

Rabbi's Weekly Message

July - December, 2016

Live for Today; Build for Tomorrow

December 14, 2016

Debbie Friedman (may her memory be a blessing) wrote a song based on Joel 3:1 from the Book of Prophets, entitled "The Youth Shall Dream Dreams." Her song called us to take action when we see wrongs committed in our world. The chorus is:

And the old shall dream dreams, and the youth shall see visions, And our hopes shall rise up to the sky. We must live for today; we must build for tomorrow. Give us time, give us strength, give us life.

What is the difference between a vision and a dream in this context and in the context of Debbie's song? Torah focuses on dreams in last week's and next week's Torah readings, and again in the many chapters to come in the Joseph story.

Dreams and visions are ways a prophet or, in this case, a biblical character, receives a divine message, a prophecy. In Jacob's first dream, he sees angels walking up and down a ladder to heaven, and experiences God's presence for the first time. In this week's reading, he fights with an angel. Our ancient commentators explained that the angel is really that part of himself that represents the yetzer hara, his own evil inclination. He is "locked in a mighty battle between 2 personas, trapped in the same body..." (Rabbi Stuart Weiss)

In the reading of Jacob's dream this week, his name is changed to Yisrael, the one who wrestles with God. Jacob now is referred throughout Torah as a man with two names. One is the man who dreams, the earthier man, Jacob. The other is a man with a vision, for his future and his children's future, Yisrael.

All of us wrestle throughout our lives between our "good" side and our "evil inclination". Which will prevail? Which will lead us to take action, as expressed in Debbie Friedman's song? "We must live for today; we must build for tomorrow." We pray for vision and for strength, for the good in each of us to triumph for the betterment of all.

May you have a week of blessings, a Shabbat of peace, a Chanukah of joy and light. To our non-Jewish members, thank you for being part of our holy community. During the season of light may you experience God's Light shining upon you, and may you experience the love of family and community.

In the Presence of the Holy One

December 7, 2016

In this week's Torah parasha (chapter), Jacob has a mysterious encounter with God. After leaving home, really running to save his life after deceiving his father in order to steal his brother's blessing, Jacob came to a "certain place" and stopped there to rest. He has his famous dream, or divine revelation, of the angels going up and down a ladder to heaven. He hears God's voice, "I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring..." When he awakens, Jacob declares, "Surely Adonai is present in this place and I did not know it."

In our own mysterious encounters with the divine, we are often deaf and blind, not recognizing God's presence. And yet, in the words of Albert Einstein, "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. One who knows it not, who can no longer wonder, no longer find amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. It was the experience of mystery that engendered religion."

May you always be aware that God is in this place, that you are in the presence of the Holy One, and the possibilities of a "relationship" are before you. May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Our Children - Our Future

November 30, 2016

During the High Holidays, there was a baby chattering during services. The mother did exactly what I asked her to do: "Do not stay away because you have a baby. Bring your baby. Your baby is our future." As the baby chattered, her voice became the poetry of prayer which inspired my prayers. Like a Chassidic fable, I had the sense that it was the baby's chatter that reached the heavens and opened the doors so that the prayers of the congregation could enter.

I always want to be part a prayer community where we recognize the chatter and laughter of children as prayer, and can find our hearts filled with joy at the sound rather than irritation. A baby's chatter in the temple represents the future not only of our temple, but of Judaism. Sometimes it's a challenge because we are lost in our own thoughts, our own meditations and prayers and the "noise" of children interrupt our prayer space. But by reframing the sound from noise or interruption into blessing, we open ourselves up to a different kind of prayer experience.

Our Emeth community of young families is growing. Our school is growing too! In fact, we are welcoming new members in every age group! Now our challenge is to bring all ages together! Shabbat Short N Sweet services is a perfect opportunity – qvell (take pleasure) as our children help lead the services and get to know each other of every age. And of course I hope you will attend our congregational Chanukah celebration on December 16!

Abraham and Sarah passed on their faith to Isaac, and Isaac and Rebecca passed on their faith to Jacob, and Jacob became Israel and we became Bnai Yisrael, the Children of Israel. They passed the blessing on to our ancestors who passed it on to us. Now we have the opportunity to pass that blessing to the wonderful children in our temple. May it always be so!

Ask the Girl

November 22, 2016

Chaye Sarah, the title of this week's Torah portion, begins with the death and burial of our Matriarch Sarah, but it quickly moves into the story of the search for a bride Isaac. Abraham dispatches his servant to find a bride for his son from his native land. The servant comes upon Abraham's relative, Rebecca, who meets all of Abraham's criteria. The servant asks Rebecca's father and her brother for Rebecca to be "the wife whom Adonai has decreed for my master's son." They accepted the engagement. When the servant wants to leave immediately, they reply, "Let us call the girl and ask her for her reply."

Ask the girl? A strange statement in this patriarchal society! The Torah commentator Rashi deduces from this that a woman cannot be married against her will in Jewish law. So the story shifts from treating women as property to requiring the woman's consent. Now suddenly we have Rebecca making decisions about her own life.

This is an important text, especially now at this critical time in our own country. Many women, myself included, fear a betrayal by our government about our rights. Torah says that my voice, as a woman, must be heard. It is for that reason that I am planning to attend the Women's March on Washington in January. It is not a protest against the winners of the recent election. It is demanding that those elected officials protect my rights, and the rights of my daughter, daughter in law, granddaughters, nieces, my Jewish community, my LGBTQ friends, my Islamic friends, my Hispanic neighbors, and you.

Torah teaches us, "Do not stand idly by!" (Leviticus 19:16). I expect I will be returning to Washington. What I have learned is that I cannot be silent nor can I be silenced. I hope you feel the same.

As Thanksgiving approaches and we celebrate our rights our free citizens in this wonderful country, we know we cannot take these gifts for granted. We must safeguard them by our deeds.

May you have a blessed Thanksgiving and a Shabbat of peace.

Pursue Justice

November 16, 2016

This week's Torah portion speaks of our responsibility to pursue justice. Arguing with God about God's plan to destroy the city of Sodom and all of its inhabitants, Abraham challenges the Holy One: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Chumash Etz Hayyim notes, "Abraham's conviction that God must be just has provided theological grounds for Jewish commitments to justice and social action, for just as God seeks justice and helps the poor, so must we."

Indeed, so must we! Congregation Emeth's Board of Directors has changed the name of our temple's activities in the area of social justice, social action, community service, tzedakah, and more to Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. Now the Tikkun Olam is forming under the enthusiastic and determined leadership of past president Susan Meyers. Susan will be seeking partners from Emeth members to help design a program of social justice for

our congregation and I urge each of you to find ways to participate. Our world is desperately in need of healing and repair.

True, we are often too weak to stop injustices; but the least we can do is protest against them. True, we are too poor to eliminate hunger; but in feeding one child, we protest against hunger. True, we are too timid and powerless to take on all the guards of all the political prisons in the world; but in offering our solidarity to one prisoner, we denounce all the tormentors. True, we are powerless against death; but as long as we help one man, one woman, one child live one hour longer in safety and dignity, we affirm a human's right to live. -Elie Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers

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

The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave

November 9, 2016

Precious congregants and friends,

Today is the anniversary of Kristallnacht, or the “Night of the Broken Glass.” On November 9 to November 10, 1938, Nazis in Germany torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses and killed close to 100 Jews. During and following, about 30,000 Jewish men and boys were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. While Jews had been subjected to oppressive policies since 1933, this night was considered the beginning of violence against Jews.

In contrast to those horrible years, we just completed a free and democratic election which has been called “historic” for many reasons. Some of us are devastated and some of us are overjoyed. For all of us, our motives were to select the best leader for our country whose vision each of us believed most closely mirrored our own. I have witnessed many elections in my lifetime and my candidates lost more than they won, and in spite of campaign rhetoric and vitriol, we survived each presidency.

But one fundamental principal continued no matter who was declared the winner: we are in the land of free and the home of the brave. Each of us has the responsibility for bringing our country back together. Each of us is responsibility for healing the wounds of those who are distressed and fearful. Each of us knows what is possible in this great country of ours and none of us should succumb to terror and loathing, or gloating. We owe it to our children to model the behavior of good winners and good losers.

Let us come together as a community this Friday night, and celebrate Shabbat, in song. Let our holy Sabbath unify us as a congregation and heal those whose spirits are low.

G-d bless America.5

VOTE!

on Tuesday, 01 November 2016.

As much as I'd like to write about this week and next week's Torah portions, I must use this space to urge you to vote! There is a principal in Judaism called *dinei d'malchuta dini*, the law of the land is the law. This means that Jews are obligated to follow the laws of the land in which we live, unless it leads one to immoral or unethical acts.

In the United States, voting is not a law; it is a free will opportunity to participate in a citizen's most important act. However, in my opinion, it belongs with *dinei d'malchuta dini* because it is through voting that laws are determined. Who we elect, especially true in this election, will be the decider for how we will live our lives for at least the next four years if not for generations. We all have our own version of what is moral and what is ethical and what is forgivable and what is not. I daresay all of us are eager for this election to be over and for our country to begin the process of healing and unifying. But do not think your vote does not count! It counts perhaps more this year than any other in recent memory.

I quote part of a message from Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner who represents the Reform Movement to Congress and the administration as the director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism:

"We stand together, all of us, as Reform Jews and as Americans, to protect the right to vote and to participate fully in our democracy. Just as the covenant is for everyone – elders, tribal heads and strangers alike – the right to vote is for all eligible Americans. We can never take our right to vote for granted, and especially not this year, when it is under attack in the wake of the 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* Supreme Court decision that eviscerated the Voting Rights Act. This decision paved the way for voter suppression laws in many states specifically designed to make it more difficult for the elderly, people of color and people of limited financial means to exercise their right to the ballot. There is so much at stake in this election – from how the United States will address the global refugee crisis, to how we meet the challenge of climate change, to whether the next president and congress will take steps to reverse the plague of mass incarceration, and much more. With so much on the line, every vote matters."

B'Shalom,

New Beginnings

on Tuesday, 25 October 2016.

This Shabbat we return to the beginning of the Torah, to read our tradition's version of how the world began. Quoting from Chumash Etz Hayim, in its introduction to the Book of Genesis, B'reshit:

"Genesis is the book about origins: the origin of the world of humankind, of the people of Israel, and of the unique relationship of God with that people. In its entirety, the book claims to cover a time span of 2,309 years..."

The beauty and power of B'reshit is that it is not a scientific scholarly treatise on the beginnings of the universe. Rather it is a religious and spiritual book, introducing us to the God of the Universe and God's love for us and for morality. Reading the Torah any other way diminishes its impact on our lives. In God's creation of the universe, God blesses it and us with the word "good!"

The High Holidays were about starting over – finding our souls, repairing ourselves and our relationships, and setting a new path on a higher moral and ethical ground. Now as we start over reading Torah from the beginning, we have the opportunity to learn more about human nature, our possibilities toward good and for mistakes, through the deeds and misdeeds of our ancestors. If we use it as a roadmap for our own life's journey, we have the possibilities of great personal discoveries and growth.

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

Recognizing the Good

on Sunday, 16 October 2016.

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat hatov*, which means “recognizing the good.” According to Mussar masters (*mussar* - moral conduct, instruction or discipline), expressing gratitude opens up our heart. After this past Shabbat, celebrating our new Sukkah and our 10th anniversary together, my heart is wide-open and overflowing with love and gratitude. Words simply can't express the joy I was feeling by the end of the evening. There is something extraordinary when one knows the love they feel is reciprocated. Oh what a night!

This Friday night we again have the opportunity for more *hakarat hatov*, as we celebrate Simchat Torah, the joy of Torah. We will eat together in the sukkah, weather permitting. But if rain keeps that from happening, *gam ze letov*, that too is for the good! Opportunities to celebrate together are wonderful and I hope you will all be with us.

The Sukkot holiday is called *zeman simchateinu*, the “season of rejoicing!” We can't argue with that! Have a wonderful continuation of the holiday and come dance with us Friday night!

May this be a week of great happiness and a Shabbat of peace,

Make Way for the New

on Monday, 26 September 2016.

During this last week before the High Holy Days, I offer this reflective poem, composed by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat and Rabbi David Evan Markus, on behalf of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal (with permission). May the new year bring you health, happiness, blessings, and gratitude. Thank you for being part of our caring, loving community of Congregation Emeth. You are *my* blessing.

The past year makes way for new.
Look back at our roads less traveled.
Lean forward into what's yet to be
And dedicate yourself to building.

Look back at our roads less traveled:
Friday nights in mystical white...
Dedicate yourself to building
The vibrant future you dream for.

Friday nights in mystical white
Enliven the soul, bring hope to the heart.
The vibrant future you dream for:
The renewal of tomorrow is in your hands.

Enliven the soul, bring hope to the heart.
What do you yearn for?
The Renewal of tomorrow is in your hands.
Dare to dream what the future needs.

What do you yearn for?
Lean forward into what's yet to be.
Dare to dream what the future needs
As the past year makes way for new.

Shabbat shalom and Shana tova! May you have a year of sweetness!

Start Anew

on Wednesday, 21 September 2016.

A teaching of Rabeinu (our Rabbi) Yonah ben Abraham Gerondi, a renowned medieval Rabbi, most famous for his ethical work *The Gates of Repentance*:

"First thing is to drop the burden of your past completely from your shoulders. Start anew as if you were born today. Now, for (the remainder of Elul) three times a day examine your actions (morning, afternoon, evening). If you find any negative behavior confess to God over it. This practice will slowly distance you from all sin, since next time temptation comes your way you will say to yourself, 'how can I have the chutzpa to do this sin, and then confess for it later to God.'" He went on to write, "Drop the Past! G-d created the world in a way that screams renewal. Every day is a brand new beginning. Even if you fall a thousand times, drop it all and start over. Drop the voice of the yetzer hara (evil inclination) saying 'how can you dare forget your past?'"

We are two weeks away from the Holy Days. It's not too late to begin the process of change and form new habits! So much work to do, and as I watch the moon waning each night (the blessing of driving home late every night) I count down the remaining days. We are at the halfway point.

Dearest congregants, doing introspective work sometimes brings up feelings and memories that are difficult to process. My door is always open to you to talk anytime, but especially now. Please call or email me; you are more important to me than anything else on my to-do list.

The Work of Elul

on Tuesday, 13 September 2016.

The Hebrew month of Elul continues. This is the month of introspection and repairing relationships. We have so few weeks - why didn't I start sooner, I berate myself. The work is so difficult, when really done with intention and determination to change ourselves and our interactions with others, in preparation for presenting ourselves to the Holy One during the upcoming Holy Days.

I am reminded of this Chasidic writing by Shmelke of Nikolsburg, Moravia (1726-1778), one of the great early Chasidic Rebbes. Reb Shmelke taught:

The Talmud tells us that if all the world were to repent, the Messiah would come. Knowing this, I decided to do something about it. Where to begin? The world? It was too large and I was too small. So I thought: Let me start with my own country. That, too, proved too much for me. My own town? I failed there as well. My neighborhood, my own family? Even there I did not succeed. Never mind, I thought, I shall work on myself.

May you be inspired to spend a few moments every day “working on yourself.” You might find it inspiring to go outside, find a beautiful spot, and have a conversation with yourself. What did I do during the past year that makes me proud? How can I do it again, or something like it? What did I do that I wish I had not? Lost my temper, hurt someone’s feelings, lied (well, it was only a white lie, not important, right?), gossiped. What can be repaired and what’s stopping me. Make your own list and add to it every day (or as often as you can). You don’t have to go outside – have this conversation before bedtime, while driving, even while exercising if that’s the only time you have “alone time”.

May you do the work of Elul, bringing blessings to yourself, and may you have a Shabbat of peace.

Psalm of David

on Wednesday, 07 September 2016.

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 27, which is read daily from the beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul (the Hebrew month before Rosh Hashanah, this month!) until the end of the Holy Days cycle. The message of the psalm (the words can be found below in HaMadrish) reflects our reciprocal loving relationship with God. The Hebrew letters comprising the word Elul is an acronym for this sentence from the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible: Ani L’Dodi v’Dodi Li (alef, lamed, vav, lamed), I am my Beloved and my Beloved is Mine.

Psalm 27 begins with this beautiful declaration: Adonai, God, is my light and my life. Whom shall I fear?

The season of teshuvah, repentance, is forgiveness. We know we have made mistakes, we know we have hurt people – sometimes intentionally, more often accidentally – and we know that from time to time we have failed morally and ethically. We didn't always do the right thing in our relationships with other nor in our relationship with the Divine. Yet in our quest to make amends and right wrongs, we are assured by Psalm 27 that the Holy Light will light our way, that we have God's love, and that metaphorically speaking God has our back. Therefore whom shall we fear?

During this first week of Elul, which actually began Sunday, reflect on what corrections you need to make, and who needs to hear your words of regret and apology. Acknowledging your errors is the first step.

May you begin the work of teshuvah and find your way to forgiveness.

PSALM 27

A Psalm of David

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.

The Real Labor Day

on Wednesday, 31 August 2016.

This is a wonderful holiday weekend, a signal that summer has ended and we are in full blast back-to-school-and-work mode.

We have another signal this weekend!

Sunday is the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holy Days. Elul is the time we begin our introspection, our spiritual inventory. As part of that process, we begin asking for forgiveness from anyone we have harmed by our words or by our silence; by our action or by inattention.

Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, wrote the book that captures the spirit of this month: **THIS IS FOR REAL AND YOU ARE COMPLETELY UNPREPARED**, The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation. Rabbi Lew, in writing about preparing for the Holy Days, wrote:

...We might begin by asking ourselves, What are the loose ends in my life? How is my mind torn? Where are the places my mind keeps wanting to go? What is the unfinished business in my life? What have I left undone? When we look out at the world through a torn mind, our experience of the world is torn...Taking a clear look at our lives, we might simply decide that we can't possibly complete all the unfinished business we've set in motion...one of the things we might decide is that we have to simplify our lives. We have to do fewer things...

This is only the beginning of the process. The above paragraph is looking at our own interior work. We have work ahead to do with others, to repairing relationships. But start by looking within.

Have a safe holiday weekend, a week of blessings, and a Shabbat of peace (Shabbat is the real Labor Day – and you get it every week!)

Keep Our Barrels Full!

on Wednesday, 24 August 2016.

In preparation for our last bat mitzvah, the social hall was reset for a beautiful Kiddush luncheon. Afterwards, I found the food collection and clothing collection barrels stashed in the utility room. This was a wise move for two reasons – space was needed in the social hall, and it was pretty much guaranteed that no one would be looking for the collection barrels.

With the exception of our youngest students when Beit Sefer (Religious School) is in session, this mitzvah opportunity is usually ignored by our congregants. Our hearts open with compassion for those in our communities, and elsewhere, who lack basic necessities in life – food and clothing and housing – and we wish we could do something. Compassion and wishing isn't enough! We have an easy and obvious opportunity for each of us to easily contribute in a concrete way.

Yes, during the High Holidays we will have our annual food drive, inspired by fasting on Yom Kippur. Then some of us will contribute to our annual clothing drive. But the needs of the poor and homeless aren't seasonal. They are ongoing, every day.

There is a common phrase that comes from this week's Torah portion, Eikev. Moses tells the Israelites, "God subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to teach you that man does not live by bread alone..." This phrase, that one doesn't live by bread alone, is commonly used to suggest that one needs more than food; one needs culture, art, "food for the spirit" as well.

Just as God graced us with food, we are obligated to provide for others. May I suggest that every time you go to the grocery store you buy one item that is designated as food for the hungry, and you bring that non-perishable food with you to the temple. Many of us just purchased back-to-school clothes; our clothing barrels will happily accept clean outgrown clothes. I will accept my own challenge; together let us keep those barrels stocked so that we can take them to those in our community who will cherish our simple gifts.

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

Take Action!

on Wednesday, 10 August 2016.

In lieu of my usual message, I am urging each of you to take action as described in the message below:

In the coming days, California's Senate Appropriations committee will decide the ultimate fate of the State's anti-BDS legislation - whether it will go to the Senate floor and then to the desk of Governor Brown. BDS stands for boycott, divest, and sanction – Israel. Those who are involved in the BDS movement for not only anti-Israel but their rhetoric is also frequently anti-Semitic.

Today, take just one minute of your time to ensure the bill in its current form makes it to the Senate floor and to Governor Brown's desk for signature. Send a message to the Senate Appropriations committee and urge them to make the right move.

This legislation is not just important for California's Israeli and Jewish communities, it's important for all Californians. Discriminatory boycotts and calls for divestment not only incite violence and hatred against California's Israeli-American community - it damages our state's economy. Israel is one of California's top trading partners with over \$4 billion in two-way trade in 2015 alone. Israeli technology may hold the key to solving California's water crisis but if the boycotters got their way we would all suffer before accepting these solutions from Israel. These are just a couple of reasons why this important legislation must pass.

Take just a few moments now to send a message to California's Senate Appropriations committee and let your voice be heard.

Go to <http://ianexus.org/support-ab-2844-comm/>

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

Be the Change

on Tuesday, 02 August 2016.

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek. - Barack Obama

The past two weeks have offered us the opportunity to hear some of the best speechmakers of our time. Regardless of your political persuasion, we were given an opportunity that only occurs every four years, where our patriotism was stirred, our values renewed, our determination to improve our lives through our legal and political system was restored, sometimes through anger and sometimes through a reflection of our own ideals.

This weekend we have the opportunity to be “the change that we seek.” We will learn about serious and life threatening flaws in our prison system, particularly their tortuous effect on juvenile offenders, and what we can do about it. This is a priority tikkun olam (social justice) program of the Religious Action Center (RAC) of Reform Judaism.

Please join us for a peaceful and inspiring setting to celebrate Shabbat together and learn from an activist on this topic. We will be reading Torah and following lunch, our children will be entertained while adults learn together. I look forward to seeing you again, as this Shabbat officially inaugurates our next programmatic year.

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