

Rabbi's Messages

August-December 2020

Vayigash

December 25-26, 2020

10 Tevet 5781

Dear Congregants,

This week's parsha, Vayigash, is about the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

"God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." [Genesis 45:7]

When Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers after years of separation, they are in shock. How could this brother they sold into slavery not only be alive, but hold a position of great authority in Egypt? Joseph reassures them that it was God's plan so that he could "ensure their survival." The famine in Canaan threatened the lives of all of Joseph's family there.

Today as we welcome the last Shabbat of 2020, we think of all of the pain of these past months. And we think of all those who face hunger in our community. The pandemic has exacerbated challenges for those in need, especially BIPOC. This Christmas day is the first time in many years we are not together as a congregation helping serve those who are hungry at The Lord's Table. Yet, the needs are vast and fortunately we can still participate in Safe Park each Friday of January when members will be providing dinner for the families there.

Today, as we welcome the last Shabbat of 2020, I invite you to reflect on one good thing from this past year. Maybe it was a new grandchild. A new job. Recovery from COVID-19.

During Chanukah, we saw the first COVID vaccinations administered. As I reflect on the verse above from this parsha, I find new meaning in "save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance" I composed this prayer to recite (before, during or after) in connection with the vaccine. Share your photos with us rabbi@emeth.net as you engage in this life saving act.

Thank you God for the blessing of modern medicine and all whose efforts helped us reach this day.

Thank you God for helping me continue to uphold the Jewish value of Pikuah Nefesh—saving a life.

Healer, may this vaccine bring protection and healing to me, to my family and to the world.

Shabbat Miketz

December 18, 2020

4 Tevet 5781 7:00 PM

Dear Congregants,

On this 8th and final day of Chanukah 5781 (2020), the smell of latkes still fills my home and my heart is full of hope and inspiration. This quintessential holiday of family and friends coming together for joy and festivities, latke eating, dreidel playing, gelt (edible and spendable), songs, gifts and acts of tzedakah, we shared our light with one another and the greater community.

Most years we strive to gather around our table one, two or more nights, and watch the candles burn from start to finish. In this dark time of the pandemic, when our country is suffering the equivalent deaths of a 9-11 nearly every day, we desperately needed to find a way to bring light into the darkness. In this time when some of our members and their loved ones are directly impacted with COVID-19, we thank God for the miracle of modern medicine and the first vaccines administered during Chanukah, when we are commanded to *pirsum hanes*, publicize the miracle. Our beautiful Chanukiah outside of the temple has been lit all week—and we are seeing photos of individuals who received a vaccine.

In this challenging time, we continue to uphold Judaism's value of pikuach nefesh, saving a life by staying safe at home. This year we were able to light our candles and observe the flames dance as we shared the lights with one another on Zoom. Instead of one night of lighting together in the Sanctuary, we had “eight crazy nights” to sing, dance, pray, cook, reflect, laugh, cry, smile and kvell. In our homes, our own mikdash m'at—small sanctuaries—we created sacred moments.

This Shabbat we read the continuing saga of Joseph and his brothers. It involves food, famine, family, testing, a haircut (really!), and gelt (silver). I invite you to join us for services tonight to continue connecting and sharing your light with our community.

Shabbat Vayishlach

December 4-5, 2020

19 Kislev 5781

Dear Congregants,

This week's parsha, Vayishlach—literally: "he (Jacob) went out"—includes the story of twin brothers Jacob and Esau seeing each other after years of separation following Jacob's deception of his brother Esau. Jacob is anxious about meeting his brother again and brings many gifts.

When we are nervous about repairing a relationship, we too may find ourselves wanting to send presents and offer lots of platitudes. Jacob is rightfully fearful and even has a dream that is more like a wrestling match.

From our Torah portion we read: Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." [Genesis 32:25-27]

Have you ever woken up from a dream and been physically exhausted? Do you try to remember your dreams? (We'll learn more about dreams with Jacob's son Joseph.)

In Jacob's dream he wrestled with an angel. He didn't want to let go of the angel unless he received a blessing. Prior to the estrangement of Jacob and Esau, it was Jacob who stole his brother's blessing and Esau pleaded with their father Isaac to bless him too. Now, Jacob is the one seeking a blessing from an angel. The angel responds: "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." [Gen. 32:29]

Yisrael—we are the people of Yisrael/Israel. We are individuals who wrestle with God. We too have dreams and nights of unrest and wrestling. We too are anxious about separation—perhaps from estrangement and for all because of COVID-19. We pray that God is with us on our journey, through times of fear, anxiety, darkness and long nights. And we accept the blessing bestowed upon our ancestor Jacob to be a Godwrestler.

Shabbat Toldot
Pre-Thanksgiving Shabbat Service
November 20-21, 2020

Dear Congregants,

“This is the line of Isaac, son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac” [Genesis 25:19]

Parshat Toldot begins with this simple yet complex sentence. Toldot translates to generations. As individuals, we each are known by our name—the name our parents give us at birth or the name we choose for ourselves. We are also known by our relationships—sister of, brother of, friend of, parent of, child of, grandparent of, grandchild of....

Isaac and his wife Rebekah are eager to become parents and find themselves facing the same challenge of infertility as his mother Sarah. But Isaac does not choose to take a surrogate wife (unlike Abraham, Sarah and Hagar). He pleaded with God for his wife and she became pregnant. I acknowledge this text is problematic for those who face infertility and are unable to conceive. What is beautiful to see though is how Isaac addresses his wife's pain. He prays for her. He hears her concern.

Isaac and Rebekah's relationship is complicated (as are so many in the Torah and in our lives). There will be conflict and concern. Favoritism of their children (she prefers Jacob; he prefers Esau). But for this moment in time, we see the love of two individuals. Isaac, our patriarch, often seen as a link between Abraham and Jacob, stands up for his wife.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we are thinking about our relationships. How do we support our loved ones in their times of challenge? We are yearning to be together with relatives and friends but recognize that the safest option this year is to join together online. At tonight's Shabbat service, we will pause to give thanks for those for whom we are grateful and invite you to bring a guest.

Shabbat Chaye Sarah
November 13-14, 2020
27 Cheshvan 5781

Dear Congregants,

Life. Death. Kindness. Comfort. Marriage. Love. Death.

Parshat Chaye Sarah—The Life of Sarah begins by telling us she was 127 years old and then tells of her death. Sarah's death occurs during a difficult time in the life of her family. Her husband Abraham has just returned from nearly sacrificing (at God's command) their precious son Isaac. Father and son are estranged. One midrash, stories that fill in the gaps in the Torah's text, suggests Sarah died upon learning of the near death of her son.

Shattered. Broken. Alone. Abraham mourns his wife, Sarah, and purchases a burial place. Isaac is not mentioned and the two never again speak. Where is he when his mother dies? How is he mourning? Abraham loves his son and seeks out a wife for him with the help of his servant Eliezer. As you may recall, he meets Rebekah at the well who passes the test of kindness, offering to water the camels in addition to providing for Eliezer.

Rebekah is also given a voice in this parsha—noteworthy because women's voices are not dominant in the Torah. When invited to marry Isaac, she is asked if she is willing to leave her family. This leads us to the moving first encounter of Isaac and Rebekah.

“Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb.” [Gen 24:62]

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנֹת עֶרְבַּ וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים:

The Hebrew phrase here, 'lasuach basadeh'—Isaac was in the field—can be translated as Isaac was meditating in the field. Perhaps Isaac found comfort through meditation, an ancient Jewish practice. Mindfulness meditation, part of **Jewish spirituality**, is a tool practiced today and helps build resilience in challenging situations.

“And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” And the servant said, “That is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.” [Gen 24:63-67]

Isaac saw the camels approaching—these are the same camels Rebekah offered to provide water to drink. Lifting water from the well requires physical strength, especially to provide enough water for camels. Perhaps this was an indicator he noticed the strength of his future bride. Rebekah 'alighted from the camel'—the Hebrew word for alighted is literally fall. This strong woman fell off her camel. Was it love at first sight? She pulled her veil down.

At Jewish weddings, there is a custom of bedeken—to check to be sure the bride is the correct woman. While many refer to the story we'll soon read about Jacob being tricked with Leah

instead of Rachel under the chuppah, this story of Rebekah's display of modesty and separating herself for her beloved is more romantic.

The scene concludes with marriage, comfort and love. Isaac, reeling from his near-death experience at the hand of his father, the estrangement from his father and the death of his mother, learning of the kindness of Rebekah and taking her as his wife. Then we are told he loved her—the first mention of love in marriage in the Torah.

And so it may be with us. We experience pain. We live life. We face death of loved ones. We seek comfort on our own and with others. We are drawn to those who show us kindness. We build loving relationships.

This is the life of Sarah—she lived 127 years old. And she died. And her husband mourned her.

May we live life fully—even to 127. And when loved ones die, may we honor their lives, find comfort in our mourning, and live life fully.

November 6-7, 2020

20 Cheshvan 5781

Dear Congregants,

As we approach Shabbat after a very long week, I imagine our ancestor Abraham's experience of waiting. In this parsha, Vayera, it begins with him sitting in the heat of the day, in his tent, recovering from his circumcision (as God commanded him at the end of last week's portion). He waits, taking time to heal, and soon others come to visit him, bringing comfort. Three guests appear as three men though they are actually angels of God. Abraham, not expecting guests while convalescing, tells his wife Sarah to quickly prepare a meal for the guests.

Thus we are taught two mitzvot—at the very beginning of this portion: Bikur Holim—Visiting the Sick and Hachnasat Orchim—welcoming guests. To this day we recognize the power of these mitzvot and have navigated the challenge of engaging in them these past 8 months. Visits to the sick are often by FaceTime, Zoom or phone call. Or even an outdoor visit waving through the window. Welcoming guests has required creativity and caution—whether in outdoor distant visits or indoor on Zoom or FaceTime—when we can virtually expand our tables as long as we like (without any extra dishes to clean or food to prepare).

The essence of these mitzvot is the power of presence. Being there for one another. At this time where we are in need of physical, emotional and spiritual connection as individuals, families, a

community and a nation, may we show the power of our presence through online and safe-distance connections with one another. And may we, like our ancestor Abraham, find healing.

Shabbat brings welcome peace.

October 30-31, 2020

13 Cheshvan 5781

Dear Congregants,

This Shabbat we read the third portion of the Torah, Lech L'cha.

“God said to Abram, “Go forth [lech-l'cha] from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.”[Genesis 12:1-2]

Abram is told to 'go forth' or 'lech l'cha.' These two Hebrew words are repetitive for the first word 'lech' means to go forth. Why is there a second word, l'cha. Commentators suggest that it emphasizes Abram is urged to go forth for his own benefit—'for yourself'—or 'to yourself'—to fulfill his potential. Abram set forth with faith on a journey uncertain of what the future would bring.

When are we urged to go forth? Who will join us on our journeys? Some accompany us by choice and some by circumstance. Sarai goes with her husband and encounters her own challenges along the way (she faces infertility, encourages Abram to have a child with Hagar, becomes jealous of Hagar, and has to pretend to be Abram's sister instead of his wife to ensure safe passage on part of their journey—these Genesis portions are chock-full of drama! Delve into the text Genesis 12-17 at

[CLICK HERE.](#)

This Shabbat before the election we are all on a journey. We have been called to engage in democracy by at least casting our ballots. What challenges have we faced collectively and individually these past months and years? How are we each responding to the call to 'lech l'cha?' May we all go forth to be a blessing.

I offer this prayer shared by my Rabbinical school classmate, Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss:

A PRAYER FOR OUR COUNTRY

Every inch of America is sacred, from sea to shining sea.

There is much to be done in our time, the sort of hard work on which God smiles because it is done for the sake of the dignity and well-being of all God's creatures.

Together, let us work to preserve and make manifest the values upon which our democracy was founded.

The task of all people of faith is to call governing authorities to fulfill God's purpose of bringing about justice, mercy, and peace.

Individually and as a nation, may we heed our obligations to each other as we navigate the tensions of building a just society.

Rather than a politics of divisiveness, may we move our country toward a politics of empathy.

May we use our power well so we do great things for all God's creatures, all those made in God's image who yearn for an equal place at America's table.

If we do all this, may grace and peace be ours in abundance.
May we be a beacon and a blessing to the world.

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Compiled and adapted from American Values, Religious Voices letters by
Eboo Patel, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Andrea Weiss, Susan Garrett, Carmen Nanko-Fernández,
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Friday, October 23-24, 2020

6 Cheshvan 5781

Parshat Noach



Dear Congregants,

This Shabbat we invite you to bring your animals to services (on Zoom) as we celebrate Parshat Noach. God instructed Noah, a righteous man in his generation, to build an ark. He was told to bring his family and animals on it to protect them from the huge flood God was bringing. It rained and poured for forty days and forty nights. There were a lot of animals and it must have been noisy on the ark!

As we know from these past 7 months being at home with our pets, it can be challenging to be in class or at work when a cat walks across our computer screen, a dog barks, bird chirps or other animal calls for our attention. But, for all who have or had a pet, we know the joy they bring.

Services begin at 10 AM and we'll focus on the animals in the first half hour of services so if your pets or children (or you) need to take a break, no worries. You're welcome to join us for as much of the service as you like.

I look forward to sharing Shabbat with you.

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Faith Joy Dantowitz

Friday, October 26, 2020

29 Tishrei 5781

Dear Congregants,

This week we begin again. The Torah that is. After our flurry of Tishrei holidays, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah, we have completed the Torah reading cycle and return to the very beginning—Bereshit (Genesis). This Shabbat's Torah portion includes the familiar stories (two versions actually) of Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, light and dark. The foundation of who we are as human beings is embedded in the blueprint of creation—as we learn about God creating us in God's image (B'tzelem Elohim). The first six days was the work of Creation. And on the seventh day, God rested from work, blessing the day and making it holy.

I invite you to rest from your daily work and enter Shabbat this evening with our kehilah kedosha—our holy community—as together we sanctify time and space to celebrate Shabbat.

Friday, October 2-3, 2020

15 Tishri 5781

Dear Congregants,

Tishri is a terrific month of holidays and tonight we are entering the Jewish thanksgiving holiday of Sukkot! While we are not able to gather together at temple to build, decorate and rejoice in our Sukkah this year, we CAN still take time to celebrate this Festival!

Join us for a Sukkot Shabbat Service tonight with a:

1. Sukkot story-Tonight's service will include a special Sukkot story instead of a sermon.
2. Virtual guests-Ushpizin-It is traditional to welcome guests (Ushpizin) into the Sukkah. Please 'bring' a guest with you. During services we will ask why you invited them (historical/modern).
3. Sukkot treats-This will be 'bring your own Oneg' and we invite you to make your own edible Sukkah to show at the end of services and then enjoy. Suggestions include graham cracker/chocolate/marshmallow; melon/berries/apple; carrots/celery/lettuce; pretzels/frosting/candy—have fun creating your own delicious sukkah!
4. Learn how to make an Edible Sukkah Oneg
Edible Sukkah Oneg flyer [CLICK HERE](#)
5. Sukkah-If you built a Sukkah at your home, please take a picture of your family celebrating in it and send the photo to us.

Before we enter Sukkot, I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on the High Holy Days. It was wonderful to welcome the New Year 5781 with you on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Thank you to everyone who participated in services and joined our sacred community turning Zoom into a holy space. I was honored to lead services with Cantorial Soloist Mira Weller, HUC-JIR 4th year rabbinic student in LA. I am also grateful to my Rabbinic organization, CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) for their Visual Tefilah slides. I'd like to thank a few individuals. Special recognition to Congregation Emeth President Michael Oshan for all of his support and the wonderful welcome videos he put together from the Friends and Past Presidents. Thank you to Ritual Chair Mel Weisblatt for all of his help finding congregants to participate in the services. Thank you to Marcia Fishman and her sisters, Nancy and Bonnie, for organizing the High Holy Day gift bag distribution before Rosh Hashanah and to Marcia for her ongoing support as Temple Administrator Manager. Thank you to Charlene Rose, Temple Administrator, for her help communicating all of the High Holy Day information. And thank you to Congregation Emeth's Jonah teller extraordinaire, Peter Mandel, for his fantastic video.

I look forward to celebrating Sukkot with you tonight. This is z'man simchateinu—the season of our rejoicing so let's have fun in our virtual Sukkot together!

September 11-12

23 Elul 5780

The days of Elul are marching towards the New Year. Will we be ready? How will we prepare?

Each day brings new challenges and opportunities. In the show "Annie," the song "Tomorrow" tries to offer a positive spin on a dark time. Yet the lyrics which say "the sun'll come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun" certainly is something we wish was true as we look at skies that are far from blue.

This week's Torah portion (a double portion) speaks about teshuva—repentance and turning to God. In Deuteronomy 30:2-3 we are told "and you will return to Adonai your God, and you and your children will listen to God's voice with all your heart and soul...and God will take you back in love." In the Talmud we read (Bavli Yoma 86a) "R. Levi said: Teshuvah is great, for it reaches to the Throne of Glory, as it says, Return Israel to Adonai your God (Hoshea 14:2)." In other words, R. Levi is saying that by engaging in teshuva we may also move closer to God.

As we contemplate where we are spiritually and physically, time to focus on teshuva is deeply significant. This weekend offers opportunities for reflection, prayer and safe distanced physical connection. Join us to welcome Shabbat on Friday at 7pm. On Saturday night we have an opportunity to delve into one of the major themes of the Holy Days—forgiveness. And on Sunday, we are holding a drive-thru High Holy Day gift bag pick-up from the parking lot. Please refer to Wednesday's HaMadrach for all of the Zoom links and details.

Here are reflections I shared on themes from the High Holy Days as part of the Women's Rabbinic Network Elul Reflections. [CLICK HERE](#) for youtube video.

September 4-5, 2020

16 Elul 5780

Shalom Congregation Emeth,

As Shabbat approaches, my heart is full and heavy, happy and aching all at once. There are the challenges and joys in the world and personal reflections for this time. Traveling during the pandemic has been difficult and I've heard from many of you how much you miss seeing family as well as going on vacation. I think now of additional travels as my youngest son leaves for college. We view travel through a new lens these past months. But we still do travel through our days even if we are not venturing far. The smoke from the fires made us appreciate the ability to walk or hike outside—to travel outdoors and not remain inside.

This month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah is a time of spiritual journeying—leading us into the Holy Days which will include more introspection and Heshbon HaNefesh—an Accounting of our Souls. As I reflect on this time in the Jewish calendar, I also contemplate this new chapter for my family. It is a time of reflecting on my journey as a parent as well as my son's journey from infancy to college student. My colleague Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg wrote a beautiful traveler's prayer based on the Talmud (Brakhot 29b).

Traveler's Prayer

by Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

A prayer for the journey

We could say it every day

When we first leave the soft warmth of our beds

And don't know for sure if we'll return at night.

When we get in the trains, planes and automobiles

And put our lives in the hands of many strangers

Or when we leave our homes for a day, a week, a month or more –

Will we return to a peaceful home? Untouched by fire, flood or crime?

How will our travels change us?

What gives us the courage to go through the door?

A prayer for the journey

For the journey we take in this fragile vessel of flesh.

A finite number of years and we will reach

The unknown where it all began.

Every life, every day, every hour is a journey.

In the travel is the discovery,

The wisdom, the joy.

Every life, every day, every hour is a journey.

In the travel is the reward,

The peace, the blessing.

I pray we approach our journey toward the new year, 5781, with openness to imagine the potential a new day and new year offers, even when our hearts ache with the pain of this past year. May our journeys also include sweetness. Though we are not traveling as we were before the pandemic, we each face life's daily journey, physical and spiritual.

August 28, 2020

Dear Congregation Emeth Congregants and Friends,

Rosh Hashanah is three weeks away and this month of Elul is a time to begin preparing for the Jewish New Year. I offer you this poem for reflection.

For Grace

All I am,

All I have,

All I'll become,

Are present in this moment:

Warmth and breath,

Love and compassion,

Silence and celebration.

Everything, here.

All gifts, present.

What then, God of all being,

What then of my choices?

What will I make of the space
Between this breath and the next?
Will I bring laughter and light,
Hope and faith,
Wonder and strength?
Will I stand in humble service
For all of my brothers and sisters?
Maker of heaven and earth,
Grant us the wisdom to choose lives of grace,
Of vision and understanding,
Seeing each moment as a choice
To bless our companions
With strength and wisdom,
With honor and respect.
Blessed are the gentle moments of grace.

— Alden Solovy, *This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*

(CCAR Press, 2019), p. 85.

How have you grown or changed in recent months? How are you still becoming?

It's traditional to hear the shofar blast each morning of Elul. This is a spiritual wake up call for us to begin the work of Teshuva.



[CLICK HERE](#) for video

As the second week of Elul begins, I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on this passage and hear the sound of the shofar calling to you to do the work of Teshuva—turning/repentance.

August 14, 2020

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Re'eh, begins with these verses in Deuteronomy 11:26-28:

"See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. A blessing: if you obey Adonai your God's instructions, which I offer you today. A curse: if you do not regard the instructions of Adonai your God but turn away from the directions I have shown you today and follow other gods who you do not really know."

Blessing and Curses. These are two categories we can understand and even utilize as a lens through which we can evaluate these past 5 months of the pandemic. Blessings: As we have sheltered in place, we've learned the blessing of safety –from having a roof over our heads, food to eat, time to do projects at home we've always wanted to do (or maybe we learned we don't really want to do them); and hopefully the blessing of health. Curses: some of us have experienced illness or death of loved ones-whether COVID-19 or other illnesses. The pandemic has highlighted deep challenges in society including racial injustice, unemployment, healthcare and education.

This Shabbat is the final one of the month of Av and next Friday we will welcome the month of Elul. Elul is the last month before the Jewish New Year. It is time when we focus on turning or Teshuva. I invite you to join me on a spiritual journey preparing for the High Holy Days, turning to the best version of ourselves as we turn toward God.

Elul Daily Video Reflections by Women's Rabbinic Network [WRN], [CLICK HERE](#)

The Shofar Project with Institute for Jewish Spirituality [IJS], [CLICK HERE](#)