

# Our Country's Growing Opioid Epidemic

June 30, 2017

“When keeping the body in health and vigor,  
one walks in the way of God.” Maimonides, Mishneh Torah

”Be extremely protective of your lives.” (Deuteronomy 4:15)

From the title, you may expect me to write about exercise and healthy eating. Instead I intend to draw your attention to our country’s growing opioid epidemic. Substance abuse is a devastating and tragic problem, affecting your own friends and neighbors, and yes, our congregants and their children.

While I don’t claim to be an expert on this subject, I am the daughter and sister of drug addicts. My beloved mother lived during the time when a doctor’s response to pain was to increase the dosage of pain killers. My oldest brother, a brilliant physician, wrote his own prescriptions for self-medicating before ultimately taking his own life.

So I know firsthand the consequences of addictions and what happens when one who is addicted to drugs or alcohol doesn’t get the help they need. During the years I’ve been privileged to be your Rabbi, I’ve heard from addicts and family members about the dire consequences of addiction.

Is this a “Jewish” issue, one that I should be writing about? You bet it is. Remember during our Passover seder, when we say, “This year we are slaves. Next year may we be free?” There is more than one kind of slavery.

In an response to a question on addiction on the website The Jewish Ethicist, Rabbi Asher Meir wrote: “Rabbi Dr. Avraham Twerski, an internationally recognized authority on addictive behavior and treatment, has suggested (that)...an addict, by definition, is someone who has lost control of his behavior. He is in servitude to his habit. In fact, the modern Hebrew word for becoming addicted is “hitmaker”, literally to sell oneself.”

In Leviticus we are commanded to redeem the slave – meaning we are obligated to help rescue anyone who is enslaved, in this case to addiction. Whatever your political persuasion, this is a full blown crisis that needs our collective attention and resolve.

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

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# Korach, the first Fake News Politician

June 21, 2017

We hear a lot these days about “fake news”. More often than not, the reports we read across the political spectrum are not obviously fake so much as incomplete, news stories with just enough truth to be convincing but somewhere inserted in the truth are inaccuracies or messages that are suspect. For those of us who read news reports on social media, all the more so to be aware of the sources of the stories. The stories seem true and accurate, and then looking at the source, one wonders – or should wonder!

This week’s Torah portion is the story of the rebellion of a tribal chief among the Israelites, named Korach, for whom this chapter is named. Korach and his followers (a gang, as described in Torah) challenge Moses’ authority, his right to be the leader of the Israelites. Korach presents his case as looking for equality, proclaiming, “All of the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you (Moses and Aaron) raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” However in truth he is not looking for equality but instead is attempting a coup d’état, intending to replace Moses as the leader. God punishes “the gang” either by fire or by the earth swallowing them up, or – in Korach’s case – first by fire and then by being swallowed.

Korach was very clever in the way he presented his case against Moses. He spoke the truth but, within the truth, he inserted lies. He incited the people and made them question Moses’ authority. His incitement was self-serving. The welfare of the Israelites was not his concern; his concern was his own self-promotion.

We all know people with Korach-like behavior – individuals who tear others down in order to build themselves up. Sometimes they are elected officials, sometimes they are in our social circle or community. They poison groups with half-truths, with gossip. But they rarely stand alone in their guilt – those who join them in their lashon hara share their guilt. When we hear gossip or read questionable news reports, we must be vigilant to silence the slanderers, as tempting as it is to listen and then repeat their stories. It is a very difficult task and we must train ourselves to be up to it!

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

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## Have No Fear And Trust In the Holy One

June 14, 2017

This week’s *parasha* (chapter), *Sh’lach* (you send) begins with God telling Moses to choose scouts to survey the Promised Land and report their findings to Moses. When they returned, most of the scouts were frightened by what they saw. They reported, “The people who inhabit the country are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large... We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we are.” The scouts spread dread throughout the Israelites’ camp by their negative report. Only two, Caleb and Joshua, assured the Israelites that they should “have no fear...” The Israelites wailed and lost faith, and were punished by wandering in the desert until that

generation had died out.

They committed a grievous sin by their faithlessness which is central to this week's *parashas* – the lack of faith of the Israelites. In spite of all that happened to them, from the Holy One taking them out of Egypt to providing for them in the wilderness to leading them to the Promised Land – in spite of all this, they still lacked faith.

In English, faith is translated as reliable, trusted or believed. Faithful implies “a long-continued and steadfast fidelity to whatever one is bound to by a pledge, duty or obligation; *a faithful friend*.”

The Hebrew word for faith is “*emunah*” (Hebrew letters are *alef, mem, nun, hey*). The Ancient Hebrew Research Center defines *emunah* as meaning firmness, something or someone that is firm in their actions. At the end of a blessing, we say, “*amen*”, which comes from this word for faith, *emunah*. The Hebrew Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew translates *amen* as, “believing, being trustworthy...and confirmation of terms of a declaration.”

These definitions are notably different than the English one. In English, it implies obligation – one is faithful because one is duty bound to be faithful (as in a marriage contract); in Hebrew, we understand that one who is shaky in his/her beliefs cannot be faithful, even if one feels obligated. Faithfulness comes from a surety, firmness. *Emunah* commits us to our relationship with God, trusting in God and God trusting in us in return. And let us say: Amen.

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

(Note: a portion of this lesson from Torah is edited from a message in 2009)

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## The Miracle that is Israel

June 7, 2017

In the morning of June 5, 1967, I was in bed with pneumonia and a raging fever. Barely able to lift my head I watched the morning news and saw that war had begun between Israel and the Arab countries surrounding her. Not a real surprise because war had been building throughout May. It wasn't a question of if; it was only a question of when. Married not quite a year, I struggled through my feverish state to tell my husband that as soon as I was well I was going to Israel to help. He wasn't happy but, well he knew his wife. Little did either of us know that by the time I was well, the war would be over.

That's my first memory of the Six Day War, commemorated this week, 50 years later. Today the consequences of that war still linger. Rather than immediately claiming ownership of all the land, Israel hoped that the newly conquered areas could be used to broker a lasting peace. Fifty years later, a lasting peace is still a dream.

Today we forget how close we came to the total annihilation of the Jewish state. We forget how alone Israel was in the world in June 1967, how unprotected by the UN forces who had been sent to prevent war, surrounded once again by Arab countries determined to drive the Jews into the sea. David vs Goliath.

And we ask, why can't there be peace in the region? One of the biggest barriers to peace is that those outside the region, those who are neither Israeli nor Palestinians, think that negotiating peace is making a real estate deal. They don't understand the ancient longings to be in the land, the emotional connection to the land. "Brokering a deal" will not bring peace.

I don't pretend to have the answers. What I do know is how proud Jews throughout the world were on that day, six days after the war began. Not just proud of Israel but proud to be Jews. While I worry about the future and pray for peace, this week I am celebrating the miracle that is Israel.

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

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## What Are We Chosen For?

May 29, 2017

We all celebrate many different milestones in our lives. Shavuot gives us the opportunity to celebrate the most important milestone in the history of the Jewish people – the receiving of the Torah. Tuesday evening and Wednesday will be the 3,329th anniversary of God gifting the Jewish people with God's precious treasure, the Torah. Do you think those hundreds of thousands of Israelite men, women and children, who stood at the foot of Mt Sinai, would ever have imagined that their descendants would be here, in South San Jose, Hollister, Gilroy and Morgan Hill, celebrating that day!

Shavuot is the completion of the Passover story. In the third month after the Israelites were taken out of Egypt they arrived at the foot of Horev, known today as Mt. Sinai, in the wilderness of Sinai. In the beautiful language of Torah, God says, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me."

This event represents the culmination of God's covenant with the Israelites and the beginning of our lives as a nation, a people. God has said that we are the first to recognize that there is only one God, and for that reason we have a special place in God's heart, metaphorically speaking. Some people are troubled by this, not understanding the meaning of the term "chosen people." The question we must ask is, what were we chosen for?

And the answer is told as we read Exodus 19 and 20 on Shavuot – we are chosen to receive God's commandments, all of which are intended to teach us how to be a moral and ethical people, a model for other nations. We are chosen for this special role, but it is not an exclusive relationship – anyone who chooses to behave ethically – to honor one's parents, to not steal, to not commit adultery, to not covet – anyone can join and become a model of morality in their own communities. This is why the Torah is given to us in the wilderness of Sinai, in a land belonging to no one, to teach us that the principles of Torah are universal and freely given to anyone who will accept them.

Fundamental to this acceptance is teaching our children. We received Torah more than 3000 years ago and we still remember. The reason we remember is because we teach our children, and our children teach their children. That's how we never forget. As our tradition teaches us, our children are our guarantors. This is the reason why the religious school is a large part of a temple's budget – it is a commandment in Torah to teach our children,

perhaps the most important responsibility of Jewish life, at home, in the temple, “when walking by the way...”

Chag Sameach – Happy Shavuot. Enjoy your spring produce and beautiful spring flowers, it’s part of celebrating this wonderful holy day!

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## What a Wonderful World

May 19, 2017

*“How full of wonders the world is! And yet we take our little hand, cover our eyes and see nothing!”* (Ba’al Shem Tov, Chassidic saying)

Imagine a “love song” sung to us by the Holy One of Blessings. Leviticus 26:12 could be read as if God is doing exactly that. God assures us, “I will be ever present in your midst, I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” And if we have any doubts, God immediately reminds us, “I am your God who brought you out of the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke, and made you walk erect.”

What greater blessing could God give us than the assurance that God is walking among us? We are living every moment of every day in the presence of God. Yet we cover our eyes and see nothing! By simple removing the obstacles before us, we can capture the experience of being in God’s presence. It is not even difficult to do! Look at your loved ones, acknowledge the roof over your head and the food on the table, open your eyes to the magnificence of the world around us. Be conscious of your blessings and you will experience God’s presence in your life.

May you have a week of consciously walking with God and a Shabbat of peace.

*Shalom u’vracha - Peace and Blessings,*

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## Reaping our Harvest

May 12, 2017

This week’s parasha\* (for definition of a parasha see the \* below) is Emor. Like most chapters, the title comes from the first word, which in this case is “And God said...” Throughout this chapter, typical of the Book of Leviticus, God speaks to Moses and tells Moses to speak to Aaron and Aaron speaks to the priests. Since Leviticus is a “Priests’ Manual”, the commandment usually tells the priests how to do their jobs in the Temple. But in this chapter, Moses is also instructed to speak to the entire Israelite nation, telling them how to observe the Shabbat and each holiday throughout Jewish yearly cycle. In the middle of the chapter, the language shifts from describing festivals to commanding behavior, specifically:

*“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger...”*

In our day and in our place, it might be difficult to leave part of our harvest behind for the poor. How many of us are farmers? Instead, every time you walk into the sanctuary you will find a donation envelope addressed to Mazon. Mazon is an American nonprofit working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel. Their response to hunger is to help meet the immediate needs of hungry people while developing and advocating for long-term solutions. We may not be able to share the gleanings of our fields, but we can share the “gleanings” of salaries through the giving of tzedakah.

“When one shares one’s bounty with the poor, it is as if it were offered on God’s altar.” (Chumash Etz Hayim, commentary on Leviticus 23:22)

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

Rabbi Debbie Israel

*\*Parasha, Torah Portion, Sidra, Torah chapter – these are words that are used as synonyms to describe the weekly reading from the Torah. The Torah is divided into 54 sections, one of which is to be read each week, so that from one Simchat Torah holiday to the next we will have read every chapter of Torah.*

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## You Shall Be Holy

May 5, 2017

What does it mean to be holy? This week’s Torah reading begins with God’s words to Moses: “Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy because I, Adonai your God, am holy.” In order to *be* holy, we must define holiness. The online dictionary uses these synonyms: sacred, consecrated, hallowed, sanctified, etc. More words that need definition! What exactly is God commanding us to do in order to be holy?

I would define holiness as elevating the ordinary to something we might call “God-like”. We take the “qualities” we attribute to God and make them part of our own behavior, personality, or characteristics. This week’s *parasha*, Torah reading, gives us specific examples of how we can sanctify – make holy – our lives. At the core is our behavior toward others, recognizing in everyone we encounter the divinity within them. Examples in this *parasha* include: leave the gleanings of your harvest for the poor; do not insult the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; be fair in your judgments (and do not favor the poor); do not wrong the stranger...

Holiness is a status that is required of everyone. It is not a state reserved for community leaders or clergy. This Torah *parasha* teaches us that everyone has the capacity to be holy. Further, the commandment to be holy is given in the plural, teaching that holiness is best attained in community.

As our congregation engages in acts of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world and social justice issues, we easily recognize that it is in community that holiness best becomes manifest. How much “repair” can one do alone? It is in community that we pray, learn, work together, and volunteer as we move toward holiness.

Note: at last week's services, we shared opinions about moving the Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. Questions were asked and I said I would search for answers. I found this article that I believe sums it up. I look forward to future discussions with you on timely topics! [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/world/middleeast/jerusalem-us-embassy-trump.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/world/middleeast/jerusalem-us-embassy-trump.html?_r=0)

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace, engaging in acts of holiness and righteousness, and love of one another through our deeds and words.

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## The State of Israel Lives

April 28, 2017

For the first 18 years of my life (and two years before I was born), my father Julius Israel (may his memory be a blessing) was the Executive Director of the Southwest Region of the Zionist Organization of America. Pity me: that's what I had to write on my school forms under “father's occupation”. (Sometime in junior high school, we got the idea to simply write “social worker”).

The Zionist Organization (ZOA as it was and still is called) was quite a different organization than it is today. As regional director, my father was responsible for raising money and creating positive relationships throughout Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana to send to the Jewish state. His job was to promote a pro-Israel attitude among both Jews and non-Jews. He met with state legislators and community leaders. I still have his “little black book” with all of his contacts. Those individuals, like my father, are long gone, but the legacy of their work endures. The State of Israel lives.

I am so grateful that I was alive during those early years of struggle. I got to visit Washington DC with my parents and observe Congress in session, sitting next to then-Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. My father had created a special pro-Israel relationship with him, and he was a genuine supporter of Israel.

My devotion to Israel allows me to criticize her politics while loving her. Whenever I go to Israel, I leave a piece of my heart behind, waiting to be recovered on my next trip.

Please join us this Friday night when we celebrate Israel's 69<sup>th</sup> birthday!

*May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace and joy!*

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## When to Speak and When to Be Silent

April 21, 2017

Aaron is center stage in this week's Torah reading. Sandwiched between his big sister Miriam, and younger brother Moses, we find Aaron. We first met Aaron when God gave the middle brother the role of spokesperson and negotiator with Pharaoh. Later, while Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the Ten Commandments, it was Aaron who had to face the Israelites while they built the Golden Calf.

In this week's Torah reading, Aaron is officially ordained as the first High Priest of the Israelites. But central to this week's reading is the troubling episode when Aaron's sons bring a "strange fire" as an offering to God, and they are consumed by God's fire. After their death, Torah tells us, "Aaron was silent."

Rabbinical commentaries offer many explanations for Aaron's silence but I find it consistent with the glimpses of his personality that we've seen so far. After all, God assigns him the role of Moses' spokesperson, and assigns him the role of High Priest. How does Aaron react to these roles? We don't know. He doesn't say. While Moses argues with the Holy One that he's not up to the task, Torah tells us nothing of Aaron's reaction. He is silent. The only time we hear Aaron speak is in response to the episode of the Golden Calf. He blames it on the people, taking no responsibility and showing no leadership.

Perhaps Aaron's reaction to the deaths of his sons is the only way he knows – silence and acceptance. This is not the last time Aaron will be silent. Later in the tale of the Israelites wandering in the desert, we will read that Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses, but in that story only Miriam does the speaking.

What do we make of this? Do you think his silence presents him as a good role model, an obedient servant? Is acceptance the better reaction to the arbitrary difficulties we encounter along life's journey or is there a time to speak out? I am reminded of the Serenity Prayer, written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

May you be granted the wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent, what things are within your ability to change, and the awareness of knowing the most courageous and responsible time to speak up.

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

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## How To Live Meaningful, Ethical, God-Centered Lives

April 7, 2017

Our Torah reading this week comes from the shortest book of the Five Books of Moses, *Va'Yikra*/Leviticus. The title of this week's *parasha*, chapter, is *Tzav*, meaning the imperative form "Command!" You will recognize that *tzav* comes from *mitzvah*, commandment.



What is Moses being commanded to do? “Command Aaron and his sons this: This is the ritual of the burnt offering...” That’s the English, but the Hebrew uses an interesting word for ritual – the word is *torat*, coming from the root word, *torah*. In this case *torat* is a verb, meaning “to aim, direct toward”; in other words, to show the way, to instruct. (Chumash Etz Hayim) This is the deep meaning of *Torah* – *Torah* is not a history book; it is a book of instruction on how to live meaningful, ethical, God-centered lives.

This chapter includes a very important lesson. It is, like most of Leviticus, about sacrifices to be offered in the Holy Temple. Among the sacrifices are purification offerings, offered in repentance for misdeeds. The Torah defines these offerings as “most holy”. From this we learn the importance of repentance. Those who sin and then repent, having struggled to overcome temptations and misdeeds, are considered to be holier than those for whom righteous living comes easy, those who never have to struggle. We know from our life experiences that we grow, change, and find inner healing through fighting back our evil impulses and overcoming them.

As you prepare for Pesach, may the model of Moses and Aaron inspire you and your family to discover the blessings of freedom and be inspired to fight the injustices in our world. Chag Pesach Sameach – Happy Pesach

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## Repairing our Broken World

March 24, 2017

Last week, a meeting took place of Emeth's newly formed Tikkun Olam committee. Tikkun Olam, meaning “repairing the world”, is a fitting description of the work we intend to do. Most of the people who attended the meeting were fired up with the commitment to do just that, repair the world or at least our corner of the world. Our guest facilitator, Rabbi Jessica Kirschner, representing the Reform Action Center, and I kept emphasizing that our work needed to be based on Jewish values. So then we talked about what exactly are Jewish values and how do Jewish values differ from universal values or the values of any other religion. Maybe they aren’t different, we agreed, but nonetheless Jewish values are the principles from which we operate.

The classic example, of course, is the teaching we learn from the great sage Hillel, the rabbinic figure most willing to give ethical behavior equal, if not even greater weight, than ritual law. The story for which Hillel is most famous involves the non-Jew who wanted to convert to Judaism while “standing on one foot.” Having been driven away by another rabbi who was appalled by this request, the non-Jew comes to Hillel, who explained Judaism and the Torah as follows. “That which is hateful to you, don’t do to another. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn. And he converted him on the spot.”

From this exchange we are reminded the basis of Judaism is a supreme ethical principle. Jewish values are also these words said by Rabbi Akiva, the greatest sage of his generation, “Love thy neighbor as thyself; This is the major principle in the Torah.” And this is the essence of Judaism. It is what I mean when I say that our commitment to social justice must be based on Jewish values.

Judaism is first and foremost about the ethical. This is why the need to do social justice cannot wait any longer. Our world is broken. And we cannot delay in beginning our task as a congregation to do the work of repair.

I hope every one of you will see your obligation as Jew to be part of the Tikkun Olam committee, so that it becomes a committee of the whole. We know we'll never have unanimity in selecting the programs we work on. So let's have many programs. We know we'll never have unanimity in deciding the best answers to the problems that plague us, so let's have many answers. Let's not let differing opinions stop us from doing the work that needs to be done. Tell Susan Meyers ([pastpresident@emeth.net](mailto:pastpresident@emeth.net)) you want to be part of this urgent work.

(This is an abbreviated version of my dvar Torah this past Shabbat.)

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

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## Be Slow to Anger

March 17, 2017

This week's Torah reading tells us the famous story of the Golden Calf. Moses had been on the mountain for 40 days and the Israelites were feeling deserted and neglected, both by their leader and by the Holy One. Not unlike a child whose parent disappeared in a store, they were feeling lost and abandoned and so they responded by building a Golden Calf.

Before Moses descended the mountain, God told him about the Israelites great sin – afterall, they had just heard the Ten Commandments and knew God would not tolerate creating false images! God told Moses, “Hurry down and see what the people did! They built a Golden Calf and sacrificed to it.” When Moses came down the mountain carrying the Tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, he knew what he would be seeing. Yet, he is filled with rage once he sees the Golden Calf with his own eyes. Consumed by anger, he threw the Tablets to the ground, breaking them in fragments.

There are many lessons to be learned from this episode in Torah, but one of them is how to respond and react to the frustrations and difficulties we encounter. Like Moses, we can match anger with anger and respond to frustration with frustration. We can angrily express our disappointment when other people let us down. Moses' lack of self-control is the failure of his leadership.

We learn in Proverbs: “Better to be slow to anger than mighty, to have self-control than conquer a city” (Proverbs 16:32). No one says never be angry. Rather, we should use our anger as a tool to motivate us to take action, to correct wrongs and injustices. As we continue to read Torah and review the experiences of the Israelites in the desert we will see that anger gets the better of Moses many times. We would do well to review the times our own anger led us to behave in ways that were counter to our core values.

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

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## When We Won't Need a "Women's Day"

March 10, 2017

Today (Wednesday, March 8) is International Women's Day. In the United States today has been also designated as a "Day Without Women." I have a lot of sadness about this day. It seems to me that the time has long passed for us to be demanding women's rights in this country. It seems to me that fight should have been over long ago. And yet we still have to fight to make our own decisions about our bodies; we still fight for the right to progress to leadership positions in most corporations and receive equal pay for equal work; and as we have seen in recent months, we still must fight for respect and equality. I long for the day when we will not be identified by our gender but rather by the excellence of our work, our work ethic, our ability. And I long for the day when my sisters in Israel can pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem with full equal access to our holy site and read from Torah, without harassment. I long for the day when we don't need a Women's Day any more than we need a Men's Day. This weekend we celebrate the holiday of Purim. This holiday is based on the biblical Book of Esther. Esther is one of two Bible characters whose deeds and story is recorded in its own book in the Bible. The other is the Book of Ruth. Perhaps because the Book of Esther is said to have been written by her foster father Mordechai, Mordechai is not credited for saving the Jews. No, it is Esther who is the hero of our story and finally a model for our young women. Yes, she was in her position because she won a beauty contest (oy vay). Yes she was in her position because Mordechai told her to enter the contest. Yes, she went before the king because Mordechai told her she must. And yes, she was able to save the Jews of Persia from slaughter because her husband loved her. Yet, to be honest, as a feminist, I never really liked the Book of Esther, nor did I appreciate the Book of Ruth. As a young woman I longed for stories like that of the prophet Deborah – stories that presented women as models of courage, bravery, wisdom, leadership and strength. But now I tend to concede that something is better than nothing. Though, I still long for the day that we won't need an International Women's Day anymore. Until then I celebrate Esther and this joyous holiday. Chag Purim Sameach – Happy Purim! And may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of great joy and gladness!

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## The Important Thing is Not to be Afraid

March 3, 2017

Dear Congregants and Friends,

I know you share my concern, outrage, and sadness over the ever increasing episodes of hate crimes we are seeing in our beloved country. On Sunday, we woke up to the news of yet another act, desecrating grave sites in a Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia, right after the vandalism of dozen of graves in St Louis. And we have heard of multiple bomb threats at Jewish Community Centers, Jewish day schools, and Jewish institutions. These threats are meant to intimidate and scare us. For our peace of mind, I have met with the Morgan Hill Police Department, and requested that our precious religious home be checked out on a regular basis as police officers drive by along Monterey Street.

Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, President of the Academy of Jewish Religion (AJRCA), my rabbinical school, sent a letter to all of us in the AJRCA community and I am reprinting parts of it here with his permission:

*The ADL amongst several watchdog agencies as well as journalists have documented the rise in anti-Semitism over*

*the past year and it is time to raise awareness and do all that we can to prevent harm, address the roots of this phenomenon and join with all those who wish to create a humane, respectful, just American society as we live as productive, proud citizens in the United States. We know all too well from our history that when one group is targeted and we remain silent, we become more vulnerable as the poison is spread by those who are emboldened by the silence of others. We will not remain silent in the face of this grave rise in anti-Semitism and the spread of hate crimes in other communities as well.*

*As the great Jewish Philosopher, Emil Fackenheim has taught, after the Holocaust there is an additional 614th commandment and that is "Not to give posthumous victories to Hitler." There are two components to this commandment. The first is: Hitler wanted to destroy the Jews and thus we must and will strengthen our Jewish identities and grow and flourish as a people bringing the most elevated, humane values to our world. And secondly, "We will not in any way take on any characteristic of the vile, hate-filled, dehumanizing behavior that Hitler and the Nazis epitomized, but, on the contrary, with every fiber of our being, we will act with dignity, with strength, with awareness to manifest love, justice, solidarity with our fellow human beings... (We will) elevate the world to the place... where all human beings are respected, supported and encouraged as brothers and sisters of one large family on this planet, interconnected... What is done to one person affects all of us and impacts all of us, each and every one of us created in the image of G-d. So let us stand strong, vigilant and do what we must to protect ourselves and others, but also at the very same time increase our faith, our mandate as a Jewish people carrying out the highest values of our beloved tradition, and use our energy at this time to overcome this desecration of G-d's name... to increase our mitzvot (our good deeds and outreach to all in need), so that this crisis leads to greater growth...*

To which I add, in the word's of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav: "The whole world is a very narrow bridge; the important thing is not to be afraid."

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

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## The Real Meaning of Eye for an Eye

February 24, 2017

Do you remember the classic movie scene in History of the World Part I, when Mel Brooks as Moses comes down Mt Sinai carrying three tablets, proclaiming "The Lord God has given unto you these fifteen..." (then he drops and shatters one of three tablets and says, "Oy!... Ten! Ten Commandments!")

Well, he was right – and he was wrong. There were more than ten – there were even more than fifteen.

This week's parasha begins with, "And these are the laws..." Our tradition teaches that all of the laws of Torah were also given at Sinai, not just the Ten Commandments. Mel Brooks couldn't have carried them all!

What is the purpose of all of these laws? The Torah aims to create a moral society, for each of us to become a *mensch*, an ethical and moral human being. The way these laws are placed we can easily see that, from the Torah's perspective, religious law and the judicial system have to go together. When we have religions without ethics, we

have a society which feels free to oppress the powerless in the name of the law. But justice without religion has limits too. A judicial system that cares more about the power of the law than the people for whom the law was created becomes quickly corrupt. A judicial system needs a religious system to be non-oppressive.

One of those laws included in Mishpatim is one of the most well known after the Ten Commandments. "... An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot." This law, frequently misinterpreted, is intended to provide a means for equitable retaliation for an offended party, a form of direct reciprocal justice. It defined and restricted the extent of retaliation. These lines are not to be read literally – but rather to answer the question: what is that person's eye worth? What is that person's hand worth? If a person is a farmer the eye may have less value than if that person is a jeweler. If a person is a scholar the hand would have less worth than if that person was a construction worker.

Often we accept "common knowledge" without doing the research to really understand biblical law and its application to our time. You may be surprised to know that this system of "Damages, Pain, Medical Expenses, Incapacitation, and Mental Anguish" underlies many modern legal codes.

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

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## Dear Moses Honey

### Summary of this week's Torah passage:

February 17, 2017

Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, brings Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, to the Israelite camp. Moses follows Yitro's advice to "find capable men who fear God and trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these men over the people...and let them exercise authority over the people at all times. They will decide the minor disputes and bring the major disputes to you." Later in the chapter, the Israelites stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

I was going to write a Shabbat message about this week's Torah reading but I just had to share this new archeological finding! A letter was found – preserved in the desert after all these years! Here it is (well, I edited out some of the personal, mushy stuff). Shabbat Shalom!

Dear Moses Honey:

I'm so proud of you and all that you've done, with the help of God's outstretched Arm of course.

I know you sent me away when you started all of the trips to Egypt...by the way, I hope we are getting some frequent travelers points out of this...

Anyway, when Daddy Yitro said he was coming to see you, well I quickly packed up the boys and headed through the desert with him. It's just been too long, sweetie, and we all missed you so much.

So imagine my surprise when we finally get to the wilderness camp – I see you running out to meet us and my heart leaped with joy! Imagine my surprise when you fell to the ground and bowed before Daddy Yitro, then got up and kissed both his cheeks, while the boys – YOUR SONS – just stood there feeling foolish. What are we, mashed potatoes? I mean, not even a hello to us? A quick peck on the cheek before you go running off to meet with Daddy?

I have to tell you; you really hurt my feelings, really badly. And your sons! It'll be years of therapy to get over this rejection.

I'm so glad Daddy Yitro took you aside and told you that you are doing just too much! You've got to learn to delegate! 600,000 Israelites – surely you can find some volunteers to help you out! Daddy Yitro gave you a plan, now follow it please.

Just remember: the people need you but so does your family! Don't be so consumed with work that you forget us! Keep your priorities straight – it can all get done, but we're the only family you've got. Do you think at the end of your life you're going to wish you had spent more time wandering in the desert? No, dear, you are going to wish you spent more time with us!

Well, I know duty calls, but I just had to tell you these things! Be a role model, Moses! Family first!

Your devoted wife, Zipporah

(Edited and revised from a message I posted in 2007. Enjoy!)

Have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace,

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## Be Careful Not To Spoil My World

February 10, 2017

The holiday of Tu B'Shvat will be observed at Emeth this Friday night, February 10. During Chai School our students will plant a tree and participate in a classroom seder. But make no mistake, Tu B'Shvat is not a children's holiday. It is a serious holiday especially in our time, when some United States' leaders think global warming is a myth and our president threatens to significantly change United States' environmental policy. In the very first chapter of Torah, *Bereshit*, God "took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till and tend it." (Genesis 2:15) Chumash Etz Hayyim comments, "This requirement that we preserve nature even while we use it underlies classical and contemporary concern for ecology in Jewish law and thought."

The Rabbis expounded on this verse from Torah in the following *midrash* (ancient rabbinic commentary on the text): "When G-d created the first human beings, God showed *them* all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said, 'See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world – for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.'"

This warning is especially true for us today, as we see what we have done to our precious earth. Here is a list of simple things every one can do.

- In the grocery store, select items which use the least packaging.
- Select products that already come from recycled material and/or can be recycled.
- Glass can be recycled many times while plastic has a limited reusable life.
- Save paper. Use erasable pen message boards instead of note pads, or the back side of used envelopes.
- Don't save your cloth napkins for special events! Use them regularly. If you must use paper napkins and towels, buy ones made from recycled materials!
- Turn your thermostat down two degrees in winter and up two degrees in summer to save 2,000 lbs. of

- O2 a year.
- Replace a regular light bulb with [a compact fluorescent bulb](#) to help save 1,000 lbs of CO2 per bulb.
- Turn off lights, monitors, and other electronics when you leave a room.
- Keep your car in tune and tires at the right pressure to save up to 4% on your gas mileage (that's 20 pounds of carbon dioxide for every gallon saved).
- Buy food with an eye to its impact on the environment: Where possible choose locally grown, fresh rather than frozen, and organic rather than regular produce.
- Add to this list!

Post this list and use it throughout the year. (This list was composed, using some suggestions from Rabbi Susan Grossman.)

May you have a joyous celebration of the beautiful earth the Holy One entrusted to our care, and a Shabbat of peace.

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## We Are All Immigrants; We Are All Refugees

February 03, 2017

*“The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years; at the end of the 430th year, to the very day, all the ranks of Adonai departed from the land of Egypt.”*

Exodus 12:40-42

In this week's Torah reading, from the chapter *Bo* in the Book of Exodus, the Israelites leave the only home they've known for 430 years. They are refugees, and we, as loving descendants, should be experiencing their pain, their fear, their anguish. Along the way, they will encounter nations who will try to block their way, many engaging them in war. They are homeless, but they are going home, to their, to our, Promised Land. Their trip will be filled with risks and dangers along the way; they will experience the plight of refugees. If we have trouble identifying with our ancestors' history, we need only look at our America this week to stir up the memory of their torment and distress. They couldn't stay in Egypt as slaves, for every day was life threatening.

As your Rabbi, my responsibility is to teach how Torah continues to live in our modern life. We are admonished 36 times in Torah to treat those who are foreign born with fairness and compassion - “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20). We are face-to-face with this fundamental Jewish value today, in America. How will we respond?

Across the Jewish world, regardless of denominational affiliations – leaders from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform movements, leaders from the Anti-Defamation League, HIAS and more – all have issued statements that warn us and our government to remember that no one should be targeted because of their religion, and reminding us as Jews that we must support the rights of immigrants. All of us are the children, grandchildren, or descendants of immigrants. Today all of us are refugees.

May you have a week when your soul is stirred to action and may you have a Shabbat of peace.

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## Courage to Change

January 27, 2016

*I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary punishments.*

(Book of Shemot/Exodus, Va'eira, 6:6)

This week we read from the second Sidra (the Torah portion that is read on a particular Shabbat). In this *Sidra*, God has heard the cries of the Israelites and sets about to free them. The reading depicts the struggle for freedom, characterized by the famous quotation from this Book of the Torah, "Let My people go!" Rabbi Bunam, a Polish Hasidic master taught: We eat matzah first and maror [bitter herbs] next, though it would seem the reverse order is appropriate, since we first suffered and later were freed. However, as long as there was no prospect of being delivered, the Israelites didn't feel the bitterness of the experience keenly. But as soon as Moses spoke to them of freedom, they awoke to the bitterness of their slavery. In response to Rabbi Bunam's teaching, Rabbi Debra Kassoff asks: Is there something holding you back that you've come to accept as an accustomed obstacle? Has time or weariness robbed you of any hope of change? What, like a taste of matzah in the Seder ritual, might awaken you to the true bitterness of your situation? And, once awakened, where might you find the strength to face painful truths while working to change them? These are timely questions and I encourage you to ponder them. May you find within your answers the courage and stamina to "change the things you can." May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

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## Praying with our Feet

January 20, 2017

This week we begin the second Book in the Five Books of Moses, the Book of Exodus, or *Shemot* in Hebrew. The first chapter, also called *Shemot*, introduces us to our people's enslavement in Egypt. On the very Shabbat that we would be reading this section of Torah in the temple, some of us are joining together in what has become known as the Women's March.

As Rabbi Laura Geller pointed out in a Huffington Post article, "How powerful that this event takes place on the day that the Jewish community reads the story of the first recorded conspiracy of women, the first recorded act of civil disobedience."

It is in this chapter that we have the midwives Shifra and Puah disobeying Pharaoh's command to kill all the Jewish boys as they are being born. We have Yocheved, Moses' mother, giving up her son in order to save him.



We have Moses' sister Miriam ensuring that Moses is rescued. And we have Pharaoh's own daughter, the royal princess, adopting Moses and raising him as her son. Women are the heroes of this first chapter of the Book of Exodus and are central to shaping our people's ultimate deliverance from slavery.

Yes, the Women's March takes place on Shabbat. I will say my Shabbat prayers, praying from my heart and soul, and then I will join our congregants – men and women – as we continue to “pray with our feet” (paraphrasing Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's description of marching with Martin Luther King Jr in Selma). What are we marching for?

“In the spirit of democracy and honoring the champions of human rights, dignity, and justice who have come before us, we join in diversity to show our presence in numbers too great to ignore. The Women's March...will send a bold message to our new government on their first day in office, and to the world that women's rights are human rights. We stand together, recognizing that defending the most marginalized among us is defending all of us.” (from the Women's March Mission Statement)

I hope you will join us. May you have a week of blessings.

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## The Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King

January 13, 2017

*“The ultimate measure of a person is not where s/he stands in time of comfort and convenience, but where s/he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Monday is MLK Day, the day when we recognize the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his contributions to civil rights in the United States. Not as well known perhaps is that, in addition to his dedication to civil rights, Dr. King was also deeply concerned about the plight of the Jews and was dedicated to Israel. In his view, support for the Jews and Israel was a just and moral cause.

Only ten days before his assassination, Dr. King spoke to the convention of the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative Rabbis) saying, “Israel is one of the great outposts of democracy in the world...Peace for Israel means security, and that security must be a reality.”

In a book written by Rabbi Marc Schneier, “Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King Jr and the Jewish Community,” examples are included of King's use of the Jewish experience as a model of success over oppression. “He was sure that an alliance between blacks and Jews was fundamental to progress in civil rights. King felt a sense of kinship with the Jewish people and welcomed – even expected – Jewish support and felt let down when it was not forthcoming.”

I hope all of you will join me and the South Valley community in our MLK Interfaith Service this Monday evening, as we use Dr. King's teachings to build a “Beloved Community.”  
May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

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# The Miracle of Religious Freedom

January 6, 2017

Because I always wear a *kippah* (headcovering, *yarmulke*), I tend to get one of two reactions: “I didn’t know women wore those” or some statement which communicates that the other person is also Jewish. During my recent cruise vacation, I heard both comments, but most often heard, “Happy Chanukah!”

Every night on board, Chanukah candle lighting was offered in a private area, a small theater seating about 250 people. This ship had a cruise rabbi, and it wasn’t me! Even though I brought my own battery operated *chanukiah* (Chanukah menorah), I joined the group celebration because I believe it’s important to support the community (hint, hint), even at sea. Candle lighting on first night onboard was standing room only! Not surprisingly, less people came on subsequent nights, but we nonetheless enjoyed a communal celebration. The ship provided latkes and sufganiot (fried donuts) each night, plus kosher sweet wine and, on Friday night, lots of challah.

While it’s fun to share my happy time with you, there is another reason I am writing about it. This week, we near the end of the book of Genesis, with Joseph and his brothers reconciling, Joseph reuniting with his beloved father Jacob, and the whole Israelite clan, “70 souls”, immigrating to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan. Soon the period of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs will end, and we will begin the next chapter in our people’s history. From Abraham’s first journey to the Promised Land, to the Israelites leaving the land and then returning to it, to the formation of what we now call Judaism, to the Holy Temples and their destruction, to our expulsion from our land and then 2000 years later, our return... This connection to our history did not escape me, as I gathered with my people on a fun cruise in Caribbean waters, celebrating the miracle of religious freedom and rededication of the Holy Temple.

May this be a week of continuing miracles and a Shabbat of peace.