Our congregation is diverse in every way, with people of different nationalities and ethnicities and cultural backgrounds and life stages and relationships with Judaism -- and our congregation is also diverse politically. Some might therefore ask: Why bring the conflicted world of politics into a house of worship? In a house of worship like a synagogue, why can't we just focus on the things that unite us? When we gather for prayer, shouldn't that be like a 'safe zone' from whatever issues are going on in the country and the world that are probably sources of stress and conflict, two things we seek to reduce or eliminate on Shabbat and holidays?

In brief: I like the idea that a house of worship should be a place where electioneering doesn't happen. I appreciate that there are laws in the United States that would remove the tax-exempt status of a house of worship that officially endorsed a candidate for elected office. (Such laws, in my opinion, are not limiting anyone's free speech; rather, they say: if you want to be a tax-exempt non-profit, then don't endorse candidates.)

On the other hand, though: if someone's religious commitments are really worth anything, then those religious commitments will address the most important issues in our lives and in our world, even if they are controversial. Otherwise, religion is inert and irrelevant. It is specifically now that teachings from the Torah on issues of relevance in the current American experience are most necessary.

President’s Report

David Swirnow

One of the issues the board discusses is how to strengthen the sense of community. A synagogue, after all, is a group of people as much as the physical space in which we meet, and we should measure our success not merely by numbers (of members, of students, of dollars raised, though those are all important). I thought about this as I was at the bar mitzvah of one of our LC students. As I watched family members and friends ascend the bimah for their aliyah, the moment came that so surprises me – simply because it wasn’t done at the synagogue where I grew up – when the previous bar/bat mitzvah comes up for an aliyah.

My own bar mitzvah experience was that there were no other children who came up for an aliyah though I’m pretty sure my brother did one. So to see someone come up who may have only been there as recently as a week before seems to me an amazing thing.

As we look at ways to expand our sense of community, I realize that we ARE, already, a community. And to see these youngest and newest adult members of this community come up to the bimah is something special. Some might do so because they are close friends of the current bar/bat mitzvah. Some might come because it’s simply part of how WE do things at USH. But I think about the fact that they are there nonetheless. They perform a task that connects them to the community. I thought the same thing when one of our members came early to a class so that we could say kaddish. She had lost a parent recently, and her son came with her. Again, I was struck by the fact that a 13-year old, while an adult in terms of Jewish ritual, is still really a child yet was taking part in this very adult task.

I feel an immense sense of pride that this is the sort of community we are. And an equally immense sense of happiness that I found this community and am a part of it. As we continue to examine how we can strengthen this sense of partnership and participation, I hope you’ll continue to do your part and help us develop new ideas for how to achieve this goal. ✡
In our diverse community, we are not always going to agree on how the Torah sheds light, or does not shed light, on issues of contemporary controversy. But if we take the Torah seriously, then we as individuals will wrestle with the implications of the Torah’s teachings on these and other issues, even if we do not reach consensus about what those implications are.

It is in this spirit that I offer some thoughts about one theme of the upcoming holiday of Pesach that is on my mind now.

On the festival of Pesach, we express our profound gratitude at having escaped slavery. That there is a Jewish holiday focusing on slavery is sadly not surprising. Slavery and oppression were rampant in the ancient world - as they are sadly rampant today. There are likely more people enslaved around the world today than there were at the time of the actual Exodus from Egypt. What is surprising about this story, however, is that the people of Israel managed with God’s help to get free. So frequently, the Torah reiterates just how terrible it is to be enslaved, and how much gratitude we need to have, continuously, that that is not our fate today. According to the Torah, it is not only on Passover that we are to recall this; such rituals as Pidyon Haben (redemption of the first born), the wearing of tefillin (boxes with scrolls worn during prayer on weekdays), and the weekly observance of Shabbat are all rituals whose purpose is to remind us of our gratitude for our freedom, strengthened by our ancestral memory that we were not always free. Jewish tradition specifies that we express gratitude for our freedom from slavery several times each day.

But another theme of the Torah’s treatment of the Exodus narrative is that our status as free people should remind us to care for and protect others who sadly do not share this freedom. More often than any other commandment in the Torah, we read the repeated injunction to care for and even to love the stranger, ‘for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’ Our own experience is supposed to make us more sensitive to the needs of those who are enduring the pain that we have experienced earlier in our history. And for many of us, this injunction, and the general theme that our own history of suffering should make us more sensitive to the plight of others, apply not only to the remembrance of the Jewish plight in ancient times, but also in modern times.

One of our former rabbinic interns, Rabbi Charlie Schwartz, was briefly in the news last year because of a Twitter account that he and a friend set up, called @Stl_Manifest. They wanted to call attention to the nearly 1000 Jewish refugees from Europe who were on a ship called the SS St Louis in 1939. These passengers thought they were fortunate, as they had managed at the last possible moment to leave Europe for a ship bound for the Americas - actually, for Cuba.

But Cuba turned the ship away. The ship approached Miami, but the United States refused them entry, because at that time the US had a strict quota system on immigration, established in 1924. Quotas on immigration were popular at that time. There was concern that if the gates of immigration were open to Jews, then millions of Jews would flood in to the United States and have a deleterious effect on American life and culture. Additionally, many Jews were connected with radical and revolutionary movements, and it was feared that bringing in an even larger group of Jews could be destabilizing to American society. Additionally, there was the possibility that Nazi spies might sneak into the United States pretending to be Jews. (In fact, a few years later there was an actual case of such a Nazi infiltrator claiming to be a refugee.)

The passengers on the St Louis had gotten so close to the United States, but they were sent back to Europe. Rabbi Charlie Schwartz and his friend created a Twitter account that tweeted pictures of more than 200 of the passengers together with an account of what had happened to them: “My name is Joachim Hirsch. The US turned me away at the border in 1939. I was murdered in Auschwitz.”

The experience of the S.S. St Louis reminds us why it is that it is so many people from the American Jewish community -- including in our own community -- are on the forefront as advocates for refugees, in the US, in Israel, and everywhere. Many Jews see echoes of the refugees of today, both in the Torah that focuses so much on the flight from oppression to a place of freedom, and in the Jewish historical experience. Truly it is not easy to claim that the passengers on the SS St Louis were victims of injustice and not to feel similarly about those seeking refugee status today. Is the situation exactly the same? Of course not! But is it possible to learn from the experience? We should always be learning from historical experiences.

As we commemorate Pesach and celebrate our freedom, beginning later this month, may we be mindful of those who suffer from similar oppression and dislocation today. If we applaud the actions of the midwives and of Pharaoh’s daughter in the opening chapters of Exodus, we ought at least to consider what we could do to emulate their courageous life-saving acts. ✡
The Women’s Torah Study Group

by Anne Pettit

It started one Shabbat in the summer of 2016, around a table at Kiddush after services. Several women were talking about Jewish learning, how it could be difficult to fit it into our schedules, and how nice it would be to have a low-key, informal way to learn about what Judaism had to say about life issues, prayer, Jewish holidays, and any other topic that struck our fancy. Because I had spent five years at a women’s yeshivah, the Drisha Institute in New York City, and had graduated from their Scholars Circle, someone suggested that maybe I could teach a class like that.

I told my friends that the biggest problem that comes up with such groups is that no matter how badly the participants want it, life gets in the way. Other things come up, and one missed class turns into two, and then the group can often fade away. “Why don’t we have it once a month?” someone suggested. We went around the table, and lo and behold, there was one day that everyone had available each month — the third Tuesday. And everyone agreed that they were willing to spend that Tuesday evening studying Torah, not just the Torah, but Judaism’s teaching about all kinds of topics.

Over the past 15 months, the Women’s Torah Study Group has studied the Shema, the High Holidays, Sukkot and the sukkah, Hanukkah, Judaism’s teachings about the elderly, and even a class on the controversy surrounding actor Mayim Bialik’s writings this past summer on modesty in Hollywood. We have just started to delve deeply into the Amidah, the central prayer of the Shabbat morning service. When studying the prayers, we often make use of the excellent and thoughtful commentary and translations in Siddur Lev Shalem, which USH now uses, and for which Rabbi Scheinberg served on the editorial committee. Most of us have even bought our own copies.

We also participate in our own version of “chevruta (partner) study,” a traditional form of Jewish text-based learning; we read aloud excerpts from various Jewish sources, both ancient and modern, that I’ve prepared into source sheets, and then proceed to pick each sentence apart, as a group.

As we are not an official USH program, the group — which now counts about a dozen of us — meets each month in a different class member’s home, and we take a little time to catch up with each other over snacks. When it’s time to learn, we say the blessing for Torah study, Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kiddeshanu b’mitzvotav, vetzivanu la’asok b’divrei Torah, and transition into our topic for the evening. The informal setting is relaxing, and everyone feels free to share her thoughts about the topic and how it affects her. For me, one of the most beautiful parts of the experience is to hear how everyone has knit Jewish practice into her life, whether in the classical manner or in a way she has developed to find meaning for herself. And I think all of us can agree that participating in a study group is invigorating.

Because many of us are attending Rabbi Scheinberg’s Jewish Ethics class on Tuesdays, we are currently meeting on Thursday evenings, which, thankfully, most of us can attend in any given month. When that class is completed our group will once again return to Tuesday evenings. We hope to keep going and learn many new things together, and that we can keep fitting into Hoboken, Jersey City, and Rutherford’s tiny dining and living rooms!

If you’re curious about the Women’s Torah Study Group, please feel free to ask me, or contact me at anne.e.pettit@gmail.com.

“For me, one of the most beautiful parts of the experience is to hear how everyone has knit Jewish practice into her life, whether in the classical manner or in a way she has developed to find meaning for herself.”

ANNE PETTIT
Why One Family Moved to Hoboken and Will Never Leave

by Charles Rubin

For 22 years my family and I lived in Westfield, by many measures, the ideal place to raise a family. There are great schools, quiet leafy streets, multiple transportation options, a walkable downtown, and cultural and religious options to fit diverse tastes.

Even its name evokes wholesomeness. When I arrived there in 1995, I knew within 30 minutes that it was the wrong place for me. It took us 22 years to undo that decision. I spent years telling myself that it was not so bad, but always hating it. This is a story of finding my comfortable place in the world.

We arrived in Westfield through a division of chores between my wife and me. We had spent the previous three years living in Israel and had just returned to the U.S. to be nearer our aging parents with 4- and 7-year-old daughters in tow.

There are reasons why this town should have been unsuitable to me. I have had a visual impairment since birth. This disability means that I don't have a driver's license. In the days before Lyft and other ride-sharing services my world was built around the kindness of friends and relatives, public transportation, or where my feet and bicycle could take me.

A leafy burg where many of the streets had no sidewalks and many services only found at the highway strip malls on distant Route 22 set off the warning bells on that first evening in town.

In 2001 we bought a house, reasoning that the kids were comfortable in school and suspecting that owning might translate to a greater sense of belonging. We spent 16 years in that house fumbling through home repair crises, shoveling snow, raking leaves, and worrying about where the next major expense would pop up.

We also discovered that neighbors were a curious thing. On one side of us were a warm and engaging family that brought over a focaccia on move-in day and on the other was a couple whose hostility to us only grew as time went on. There were the normal disputes -- his barking dogs, our unkempt front lawn -- that just escalated over time.

While we had more space to spread out, it felt more isolated and cramped. Our kids, used to apartment life with the reality of friends just outside the door, did not adjust well to the new circumstances of needing to be driven to play dates. No one just dropped in on our block.

After so many years, the suburbs still felt like an alien environment. Our kids were never into sports so that means of social interaction never happened for us. People seemed reluctant to invite us into their homes and when we invited people over they sometimes came but never returned the invitations.

Given the long commute, Westfield felt like a place that I slept, but didn't really live. We told ourselves that the kids were doing well in school and we didn't know where else to go. The school excuse ended in 2009 when our youngest graduated from high school.

A year ago, we finally put our house on the market. It was a leap of faith. We did not yet know where we were going, but selling the house would force that decision.

Friends made suggestions -- South Orange, Weehawken, Riverdale. Visits to those places were disappointing. They seemed in too many ways just like the place we were trying to leave. It was then we realized what we wanted -- stores, street life, social activities, a library that we could walk to and a building with an elevator.

Weehawken seemed the most affordable choice but, on a whim, we looked in Hoboken which we had always considered a little too hip and far too expensive for us.

We visited the synagogue which, despite its imposing 100-year-old building, was warm and friendly with the rabbi following us out to the street after services to introduce himself and hear our story.

Then we discovered that there were very attractive rental opportunities dealing directly with the landlords and avoiding a broker fee. We looked at seven different buildings and went to a brick oven pizza place to weigh the options. One two-bedroom apartment with about the same square footage as our house and an 11-foot marble kitchen counter quickly rose to the top of the heap. The rent, however, was 50 percent more than we had paid on our mortgage. We concluded that it was something, that for a year at least, we could afford. We moved in a week before we had to vacate the Westfield house and have not looked back.
I pinch myself each day when I step off the bus three blocks from our Monroe Street apartment at 5:20 p.m., more than an hour earlier than I used to arrive home. The past summer was a whirlwind of outdoor concerts, movies, plays, and trying out what seems like hundreds of outdoor dining venues.

I seem to have found an extra day of leisure somewhere. I leave an hour later for work in the morning and, somehow, get to the office earlier. There are, of course, negatives to consider. Parking is limited and there are panhandlers on Washington Street, the main drag.

Time Magazine in their Oct. 17, 2017 issue, ranked Hoboken as one of the seven best places in the U.S. to retire. When we mention to people that we meet in Hoboken that we just moved here from Westfield they remark that it's usually the other way. Families generally leave Hoboken when their kids are of school age. Now we feel like we are the vanguard of a movement of older adults seeking a lifestyle that they could not find in the suburbs.

It's still early in this experiment but I keep wondering why I did not make this move nine years ago. Suburbs may be wonderful for some people, but my visual impairment should have ruled it out.

While many people crave space, I don't. I love walking to the bus in the morning and seeing mothers and fathers walking their kids to school. I love having a supermarket across the street and too many restaurants to choose from.

For now, I am close to work, in a place that delights and intrigues, in communities that welcome me, and somewhere that perhaps I can grow older gracefully in a place that I fit, a place to call home.

Editor's note: A longer version of this article was published in The Jersey Journal and is printed with permission. Charles Rubin is a systems engineer whose family has lived in New Jersey for the past 22 years and Hoboken for the past nine months.

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A Great Sunday Brunch
by Jeremy Morley

The last Sunday brunch, with Prof. David Fishman, was very well attended and well received. The audience was spellbound as he told the story of the “Paper Brigade” of Vilna. Known as “the Jerusalem of Lithuania,” Vilna was the cultural capital of Eastern European Jewry, a “city of books for the people of the book.”

When the Germans captured the city in 1941, 40,000 Jews were crammed into two small ghettos. Most were then rounded up and shot in a nearby forest. The Nazis were determined to destroy not only the lives of the Jews but to eradicate all Jewish culture. They collected Jewish books and other treasures from throughout Eastern Europe and sent them to Vilna for destruction and looting. They also elected to send some remnants of Jewish artifacts to Alfred Rosenberg’s “Institute for Study of the Jewish Question” in Frankfurt, so as to somehow “justify” the Holocaust. For this purpose, Johannes Pohl, a Catholic priest and a scholar of Hebrew and Jewish studies, set up a slave-labor group – the “Paper Brigade” – of 40 Jewish scholars, librarians and workers, who were ordered to select items to be deported and items to be destroyed.

Despite the obvious grave peril, members of the Paper Brigade hid many important papers and books, secreting them in their clothing, walking off with them wrapped around their bodies, going past guards who would have shot them had they been discovered, and hid them in underground bunkers.

After the war, some surviving members of the Brigade returned to Vilna, which had been annexed by the Soviet Union, which was not sympathetic to the Jewish experience. They dug up the buried treasures and helped to smuggle them out of the Soviet Union to Poland and then to the United States.

Prof. Fishman introduced us to three remarkable and brave members of the Brigade, Shmerke Kaczerginski, a poet, Abraham Sutzkever, also was a poet who ultimately received the Israel Prize, and Rachele Krinsky. Rachele’s husband had been killed by the Nazis, and she had placed their infant daughter, Sorele (Sarah), in the care of the family’s non-Jewish nanny. While in the ghetto Shmerke wrote a song about Sarah entitled The Lonely Child. Rachele survived the war and was reunited with her daughter. They moved to New York. Ultimately Rachele lived in Teaneck from 1970 to the late 1990s.

After the lecture I discovered that a film based on the song is being developed by Alix Wall, who is Sarah’s daughter and Rachele Krinsky’s grandchild. A must-see and really wonderful trailer for the movie can be found online at https://vimeo.com/214964407

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Lyrics to Dos Einte Kind (The Lonely Child) | English Translation

Who’s chasing me — who?
And leaves me no peace?
Oh mother, my mother dear,
Where are you, where?
Your Sorele seeks you,
Your child’s crying out
Howling and wailing like wind in the grass.
My father is missing.
Who knows where he’s gone?
He was caught in a trap by a terrible foe.

The night was so dark, when this happened to him,
Still darker than night was my dear mother’s face.
All day she wanders, all evening she roams.
All through the restless night, the child worries on.
She hears in her mind her father’s close footsteps,
Her mother still rocks her and sings her this song.
If it happens some day that a mother you’ll be,
you must make your children aware of our pain.
How your father and mother suffered under the enemy.
 Forget not the past, not for one single day!
Beer Mitzvah
USH Men’s Group

Time for the next Beer Mitzvah!
WHEN: March 8th, 2018 7PM - Dawn
WHERE: Hoboken Ale House, 1034 Willow

HOW: How should we know, you gotta deal with that on your own but we hope to see you.

WHAT: Please bring yourself, any friends you actually have, and a bar of soap or a roll of toilet paper to donate to the Hoboken shelter.

Contact dheyman@me.com if you possibly need more info.
The Refugee Support Committee

Theatre: The Refugee Support Committee invites you to buy tickets on the USH website for Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story, presented by 2b Theatre Company. USH is a community partner for this event. March 25, 2018/ 2 p.m./ 59 East 59th St., New York/ $40/ticket* (*These are reserved orchestra seats for USH members. Limited number available.) (https://www.hobokensynagogue.org/our-community-2/events/)

Inspired by the true stories of two Jewish Romanian refugees coming to Canada in 1908, Old Stock is a humorously dark folktale woven together with a high-energy concert. This genre-bending music-theater hybrid starring Klezmer-folk sensation Ben Caplan is about how to love after being broken by the horrors of war. It’s about refugees who get out before it’s too late, and those who get out after it’s too late. And it’s about looking into the eyes of God.

Refugee Support Dinners: On January 20th, the Refugee Support Committee held a wonderful dinner at the Lighthouse cooked by Asmeret, a refugee from Eritrea who lives in Jersey City. The Lighthouse is a halfway house for immigrants who had been seeking political asylum in the United States and were recently released from detention. It is a joint project of the Church of the Incarnation in Jersey City and First Friends of New York and New Jersey. This was our second dinner at the Lighthouse. Thirteen diners and three asylees attended, along with Jill Singleton, the founder of the Lighthouse. Participants were moved, often to tears, while listening to the harrowing tales of folks from Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Syria who have struggled so hard to arrive here and to start a new life in this country.

****************************Please Take Note***************

The next Refugee Support Committee Dinner will be held at Temple Beth-El in Jersey City (2419 Kennedy Blvd.) at 7pm on Saturday March 17th. The dinner will be 100% vegetarian, cooked by Fadila, a Syrian Kurdish refugee chef. The cost of the dinner is $45 per person, with 100% of the funds going to the chef. This is the link to the sign up for the dinner: http://www.signupgenius.com/go/5080f4ca9a92fabfc1-march Or, you can contact Ben Zablocki at zablocki@rutgers.edu

What You Can Do (If You Have 30 Minutes or Less):

Make a donation: Two refugee families recently lost their homes and all their belongings in a fire. Please donate money, clothing, appliances, etc. via Sign-up Genius at: https://www.teamcwes.org/jerseycity/WelcomeHome. This money will go to Welcome Home, the 501c3 which is supporting the refugees in Jersey City and organizing everything to take care of the families who were displaced.

Join: The Refugee Support Committee’s Facebook Group. Go to Facebook. Press the icon that takes you to “Shortcuts/Explore.” Choose “Groups.” & then “USH Refugee Support Committee.”

ESL: There are new opportunities for those who wish to “drop in” for conversations with refugees. We still need new ESL tutors as well. Contact Razel Solow at: razelsolow@gmail.com.
United Synagogue of Hoboken
115 Park Avenue, Hoboken, NJ 07030
www.hobokensynagogue.org

TO:

Congregational Passover Seder
Sat. March 31, 7:30pm
Registration form at hobokensynagogue.org

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg leads a traditional and family-friendly seder, with a delicious catered meal, with our congregation’s “special touch” – come ready to participate! Everyone is welcome, and babysitting will be available.

Space is limited! Contact the synagogue office by March 23 (office@hobokensynagogue.org or 201-659-4000) or fill out the sign-up sheet at hobokensynagogue.org

Cost:
Adult members $45
Adult non-members 50
Children 1-12 12
(includes babysitting)

Shabbat Dinner
Friday, March 9, 2018
5:30 PM - 7:00 PM

Learning Center Gan - 5th Grade and their families

Click here to reserve your spot now!

Dinner and family activities, get to know your Learning Center friends better while celebrating Shabbat!

Limited Space Available
Please RSVP by Friday, 3/2 - so we can finalize catering for this event!

$15 per adult
students are free

Proofreading provided by Jane Klueger, Louise Kurtz, Allen Reuben and Rabbi Scheinberg

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