

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January 2018 - June 2018

Becoming a Country of Compassion and Humility

June 22, 2018

Over the weekend I began pondering my message for this week. On Monday I knew what I wanted to say. Monday night I began writing. On Tuesday I completed my message and sent it to two people to get feedback. Both responded that it was “good” and “powerful” but may become irrelevant. On Wednesday morning, it became irrelevant as predicted.

My original message was an open letter to President Trump regarding the separated families seeking asylum on our borders. The letter was written because it is my job as Rabbi to speak out when I see injustice. Tochecha, meaning “rebuke,” is a Jewish value that teaches us the importance of reprimanding another when a wrong is transpiring. We learn in Proverbs: “One who rebukes an individual shall, in the end, find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue.” (28:23)

My rebuke to the President was to immediately stop separating families and to place the wellbeing of children as a top priority. Now the message must go to all in leadership, including the President, his counselors and advisors, his cabinet (in particular Jeff Sessions), and all members of Congress. The time has come to put aside your own welfare and interests.

There is a process in leadership training programs that is called “Win as Much as You Can.” In this “game,” participants have the choice of improving their own standings in order to win, or working with their teammates and helping everyone to win. Is one’s focus on the team winning or the individual winning? In my early years, I was not a team player and always played the game with every intention of winning as much as I could. I’ve come to learn that when the team succeeds, everyone on the team wins. It is past time for our country’s leadership to stop playing “Win as Much as You Can” and start playing as a team, putting the welfare of the most vulnerable among us as paramount. This is not about legal or illegal, Dreamers, refugees, or asylum seekers. This is about becoming a country of compassion and humanity. The political parties must stop blackmailing each other – “if you do this, I’ll do what you want but if you don’t do what I want, I won’t do what you want.” Stop acting like children on a playground and realize that real people’s lives are at stake and these stakes are high!

*“You must not oppress foreigners.
You know what it’s like to be a foreigner,
for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9)*

*“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land,
you shall not do the stranger wrong.
You shall treat the stranger who sojourns
with you as the native among you,
and you shall love the stranger as yourself...” (Leviticus 19:33-34)
“The same law applies both to the native-born and
to the foreigner residing among you” (Exodus 12:49)*

Do Not Bear False Witness

June 8, 2018

We live in a time of “fake news” and reports that are often suspect and unauthenticated. Recently I posted a photo on Facebook. My intention was to communicate my distress about children being separated from their parents who were attempting to enter the country either illegally or as asylum seekers at the border. The photo was real enough, but it was apparently an old one. But I had accepted the photo from several reliable news sources and individuals I trusted; they too had been duped. I was called out about it and I research it further. Snopes.com set me straight – sort of. It seems the authenticity wasn’t a black and white, yes or no issue. Because it wasn’t absolute, I deleted the posting. And learned for the 100th time to check snopes.com before sharing “news” or “reports”.

But it beautifully demonstrates the point of the ninth commandment: do not bear false witness. That commandment is a focal point of this week’s Torah parasha, Shelach. In this Torah reading, Moses sends 12 spies into Canaan before the Israelites enter it. Ten spies report frightening stories, which shake the confidence of the Israelites in their ability to conquer the land. Only Caleb and Joshua report positively and encourage the Israelites to have faith in God. My teacher Tamar Frankiel wrote: “...Although the original 9th commandment specified ‘against your neighbor’ and referred primarily to testifying in court, the report of the ten spies about the land, spread in whispers during the night, was equally devastating. Breaking ranks, they cast doubt on Caleb and Joshua and devastated the people’s morale. Failing to speak truthfully and with full transparency, they put the entire enterprise at risk.”

As a consequence of listening to the reports of the spies, demonstrating their lack of faith, God condemned the Israelites to wandering in the desert for 40 years, until the generation of slaves had died and a new generation would enter the land.

Torah narratives speak to ancient times but they speak to our time too. All of us must be vigilant to speak the truth, to confirm our sources, to admit when we make mistakes, and to refrain from speaking, writing, repeating, and listening to false reports. On the other hand, once we have educated ourselves and are confident we know what

Lovingly Rebuke

May 30, 2018

This week's Torah portion includes several different themes. It begins with the raising of the *Menorah* in the *Mishkan* (the Sanctuary in the desert), further celebrating the completion of its construction. We will read, "*God spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and say to him: When you kindle the lamps (of the Menorah) toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light.'*"

Near the end of the chapter we are presented with another narrative: "*Miriam and Aaron* (Moses' sister and brother) *spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married...*" (Num. 12:1-2). The text says, "God heard it," and punished Miriam with leprosy.

The medieval commentator Rashi explains that Miriam's motivation was not to vie for leadership but rather to criticize Moses for not paying enough attention to his wife. But Miriam was harshly punished because, in Rashi's view, the sin she committed was issuing her criticism publicly, rather than speaking privately to Moses.

While there are many layers to this short episode in our chapter, one of the lessons is especially relevant to our lives. We often don't know people's motivations nor do we always know the whole story behind their actions. We only know our own perceptions and interpretations of events. While Torah does instruct us to "rebuke your neighbor," (Leviticus 19:17), we are instructed in the same paragraph to "love your neighbor". Our obligation therefore is to be kind and gentle in offering constructive feedback (rebuking). We can safely assume that every one of us is trying the best we can, and sometimes we make honest mistakes. We need others to point out our errors, because that's how we grow and learn. But the one offering the feedback must do so in a loving way.

(Parts of this message were revised from an earlier post in 2008.)

May You Bless And Be Blessed

May 27, 2018

Reviewing our Torah journeys, we read about our formative narratives, our slavery in Egypt, and our redemption from slavery, after which we traveled to Mt. Sinai. After receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites were given multiple instructions on building the *Mishkan*, the portable Sanctuary in the desert. In this week's Torah reading, Parshat Naso, we are nearing the end of the *Mishkan* narrative and look to its inauguration.

That is why, at this moment in our national history, God instructs the High Priest Aaron, to bless the entire people for the first time with these words:

"May God bless you and protect you. May God deal kindly and graciously with you. May God uplift you and grant you peace."

Imagine, these very words have been said since the time of Moses and Aaron, since our time of wandering in the desert, around 3000 years ago! It is the oldest known Biblical text that has been found! Amulets with these words dating from the First Temple Period – 960-586 BCE – were discovered and are now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

From that time of our wanderings in the desert, we have blessed and been blessed using these words! And it is a blessing expressed not only by Jews – perhaps you noticed the words sung during the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (also known as Prince Harry and Meghan Markle). We often include this blessing in our South County Interfaith Services because of its universality. It has been used in Catholic mass since the first centuries.

And yet, it is a personal blessing, the blessing a parent gives one's child. It is a profound way of expressing love, not only to children and grandchildren, but to spouses, siblings, other relatives and friends. It is intimately said with one's hands on the other's head.

The words of the Birkat Kohanim, blessing of the priests, are ageless and timeless. These words connect us to our past and to our own time when we bless our descendants, our future.

May you experience these blessings in your own life and may you have a Shabbat of peace.

Honoring Our Teens

May 18, 2018

This Shabbat, we will observe Shavuot. Like all festivals, Shavuot has three aspects:

- Agriculture – On Shavuot we celebrate the first fruits, the beginning of the harvest.
- Historical – On Shavuot, we received the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

- Theological – On Shavuot, God revealed Godself directly to the 600,000 people standing at Mt Sinai. Tradition is that all of our souls were present for this great ephiphany.

Shavuot is also known by several names: *Yom haBikkurim*, the festival of the first fruits; *Chag haKatzet* – the festival of the Harvest; and *Zeman Matan Toratenu* – the Time of the Giving of the Torah. A custom is to stay up the entire night of Shavuot studying and discussing topics of Torah.

At Congregation Emeth, we also celebrate the ongoing commitment to Jewish study by our teens, through a ceremony of Confirmation. Confirmation is an opportunity for teens, after completing Religious School and continuing their Jewish studies in high school, to “confirm” their commitment to Judaism and Jewish life. It is not graduation; their Emeth Jewish studies will continue until they graduate high school. We have eight teens who studied and prepared for Confirmation, in addition to their participation in our teen program, Emet Dor Kef.

Teaching and being in relationship with all of our teens is perhaps my greatest privilege as an adult Jew. I don’t say “as a Rabbi” because I have been working with Jewish teens since I was 18. I’ve been leader or advisor to B’nai B’rith Girls and B’nai B’rith’s AZA for boys, as well as United Synagogue Youth and Young Judea, and leading a teen trip to Israel. There’s hardly been a time in my life when I wasn’t working with teens. It is my passion because I believe these are the formative years when we need to arm our youth with Jewish knowledge and, perhaps more important, Jewish connections. Additionally, as a Rabbi, being in relationship with our young people before they begin their college journeys is of supreme importance. They know, when they leave home, that their Rabbi is always here for them, to consult, console, counsel, problem solve, and even engage in study. I am so proud that I receive emails and phone calls from other temples or professionals wanting to know our secret, because with very few exceptions our teens don’t drop out after bar/bat mitzvah – they continue to be part of temple life through our teen programming.

Please come to services this Shabbat to celebrate these dedicated young people, who chose to continue their Jewish studies in preparation for Confirmation. You should be as proud of them as I am.

A Sabbatical for the Land – and Your Rabbi

May 9, 2018

This week’s Torah reading is B’har – God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai and gave him a code of law about how we are to treat the land. The fundamental principle of land occupancy is based on the acknowledgement that we do not own the land, we merely inhabit it. The land belongs to the Holy One Who created it. Just as we are instructed to observe a Sabbath on the seventh day, we are commanded to

give the land a Sabbath every seven years. This system proved to protect the land and permit it to replenish itself.

It is not only the land that needs to be refreshed. Like the Torah teaching to leave fields uncultivated in the seventh year, clergy and academics are among a few professions that routinely grant long-term paid absences after seven years of service. The reasoning is the same: to rest and to be refreshed.

As I approach my 12th year of service to Congregation Emeth, with the wise counsel of a clergy colleague, I recognized that I am past due for a sabbatical. The approaching year is the perfect time on our congregation's calendar. Arranging proper coverage in my absence and with the support and encouragement of our Board of Directors, I will be on sabbatical this upcoming year, however I will not be taking a year - just November, December and January.

What does a Rabbi do during a sabbatical? I plan to use this time to study, rest, and travel. Details are being made and I am feeling refreshed already!

"This (the sabbatical year) reminds us that our souls are of a Divine, spiritual nature, and that our goal is to return to our original state of spiritual rest." (From the Teachings of our Sages, Rabbi Mordechai Katz) Ultimately this is my goal for my sabbatical.

Who Should Be Your Role Models?

May 2, 2018

Last week, we read the Torah chapter Kedoshim, Holiness. That chapter stressed the obligation of everyone to strive to "Godlike" in our behavior. It teaches us how to treat one another, including the famous passage, Love your fellow as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). These are instructions are for everyone, rich and poor, leader and follower, old and young.

In contrast to last week's universal ethical teachings, this week's chapter, Emor, is directed toward the priests in general and high priests in particular. The message to us is clear: people in leadership positions and people who have authority of governance have a special and direct responsibility to govern fairly and to serve as role models for the masses. Their behavior must be beyond reproach, as close to perfect as humanly possible.

According to Chumash Etz Hayyim (biblical readings and commentary), "...As the Israelites are to represent God-oriented life to the nations of the world, the kohanim (priests) are to represent a maximal level of devotion to God for their fellow Israelites..." As the Israelites learned from the behavior of the priests, so too we are instructed to learn from the righteous behavior of those who serve in leadership in our communities, not only in our religious life but in our secular life as well (because in

truth, regarding our interpersonal behavior, religious and secular should not be separated). Who are those modern day models who are worth emulating? Look to those key values we learned in last week's parasha, the guidelines to selecting those who are qualified to be our role models.

Who are your role models for "loving others as yourself"? Who in your life models honoring parents and the elderly? Moral employers and honest employees? Caring for the most vulnerable in society? Don't take it for granted that they are in your midst – they are but you must seek them out. They may be close to you like a parent, grandparent, sibling, or even your child (it's my experience that children intuit kindness as a value, even when they are challenged to exhibit it). They may be governmental leaders, religious leaders of many faiths, every day people you encounter in your life. Take note and ask yourself, "What is it about this person that I should strive to attain in my own behavior?"

That's the guiding principle of Kedoshim and Emor.

70 Years Ago

April 18, 2018

My father was the Executive Director of the Zionist Organization of America, Southwest Region, beginning in the early 1940's. As such, he was responsible for raising money and for gaining acceptance for the emerging Jewish state. He traveled throughout Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, New Mexico and Arkansas raising money, visiting with politicians who could influence American support, and trying to convince Jews, including Rabbis, of the need for our own self-determination in our own land. One of his closest contacts was the late President Lyndon Johnson, then a Texas congressman. President Johnson continued to be an ardent supporter as he politically progressed.

One of my most precious childhood memories is the story my parents told about the origins of the modern State of Israel in 1948! On one fateful night in 1948, a national meeting of the Zionist Organization (ZOA) was taking place just at the time the United Nations was having its historic vote on the establishment of the State of Israel. All of these men and women who had worked so hard on behalf of the Jewish state sat in one room listening to the radio which was broadcast over a microphone to the filled auditorium – no live television feed in those days. The ZOA delegates anxiously listened and kept track of the yays and nays. The final votes were 33 countries (72% of voting) in favor, 13 countries (28%) against, 10 countries abstaining, 1 country absent for the vote.

Now, 70 years later, that fledgling state stands as a miracle. Rising like the mythical Phoenix from the ashes of the Holocaust, we can all be proud of Israel's accomplishments in the fields of technology, medicine, and more. We may not always agree with the political decisions made, just as we don't always agree with the decisions American politicians make, but we must acknowledge the important role Israel plays as a free and democratic country in the world of nations.

To me, always, Israel is where my heart lives. Even when its politicians anger me, even when I think wrong choices are being made, I will always be proud that we have a free and independent place on the planet that is the homeland of all Jews. As we celebrate the miraculous 70th birthday of its founding, we pray to the Holy One of blessings:

Bless the State of Israel which marks the dawning of hope for all who seek peace. Shield it beneath the wings of Your love; spread over it the canopy of Your peace; send Your light and truth to all who lead and advise, guiding them with Your good counsel. Establish peace in the land and fullness of joy for all who dwell there. Amen. (Mishkan T'fila siddur)

I hope to see all of you at our Israel@70 birthday party this Friday night, 7:15 PM! Chag Sameach – have a joyful holiday!

In Honor of Those Who Survived

April 11, 2018

This week we remember the 6 million of our people who were systematically murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators and supporters. We also remember those who survived. In 1933 there were 9.5 million Jews in Europe, but only 3.5 million survived. Today, only an estimated 100,000 Survivors are alive in the United States.

Those who survived should be our most honored and treasured population. They are our heroes, not only because they are living testimony to that terrible time, but because after surviving they somehow found reasons to live and to have families, which took tremendous courage and faith.

Many of those Survivors became community leaders. Many were successful in their respective occupations and gave back to the Jewish community both financially and as volunteers.

However, in 2018, an estimated 35% of all Survivors in our country live at or below the poverty line, meaning an individual annual income of less than \$18,000! A 2017 CNN reported that Survivors from the former Soviet Union “have it particularly bad,” with 80% living in poverty!

Frankly, as a people, we should be ashamed of ourselves. How could we allow these precious souls to end their lives in suffering from poverty and food insufficiency!

This week of Yom HaShoah, remembering the Holocaust, I urge every one of you to contribute to provide food and other necessary items for our elderly victims of the Holocaust. My organization of choice is Kavod. As it says on their website, Kavod helps Holocaust Survivors in the United States live the remainder of their lives comfortably and with dignity. Kavod has provided confidential assistance

through Jewish Family Services, including our own Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley, and other organizations. Wherever there is a need Kavod responds, with food, medicine, and household goods. The aid is provided in the form of gift cards to preserve the dignity of these courageous individuals. The founders of Kavod are my niece and nephew, of whom I am so proud. Every donation goes directly to Survivors – no donation is used for any administrative purposes. Every dime provides direct aid to the Survivors. On this Yom HaShoah, I hope you will honor our Survivors with a donation to Kavod: <http://kavodensuringdignity.com/donate/>.

No Stand-Ins, No Representatives, Just You

March 21, 2018

This week is Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat, the Shabbat before Passover begins. The joyous countdown to our Festival of Freedom nears.

The Torah reading this week is from Parasha Tzav; tzav is the imperative form of the Hebrew word command – the root letters of mitzvah, commandment. The chapter continues God's commandments and instructions for making sacrifices and bringing donations to the Holy Temple.

There is one sentence that particularly grabbed my attention this week: "The offering to Adonai from a sacrifice of well-being must be presented by the one who offers the sacrifice of well-being to Adonai, one's own hands shall present Adonai's gifts." (Leviticus 7:29-30) In other words, no one can take the place of the donor of this sacrifice; one can't assign a stand-in or representative. The donor must personally present the sacrifice.

I find this idea especially meaningful after something I observed this week. A man in a white uniform, collecting donations for a Christian charity, always stands front of one of the grocery stores I frequent. As I walked toward him, near the store's entrance, a person crossed in front of me. He was dressed shabbily, walking an old bike with a bike basket filled to overflowing with his personal stuff. Judging a book by its cover, there was no question in my mind that this was a homeless person. He approached the collector, stopped, rummaged in his pockets, and put coins in the collector's tub.

I stood in my place speechless, so moved was I by this act of charity. I wanted to run up to that man and offer him my charity. I held myself back, recognizing that even the poor among us must have opportunities to present their own charitable donations, their own holy gifts. My financial ability to give may be greater than that man, but I believe that in the metaphorical Eyes of the Holy One our gifts were equal and both are sacred.

May your heart be moved to make your own donations of well-being this week, and may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

The Gift of Making Time

March 12, 2018

This Shabbat is a special one of the Jewish calendar – yes, every Shabbat is special but this one is uniquely so. This Shabbat we not only begin reading from the Book of Leviticus, Vayikra, in our weekly Torah reading cycle. We also observe Rosh Chodesh – the new moon signifying a new Hebrew month – and Shabbat HaChodesh – “The Shabbat of the month.”

Rosh Chodesh is really another new year’s on the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashana celebrates the beginning of the Jewish year but it takes place at the beginning of the seventh month. Shabbat HaChodesh is the beginning of counting of months, starting with Nisan, the month of Passover. Shabbat HaChodesh is a remembrance of the first commandment God gave the Israelite nation: celebrate the new month. God issues this commandment when we were still slaves in Egypt, as we were preparing to leave. By giving us a system of counting the passage of days and months and years, God gave us something that slaves never had – the gift of time. The slave’s life is the same every day, every week, every month. Get up, do back breaking labor, collapse into sleep, get up again. One day has no more significance than the day before. But with Shabbat HaChodesh, God demonstrates to us that we are no longer slaves! We can now measure and sanctify time. This mitzvah, commandment, is God’s precious gift to us. We are truly free.

Shabbat HaChodesh is also a signal: Passover is coming in only two weeks! If you have any questions, please ask me! As a reminder, chametz, the five grains forbidden during the week of Passover are wheat (except for matza and wheat that has been “guarded” or watched to be sure it didn’t rise in growing or preparation), oat, rye, spelt, and barley. Some Jews of Ashkenazic descent also refrain from eating kitniyot, which generally include corn, rice, peas, lentils, and beans. As Rabbi, I approve of eating kitniyot and permit it in our temple.

Esther - A Profile of Courage

February 28, 2018

One of the most important lines in Megillat Esther (Book of Esther) comes after Mordechai learns of evil Haman’s plan to annihilate the Jews. Through a messenger he tells Queen Esther, his cousin and adopted daughter, “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace...And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”

At that moment, the meek, dutiful, and complaint Esther the girl emerges as a self-possessed, confident, courageous woman, worthy of the title Queen. No longer is she following Mordechai's orders. Now she takes control of the situation and she tells him what he and the Jewish people must do. From that point forward, she is in charge of her own fate and the fate of her people. She devises a plan that will draw the king's ire so that he takes decisive action to protect himself and his kingdom.

Throughout our lives, we are confronted with situations that demand our attention and our action. We never know which of those actions is decisive to our future. We often stand before two doors – which one will we open; Behind which one might we find the very purpose of our existence?

From Esther, we learn to be decisive, self-confident, and courageous. These attributes often don't come automatically to us. They must be nurtured and cultivated. We are often called to find our best selves and we can't let fear of failure hold us back. Sometimes it's changing a job or a career, sometimes it's standing up when we see injustices, sometimes it's just saying no. Esther is our model – we are all capable of growth and change. She has proven it to us for all time.

(Inspired by a lesson on Megillat Esther by my teacher, Rabbi Haim Ovadia.)

May you have a festival of great joy as we are commanded! See you at our Purim services and party Friday night, and our Purim carnival Sunday.

Be the First to Jump in the Sea

February 21, 2018

In this week's Torah reading, the Israelites are in the desert, engaged in the building of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary, soon after receiving the Ten Commandments.

But I want to take you back to an earlier time in our narrative, to the time when the Israelites were trapped by the shores of the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was close in pursuit behind them. In front of them was the raging sea. They were immobilized, not able to go forward or back, sure to die.

There is a *midrash*, a story found in the Talmud, that explains how the Israelites came to enter the Red Sea as it parted, going to safety on the other side. It begins in the Torah narrative with Moses turning to God for help, and God answering, "Why are you crying out to Me? Go forward." God is saying, "There is a time for praying and a time for action." God tells Moses to lift his rod, and then God begins to split the sea.

But in our *midrash*, the people feel powerless, standing in fear. None of the tribes were willing to be the first to jump into the sea. A man named Nachshon, the midrash says, saw what was happening - and jumped. And the Israelites followed Nachshon's example, and were saved.

This powerful *midrash* models for us courage and action. These days, many of us feel as immobilized as the Israelites, wanting change to happen in our country to protect innocent lives, especially and urgently our children. We offer prayers of condolences and express grief and outrage. But our job in this world is to be courageous, to take the first step into the sea. While prayer reflects our soul's pleas we are reminded: "Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you."

"When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying 'Have faith and take your troubles to God.' Act instead as if there were no God, as though there were only one person in all the world who could help – only yourself." Martin Buber

Bringing God Radiantly Into Our Lives

February 14, 2018

And Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, that they bring me an offering... The name of this week's Torah reading is Terumah, gifts, specifically gifts that were especially set aside with the intention of being a sacred donation. The etymology for terumah is the Hebrew root "to raise" or "to elevate." The connection is obvious – a gift for a sacred purpose will elevate the giver.

The gift the Israelites are told to bring is for the construction of the sanctuary in the desert, called the mishkan. Indeed gifts to the sanctuary in the desert and gifts to support our own Emeth mishkan was and is an opportunity to elevate oneself spiritually.

Notice that our sanctuary, like most, has as its centerpiece a bimah, a stage. The bimah is elevated and when one approaches the Holy Ark and the Torahs within it one must rise up. The honor of standing next to the Torah reader and chanting the blessing is called an aliya, literally going up. Elevating one's spirit, coming closer to the Holy One of blessings, is the essence of terumah.

Indeed, in this Torah portion the Israelites are instructed to build the mishkan so that God would dwell among them. God doesn't limit Godself to the confines of the sanctuary, but would "dwell" among the people, wherever they were. The act of elevating oneself for this sacred purpose brings the Holy One into their midst. This is true for us in our own time. Sacred donations and sacred acts elevate our spirits and our souls and bring God radiantly into our lives.

For Once You Were Strangers Too

February 7, 2018

Throughout Torah we are given many commandments, beginning right in the first chapter: “Be fruitful and multiply.” But there is one commandment that is repeated over and over again, 36 times to be exact. In this week’s chapter alone, we hear the commandment twice: “Do not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20),” and “You shall not oppress the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).”

Torah doesn’t rely on our memory of our history, because generations come and go and this commandment holds: do not oppress the *ger*, the stranger. Who is the *ger*? Chumash Etz Hayim identifies the *ger* as someone who is a foreign born permanent resident, whose status was between the native born citizen and the foreigner who is temporarily residing outside the community.

Not only are we told to “not oppress” the stranger; later, in Deuteronomy, we are even commanded to love them! This teaches the deep care we must extend to the stranger, going beyond what we must not do. By loving, we extend housing and sustenance, and insist on just treatment. By loving, our obligation is deep and constant.

One thing a student of Torah understands is that Torah doesn’t mince words – if it’s there, it’s there for a reason. If it’s there 36 times, for sure it is not meant to be ignored! Take care of the *ger* and other people in our society who lack means or protection – the poor, the widow, the orphan (Exodus 22:20-23). They need our guardianship. Our history confirms that we know what it is like to be outcasts from society, to be maltreated, to need the loving care of others.

Our Passover seder will remind us that we were once sojourners. Our daily news reminds us of those around the world who are sojourners today. Let us use the lessons of Torah to teach us how to respond.

Meeting God

February 1, 2018

When we talk about the experience of Sinai we usually say things like, “The Israelites received the 10 Commandments at Sinai.” Or, “Moses said to the Israelites...” Or, “The Israelites heard...”

When we reflect on the experience of Sinai, the essence of this week's Torah chapter, we rob ourselves of the awesomeness of the experience. The sentence structure is too passive. The words are too ordinary. Instead, we should be imaging being there, standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, hearing the utterances of the Holy One. Indeed, tradition is that all of our souls were there at the foot of the mountain, and therefore we were all there, so I will write in terms of "we" rather than "they", the Israelites.

So, put YOURSELF there, at the foot of the mountain. You are experiencing the earth shaking, the mountain roaring. The Torah text tells us, "There was thunder and there was lightening, and there was a dense cloud upon the mountain...and all of the people (and that includes YOU) trembled." And the text tells us that we saw the thunder and lightning, but we were afraid. It was overwhelming to be in the Holy Presence and we asked Moses to intervene for us. But make no mistake, the Jewish people for all eternity witnessed the most dramatic, miraculous event in human history.

If you can imagine this scene, you have the potential to elevate your spiritual longing to be in relationship with God. You already are a witness; you already had the experience. And now that we have had the experience once, we long to meet God once again. How do we do that? The commentary in Chumash Etz Hayyim tells us, "Through ritual, through study, through the performance of mitzvot (used here as both commandments and good deeds), and through our encounters with people who embody what God stands for, we are able to 'meet' God."

One Mitzvah Leads to Another

January 23, 2018

For many years now, our bar and bat mitzvah students have a "mitzvah requirement" during the year preceding their celebration. Each week, they are required to perform a mitzvah – a commandment – and record their experience and reactions to it in a journal. Of course they perform mitzvot (plural of mitzvah) regularly and don't even know it – and that's the purpose of the "Year of Living Jewishly" – to teach them that observing mitzvot is indeed part of their daily lives. Some mitzvot are difficult for some of them; for example, going a week without mixing meat and milk ("What? I can't have a cheeseburger?") and some are easier (being kind to elders or lighting Shabbat candles).

This week's Torah portion, B'Shallach ("When Pharaoh let the people go...") includes a mitzvah that is almost hidden in the text, because so much is happening here (leaving Egypt, the miracle of the Red Sea splitting, manna for food, etc.).

The mitzvah is found in Exodus 13:18: "And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph." Before Joseph died, 210 years before the Exodus, he asked that the Children of Israel take an oath that, when they leave Egypt and return to the Holy Land, they would take Joseph's bones with them for burial. Moses

fulfilled this promise because it was his responsibility to do so. He sought no reward for fulfilling the promise made by generations before.

Burying the dead is a commandment held in highest regard because the dead cannot reciprocate, there is no repayment expected, no way of saying thank you. Yet we are expected to attend funerals and to shovel dirt at the end, participating in the actual burial.

Burying the dead is a mitzvah that is done because it is the right thing to do. We are also taught that "mitzvah goreret mitzvah," one mitzvah leads to another. After burial, we support the bereaved with acts of lovingkindness – attending the house of mourning, bringing food and participating in services so they can say the Mourners' Kaddish.

Pharaoh and the Freedom to Choose

January 16, 2018

In this week's Torah parasha (chapter, reading), the narrative tells us repeatedly that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." This is troublesome to most of us. After all, didn't the Holy One endow all humans with free will? If God took away Pharaoh's free will, his freedom to act, what does it mean to be human? Actually two different words are used in describing God's actions. The text uses the Hebrew word "hichbaditi", "I made heavy," which is usually translated as hardened (Pharaoh's heart). In other places (for example Shemot 4:21 and Bo 11:10) the text uses the verb va'y'chazek, meaning "God strengthened."

If God "made heavy" Pharaoh's heart, then God removed his freewill. However, if God strengthened Pharaoh's heart, then Pharaoh had already made his choice and his resolve was strengthened. Pharaoh never lost his freedom to choose. He never lost what makes him human. But he did lose his humanity! There is a difference.

Pharaoh lost his humanity when he closed his heart to the suffering of the Hebrews, and even to the suffering of his own people! When his ego was so great that he had shut out any empathy or compassion for the suffering of others. Only when he lost his own son in the tenth plague, the death of the first born, did he finally release Israel from bondage.

The Exodus is the defining moment of the Jewish nation. Only with the Exodus itself could we even become a nation at all. For 465 years, we were captive Hebrews, children of Israel. Our suffering taught us empathy, compassion and kindness.

May we be like Moses and not like Pharaoh. May we have hearts that are strengthened to be compassionate and loving, caring and kind. Let us use our freedom on behalf of others. Let us use our freedom to be role models of ethical behavior. Shabbat shalom.

Encountering God

January 9, 2018

At some point in our private study sessions together, it's not unusual for a bar or bat mitzvah student to ask me, "Why doesn't God talk to us (or to prophets) anymore?" The conversation will go in the direction of how do we know there really is God and asking me why I believe in God.

Adults pose the question in a different way. Usually it's a declaration that sounds something like this: "I'm a spiritual person but I don't (or I'm not sure if) I believe in God." Often the tone of voice tells me that it's a challenge: make me believe.

This week's Torah reading begins with God speaking to Moses: "I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." Then God tells Moses to tell the Israelite slaves that God has not forgotten them, has heard their suffering, and promises to free them, deliver them, redeem them, and take them to be God's people.

That's a very dramatic encounter and not likely one that you or I will experience. The truth, however, is that we have the opportunity to be God's presence every hour of every day. It takes a willingness to accept that as a genuine possibility and then open our souls to it.

I experience God's presence most when I am riding to or from the temple, when a dilemma is facing me and I'm not sure how to proceed; or when someone I love is sick or suffering; or I'm worried about the world I'm leaving for my descendants. While I drive, I call out to God and we chat. Don't think I'm crazy, we do chat. I tell God everything that's in my heart. Afterwards I almost always have clarity and an awareness of possible choices. Now, I know people who don't engage God in this way will have many reasons they can offer for my resolutions. I don't accept them. Why am I so sure I am in conversation with the Holy One? Because I am engaged in an experience. Just as love can't be explained or rationalized, my relationship with God is experiential, not in my head but in my heart.

The encounter that Moses had with God in the desert is available to each of us. We won't hear God's voice calling out to us. But God will hear our voice.

Back to the Future

January 2, 2018

This week's Torah portion is Shemot, the first chapter in the second Book of Torah, commonly known as Exodus. The chapter begins with the enslavement of our ancestors and the embitterment of their lives. To the Hebrew slaves in their misery, there was no end to their suffering in sight. But when we read this chapter today, around 3000 years after it occurred, we know how it will end. We know that God will save us, we know that our Torah narrative will end with our becoming a nation in our own land.

This week's Torah reading teaches us that we can never know the future, and that what seems untenable and impossible now might right itself for good. We also know that our lives have high points and low points, and we need to wade through the muck sometimes before we reach the good.

In this week of beginnings I share with you these words written by Craig Taubman: "Given Judaism is over 3800 years old, I question the need for new ideas. We might be better served focusing on some old ideas, like tolerance, gratitude, empathy, respect and kindness. If the goal of Judaism is to bring people closer to goodness through relationship with God, then it is these attributes that will likely contribute to a more just and peaceful world. The Talmud challenges us to recite 100 blessings every day. Imagine if we praised 100 people or places each day - maybe then we could realize a really old idea: "Love our neighbors as we wish to be loved."

May this be a year of a fuller living, of reaching toward impossible dreams and overcoming incredible odds. And at the end of the year, may we reflect back and discover it had been a year of blessings.