

# Rabbi's Weekly Message

July 2018 - December 2018

## Win By Losing

Marcia Fishman, Secretary, Congregation Emeth

*December 12, 2018*

Will our actions be a blessing or a curse? Can we win by losing? We can ask ourselves these questions after reading the parsha, Vayechi.

Joseph's father, Jacob, has died – and Joseph's brothers are fearful of Joseph. Decades earlier, they plotted to kill Joseph, eventually selling him into slavery instead. So now, following the burial of Jacob, Joseph's brothers are worried that Joseph might hold a grudge against them and punish them for their evil doings. But Joseph had learned that his brothers' actions were of G-d's doing; a plan that would bring Joseph to Egypt and eventually prevent a terrible famine. Joseph therefore asked his brothers not to be afraid and their ties were reconciled. One might ask how he could do this after what his brothers had done. Joseph knew, however, That G-d had a plan to save lives and the lives of his family. The ends of fulfilling G-d's purpose had justified the means.

This Biblical family worked through the traumas of their past. In our current lives, are we able to do the same? What do we do with old hurts that lie under the surface for decades?

In 2013 I grabbed the opportunity to join a Jewish tour of South Africa. While in Cape Town, I visited Robben Island, home of the prison that held Nelson Mandela for 27 years. After this experience, it was inconceivable for me to understand how President Mandela, following incarceration, could say, "We must strive to be moved by a generosity of spirit that will enable us to outgrow the hatred and conflicts of the past." But President Mandela was correctly (and tenaciously) convinced that reparation of South Africa would depend on reconciliation with his enemies of the past.

With both Joseph and President Mandela, we are not merely talking about forgiveness. With forgiveness, we work through hurt and let go of a grudge - and we can do this without engaging any of those we have forgiven. We can even forgive someone who has already died. Conversely, reconciliation is an interpersonal process where both parties interact about what happened, exchange stories and begin to reestablish trust. This is more complicated and involves more effort.

Joseph carried out reconciliation by reframing his brothers' misdeeds as a story of shared history and destiny. He advocated for the larger picture of God's plan, and the brothers participated by apologizing

– all in the name of their united future. Further recrimination was unnecessary. No one would have won.

Is this relevant to our daily lives? At one time or another (or now), many of us have been entangled in a web of misunderstandings or realities that sparked frustration and anger. Like Joseph, we can choose to reinterpret the story, or avoid the blame game, or realize the true needs of our opponent. We can choose to stand in our self-righteous shoes, or we can instead stand in the shoes of others. And like President Mandela, we could step back from our need to be right and look at the bigger picture instead. Being right may offer a moment of satisfaction, but it can also be fraught with bitterness – as if we won a war - but the stakes were too high in the end. If we win by losing, the reconciliation could be peaceful and sweet.

It is often said: “Live well. It is the greatest revenge.” Or more humorously put by Oscar Wilde: “Always forgive [or in this case – reconcile with] your enemies – nothing annoys them so much.” The Torah’s view is not to bear a grudge at all. That is living well!

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## An Interfaith Perspective on Anti-Semitic Hate

Michael Heil, Vice President, Congregation Emeth

*December 5, 2018*

As readers of the weekly message will know from the wonderful messages from Marcia Fishman and Elizabeth Mandel, while Rabbi Israel has been embarked on her well-deserved sabbatical, Board members have been asked to pinch hit to write weekly messages.

In mid-October, when we planned topics for each of us, I suggested some sort of interfaith subject. It seemed a logical topic for me. This is because my wife, Bette Gardner, and I are one of many interfaith couples that are part of Emeth. I am one of the board members who is not Jewish. I was thinking I would write about my journey through parts of Judaism from some basic learning in 1984 to now. The journey started with Rabbi Henry Jay Karp, who, before he would marry us, expected me to go through a course of study—books on Judaism, book reports and discussions with him. The next milestone in the journey was in 2001 when we joined Congregation Emeth. The next major milestone was in 2010 when I began to serve as a member of the Board. There was a lot I thought I might say about this journey. The central theme would have been the process of being welcomed and accepted by the community (which happened quickly) and the process (slower) of me fully believing in my own integration into the community. Even today, there are times that I feel a bit like a fish out of water.

But before it was time to start writing that kind of message, the October 27 attack at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh happened—11 people murdered and 7 injured for being Jewish. After the

initial shock subsided slightly, I became overwhelmed with the beginning of an understanding of what it must be like to be part of a group of people that is the target of hate. Of course, I have known for many decades that a number of groups of people, including Jews, are the targets of hate. But that was a knowing of the intellect; not of the heart, not in the gut. The Pittsburgh attack started to change that.

The most significant part of my developing thoughts involves recognizing the following contrast. A person in America who is white, a male, heterosexual, relatively affluent and was raised in a Christian faith most likely has never known what it feels like to be hated simply for being the essence of what he or she is. Only a person who is Jewish (or Muslim, or non-white, or a non-heterosexual, or poor or a woman) or who embodies several of those intrinsic characteristics can know what it must be like.

I look forward to opportunities for dialogue on this topic where those of us that are Jewish and those of us that are not, can explore this more deeply with one another, particularly focused on the heart and gut.

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## What Would Joseph Do?

Marilyn Freund, Membership Director, Congregation Emeth

*November 28, 2018*

Our ancient sage Joseph, despite his imprisonment, arose to make a huge contribution, through dream interpretation to those around him. He inspired people to react in a positive way. He wanted people to utilize ways to help people in need for survival. What can we do? We can volunteer time at The Lord's Table on Christmas Day in Gilroy. Therefore, we can contact Curtis Palm or look at the SignUpGenius to see what help and food needs support! We can bring in travel toiletries, tarps, socks, jackets, tents, ponchos, flashlights and batteries. This would provide some comfort for people with extreme adversity. Joseph would expect his people at Emeth to participate in The Dreidel Board which has the needs of Jewish people in the greater community. In addition, Joseph would want us to share The Chanukah Story with our family and include those without family. We will experience gratitude within ourselves for making the world a better place, and cherish the fact that we could make a difference!

Have a Very Happy Chanukah!

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## Let's Talk About Anger

Elizabeth Mandel, Communications Director, Congregation Emeth

*November 14, 2018*

Last month, in response to the horrific shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Rabbi Israel wrote a powerful opinion piece for the local papers. She concluded the column by telling members of the community, "I want you to be as angry as I am. And I want you to use your anger to change the culture of bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and all the other "antis" in which we are drowning. Picket and scream and shout against the hatred that is consuming our beloved country."

In my capacity as Emeth's Communications Director, I shared the rabbi's message with the papers and various community leaders. I was unprepared for the discomfort many people expressed with the rabbi's profession of anger. They wanted to hear requests for solidarity; they wanted to hear about determination and resolve; but "anger" made them uneasy.

I believe the discomfort I heard with the word "anger" stems in part from the erosion of civil discourse in this country. "Anger" is becoming increasingly equated with either overreactions to personal desires being thwarted or "rage"--uncontrolled anger--or both. In order for us to feel comfortable in speaking out strongly and unequivocally, we must recognize there is another kind of anger, righteous anger, also referred to as righteous indignation or justifiable anger. Righteous anger is an unambiguous reaction to evil. And I would argue that the killing of defenseless worshipers in their sanctuary must elicit such righteous anger, anger which then must propel us toward action.

Not all religions believe that anger can ever be justified. Purifying ourselves of anger is essential to Buddhist practice, as Buddhists believe that anger is one of the three poisons (along with greed and ignorance) that leads to a cycle of suffering and rebirth. However, even Buddhism acknowledges that all people get angry; Buddhism teaches mindfulness, encouraging people to observe and fully acknowledge their anger. Whether or not you believe anger can be justified, observing and acknowledging your anger is a critical first step toward rational action.

Suppose you are angry. What is the right response? Religions do agree that when we become angry we must take care not to act on our anger to hurt others. Being mindful of this dictate to do no harm, how then should you act, directing your anger to effect change?

Elie Weisel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, provides a model for such action. He said, "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

More emphatically, Rabbi Israel said, "Picket and scream and shout against hatred."

Let this be a call to action: Let us all first acknowledge our anger, let us recognize that this is a valid and justifiable emotion, and then let us channel it to speak out against hatred and violence. Your voice can take many forms: vote, write letters denouncing violence, participate in protests, donate time or money to organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), run for elected office, call out hateful

behavior when you see it, and actively engage friends and family in thoughtful discussion. Be the voice that refuses to normalize this behavior.

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# The Argument for Deception

Marcia Fishman, Secretary, Congregation Emeth

*November 7, 2018*

When is it okay to be deceptive? And when are we on the ledge of honesty before we jump into that pit of deceit?

I consider myself to be an honest person but, in some circumstances, I know that I have been guilty of:  
Avoiding full disclosure.

Framing an argument to my advantage.

Complimenting when the compliment wasn't warranted.

I hope that these degrees of duplicity were justified or conducive to good at the time. But how do we measure such degrees of truth vs. deception?

In this week's Torah portion, Toldot, we read about how Rebecca helps her son, Jacob, deceive his father, Isaac. Esau, the older brother of the two, held the birthright, i.e. the rights as the first born. One day Esau returns from working in the fields and spots Jacob with a pot of stew. Feeling faint with hunger, he asks for some food. Jacob responds that Esau can trade the food for his birthright. Esau did not like his birthright and he readily agreed.

Years later, their father, Isaac, is blind and near death. He asks Esau to bring him his favorite food and he will then bestow the blessing for the first born. As Esau leaves, Rebecca herself prepares Isaac's favorite dish, and calls to Jacob with a plan of deceit. She covers Jacob's arms and neck with goatskin to feign the feel of his hairier brother, and then sends him to Isaac. Isaac is convinced that Jacob is Esau and offers a blessing for an abundance of corn and wine, that people will serve him, and nations will bow down to him.

Was this deception justified? It was clearly a lie.

The Roman poet, Horace, said, "He who has made a practice to lie and deceive his father, will be the most daring in deceiving others."

Is Horace correct with Jacob and his father? The good news is that the deception was arguably justified and would not necessarily lead to others. Rebecca felt that G-D let her know that her younger son

would rule over the elder. G-D knew Jacob's heart and that he was truly the righteous one of the two brothers. And when Isaac learned of the deception, he also learned that Esau had sold his birthright – and he understood that Jacob was the one who deserved the blessing. He averted a terrible mistake. So back to my first question – When is it okay to be deceptive? It is a question for pause and consideration. When will a deception hurt and when will it help? When do people want to learn truth and when would they rather ignore it? And when do we make efforts to actually seek out the truth, and when do we listen to the Wizard of Oz when he instructs, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

For me, I usually don't hang with people who hide behind a curtain. I basically wish for people to tell the truth, keep things to themselves when necessary, and know how to balance the two.

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## Shout Against Hatred (Morgan Hill Times Guest Column)

*October 30, 2018*

For Jews, Saturday is the Sabbath. When we greet one another on Saturday, we say these words: “Shabbat shalom, Sabbath peace.”

But this past Saturday, as Jews gathered in worship at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, there was no Shabbat shalom. Throughout the United States, and indeed the world, we were horrified with the news of what had happened during the most sacred time in Judaism.

Each of us come to our respective sanctuaries to pray, to commune with the Holy One, to be at peace, to share life's meaning with friends, family and our faith community. By definition, a sanctuary is a refuge, a haven, a shelter, a place of safety. But on this past Sabbath, the sanctuary of Tree of Life synagogue was not a haven and not a sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace. We've been told that this was the most hideous and worse attack on Jews in America since its founding. How can this be? We have well documented evidence that anti-Semitism in America has been rising year after year.

But we also know that when one group is attacked, all groups are attacked. When one group suffers, all groups suffer. In recent years we have seen attacks on Muslims, attacks on the undocumented and refugees, attacks on transgender and non-binary and gays and lesbians, attacks on women, attacks on indigenous people and all people of color. And then they came for Jews. I am a Jew. They came for me. They came for us.

You and me, dear friends of different faiths and races and sexual and gender identities, over the years we have stood together through each of these attacks and we said in one voice, “We will overcome them!”

This is not the first attack in a place of worship. In fact, on Friday an attempt was made to enter a black church in Kentucky; when that failed the killer went after two African-Americans in a nearby convenience store and murdered them instead. And last week we read of repeated bomb threats to our nation's Democratic leaders. A week of violence. Violence begetting violence.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Weisel, referring to the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom as a consequence of the inhabitants' evilness, wrote:

One day a righteous person came to Sodom; he knew what Sodom was, so he came to save it from sin, from destruction. He preached to the people. "Please do not be murderers, do not be thieves. Do not be silent and do not be indifferent." He went on preaching day after day, maybe even picketing. But no one listened. He was not discouraged. He went on preaching for years. Finally someone asked him, "Rabbi, why do you do that? Don't you see it is no use?" He said, "I know it is of no use, but I must. And I will tell you why: In the beginning I thought I had to protest and to shout in order to change them. I have given up this hope. Now I know I must picket and scream and shout so that they should not change me." (Words from a Witness, pg 48)

Speaking as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of South County, I ask you not to comfort us, not to pray for us, not to offer flowers and sympathy. I want you to be as angry as I am. And I want you to use your anger to change the culture of bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and all the other "antis" in which we are drowning. Picket and scream and shout against the hatred that is consuming our beloved country. It is not too late to change them. But in the process let's make sure they never change us.

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## You Count!

*October 26, 2018*

We are bombarded with reminders these days of how important we are, that we count! Those reminders are the heart of our reminders to vote this year! You count, so vote so that you will be counted.

I couldn't agree more, but I am struck by another way, an often-forgotten way, of how much you count. You count here, at Congregation Emeth. We forget that, but the 9 people who made up our minyan (prayer quorum, 10 post bar/bat mitzvah Jews) last Shabbat morning knew how much they counted and how much those who were not here counted.

I know how difficult it is to wake up and get up on Shabbat mornings, or be on our way home from a difficult week on Friday evenings, and we think of all of the reasons to stay away from the one activity

that is viewed as optional: attending Shabbat services. You might be thinking to yourself, “I don’t need it” or “I’m too tired” or “I’m too busy” or “Out to dinner and a movie” or simply, “Not interested.”

I get all that, because I have the same conversations with myself on days when Congregation Emeth doesn’t have a scheduled service. But then I remember: I count. For those people who are attending services because they are saying the Mourners’ Prayer, and need a quorum to do so, I count; you count. For those people who studied and worked so hard to learn a Torah reading in service to the Congregation but cannot read Torah without a prayer quorum, I count; you count. For those struggling with illness or disease, or who have loved ones or friends in pain, hearing the voices of others praying for their recovery, I count; you count. For those going through personal struggles, privately in pain, but needing to see familiar faces who can simply give them a Shabbat Shalom hug and let them know they are not alone, I count; you count.

Quoting from my Yom Kippur d’var Torah (sermon): “Victor Frankl wrote that people are in search of meaning. In our time, people aren’t only in search of meaning, we also are in search of connection...The strength of human relationships enables us to survive and thrive. What we want more than anything is a connection to other human beings...We must do everything we can to nurture our relationships with one another. And I suggest the best place to start is here, in our temple, being part of a community and supporting our communal activities.”

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## A Warning Label for Noah and the Ark

*October 12, 2018*

This week’s Torah reading is a perennial favorite, Noah. It is a rare children’s library that doesn’t include several versions of the story, usually beginning with picture books. My personal favorite is Peter Spier’s version, which has no words, only water color interpretations. (You may know that in my previous career I was co-publisher and managing editor of NOAH’S ARK, A NEWSPAPER FOR JEWISH CHILDREN.)

In the Bible version of the story, at least two of every animal boarded the ark to be rescued from the Flood. If that story would be written today, the story would have to describe those many already extinct animals who didn’t make it on the ark because of human greed and exploitation.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature reports that there are now 41,415 species that are endangered, including both animals and plants. Of those, 16,306 are threatened with extinction! High on the list of endangered animals are gorillas, tigers, elephants, and sea turtles.

At the end of the biblical story, God puts a rainbow in the sky with the promise that the Holy One would never again destroy the earth. Unfortunately, that agreement was one sided, but it is not too late for a reciprocal covenant. God destroyed the world because of corruption, which is Bible-speak for



illicit sex and immorality. Now, humanity is destroying the world because of greed and a lack of appreciation for the tremendous gift we have been given.

Is it too late? In 2004 the giant panda was nearly extinct. But in 2014, the species was downgraded from endangered to vulnerable. “The recovery of the panda shows that when science, political will and engagement of local communities come together, we can save wildlife and also improve biodiversity,” said Marcus Lambertini, executive director of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

“The heavens belong to God, but the earth God gave to humans.” (Psalm 115:16) Let us treat this responsibility as the precious gift it is.

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## Darkness Before the Light

*October 5 2018*

During Simchat Torah, we read the last words of Torah, describing the death of Moses, called *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Rabbi. If we are able to restrain our rational selves and delve into this emotional scene, we will recognize and acknowledge the great sadness with which Torah ends. After all, the death of Moses is so climactic, so dramatic, and so very sad that after his death the Torah ends. What else could be said? God’s very messenger, the one God entrusted with the responsibility to speak to Pharaoh on God’s behalf; the one who led the slaves out of Egypt and heard their complaints for 40 years in the wilderness; the one who took groups of tribes and forged them into a nation; that very one, Moses, was dead. We must pause to remember his death, to recite *kaddish*, the Mourner’s Prayer.

But immediately after, both during Simchat Torah services and the Shabbat following, this Shabbat, we begin reading the Torah over again. We begin at the beginning, in darkness. Is this the darkness we are holding in our hearts over the death of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the darkness of despair? Who will lead us now that Moses is gone? Who can we turn to?

We are reminded immediately that God is still with us. God turns on the light, so to speak. This week’s Torah reading begins, “When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface...and God said, “Let there be light.” That’s all it took. Light breaking up the darkness. We go from mourning to lightness. God, our Creator, has restored our faith in the future. As my colleague, Rabbi Sara Davidson Berman, wrote, “Darkness comes first, but darkness is always followed by light. By believing that the light will ultimately come, (hope in the future is restored).”

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## Celebrate With Great Joy

*September 28, 2018*

We are nearing the end of our Holy Days and holiday season! We have had a full celebration including:

- the prayers for a blessed New Year
- to the joyous experience of having been forgiven on Yom Kippur
- to Sukkot, the biblical, agricultural and historical festival, which is also called Chag HaSimcha, the joyous or happy holiday
- to Simchat Torah, the celebration of ending and then beginning again the reading of the Torah, which we will observe this Friday night.

Some people are “synagogued-out” by this point, meaning they have had “enough” of synagogue services. To me, that’s like saying, “I’ve had the entrée, who needs dessert?” Simchat Torah is the culmination of this great joyous season. We end the cycle of Torah readings by chanting the last words in our holy text. Then, just like we start over again with a clean slate after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we start reading Torah over again, from the beginning, as if we never read it before. This is not hard to imagine because scholars, Rabbis, and sages study Torah their entire lives and always discover new insights and understandings.

Let’s keep celebrating with great joy! Cantorial student Elizabeth Baseman will be providing our music, and we will be dancing around the Torahs! This is the holiday for adults and children to come together to celebrate! We’ll have dinner in our beautiful sukkah followed by our abbreviated service, then dancing, and an oneg! What a wonderful way to end the holiday season!

Moadim l’simcha – Happy and joyous holidays!

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## Soul Searching and Soul Healing

*September 7, 2018*

One week remains until the start of Rosh Hashanah. The clock is ticking as we confront our strengths and weaknesses, our interpersonal successes and failures, and our relationship with the Holy One of Blessings. To take those crucial first steps toward change, we will need courage and the will to change, to seek forgiveness, and to be forgiving.

Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, the President of my rabbinical school (AJRCA) who continues to be my beloved teacher, wrote this message to students and alumni, which I am sharing in part with you, with Rabbi Mel’s permission:

*Let me suggest a short exercise that may assist us on this journey during this High Holiday period. Choose an evening, take a pen and a piece of paper, go into a quiet place in your home where you won’t be disturbed and I’d like you to take ten minutes to write a letter to G-d. In this letter, honestly open up your heart to*

*where you are now in your life, what positives and negatives you find in your soul, what struggles you are honestly engage in or are avoiding, what you aspire to, what help you need...tell G-d about it. I believe it will give you a moment of radical honesty with yourself, where you will have the opportunity to actually hear yourself. If this exercise is difficult for you, then simply write about that difficulty. The next thing I would like you to do is to write a second letter, this time from G-d to you, responding to your letter. I think this response will also help you, and hopefully strengthen you.*

*This exercise will only take fifteen to twenty minutes, and open you up to some potentially real issues within your soul. At the very least it will make you better prepared for the endeavor of the High Holidays...May our work be successful this year and may our joyful aspirations become a reality through our work.*

Driving to temple, through the beautiful forest of Hecker Pass, I spoke aloud my letter and God's response to me. It was a powerful exercise. I spoke my truth and then God actually chastised me for those times I let myself, and the Holy One, down during this past year. God told me to get over myself and recognize I was doing the best I can. God assured me that I could count on God to be with me as I struggled to repair my soul and do better this year. And more. My insights were so powerful, as a result of my willingness to be truly honest with myself and God, I feel inspired to make the changes I need to make. I know I am not alone. And neither are you.

May you realize your own truths and start on the path to soul-searching and soul-healing, blessed by God. Shana tova!

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## The Power of Forgiveness

*August 31, 2018*

We are in the last days before the High Holy Days begin. The dominant themes of this holy period are *teshuva*, literally "return", achieved through asking for and granting forgiveness; *tzedakah*, literally "righteousness" but during this holy period it is used as the righteous act of making charitable donations; and *t'filah*, prayer. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our focus will turn to prayer and in these pre-holiday weeks, our attention is on forgiveness and *tzedakah*.

Forgiveness is the most difficult, both to ask for it and to grant it. As I wrote last week, it must be accompanied by genuine remorse and a commitment to never repeat the act for which one is asking for forgiveness.

In recent days, we have learned many lessons about forgiveness as we heard stories about the life of Senator John McCain, may his soul rest in peace. Like Ted Kennedy, Senator McCain was that rare politician who could argue by day with his adversaries in the Senate and socialize with the same

opponents when not in session. As Senator Jeff Flake, his fellow Arizona Republican, commented on the Sunday morning news shows, said, “Senator John McCain’s greatest lesson was to forgive and to see the good in his opponents.” We know this is true because of the wide range of comments of praise, many beginning with, “I didn’t agree with his politics but...”

Further evidence of his ability to forgive is that he asked two of those opponents to deliver his eulogies, former Presidents George W. Bush and Barak Obama.

Over the years I have often taught you about the relationship between Talmudic sages Hillel and Shammai. They were opponents in their interpretations of Jewish law. Yet they serve for the ages as the models for *machloket l’shem shamayim*, disagreements for the sake of heaven (though a time did come when their disagreements escalated into a conflict). Nonetheless, we use them to teach us to question our motivations and to argue not for personal gain but for the greater good and wellbeing of one another, and to admit when we are wrong.

These models should inspire us during these days as we struggle with our own interpersonal relationships and what we can do to improve them.

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

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## Preparing for the Season of Change

*August 23, 2018*

Look in the sky each night; the moon serves as our High Holiday ticking clock. As we watch the moon grow in size, and then decrease, we have our countdown until the start of Rosh Hashanah.

One of the central themes of the holy season is *t’shuvah*, repentance. The partner of repentance is forgiveness. Jewish tradition tells us to reach out to people we might have harmed, through speech or deed, during the past year and ask for forgiveness. And to be forgiving to those who reach out to us. But there are behaviors that shouldn’t be forgiven. Rabbi Bradley Artson describes them this way:

“...our tradition teaches that God does not respect every action. And God’s love does not cover for acts of disrespect, for acts of brutality, for acts of exclusion. Our tradition teaches us...those who love the Lord must hate evil. It is sometimes a *mitzvah* to hate. There are behaviors done, so atrocious, that the only way to not hate them is to kill your moral sensibility, to make yourself ethically dead. And to do that is, to the contrary, not an act of religious piety; it is an abandonment of religion. If God commands justice, if God liberates slaves from Pharaoh, then our job is to love those who deserve to be loved: the weak, the powerless, those who are outcasts. But those who behave in ways that are cruel and crushing, they do not deserve our love; they deserve our resistance...(But) If you are presented with someone who

shows sincere remorse, is committed to never repeating the behavior again, demonstrates that by making good as good as possible, then by all means you have an obligation from the *Torah* to forgive...” (Times of Israel blog, October 2016)

These are our guidelines for receiving forgiveness and for forgiving others - the order is important – the first two must come before the third: the abandonment of sin; the feeling of remorse; asking for forgiveness; and providing the assurance never to repeat the sin.” (Rabbi Yohanan Yahan, 9<sup>th</sup> Century)  
May your preparations for the season of change go well and may you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

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## Pursue Justice

*August 17, 2018*

The word *Shoftim* means “judges”, the first word in this week’s *parasha* (selected reading) and its underlying theme. We are told at the beginning of the *parasha* to create a just judicial system and a righteous society.

This week, we learned that the next Supreme Court candidate would come before Senate hearings on September 4<sup>th</sup>. During the selection hearings, the candidate will be grilled about his ability to weigh judgments without prejudice and to not allow his personal biases to influence his decisions. These are the same questions put before any Supreme Court nominee. It is the same criteria emphasized in this week’s Torah reading, stressing that judges must possess the ability to “govern with due justice.” The Torah is specific: do not judge unfairly, show no partiality, take no bribes. The instructions end with one of Torah’s most famous quotations: Justice, justice shall you pursue! (Deut. 16:20)

Notice the word Torah uses in this instruction, pursue. This is the second time in Torah we are told “to pursue”; the other time it is used is “to pursue peace.” Pursuit conveys a sense of urgency and eagerness. Don’t just wait for the opportunity to behave justly – pursue justice!

The command doesn’t just refer to those who are employed in the legal system. It refers to all of us, to society at large. Each of us must judge one another fairly, and we must be sure that the most vulnerable, the neediest, among us are cared for. It is a responsibility that rests on all of us. Justice is one of the primary religious categories of Judaism, the very foundation of what it means to be a Jew.

On another note, the Hebrew month of Elul began Sunday. The countdown to Rosh Hashanah has begun. I hope during this time you will warm up your prayer muscles by attending services. You are also welcome to drop into the sanctuary for some private meditative time. Please check with me ([rabbi@emeth.net](mailto:rabbi@emeth.net)) to make sure the holy space is not being used.

May you have a week of blessings and a month of spiritual repair.

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## Look and Listen

*August 10, 2018*

*"Re'eh – 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*". Last week's Torah *parasha* focused on the word *shema*, listen. This week the dominate theme is look, see. Why did Moses begin with the imperative, see? What is it that they should see?

Moses is speaking to the second generation of Israelites just before they enter the Promise Land. The first generation wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. This generation did not have the first-hand experience of slavery. But they also missed the experience of seeing God's miracles in Egypt, of seeing the sea split so they could pass, of witnessing the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai.

We have all been told that "seeing is believing." Moses is speaking to the next generation who didn't see the plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea but 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. Soon 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.

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

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## Express Gratitude

*August 3, 2018*

I have returned from my vacation. During the month, you were never far from my thoughts, and I return to you with gratitude for our relationship, for your trust in me to be your spiritual leader, for the opportunity to continue to serve you and the Holy One of blessings.

How appropriate that this Shabbat of my return is the Shabbat of gratitude. In this week's Torah reading, Moses is offering his final speech before his death (it's a long speech and will continue for the next 7 weeks of Torah readings). He cautions the Israelites that they will have prosperity and good health if they follow the commandments. He reminds them that just as God provided for them in the wilderness, God will provide for them when they reach the Promised Land.

And Moses reminds them to be grateful for these gifts from the Holy One. When they are farming the land, would they give themselves all the credit or would they remember to thank the ultimate Source of their blessing? In this chapter, we read the words that became the Birkat HaMazon, the blessing after the meal: When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to Adonai your God for the good land which God has given you (Deuteronomy 8:10). We say a blessing at the beginning of the meal, ha-motzi, thanking God for “the bread of the earth.” Then, we express our gratefulness when we complete our meal, when we have “eaten our fill,” with the Birkat Ha-Mazon.

It only takes a moment to chant Birkat HaMazon, but expressing one’s gratitude will elevate your mealtimes and bring a sense of sanctity to your kitchen table. Here is a very abbreviated version in English that I encourage you to use if you are not comfortable reciting the Hebrew or the entire text: Blessed is our God, Sovereign of the universe, who provides food for all. We thank our God with praise, as it is written: When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to your God for the good land which God has given you. Blessed is God for the land and its produce.

May God who continually shows us kindness continue offering goodness to us and continue to bless us with grace, loving kindness, compassion, deliverance, prosperity, redemption, consolation, sustenance, and mercy; a life of peace and all goodness. May God never withhold goodness from us. Amen.