

# Rabbi's Weekly Message

July 2019 - December 2019

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## Don't Let the Light Go Out

*December 29, 2019*

When we light our eighth candle on this last night of Chanukah, I am reminded of Peter Yarrow's Chanukah song, Don't Let The Light Go Out. In the face of continuing acts of hate, not only against Jews but only today a church in Texas, we must be a beacon of the light of decency and harmony. Our country is stained with bloodshed and we cannot simply shake our heads nor allow rage to envelope our souls. We must stand up to hate, inspired by Chanukah's message: tyranny, which today I define as senseless acts of violence and hatred, will not overcome the eternal value, Love your neighbor as yourself. With diligence and determination we can create a better tomorrow. Do not despair. And do not let the light go out.

May the fully lit *Chanukiah* (Chanukah menorah) restore your souls and remind you that good will triumph.

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## A Message to Our Interfaith Families

*December 25, 2019*

When Chanukah and Christmas share days of celebration on the calendar, I am especially reminded of Emeth's holy congregants who, though not Jewish, support Congregation Emeth. In my years of service as your Rabbi, you have taught me many lessons about the values we share: kindness, mercy, and righteousness. I have never taken for granted your trust in me and our congregation, especially with teaching your children about Judaism. I pray that all of us, Jews and non-Jews, people of different beliefs, discover the deeper and joyful spiritual meaning of the season -- and that all of us join together to bring light into the world.

With affection and gratitude, and wishes for a meaningful holiday season.

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# Chanukah!

*December 18, 2019*

Sunday night we will light the first candle on our *Chanukiah* (Chanukah Menorah). We light these candles as a symbol of the miracle that occurred in the 2nd century BCE, when our Holy Temple had been desecrated by the Assyrians, under the rule of King Antiochus. A Jewish rebellion, led by the Maccabees, entered the Holy Temple and attempted to restore it to its holiness - by lighting the Temple Menorah, one of our oldest religious symbols. Why was lighting the Menorah so important?

In the Torah, Exodus 27:20, God speaks to Moses: "You shall command the Children of Israel that they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil for illumination, to kindle the lamp (Menorah) continually." Torah instructs us that the oil used must come from olives which were hand-pressed, rather than squeezed by a machine or olive press. The amount of oil was specific: the priests were commanded to fill each of the cups of the Menorah every night with five lug, an ancient measurement of oil equal to almost 3 liters. This gives you an idea of the size of the Menorah in the Temple.

The Temple's Menorah was a seven-branched candelabrum, made from a single piece of solid gold, which stood in the southern side of the Sanctuary. Each morning a priest prepared and rekindled the wicks. The central wick was required to burn perpetually. (Today that wick is represented by the Eternal Flame, *Ner Tamid*, placed in every sanctuary. Emeth's *Ner Tamid* hangs over our Ark.) The purpose of the Menorah was not to illuminate the Sanctuary, but rather to spread its light throughout the entire world. For this purpose, the windows of the Temple were constructed so that the light of the Temple shone outward. I am reminded of this when I leave our synagogue at night and I see the bright light sent out by our own *Ner Tamid*.

Now we come to our Chanukah story, when all of this changed. It was during the 2nd Century BCE, after the appointment King Antiochus, an Assyrian appointed to rule Judea after Alexander the Great conquered it. Among the many things Antiochus did in an attempt to pull the Israelites away from their faith and to adopt the ways of the Greeks was to defile the Holy Temple, bringing in idols and roasting pigs. They took the silver and the gold from its coffers, and made a mess of this once majestic holy structure.

When the Maccabees managed to successfully reclaim the Holy Temple, the first act they did to rededicate it (Chanukah means "rededication") was to light the Menorah. After the defilement by the Assyrians, only enough ritual olive oil could be found for one day, which would mean only 3 liters of hand pressed olive oil bearing the seal of the High Priest was found – but you recall that the central wick had to burn perpetually. In an act of faith, they lit that candle anyway, expecting it to burn one day but it continued to burn for 8 days, during which time more ritual olive oil could be prepared.

That this small quantity of oil was miraculously kept burning for eight days teaches us that God had not abandoned the Jewish people who had suffered so greatly in their war against the Greek-Assyrians.

The lit menorah is God's eternal sign to the Jewish people that God responds to our yearning to be in the Eternal One's presence. May you experience God's presence in your life as you light your own *Chanukiah*, Chanukah Menorah.

I look forward to sharing our Temple community's annual Chanukah celebration on Friday night, December 27th, Shabbat and the 6th night of Chanukah! Shabbat shalom and Chag Urim Sameach, happy lights of Chanukah!

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## Jacob's Struggles

*December 11, 2019*

In this week's Torah *parasha* (reading, chapter), we are continuing the story of Jacob. He is now traveling with his family to meet his estranged brother Esau, from whom he fled after stealing Esau's birthright and blessing. It's been 20 years since Jacob fled his parents' home, fearing Esau would kill him. During that time, Jacob traveled to Haran to work for his uncle Lavan and married Lavan's daughters, Rachel and Leah, plus their two handmaidens.

Eventually Jacob became rich, and God told him to return to the land of his ancestors. So, Jacob made his preparations, and set out for home.

The Bible tells us: "That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Yabbok (river). After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions." The commentators tell us that Jacob crossed the river repeatedly until all of his people and possessions had been safely transported to one side. And he is left alone on the other side, in the dead of night.

Jacob is afraid because he will soon be visited by his brother, Esau. What will happen when he meets Esau after all these years? We can assume that through all of those years he lived both in guilt for what he had done and in fear for his life. Now he is alone in the dead of night, with both his fear and his guilt, and nowhere to run and hide.

There are many explanations for what happens next: Jacob wrestles with a mysterious being. Who is this being? Is it a nightmare? Whatever it is, it is intense and frightening. Some commentators say that this mysterious being is his conscience. Jacob is fighting his inclination to run away. Perhaps the

mysterious character is God urging him to fight his yetzer rah (evil inclination). At the end Jacob asserts, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

Jacob finishes the battle physically injured but morally intact. His name is changed to Yisrael, which the Torah defines as “one who struggles with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” At the end of the story, the Torah says that Jacob, now Yisrael, arrived at his destination “shalem”—whole, safe, at peace with himself.

Perhaps this chapter is meant to teach us that anything is possible – that Jacob, who was first portrayed as kind and gentle and later became cunning and calculating, could change, could reconcile, could wrestle with his evil inclination, and come out at the other end shalem, whole. If Jacob can do it, so can we all.

Like Jacob, sometimes we feel protected and safe, and other times we have to wrestle first. However it comes to us, may we all emerge *shalem*, complete, and confident that we dwell in the shelter of God’s peace, b’shalom.

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## Angels in Our Lives

*December 4, 2019*

And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and remained there all night...and he lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. (Genesis 28:1-13)

This is not the first time we read about the presence of angels in Torah nor will be it the last time. In fact, angels are present not only in Torah but also throughout biblical literature and well as rabbinic writings. Who are these angels? What roles do they play?

The Hebrew word for angel is *malach*, meaning messenger. An angel is interpreted as a messenger of God. Sometimes an angel appears to deliver a message from God, other times to guide someone to, change or improve their behavior. Sometimes angels play the role of protector.

Later writings describe angels as celestial entities but this is not how they were first seen in Torah or the Bible. In most biblical accounts they are introduced in human form acting as humans would. In the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eve, God places angels of a different name, cherubim (literally “mighty ones”), at the gates of the Garden to keep humans from returning. Remember the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac? It was an angel who stopped the Patriarch at the critical moment. “Biblical angels fulfill a variety of functions, including conveying

information to mortals, shielding, rescuing, and caring for Israelites, and smiting Israel's enemies.”  
(Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis)

The role of angels throughout Jewish literature would entail a multi-week adult education course. It is a fascinating subject. I think angels are still present in our lives, individuals who, without their knowledge, show up in our lives and offer just what we need in the moment.

I had such a person, Sarah, play that role for me. She was my study partner one summer at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. I had ended one career and was desperately in search of another. I felt aimless and uncertain about my professional future. It was Sarah who asked me, “Why aren’t you in rabbinical school?” and directed me away from my objections (“it’s too late for me”) and toward the possibilities of realizing my lifelong dream. Since that day I have seen Sarah as my guardian angel on the ladder, as I dreamed of life’s possibilities. I await the next guardian angel to guide me toward what the Holy One has in store for me now.

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## Expressing Gratitude

*November 21, 2019*

This is a two-week *HaMadrish* (The Guide). During this time, the *parshiot* (Torah readings) are rich and offer many opportunities for insights. This week’s reading is *Chaya Sarah* (“The life of Sarah”). Though the title, based on the first words of the chapter, speaks of Sarah’s life, the chapter begins with the preparations for her death and burial. Abraham purchases a burial ground for Sarah and then sends his servant to find a wife for their son, Isaac. It ends with the death and burial of our Patriarch Abraham.

Next week’s chapter is *Toldot*, the story of Isaac and Rebekah and their children, Esau and Jacob. Isaac has grown old in this chapter, and under Rebekah’s direction, Jacob deceives his father in order to receive his brother’s birthright he must then leave home to escape the wrath of Esau.

But next week is also the week of Thanksgiving. Rabbi Naomi Levy shares the following expression of gratitude which I encourage you to read at your own Thanksgiving celebration:

For the laughter of children,  
For my own life breath,  
For the abundance of food on this table,  
For the ones who prepared this sumptuous feast,  
For the roof over our heads,  
The clothes on our backs,  
For our health,

And our wealth of blessings,  
For this opportunity to celebrate with family and friends,  
For the freedom to pray these words  
Without fear,  
In any language,  
In any faith,  
In this great country,  
Whose landscape is as vast and beautiful as her inhabitants.

Thank You, God, for giving us all these. Amen.

May you have two weeks of blessings and an especially meaningful Thanksgiving day.

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## This is Only a Test

*November 13, 2019*

“This is a test; it is only a test.” From time to time, when we are watching television, an annoying sound will be emitted preceded by the announcement, “This is only a test.” From that, we are assured that no emergency is forthcoming and this annoyance will soon be over.

In this week’s Torah chapter, *Va’yera*, we read, “Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test (Genesis 22:1).” What was the test? God asks Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac, heir to the dynasty that will become the nation of Israel, and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah.

The beauty of reading and re-reading Torah year after year is one’s opportunity to reinterpret the text. This time, that line stood out to me, as if it was written in all caps and bold, perhaps even with the emergency system alarm sound blaring. The narrative is telling us, “Listen, don’t take this too seriously. The sacrifice is not going to happen. It is only a test.” We can relax. We can breathe easier. God will not allow the sacrifice to occur. The test is not about Isaac and his future; it is about Abraham and his relationship with God.

Does Abraham pass the test? It is in the eyes of the interpreter. Some say he does not, because he did not argue with God as he did when he was told that God would destroy all of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some say he did pass the test, evidencing his total faith in God by following God’s every instruction.

We are faced with tests regularly. Sometimes it is a test of our ethics, such as when we are not charged enough for a meal. Do we tell the server or gloat that we beat the system? Sometimes it is a

test of our morality, such as when we ignore the less fortunate or hate others because of their skin color or religion.

And sometimes our faith is tested, as is Abraham's in this narrative. When life is challenging us, we are tempted to blame God and lose our faith. When terrible things are happening around us, we ask "Where is God?" when the real question is "Where am I and what am I doing about it?"

When we are faced with tests in the process of living day to day, it helps us to realize that this is only a test. We can emerge with our faith intact, hope restored, and motivation to face the new day.

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## "*Lech Lecha*" - Go Into Yourself

November 6, 2019

"*Lech lecha!*" That's how this week's *parasha* begins – God tells Abram (that's his name at the beginning of his story; God later changes it to Abraham), "Go!" These words have been interpreted in various ways. They could mean "*Lech* – Go; *lecha* – you go"; another is, "go forth"; and, as later Hasidic commentators taught, "Go into yourself." This is my preferred interpretation. By telling Abram to go into himself, God is instructing the future Patriarch that it is inside himself where he will discover his destiny, his purpose in life.

The renowned modern Biblical scholar, E.A. Speiser, wrote; "The story commences with one individual, and extends gradually to his family, then to a people, and later still to a nation. Yet, it is not to be the tale of individuals or a family or a people as such. Rather, it is to be the story of a society in quest of an ideal." And at the beginning of the story is one person: Abraham.

Recently we heard Maria Walters' father, Zinovy Gutman, speaking about his book, *In Pursuit of Liberty*. The book describes his life in the former Soviet Union and his efforts to live freely in America as a proud Jew. His story was one of many who took the heroic step to find freedom by leaving the former Soviet Union, yet it was also the story of one person and one family. Was there one individual responsible for the exodus of Russian Jewry? No, not one, but a series of ones. One person here, one person there, one person working with another one, until there was the momentum to absolutely change the course of modern history.

His story reminded me that I – and you – have the power of one; each of us is capable of doing something in this world that matters and inspiring others to participate in activities that matter. It took just one individual to inspire me to go to the Soviet Union to visit *refuseniks* (Russian Jews who asked for permission to leave the Soviet Union and were refused). I ended up chairing a national campaign to free Soviet Jews for *B'nai B'rith Women* (now known as Jewish Women International) and a national letter writing campaign on behalf of one Jewish prisoner in particular, Yuli Edelstein,

who later had a successful political career in Israel including serving as the Speaker of the Knesset (Israeli Government). I was not a person of national influence – I was just one person who was inspired to motivate others to take action. One person, plus one letter, plus another letter, plus more letters. One added to a multitude as each activist added his and her voices. To paraphrase the words of a Russian leader to an imprisoned *refusenik*, “Do you think housewives and students will save you?” The answer was yes, because of many “ones” who knew their actions mattered, and the result was that the Kremlin ultimately caved in.

Abraham was one person, who became the founder of a nation of believers in one God. One person. One.

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## The Torah: True or False?

*October 30, 2019*

This week our Torah *parasha* (selected reading) is the story of Noah and the Great Flood. Many ancient civilizations have a version of the flood story. Quoting Wikipedia, “Flood myths are common across a wide range of cultures, extending back into Bronze Age and Neolithic prehistory. These accounts depict a flood, sometimes global in scale, usually sent by a deity or deities to destroy civilization as an act of divine retribution.” Those who challenge the biblical account of the Great Flood use this information to discount our own Torah narrative.

In discussing the creation story with my Chai School (Religious School) students last week, I asked them, “Can something be both true and false?” This difficult question generated an interesting conversation and I invite you to take a moment and think about your own response.

The Flood story is a perfect example of something that could be both true and false, both fact and myth, true even if may not be historically factual. What is likely accurate is that there was a great flood and ancient civilizations, including our own, sought to find meaning in it. What is absolutely true is that eternal lessons can be found in this story, including: What happens to a civilization when wickedness is pervasive? What happens when “the earth is filled with violence.” Whether the devastation comes in the form of a flood or as a result of humanity’s inhumanity, history has shown us that retribution will eventually come.

As I often teach both adults and children, if you are reading Torah as a history book, you are reading the wrong text. If you are reading Torah as a scientific book, you are reading the wrong text. If you are reading Torah for eternal truths about human nature and the consequences of immoral or unethical choices, you are reading the right text. Torah is not a book of history or science; Torah is a book of ethics and morality, a book that teaches us how to treat one another, and its lessons are eternal and true.



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# Show Up For Shabbat

*October 23, 2019*

Across the country, this Shabbat is being called *Show Up For Shabbat*. The first Show Up For Shabbat occurred a year ago, after the shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Many temples are using the date as a reminder of that outrageous and unspeakable white supremacy terrorist attack, the worst anti-Semitic attack in US history.

This Friday night, Congregation Emeth encourages you to attend our own Show Up For Shabbat service. We will be celebrating Simchat Torah, and we will be coming together to celebrate our own precious community.

Show Up For Shabbat really means showing up for one another.

Here's why:

Before we study a text from Torah we say the following blessing: Blessed are You, God our God, who makes us holy through Your commandments and commands us to engage (*la'asok*) in the words of Torah.

"To engage" is an English translation of the Hebrew word, "*la'asok*" – which could also be translated as to practice, deal, pursue, with. It is an active verb. When we study Torah, we are usually sitting, in front of a prayer book, Bible, or copy of a text, or listening to the Rabbi teach. From the translation of the blessing, we can recognize that studying is only the first part of "*la'asok*." Something must come after studying. We must then become engaged with the text. Our behavior is the process through which we become engaged with the words of Torah. How do we practice the ethical teachings of Torah? How do we make Torah engagement part of our everyday life?

As I often teach, the essence of Torah is found in Leviticus 19: Love your neighbor as yourself. As we learn from Rabbi Hillel, the rest is commentary. Our behavior toward one another is essential to engaging with Torah.

This Friday evening as we celebrate Simchat Torah, the joy of Torah, I want to invite you to attend and also teach you why attending is an example of engaging with Torah.

When we choose whether or not to attend services we usually ask ourselves: What kind of service is it? Who will likely be there? What other events are going on in town that evening? Am I just too tired? Do I "feel like going"? I know these questions because I am no different than you. I ask myself the same questions when Emeth doesn't have a service and I am looking for another temple to attend. Is it "worth" the effort, I ask myself.

Engaging in the words of Torah teaches us that it's not just about our own needs and our own wants. It is about being present for others in the community. Who is attending services to pray on behalf of a loved one or friend who is sick, who could use your prayers of healing joining with their own for that person or maybe themselves? Who is mourning a recent death or remembering a loved one and needing to say the Mourners' Kaddish? Who is feeling lonely and attending services to be in the company of others? As members of the extended family of Congregation Emeth, we show up for one another. That hug you extend at the end of services may be the only contact the recipient has had all week. You can not begin to realize the impact of your presence. And you might even get something out of it yourself.

May you have a joyous Simchat Torah holiday and a Shabbat of peace

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## Sukkot - And the Roots of Thanksgiving

*October 16 2019*

Most of us are aware of the origins of Thanksgiving, the holiday Americans celebrate in November. According to Wikipedia, the modern Thanksgiving holiday tradition is traced to a well-recorded 1619 event in Virginia and a sparsely documented 1621 celebration at Plymouth in present-day Massachusetts. The feast and thanksgiving were prompted by a good harvest, which the Pilgrims celebrated with native Americans. As President of the United States, George Washington proclaimed the first nationwide thanksgiving celebration in America marking November 26, 1789, "as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God".

While most of us are aware of that story, you may be surprised to learn that the roots of the holiday can be traced to Torah. In Leviticus, beginning in 23:39, the holiday of Sukkot is ordained, as a celebration of the completion of the successful harvest. This holiday that we are now celebrating, which may seem strange to many of us, is the Jewish Thanksgiving! Our meals are centered around the produce of the season.

Like all Jewish festivals the holiday has three components: agricultural, theological, and historical. Agricultural: the three biblical festivals are based on the growing season of the holy land, which is remarkably similar to ours in South County. It begins with Passover, at the beginning of the Jewish year in April, when the first grains are planted and we begin counting until they bear first fruits. That occurs on the second festival, Shavuot, usually taking place in May or June on the secular calendar. On Shavuot, we give thanks for the harvest of the first fruits. And Sukkot completes the cycle, the final harvesting of the produce.

Theological: we thank God for the successful harvest, and at the end of the weeklong Sukkot holiday we begin adding prayers for rain to our prayer service – because we want another successful harvest next year!

Historical: in this case, we remember when the Israelites dwelled in temporary huts in the desert after leaving Egypt. More directly linked to this holiday is replicating the lives of the biblical farmers, who lived in huts as they worked the fields during the harvest season.

This holiday carries with it a unique commandment, straight from Torah: You shall rejoice! This is our happiest holiday! May you enjoy and appreciate the beautiful produce that surrounds us and may you celebrate with joy our own Thanksgiving holiday!

*Chag Sukkot Sameach* – Happy Sukkot!

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## Religion and Politics

*October 8 2019*

Many years ago I started a program at Emeth for our *b'nai mitzvah* students, which is called the year of living Jewishly. The intention of the program is to teach students that Judaism isn't something that happens in a vacuum. Our everyday life is grounded in Jewish values. We have commandments for everything, to direct us how to live our life. For example, we are told in various ways how important it is to take care of our bodies and our health. We are taught processes of decision making. We learn from the Talmud that our sages didn't agree on every issue, but they argued the issues with civility (usually).

Rabbis around the country are always faced with the dilemma of speaking about current issues in a way that is inclusive on the one hand and based on Jewish values on the other. When I select a topic and begin to research it, I consider how you will relate to it, whatever your political affiliation.

Some people object to what they would call the mixing of politics and religion, as if those two things can be separated. When I looked up the definition of politics, it was hard to find something that was clearly defined. The best I found was: the total complex of relations between people living in society.

And surely we could say that is the definition of religion as well. "Rabbis have been discussing 'politics' for literally thousands of years. It's so old the prophets of 400 BCE - Amos and Hosea - were preaching politics to the ancient Israelites. That was their job, and though they faced harsh consequences - social isolation, public humiliation, loss of friends and family – they did not stop their messages of social change, social justice and social upheaval. They knew they had a divine message, and they knew God expected them to deliver it. I believe they were afraid, but they delivered their message anyway. It is the message we still read today." (Rabbi Annie Belford)

I don't believe it's my job to tell you who to vote for, or where to stand on an issue. My job is to teach Torah and sometimes to ask difficult questions. I've been told I make people on both sides of the aisle uncomfortable from time to time. Good! I even make myself uncomfortable. That is my job.

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## Gratitude

*October 3, 2019*

In our High Holiday *Machzor* (prayer book for Yom Kippur), *Mishkan HaNefesh*, we find a section on gratitude (pages 396-397). I usually include this reading in our service:

What has happened in my life, since last Yom Kippur, that makes me thankful?

Have I grown during the past year in my ability to experience and express gratitude?

Am I consistent in expressing gratitude to loved ones and friends? Do I look for things to feel grateful for, or things to complain about?

Do I feel appreciated by others? What have I done during the past year that has earned someone else's gratitude?

What blessings have nourished me in recent years? What are some miracles that greet me every day?

During these Days of Awe, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I invite you to answer these for yourself. I too have been pondering these questions, while reflecting on the past 12 years during which I have been privileged to be Emeth's Rabbi. These Holy Days represent the start of my "bat mitzvah" year with you. Included in my Erev Rosh Hashanah *d'var Torah*, (sermon), I talked about the importance of being aware of the blessings in our lives and expressing gratitude. So, in keeping with that message and the questions posed in our *Machzor*, I would like to use this week's HaMadrish as my opportunity to thank each of you for being such a blessing in my life.

During our years together, we have seen the congregation grow steadily, both in numbers but more important in engagement of our members through excellent programs. The quantity and quality of activities that we are able to offer all ages gives me great pride. When I began, we had services twice a month and religious school twice a month. Now we have weekly Shabbat services and Torah study, and religious school every week (except for school holidays). We are involved in the communities where we live, representing Judaism in Morgan Hill, Gilroy, San Martin, Hollister, and South San Jose. We are actively engaged in interfaith and social action programs, responding where the need calls us. Our teens participate in temple life, and I treasure the relationships we build together.

Every day I thank God for the privilege of being your Rabbi. I thank you for your trust and support. You have also allowed me to make mistakes and grow as a spiritual leader, and for that I am especially grateful. I take your constructive feedback as well as your compliments to heart and learn so much from you. The bar/bar mitzvah year is a year of acquiring more knowledge and spiritual growth. I pray that will be true of my *bat mitzvah* year with you.

May you be written and sealed in the Book of Life. Shabbat shalom and Shana tova.

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## We are Stewards of this Planet

*September 25, 2019*

All chapters of Torah have great lessons to teach us, and this week is no exception. This Torah *parsha* (weekly Torah reading) is so important that it is repeated in the Torah reading on Yom Kippur.

The Torah *parsha* begins: "You are standing this day all of you before Adonai your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water; that you should enter into the covenant of Adonai your God..."

This is a message of inclusion. Moses has an important lesson to teach us: everyone counts! He doesn't deliver his message exclusively to the priests. He doesn't only speak to the heads of the tribes. No, he speaks to the entire community as equals – the wise elders along with the woodcutters and water drawers. In a time when women were not held as equals in society, Moses speaks to them equally.

The message is clear: every single person is important in God's eyes and everyone has a vital role to play. Notice that "your little ones" is included in this list. This week, the remarkable 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, reminded us that we are all citizens of this planet and share jointly and equally in the responsibility to care for it. She challenged us, "How dare you" to have let our climate reach this emergency condition. And she is right. We selfishly exploited our planet for our own immediate gratification at the expense of future generations. Our own children and grandchildren and great grandchildren will suffer because of us. How dare us indeed. And fixing this problem doesn't only rest in the hands of politicians and world leaders. It is the responsibility of all of us – from the elders to the "little ones", each of us is absolutely and immediately responsible.

It is time for all of us to come together and demand immediate change. This is Torah talking to us! Torah forbids wanton destruction. Destruction of nature entails the violation of a biblical prohibition, *ba'al tashchit* – do not destroy (Deuteronomy 20:19). We are all too late learning the

wisdom of our ancient sages who wrote this midrash (elaboration on the Torah): “When G-d created Adam, God took him around the trees of the Garden of Eden, and God said to him, ‘Look at My works! How beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Take care not to damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it after you.’” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

Greta Thunberg is teaching us this fundamental lesson about being stewards of this planet. We are damaging this world and assuming the next generation will repair it for themselves. Greta warns us, there is no one to repair it if we don’t.

In these final days of soulful preparation before the High Holy Days, let us make this fundamental change: to be more conscious of everything we do that could potentially damage our planet. We can live without plastic straws (I have non-disposable ones I carry with me). We don’t have to put our vegetables in individual plastic bags in the grocery store. We must stop wasting resources. These are small steps every one of us can take.. And the bigger steps? Demand our national leaders act like leaders and take action to protect our natural world.

May you have a week of blessings, a Shabbat of peace, and a new year of health, joy, and repair.

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## Our *Ketubah* With God

*September 18, 2019*

Adonai your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul. You have affirmed this day that Adonai is your God, that you will walk in God’s ways, that you will observe God’s laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey God. And God has affirmed this day that you are, as God promised you, God’s treasured people who shall observe all God’s commandments...and that you shall be, as God promised, a holy people to your God.” (Deuteronomy 26:16-19)

A Jewish wedding ceremony begins with the signing of the *ketubah*, the wedding contract. Like any contract, the *ketubah* expresses the terms of the agreement. This week’s Torah reading, *Ki Tavo* (“when you go” – meaning when you enter the Land of Israel), is in many ways a *ketubah* between God and the Jewish people. This section of Torah summarizes what God expects of us in our loving relationship. It is a version of expressing the promise to forsake all others and, in return, God will love us in sickness and in health. We have both a spiritual connection to God and a legal obligation as expressed in this Torah reading.

We read these words as we prepare ourselves for the High Holy Days, giving the words special meaning. “This Hebrew month of Elul is the time to be reaffirming our relationship with the Holy

One. We struggle to become closer just as we pray that God will show loving compassion on us and forgive us for any errors we made during the past year. We all make mistakes, in our relationships with parents, spouses, friends, children, employers or employees – and God. This is the time to make amends for those errors and to ask for forgiveness, remembering that we are God’s treasured people – and as such we have specific moral and ethical obligations.” (Rabbi’s Message, HaMadrach, 2008)

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## Reminders as We Prepare for the Days of Awe

*September 10, 2019*

Today’s date on the Hebrew calendar puts us right in the middle of the Hebrew month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holy Days. In preparations for the season of repentance, I hope you are giving considerations to changes to your behavior, as I am. It’s hard work, and I’d rather be binge-watching a favorite show. But that escapism takes me away from the hardest task of all, changing my behavior. I notice that every year I return to the same difficult character trait in need of repair.

As I do this work, I take comfort in knowing that the Holy One is on my side, rooting for me to get on with it and take concrete steps to be a better me. One way I put myself into the space of connecting with God is by reciting the evening prayer, *Ahavah Rabbah* (“a lot of love) or the morning prayer, *Ahavat Olam* (“eternal love”). These prayers have slightly different words but the same theme: God’s love for us is deep and unending.

Traditional Jewish belief is that God will always be there for us, regardless of what we have done or how we think of ourselves. This is an important reminder during this time of the year, as we go through our spiritual checklist in preparation for the Days of Awe. As we struggle to make changes, to improve, we are reminded that God is with us, giving us strength and courage.

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## Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue

*September 4, 2019*

This week’s Torah *parasha* (designated Torah reading) is titled *Shoftim*, translated as Judges. The *parasha* begins with the command to appoint judges for all of the tribes, in all of the settlements.

Deuteronomy 16:20 is among the most known and always relevant Torah verses: *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* (“Justice, justice you shall pursue”). This is the classical source of Judaism’s stand that justice must be fair and equitable for all people, using procedures that protect all people, rich and poor alike, and safeguard that just verdicts are issued.

We know this word *tzedek*, justice. We use it when we talk about “charity” or distribute gifts to those in need – *tzedakah*. This term, *tzedek*, is found 118 times in the Hebrew Bible! The prophets in particular used this word as the foundation for social justice. You may be familiar with the quote used by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, 1963: “Let justice (*tzedakah*) roll down like waters.” (Quoting the Prophet Amos 5:24)

This *parasha*, read during the Hebrew month of Elul when we are preparing ourselves for the High Holiday season by self-evaluating and introspection, is most timely. How are we applying the principles of *tzedek* in our lives? Do we take care of the poor? Do we support businesses that exploit their workers? Do we stand up for those who are unable to stand up for themselves?

*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*— Justice, justice you shall pursue. This is the foundation of a just society.

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

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## An Open Letter to President Donald Trump

*August 24, 2019*

“I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.”

– President Donald Trump

Dear Mr. Trump,

I had already prepared a message to my congregation on the theme of gratitude. Then, before hitting the send button, I read your outrageous, offensive, and demeaning statement that “...any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.” Then this morning, Wednesday, you repeated your accusation, saying, “If you want to vote Democrat, you are being very disloyal to Jewish people and very disloyal to Israel.”

By virtue of my position as a Rabbi, I consider myself a leader of the Jewish people and I cannot stand silently by while you repeat anti-Semitic tropes that have been used by those who want to do my people harm. I do not engage in name-calling because I try to follow a principle of avoiding what is referred to in Judaism as “the evil tongue.” But Mr. President, you have called me either stupid or disloyal to the United States if I do not agree with your vision of America. I am neither stupid nor disloyal.

In an article in the Business Insider in April, 2012, CJ Grisham wrote the following about loyalty from a soldier’s perspective: It’s easy for troops to display loyalty to their leaders. Often, they have no



choice. We are in a profession that demands loyalty to ensure success on the battlefield and preparing for it. However, loyalty doesn't mean being a "yes man." There is a delicate balancing act that must be undertaken to ensure that, for example, a Soldier's loyalty to his supervisors doesn't contradict his loyalty to the Constitution. This is why Soldiers are allowed to disobey unlawful orders."

Mr. Trump, like the soldiers employed to defend our country, the Jewish community understands that our loyalty is to the Constitution. Our devotion to the United States permits us to disagree with its leaders in the interest of the greater good.

You have evoked a tireless anti-Semitic trope in your accusation. Charges of disloyalty have long been used to attack Jews. I must ask you, what is your motivation for this hateful attack? Are you, as others implied, attempting to stir anti-Jewish sentiments with the intent to do us harm? By your words, you are teaching others that Jews must be suspect and that Jews are disloyal to America. What do you think will be the consequence of your words?

I am calling on my Republican congregants to immediately communicate with your office and with Republican congressional representatives and senators, imploring them to demand that you disavow this statement immediately. And I trust that my Democratic congregants will not be kowtowed by your attempt to isolate them as disloyal Americans.

In loyalty to the United States of America,

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## Awe and Wonder

*August 13, 2019*

This week's Torah reading begins with Moses' plea to God: "I pray, let me go over and see the good land...that goodly hill-country..." This is but one example of many in Scriptures that describe our deep love and special relationship with nature.

Our biblical ancestors' experiences as farmers and herders gave us poetry that reflects the landscapes of the natural world. Not only the imagery of goodly mountains but also the trees, brooks, and native animal life of ancient Palestine. The psalms sing praises to God's natural world; the leading one perhaps is Psalm 104, which uses the world of nature to praise God's grandeur: "Bless the Eternal, O my soul. God established the earth on its foundations so that it shall never totter; You made the deep cover it as a garment; the waters stood above the mountains...Mountains rising, valleys sinking, to the place You established for them...How many are the things You have made, O Eternal, You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations..."

Through biblical passages and history, we learn continuously that the earth belongs to God and we are only tenants dwelling upon it. As good tenants, we must appreciate this mighty gift and strive to treat it -- our earth -- with love and respect as an expression of our appreciation to God for providing it. Judaism celebrates the divine presence in all of nature and affirms our kinship to all of God's creatures and to the land.

In this week's *parasha*, we also read the *Shema*, the watchword of Judaism, the fundamental truth of our faith. We declare that God is One, and in so doing we assert that everything exists as part of God -- that God is in all of creation. God is the force that binds all of it -- nature, animals, and humanity -- God is the force that makes it one.

The great rabbi and scholar, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught through his writings that religion begins with a sense of awe and wonder. Perhaps that is why, when we look at a mountain or the ocean, we feel more religious, closer to God, than at any other time...it is the awe and wonder that comes from the majesty of nature.

This is the ideal *parasha* to read at our annual Shabbat in the Redwoods. Under the crown of the giant Redwoods, we feel the awe and wonder in a most intimate way.

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

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## Taking Responsibility: What Can We Do?

*August 7, 2019*

This week we observe *Tisha B'Av* (literally the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av), the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. It is on this day many calamities happened to the Jewish people, most notably the destruction of the First and Second Holy Temples in Jerusalem.

The Rabbis who lived in the centuries after the destruction of the Temples tried to find meaning in its destruction. In the case of the First Temple, they identified the cause was idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed. During the time of the Second Temple, the cause of its destruction was *sinat chinam*, causeless hatred of one Jew toward another.

But this is not a teaching to which I ascribe. I do not believe that we are collectively punished because of the sins of others, even the sin of causeless hatred. I do not accept that God singles out any one or any group and causes catastrophes to occur. I don't believe some of us are blessed and some are not. I see God as loving and forgiving.

However, I do think there are lessons to be learned from this interpretation of causeless hatred. We are witnessing that now in our beloved country – in Gilroy, in El Paso, in Dayton. The fallen Temples represent our fallen America right now. All of us are sickened by these domestic terrorist attacks but we each rationalize the cause depending on our political viewpoint. This finger pointing stops us from working together to find solutions. It is evidence of causeless hatred rather than collective will.

Each of us must take responsibility for this internal war against values we hold dear. Depending on our personal perspectives, we will have different answers and solutions. But causeless hatred cannot continue to divide us if we are to heal our societal wounds. Right now, each of us must ask ourselves: what can I do to improve our country? How can I stop the madness? We need to be unified against hate and it starts with each one of us.

We cannot let America become the fallen Temples in our time.

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## "God is near to the broken hearted" Psalms 34.19

*July 31, 2019*

This week, we are all among the broken-hearted. Twice in as many months a terrible shooting occurred, one in Morgan Hill at the Ford dealership and now in Gilroy, at our beloved Gilroy Garlic Festival.

We are shocked and sickened that an event so treasured by South County and beyond could be torn asunder in this way. Even though we relinquished our Photo Booth this year, all of us are connected to the Festival like friends and family. We cannot believe someone would do in this our town, to our friends and family, because even if we never heard their names before they are like family to us.

I will not honor the shooter by giving him a name. We can never understand or justify this kind of explosion of hatred. We try to explain it, because it's the only way to make sense of it.

When the tears stop flowing, we will argue the merits of further restrictions on the availability of fire arms and more sensible national gun laws. While we may not agree with solutions, we cannot argue the fact that on July 28 the day of the mass shooting in Gilroy, there were 59 lives lost to gun violence, in the United States, four of those at the Gilroy Garlic Festival.

“Jewish tradition emphasizes the sanctity and primary value of human life. The Bible commands us, ‘Thou shalt not murder’ (Exodus 20:13). The Talmud teaches us that ‘he who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe’ (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). In an increasingly impersonal and alienating society, the

dehumanizing of the human being and the carelessness with which human life is taken stand in direct violation of these affirmations of our tradition.” (Religious Action Center, Union of Reform Judaism)

My friends, this Shabbat morning we will have a healing circle at 10:00 AM which will be followed by Torah study, if we are ready, at 11:00 AM. Please attend, for your own sake and to bring comfort to the broken-hearted among us. May the Holy One of blessings bring all of us comfort as well as insights and determination to solve this cancer of gun violence.

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

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## Think of God's Reaction to Our Words

*July 17, 2019*

I enjoy reading newspaper advice columns. First I read the “problem,” then think how I might answer, and lastly read what the columnists advise. Frequently communication is at the core of these dilemmas. “Should I tell...” “What do I say when...” “I wish I hadn’t said that...”

This week’s Torah portion struggles with the issue of communication as well. The non-Jewish prophet Balaam is hired to curse the Israelites. God intervenes and Balaam is unable to issue curses, only blessings. But for most of us, we open our mouths to speak and there is no intervention. Instead we say what is on our minds and we often are filled with regret later.

We can change this way of speaking by inviting God into our thoughts instead of waiting for God to intervene. The Hassidic master Rebbe Hayim Heikel of Amdur wrote: “Always be mindful of your thoughts and feelings. If you experience a loving moment, connect it to your love for the Creator. If you have a hateful or angry moment, connect it to your awe of God. If you feel arrogant, sit and study, for the Torah is God’s pride. The basic principle is that you should not do anything – great or small – without first thinking about its Divine source...”

If we add to that list, before speaking think of God’s reaction to our words – then we will have less to regret and our interpersonal communications will be affirmations of love and respect.

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## Take Care of the Stranger

*July 10, 2019*

In *Parashat Chukat*, this week's Torah chapter, the Israelites are nearing the end of their sojourn in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. In this week's reading, Moses and Aaron learn they will not be permitted to complete the journey and they will die before arrival.

What caused this literal death sentence? Near the beginning of the chapter, Miriam dies and therefore the Israelites were without Miriam's well that accompanied them in the desert. Their water supply ceased and they were thirsty. They demanded that their leaders, Moses and Aaron, provide water. God tells Moses, "You and your brother Aaron should take the rod and assemble the community. Before their very eyes command the rock to issue forth its water. Thus, you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and the animals. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock? (Num. 20:8-10)."

Then, instead of speaking to the rock as commanded, Moses hits it with a stick. While water does spew from the rock, most commentators say it is for this reason that Moses and Aaron are told they will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. Their sin seems to be both disobeying God and also taking credit for the water.

However, Maimonides (the 12th century Sage) said that the punishment was the result of Moses' angry response, shouting "Listen, you rebels!" In Maimonides' view, the people were desperate for water and Moses answered them not with compassion but with anger.

This is a lesson for all time. As we continue to hear about refugee children who are dreadfully sick and horribly mistreated along our southern borders, blameless children who were separated from their parents, our hearts churn with outrage and pain for these little ones. Those trying to justify their maltreatment claim they deserve it but I daresay all of us, regardless of where we stand on immigration reform, cannot abide this abuse from which these children's souls will likely never recover. All of us, every one of us, must demand a change. Instead of following the commandment to take care of the stranger, we are in our own time "hitting the rock".

There are many sources online; google how to help refugee children. This is not about politics; this is a humanitarian crisis. To learn the position of the Reform Movement, go to the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement (RAC): <https://rac.org/help-us-end-child-detention-now>. Do something now.