, I believe that, on Judgment Day, my mother will be in heaven. There are Jewish people who lead good lives. When they die, I believe they're going to heaven. It doesn't matter what religion you are, if you're a good person you'll receive God's blessing. Muslims, Christians and Jews all serve the same God. We just serve (God) in different ways. Anyone who believes in One God should also believe that all people are part of one family. God created us all. And all people have to work to get along."

In his 2004 memoir "The Soul of a Butterfly: Reflections on Life's Journey", Ali reflected: "Over the years my religion has changed and my spirituality has evolved. Religion and spirituality are very different, but people often confuse the two. Some things cannot be taught, but they can be awakened in the heart. Spirituality is recognizing the divine light that is within us all. It doesn't belong to any particular religion; it belongs to everyone. We all have the same God, we just serve (God) differently...It doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew. When you believe in God, you should believe that all people are part of one family. If you love God, you can't love only some of his children."

To me, then, Ali's lasting legacy is that we all have the capacity to change on the one hand, and on the other, to influence the world to be accepting of those whose beliefs differ from our own.

(Sources for this message came from HaAretz, Times of Israel, and The Jewish Forward.)

May you have a week of blessings, a Shabbat of peace, and a Shavuot holiday of joy!

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## South Bay Pride

on Thursday, 02 June 2016.

When we hear of events taking place in San Jose or Los Gatos, we often dismiss them, thinking they don't apply to us. I want to tell you about an event that I hope you will attend.

But first, I just returned from the 13<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Shabbaton (Shabbat retreat) of the AJRCA (Academy of Jewish Religion, California) where I attended rabbinical school and received my *smicha* (ordination). What an inspiring weekend it was, ending with the rabbinic ordination of my good friend, Meeka Simerly. The weekend was spent celebrating Shabbat and learning from my esteemed teachers and colleagues. I return to you refreshed, inspired, and eager to begin the next years of my service as your spiritual leader. It only took a weekend!

While I was there, I had the opportunity to do a lot of chatting with one of the rabbis who was in AJRCA's first class, Rabbi Tsipi Gabai. Rabbi Gabai is the rabbi who made national news in March, 2015, after she created a ceremony to mark the transition of Tom Chai Sosnik. Tom is a transgender teen, who is Rabbi Gabai's student at the Tehiyah Day School of El Cerrito, where she has been director of Hebrew and Jewish studies for 26 years.

Rabbi Gabai is a descendent of a long line of rabbis, and is the first female Moroccan rabbi. In my conversations with her I found her to be wise, full of humor, and personally inspiring. I want to share her with you, and hope you will make every effort to attend South Bay Pride Shabbat on June 10 (services and potluck vegetarian dinner), beginning at 6:30 PM, at Shir Hadash, 20 Cherry Blossom Lane, Los Gatos. Emeth is a co-sponsor and I will be participating in the service. Come and be inspired by her remarkable story!

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

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# God's Gift of Nature

on Tuesday, 24 May 2016.

In preparation for a holiday weekend, I send this message. I received it from my teacher, Rabbi Haim Ovadia, from whom I learn daily. Rabbi Ovadia wrote:

An article in the recent issue of National Geographic discusses the benefits of being in a natural setting.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2016/01/call-to-wild-text>

Even thirty minutes can significantly reduce stress, and a couple of days can do wonders. The first two things which came to my mind when reading the article were America's "I've been through the desert on a horse with no name", and King David's Psalm 104. As the beautiful verses of Tanakh (Bible) which speak of the magnificent creation attest, when we wander into nature, we also get closer to God and to our inner spirituality. Nature is God's gift to us and we should protect it, respect it, and learn to benefit from it.

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

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# The Holiness Code

on Wednesday, 11 May 2016.

This week's parasha (reading from Torah) is titled Kedoshim, Holiness. This chapter teaches us to follow God's ways, to walk with God. The chapter is also called "The Holiness Code", because it is a framework for living a life in imitation of God. The highest point of this chapter is the commandment found in one form or another in most religious traditions: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

This chapter is written in simple language, words that we can all understand. As God is merciful and forgiving, we must be merciful and forgiving. As God is gracious, and gives freely to all, so must we.

Here are Chassidic quotes that reference this beautiful chapter of Torah, found in Rabbi Chaim Stern's book, Day by Day:

"Do you want people to love you? Love them first." (The Bershider Rebbe)

"What in your neighbor is hateful to you, do not do yourself." (Rabbi Shmelke)

"Do not limit the form in which you wish to serve God – be what the moment calls for. Be like a vessel into which anything can be poured – wine, milk, or water." (The Apter Rebbe)

"Learn to be at least as careful in life as we are when we play checkers. Before we take any action we should think in advance whether we will have cause to regret it." (Rabbi Bunam)

Happy Israel Independence Day! May you have a week of blessings and celebration, and a Shabbat of peace.

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# Pesach

on Sunday, 01 May 2016.

Last Saturday evening, Congregation Emeth held its largest seder ever. Sixty-five members and guests attended our Moroccan seder, not because of the unique dinner menu (as said by the participants surveyed at the end of the seder), but because they wanted to come together as a community to observe the holiday.

Originally it was only the food that would be Moroccan but in the months and weeks before, I began studying the customs of Moroccan and other Sephardic (Jews primarily from Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East) and incorporated many of those customs in our seder. I was struck by both the similarities and the differences. How wonderful that Jews around the world observe this holiday in a very similar way. All of us use a Haggadah, whose contents don't vary much (except for the modern thematic ones). They essentially follow the same order and include the same rituals.

But there are noticeable differences. For example, a Sephardic haggadah has the blessing for the wine only before the first and third cups. The second cup of wine is "covered" by the first blessing, and the fourth is "covered" by the third. Some Sephardic customs have a chair for Elijah instead of Elijah's cup. And there are more subtle differences but ultimately the seders are very similar.

The point is that we are all part of one family, sharing our history together, telling our children that were it not for the miracles of Passover, they and their children and their children's children would still be slaves in the land of Israel!

Chag Pesach Sameach – Happy Passover holiday!

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# Shabbat & Passover

on Sunday, 01 May 2016.

This Friday night we have the double joy of Shabbat and Passover. Almost all American Jews observe Passover to some extent. Most Jews avoid the five grains specifically prohibited in Torah: wheat, oat, spelt, rye, and barley. For some it's simply coming together with families and friends and sharing a seder meal together.

I believe this holiday is so popular because it is rich in rituals and is designed to create memories. It is a celebration of freedom, something that resonates in every age.

I've introduced you to some of the wise words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, may his memory be a blessing. Here is a teaching of Rabbi Heschel that is relevant to our Passover holiday of liberation. He spoke these words as he addressed the National Conference on Race and Religion, in Chicago, in 1963. At that time he first met Dr. Martin Luther King, who became his partner in working for equality and justice. In his

remarks, Rabbi Heschel reminds us that “the figures of Pharaoh and Moses remain important models in a world where far too many people still yearn for liberation.” (Rabbi Or Rose)

Rabbi Heschel said, “At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began, but is far from having been completed.”

Our seder table is the best place for us to reconfirm the importance of advocating for the freedom of all people. As Martin Luther King Jr said, “No one is free until we are all free.” Our holiday of freedom inspires us to aspire to the legacies of Heschel and King. (For more information:<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/obama-signs-law-banning-imported-good-produced-force-labor-n525901>)

May this holiday and these heroes awaken within us our compassion for those around the world who are suffering from tyranny and oppression.

*Chag Pesach Sameach* – Happy Passover Holiday. May your holiday be as sweet as charoset! Get ready and in the mood for Pesach, with Six13 - Uptown Passover (An "Uptown Funk" for Pesach).<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Q7Jo7FkLH4>

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## Metzora

on Sunday, 01 May 2016.

The Torah reading of the week is Metzora, a continuation of last week's theme of cleansing a person from a skin affliction. The sages interpreted the word to include not only a plague on the outside but also on the inside, a plague of the soul. And the plague was usually attributed to *lashon hara*, the evil tongue.

Last week in this message, I introduced you to Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), otherwise known as the Chofetz Chaim, who dedicated his life to teaching *lashon hara*. Here is another one of his teachings:

*A stranger was visiting in town and needed a place to eat and stay. A villager saw him and welcomed the stranger. "Please, my friend, come. You look like a stranger in town. Let me show you around town and help you get settled. I will arrange a place for you to sleep tonight. But first, I am sure that you are hungry. Please, come with me for a bite to eat." The stranger was very happy to be welcomed by such a friendly individual. Little did he know that his "friend" was really a trickster.*

*The trickster proceeded to take the stranger to a fancy restaurant. They entered and were shown to their seats. "Please order whatever you like," said the trickster. "I will pay for everything." The items listed on the menu all sounded delicious and were very expensive. "This man is very generous," thought the stranger. "It is my good fortune that I met him."*

*The two men proceeded to order a sumptuous complete meal. The food was served in all of its courses, and they enjoyed themselves tremendously. As they finished eating and drinking, the trickster excused himself for a few minutes. He slipped away out the back door of the restaurant. The waiter then came and presented the guest with a huge bill. "Yes,*

*just a moment. My host will be returning to pay this."*

*They waited and waited, but the trickster was nowhere to be found. The owner of the restaurant came to help the waiter. "But, but, my friend was supposed to pay this bill," the man pleaded.*

*"Your friend is not here, but you are. You ate this food and must pay for it." The guest, realizing that he had been tricked, sadly took out his wallet and paid the expensive bill for the meal.*

What is the message here? While the guest was eating, he thought the trickster was his friend. It was only after the meal that the stranger realized that he had been robbed. So too with *lashon hara*. It is our nature to be flattered when another tells us gossip about someone else. But we will soon come to know that listening to *lashon hara* causes one's soul great harm and we have been diminished, robbed. (Inspired by a rendering of Chofetz Chaim's parable on <http://ohr.edu/> by Ohr Sameach).

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

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## Teachings of Our Sages

on Wednesday, 06 April 2016.

The Torah reading of the week is Tazria. Tzora'at is a skin disease, usually identified as a disease like leprosy. Anyone who contracted tzora'at was examined by the High Priest and placed in isolation for seven days, then examined again. If the blemish didn't heal, that person became a metzora (that's next week's Torah reading!) and was sent to live outside the Israelites' camp.

Because of the seriousness of this disease, the Rabbis linked it to the sin of *lashon ha'ra*, the evil tongue. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), otherwise known as the Chofetz Chaim, dedicated his life to teaching *lashon ha'ra* (our mussar group studies his lessons as part of our curriculum). According to the Chofetz Chaim and other rabbis, one cannot be clean on the outside (from the disease) until one's lips are clean from evil speech. Here is one of his teachings:

The Chofetz Chaim once paid a visit to a prospective supporter of his yeshiva (school of Jewish learning). When he arrived, the wealthy businessperson was preparing a telegram to his business partner. He greeted the Chofetz Chaim and they began chatting. Soon the Chofetz Chaim realized that the discussion was leading to *lashon ha'ra*, talking about a certain individual. So the Chofetz Chaim suddenly commented on the telegram on the man's desk.

"It looks as if you had carefully thought out every single word there," he commented. The man replied, "I certainly have. Every unnecessary word will cost me extra money."

The Chofetz Chaim marveled, "If only everyone was as careful as this when choosing what to say!"

(Retold in From the Teachings of our Sages, Rabbi Mordechai Katz)

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

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# Pour Out Your Heart

on Wednesday, 30 March 2016.

Over 200 years ago, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) wrote prayers and taught timeless wisdom. Rebbe Nachman was a Hasidic Master, the great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidism). Unique in his time, his message lives on in the tens of thousands of Breslov followers today. His philosophy combined Torah study with developing a close personal relationship with the Holy One. In fact, he taught, "When you pray, hold nothing back from God. Pour out your heart with honest openness, as if you were speaking to your very best friend." He taught that the secret to prayer is to open one's heart, praying in one's own language, in one's own words.

The Rebbe taught that we should take a few minutes every day to converse with God, which some would call prayer. He called this special outpouring of the heart *hitbodedut* – focused, private prayer. Too busy? Alone in the car, exercising, sitting in a chair in your living room... Rebbe Nachman especially loved going into the forest or some place of natural wonderment for these personal conversations.

My Rebbe Nachman books are marked with folded in corners and special slips of paper. What's fascinating to me is how many times I've unfolded a corner – I'm done with that one – only to quickly find a replacement page. His writings are timeless and speaks to me as if he knows me. In the next few weeks I hope to share some of Rebbe Nachman's wisdom. To begin (from The Gentle Weapon, Prayers for Everyday and Not-so-everyday Moments):

A Prayer for Living Life to the Fullest: Dear God, as I age – as hours turn to days, days to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years – let none of my time be wasted or lost. Let me use my life to the fullest, to become the person I was meant to be.

A Prayer for Seeing the Good: God, it is oh so simple to find the evil, the ugly, the bad. Help me learn to discount all that is negative in the other. Show me the goodness, the beauty, the kindness, in everyone I meet.

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

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# Faith in the Future

on Wednesday, 23 March 2016.

The world was shocked upon learning that ISIS has once more attacked innocents in their attempt to make the world cower into submission. I am sure that you, like me, were saddened, frightened, and dismayed – and are there really words to describe our feelings? While driving to the temple, my soul began singing a response to my sorrow, the words of Rebbe Nachman of Braslav: "Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, ve'ha'ikar lo lefached clal (The whole world is a narrow bridge, the key is not to be afraid)."

On this narrow bridge that we call our world, we wonder: where is one safe? At what moment might terrible things happen to us or to those we love? Do we stop traveling? Do we go into our homes and lock the doors? But we are taught this important lesson: the fundamental thing is, do not be afraid. Yes, the world is unpredictable. Yes, there are aspects outside of our control. This is not new; our ancestors confronted this as well, maybe more so.

We cannot live in fear; that's not a life. We must do what we can to bring safety to our lives and then we must go out and live a life of fullness, a life of blessings.

I once asked my mother, of blessed memory, "After the Holocaust, how could you even think about having children, of bringing a new life to this scary world?" My mother simply answered: "Because life goes on. We have faith in the future, that it will be a better world. So we have children..."

Faith in the future, and a belief that ultimately good will triumph over evil. That is the message of Purim after all.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace, inside our homes and in our hearts.

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## Chag Purim Sameach!

on Tuesday, 15 March 2016.

This Friday night, Congregation Emeth will celebrate Purim with our annual Purim Carnival, Purim Shpiel (play), and Purim Seudah (meal). This is a joyous holiday, with only four commandments:

- eat a Purim feast (you can fulfill this mitzvah at our Carnival);
- deliver Mishloach Manot, Purim gifts (thanks to Marilyn Freund, you can make a gift for members of our congregation who are on our Rachamim Committee's loving care list);
- hear the Purim Megillah (the Purim story from the Book of Esther – Friday night we'll give you that opportunity too!);
- The fourth mitzvah is giving tzedakah, gifts for the poor. Everyone, even the poor, are required to fulfill this mitzvah at whatever level one is capable. Our tzedakah boxes will be out and you can be easily fulfill this commandment by putting some coins in the pushkes (charity boxes).

One of my favorite scholars and authors is the brilliant Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who told this story about giving tzedakah:

"There is a lovely story about the great Victorian Anglo-Jew, Sir Moses Montefiore...one of the outstanding figures of the nineteenth century...(He was a wealthy man.) Someone once asked him, 'Sir Moses, how much are you worth?' Moses thought for awhile and named a figure. The other reply, 'That can't be right. It's a large sum but not large enough. By my calculation you must be worth 10 times that amount.'

The reply Sir Moses gave was moving and wise. 'You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I'm worth. So I calculated the amount I have given to charity this year, and that is the figure I gave you. You see...we are worth what we are willing to share with others.'



(He understood that) happiness is not made by what we own. It is what we share.”

*May you have a week of blessings, a Shabbat of peace, and a Purim filled with great joy and happiness!*

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## Words to Live By

on Tuesday, 08 March 2016.

For the past few months, I've been sharing with you quotations that have special meaning to me. I got lost in the inspirational words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and stayed there! I'm moving on to other authors, but I strongly recommend you read Heschel's books, starting with I Asked For Wonder and then moving on to God's Search for Man and other titles.

This week, here is one of my favorite “words to live by”, a quotation from the modern Jewish philosopher Martin Buber:

*“When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying ‘Have faith and take your troubles to God.’ Act instead as though there were no God, as though there were only one person in the world who could help – only yourself.”*

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

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## Emeth as a Work of Art

on Tuesday, 08 March 2016.

Mazal tov! This weekend Congregation Emeth celebrates our 40th Anniversary. Our founder, Ellen Fuchs, tells us that when the congregation was formed, she used to go through the telephone books looking for Jewish sounding names to invite to join the temple. Our founding members struggled to grow on the one hand, and became a *kehillah*, a unified community, on the other.

There are few opportunities as satisfying as looking at the road traveled and feeling proud of the place where we arrived.

Reflecting on the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose philosophies and writings I've been sharing with you for the past few months, I am reminded of this saying of his: “Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art.”

Our founders and long time members, our past presidents and leaders, designed the artistic rendering of our congregation. Our current members, including those who came before and are still involved (may God bless them!), continue to add their touches to the work of art. Each of us has his or her own special spark of color to

add – we each bring unique talents and interests to the drawing board. It is a painting without completion, we pray. It is a work of art that expands and encompasses all of us and has no frames to limit it.

I am looking forward to celebrating this weekend with each of you, members young and old and in between. Siman tov and mazel tov – “It is a good and lucky sign for us” – and may our beautiful temple go from strength to strength, from one generation to another.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of celebration!

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## Prayer is the Answer

on Thursday, 18 February 2016.

Last week, I offered to you Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s concept of radical amazement, and the necessity of being conscious of the wonder and mystery of living. How do we respond to Heschel’s ideas? According to Heschel the response is found in prayer.

Here are edited thoughts from the great philosopher about the need to pray, excerpted from his book, God in Search of Man.

*To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers — wiser than all alphabets — clouds that die constantly for the sake of God’s glory, we are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit glory in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.*

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

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## "Radical Amazement"

on Wednesday, 10 February 2016.

If there is any phrase or teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that guides my life, it is the phrase “radical amazement.” Rabbi Heschel teaches us that this should be our goal, to live our lives in radical amazement. The words alone lead me to a sense of euphoria, an elevation in my experience of living. Here is Radical Amazement in Rabbi Heschel’s words (excerpted from God in Search of Man):

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a legacy of wonder. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to take things for granted. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious person's attitude toward history and nature...we know that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; we are aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate our sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all...

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Humankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder...

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act... While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.

The grandeur or mystery of being is not a particular puzzle to the mind, as, for example, the cause of volcanic eruptions. We do not have to go to the end of reasoning to encounter it. Grandeur or mystery is something with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times...

*May you seek and find for yourself radical amazement, which will bring you to a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.*

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## In the Image of God

on Wednesday, 03 February 2016.

Continuing the theme of words that inspire me from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, this particular quotation particularly resonates with me. It speaks to us about our origins as humans, as part divine image and part worthless dust. When we are sad, depressed, and feeling less than competent and successful, it is good to remember that we are created in the image of the Holy One, who I like to say, doesn't make mistakes. When we are feeling full of ourselves, it is good to remember our origin as dust of the earth! This following is edited Rabbi Heschel's Insecurity and Freedom:

It is the creation of adam (human) that opens a glimpse into the thought of God, into the meaning beyond the mystery.

"And God said: I will make adam in my image, after My likeness.... And God created adam in God's image, in the image of God God created him" (Genesis I:26 f.).

These words...contain, according to Jewish tradition, the fundamental statement about the nature and meaning of humans.

There are two ways in which the Bible speaks of the creation of humans. In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, which is devoted to the creation of the physical universe, adam is described as having been created in the image and likeness of God. In the second chapter, which tells us of the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, adam is described as having been formed out of the dust of the earth. Together, image and dust express the polarity of the nature of humans. (We are) formed of the most inferior stuff in the most superior image.

(Humans), then, are involved in a polarity of a divine image and worthless dust...a duality of mysterious grandeur and pompous aridity, a vision of God and a mountain of dust. It is because of being dust that one's iniquities may be forgiven, and it is because of being an image that one's righteousness is expected.

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

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## May The Force Be With You

on Wednesday, 27 January 2016.

I finally took the time to see Star Wars. I was transported back in time, when my son was young and his life revolved around Star Wars toys – storm troopers, and space ships, and Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, and the Force. I watched the movie both in the past, remembering my son's joy, and yet enjoying the experience for myself in the present.

But imagine my surprise when the present took on a religious significance. I watched the various creatures looking so different, some gross to my sensibilities, and some humorous. But overarching all of my judgments was the awakening awe that the Holy One created a universe that's far reaching and beyond my comprehension. And so, I turn to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel for this week's quotation:

*It seems as though we have arrived at a point in history, closest to the instincts and remotest from ideals, where the self stands like a wall between God and humans. It is the period of a divine eclipse. We sail the seas, we count the stars, we split the atom, but never ask: Is there nothing but a dead universe and our reckless curiosity?*

*Primitive human's humble ear was alert to the inwardness of the world, while the modern human is presumptuous enough to claim that we have the sole monopoly over soul and spirit, that we are the only thing alive in the universe. ... But there is a dawn of wonder and surprise in our souls, when the things that surround us suddenly slip off the triteness with which we have endowed them, and their strangeness opens like a gap between them and our mind, a gap that no words can fill. ... What is the incense of self-esteem to the one who tastes in all things the flavor of the utterly unknown, the fragrance of what is beyond our senses? There are neither skies nor oceans, neither birds nor trees — there are only signs of what can never be perceived. And all power and beauty are mere straws in the fire of a pure human's vision. ("The Holy Dimension", p. 329)*

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

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# Prophetic voice of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

on Tuesday, 19 January 2016.

And now, O Israel, what does Adonai your God require of you, but to stand in awe of Adonai your God, walk in God's ways, love God, serve Adonai your God with all your mind and heart, and keep the commands of Adonai and God's statutes that I am commanding you today for your good? (Deuteronomy 10:12)

This week, with God as our Subject, I am quoting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, *I Asked For Wonder*. (Note: I edited Rabbi Heschel's brilliant language to make it egalitarian; it was written at a time when writers lacked this sensitivity. Rabbi Heschel's commitment to egalitarianism in principle makes me certain he would not object to this minor edit.) Among his writings about God, he wrote:

God is of no importance unless God is of supreme importance.

God is not a hypothesis derived from logical assumptions, but an immediate insight, self-evident as light. God is not something to be sought in the darkness with the light of reason. God is the light.

God is not hiding in a temple. The Torah came to tell inattentive people: "You are not alone, you live constantly in a holy neighborhood; remember: 'Love thy neighbor – God – as thyself'".

We are not asked to abandon life and to say farewell to this world, but to keep the spark within aflame and to suffer God's light to reflect in our face. Let our greed not rise like a barrier to this neighborhood. God is waiting on every road that leads from intention to action, from desire to satisfaction.

Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God.

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

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## Praying with my feet

on Wednesday, 13 January 2016.

Last week I told you that I would be sharing with you quotations from some of my favorite writers, scholars, and/or books. These are quotations that inspire me in my own spiritual journey. Since then, I decided to focus especially on one of Judaism's modern prophets, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who I actually quoted last week. I'll tell you more about Rabbi Heschel in the weeks to come, but this is the perfect week to draw your attention to him. This Jewish leader is known for many things, not the least of which is walking arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Freedom March in Selma, Alabama. The quote that most inspires me and directs my inner conscience is this:

When Rabbi Heschel returned from Selma, he was asked, "Did you find much time to pray when you were in Selma?" Rabbi Heschel responded, "I prayed with my feet."

To Rabbi Heschel, protesting racism was the greatest prayer of all. In this regard he said, "Few of us seem to

realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking."

Finally, as we approach Martin Luther King Day, I am reminded of these words, spoken by Rabbi Heschel after the assassination of King, "Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us...his mission is sacred...I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the influence of Dr. King."

May this be a week of blessings, a Shabbat of peace, and a time for all of humanity to experience tolerance, justice, and universal freedom.

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## Sacrifice of Isaac

on Wednesday, 06 January 2016.

In selecting my message to you this week, I looked through some of my favorites books for inspiration. I decided that for the next few weeks, I would share with you some thoughts that I rely on to guide me in righteous and mindful living. As we prepare for our interfaith gathering in South County on January 18, these words especially resonated with me this week:

A child of seven was reading in school the chapter which tells of the sacrifice of Isaac:

Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard: "Abraham, lay not your hand upon the lad, for now I know that you fear God." And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. "Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi. "You know that Isaac was not killed."

And I said to him, still weeping, "But Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?"

The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late. An angel cannot come late, but we, made of flesh and blood, may be.

I Asked for Wonder, Abraham Joshua Heschel.