

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January 2019 - June 2019

Be a Light to the Nations

June 19, 2019

In this week's *parasha* (Torah chapter), the Israelites are in the final preparations to leave Mt. Sinai and begin their trek to the Promised Land. Before doing so, final preparations for the use of the Tabernacle are being made, including raising the lampstand – the seven-branched Menorah. Today a reproduction of the Menorah graces the entry to the *Knesset*, the building that houses Israel's parliament, considered the seal of the State of Israel. Along with the *Magen David*, the 6-pointed “Jewish star”, the Menorah is one of Judaism's most recognizable symbols.

The Menorah's base was a solid piece of hammered gold. The seven lamps were detachable. We can see this as a symbol of our own lives. Rabbi Mordechai Katz taught, “Just as the Menorah began with a central base and branched outwards, so too should our basic personality stem from within us. Our motives should come from an inner desire to be good and should not be dependent on the other influences of society.”

We could say that the center base represents the light of Torah. The Jewish people's primary role in this world is to be “a light to the nations” and the Menorah represents the light of Torah guiding us toward ethical behavior and moral principles. As long as our base stands solid and firm, and we remain committed to building a just society, we will fulfill our obligations to ourselves and humanity.

The Argument for Moderation

June 12, 2019

I doubt most of you have seen the movie *Samson and Delilah*, an old multiple award-winning classic that rarely shows up on those TV stations featuring old films. But when it does, I suggest you watch it for an interesting history lesson (as well as a laugh because it's melodramatic in that old-fashioned way typical of movies of the 40's). For a synopsis, check it out on Wikipedia.

The movie is a retelling of the story of a *nazarite*, Samson, found in the book of Judges (13:2-15), which is the *haftarah* (reading from the Book of Prophets) this week. The laws regarding the nazir is included in this week's Torah reading, *Parashat Naso*. Laura Suzanne Lieber defines the *nazarite* as: "...people who expressed their commitment to God by temporarily imposing extra strictures upon themselves (including abstention from grape products [which lead to wine] and cutting of hair), or had such strictures imposed upon them by their parents before birth. Both men and women could take the vow of the *nazirite*, according to the *parasha* (chapter)." (From Study Guide to the JPS Commentary: *Haftarot*)

To me, the *nazarite* represents extremism and fanaticism. While possessing self-control and restraint are worthy attributes, moderation is a far more worthy place to be. The Talmudic sage Rav taught that in the World to Come, people will have to account for all the good and permissible things they could have enjoyed but did not.

Shavuot

June 5, 2019

The blessing that precedes the *Shema* in the evening service is *Ahavat Olam* (Enduring love); in the morning service, the prayer is *Ahavah Rabbah* (A Lot of Love). In both of these prayers, which are similar in content, we can imagine God speaking to us, expressing God's love for us. In return we respond with the declaration of God's Oneness in the *Shema*, followed by the words from Torah telling us what God expects in return for the Holy One's Love (in the *v'ahavtah*). This is a beautiful expression of God's covenant with us, acknowledged in every service.

This is the essence of the holiday we celebrate this Shabbat. Shavuot, meaning "weeks" (7 weeks from Passover to Shavuot), is called by another name, *Matan Torah* (Gift of Torah).

If we are expressing the love between God and the Jewish people, then imagine Shavuot as the wedding day. Carrying this analogy further, God is the Groom and we are collectively the bride; Mt Sinai is our *huppah*, our wedding canopy, and the Torah is our *ketubah*, our wedding contract. And Shavuot is our anniversary, the time we remember standing at Sinai and receiving the gift of Torah.

Behavior Has Consequences!

May 29, 2019

In this week's Torah chapter the Israelites are still at Sinai, hearing instructions and admonitions, before they begin their wanderings through the desert. This week's reading is direct and fearsome. God assures them they will receive blessings if they follow the commandments and warns them of the curses that will befall them if they do not. Like any parent, the Almighty cautions the Israelites that their behavior has consequences!

The chapter begins: "If you follow my Laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant you rains in their season..." (Leviticus 26:3) Nachmanides (a leading medieval Jewish scholar and Sephardic rabbi) taught that rain in its proper season is mentioned as the first blessing because rain will allow the air, springs, and rivers to remain pure and good.

We learn in this chapter that the blessing of rain in its season is a gift from God. But we have trampled on this gift by our treatment of the environment. Throughout Torah we are admonished repeatedly to keep the air clean and pure (examples: Genesis 5:5 and 23:26, Deuteronomy 7:14-15, and this chapter). Later, the prophet Hosea teaches that God will cause the sky to respond to the clean earth with rain in its season and the earth will respond to the sky by producing grain, wine, and oil.

We are commanded to take care of our earth but we rationalize and excuse our behaviors, pretending we have time. These warnings from Torah came thousands of years ago. Time is running out.

Environment activist Rachel Carson (author of *Silent Spring*) wrote, "There will come a time when there will be no birds singing in the spring, because of what we are doing to our land, air and water..." We are each responsible for correcting our environmental errors while we can – because time is running out.

After years of drought, we greet each rainfall with, "What? Again?!" Instead, we should greet the unexpected rain with an acknowledgement that this rain is not in its season and we are the cause.

Be Slow to Anger

May 15, 2019

Parasha Emor

At the end of this week's Torah *parasha*, we read a story of two men fighting with one another. One is so angry that he curses the other, using God's name in vain. The Torah makes clear that cursing, even when one does so in the course of anger, is not permissible. Anger doesn't excuse destructive behavior.

But wait just a minute. How can that be? The Torah is filled with stories about God's anger! We have to remember that when Torah speaks about God it often uses human characteristics and metaphors to describe the Holy One. We cannot take these anthropomorphic descriptions literally.

However, the images of God's anger in the Torah reflect our human anger. The Rabbis throughout the ages talked a lot about anger, warning us of its dangers. The early rabbis teach us to "be slow to anger and easy to pacify." They didn't say "never get angry," rather they taught, "be slow to anger." It holds out for us a realistic and doable goal: work on getting your anger under control, "be slow to anger."

In Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Ancestors (Avot 5,11), we learn from our Talmudic rabbis that there are four kinds of temper:

there is the person easy to provoke and easy to appease—the loss is cancelled by the gain;

hard to provoke and hard to appease—the gain is cancelled by the loss;

easy to provoke and hard to appease—that person is wicked;

hard to provoke and easy to appease—that person is saintly.

There is an assumption in this passage that everyone loses his or her temper and becomes angry on occasion. It is the degree to which one is able to control one's temper that makes all the difference.

(ReformJudaism.org, Marlene Myerson)

King Solomon, the wisest of all people, cautions us about the mind, body and emotion connection: "Remove anger from your heart so that you remove pain from your body," teaching us that we harm ourselves when we let anger get the better of us.

All of us have experienced someone's anger at some point. It feels like a blast of heat blowing in your face. Most of us have been angry at some point, so much so that we say words we regret forever.

People who are easily angered find they have to say "I'm sorry" a lot.

May you recognize the destructive force of anger in your life and may you find ways to channel your anger into positive activities. May you forgive those who expressed their anger to you in ways that hurt your feelings. And may you find it in your heart to ask for forgiveness when your angry words hurt someone else.

The Holiness Code

May 8, 2019

As a preface to our Torah service, when I see many guests in the congregation, I explain that the Jewish approach to our sacred writing is unique compared to other ancient traditions. In those

religions, the sacred text was in the exclusive hands of the priests. In Judaism, the Torah is the “possession” of all of us, to be studied and embraced by each one of us.

Also unique to Judaism is the idea of “holiness”, that the possibility of attaining holiness is available to each of us. This week’s Torah reading is often referred to as “the Holiness Code.” Within its chapter are 51 *mitzvot* (commandments), laws of holiness, which reach across all activities of life – the laws of the Ten Commandments, dealing fairly with one another – and the basic tenant of human interactions: Love your neighbor as yourself. All of these support us in becoming holy, because, as God says, “I – God – am holy.”

The chapter does not define holiness but it does tell us what we must do to be holy. That means, holiness is available to each and everyone of us, achieved not by position in our community but through our behavior. Holiness is found in daily living and our interactions with one another. On Shabbat morning, we will study this chapter in depth (10:00 AM).

The High Holiday prayer book *Machzor Hadash* teaches us the pathway to holiness:

“There is holiness when we strive to be true to the best we know.

There is holiness when we are kind to someone who cannot possibly be of service to us.

There is holiness when we promote family harmony.

There is holiness when we forget what divides us and remember what unites us.

There is holiness when we are willing to be left out for what we believe in.

There is holiness when we love - truly, honestly, and unselfishly.

There is holiness when we remember the lonely and bring cheer into a dark corner.

There is holiness when we share – our bread, our ideas, our enthusiasms.

There is holiness when we gather to pray to God who gave us the power to pray.”

May you have a week striving for holiness and a Shabbat of true peace.

Solidarity Shabbat

May 1, 2019

This Shabbat is Solidarity Shabbat at Congregation Emeth. As a congregation, we come together – joined by friends from the interfaith community – to worship, learn, and stand together as a community. This is a time when each of us, myself included, need one another for comfort and support. Please consider this a personal invitation and request for your presence.

I hope that you are inspired and emboldened by the words of Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, Rabbi of Chabad of Poway, who wrote in the New York Times: “(After the shooting and the shooter had fled:) We all gathered outside... I remember quoting a passage from the Passover Seder liturgy: ‘In

every generation they rise against us to destroy us; and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.' And I remember shouting the words 'Am Yisrael Chai! The people of Israel live!' I have said that line hundreds of times in my life. But I have never felt the truth of it more than I did then.

"I am a religious man. I believe everything happens for a reason...I do not know God's plan. All I can do is try to find meaning in what has happened. And to use this borrowed time to make my life matter more...I pray that my missing finger (shot off by the terrorist) serves as a constant reminder to me...A reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish..."

Rabbi Goldstein's message is that this is the time, more than ever, to be brave and unabashed in our Jewishness. I look forward to sharing Shabbat joy with you this Saturday morning, beginning at 10:00 AM.

Standing Together After Poway

April 28, 2019

We are angry and horrified that yet another attack was perpetrated on a House of Worship. Week after week we see another House of Worship attacked and this Shabbat, on the 6-month anniversary of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, we find the Jewish community once again the victim of a hate crime. One person dead, may the memory of Lori Gilbert-Kaye be a blessing, and three other persons injured, including the Chabad Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein and an 8 year old child, may their healing of body and soul be quick and complete.

We are living in times when hate mongers feel safe to come out from under the rocks and spew their venom in public places and use their guns on innocents at prayer. It happened to Muslims during Friday Sabbath prayer services in Christchurch New Zealand; to Christians in Sri Lanka on Easter; to Jews in Poway on Shabbat and the last day of Passover.

This Shabbat morning, May 4, beginning at 10:00 AM, Congregation Emeth will hold our scheduled Shabbat services, which we now will call Solidarity Shabbat. Community members have asked to join us in prayer and I have welcomed them. I hope you will prioritize this service and attend as well. In a sad coincidence it will include our Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Day) remembrance. But there is a big difference between then and now – our communities stand together. We will not be cowarded. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov used to teach: The world is a narrow bridge. The important thing is not to be afraid. I pray that you will attend, allow us to offer comfort to one another, and stand as a community against hate.

Your Board of Directors have been upgrading our security in the past six months, learning from professionals. The Board is meeting to further discuss security and you will be hearing from our president Peter Mandel in the coming days. We are committed to your safety.

The Importance of Rituals

April 24, 2019

On Tuesday, the New York Times published an article about the importance of rituals. When I think of rituals, I think of Jewish rituals, but the article talked about the use of rituals in many aspects of our lives, not only religious. It also quoted the philosopher Abraham Kaplan who calculated that over 60 percent of Judaism's 613 commandments involve physical ritual.

The feast of Passover is rich with rituals and all of them are intended to bring us closer to remembering and experiencing that "once we were slaves, now we are free". The matzah, maror (bitter herbs, horseradish) and salt water symbolize slavery; the sweet charoset (the mixture of apples, nuts and cinnamon), the wine, and the festive meal symbolize freedom. The tastes, smells, songs, and readings move us from being passive students of history to active participants in our collective memory.

Because of the importance of Passover, the Torah offers not only one but two opportunities to observe the holiday. No other holiday is given this option. Torah tells us that those who did not bring their Passover sacrifice to the Holy Temple on the eve of the first Passover can bring it one month later, on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar. In other words, we get a do-over, a second opportunity. This teaches us how important celebrating Passover is – that the lessons and experiences of going from slavery to freedom are foundational to our people.

If you did not attend a seder this year, why not take advantage of this second chance! I will loan you family-friendly haggadahs, and offer whatever guidance you need. I'll even come and lead it for you if that will help.

May the remainder of this week's celebration bring you a recognition of the importance of freedom and our obligation to preserve it. And may we always be cognizant of our responsibility to "love the stranger as yourself for once you were slaves in the land of Egypt."

Once We Were Refugees

April 17, 2019

Near the beginning of the seder, we introduce the Passover story with this paragraph from Torah: "...My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous; And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard slavery..." (Deuteronomy 26:6)

Who is the "father"? He is Jacob, who went down to Egypt with all of his children and their families because of a great famine in Canaan. Our Passover story begins with the Hebrews entering Egypt as refugees in great need, for they would starve if they remained in their own land. At first, the Egyptians welcomed them and took care of them. Time passed and a leader came to power who felt threatened by these immigrants. And that begins the story of our enslavement in Egypt.

This is the foundational story of the Hebrew nation: once we were slaves and God freed us to become a nation. It also reminds us that once we were refugees and many times in our history we were dependent on the goodwill of other nations to save us.

This story of immigration is treated with upmost urgency in Torah and Jewish tradition. Thirty-six times we are commanded to take care of the stranger in our midst. In Leviticus 19, we are commanded, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them – LOVE THEM! – as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

This is the priority commandment: love, protect, and care for the stranger. It is mentioned more than any other commandment, more than the commandment to love God, more than the commandment to observe Shabbat.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism stated, "Our own people's history as "strangers" reminds us of the many struggles faced by immigrants today, and we (Reform Jews) affirm our commitment to create the same opportunities for today's immigrants that were so valuable to our own community not so many years ago."

While our news focuses on the refugees arriving through the southern border, most of us have forgotten about the refugees seeking asylum from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran, families who fled war, rape, and pillaging, families fleeing for their lives. Our own Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley is the only agency resettling refugees in South County. The legal refugees come from around the world and have gone through a rigorous vetting.

And they need you. They need families for temporary housing (1-2 months). The volunteer host family only needs to provide a bedroom and bathroom – they are case managed by the Jewish Family Services staff.

For more information, contact the Jewish Family Services' Refugee Coordinator who can answer all of your questions: azitac@jfssv.org, 408-357-7457, or go to the JFS SV website. This is the definition of "Love the stranger..."

Searching for Chametz

April 9, 2019

This week's Torah parasha (the section of Torah read each week), M'tzora, is usually read in combination with last week's parasha, Tazria. Because this is a leap year on the Jewish calendar, the readings are separated but they focus on the same theme – the priestly rituals used to cure impurities, specifically tzarat, a contagious skin condition like leprosy.

The priests are also instructed to remove disease from a house which is plagued with some eruption, perhaps mold or the like. Even a house needs purification from the priest.

The Sages used these two chapters to teach the dangers of lashon harah, the evil tongue. We are warned that gossip and slander are compared to a contagious disease, harming not only the gossipers but all those who come in contact with them.

As we prepare for Passover by removing chametz (unleavened bread) from our homes, this Torah reading reminds us to also remove symbolic chametz from our lives. Using the word chametz to represent our shortcomings or areas needing improvement, this Torah parasha has additional relevancy. We must rid ourselves and our homes of the chametz that could damage ourselves and spread to others. We clean away the unleavened bread from our homes as we clean the evil inclination from our soul. For most of us, our biggest shortcoming is the inclination to gossip. Because we no longer have the priests to perform rituals to remove tzarat from our skin or homes, no one else can remove the symbolic chametz from us either. We must rely on ourselves and our good intentions.

May you be successful in your search for chametz, in your home and in your soul. May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.

Celebrating Rosh Chodesh

April 3, 2019

Celebrating Rosh Chodesh, the first day of each Hebrew month, is the first commandment given to the Israelites as a nation. Even before leaving Egypt, the former slaves are given the commandment to measure the passing of days, something only a free person could do. To a slave, one day melds into the next. Each day is like the day before. This commandment is significant in that it represents true freedom.

The Jewish calendar is measured by the moon because, unlike the sun, the moon waxes and wanes. We can measure our days by watching the sliver of the moon enlarge and then become smaller again. The first day of the Hebrew month Nisan tells us to watch the sky and know that in only two weeks, on the 15th day of the month, when the moon is full, we will be observing the first night of Passover, celebrating our freedom.

This Shabbat is the beginning of the Hebrew month of Nisan, the first new month of the Jewish year. The Torah commands that “this month (Nisan) is for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.” Therefore, because it is the first new month of the year, it is called Shabbat HaChodesh, “the” New Month, not just “a” new month. As such it is one of the four specially named Sabbaths that precede Passover.

If Nisan is the first month, how could Rosh Hashanah be the new year? Rosh Hashanah is not the beginning of the Jewish monthly cycle, but rather it is celebrated as the anniversary of humanity’s creation and a reminder of the creation of the world. This is why the number of years changes on the Jewish calendar year on Rosh Hashanah. To help you to understand, this is the Hebrew calendar year 5779, which our sages counted as 5,779 years since God created the universe. While on the secular calendar, the first day of the year changes the year number – i.e., January 1 became the first day of the year 2019 – on the Hebrew calendar, the first day of the year and the counting of the years do not occur at the same time. It’s confusing because it’s so different from the secular system to which we are accustomed.

We don’t need a calendar to know that Passover – and other Jewish festivals and Holy Days – are coming. Looking at the evening sky is our way of counting the days, sometimes making us happy and sometimes, usually during the countdown to Passover, a little panicky. So much to do, so little time.

Differentiating as a Pathway to Holiness

March 27, 2019

Throughout the Book of Vayikra (Leviticus) we read, “You shall be holy because I, Adonai your God, am holy.” And each time that commandment is stated we come closer to understanding the pathway to holiness.

At the very end of this week’s chapter in the context of permitted and forbidden food to eat, we are commanded to differentiate between the pure and impure. Differentiating is presented as a process by which we might become holy.

The Hebrew word for “to differentiate” (used here also as a word meaning “to separate”) is “I’havdil”. This is the root of Havdalah, the ceremony separating Shabbat from the rest of the week. Another

example of l'havdil, differentiating: throughout the year we eat leavened foods but on Passover we eat only the unleavened, matza.

This week's Torah reading tells us that one way to separate the pure from the impure is paying attention to what we eat. Even if you do not observe the many dietary laws described in this chapter, when you notice what you put in your mouth and to acknowledge that animals are also creatures of God, This recognition brings us closer to living a life of holiness.

A test for you: for one week, notice with care the foods you are eating. Try to avoid the biblically prohibited animals listed in this chapter*. At the end of this trial period, acknowledge how much more consciously you are eating. Take it a step further by expressing gratitude for the foods you eat. (If a week is to long, then a few days!)

**Biblically prohibited animals to eat include pork; rabbit, shrimp, lobster, or any other shellfish; any fish without scales, such as shark; scavenger fish such as catfish; insects; and birds of prey. Also, avoiding mixing dairy and meat products.*

Mitzvot Associated with Purim

March 20, 2019

This week we celebrate Purim, the first holiday that takes place outside of the land of Israel. The setting is Persia, during our first diaspora, our first expulsion from our land after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem.

To give spiritual meaning to the holiday, the Rabbis associated several mitzvot* to it: hearing the reading of the Megillah (the Book of Esther), delivering gifts to at least 2 friends (Mishloach Manot*), eating a festive meal, and giving tzedakah* to the poor.

The mitzvah* of giving tzedakah to at least two poor people is considered so important that even the poor are required to give (they can accomplish this by exchanging coins with one another). I would like to suggest two important and meaningful gifts of tzedakah for you to consider this year:

The first is donating to support the Islamic community in Christchurch, New Zealand. We have learned that this murderous tragedy has resulted in many families losing their breadwinners and being uncertain how to carry on. The area around and including Christchurch already experienced a deadly earthquake in 2011, with 185 people killed. They have not yet recovered and much of Christchurch remains damaged. I urge you to send a donation to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund (RDF), designated for the IC Fund, and I will send a contribution from Congregation Emeth, making your gift anonymous. To donate send your donation by mail to Congregation Emeth RDF, IC Fund, or [CLICK HERE](#) to donate via Paypal (select Rabbi's Discretionary Fund and indicate IC Fund).

The second is a gift to support one of our beloved cantorial soloists, who became too ill to continue to work about two years ago. She has been living at home with her mother in her home state, and attending daily physical therapy treatments. She now needs either round the clock home care or a live-in facility. Either solution strains her financial resources. Please send your donation to the RDF, designated for the AG Fund, and I will send a contribution from Congregation Emeth, making your gift anonymous. To donate, send your donation by mail to Congregation Emeth RDF, AG Fund or [CLICK HERE](#) to donate via Paypal (select Rabbi's Discretionary Fund and indicate AG Fund).. Chag Purim Sameach*! See you at our many Purim celebratory events this week!

Hebrew Words used in this message:

* *Talmud* – (literally, “study”) is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish beliefs.

* *Mitzvot, mitzvah* – literally commandments (*mitzvah* is singular)

* *Mishloach manot* – literally, sending gifts specifically on Purim

* *Tzedakah* – (literally from the word “righteous” or “just”) commonly used to describe charitable donations.

* *Megillah* – (literally a scroll) – the special scroll that includes the words from the Book of Esther, read on Purim.

Chag Purim Sameach – Happy Purim holiday!

Parashat Vayikra & Women of the Wall

March 13, 2019

If you are one of my Facebook “friends,” you might have noticed a lot of comments from me regarding the violence perpetrated toward the Women of the Wall (WoW) in Jerusalem last Friday.

First, about Women of the Wall, and then I'll tell you what occurred. Last Friday, on Rosh Chodesh (the New Month) which coincided with International Women's Day, Women of the Wall celebrated its 30th anniversary. For 30 years, a brave community of Jewish women from Israel and around the world, women of every denomination – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Transdenominational, and more – come to the Kotel, known as the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, for the special Rosh Chodesh prayer service. For more than 30 years, WoW's central mission has been to achieve the social and legal recognition of women's right to wear prayer shawls and tefillin, and to pray and read from the Torah collectively and out loud at the Western Wall. While I wanted to attend this celebration, having joined my sisters in prayer many times over the years, I had just returned from my sabbatical and knew I should not leave again so soon.

So instead I watched the service livestreamed, as I do most months. Every month there are hareidim (ultra-Orthodox) who attempt to cause a disruption in the prayer service. Every month the police are alerted and every month they stand idly by and do not protect WoW as they are instructed to do. Make no mistake, WoW has every legal right to be there but the rabbi who administers the prayer plaza does not support that right.

Last week however was the worst violence imaginable. My own eyes saw what occurred, watching the livestream, and journalists reported afterwards, that the hereidim bused in thousands of young boys and girls to fill the plaza and create violence. For complete details of what ensued go to <https://www.haaretz.com/.../.premium-ultra-orthodox-jewish-fe....>

This week's Torah reading is Vayikra, the first chapter in the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus' primary focus is on the sacrifices brought to the Holy Temple. In Hebrew, a sacrifice is called korban, which literally means to bring near. This is a most appropriate chapter to be reading the week after this terrible attack on women seeking to come near to God by praying together at the last remaining wall of the Holy Temple complex. This was their sacrifice, a modern day offering. We don't bring animals or fruit or "first offerings" to the Temple since its destruction. Instead, we bring our hearts and intentions, to offer our gratitude to God through our collective prayers.

May those who sacrifice themselves month after month, year after year, be blessed knowing their efforts will one day lead to a peaceful place for all Jews to pray at our holiest site. May it be so.

A Faithful Person

March 6, 2019

In this week's Torah parasha* the Israelites have finally completed building the portable Tabernacle in the desert. The chapter begins with an inventory of everything that had been donated by the Israelites and how the donations were used in the Tabernacle's construction.

The reason for this detailed accounting is so that no one can accuse Moses of taking anything for himself. Because of this chapter, the Torah and Talmud* refer to Moses "a faithful person."

Moses was the treasurer of the project. In the Talmud*, the sages taught: "One must not appoint fewer than two people to control the finances of a city or community." The Midrash* questioned whether Moses was the sole administrator of the funds, and answered that he had auditors monitoring him, probably Itamar, identified as the son of Aaron the Priest.

This model is followed in most non-profits, including Emeth, which require two signatures on checks and has overseers (the Board) and transparency to all affiliated congregants, who can see the full budget.

From this we learn, quoting Etz Hayyim Chumash*, “...The Midrash emphasizes that leaders of the community must be above any suspicion of personal aggrandizement...” Important for our ancient leaders; important for our own time.

May you have a week of blessings and a Shabbat of peace.
Rabbi Debbie Israel

Hebrew Words used in this message:

** Parasha – The weekly Torah portion or reading.*

** Talmud – (literally, “study”), the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish beliefs.*

** Midrash – an ancient rabbinic commentary on parts of the Hebrew Bible, attached to specific biblical texts.*

** Chumash – a Torah is handwritten as a scroll. A chumash is the Five Books of Torah, plus commentary and Prophets, in printed form and used to read and study Torah.*

Shabbat: Stop! Rest!

February 27, 2019

We are all so busy! Our lives seem to be filled with one event after another. Parents are constantly on the go, doing their own work and schlepping (Yiddish, dragging from one place to another) children from one activity to another. And for most people of all ages, children to older adults, we are often surprised how busy we are – and how tired we are. Not that we are necessarily fulfilled in our busyness – we are just on the go nonstop. If you are someone for whom this doesn't apply, you are either very wise or very fortunate.

This week's Torah portion, Vayakehl, tells us to stop! Rest! One day, that's all, just one day, rest, refresh and recharge. Torah doesn't tell us precisely what rest means, but the inference is to enjoy all day. How did God rest after creating the universe? God looked at all the Holy One had created! Look at your life, reflect on all you did during the week and find reasons to express gratitude.

Torah stressed the importance of working the other days but concluding the week with rest: “On six days work may be done but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest...” First do your work, then you have earned your rest.

Shabbat is not a day of DO NOTs – it is a day of Dos:

DO: Rest.

DO: Enjoy yourself and your family.

DO: Have a candlelight dinner, with a glass of wine and a loaf of bread!

DO: Read a good book.

DO: Take a nap.

DO: Play games.

DO: Attend synagogue and celebrate Shabbat with your extended family in Congregation Emeth.

DO: Say SHABBAT SHALOM!

Knowing that you Count!

February 20, 2019

In this week's parasha, Torah reading, we learn that Moses has been on the mountain top 40 days and 40 nights, conferencing with God. Meanwhile, the Israelites below are anxious and impatient. Where is their leader Moses? Maybe he is dead? Maybe he will never return? Where is God? What do we do now? Their response was to build a Golden Calf. Did they intend to worship the calf as an idol, expressly forbidden by the second commandment? Or were they looking for something to represent God, to comfort themselves? Whatever their intentions, they have angered God. God tells Moses, "Go, get down (the mountain), and see what the people did! They built a Golden Calf and sacrificed to it." God's anger is intense and God is ready to destroy the entire new nation.

My teacher Rabbi Gail Diamond offers the following midrash (story from the Talmud to explain the text) which I have slightly edited for clarity:

And God spoke to Moses, "Go, get down." What is meant by "Go, get down"? Rabbi Eleazar (a Talmudic sage) said: God tells Moses, "Descend from your greatness. The reason I gave you greatness was for the sake of the Israelites. And now the Israelites sinned; what do I want you to do?" Moses became powerless and he had no strength to speak. But when God says, "Let Me alone that I may destroy them," Moses said to himself: "(Saving the Israelites) depends on me." Immediately he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy (on behalf of the Israelites).

Here is a parable to further explain it: A king became angry with his son and began beating him severely. His friend was sitting before him but was afraid to say a word until the king said: Were it not for my friend here who is sitting before me, I would kill you. [The friend] said to himself, "This depends on me." Immediately he stood up and rescued the son.

Moses offers calm, and reasons that it will damage God's reputation if God kills the people right after freeing them. God relents, and sends Moses down the mountain.

Going backwards in the chapter, Ki Tisa, begins with a census taking, a counting of the Israelites. In this chapter we have two ways of being counted. One way is being part of the group, which is an important trait. We see this in all of you who have affiliated with Emeth. You count here and enable our presence in South Valley to have an important impact in the community. The other way of counting, in the example of Moses intervening with God to save the Israelites, is by being someone others can count on. Recognizing that your voice, your skills, your time, and your charity count is a significant lesson from Ki Tisa. We must not sit idly by; we must stand up for those in need and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Ner Adonai Nishmat Adam

A person's soul is the lamp of Adonai (Proverbs)

February 13, 2019

This is a favorite teaching of mine. I often meditate on the words, inspired by interpretations of the message.

The Torah commentator Nehamia Lebovitz, may her memory be a blessing, explains that “lamp” symbolizes words of Torah, lighting our way toward ethical and moral behavior. The metaphor is that the lessons of Torah makes us wise and prevents us from making errors. The example she uses comes from a midrash, a teaching from the Talmud, summarized here:

When one is walking in darkness and comes before a stone, one stumbles over the stone. When one is walking in darkness and comes upon a gutter, one falls, striking one's face to the ground. But when one is knowledgeable through the study of Torah, the light of the teachings of Torah enable us to step over the stone or walk around the gutter. The lamp – Torah – saves us from obstacles and from falling.

In the first sentence of this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh (“You yourself command...”), God instructs Moses to command the Israelites to bring pure oil for lighting the Menorah, which is to burn continuously. The Menorah is a symbol for the light of Adonai burning continuously within us, inspiring us to perform acts of lovingkindness toward one another.

Lebovitz explains that the function of the Menorah, the first mitzvah (commandment) to be performed in the Temple of Adonai, was “to fill the whole House with light” eternally. May our own Congregation Emeth be filled with the Light of the Holy One and may the Light inspire us to walk in God's ways and perform acts of lovingkindness toward one another.

Twice Blessed

February 6, 2019

“You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28:6)

Beloved congregants and friends,

How blessed I was during the past 3 months, as I experienced travel that encompassed both historical locations and amazing examples of the miracles of our physical universe. I was blessed in my going, and I am feeling twice blessed in my return – to the holy work that God has led me to do and back to you, renewed and refreshed.

This week’s Torah parashah (reading from Torah) describes the instructions for building the Tabernacle in the desert. God instructs the Israelites, through Moses, to build the Tabernacle so that God might dwell in their sanctuary. While our tradition teaches that God can be found wherever we search for the Holy One, it is particularly in the sanctuary when one’s attention is focused on God’s presence.

During my travels I visited many ancient synagogues. Some are still active, but many, if not most, are either just tourist sites now or are barely hanging on. In one location, the guide wasn’t even Jewish. Regardless, in each of them, I experienced the Divine Presence, sometimes with joy and awe and sometimes with sadness. Many communities were devastated by the Holocaust and few Jews remain (or returned). In some locations, the old meets the new, and Judaism has been reborn.

But in each of them, I offered prayers of thanksgiving for our beloved Emeth congregation. In contrast, we are a vibrant community, with congregants who sustain and maintain Jewish life in South County.

Evidence of this can be found in the many individuals who stepped in to cover for me in my absence. This sabbatical could not have occurred without them. To those who led services, who wrote our weekly email messages, who directed our youth activities (EDK), who stepped out in front and who worked behind the scenes, thank you! To those who participated and supported those who were leading services and activities, thank you as well. I am eager to see all of you, and thank you for supporting me so that I could be absent.

Todah Rabbah – thank you very much!

Mishpatim, The Book of the Covenant: The Laws

Becky Neto, Past President, Congregation Emeth

January 30, 2019

If the stories of Torah were televised during their writings it would definitely be the highest rated “Reality TV” program watched. There is love and friendship, sex and intrigue, sibling rivalry, and even murder and mayhem. Many of the families would be considered dysfunctional by today’s standards. The Torah covers all these topics and more. There are stories that show us how to get along with others and what happens when we cannot. This week’s portion teaches us the many rules to live by to live a just life. And there are many.....

The Book of the Covenant has four distinct parts: Civil and criminal matters; Humanitarian concerns; Affirmations of the divine promises of Israel; and how the document was ratified along with the account of Moses receiving the rules. Referring to the laws, Moses was told “you shall set before them.” Sages have interpreted this as meaning knowledge of the law is to be an obligation and privilege of the entire people. This is why the Torah is read by the entire community and not just the high priests. This is why the laws apply to Everyone.

The curious thing about these rules is that they are a culmination of not only religious laws, but of moral and civil laws as well. No products of human thought were used, the laws are a direct reflection of divine principals built into this world. The laws are not given in the name of anyone, not even Moses. These rules are given by G-d and therefore, disobeying the rules means, in addition to whomever was offended, you are disobeying G-d as well. Because the laws are provided directly from G-d, they show a deep recognition of the image of G-d, in every person and the presence of G-d in every relationship.

The unique thing about Torah is how we interpret it. Why do we continue to read the same portions every year? One reason is the way we understand the narratives’ changes to correspond to where we are at that particular time in each of our lives. I remember being at a Shabbat Short & Sweet service where Rabbi Israel solicited ideas on what the congregation thought of what a particular passage meant. There were many responses, and all were as varied as the people offering their points of view. Rabbi Israel acknowledged all our ideas and showed us how our interpretation of the law was correct for each of us individually.

So, the next time you need to know what a fair response is, or something is troubling you, take a look at what the Torah says. You might just be surprised at what you discover. The Torah really does cover everything!

As a final mention I would like to thank all the people who stepped up while Rabbi Israel was on sabbatical: Our lay leaders did a fantastic job with services. Normal programming continued, including very successful celebrations during December, the Board of Directors provided many different perspectives in the weekly message, plus the many other behind the scenes work that was provided in order to keep Emeth moving forward.

Thank you All and Welcome home Rabbi Israel.

Listen Up

Marcia Fishman, Secretary, Congregation Emeth

January 23, 2019

Listen up! If you ever look for relevance in weekly Torah portions, you will clearly find it in the parsha, Yitro (Jethro). It is about delegation of power and what we might learn if we are willing to listen to others. Do we currently think that this is an enlightened concept? We shouldn't – because Moses figured it out over 3,000 years ago. But Moses was a great leader. He listened up.

The story is one of Hollywood's favorites – right before Moses climbs Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, has been observing how Moses adjudicates all the disputes among the Israelites. Jethro feels that this process will exhaust Moses, leaving him with little energy for greater deeds. Therefore, he advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of wise and righteous judges and delegate responsibilities. Even though Moses was reportedly much wiser than Jethro (and most of the others for that matter), he accepts his father-in-law's suggestion and establishes a new judicial system.

Later, Moses ascends Mount Sinai where G-D sends the message that the Israelites are G-d's "treasure out of all people." But the people must accept that they will do as G-d commands. G-d further says that G-d will be revealed to the people in three-day's time. Thus, on that third day – thunder, lightning, and the glaring sound of a shofar were discharged from the mountain.

G-d recites the Ten Commandments, but the Israelites could not effectively listen amid the frightening din of the thunder and lightning. They ask Moses if they could again hear the words through Moses' lips, and he agreed.

In essence, Moses acted as we wish many leaders would act. First, he listened carefully to Jethro, a man he respected. Then he delegated responsibilities – even though he himself could have performed better with his inimitable wisdom and leadership skills. And finally, he listened to the needs of his constituents who, themselves, recognized that they would better learn if they could alter the atmosphere for listening.

What was most remarkable, however, was that a new nation was created – a nation of citizens under the sovereignty of G-d with a written constitution (the Torah). The judges became the government officials, and the Torah set moral limits and dictated right over might. Someone at Harvard Law School knew this because the school's Austin Hall has an overhead quote engraved from this Torah portion (Exodus 18:20) "And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do."

Who emulates Moses today? Who in our own midst listens quietly and patiently, accurately hears what is being said, and puts good advice into action? From my own professional experiences, I have appreciated that a leader must have self-awareness, must know how s/he affects others, and must understand the world around them. Finally, a leader must be teachable, i.e. willing to learn new ways and follow through on what s/he has learned. British statesman Benjamin Disraeli said, “I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?”

I am confident that many among our congregants hold a bit of Moses within us. It is my hope that many among our political leaders possess the same – and have the bravery to act on these merits.

Tu B'Shevat

Eric Killough, Board Member-at-Large, Congregation Emeth

January 16, 2019

When, as a board member, I was given the choice to sign up for a week to write in Rabbi Israel's absence, I jumped at the chance to write on Tu B'Shevat. “Trees”, I thought, “I love trees” because that's all I knew about Tu B'Shevat. I'm new to Jewish customs, having been raised Protestant. Fun fact about Judaism: there are a lot of customs. One thing I know about this one custom is that Tu B'Shevat celebrates the trees. I've heard called “Jewish Arbor Day” or “New Years for the Trees”. Both of those names are pretty fun but I decided that, for this article, I'd try to find out the full meaning to the fullest extent that Google will allow.

“Tu B'Shevat” gets its name from the date on which it occurs: the 15th day of the month of Shevat. A minor Jewish holiday, it is often referred to as the new year (or “birthday”) of the trees. The word “Tu” is not really a word; it is the number 15 in Hebrew, as if you were to call the Fourth of July “Iv July” (IV being 4 in Roman numerals). The holiday originated in the Talmud, and was based on the date chosen for calculating the agricultural cycle of taking tithes from the produce of the trees, which were brought as first-fruit offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Tu B'Shevat fell out of practice after the destruction of the Second Temple, but was revived by kabbalists in the Middle Ages. They began to practice the Tu B'Shevat seder: a meal that partly mirrors the Passover seder and involves eating biblical foods native to the Holy Land. And drinking four cups of wine! Tu B'Shevat has since developed into an ecological holiday that reminds Jews of our connection to the earth and to our role as caretakers of the environment. Some modern practices include donating money to plant trees in Israel or planting trees locally.

Although this day is Rosh Hashanah for trees, we attach special significance to this holiday because “Man is [compared to] the tree of the field” (Deuteronomy 20:19). Through cultivating strong roots – faith and commitment to G-d – we produce many fruits—Torah and Mitzvot.

On this day it is customary to partake from shiv’at ha’minim (seven species endemic to the Land of Israel): wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, dates. If tasting any of these fruit for the first time this season, remember to recite the Shehecheyanu blessing. (A blessing recited on joyous occasions, thanking G-d for “sustaining us and enabling us to reach this occasion.” This blessing is recited before the standard “Ha’etz” blessing recited on fruit.) Beyond that, there are many possible variations for preparing a Tu B’Shevat meal, usually incorporating dried fruit and nuts, and one can be creative in deciding how to plan the menu.

In addition to culinary customs, some people plant trees for Tu B’Shevat and a lot of Jewish children go around collecting money for trees for Israel at this time of year.

I’d like to close here, back where I began this article, with my simple love for trees and gratitude for a holiday that celebrates them. I love the image of Jewish children going door to door collecting money for trees in Israel. I like to imagine them eating lots of fruit. And I love the idea of them planting trees in America too, as our students do behind Emeth. Let’s let this time of year, this once lost holiday, be a reminder to us that we are servants of the trees and not the other way around. Sure, Tu B’Shevat once served to tell us when and to whom we paid out tithes, but let’s let it be more than that. Let’s let this be a time to remember that we share the bounty of the natural world with one another.

Happy Tu B’Shevat!

Antisemitism Here and Now

What Is The Situation and What Can We Do?

Arthur Reidel, Treasurer, Congregation Emeth

January 9, 2019

On Dec. 23, the neo-Nazi group Identity Evropa posted their repugnant version of a “Merry Christmas” message in downtown Morgan Hill– neo-Nazis are present right in our front yard. Messages were initially posted on [Nextdoor.com](https://www.nextdoor.com) opposed to the hate message, but they were followed by a series of posts defending Identity Evropa and ranting against SPLC and George Soros. College campuses in the Bay area are rife with “BDS” and other antisemitic activity. Leadership of the national “Women’s March” includes individuals who have made strongly antisemitic remarks. Famous author

Alice Walker has very recently been exposed for holding and expressing virulent antisemitic views. Antisemitic incidents were up 57% last year in the US and, despite our smaller numbers, more hate crimes were committed against Jews than any other identified group.

There is a conflation of anti-semitism with anti-immigration and other populist issues. The shooter in Pittsburgh thought he was attacking an Immigration Shabbat, in association with HIAS, but he was misinformed and a week late. Surveys indicate that approximately 30% of the US population continue to believe that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the US, and that Jews killed Christ, along with other historic tropes. Even more alarming, those who feel emboldened to act on these beliefs have increased sharply. The situation in Europe is considerably worse than it is in the US, and many synagogues there have been turned into armed fortresses.

Long time ADL leaders Abe Foxman and Kenny Jacobson, who have been fighting antisemitism for five decades, believe that antisemitism has been present in the US all that time but that it was kept in check by “guardrails.” Now however those guardrails are down, openly expressing antisemitic views no longer has the social consequences it used to, and antisemitism along with all other forms of hate speech has moved from the fanatic fringes of society into the mainstream. How can we get that “genie” back in the bottle? What else can we do to fight antisemitism in all of its manifestations, and hate of all kinds?

This is needless to say a very complex topic, and not amenable to solution in a short essay, but here are a few starting points. Support organizations such as ADL, HIAS, and JCRC– don’t leave it to “the other guy.” Isn’t it worth a few small sacrifices in lifestyle, to be able to contribute to one of these organizations, so that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the security and freedom we have had– rather than the overt discrimination and prejudice suffered by our grandparents? Speak up and take action– when you see something objectionable posted online, report it as hate speech to the hosting platform. Engage with other members of our community, and with your friends and family, to raise consciousness of this issue. Support and advocate for anti-bias education in our schools. Make common cause with people of other faiths in opposing hate and discrimination in all its forms. Focus on changing the tone of political speech in Washington, but do not believe that alone will solve this problem.

It is through the collective efforts of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents (ADL was founded in 1913 in response to incidents including the lynching of a Jewish businessman in Georgia and, in the 1950’s, my parents were turned away from “Christian only” hotels and suffered from overt discrimination in education and employment) that we came to enjoy the freedoms and security we long took for granted. If we become as vigilant and work as hard as they did, we can hope to turn back the terrible tide once again.

BDS: Boycott, Divestiture, Sanctions movement, targeting Israel

ADL: Anti Defamation League: www.adl.org

HIAS: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society: www.hias.org

JCRC: Jewish Community Relations Council: www.jcrc.org

SPLC: Southern Poverty Law Center: www.splcenter.org