

Senior Rabbi's Report
Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer
Judea Reform Congregation Annual Meeting
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Judea Reform Congregation, my dear friends, it is hard if not impossible to comprehend that one year has passed since our last Annual Meeting. And here we are again, in the same zoom room, but yet nowhere near where we sat then.

The very first Annual Meeting of the Jewish people took place in a zoom room called Mount Sinai. The Rabbi's report took about 40 days and 40 nights to write. I heard it was a rather impressive meeting (with copious minutes). And today we, Am Yisrael, the people of Israel, are still trying to figure what was really in that report.

That said, perhaps Martin Buber was right—that the essence of Sinai was not a report; not a text of any sort. Rather, what was given at Sinai was Presence; ultimate relationship, with Torah not as a literal scroll but as a symbol, our access point to a Divine Presence surging within the Am Yisrael and which surges still, when *and only when*, as Buber said decades ago following the tragedy of the Shoah, “we let God in.” He reflected upon utter dehumanization and could only call it an “*eclipse of God*.”

An eclipse of God. We still stand at Sinai in a mighty struggle to write this moment ourselves—for the next generations.

Is God eclipsed, totally and inalterably, or are we beginning to break through? We cannot take our story for granted, misreading Torah as a one-way, a Divine promise to us, reading Torah as literalists—and lousy ones at that.

We see today how that plays out with our people in the State of Israel. As *ohev Yisrael*, lovers of Israel, we pray for the wellbeing of our people and for the well-being of humanity. Locked in a deadly war between Israel and Palestine, our expression of Zionism is no less resolute today. As we gather today, during this heartbreaking war, we affirm our commitment to the Jewish State—through advocacy for an enduring ceasefire; through our condemnation of the chokehold of religious fundamentalism. We condemn the terrorism of Hamas, and as Reform Zionists we condemn the internal deadly virus of government-sanctioned religious fanaticism.

I simply cannot report as a Rabbi to this congregation, or any gathering of the Jewish people, without including the welfare of the State of Israel.

Talmud teaches, *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh la zeh*, all of Israel is responsible for each other. That means that we see ourselves, American Jewry, as partners in the enterprise of the Jewish State. We *all* stand at Sinai, together, with a call to give and receive Divine Presence, Divine spirit.

Allow me to speak of this Divine spirit. *Ruach Elohim*, the Divine Spirit, within and among us—Judea Reform Congregation—is so powerful. In a year of physical separation, this *ruach*, spiritual wind, has moved so mightily, and so lovingly.

It moves. It moves through our Leadership, throughout the extraordinary tenure of our president, Ziva Raney. Ziva, you have given your immeasurable heart and your brilliant mind to this congregation. Your heart and mind manifest with an emotional intelligence that has anchored us, from struggle to struggle, with strength to strength....to strength (a third one for your extra year).

Along with our outstanding Executive Director Emily Young, my partner-in-Covenant whom I value beyond words, we are so grateful to you, Ziva. You are a true friend, both of you, in the holiest of ways.

The Divine Spirit moves within the leadership of Heidi Tyson our rising Vice-President. Heidi, what you bring to this congregation is an extraordinary gift, perfectly suited for this moment. You are force for compassion, and you embody the Promise of *ruach Elohim*.

Our Board and our Staff have stood at Sinai as champions of *ruach Elohim*. Each and every one deserves his/her/their own expression of amazement and gratitude—I hope you all feel it in our hearts. In particular I want to lift up our Director of Congregational learning, Rena Fraade. Rena has shined so much light upon this community, and upon my rabbinate. We will lift up Rena's *ruach Elohim* on Friday, June 4th, in two weeks. Please be Present.

And please be Present on the following Shabbat, for our Levin-Moscovitz lecture series, where we explore in depth the meaning of *ruach Elohim* in this time of Pandemic. Guided by a tremendous teacher Rabbi Rachel Sabath-Beit Halachmi. Our learning will bring great *kavod* to the memories of Charlotte and Dick Levin. It is through their love and generous devotion that we are even able to move *ruach Elohim*, the Divine spirit, among Jewish Reform Congregation the power and promise that we feel in this moment.

Our congregants have felt *ruach Elohim* in countless moments this year. We have felt *ruach Elohim* in the Life Cycle events of our congregants, within 20 B'nei Mitzvah; 11 Confirmands; well over a minyan of weddings; of births and adoptions; 8 baby-namings; 7 conversions. And 18 deaths. 18 deaths.

My family has felt *ruach Elohim*, more viscerally than ever before, through the love of this congregation. I know I speak for Nicole, Caleb, Carmel, and Iggy, when I say thank you. Like too many others—too many of you—I am still so grieve-stricken. My mom, Bess Soffer, of blessed memory... when she was here—and I mean *here*—she felt it; *ruach Elohim*; she knew that we had found Home.

Home. Bayit. A synagogue is a Beit K'nesset, a House for Gathering. In the year to come we will feel the spiritual wind of Judea Reform moving us closer and closer.

The call of rabbinic leadership is to do just this—to embody Torah by drawing us closer and closer to each other. In the year to come this is my top priority. We will be moving our students closer and closer to each other, ensuring that they understand this tradition, that they love Judaism, and that they forever value the Am Yisrael, the Jewish community.

We'll feel *ruach Elohim* next year as we are embarking upon an expansion of rabbinic leadership that *you will feel*. Over the summer we will be joined by a rabbinic intern. In the late summer and fall, we will embark upon a journey through the Jewish Sacred Aging Project, and the wisdom of Rabbi Richard Address. This project will deepen and sanctify our understanding of aging, of moving through time, of growing closer and closer to *ruach Elohim*.

And of great significance for next year, we will welcome a Rabbi-in-Residence, who will work with me to focus attention on our adult education, our engagement with this tradition; and this Rabbi-in-Residence will partner with us to ensure that our senior congregants can draw near to each other. This, too, is a major priority in the year to come.

Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on a mountain, far away from a community. That part of Sinai didn't go so well. We learned from that. In this week's portion actually Moses was overwhelmed by the needs of community—he couldn't meet them alone, and so what does God do? Torah tells us this week:

Vaya'atzl min ha-ruach asher alav....

And God descends in a cloud... and God drew upon the *ruach*, the spirit in Moses, and shares it with others.

Without this expansion of rabbinic leadership, the Israelites would still be lost Wilderness. We are not lost. We have a job to do. A promise to fulfill.

A promise, a mission, for all of Israel—both the State and the People. *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh la zeh*. All of Israel now stands at Sinai. That means that Sinai is here, that *ruach Elohim* moves across land and sea, among us all. Therefore, what we grow, here, in Judea Reform Congregation, is part and parcel of the survival and blessings of Torah—the Tree of Life that we receive at Sinai.

Every tree needs sunlight—sunlight of the Divine Presence. Judea Reform Congregation, I am reporting to you as your rabbi that *the threat of an eclipsing God depends on us*. However, that is good news; because with *ruach Elohim*, we are powerful, and we are ready. Perhaps that is the report of Sinai; that we are ready.

We are ready to pursue the proclamation we hear this week from the Prophet Zecharia: *lo v'chayil, v'lo v'choach, ki im b'ruach*—not by might, not by force, but by Spirit" ... that shall live in peace.

Amen.