

Rabbi's Weekly Message

July 2017 - December 2017

Why Not Joseph?

December 22, 2017

In the next two weeks, we will complete the reading of the first book of Torah, *Bereshit*, or Genesis. In this Book, we met our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the founders of our faith. After the long Jacob chronicle, Torah introduced us to Joseph, the 11th son of Jacob and the first born from his beloved wife Rachel.

Joseph, now the second most powerful figure in Egypt, is the primary character for the last third of the book of *Bereishit*, achieving the greatness he prophesized. And yet, why isn't Joseph our 4th Patriarch? Why isn't Joseph remembered in the same way that we remember Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah?

Indeed, why not Joseph? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Great Britain, wrote that it is Judah, another of Jacob's sons who ultimately leaves his mark on the Jewish people. Indeed, we bear his name.

Later in our history, sometime between 926-922 BCE, after the division of the Hebrew's kingdom and the conquest of the north by the Assyrians, our ancestors became known as *Yehudim* or Jews, named after the tribe of Judah, whose Hebrew name is *Yehuda*, Jew. It was the tribe of Judah who dominated the kingdom of the south, who survived the Babylonian exile, who are our ancestors.

So we became known as Jews, *Yehudim*, named after Jacob's fourth born son, Judah, son of Leah. Judah became the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David; our tradition tells us that the messiah will come from the seed of David, which means the messiah will also come from the seed of Judah.

But why Judah, why not Joseph? The answer lies in the beginning of *Vayigash*, next week's Torah parasha, as the two brothers – Judah and Joseph - confront one another. 22 years have passed since the last time they had been together, when Judah suggested the brothers sell Joseph into slavery. But now, not knowing he was in front of his brother, Judah pleads to the man he thinks is a great Egyptian ruler. As this chapter of Torah begins, Judah offers himself as a slave in exchange for his youngest brother's freedom.

From this selfless offer, we recognize that Judah has repented. Judah acted courageously in order to save Benjamin. It is only at this point that Joseph reveals his identity because he sees that Judah had changed.

This is a highly significant moment in the history of the human spirit. Judah is the first penitent in the Torah.

Joseph became powerful, “second to the king.” But Judah - the first penitent in the Torah - became the ancestor of David, and Solomon, the father of Israel’s kings. Where the penitent Judah stands, even the perfectly righteous Joseph cannot stand. However great an individual may be in virtue of his or her natural character, greater still is one who is capable of growth, repentance, and change. That is the power of repentance, and it began with Judah.

For our interfaith families:

It wasn’t very long ago that intermarriage was considered a dire threat to the Jewish community. There are many who still hold that view. What I have learned as your Rabbi is that our interfaith congregants strengthen us. You stir me to speak to common values, to find universal lessons in our Jewish texts. Your presence has taught me to be more open and trusting of others. Mostly, you have inspired me by your ongoing presence and especially by trusting us with your children. I pray that 2018 brings us peace and contentment, acceptance of people who are different than we are, hope that this world can be a better place and the willingness to make it so. Happy holidays, happy secular New Year, and Shabbat shalom.

Dreaming Dreams

December 8, 2017

There are certain biblical tales that mirror the Jewish holiday calendar. This week, our Torah reading begins the story of Joseph, a sure sign that Chanukah will soon be here. How appropriate! Both of these stories are the stories of dreamers and visionaries.

In the Torah narrative, we read about the dreamer Joseph. His dreams do come true, but they are personal at their core. The first stories reflect his relationships with his brothers and when he shares his dreams with his family, the result is friction and jealousy. The ultimate result is the brothers’ nefarious act of selling Joseph into slavery and lying to their father about his fate. Later, once in Egypt, his dreams become less personal and more visionary, ultimately pathing the way of saving the Egyptians – and later his whole family – from starvation due to a famine.

In the Chanukah story, we have another kind of dreamer. The hero of the story is Mattathias, who envisioned a land where the Israelites would be free of the Assyrians. He and his sons led the first war for religious freedom in world history. Mattathias’ war, led by his sons the Maccabees, was a war that established the freedom to worship God in the restored Holy Temple which had been defiled by the

Assyrians.

As the prophet Zechariah proclaimed, “Not by might and not by power but by spirit alone shall we all live in peace.” This was the dream of the Maccabees and as we enter the Chanukah season, we remember their dream even as we envision the same for all people in our own time.

Chanukah begins next Tuesday evening. On that night we light the first candle! We will be lighting candles at the end of Hebrew School. You are invited to join our students at 5:45 PM.

To learn the blessings and procedures for lighting the Chanukah menorah, go to: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-candle-lighting-ceremony/>. There's even a video to help you!

May you have dreams that lead you to action and visions that will serve humanity, in our own time

100 Opportunities to Say Thank You!

November 17, 2017

*Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life.
It turns what we have into enough, and more.
It turns denial into acceptance,
Chaos into order, confusion into clarity.
It can turn a meal into a feast,
A house into a home, a stranger into a friend.
Gratitude makes sense of our past,
Brings peace for today,
And creates a vision for tomorrow.
Melody Beattie*

Thanksgiving's origins are in the holiday of Sukkot, our biblically ordained fall festival holiday. Both Sukkot and Thanksgiving gives us an opportunity to realize how blessed we are by expressing gratefulness, thankfulness.

Dr. Alan Moranis teaches, “The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hikarat hatov*, which means, literally, ‘recognizing the good.’ Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours.”

The quality of expressing gratitude, of saying thank you, to the Source of all that is ours is a fundamental Jewish value. Our Sages taught us to find 100 opportunities to say thank you every day -

not only on Thanksgiving – every day! They didn't tell us to say thank you 100 times – they said find 100 opportunities to say thank you – and then say thank you. When we are looking for opportunities for thanking God, blessings appear before us. Food to eat, water to sustain us, a home, family, friends, a beautiful tree, a rose, a scholar, our holy community of Congregation Emeth...we thank God for our lives which are in God's keeping.

There will be no HaMadrach (weekly online announcements) next week. May you be blessed with many blessings, a Shabbat of peace, a Thanksgiving of joy and 100 opportunities to be grateful.

Where is God When Tragedy Strikes?

November 10, 2017

Mass murder again this week, this week in the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Again, we have politicians and others expressing their sadness by saying, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims." But platitudes lead us nowhere.

Where is God when tragedy strikes? There are those who will try to convince this that "this was God's plan." The God I believe in cherishes our lives. Torah teaches us that we are created in the Divine Image. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote, "The Author of life urges us to care for life, to treasure it, to preserve it. Therefore, it is inconceivable that God would send a madman to destroy (innocent lives). I cannot conceive of the murderer as God's messenger. On the contrary, everything this murderer has done is in flagrant violation of God's will."

So where is God? I believe we find God in the healing that now must take place in our communities. God is in the resolve to stop the insane killing that continues to petrify our nation. God is in our dedicated intention to change the climate that permits this to happen over and over again. This week, I called Kamala Harris and asked her to be a co-signer to the Senate bill to keep guns away from domestic abusers. I have signed petitions. I have expressed my viewpoint to my representatives. **I urge you to make your voice heard too. Our Torah teaches us: "Do not stand idly by."**

I am part of a group called Rabbis Against Gun Violence. We posit that it is far too easy in our country for dangerous people to obtain guns and use them with deadly results. This easy access to guns means we are not safe anywhere – not in our places of worship, concerts venues, movie theaters, workplaces or schools. More than 90 Americans die from guns and hundreds more are injured each day. We must resolve to do more to save lives and make our communities safe. (For more information go to the Rabbis Against Gun Violence Facebook page.)

"We must end this uniquely American insanity," said Rabbi Menachem Creditor. "The Gun Violence epidemic is fueled by profit-lusting weapon manufacturers, amplified by NRA blood-money, protected

by cowardly legislators, and enabled by our silence. This is on us. The blood of 59 concert goers just over one month ago, of the hundreds who have died since then, and now of the worshippers in Texas is screaming to us from the earth. We must demand that our lawmakers act to keep guns out of dangerous hands.”

In Deuteronomy 30:19, God says to us: “Behold I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you and your offspring may live.” Choose life that all of us may live! May this be a better week, a week of blessings, and a Shabbat of peace

“Follow Adonai your God”

November 3, 2017

“Follow Adonai your God,” Torah teaches us (Deuteronomy 13:5). The Rabbis of the Talmud explained this teaching means for us to behave in ways that emulate the Holy One, and gives us the following teaching:

As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked (following God’s example of clothing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3:21); as God visited the sick, you should visit the sick (as God “visited” Abraham while he was recuperating from his circumcision, the text that begins this week’s Torah reading, Genesis 18:1); and the list continues, teaching us to act “Godlike”, following God’s examples of lovingkindness.

This week’s Torah portion also provides another interesting example: God’s angels visit Abraham and prophesy that a son will be born to him and Sarah. Sarah hears this and laughs at the idea that she might become pregnant. She says aloud but to herself, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment - with my husband so old?” God reports Sarah’s words to Abraham, but doesn’t quote her exactly. God says, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child as old as I am?’”

God protects Abraham’s feelings by reframing Sarah’s remarks, with Sarah focusing on her own old age instead of Abraham’s.

From this, the Talmud teaches that we are permitted to color the truth in order to protect someone’s feelings, going so far as to state that one may even speak an untruth for the sake of peace (Chumash Etz Hayyim).

While this lesson may surprise us, the message is clear: Demonstrating loving kindness to one another is a priority principle, sometimes even more important than the whole truth. In that way, we will be behaving Godlike.

Taking a Spiritual Journey

October 27, 2017

Most of us have left our parents' home, and many have left the city of our birth. Today, many people have fled their homes not by choice but because of floods or fire. For those who leave their home voluntary the journey is often seamless and simple. We are at choice. For those fleeing natural or human-made disasters, the challenges are more difficult and filled with agony and pain.

Our Torah reading this week, *Lech L'cha* (Go, you go!), chronicles the beginning of Abraham's intimate relationship with God. Our Torah reading begins with God instructing Abram, saying: *Go to yourself, out of your country, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, unto a land which I will show you.*

The expected order of these instructions is surprising. It's in reverse order, isn't it? First, you decide where to go, then you leave your parent's home, then your city, then your country, but you take yourself with you. The wording of this text suggests that God is not only asking Abraham to leave home and go to a new land; God is also asking for a spiritual journey.

But along the way, whether traveling by choice or by necessity, or even if you were born and raised right here in South County, each of us has traveled a spiritual journey through our lifetime. The Torah tells us, *Lech Lecha* – go into yourself. Find within yourself your core values, your spiritual home. More than moving physically, the spiritual journey is the more difficult one.

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

Being Kind to One Another During Trying Times

October 20, 2017

This week's parasha is called *Noah*. *Noah* includes two famous accounts: the story of the Flood and the story of the Tower of Babel.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, the people decided to build a city and within it, a tower that would reach to the heavens, "to make a name for ourselves." God punished them, not for building the tower, but for their sins and their **punishment** was the inability to speak a common language and to

understand one another. This was **followed by the dispersion** across the earth with their many different languages.

This story has many layers. Some of our ancient sages and interpreters taught that the real sin of Babel was caring more about material possessions than one another. As they were working on the high structure, when one of the builders fell and died, the other people didn't notice **or care**. But if a brick dropped and was destroyed, there was great weeping. Property was put above people; bricks were dear and life was cheap.

We know this to be true in our own time. We see evidence of this every day. But as the issues of the day alarm us, we need to remember what is most valuable. We need to focus on those who cannot provide their children with one decent meal a day, those who spend every night on the streets. We must remember to be kind to one another, to share what we have, to hold on to one another and value humankind. By doing so, we will have learned the lesson of the Tower of Babel. Our congregation has demonstrated we have learned this lesson:

- - Congregants responded generously to the request to provide gift cards for residents in Southeast Texas who lost homes and possessions in Hurricane Harvey.
- - Congregants brought gift cards and made direct contributions to KAVOD, for impoverished Holocaust survivors living in Florida and trying to recover from their losses after Hurricane Irma.
- - Congregants brought more food donations than ever before for our annual Food Drive between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, donated to local food banks.
- - Congregants joined the South County Interfaith Community in collecting undies and socks for suffering loses because of the earthquake in Mexico.

And now we have another challenge: providing help to those still suffering in Puerto Rico and those who lost everything in the Santa Rosa fires. If we count our blessings we can find that we still have within us the capabilities of stretching ourselves to do more. I am sending money from the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund to Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa. That temple is running a day camp for school aged children since the schools are closed this week. The money will be used to provide lunches for 60-70 children.

On behalf of those who can't thank you directly, accept my thanks for your generous spirit and open heart.

A Night of JOY-daism

October 13, 2017

I wish I could remember the exact year but I can't. It was sometimes in the early 80's. I went with 3 other people to visit refuseniks in the former Soviet Union. (A refusenik was a person in the former Soviet Union who was refused permission to emigrate; in particular, a Jew forbidden to emigrate to Israel.) Pretending to be part of a tour, we carried with us religious artifacts, books, and hidden documents for those refuseniks in Moscow and Leningrad, the only cities we were permitted to visit. During that trip I met true heroes, people who risked everything so that they could leave the former Soviet Union and live their lives in freedom as Jews which they were prohibited from doing in the USSR. The highlight of our trip was Simchat Torah in Leningrad (now known as St Petersburg).^{*} Jews who lived hidden lives openly came to the synagogue – thousands of Jews of every age – to celebrate this Jewish holiday.

In Elie Wiesel's book, The Jews of Silence, he wrote about his visit to Moscow on Simchat Torah in 1965: "They came in droves. From near and far, from downtown and the suburbs, from the university and from the factories...they came in groups, they came alone. But once here, they became a single body, voicing a song of praise to the Jewish people and its will to live."

Rabbi Mark Greenspan wrote that what captured the imagination of these Soviet Jews was joy, the sense of celebration that is at the heart of Jewish life. We sometimes forget that there is joy in being Jewish and celebrating our heritage. Simchat Torah provides us the opportunity, as it did those Soviet Jews, to dance with the holy Torahs in celebration of endings and beginnings. But are we too stuffy for that? Is it too childlike to celebrate, to dance and sing with abandonment? Let's celebrate not just our Judaism but our JOY-daism as well! I invite all of you to celebrate your freedom as Jews, to celebrate our Torahs, to come to temple this Friday night, to dance and enjoy being together as one single body. This is not a holiday for children only! This is a day for all of us! Please be here! May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of Joy-daism!

Honoring the Victims By Our Actions

October 6, 2017

How about instead of politicians saying, "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims," try saying, "our commitments and actions will honor the victims..." (David Miller, congregant and college student, Facebook post, October 2, 2017)

We just completed the holiest days of the year and now begin the happiest, Sukkot. On Yom Kippur, our Torah reading was from the chapter called Nitzavim, from the Book of Deuteronomy. In my brief comments prior to the Torah reading, I talked about the mitzvah, commandment, that Moses presented to the Israelites. The mitzvah was "choose life that you may live." I told you that the mitzvah "choose life" is grounded in the belief that we can make moral choices. The commandment to choose

life is part of our very being as Jews. It shapes our capacity to overcome shame and adversity and to push on, renewed for the year ahead.

Through the years of my rabbinate I have taught that, in Judaism, prayer is not limited to the words of our mouth. While those words shape our behavior, they are meaningless unless they are demonstrated by our actions out in the world. That's what is meant by praying with our feet.

We have had many calls to worship with our feet, but none so urgently as the need to make changes in our gun laws. How can we choose life if murder by firearms is so easy? Though I am not a gun owner, the website Gun Owners For Responsible Ownership uses language that expresses my belief about choosing life and the second amendment:

"We envision an America where all are safe from gun violence, and where responsible gun owners take the lead to promote safe gun ownership and sensible laws and regulations...We believe in common-sense efforts to reduce gun violence and promote gun safety including: universal background checks to keep firearms out of the hands of dangerous people; and safe and secure storage of firearms to prevent access by children or any unauthorized person."

It is always the time for prayer. But now is also the time to act. I urge you to contact our representatives in Congress and tell them to take action now! In the words of Rabbi Hillel, *If not now, when?*

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), sent this press release about the shooting in Las Vegas. Here is the link: <https://urj.org/blog/2017/10/02/urj-presidents-statement-following-mass-shooting-las-vegas-we-must-revere-human-life>

Discover the Light Within Yourself

September 27, 2017

"Every human being should know and understand that deep within there is a lit candle,

and each candle is unique

and there is no one without such candle.

And every human being should know and understand that they have to toil and discover the candle light in each other,

to kindle it to a huge flame,
and to enlighten with it the whole world."
- Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

May we all discover the light in ourselves and each other, make it a huge flame and enlighten with it the whole world.

Gmar chatimah tovah – May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

The Hard Work of Tishuvah

September 13, 2017

We are a week away from the Days of Awe, beginning with Rosh Hashanah. This week, repairing relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and others in your life should be the focus:

Which relationships do you need to repair by asking for forgiveness?

Is there someone in your life who needs your forgiveness?

What would it take for you to forgive them?

What would that person have to do in order for your wounds to heal?

For many of us, it is one thing to ask others for forgiveness and quite another to be forgiving. Psychologists Julie Exline and Roy F. Baumeister. Their research defines forgiveness this way: To forgive someone means to cease feeling angry or resentful over the transgression...In this sense, it is even meaningful to speak of forgiving someone who is dead or absent, or who, for other reasons would have no way of knowing whether he or she has been forgiven...On the other hand, forgiveness is a social action that happens between people. It is a step toward returning the relationship between them to the condition it had been before the transgression. Forgiveness signifies that the victim will not seek further revenge or demand further reparations.

In Judaism, when someone has sincerely and fully repented, we are obligated to forgive that person, not only for their sake. It is my experience that forgiveness can be therapeutic and benefits the one doing the forgiving as much as the one asking for forgiveness.

Sometimes we forgive people who have hurt us just because we remember the love we once had for them or the good they did in the past. This is often a reason for forgiving family members or friends who may have caused us pain. Forgiving doesn't mean pretending you weren't hurt or offended. For the relationship to mend, truthfulness has to be part of this process.

We are at a crucial time, doing difficult internal and communal work. At services this Friday night, we will ask for forgiveness from the Holy One of Blessings during our Selichot services, and our very special

speakers, Eric and Beth Killough, will offer skills for teshuvah, a return to our core selves. I hope you will make attendance a priority. If your children can't stay up late, this is the one service I suggest you consider hiring a babysitter so you can attend!

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace. Shana Tova!

Take Time to Refresh Your Soul

September 7, 2017

If you have planned a bar or bat mitzvah or a wedding, you know how much time and effort goes into planning a large event. For most milestone events, a family plans for more than a year. It seems that the more important the event, the longer we plan for it.

Yet we are only given 30 days before the High Holy Days to prepare ourselves, plus the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This kind of planning and preparation doesn't require calling caterers and reserving DJs. It requires taking time each day for introspection. It requires self-scrutiny and self-honesty, asking oneself:

What have I done wrong during the past year?

Can I correct the errors I've made?

Do I feel regret or remorse for words I have misspoken, for hurting feelings or not fulfilling my promises?

Am I ready to make changes in my behavior?

Can I do better?

Ethics of the Fathers teaches us an important lesson for engaging in this process. The Rabbinic Sage Shammai was known for his quick temper and less than pleasant demeanor. Yet it was Shammai who taught, "We should welcome all people with a cheerful countenance." What a strange teaching to come from this Rabbi! But by teaching us, Shammai was also teaching himself, telling himself it was time to change his own behavior. He recognized his own failure, just as we must begin the process of identifying our own.

Looking at the full moon that in the sky tells us that just passed by, we are halfway into the Hebrew month of Elul, a few short weeks until Rosh Hashanah. Take time during these weeks to refresh your soul, to return to your true self, by making amends and correcting mistakes.

We are now using the greeting Shana Tova – we are that close! So:Shana tova and may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace

Carrying On in the Face of Devastation

August 30, 2017

I was born in Houston and lived there all of my life, except for a year in Israel – and the last 10 years with you in California. Houston is where my parents and most of my loved ones are buried. Houston is still home to many of my nearest and dearest lifelong friends. And this week, of course, I can't stop thinking about the devastation that is happening in Houston.

In my life, I lived through many hurricanes and have my share of stories. Hurricanes, while always life threatening, have a certain drama to them, an orchestra of sounds: the howling winds, the drumbeats of rain on the roof, the silence of the eye of the storm. But this hurricane is like no other. This hurricane is destroying homes and property and lives in a way that's unprecedented.

One of the most difficult aspects of life is dealing with those moments over which we simply can have no control. We couldn't pray Hurricane Harvey away; we couldn't wish it away; we couldn't will it away. But these horrific acts of nature teach us the true story of our humanity. Horrible things happen – how do we respond? Do we turn our backs on those who need our help or do we stretch ourselves to do as much as we can to help others.

While we are safe in our homes in California, there is something every one of us can do. People are homeless and don't know when they'll be able to return. Many left their homes with only the clothes they were wearing or could carry. Food and water is needed. This is the time to reach into your pockets and share your good fortune to the best of your own ability. They don't want stuff right now; they need money to be distributed where it can do the most immediate good.

The best way to see that your donation goes specifically to helping the needy refugees of Hurricane Harvey is a fund established by the mayor of Houston: <http://ghcf.org/hurricane-relief/>. To make a donation that will benefit the Jewish community and its institutions which have been severely hit go to: www.houstonjewish.org.

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

And Now It Begins

August 23, 2017

This week most of us were mesmerized by the full solar eclipse, whether we were able to see it with our own (protected) eyes, or photographs taken by others. There was something unifying and mystifying about watching this phenomenon of nature.

And the very next evening, Tuesday, August 22, began is Rosh Chodesh (new Hebrew month) Elul. Elul is the month before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year; when Elul ends the new year begins. Going from the moon hiding the sun, to then the next night nearly disappearing as a new moon, has its own mystical element to it. It is as if the moon is being punished for its lack of humility in trying to be greater than the sun.

Rosh Chodesh Elul is the beginning of the High Holy Day season, so this conversation has particular relevance. If I can assign a lack of humility to the moon, metaphorically speaking, what behavior corrections do I need to assign to myself? I have only a month to figure out what traits I will prioritize in my inner spiritual work. What relationships are damaged or in need of attention? What are my areas of teshuvah (commonly translated as repentance)?

As Rabbi Alan Lew titled his wonderful book (which I re-read annually in Elul), This is Real and You Are Totally Unprepared. Rabbi Lew is right of course, we are totally unprepared to confront the sins and errors of the past year and set about making changes. It begins now. As you go through your spiritual journey, I am here to support and assist you. Consider it your annual spiritual checkup.

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

Seeing Versus Hearing

August 17, 2017

Beloved congregants and friends, our collective heart breaks at intolerable, hateful and horrendous terrorist acts this past Shabbat. We pray for peace to be restored to our streets, for wisdom to guide our nation's leaders, and for justice to be our guiding principle in the days ahead. I urge all of you to attend our Interfaith CommUNITY Peace Walk and Prayer Vigil (details below) on Shabbat afternoon, 4:00 PM. This is truly an example of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's message: Praying with our Feet. This is a non-political, bipartisan rally against hate. The presence of the Jewish community is urgently important because anti-Semitism is at the heart of the supremacists rally this past Shabbat. I will be speaking and will look for your faces. Thank you! And now, some words of Torah:

Seeing versus Hearing

"See, I am placing before you this day a blessing and a curse...." (Deuteronomy 11:26)

While studying this week's parasha (chapter), I couldn't move beyond the first word, "re'eh" (which means "see"). I kept thinking of "shema", which means hear or listen. If I were the author of this line, I think I would have said, "Listen, Israelites, I am placing before you today..." Why did Moses begin with the imperative, see? What is it that they should see?

This discourse takes place just before the Israelites enter the Promise Land. Moses is telling them of the blessings that will come when they fulfill God's commandments. If they abandon the commandments, he warns them that they will be cursed.

We have all been told that "seeing is believing." Most of us would prefer to "see with our own eyes." The Israelites who left Egypt saw God's miracles, but that generation wandered in the wilderness until most of them died. Moses is speaking to the next generation who didn't see the plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea. They heard about it from their parents or from Moses' discourse in Deuteronomy. Moses is telling them now: don't just listen to the stories. You have the opportunity to see God's miracles for yourself! You will enter the land and you will see what happens when you follow God's commandments! You will be blessed.

Granting us the ability to choose between blessing and curse is an ongoing gift from God. This passage teaches us that we decide for ourselves how we will behave, that our behavior is not predetermined. We always have a choice and Re'eh urges us to choose wisely.

Have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.
(Adapted from a message from 2008.)

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

A Reciprocal and Enduring Love

August 9, 2017

This week's Torah parasha (chapter) is a love story. Ekev, the third chapter in the Book of Deuteronomy, describes the loving relationship between God and the people Israel.

The word ekev means "because." It is because of God's love that we will be blessed with "a good land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill...a land where you will lack nothing..." And what does God ask of us, to show our love in return? "Only this: to revere your God, to walk in God's paths, to love God, and to serve God with all of your heart and soul, keeping God's commandments and laws..." Our love is reciprocal. God provides for us and we express our gratitude for

God's good grace. How do we express our gratitude? Yes, we say the words of thanks, but we also thank God by living upstanding, moral, ethical lives, caring for one another and for this precious world.

We are surrounded by God's love always, day and night. Our Shabbat in the Redwoods enabled some of us to experience that great love in a dramatic way, sitting among the awesome trees. But even sitting quietly in our homes, with simple food on the table, we can experience God's benevolence. God provides, and we notice and express our thanks.

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

Teach Your Children Well

August 1, 2017

While traveling in Alaska on vacation, we toured a native village and heard a young woman talking about her culture. She said something that struck me as very important: many people in their communities, as part of their integration and assimilation into the white people's lifestyle, had forgotten the ancient ways. An interesting thing is happening: as a result of their own education, the children are teaching the elders the native ways and a renewal and expansion of native life is ongoing.

This week's Torah parasha (chapter) speaks to that very issue. It happens to be one of the most beautiful and important chapters in all of Torah. Moses is delivering words from his heart, knowing that his own death is imminent and he will not cross the River Jordan with the Israelites into the promised land. The chapter includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments, with instructions. Preceding the repetition of the Commandments is this important admonishment: The covenant made at Sinai is binding until this very day.

And to ensure that we and future generations honor the contract, the chapter includes the Shema and V'Ahavta:

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Because teaching our children is the core value of Judaism, impressing Jewish laws, cultures, norms, and history upon them and modeling these values by our own behavior, we continue our heritage one generation to the next. We place those words in the mezuzah on our doorposts, telling our children by our actions that we are Jews and being Jewish is important. We teach our children what it means to be a Jew, to be in a relationship with the Holy One – a relationship that relies on our doing acts of

lovingkindness, providing for those in need (giving tzedakah, loosely translated as charity), and living an ethical life.

When I listened to the native young woman in Alaska talking about how children are teaching their parents, I thought that is true here in our Temple as well. Some of us learned these values and forgot them; some never were taught. But through the education of our children, we continue our heritage “dor l’dor” – one generation to the next – forwards and backwards, linking to our past and our future.

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

In My Absence ...

July 19, 2017

The Torah readings in July are interesting and worthy of your study. Recommended study sources are <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/> and <http://reformjudaism.org/learning/ten-minutes-torah>.

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