

Rabbi's Weekly Message

January - July 2020

Reflecting on my rabbinate

July 8, 2020

As I write my final Taste of Torah message to you, I am struck by the symmetry of this week's Torah parasha to our lives together.

In this chapter, Moses selects Joshua to replace him and begins the process of transferring leadership (Numbers 27:12-23). Rabbi Michael Simon wrote, "The fact that Moses was not permitted to enter into the Promised Land...(is) a perfect example of what we all face in our own lives. For each of us, there is going to be a Jordan we will not cross, and a Promised Land we will not enter, no matter how hard we try...Moses teaches us what we begin, others will complete, if we have laid the groundwork, set them on the right path, and taught them how. Our actions, our involvement, our teachings, are what are most important..."

As I've been reflecting on my rabbinate this week, images of my parents and childhood kept filling my heart with gratitude. Julius and Mary Israel, of blessed memory, raised their children to know that being Jewish is at the core of who we are. My father, who considered himself "modern Orthodox", was what my brother and I have called a "practical Jew." He appreciated modernity and respected every Jew's level of observance without judgement. When I began wearing a *kippah* (headcovering) and *tallit* (prayer shawl) in prayer and later, at age 35, celebrated my adult bat mitzvah, I asked him what he thought. He said, "I don't understand it, but if it brings you satisfaction, who am I to stand in your way?"

He taught me by example that everyone must find one's own way, which prepared me to be Rabbi of a congregation whose members followed so many different spiritual paths. Because of the lessons he taught me, I held no judgments of anyone's way of being a Jew. I hope I was able to enhance your relationship to your people, Israel, and especially to God. I always prayed that our non-Jewish spouses and family members felt welcomed and appreciated. As my father taught me, "There are many mountaintops and all of them reach for the stars."

Dearest friends, I have told you how much joy you brought into my life, and you have beautifully expressed your reciprocated appreciation. Our time together was too short and yet I recognize that every day with you was a gift the Holy One gave to me.

With great and lasting affection,
Rabbi Debbie Israel

We are all here to do God's work... how are we measuring up?

July 1, 2020

I found a message written for Hamadrich in 2007, when I was commuting every week to Los Angeles while attending rabbinical school. I'm glad I saw it because I can now reflect how I felt then, at the beginning of my relationship with Emeth, and how I feel now.

I remember this encounter like it was yesterday. I was standing in line, waiting to board the airplane. That particular morning, a group of us, strangers in line, were talking. The conversation was about work, and one person turned to me and said, "And who do you work for?" I hesitated for a moment and then the words came out, surprising me most of all. "Why, I work for God," I answered. On that day, I thought, my soul spoke the truth for me: I work for God.

And since that day, I tried to be consciously aware of who my Boss is! While serving Emeth as Rabbi, I've participated in regular "performance evaluations" with temple leadership, but I never had a performance review from the Big Boss! However, I did know the job requirements and expectations.

Though I am Rabbi, my job requirements are the same as yours. They are found in this week's Haftarah – the prophetic reading attached to the Torah portion. We read in Micah 6:8: "What does God require of you? Only to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

This is a requirement that all of us can attain. In all of the words of the Bible, nowhere is the expectation laid out so clearly. What does it mean to "do justly"? It means being responsible for our actions, in business and in our homes. As business people, we mustn't inflate prices and we must compete fairly. When the clerk gives us too much change, we return that which isn't ours. When we aren't charged enough, we tell the clerk and pay the correct amount. On company time, we don't waste time on personal tasks, which is the equivalent of stealing from our employers.

What does it mean to "love mercy"? It means showing compassion for all those we encounter – the homeless on the streets, the lost souls talking to themselves, the people among us who are "different." It means showing kindness, even to that person who cut you off in traffic; to the telephone salesperson who interrupts your dinner; and most assuredly to the family members who just want a little of your time.

And what does it mean to "walk humbly with your God"? This is a little more difficult to understand. Why does it say "your" God, and not simply God? Perhaps the prophet Micah is teaching us that God is not only transcendent, distant, and taking care of the universe, but is also personal, accompanying each

of us as we go through our lives. Truly believing, knowing, that God is “walking” with us is a humbling experience.

We are all here to do God’s work! We should each do a regular check up. The best performance reviews are the ones we do honestly for ourselves. As individuals and as a congregation, how are we measuring up in doing justly? Loving mercy? Walking humbly with our God? The purpose of a job review is to recognize that we all can do better and improve!

What is the definition of a successful leader?

June 24, 2020

In this week’s Torah parasha (chapter), Korach led a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Korach’s challenge was not motivated by his belief that Moses and Aaron were poor leaders, or that the Israelites needed a new type of leader, or even that he would be a better leader.

Korach’s motivation was self-serving. He wanted power and adulation. He was a skilled manipulator and managed to gain a following. The people were demoralized because of the devastating incident of the spies (last week’s Torah reading). This was the perfect time for a demagogue to arise. As a result of his dishonorable rebellion, there was an earthquake that swallowed up only Korach and his followers.

At a time when the United States is still holding some primary elections and soon will focus on national elections, this chapter presents a leadership challenge for us. Rarely do we ask, “What is the motivation of the candidate?” We look to their promises and sometimes their personal history. But we learn from Korach to ponder what drives them to leadership? Is it to improve their own lives or the country? Is it to benefit the lives of the citizens or the leader’s personal bank account? Who has the people’s best interest at the heart of their motivation to serve?

This is not only true in politics. A teacher who focuses more on being liked rather than whether students are learning is a poor educator. Company executives who are more concerned about dominating their industry and lining their own wallets than the welfare of their clients and employees are poor executives. Public servants who are more concerned about glory and control than the public welfare put everyone at risk.

Not everyone who chooses to lead does so with malintent. But my definition of a successful leader is someone who puts the followers first, who is empathetic, who has vision and who can motivate people to help make that vision a reality.

In my role as your Rabbi, I kept this quotation by Lao Tzu above my computer screen as a reminder of the kind of leader I aspired to be (edited to be gender neutral): “Leaders are best when people barely know they exist, when their work is done, their aim fulfilled, the people will say: we did it ourselves.”

May your faith help you discern your own role and responsibility in improving our world

June 17, 2020

In this week's Torah portion, ten spies are sent from among the Israelites to check out the Promised Land and report back what they find. They are nearing the time they will enter the land and the people want to know what to expect. Eight of the spies bring back a discouraging report – “We cannot attack that people, for they are stronger than we (Numbers 13:31).” Their sin was not in their report but in their lack of faith that God would bring them safely into the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb stood up to the majority opinion, maintaining their faith that with God's help they would be victorious.

Like all of Torah, this chapter offers lessons for our lives today. Afterall, we hear and see optimistic reports of controlling the deadly coronavirus but we also hear pessimistic reports warning us that our lack of diligence will bring a resurgence. Some say that the Black Lives Matter movement has brought about an improvement in police reforms while others insist that it's not enough, so much more needs to be done. Which reports do we accept and which reports do we challenge? How does faith in the future align us with the events demanding our attention? How easy it is to lose faith! How necessary it is to reclaim it!

Torah, our prophets, and rabbinic sages taught that while we must have faith in God's protection, we also must take the steps necessary to bring change. Indeed, faith must lead to action. For faith to be genuine, we must act upon our teachings. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said it best: we must pray with our feet.

Rabbi Tarfon (1st Century) commented on Micah 6:8, saying, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to abandon it.” (Talmud)

May you find faith in the future and resolve to do your part to improve the present. May your faith help you discern your own role and responsibility in improving our world.

May this week bring peace to our communities and a resolve to demonstratively “love your neighbor as yourself.”

God's Loving Presence

June 10, 2020

This week's Torah reading is Beha'alotecha, referring to the lifting up of the Menorah, the seven-branched candelabra, that becomes the symbol of the eternal flame.

In this chapter, we are given a glimpse into the private life of Moses. At the end of the chapter, his siblings challenge him and his authority. Some say (and I agree) the cause of the exchange is his lack of attention to his wife while spending so much time serving God and the Israelites. (Rebekah Latin will discuss this episode in more detail at her Bat Mitzvah this coming Shabbat morning!)

Before that episode the people weep and complain about their unpleasant life, about missing the food they ate in Egypt (“We remember the good and forget the painful” - Nechama Leibowitz). While Moses understands the cause of their distress, he nonetheless feels the burden of leadership. He was so desperately anguished that he begs God to take his life: “Why have you brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me?...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me...and do not let me face my own ruin.” (Bamidbar 11:11-15) Imagine his great pain! The burden of responsibility on the one hand and the loneliness of leadership on the other.

Not surprisingly, there is a timely and important lesson here for all of us. In Moses' moments of greatest despair, he turned to God. He opened his heart to the Almighty. He spoke his truth. He cried out his deepest fears.

In these turbulent times, each of us has our own tipping point of despair. Fear of sickness, abuse of power, economic uncertainty, racial injustice, loneliness – even, will I ever again experience the hugs of my loved ones – creep in to overwhelm us. Many congregants, family, and friends are experiencing moments or days of depression caused by anxiety and isolation.

But this chapter of Torah teaches us to follow the example of Moses and talk to God. Sometimes I too forget that I am never alone. But in those moments of greatest sadness, anguish or despair, when I feel I am in the bottom of the pit, I remember that God is with me. I open my heart to God and talk or cry it out, and then, I turn it over to God. I do the things that I can, and those things over which I have no control, I give to God whose metaphoric shoulders can handle it.

At the end of the chapter, when Moses' sister is struck with leprosy, Moses expressed his simple prayer: "El na refah na lah – God, pray, heal her." Sometimes we think we have to compose complex prayers to express all of our feelings and fears in order to be heard by God. But in five simple Hebrew words, Moses expressed his deepest emotion: El na refah na lah.

El na refah na li – God, pray, heal me. El na refah na kulam – God, pray, heal all of us.

We are all Brothers and Sisters

June 2, 2020

Soon after creating the world, on the sixth day of creation, God created the first human. We read in Torah, "And Adonai formed adam (human) of the dust of the ground, and breathed into the adam's nostrils the breath of life; and adam became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7) In the Torah, the word used for breath is neshama, which is also translated as "soul", the life force that comes from God.

When the police officers took the breath away from George Floyd, they created a monstrous sin against both this man and the Almighty. It was God's very gift to George Floyd and each of us that they painfully removed.

I call these former police officers murderers without fear of lashon hara, the evil tongue, gossip. Our tradition is very clear about this: one cannot be convicted of murder without at least two witnesses. There were more than two people present. The brave action of a 17 year old, Darnella Frazier, who took the video, compelled all of us to be witnesses as well. What do we expect of witnesses? We expect witnesses to come forward, report what they have seen, and assume justice will occur in return. This is what those who are protesting and rallying are doing – witnessing on behalf of George Floyd and demanding justice be done.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us, "In a free society some are guilty but all are responsible." He also taught, "Equality is a good thing, a fine goal, maybe generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality." The masses of people of all races and religions on the streets represents the awakening of our collective responsibility to change police tactics and to change America's silent acceptance of inequality.

I am not including looters and those who would use this time as an opportunity to stir up hatred and do damage, stealing and destroying other people's property, starting fires. Do not confuse them with the protestors; they are criminals. I do not know who they are, what their agenda is, why they are doing what they are doing. I am referring to the thousands of people who came to protest with an open and loving heart, whose objective is to create change in our society.

“Thank God people are in the streets, refusing to accept what has been seen as normal for far too long. What a shame it would be if this nation could watch a policeman murder another human being, then pose like a hunter with his prey while his colleagues looked on, and there not be protest, anguish, anger, outrage, and moral disruption.” (Poor People’s Campaign)

I am proud of America right now – yes, you read it right. I am proud of the thousands of citizens across our country who are not sitting silently but who are demanding justice! I pray for their safety.

This Taste of Torah ends as it began, with the creation of the first human. When God spoke of creating humankind, God declared that we were created in the image of the Holy One. That first human was neither male nor female, of no race, no religion, no nationality. We all descended from that first human, we are all brothers and sisters, all called into the act of living because of the neshama, breath, of the Holy One. Let us always remember our beginnings and live in the image of God.

May peace come to our land and genuine change come with it. May you have a week of blessings, safety, and good health, and a Shabbat of peace.

Bring Shavuot Into Your Homes

May 27, 2020

Chag Sameach/Happy Shavuot! This glorious time of year has many of us outside enjoying our gardens, the sunshine, and the wonders of spring! Flowers are in bloom and the air feels fresh. Even sheltering in place cannot diminish the joy in observing the natural world flourishing. Let’s open our eyes and hearts to the awe of this glorious universe.

Shavuot is a holiday that celebrates springtime. It is one of the three major festivals – considered major because it is mandated in the Torah (Sukkot and Passover are the other two).

This is one of those holidays that celebrate our ancient roots as a farming society. During Temple times, our ancestors brought their “first fruits” to the Temple as an offering. Shavuot also celebrates the awesome moment in our history when we stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, hearing the booming “voice” of the Holy One, declaring, “I am Adonai your God!” (for it is taught that all of our souls were there among the Israelites, receiving the Ten Commandments).

Our congregation will celebrate Shavuot this Shabbat morning. For the first time since the pandemic began, we will have a zoomed Torah service! Joelle Wolf, Judith Lessow-Hurley, Rena Dubin and Julie O’Neill will read the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

I invite you to bring the holiday into your homes as well, by adorning your home with fresh flowers, serving challah and wine, and lighting candles. Serve a dairy meal, such as blintzes or a meatless lasagna

(some say we eat dairy because Torah is portrayed as "honey and milk"). In celebration of "first fruits", eat some of the wonderful fruits being harvested now.

As a family, celebrate the blessings of spring, the beginning of a successful growing season, and being privileged to receive Torah!

A Period of Transition & Uncertainty

May 20, 2020

We now begin reading the Book of Bamidbar, the fourth Book of the Five Books of Moses, the Torah. The Hebrew name, Bamidbar, means "in the wilderness," often mistakenly translated as desert. In English, it is called Numbers, because it begins with a census taking, the primary feature of the first chapter.

In this chapter, the Israelites – after experiencing their dramatic rescue from Pharaoh, after standing in the Presence of the Holy One while receiving the Ten Commandments, after building the temporary sanctuary in the desert and installing the priesthood, after being gifted with the miracle of being fed and provided with water -- after all of these things, they now begin their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

This shift has great relevance for us. We too are in a period of transitioning. Soon we will elect new officers and board members for the congregation. Soon we will be transitioning from one Rabbi to the next. We are in the midst of many personal changes and communal changes, predicated by the necessities we are facing because of the pandemic. We use language like "the new normal" while trying to anticipate the future, near and distant.

Just as the Israelites in the desert dealt with the uncertainties that were before them, many of us are facing uncertainties too. Like the Israelites, many are feeling like they are lost and wandering. It is important to remember that it was in the wilderness, Bamidbar, that the Israelites heard God's voice. If we listen, perhaps we can hear the Voice of the Holy One telling us: do not be afraid for I am with you.

This is a Chasidic saying, attributed to Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov: The way in this world is like the edge of a blade – on this side is an abyss, and on that side is an abyss, and the way life lies in between. May we all have the courage to walk the "in between".

Educating Our Students

May 13, 2020

Education – teaching and learning, the teacher and the student – occupy an esteemed position in Judaism. The word Torah comes from the root word for “instruction” – the Hebrew word for teacher, *morah*, comes from the same root letters. We learn from this that Torah is a Book of instructions, and teaching is a priority in Jewish life.

“Maimonides in his great code of Jewish law has an entire section devoted to teaching, teachers, students and the concept of knowledge and education. The basic value is that teachers are to be respected and given honor.” (Beryl Wein)

This Friday afternoon, May 15, our parents and students will join together on Zoom to express our appreciation to our amazing teachers.

Every year, in the spring, our Education Committee searches for teachers for the coming year. Every year, we have been blessed with angels who become our loving and talented teachers of Jewish studies and Hebrew.

For a small congregation outside of the “big city” we have been very fortunate to find a wonderful teaching staff. Sometimes our teachers are professionals, trained in either (or both) secular and religious studies. Sometimes, parents or high school students step in and, with the support of the Rabbi and other knowledgeable people, offer a quality education.

As an example, for years we had a devoted member who felt insecure in her Jewish knowledge. However, she willingly accepted help from others in creating lesson plans and her students and their parents recognized her as a wonderful teacher. Today, Barbara Yazman’s name (in loving memory) is on a plaque under the mezuzah on one of our classrooms.

This upcoming year, like many times in the past, will be one of those years when we need members to either help us find teachers or offer to teach. Fathers and mothers, grandparents too, are perfect “candidates”. What you may lack in knowledge will be compensated with your determination to offer meaningful lessons to our children. Your good intentions will help our children learn that they are part of a Jewish community and will enable them to create lasting friendships with other Jewish children.

Please volunteer to education@emeth.net. You don’t have to have children in the school nor do you need to have a higher degree in Jewish education. Retirees from any profession will be welcomed with gratitude. Team teaching will be welcome!

In the meantime, join us as we thank Hana Cidon, Sharon Genkin, and Joelle Wolf, and our school administrator Charlene Rose, this Friday at 5:30 PM for Teachers’ Appreciation.

Have Faith in the Future

May 6, 2020

This week's Torah portion, Emor ("And God said...speak to the priests..."), is sometimes referred to as the Torah of the priests. Last week, reading Leviticus 19, we learned the Holiness Code, a guide for living intended for everyone. In this chapter, the laws are directed to the priests. Within its pages is a description of the times of the three sacred festivals: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (the giving of the Ten Commandments) and Sukkot (the autumn festival at the end of the harvest). They are discussed here because the priests have the responsibility of accepting the sacrificial offerings for each festival.

Of the three festivals, Sukkot reminds us of the fragility of life. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches us, "The sukkah symbolizes living with unpredictability."

We are living now in days of unpredictability. We spend each day pondering how long this pandemic will last. Will life ever return to normal, whatever that will be? How do we carry on? How do we maintain our optimism, especially around our vulnerable teens and younger children?

I once asked my mother, of blessed memory, why so many babies were conceived after the Holocaust, the most horrendous event in Jewish history. My mother answered, "We always have hope. Having babies now is our answer to the Destruction. Having babies now shows our faith in the future." I add to that the words of Rabbi Sacks: "...Faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. And despite the uncertainty, we can still rejoice!"

May you find the courage to live your life even in uncertainty. May you have faith in the future, faith that we will overcome this difficult time and apply the many lessons we learned from it. May we inspired as we see images of animals freely roaming in cities, unrestricted with the absence of cars and herds of people. May we find hope by seeing the natural world righting itself from our interruptions to its natural cycle. May we honor those who suffered through this time by continuing long after it is over to take care of one another at the most basic levels. May we continue to recognize the true heroes of society: selfless individuals who put themselves in the way of harm so that we may live safely. And may we continue to love one another.

A Letter From the Rabbi

April 29, 2020

This Shabbat begins my final three months as Rabbi of Congregation Emeth. Surely this is not the way any of us imagined my final months with you would be spent. Naturally what I long to do is to see each and every one of you in person, to thank you for the most inspiring and extraordinary 13 years of my life, and to properly say goodbye. We don't know how or when the Shelter in Place orders may change and hopefully we will have the opportunity to be together before July 31.

In the meantime I want to continue serving you, teaching you, and interacting with you. It's obvious that many of us are getting zoomed-out, but it's the best we can do for now. Please send me an email (rabbi Debbie Israel@gmail.com) and let me know how I can best serve you in the coming months:

- Do you want us to offer live Friday night or Saturday morning zoom services? Or do you prefer the youtube service included in this week's HaMadrish? Or none at all.
- Is there a different kind of gathering you would like on Shabbat or any other time of the week?
- Is there a class you'd like to be offered? Right now we have three: Torah study (which can be weekly if there is an interest); Uppity Women of the Bible (not for women only!); and Conundrums of the Bible Part II taught by David Meir Levi. Is there something else you'd like to be offered? I'll do the best I can including private lessons.
- During this time of social distancing, many of us are feeling lonely and/or anxious. I invite you to schedule a time for spiritual counseling with me; just email me and we'll set a time for phone or zoom.
- Do you have another idea you'd like me or someone else to try? Share it with me!

Please continue to follow the county guidelines and be safe. All of you are in my prayers for protection and healing. May the Holy One of Blessings keep you and your loved ones healthy, safe, and in good spirits.

Trust Medical Advice, Protect Ourselves and Others, and Value Community

April 22, 2020

This week, we have a double Torah portion. Tazria and M'tzora are a natural pair because both are focused on cleanliness and ritual impurity.

The cause of these impurities is disease (our insides) or skin afflictions (our outsides), particularly those that are contagious. Usually we can't relate to these chapters because they feel archaic. Sadly, the past few weeks have given us new insights and ways of interpreting and relating to these chapters.

In both the distant and more recent past, people have been afflicted by a range of contagious diseases that attacked large groups of people – influenza, small pox, polio, tuberculosis. Every pandemic brings with it both fear and anxiety on the one hand, and an urgency for life to return to normal on the other.

In the Torah, the chapter called Tazria teaches us how skin diseases were diagnosed in biblical times. Then, the priests were not only the religious authorities but also the medical specialists. It was the priests who diagnosed the disease, prescribed a cure and, when necessary, removed the afflicted from the community so the contagion could be contained. The person could not reenter until the priests

declared him/her healed. The urgent intention of the priests' work was to bring the person back into the community as soon as possible.

Those who were afflicted had to dwell apart (in isolation) and if they left their dwelling, they had to shout, "Impure! Impure!" to warn others (Leviticus 13:45). The purpose was not to embarrass the afflicted but rather to contain the spreading of the disease. In addition, it gave others the opportunity to know who needed their prayers for healing.

From this we appreciate the need to isolate the stricken while protecting the remainder of the community; the responsibility of both the diseased and the physicians to be sure the community was protected from being exposed; the communal nature of praying for healing; and the importance of being in community – but only when it is safe!

May we learn from this chapter to trust medical advice, to protect ourselves and others, and to value community. Personally, I miss all of you. I am still conducting "office hours" – from a distance – and so, if you need me, please call or email me to make an appointment. If you or your loved ones are in need of prayers for healing, do let me know!

We Need Not Force Meaning Into Tragedy

April 13, 2020

This week's Torah reading focuses on an event that took place on the eighth day (Shemini, the name of this chapter) after Aaron and his sons were installed as priests. During the ceremony, Aaron's sons – Nadav and Avihu – entered the temporary Tabernacle in the desert with their fire pans, put fire in it, and then put incense on it, and offered it to God. God had not asked for this offering. A fire came forth and consumed the brothers, and they instantly died.

When reading this chapter, we seek explanations for it, questions and answers that have been considered by our Sages through the centuries. Was this a random accident or was it intentional? What was it about the offering that warranted a flash fire which instantly killed them? What was the motivation of the sons? Were they looking to please God or were they guilty of purposely not following God's desires for the offering? If God intended to punish them, couldn't God could have inflicted something less terrible on them to teach them and the Israelites a lesson?

So many questions – and we could think of more. This troubling chapter falls in the middle of this pandemic when some religious zealots are preaching, "This is the wrath of God." Or some people of faith are asking, "What did humanity do to deserve this?"

In our chapter, the questions are unanswered. In fact, Aaron reacts to his sons' death with silence, which also troubled the Rabbis. When death is around us, our inclination is to comfort one another. I

used to be critical of Aaron for his silence: Why didn't he cry out to God? Why didn't he challenge Moses with a crisis of faith?

These days, I am discovering that sometimes there are no words. In fact, when Jews visit a mourner, we are taught to be silent, to let the mourner speak first. In addition to allowing the conversation to respond to the needs of the mourner, Blu Greenberg teaches that this serves a different function: "...to caution against offering a rationale for the decree of death. The deeper human religious response is to be silent, to live with the contradiction, and to affirm that we need not force meaning into tragedy. Sometimes the deepest response of love is to be silent." (The Torah, A Women's Commentary)

This is true not only in the face of death. It is true to our experience during this pandemic. Let's share our humanity with one another and pray that this calamity will pass soon.

Please don't relax your diligence to safe distancing and cleanliness. If you need anything, please call me. The Rabbi's Discretionary Fund is available as much as possible to those suffering financial difficulties. Hebrew Free Loan is offering coronavirus impact loans (<https://www.hflasf.org/>). Don't hesitate to ask for assistance.

Experiencing God's Goodness

April 7, 2020

This week's Torah reading is Exodus 33:12-34:26. The designated reading for the intermediate day of Passover is the renewal of God's Covenant with the Israelites after the incident of the Golden Calf.

Near the beginning of our reading, Moses has a dialogue with God, wherein Moses begs to know God's ways, to understand how God interacts with humans, and how God governs us. God assures Moses, "I will make all My goodness pass before you." How do we know and experience God's goodness? Chumash Etz Hayim comments, "We encounter the reality of God when we experience goodness in the world, from the gift of life itself to the discovery of the capacity to do good in our own souls and the love and generosity of people around us whom God has inspired to do good."

Could these words ever be more true than what we are currently experiencing! When we step out of our own anguish and fear and look around us, we can discover so many people whom God has inspired to do good. You know who they are: health professionals, the ambulance attendants and first responders, so many people who risk their lives around the clock to save the lives of others; scientists and medical experts who are tirelessly working to find ways to cure, manage, predict, and prevent this virus; the people who risk their lives hard at work in "essential services" like the grocery store workers at every level, pharmacists and clerks; mail carriers and other people who are making deliveries so that we don't have to risk our own lives; relatives, congregants, and friends who are checking on others – the list goes on and on. So much love and generosity for humanity! They are a blessing to all of us.

Our new reality for now is to be concerned and anxious. But we also need to search for those moments when we open our eyes to the goodness that remains in our world and be grateful for the amazing capacity of others to risk their lives to better our own. That is the antidote to our fear. As Mr. Rogers said, “Look for the helpers.”

May you find a release from your fear and the ability to celebrate our freedom during this Passover holiday. As always, I welcome your reaching out to me if you need someone to talk to or if I can help you in any way: 408-348-5339; rabbidebbieisrael@gmail.com.

Chag Pesach Sameach – Have a safe, healthy, and celebratory Passover. May we open our door to Elijah the messenger of “good news, salvation, and comfort”.

Why is This Passover Different From All Other Passovers?

April 1, 2020

I can't find horseradish in my local store and I don't want to run from store to store looking for it. Same with kosher wine; I have one bottle of Manischewitz. Whatever is leftover in my Passover cupboard from last year's Passover will have to do. I bought a package of 5 *matzot* (plural of matzah) two weeks ago; glad I did even though I couldn't find my favorite brand. Normally this week I would be beginning to go through my pantries and refrigerator in preparation for Passover week. But I haven't begun. In fact, surprising myself, when I went to the grocery store at 6:00 am on Sunday to avoid the crowds, I loaded up on pasta so I wouldn't have to come back anytime soon. I'll put them in a separate cabinet for Passover but I normally wouldn't have purchased them this close to the holiday. I'm usually using up all of our chametz (the five prohibited grains: wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and oat).

Nothing is normal. This Passover is different from all other Passovers for sure. I suspect you are experiencing your own versions of different. People you would usually join or who would join you will be on Zoom instead or missing altogether. You'd be attending Congregation Emeth's second night seder. Some of you would normally be busy baking and cooking and putting food in the freezer. Nothing is normal.

Our Torah, when giving us instructions for observing the Passover, understood that there would be times like this. In Numbers 9, some people came to Moses and said that they were impure (they had been with a corpse) and could not offer the Passover sacrifice. Moses asks God what to tell them, and God offers an alternative, a second Passover, called Pesach Sheini, Pesach Sheini in this narrative is to be offered a month later.

Because of these extraordinary times, all of us are impure, at risk of becoming impure, or harming others. If you cannot participate in a seder this year or experience Passover according to your usual customs, as your Rabbi I am suggesting that you dismiss any feelings of guilt and try not to feel socially deprived. Do the best you can and refrain from eating *chametz*. Plan on participating in a Pesach Sheini when it is safe to do so! Whenever current restrictions are lifted I plan to lead a Pesach Sheini Community Seder (before July 31, my last day as Emeth's Rabbi). If you have leftover matzah, hold onto it – we will need it for our seder!

This year, do the best you can and remember why we are commanded to observe this holiday: it is because of what God did for our ancestors when we were slaves in the land of Egypt. God kept God's promises to us: "I will take you out; I will deliver you from bondage; I will redeem you; I will take you to be My people."

May you experience good health and safety and may our memories of Passover past give us comfort as we dream of Passovers in the future.

We Are a Community

March 25, 2020

This week we enter the Book of Leviticus. The focus of the Book is ensuring a path to holiness for the Israelites. The commandment to "be holy for I Adonai your God am holy" is reinforced through the sacrificial work of the Temple priests. It's a difficult book to read because we don't relate with the idea of sacrifices. So how do we get value from these pages?

First of all, almost half of the 613 mitzvot (commandments) are found in the Book of Leviticus. The famous commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is found in Leviticus 19. Leviticus 11 teaches us the laws governing the foods we eat. Leviticus instructs the Israelites how to live as a holy nation.

This then is the primary message of Leviticus. We are a community. We share a common destiny. Even when we are physically separated, as we are now during "shelter in place", we remain connected. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is "korban", meaning to come close. This is the purpose of the mitzvot – to bring us close to the Holy One and to bring us close to each other through our deeds of lovingkindness, emotionally if not physically.

Vaykira means "And God called." Leviticus and its first chapter begins with the words, "And God called to Moses and spoke to him..." instead of the usual phrase, "And God spoke to Moses..." Why is it different this time? Why is God "calling" first and then speaking? Consider the language to be a euphemism for a "wake up call". It is a forewarning – God will be speaking, get ready and pay attention.

As we go through the Book of Leviticus, let us get ready and pay attention. Hidden between the lists of sacrifices are important messages that will teach us how to live a life of holiness in community.

Facts, Dreams, and Faith

March 23, 2020

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg wrote, "There are three things in life: facts, dreams, and faith."

In these days of sheltering in place, I fear we spend too much time gathering facts and too few moments dreaming about the future. But in order to dream, we must have faith. Faith that we will overcome these challenging days and return whole. Faith that our love for one another will enable us to find ways to help those in need or who are suffering, now and later. Faith that in spite of all the facts, we - and our children and children's children - will see good days return.

In times of trouble, my father Julius Israel, of blessed memory, used to say, "This too shall pass." It's an ancient saying, repeated in different forms by poets and politicians. Let us all remember that "This too shall pass" and while we wait, let us keep dreaming and have faith.

The Ritual of Hand Washing

March 23, 2020

Dear Ones,

My hands are rough and no moisturizers are helping. Too much hand washing or allergy to the soaps I'm using? But as I touch their rough surfaces, I am reminded that it is a small price to pay to keep myself and my near ones safe.

We have a prayer for hand washing (yes, you are right; we have a prayer for everything!):
Blessed are You, God our God, who has made us holy with mitzvot (commandments) and instructed us concerning the washing of hands.

The actual language is "who commanded us to raise the hands." This prayer is for ritual use, before eating a meal with bread, in normal times. But these are not normal times, are they? Quoting Rabbi Kerry Olitzky: The ritual itself assumes that one's hands are ritually impure and must be cleansed prior to completing a ritual act.

Rather than being impure already, we engage in this ritual of strict hand washing to prevent ourselves from becoming "impure". It is the right prayer for our times. When we say the blessing and raise our

hands, let us imagine our hands outstretched to the Holy One of Blessings to protect us and our loved ones, even as we protect ourselves by frequent and thorough handwashing.

May all of us feel the embrace of the Holy One, protecting us as we take the right steps to protect ourselves.

Shabbat: God's Sanctuary in Time

March 18, 2020

There is a midrash, a from the Talmud, that says: It is told that God said to the people Israel, “If you accept My Torah and observe my laws, I will give you for all eternity the most precious thing in My possession.”

Israel asked, “What is the most precious thing that You will give us if we obey Your Torah?” God said, “The future world.” Israel asked, “But even in this world is it possible to taste the other? God said, the Shabbat will give you the taste.”

The first word in this week’s Torah reading is *vayakhel* which means “to assemble.” The chapter begins with Moses assembling the people and telling them the commandment to observe the Shabbat.

When God created the world, it was done in six days. God blessed the seventh day, called it holy, and God rested on that day. From the very beginning, God took a piece of time and said, “This is holy, this is Mine, this is My sanctuary in time.”

The philosopher Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan said, “The Sabbath is the day for rehearsing Olam HaBa, the world to come, the ideal world.” How do we rehearse? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “Sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, by beautiful garments, and delight your soul with pleasure and God will reward you this very pleasure.”

During these days of “sheltering in place” how do we still experience community and Shabbat? One way: I have created a playlist of Shabbat prayers, sung by a variety of cantors and musicians (and Peter Mandel collapsed them into youtube links to simplify the experience). I then put together a companion *siddur* (prayerbook) pdf. Simply open the siddur, begin the youtube service, and enjoy Shabbat, knowing other Emeth friends are virtually in the service with you. We also are offering the Ethics Series on Zoom. Thank you Arthur Reidel!

If you want to experience a taste of the world to come, it’s found in the peace and joy of experiencing Shabbat. Even in difficult times, Shabbat remains a time to refresh and renew our souls. Turn off those news channels for 24 hours! There’s plenty to watch that is entertaining. Call friends; we all want to

hear human voices. Play games if you are sheltered with others. Rest and refresh.

You'll Never Walk Alone

March 12, 2020

"All the world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to be afraid" (Rebbe Nachman of Breslov)

This week's Torah reading, Ki Tisa, is among the most well-known. The centerpiece of the story is the episode of the Golden Calf. Because the people were too frightened to hear God's Voice at Mt. Sinai, they asked Moses to ascend the mountaintop alone to receive the Torah. In our chapter, 40 days had passed and Moses did not return to them. These former slaves, only recently escaped – narrowly, with Pharaoh's army pursuing them – are bereft, frightened, and in despair. They felt the need to take action, any action. Coming from Egypt, the land of multiple gods and idols and the only culture they had known, the Israelites built a Golden Calf. In their despair and fear, they panicked.

The days we are living in are nothing like anything any of us have experienced before. This coronavirus is different from the others; experts were more certain in their advice to us and we were taught how to confidently protect ourselves. Now we are hearing multiple voices telling us best practices for safety. Some are not true and some are not. How do we know the difference? How do we know what to do?

I will tell you what we should not do. We should not panic. The stress this virus is producing is not good for our souls or our ability to make sound decisions. Here is what I am doing: I am following the practices recommended such as frequent hand washing and consciousness about not touching my face; I'm avoiding hugs and handshakes; I've purchased a supply of food that is part of my normal kitchen stock; I've cancelled travel plans; and I'm turning to God.

Do I think God will make the virus go away or give me special protection? I do not. Do I think God will calm my soul and allow me to experience inner peace? I do. Anything we can do to reduce the barrage of voices and allow us to have moments of peace is good for us, which is why I value prayer and Shabbat so much.

I am attaching two youtube musical versions of the words above, "All the world is a narrow bridge..." The first, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHs2DOmY_pw, sings the words in English, almost like a mantra. I suggest you listen, try to learn it, and sing or hum it when you are feeling out of control or too stressed. The other, my preferred choice, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WnEAxalTfc>, is in Hebrew with English words across the screen. It's more upbeat and has the potential to lift your spirits.

I also recommend you open your Bible (or computer) and read the words of Psalms. Psalms are poems, meant to be interpreted. When the text speaks of being protected from “armies, surrounding us like bees”, you can imagine the “armies” as droplets of this virus. My “go-to” psalm is Psalm 27, which you may recall from the High Holidays. I think Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rogers’ song from the musical Carousel is a reinterpretation of this psalm:

When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of the storm, there's a golden sky
And the sweet, silver song of a lark.
Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your hearts
And you'll never walk alone.
You'll never walk alone.

If you need to talk or need someone to listen, please make an appointment with me, or take a chance and drop in. We don't have to go through this alone.

Why Do We Wear Costumes for Purim?

March 4, 2020

This weekend we will celebrate Purim at Emeth! This is always a fun time at our temple, all the more so because we not only celebrate with children on Friday evening but also with adults and teens on Saturday evening! Our Emet Dor Kef teens will be presenting their annual Purim *shpiel* (Purim play). I hope you are planning to attend, and will be wearing a costume!

I always stress about finding just the “right” costume and was delighted to have figured it out last July! Afterall, I have a reputation to maintain. For my first Purim with Emeth, I dressed as King Ahashverus; the second time I was Sheriff Mordecai (cowboy hat, etc). Over the years my costumes included dressing as a clown, Lady Liberty, a dreidel, a religious Jewish man, Cat in the Hat, the Monopoly money bags, baby girl, and more. While dressing in costume is fun, why do we do it on Purim? The answer is hidden in the Book of Esther.

The Book of Esther (the *Megillah*), dated in the 4th Century BCE, is the basis of Purim. Here's a plot summary: As described in the Bible, a Jewish girl named Esther became queen of Persia. Evil Haman chose lots (the meaning of the word purim to decide the day on which the Jews would be massacred.

Esther thwarted his plan to commit genocide against her people. In the end, the day proved to be a great Jewish victory.

There was a rabbinic controversy about admitting the Book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible. The major objection seems to have been the lack of clear references to God, God's providence, or God's intervention in the events of our story. Ultimately of course the book was admitted. The people were going to celebrate it anyway so it was best to make it a holy book! (To learn more, attend our Purim study Shabbat morning, 10:00 AM.)

The Rabbis agreed that while God is not included in the story, it doesn't mean that God wasn't present. Surely it was God who saved the Jews from annihilation. That is one reason we dress in costumes – just as God was hidden in the story, we wear costumes to “hide”. Just as God's actions proved God was there all along, under our costumes we are present to celebrate God's salvation.

God's Commandments for the Tabernacle

February 27, 2020

This week's Torah reading, *T'rumah*, begins the process of building the Tabernacle in the desert. The Tabernacle will be the home of the Ten Commandments and the Ark. This sacred space will serve as a reminder of God's presence among the Israelites. Very precise instructions begin to be offered in this chapter and continue throughout the Book of Shemot, Exodus. The details will be interrupted by the sin of the Golden Calf.

Reading this chapter and the meticulousness required to fulfill God's many commandments in constructing the Tabernacle moved me to tears. It reminded me of our own beloved Sanctuary and this temple that has been my second home since we dedicated it in 2009. At the time, we carefully selected the colors that are designated for the Tabernacle in this very chapter. For that reason, I replicated those colors in the *tallit* I commissioned for my rabbinic ordination, to remind me always of Emeth's sanctuary. As we transformed this former restaurant into our sacred temple, the membership and I understood that we were transforming ourselves in the process.

As I regularly walk through the temple in general and the sanctuary in particular, picking up trash, straightening *siddurim* (prayer books) or moving chairs, I re-experience the holy work I am privileged to perform. Reading this chapter filled me once again with the awe and love I hold for it and for you.

Is Abortion Murder?

February 19, 2020

This question underlies the ongoing debate about women's right to choose to keep or terminate a pregnancy. Generally, and simply put, the determining factor seems to be when does life begins.

This week's Torah portion, *Mishpatim* ("rules"), is the proof-text for when life begins according to Jewish law. It states: "When men fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman's husband may exact from him, the payment to be based on reckoning." (Exodus 21:22) While capital punishment is imposed throughout the Torah, *Mishpatim* does not mandate the death penalty against the person who causes the miscarriage (abortion) of a fetus. Instead, in the lines that follow, Torah prescribes monetary damages when a person injures a pregnant woman, causing a miscarriage.

From this, the Rabbis determined that a fetus, while potential life, is not yet human life in the same sense as one who is already born. Therefore, while a fetus must be treated with respect, harming or killing it is not murder.

This does not mean that all abortions are permitted according to Jewish law. However, the health, well-being and welfare of the mother is the primary consideration.

The Talmud expounds that the rights of the fetus are secondary to the rights of the mother until the moment of birth. Rabbinic law has determined that human life begins with birth.

This does not mean that Judaism has an offhand attitude about abortion. While scholars in the various denominations may have different considerations, the mother's need for an abortion is generally respected.

In summary, Jewish authorities consider abortion a serious matter not to be entered into lightly, however Jewish law considers the fetus part of the mother's body and not an independent being until birth. We celebrate the fetus as potential life, however the mother's health and welfare has primacy over that of the fetus until birth, when it takes its first breath and is considered a human being.

I encourage you to read this chapter, which has many interesting and challenging laws, including "eye for an eye". Our new *Etz Hayyim Chumash* (Torah and commentaries) has many insightful commentaries for you to consider!

In Recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness Shabbat

February 5, 2020

This week's *parasha* (Torah reading), *B'shalach*, is the story of liberation –the escape from slavery, the exodus from Egypt and the celebration of liberation.

Within this story are lessons that can help us address a modern-day form of slavery, which often is part of the cycle of domestic violence. Someone of any gender can be a victim of domestic violence, however the vast majority of those affected are women. Every fifteen seconds a woman is battered in this country. One in 4 Jewish women, gay men, and trans people experience domestic violence in their lifetime, meaning they live in fear and at the mercy of a person who is supposed to love them. The penalty for escaping an abusive relationship can be severe punishment or death but the penalty of staying is not only living with inflicted pain but also a loss of self-esteem and self-value.

The lesson of our enslavement in Egypt teaches that power and control over someone else is wrong. Escaping injustice is difficult and sometime seems impossible. Those seeking to escape from domestic violence often do not know where to go or how to get there. They face many unknowns and threats. It is not easy for a woman in an abusive relationship to leave when she has nowhere to go.

Prior to becoming a Rabbi, I was privileged to work for Jewish Women International, and our mission focused on ending domestic violence in the Jewish community. We supported *Shalom Bayit* (literally Peace in the Home), a Bay Area organization which has the same mission. Since becoming your Rabbi, I became part of an inter-denominational Rabbinic Advisory Council for *Shalom Bayit*. This Shabbat, Rabbis like me from all over the Bay Area are speaking or writing about domestic violence to raise awareness about this issue.

Shalom Bayit receives calls from about 100 women each year who are in abusive relationships. These women are from every city of the Bay Area, including right here. They are professional women, poor women, highly educated women, young women, older women; moms and those without kids, well-known donors in the community. They come from every congregation, every denomination, all sexual orientations, all walks of Jewish life. *Shalom Bayit* offers free confidential phone and in-person support, as well as safety planning and support groups.

If you or someone you know is not safe at home, please seek the support you need. You are not alone. And you are not to blame for harm that has been done to you. You can speak with me (408-348-5339; rabbi@emeth.net) or you can call *Shalom Bayit's* free confidential Helpline (510-845-7233). The Helpline is also available to concerned friends and family who are trying to support someone in their life.

Each of us can lend a hand in helping women find empowerment and freedom. We can be there to dance and sing like Miriam to honor the moments when one person feels less alone, one person finds happiness, and when one life is saved. From that we draw strength and renewal for the work that is still to be done.

Teach Your Children

January 30, 2020

One of the most well known parts of our liturgy is the *V'Ahavta*, the verse that immediately follows the *Shema*. *V'Ahavta* means “and you shall love.” This paragraph is not only recited in every service, but is almost part of the liturgy we say upon wakening and going to sleep. It is on the parchment that goes inside the mezuzah that we place on our doorposts, For those who pray wearing *tefillin*, it is also in the black boxes worn in daily prayer on the forehead and upper arm. The text, in Deuteronomy 6:7, reminds us to remember all of the commandments and “to teach them diligently to your children...”

This admonishment to teach our children comes near the end of Torah. But in our text this week, just before the Israelites are leaving Egypt, we are also commanded to teach our children. In Rabbi Jonathan Sack's weekly message, he emphasizes three distinct passages:

- When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you? then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to Adonai, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when God struck down the Egyptians.’ (Shemot/Exodus 12:26-27)

- On that day tell your child, ‘I do this because of what Adonai did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ (Shemot/Exodus 13:8)

- “In days to come, when your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say, ‘With a mighty hand Adonai brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Shemot/Exodus 13:14)

These verses and the *V'Ahavta* that comes later in Torah tells us that our responsibility is speak of our miracles as witnesses and to be certain that we pass this knowledge on to our children. It is why Judaism has endured – one generation tells the next diligently so that the lessons are learned and not forgotten. It speaks to the importance of Jewish education and for modeling Judaism for our children. When we do so, we are not only teaching our children, but their children and their children who will follow.

Trust in Others to Take Up the Task

January 22, 2020

In this week's Torah reading God repeats the promise made to our Patriarchs. God tells Moses, “...I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession.” (Exodus 6:8)

God is not only promising to free the Israelite slaves from the bondage invoked by Pharaoh. God promises to take them to their own land, the Promised Land.

The remainder of Torah will continue the narrative of going to the Promised Land. We will leave Egypt and wander through the desert. In fact Torah will end before we reach the land's borders. The Bible will continue the story, but not Torah. Instead Torah ends with the death of Moses, who sees the Promised Land from the mountaintop. For Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, the Torah ends focused but not reaching the land of promise.

This is an experience many of us encounter in our lifetimes. One works on a particular project for many years, but sometimes must leave before the job is complete. Perhaps the successor reaches the goal for which the foundation has been laid.

We would be wise to remember these words of Rabbi Tarfon in *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Sages): "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either." As I prepare myself to leave tasks unfinished and dreams unfulfilled, I remember this further teaching of Rabbi Tarfon: Do not be arrogant; do not think that you alone can finish the job. Trust in your children and generations yet unborn to take up the task. Know that you are part of the living chain of people who have dreamed, worked for a better world and carried on this mission for four thousand years in an unbroken covenant."

Let us all keep marching toward our own land of promise.

The Importance of a Good Name

January 15, 2020

This week's Torah portion begins the Book of Exodus. In Hebrew, Exodus is called Shemot, which means "names," because the Book begins with the statement, "These are the names..." The Torah then lists the names of the children of Jacob (*B'nai Yisrael*) who came to Egypt with the Patriarch Jacob and his family.

Because the chapter begins with the listing of names, we are inspired to appreciate the importance of our names. In tractate 4:17 from *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Sages), Rabbi Simeon says, "There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty; but the crown of a good name excels them all." Rabbi Simeon is teaching us that our reputation becomes linked to our name. This is an important lesson for all of us. Once our name is tarnished, it is difficult, but not impossible, to correct our reputation.

But there is another name included in this *parasha* (weekly reading) – the Name of God. In the middle of the chapter, Moses sees the burning bush in the desert and soon learns that he is actually

encountering the God of his ancestors. God assigns Moses the task of representing the Holy One before Pharaoh, instructing the Egyptian ruler to “Let My people go!” After assuring Moses that God will be with him, Moses asks, “When I come to the Israelites...and they ask me, ‘What is Your name?’, how will I answer them?” And God tells Moses, “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*...that will be My name forever.”

The Name can be translated “I Will Be What I Will Be,” becoming not a noun but a verb, coming from the infinitive “to be”. According to *Chumash Etz Hayyim*, “The essence of Jewish theology is not the nature of God (what God is) but the actions of God (what God does).” This name models Jewish theology for us – it is not who we are but what we do.

In our world today we have names which we equate with righteousness and sadly there are far too many we equate with evil-doing. This lesson from *Pirkei Avot* teaches us that even if we have fame, wealth, or authority, it is all for naught if it is not accompanied by a good name.

The Bible as Historical Narrative

January 8, 2020

A popular form of fiction is the historical novel, spanning multi-generations. Usually there is some connection between one generation to the others and often the book ends with a resolution or completion of this repetitive theme.

We find this to be true in this week’s Torah reading, *Vayechi*, “and he lived...”, which ends the first Book of the Five Books of Moses, Genesis/Bereshit. The story ends with the death of Jacob followed by the death of Joseph.

After Jacob dies, his sons are in fear of their lives. Will the Egyptian leader, their brother Joseph, punish them for selling him into slavery? Was he only waiting for their father to die to seek his revenge? Reading this as a historical narrative, we must go back to the beginning of the Book of Genesis. After Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, they have two sons who are rivals for God’s affection. Cain kills his brother Abel, asking God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

As we continue reading Genesis the theme of brother against brother reemerges and repeats, first Ishmael and Isaac (which was really a conflict of the parents rather than the sons); then Jacob and Esau; and finally Joseph and his brothers. None of these stories end satisfactorily. We are left believing that siblings will always compete, especially for the affection and blessings of their parents.

But then we come to the end of the Book, where at last we learn the answer to Cain’s question: Am I my brother’s keeper? Joseph answered the question, “And so, fear not, I will sustain you and your children. Thus he, Joseph, reassured them, his brothers.” (Genesis 50:21)

Next week we will begin a new story, the story of the generation of Israelites who follow Joseph's narrative. Remarkably different, now we will read about siblings who love and support one another. Aaron, Miriam, and Moses form a team against a Pharaoh who made the lives of the Israelites unbearable. It is a remarkable shift. And beginning of a new Book.