TO LEARN AND TO TEACH FALL 2023

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. XII, No. 1

לֶךְ־לְךָ – Go forth!

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Volume XII Number 1

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CONGREGATION RODFEI ZEDEK
ONE COMMUNITY, MANY VOICES

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Introduction to Volume XII Number 1

לֶךְ־לְךָ (*lech lecha*) Go forth! In a few weeks we will read the Torah portion of this name. Accounts of our people going forth recur not just in this portion but throughout the Torah and throughout our history. In this issue we present Lydia Polonsky's description of her family's pathway to Rodfei Zedek. Zach Winters relates his explorations of Jewish experience in India, while Rabbi Edward Bernstein delves into his family's four generations on the South Side of Chicago.

During the pandemic our Congregation saw members "going forth" over Zoom, and we continue to cherish the resulting connections. Pieces by Diane Okrent and Thelma Plesser represent our appreciation.

Of course, the idea of going forth always evokes thoughts of our Promised Land. In his reflections on George Steiner's writing Rabbi Larry Edwards helps place our travels and settlings in context, both in terms of Western history and of Jewish theology.

We're especially conscious of the needs of refugees. Susan Meschel applies her refugee experience to lessons on Exodus. And a *Forward* interview excerpt describes Mandy Patinkin's work with the International Rescue Committee.

Whatever the time and place, we find in our traditions teachings and questions that give us direction and link us together. Rabbi David Minkus prods us to reconsider what we may have arrogantly thought outmoded. Aaron Midler, Michelle Gittler, Miriam Hirsch, and Ezra Skol apply lessons gleaned from their Torah portions. Our Rebel Without a Clue is drawn to explore a wider range of texts EVEN as he contemplates owning a pet.

Past and current editions of this publication are online at http://www.rodfei.org/To_Learn_and_To_Teac

Sins and Scapegoats

by Rabbi David Minkus

We often laugh about the lack of connection or relevance of parashat Acharei Mot. We're often inattentive to the progression from the previous portion's description of skin ailments or impurities to this portion. By ignoring its position in Leviticus – preceding Kedoshim and its idea of holiness – we miss the meaning inherent in this portion.

On Yom Kippur if we avoid the idea of scapegoat to focus on rabbinic innovations of prayer and repentance, we miss a chance to appreciate how Torah can be translated for today, reimagined for Jews, not Cultic Israelites. We fail, or more likely refuse, to interrogate why the issue of skin diseases and impurity precedes the most significant religious act in the whole of the Torah.

Before we can understand the scapegoat, we must learn that impurity was thought to be contagious. If you encountered a corpse and touched your spouse or the priest who was brought to investigate your ritual/medical condition, they, too, became impure. The idea that the house could be contaminated was not a crazy anthropomorphosis of a building, but an acknowledgment of impurity and its effect on the world.

Here is where we miss the cultic forest for the trees. We get bogged down in questions of credibility or magical or supernatural overtones. We cannot appreciate the drama of sending this goat out to die and thus saving our souls.

We also, most likely, do not give our forebears enough credit. In our small-mindedness, our distrust of wisdom from premodern religion, we arrogantly imagine the Israelites standing somewhere in the desert or in Canaan on the 10th of Tishrei and assuming that releasing the goat was all they needed to do. Would they believe that simply sending the poor beast out to wander would rejuvenate their souls? While the drama and power of the ritual were immense, I am sure the Israelites realized its connection to interpersonal relationships; and we can apply that lesson.

Just as the priest did at the beginning of our portion, we need to cleanse ourselves and our homes. Sin is contagious. *Lashon ha'ra*, I will remind you, dominates the *Al Hets* on Yom Kippur. Apologizing for the idleness of our

speech and related actions consumes the majority of chest beating during those 25 hours. The Rabbis' insistence on apologizing for those sins is analogous to the purifying of individuals within the cult, a reckoning accomplished only when we acknowledge the essential truth – that we are culpable for the public sins within our community.

Upon return to the community after a skin affliction the Israelite was to make a guilt offering. The feeling that affliction is a punishment for sin was thus addressed. The Israelite may have assumed that their sins were such as mixing meat and dairy or skipping Mincha. *Our* theology has progressed beyond reward/punishment. I hope we know that sin extends well beyond religious omissions or apathy.

What if we were more comfortable using the term "sin?"

But also, I hope that we are not so enlightened as to be above the use of the term "sin;" nor should we be so quick to purge it from our vocabulary because we see "sin" as a Christian word. We should not we settle for what a progressive rabbi might say on the High Holidays, that *het* (sin), is an archery term for missing the mark and thus, "Hey I did my best*!"*

What if we were more comfortable with using the term? What if we understood being a good person as the opposite of sinning. If we thought of our many ways of doing good, not simply as our best guess at walking through the world or even as expressing "Jewish values," but truly as a part of the system of mitzvoth. We would understand that mitzvoth are designed to lead to a meaningful life and that meaning and sin are mutually exclusive. We would see that "impurity" could mean the myriad ways we can be casual with our souls. "Impurity" could entail how we infringe upon the souls of others by not thinking that what we do or say or refrain from saying matters.

A part of what I find so moving about the need for purity before the Priests could initiate the Yom Kippur ritual (think about the timeline: Israelites cleansed themselves, then their homes, then Priests cleansed themselves, and only then was the scapegoat brought out) is how we think about that notion for ourselves. While the Israelites certainly thought their ailment was a consequence of their sins, most of us are way too advanced, modern, and wise to believe such a silly idea. But not showing up to minyan when others need you, talking badly about a friend to another friend, or choosing to order a book from Amazon instead of going to the bookstore – none of these are neutral acts. None of them are without consequence for your fellow human or the planet.

It's not simply because we have no Temple or Priesthood, that Vayikra fails to resonate. It's not just that we have more thoughtful understandings of sexual relationships and we know that *tzarat* is not actually leprosy.

But let's be more thoughtful about the contagions we are afflicted with and how we protect ourselves and our community from them. And I am not talking about our addiction to screens and divisive political arguments – I am talking about the eternal nature of how we view our God-given gift of a soul and how we conceive of the choice to make the world better. I am reminding us that rather than focusing only on our autonomy, we can choose to see that it is our Judaism which is commanding us to act as individuals who make up a community and a people.

The Talmud teaches and the High Holy Day theology presupposes that we can make the world better with each positive act. They reject the idea that negative acts impact only God. If Judaism believed that sins were only about God, Yom Kippur would not be the holiest day of the year nor would it be the most popular day to attend synagogue. While the scapegoat was wandering to its, most likely, unpleasant end, I want to think Moses and Miriam were seeking each other out to say, "Sorry, how can I do better?" Whether that is a midrash or not matters little. What matters is that we do that work. We have no goats; the only agent we have is our heart. Let's use it to do better.

Rabbi David Minkus has been with Congregation Rodfei Zedek since June, 2014. He earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana and also studied at Hebrew University and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. He graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in Jewish Education. He lives in Hyde Park with his wife Ilyssa, who is attending Rush University College of Nursing. They have two daughters, Raia and Adira, who attend Chicago Jewish Day School.

The Challenge of George Steiner: "Our Homeland, The Text"

by Rabbi Larry Edwards

Over the years Rabbi Edwards has collected essays by Jewish writers, scholars, and critics, not necessarily because he agrees with them but because he has found them broadening for his own thinking. Here is his "introduction" to one by George Steiner (1929 - 2020) writer, teacher, scholar and literary critic.

As a precocious undergraduate at the University of Chicago (1948), George Steiner was uncomfortable with the intellectual approach of some of his professors. The "neo-Aristotelian" Chicago School of literary criticism tended to emphasize the "work itself," to the exclusion of biographical or historical context. In an early work Steiner emphasized "the central role of metaphysical, religious, political concerns in literature." (*Reader*, Intro, p. 8) Some of his teachers entertained the hope that there might be some objective standards to be discovered in the study of literature, but Steiner argued, "The history of taste is rather like a spiral. Ideas which are at first considered outrageous or *avant-garde* become the reactionary and sanctified beliefs of the succeeding generation." (*Reader*, 55)

Steiner was an expansive (sometimes controversial) thinker, deeply rooted in Western culture but not deeply connected to any particular place. His parents had emigrated from Austria to Paris, where he was born in 1929. He became an American citizen in 1944, and studied at Chicago and at Harvard, then returned to Europe to earn his Ph.D. at Oxford. His transatlantic career included stints at Princeton, Harvard, Cambridge, and Geneva. His writing style is certainly elevated. As Adam Gopnik said of him in *The New Yorker*, writing just after his death in 2020, "Steiner challenged his readers but never condescended to them. He assumed that they cared as much as he did. He was the real thing, the last of the great middle-European intellectual journeyers…"

Steiner surely did not think of himself as primarily a Jewish thinker, but Jewishness was certainly among his preoccupations. Martin Jay, in a tribute to Steiner in the journal *Salmagundi*, summarized four Jewish options in the modern world that might speak to someone of that generation:

> First, he could have embraced Judaism as a religious way of life and found meaning in observing its practices and embracing its beliefs. Second, he could have cast his lot with Zionism, whether understood as a realization of messianic hopes or a safe haven for persecuted Jews, and perhaps even moved … to Palestine/Israel. His third option was to play down any residual Jewish identity, and follow the well-trodden path towards assimilation, even in the wake of the Nazi exposure of its feeble pro-

> tection for those who pursued it. A fourth choice was to identify proudly and defiantly with the diasporic Jew, more often secular than not, who turned his exile into a virtue and refused the consolations of religion, nationalism or the suturing of divided identities.

For Steiner, the fourth path is clearly the one he chose: but note that was a matter of *choosing*, and not passive indifference.

Having himself been plucked from the fires of Europe, the Holocaust was a major preoccupation in his thinking – both as a Jew and as one profoundly committed to the humane values of Western Civilization. In that same *Salmagundi* article, Martin Jay describes the tension at the heart of Steiner's thought and writing:

> In fact, one of the hallmarks of his career was a willingness to remain suspended within paradoxes, never forcing a simple choice between unpalatable options… [He] both celebrates humanistic high culture and acknowledges that the Holocaust has disabused us of the naïve illusion that it humanizes those who uphold it. Or as he put it in what is perhaps his most frequently cited sentences: "We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach or Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning." And yet, Steiner somehow never really faltered in his faith that great art remains the last refuge of meaningfulness in a world from which religious faith has fled.

I want to turn now to one of Steiner's most Jewish essays (also published originally in that same journal, *Salmagundi,* in 1985): "Our Homeland, The Text." The essay ranges widely, which is to say that it sometimes seems to lose focus. But it returns again and again to what might be considered a statement of the faith of a secularized, cosmopolitan Jew of his day and experience. Steiner was above all a reader, and that is something he deeply values in Jewish tradition:

> No other community in the evolution and social history of man has, from its outset, read, re-read without cease, learnt by heart or by rote, and expounded without end the texts which spell out its whole destiny. (11-12)

It is not solely to the traditional sacred texts that Steiner refers. He is not a Talmudist, but a scholar of literature. Among modern Jewish writers, it is Kafka who bears the closest connection to the biblical prophets: "Kafka's misery as one coerced into writing" is compared to

> the attempts of the prophets to evade the intolerable burden of their seeing, to shake off the commandment of utterance. Jeremiah's "I do not know how to speak," Jonah's flight from foretelling, have their literal parallel in Kafka's "impossibility of writing, impossibility of not writing." (13)

Some of the most influential Jewish thinkers of recent times draw upon the intellectual energy in the long history of Jewish engagement with the written text: "The 'bookish' genius of Marx and of Freud, of Wittgenstein and of Lévi-Strauss, is a secular deployment of the long schooling in abstract, speculative commentary … (while being at the same time a psychological-sociological revolt against it)." (17)

Though Steiner himself followed no religious observances, he is struck by the fact that the Jew traditionally marks the entry to adulthood by being "called, literally, to the text … asked and allowed to read correctly a passage from the Torah." (20) For him, this *aliyah* is more significant and decisive than *aliyah* to Israel. As a cosmopolitan, a diasporist, Steiner asks, "How can a thinking man, a native of the word, be anything but the most wary and provisional of patriots?" (20) Nationalism, he insists, "is a sort of madness," whereas the "man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector … to the sleep of reason which proclaims 'my country, right or wrong' … (21)

photo, Tom Pilston
The Independent,
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One may wonder at the audacity of such claims (and, yes, Steiner had his critics!), given the obvious dangers of the world and its current organization into some 195 states. Should not the Jews, after such long dispersal, be entitled to one of those 195? Steiner certainly recognizes that argument:

> To many among the few survivors, the interminable pilgrimage through persecution, the interminable defenselessness of the Jew in the face of bestiality and derision, were no longer endurable. A refuge had to be found, a place of physical gathering in which a Jewish parent could give to his child some hope for a future. The return to Zion, the fantastic courage and labour which have made the desert flower, the survival … against crazy political and military odds, have made a wonder of necessity. … What … ivory-tower nonsense, is it to suppose that alone among men, and after the unspeakable horrors of destruction lavished upon him, the Jew should not have a land of his own, a shelter in the night? … I know all this. It would be shallow impertinence not to see the psychological, the empirical force of the argument. (22-23)

And yet, and yet – some core value, a sacred teaching at the heart of the Jewish historical experience is lost if "normalized" existence in a small nation-state is seen as the ultimate goal of that history. The State may be a necessity, but it is not yet the Zion that the prophets hoped for. Steiner's hope is that human beings will "learn to be each other's guests on this small planet, even as they must learn to be guests of being itself and of the natural world." (24) For Steiner, this is the central teaching of the Torah,

as refracted through centuries of Jewish wandering and devotion to the text. Jews are "nomads of the word," with something still to learn, something still to teach the world.

Rabbi Laurence Edwards is Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Or Chadash. He was a Hillel Director (Dartmouth and Cornell) and has served several other congregations, including, in 2014, Rodfei Zedek. Larry has a PhD from Chicago Theological Seminary and recently retired from teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago, at De Paul, and at Hebrew Seminary in Skokie. He is married to Susan Boone, who retired from administrative work at the University of Chicago.

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The Einstein Effect: Mandy Patinkin's journey in rescuing refugees

by Benyamin Cohen

Mandy Patinkin and his family have close ties to Rodfei Zedek. He cites Cantor Maurice Golberg and his wife Anne for encouraging him in the synagogue's boys' choir, The following piece is excerpted from the Forward *of July 17, 2023. It was adapted from* The Einstein Effect, *a book about Einstein's modern-day relevance,*

While Mandy Patinkin was in Berlin filming the fifth season of *Homeland,* the spy thriller TV series, in 2015, some 125,000 Syrians were fleeing their war-ravaged homeland, hoping to seek refugee in Europe. The day shooting wrapped, Patinkin, then 63 and one of the world's best-known actors, hopped on a plane to visit a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece.

"I'm looking at photos of these people in lines, trekking, and they reminded me of my ancestors fleeing the pogroms of Poland and Belarus," Patinkin told me in an interview last year, recalling his 20-plus relatives lost in the Holocaust. "We were all refugees. And I thought: There but for the grace of God go I."

Patinkin had reached out to the International Rescue Committee, a refugee aid organization that Albert Einstein helped form in 1933 and that remains one of the largest in the world, helping millions of people across 40 countries. Patinkin said he wanted to volunteer "not as a celebrity, but just as a human being.... The next thing I know," he said, "I'm there, and it changes my life." He has been the group's ambassador ever since.

During that first visit to Greece in 2015, Patinkin said, he rushed to the edge of the Aegean Sea and saw a boat coming to shore.... "And a person puts a little girl in my arms with a pink jacket." She was limp, and Patinkin thought she might be dead.

"All of a sudden, I put my finger in her hand and I feel her squeeze my pinky," he told me. He took the girl to a medical tent and eventually reunited her with her family. Patinkin was hooked: He's since gone with the IRC to visit refugees in Uganda, Serbia, Jordan and along the U.S. - Mexico border.

Patinkin's involvement got turbocharged after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, who slashed by 85% the number of refugees allowed into the country.... He told me a story about his Grandpa Max, his father's father, who came through Ellis Island in March of 1906 with $3 in his pocket, and eventually became a prosperous businessman. "He used to say a Yiddish phrase, *dos redl dreyt zikh*, which means

'the wheel is always turning,'" Patinkin said. "If somebody on the bottom is knocking on your door and you don't open it up and welcome them and give them comfort, food and sanctuary and safety, when you're on the bottom, no one will open the door to you. It's just clear, moral, ethical behavior. For me, my job for the rest of my life, is to open the doors for others who are in need."

The creator of the group that Patinkin now serves as spokesperson for was himself one of the most famous refugees of his generation. As Nazism took hold in Einstein's native Germany in the early 1930s, he was named an enemy of the state and barred from his teaching position at the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin. When he left his homeland in December 1932, Einstein reportedly told his wife, Elsa: "Take a very good look at it. You will never see it again."

Einstein renounced his German citizenship and was granted residency under the government program EB-1, which gives priority to immigrants who have "extraordinary talent" or are "outstanding professors or researchers." It has since become known as the "Einstein visa."

With his own situation secured, Einstein leveraged his celebrity influence to help rescue other German Jews. He gave speeches and spoke at fundraising dinners. He performed a violin concert for the United Jewish Appeal, a philanthropic organization, and served as the group's honorary chairman from 1939 to 1944. He formed what was originally called the International Relief Association in the summer of 1933 "to assist Germans suffering from the policies of the Hitler regime." A similar group, the Emergency Rescue Committee, was created in France, and in 1942 they merged to become the International Rescue Committee.

Patinkin knew well the history of the organization's founder. "When Einstein arrived in America," he said, "he spent his own money to help people get visas, and then he joined the NAACP because he was in shock that everything he ran away from was happening right here with Black people." For Einstein, Patinkin said, it was "just the same horror that the Jews were escaping."

Indeed, when a hotel in Princeton refused a room to Marian Anderson, a visiting Black opera singer, Einstein invited her to stay at his home. (The 2021 play *My Lord, What a Night* reenacts that event.) Anderson returned to visit many times, and the two remained friends until Einstein's death.

Einstein declared: "The separation of the races is not a disease of the colored people, but a disease of the white people," adding: "I do not intend to be quiet about it."

As I shared some of this with Patinkin, he shook his head in admiration. "Einstein flees one situation, comes to safety, and immediately has the courage to speak out...."

Patinkin said he was reminded of Einstein's attitude when he was in Germany meeting with Syrian refugees and

asked a woman if she had a lingering sense of fear.

"She said, 'After what we've been through, we are afraid of nothing. I saw death behind me and life in front of me, and I just kept walking,'" Patinkin recalled. "It's the same thing with Einstein. After what he had been through, what he had just witnessed, he was not afraid to stand up for what's right — morally and ethically.

I asked Patinkin what he would talk about with Einstein if he were to meet him in the afterlife.

"First I would say, let's go get some lox and bagels," Patinkin said with a roaring laugh. "We'd go sit down. And then I'd say to him, 'How do we address hate? How do we change a hateful heart? How do you undo hate? How do you change someone's fear of othering? How do we do that?' I can't figure it out other than acts of kindness."

"He was intelligent in his soul," Patinkin continued. "In my life, what he's known for is not the theory of relativity, but the theory of relatives...."

Patinkin, now 70, said he sees "one of Einstein's greatest gifts" as "his compassion for humanity."

Patinkin recalled the time he met Farhad Nouri, a 10-year-old Afghan refugee, in Serbia. They sat on a bench together with an IRC film crew nearby, and Patinkin asked if there was a message the boy wanted to send to the world. "Yes," the boy said. "Refugees need kindness." Tears appeared in Patinkin's eyes as he retold the story. "Einstein knew this. So, I would sit with

Einstein, and I would say how do we teach a 10-year-old-boy's wisdom to a world that wants to embrace fear of others, xenophobia, hate, and employ violence toward others. How do we stop that?"

I would ask: 'What do we do?' And I am certain that he would let me walk away from that lox and bagel sandwich with an action to take. I'm certain. He was a doer. A practical man."

And so is Patinkin. He hosted a podcast, called *Exile*, about Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism. He's performed Yiddish versions of Broadway showtunes in dozens of cities. Like Einstein, he has used his celebrity to speak out against social injustices including police brutality and voting rights.... In recent weeks, he has joined the picket lines of striking Hollywood writers.

"If you have the privilege of having a platform for whatever reason," Patinkin said, "and you can reach one person, or many people – use that opportunity, use that privilege to speak out for what you believe in." A wide smile came across Patinkin's face. "As Einstein said, 'A life lived for others is a life worthwhile.'"

Benyamin Cohen is News Director at the Forward*. In addition to* The Einstein Effect *he is the author of* My Jesus Year: A Rabbi's Son Wanders the Bible Belt in Search of His Own Faith *(HarperOne, 2008*).

A Few Short Notes on the Jews of India

by Zach Winters

I recently had the good fortune to spend six months of 2022 in Hyderabad, India, thanks to a Fulbright fellowship. The majority of this time I was toiling away in a variety of manuscript libraries across South India, as my own work focused on religious and intellectual developments in Iran and India in the period following the Mongol invasion (which is to say, roughly the 14th and 15th centuries CE). This was not my only goal, though. I also had hoped to take advantage of this time to find out something about the legacy of Judaism in India – a history long and notable about which I knew almost nothing.

We do know that there are accounts of communities of Jewish traders working as early as the 8th century in what would now be considered cities of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Jewish legacy in South India is attested to be even older, as the lore suggests that Jews were living on the Malabar coast as early as the days of King Solomon, with the community growing considerably after the destruction of the Second Temple. Whether this ancient history is legendary or not, we certainly have evidence of Jews in the region as early as the 9th century CE.

A more modern community of note would be the Jews of Calcutta (now also known as Kolkata). The core of this community was made up of primarily Baghdadi Jewish merchants who set out for Calcutta in the late 18th century to take advantage of commercial opportunities in a city which was a major center of the East India Company and would soon become the headquarters of the British Raj. Beginning with only a handful of businessmen, the community grew quite rapidly, with nearly 2,000 Jews in Calcutta by the early 20th century, and peaked with about 6,000 members around the time of the Second World War.

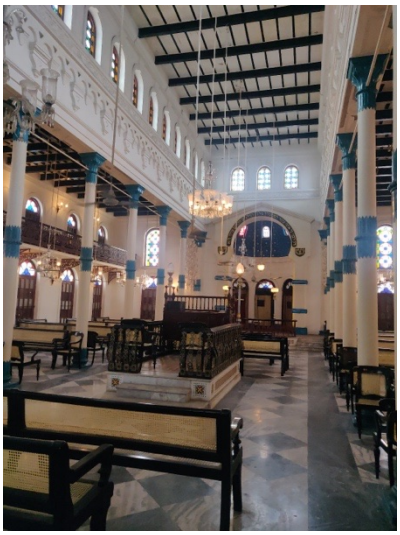
This is the point where my own time working in South Asia intersected with the long and varied history of Judaism in India. By August 2022, nearing the end of my Fulbright fellowship, I had largely been able to scour the manuscript libraries of Hyderabad for any of the various materials which might be helpful for my own research. In reality, I had only scratched the surface of the enormous and rich collections of documents which are stored across India. Calcutta, for only one example, has libraries which hold enormous quantities of manuscripts – partly a legacy of British imperial efforts to collect documents into what are now the Asiatic Society and the National Library of India – including many which are written in Arabic and Persian. This was too much to resist, and away I went.

Having been able to find the manuscripts I needed most urgently with time to spare, I also decided to track down the synagogues of the Calcutta Jewish community and see them for myself.

There are two quite fine houses of worship both located in the Bara Bazar neighborhood of Calcutta: Beth El, founded in 1858, and Magen David, built in 1884. Both buildings have been recognized as historical landmarks by the Indian government and are well-maintained. While I cannot claim to have any architectural expertise, the buildings themselves are considered to be mixtures of a Baghdadi-Jewish and British-Victorian style, and even to a layperson, the beauty of these structures is on clear display.

They are likewise technically both still active synagogues, though the community in Calcutta at present is quite small. In the words of the caretaker of Beth El, today the Jews of Calcutta are represented only by "a dozen old men" who still attend services at these buildings on Shabbat and at holidays. The descendants of what was once a large and vibrant community have today largely settled in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Otherwise, many of the daily visitors to these fine Jewish sites of Calcutta are just passersby like myself, curious to see the landmarks of this small but significant Jewish community of India.

Zach Winters, originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, has been attending services at Rodfei Zedek since 2019. He recently completed a PhD at the University of Chicago in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, studying religious and political dynamics in Iran and India in the 14th and 15th centuries. Last year, he spent nine months in Hyderabad, India, as part of a Fulbright fellowship to study the history of Islam in South Asia. He currently works as an analyst for the Department of Energy and lives in Bridgeport with his three cats.



Beth El Synagogue: Exterior façade (above left), interior (above right)

Magen David Synagogue, interior

A Refugee's Look at the Exodus

by Susan Meschel

The Rodfei Zedek Sisterhood invited Susan to be their speaker at the final Sisterhood Shabbat. This is a version of her talk.

When I was asked to talk about Parashat Yitro, I wanted to decline this honor, thinking I had nothing new to say. Then I began to think about something which is usually forgotten. I would like you to think about the Israelites escaping from their homeland. All we know about the Israelite crowd is that they grumbled and complained. We do not know how they felt.

Even if they were slaves, they lived in Egypt for four hundred years. They had homes, families, and last but not least the graves of their ancestors. How did they feel about leaving the certainty, even if it was not good, for the danger and uncertainty of the future? I am asking you to show some compassion for our scared ancestors. I feel that I have some familiarity with the situation they were in.

My mother and I escaped illegally from Hungary after the Soviets defeated the Hungarian uprising for freedom in 1956. It was not easy to convince my mother to leave Hungary and her home. She looked at her lace curtains, the piano, and the custom made furniture and cried. I had a chance to leave by myself, but I felt bound by the commandment, “honor your parents,” which is an important part of this parasha. When my father was deported in 1944 to Germany, he asked me to take care of my mother. I tried to keep my childhood promise. Despite the fear and sadness of leaving our home, my mother decided to join the escape, for I was in danger of being caught by the Soviet authorities for participating in the uprising. Many of my acquaintances were too scared to try to escape and later regretted it. I am sure there were some Israelites who also decided to stay in Egypt.

What do you take with you when you flee from your home forever? My husband George took two volumes of works by Zoltan Kodaly, I took family photographs and my one and only evening dress, while cousin Robert took a caliper and a box of Swedish billiard chalk. My dress was special, for my father bought the material in Italy before the WWII. As he was killed in Bergen Belsen, I thought of the dress as a posthumous gift from him. My mother carried a pound of cooked brisket. I wonder what the Israelites took with them when they fled, besides Joseph’s bones? We know that they carried bundles of unleavened dough and several timbrels. We know that they took some jewelry from the Egyptian neighbors, which we will see in the episode of the Golden Calf.

During our escape from Hungary, we followed a smuggler through a mined border area searched periodically by the Soviet searchlights. When we saw the

searchlight circling above us we ducked in the mud so they could not detect our group.

Our ancestors had to cross the Red Sea, without knowing that God would part the water. They must have been very frightened. They did not know Moses well and did not know what God is capable of. A very beautiful midrash relates that Nachshon ben Aminadav was courageous and had the faith in God to jump into the water first. I always believed that God needed the faith of one man to create the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea.

So I am asking you to consider the feelings of our frightened ancestors and show compassion and note that in spite of their fear and ambivalence they did follow Moses and crossed the Red Sea.

In this parasha we see the wonderful relationship between Moses, the son, and Yitro, his father-in-law. The name of Moses's son Gershom means a stranger in the land, identifying him as an immigrant. I can fully identify with this sentence, for I was a political refugee in 1957, when Eisenhower allowed 30,000 Hungarian refugees to enter USA. I am one of those 30,000.

Lastly I would like to tell you what the Red Sea means to me on the personal level.

My best family recollection was the last Seder, when our family was still together before the Nazi occupation. It was a warm, noisy Seder of about 25 - 30 people with lots of singing. It was was especially memorable for me since my cousin Erwin was there, and I was looking forward to the adventures and mischiefs he might get us into. My grandmother placed a large wooden wash tub filled with beet juice at the door of the dining room to symbolize the Red Sea. All the grandchildren had to jump over the tub to indicate that we are crossing the Red Sea and identify with our ancestors. At this memorable Seder, Erwin decided to jump the length of the tub and fell in. For me this was an unforgettable event. I kept the custom of jumping the tub at the Seder with my children and grand-children, though I never saw it mentioned in a book or knew anyone else who kept it.

We all have a critical event in our lives, our symbolic crossing the Red Sea. May we all have God's help and get safely to the other side.

Susan Meschel attended the Technical University in Budapest, Hungary. In 1956 she escaped from Communist repression and antisemitism in Hungary and immigrated to the US, where she earned a PhD in chemistry at the University of Chicago. She taught and did research in metallurgy at the U of C, Roosevelt University, and Illinois Institute of Technology and volunteered at the Museum of Science and Industry, where she created an exhibit on women scientists. She also contributed to three books of memoirs from the Holocaust, Communist repression, and immigration.

At the time of his death this year Susan's husband George and she had been members of RZ for 25 years. She continues to be an active member, and cites Rabbi Gertel for encouraging her study of scientific aspects of Biblical text.

From South Africa to Rodfei Zedek

by Lydia Polonsky

Kenneth, Tammy, and I arrived in Chicago as immigrants from South Africa on January 6, 1976. (Jonathan and Daniel were born the following year.) It had just snowed, and we had never experienced such cold. The day before, we were swimming and enjoying summer in Johannesburg.

We soon learned that our lives would be different in many ways. Most urgently, we had to buy warm jackets. Driving on the right-hand side of the road and one that was icy was a challenge. We tried scraping the ice off the windshield by hand until a passerby suggested an ice scraper. We were terrified when the person we were driving with, turned right at a red light. There was no television in South Africa. The Apartheid Government feared that we would be influenced by outside forces. Here in Chicago, we watched endless hours which made us aware of Thanksgiving, the Superbowl, the World Series and an overwhelming choice of products from cereals to furniture.

Professionally, we had to prove ourselves all over again. I was not able to find a mathematics teaching position until I completed a master's program and became familiar with mathematics education in the United States. Kenneth's first position as a resident was untenable and we almost went back home, with the thought of going to Australia. Luckily, an opportunity at Michael Reese Hospital became available, and we were able to settle down.

Even though many people reached out to help and guide us, the lack of our extended family and close friends was particularly difficult. Calling home was unaffordable. It was $10 a minute. One had to go through an operator who often had trouble understanding our accent. We waited at the mailbox for letters. We were lucky enough to take yearly trips back home.

Our families' origins are in Eastern Europe. I often think about how many of them had to leave their homes under dire circumstances.This exodus to South Africa started in the late 1800's. One of Kenneth's grandfathers left the small town of Ruzhany in Belarus to avoid being conscripted into the army, the other fled the pogroms in the Siady ghetto in Russia. My grandfather made his way to Palestine. He was deported by the British because he was a communist. He then went to South Africa. My maternal grandparents left Opalin in Poland in the late 1920s. Their families who tried to come in the 1930's could not get immigration papers and died in the concentration camps.

After the war, South African Jews were able to build a vibrant Jewish

Community of about 120,000 people. There were many synagogues both Orthodox and Reform. Our families belonged to Orthodox congregations. They were similar to Conservative synagogues in the United States. The women, however, sat separately, upstairs. We weren't hidden. Think of balcony seating in a concert hall.

There were multiple kosher butchers, caterers, and bakeries with authentic boiled bagels. We celebrated Purim with yeast dough poppyseed hamantaschen, and Rosh Hashanah and Passover with taiglach, which are like profiteroles covered in syrup instead of chocolate. There were Jewish newspapers and kosher hotels at seaside resorts.

Kenneth and I went to King David School, a K-12, Jewish Day School which was established in 1947. There were about 1200 students by the time we graduated in 1967. There were two classes a day devoted to Hebrew and Jewish Studies, with the remainder of the time spent on secular subjects. There was, of course, the celebration of the chaggim and time was set aside each day for Shacharit and Mincha. The boys put on tefillin every day. There was a 3-month trip to Israel for 15-year-old students. Every Friday, one student would give the *sedra* of the week at our school Assembly. It wasn't a sought after assignment. I remember we would scurry and hide when the head of the Hebrew Department would walk down the corridor looking for someone to present the *sedra* the coming week.

Lydia and Kenneth in front of King David School

I grew up in a kosher home. My maternal grandparents were Orthodox. My grandmother would make periodic checks in our kitchen to make sure that dishes, dishcloths and knives and forks were appropriately divided into dairy, meat and pareve.

Seders for us were gatherings of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents and often someone in the community who didn't have family or anywhere to go.The men sat at the head of an enormously long table with wives and restless children at the other end. The Haggadah was read through at a fast pace, although when my sisters, cousins and I were able to sing Birkat Hamazon or some of the songs at the end of the seder, my grandfather encouraged us do it.

Even though I grew up with men dominating religious life, my grandparents valued a Jewish and secular education for women. My uncle would give me 25 cents for every A that I got. In Poland my grandmother was the only woman in her village who could read and write. Her father was anguished that she could not attend a Yeshiva.

Shortly after coming to Chicago, we moved to Hyde Park. We joined

Congregation Rodfei Zedek soon after. The feeling of community, belonging, and connection was immediate. Despite men and women sitting together, the service was familiar and most of the melodies were identical. It was such a comfort to read Aleinu and know when to bow, when to join in, when to take three steps back and when to sit down. Singing Adon Olam and Yigdal at the end of the service often takes me back to prayers at King David School.

We moved to the Southern Suburbs for a few years and joined Congregation Am Echad. The rabbi at the time, was determined to start a Jewish day school. We were enthusiastic supporters. It was exciting to feel that we were creating an experience similar to our own growing up. Unfortunately, there was not enough interest to sustain the school long term. It closed after eight years.

We have now been part of CRZ for over 40 years. We have celebrated milestones, significant events, and women reading from the Torah. Even though there is anxiety when reading a portion, that the tikkun will be different from the Torah itself, there is a feeling of accomplishment when I complete a portion and also when I see our children and grandchildren doing the same. We have evolved with the Congregation and now enjoy services with instruments as well as the more traditional service we grew up with.

I came to realize that Jews in South Africa and the United States are very similar in their histories and backgrounds. This has been a source of comfort. I feel a sense of continuity between our lives in South Africa and the United States.

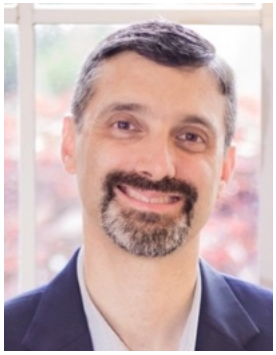
The Great Wolmarans Street Synagogue, Johannesburg

After graduating with a B.Sc and B.Ed at the University of the Witwatersrand Lydia taught mathematics at King David High School. After immigrating to the U. S., she completed a Masters of Science in Teaching at the University of Chicago. She worked as an editor and author on the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project and later taught mathematics at the Laboratory Schools.

Lydia and her husband Kenneth Polonsky have three children and seven grandsons, three of whom have become b'nai mitzvah at Rodfei Zedek.

The Crown of a Good Name: The Legacy of Shabbsai Dov

by Rabbi Edward Bernstein



Chuck Bernstein's Hebrew name is widely known at Rodfei Zedek. "*Ya-amod* (arise [to the bimah]) *Shabbsai Dov ben Nahum v'Hodel…"* Cantor Rachel Rosenberg, and lay leaders serving as gabbai do not need to look up Chuck Bernstein's Hebrew name or ask him for a reminder. They know he is Shabbsai Dov, and they relish calling him up to bless the Torah during its public reading on Shabbat. Among contemporary American Jews, it is common for people to have a secular name by which they are widely known, and a Jewish name used for sacred Jewish events, such as being called to the Torah or for marriage. It is unusual for anyone outside their immediate family to know their Hebrew name. But Shabbsai Dov is more than just a name for Chuck. Inherited from his grandfather, his name is part of his identity, his family legacy and his deep roots in his community.

Charles Bernard Bernstein, (or "Chuck," his preferred nickname), is my father. He and my mother Roberta have been dedicated members of Congregation Rodfei Zedek since 1974, when I was three years old. For half a century, Chuck has been involved in practically every aspect of synagogue life: board of directors, the ritual committee, leading Shabbat and holiday services, and attending weekday minyan. Chuck is known for his principled commitment to Jewish life, his strongly held views that he expresses with conviction and passion, and his expertise in genealogy and Chicago Jewish history. Furthermore, one cannot understand Chuck and his pride in his name without reckoning with his lifelong residency on the South Side of Chicago. In fact, Chuck is a fourth-generation resident of the South Side. His granddaughter Avniel is a sixth-generation South Sider.

An exploration of Chuck's rootedness to the South Side takes us to the Hebrew school at Congregation Agudath Achim, an Orthodox synagogue on 79th and Yates. Chuck began attending Hebrew School in 1952 at age 11, surprisingly late given his mastery of Hebrew decoding and public chanting of sacred texts that he has performed so well as an adult. Chuck often recalls meeting the principal, Rabbi Isidore Naiman. "He was a wonderful man," Chuck invariably adds with tears in his eyes. Chuck said on the first day of Hebrew School, Rabbi Naiman asked him, "What's your Hebrew name?"

"I went home and asked my dad [Norman Bernstein], 'What's my Hebrew name?' He said, 'Shepse Dave,' with a Litvak accent," referring to the style of Hebrew pronunciation characteristic of Jews from Lithuania. "So I went back to Rabbi Naiman and said my Hebrew name is Shepse Dave. Rabbi Naiman

looked initially puzzled. Then he shuckled back and forth as if he were studying a page of Talmud. Suddenly, he declared, 'Oh, your name is Shabbsai Dov!'"

The varying pronunciations of Hebrew among Jews in Chicago indicate the rich diversity of immigrant Jews who came to Chicago in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Consider, for instance, the pronunciation of a Hebrew word with a long-O. The word Torah would be pronounced by Lithuanian Jews, such as Chuck's ancestors, as "TAY-rah." Galitzianers, Jews from Galicia (Eastern-Central Europe) would say TOY-rah. German Jews would say TAU-rah. As Jewish immigrants became more Americanized, the long-O pronunciation became the standard. Furthermore, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 prompted many Hebrew educators across America, including in most Conservative congregations, to teach Hebrew with a Sephardic accent. In Sephardic Hebrew, the accent is more commonly on the final syllable—To-RAH— and the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Tav, is consistently pronounced with the hard "T" sound. Thus, Shabbos is Shabbat, and Chuck's Hebrew name, meaning "of the Sabbath," transforms from Shabbsai to Shabbtai. Chuck is proud of his Ashkenazic and Litvak heritage and pronounces his Hebrew name Shabbsai.

Chuck is named in memory of his grandfather, Charles Bernard Bernstein (1874-1929), often known in family lore as "Charley," who died 12 years before Chuck was born. Not only is Chuck named for his deceased grandfather, but two of his first cousins are as well. All of them bear the Hebrew name Shabbtai Dov. With three people in the world named both Charles and Shabbtai Dov, we must explore more deeply the man for whom three grandsons are named.

According to Chuck's voluminous unpublished manuscript tracing the genealogy of all branches of his family, his grandfather Charley was born in 1874 in the Lithuanian town Mariampole, which was under the rule of Czarist Russia. Charley and his family came to the United States in the massive migration of Jews fleeing the terror of the pogroms and antisemitic persecution. Charley and his father Nathan Bernstein were naturalized as United States citizens on October 16, 1896, seven years after their arrival. In his Minor's Affidavit for Naturalization, Charley stated under oath that he was born in Russia, he arrived in the US a minor, under the age of twenty-one years, and that he renounced his allegiance to the Czar of Russia.

Like so many other Jewish immigrants of the time, the Bernsteins worked hard to establish themselves in business. Nathan owned a dry goods store on the South Side, while Charley bought a dry goods store in the western Chicago suburb of Melrose Park and lived there with his family from 1901 to 1917, when Nathan retired and sold his store to Charley. That store at 8428 Burley Ave. was the foundation for six consecutive generations of Chicago South Side residency for the Bernstein family.

Charley's wife, Rebecca "Becky" Susman Bernstein (1875-1959), was

Charley's indispensable partner in running the front of the store and in managing the family's household in the back of the store. Chuck knew his grandmother well. She died when he was 18 and had regaled him with stories of her family that inspired his lifelong passion for genealogy.

Charley and Becky circa 1900

Charley and Becky achieved a moderate amount of success, lived relatively comfortably by the standards of the day, and eventually opened a second store on North Avenue. Chuck's manuscript reports Becky's shrewd business acumen as key to the family's survival.

One day, in about 1922, Charley and daughter Ida were working in the North Avenue store, leaving Becky all alone in the store in South Chicago. Becky asked her son, Norman, who was about ten years old, to stay home from school in order to stay in the store with her and keep an eye on the customers, since she would be running the store alone. He spotted a man putting a shirt under his coat. Norman ran to his mother and dutifully reported the shoplifting. Becky told him not to say or do anything. The man continued to shop, Becky pretended not to pay any attention , and Norman got very excited. "Ma, aren't you going to do anything?" Again, she told him to be quiet. The man had selected a number of items for purchase and brought them to the counter to check out. By this time, Norman was practically jumping out of his skin with excitement. Becky toted up the tab for the merchandise the man presented to her and asked for the money. Norman was ready to scream. As Becky took the payment from the customer with one hand for the merchandise he purchased, she deftly opened his coat and took the shirt out with her other hand. After the man walked out of the store without the stolen shirt, Becky finished her business lesson: "If I had taken out the shirt before he paid, he would have walked out without buying a thing. I didn't want to lose the sale," she told her son.

Charley, for his part, had a sterling reputation as a decent, honest man and was proud that he never wrote a bad check. Charley insisted on always using his middle initial, "B." There was another Charles Bernstein in South Chicago, a livery stable owner, whose ethical standards were not as high as Charley's. One time a deputy sheriff came to South Chicago to serve "Charles Bernstein" with a warrant for fraudulent conduct. On his way to serve Charley with the warrant, the deputy was intercepted by the local policeman on the beat who said, "He is Charles B. Bernstein. He is a very honest man. He couldn't be the man you want to serve. Serve the other Charles Bernstein." Because of this story, Chuck,

with the identical name as his grandfather, has had the practice since the fourth grade to sign his name Charles B. Bernstein.

Charley and Becky together led a proudly Jewish home. Throughout Charley's life, he lived in a kosher home. He belonged to the Bikkur Cholim synagogue at 8927 Houston, where Charley regularly sat in the center of the first row in the men's section on the main level, while Becky sat in the equivalent seat in the women's section in the balcony.

Bikur Cholim Synagogue

In the early 1920s, Charley's health began to decline. Charley's doctor said the long hours in the store were taking a toll on him and that he should get outside more. Charley sold the store and the family moved to an apartment at 7227 Coles, in an elegant area a block both from Lake Michigan and the exclusive South Shore Country Club, which did not admit Jews. The rent in 1929 was $90 per month. Charley took up the business of selling general merchandise on the installment plan to persons in their homes. The customers were accounts whom he called upon regularly. The South Chicago community where he operated was populated mainly by laborers in the steel mills and their families. In those days, a mill worker, who made perhaps $5 or $10 per week for a fifty or sixty hour week, could not buy merchandise in large department stores since the stores did not give credit to working-class people. The only opportunity for these people to buy anything on credit was through merchants such as Charley who sold to them in their homes. The credit sales industry was almost entirely run by Jews, from the wholesalers on Roosevelt Road who supplied the merchandise to the retail salesmen. South Chicago was virtually a "company town" where most people worked in the steel mills and the economy was prisoner to how the steel mills were doing. When the business of the steel mills was down or the steel workers were on strike, the business of the merchants declined drastically.

Charley contracted liver cancer and, after only a few weeks of illness, died on February 22, 1929. It is perhaps a sad irony that the doctor who had Charley sell his stores so that he could go outside to get fresh air may have instead unwittingly given Charley a death sentence. There was no fresh air to be found in the shadow of the steel mills. For a man who was already in infirm health, the daily exposure to the steel mills' toxins may have dealt a lethal blow.

Charley's untimely death was devastating for the family. While Ida and Kal were already independent adults, Norman was 17 years old when he lost his father, and Sid was only 10. It fell upon Norman to leave high school to help Becky run his father's installment business. Norman was eventually able to return to Bowen High School and graduated in January, 1933, one month shy of his 21st birthday, three years older than his classmates. Norman then went back into the installment business,

literally following his father Charley's footsteps. He pounded the pavement of South Chicago for more than 30 years and was the only one of Charley and Becky's four children to spend his entire adult life on the South Side.

Norman and his wife Adele instilled in their children, Chuck and Barbara, a love of education so that they would not have to work in the installment business. Chuck graduated the University of Chicago and DePaul Law School and spent a career practicing law. He not only traced his family genealogy, he helped develop the field of Jewish genealogy. He has been an active member of Rodfei Zedek for half a century and instilled love of Judaism in his children and grandchildren. Through it all, 54th Street is the farthest north he has ever lived.

Charley, the original Shabbsai Dov, was committed to his family, his community and the Jewish people. He sat in the center of the front row in synagogue. He always signed his name with the middle initial "B" as a reminder to himself that he had a responsibility to uphold and a good name to preserve. Charley wove the thread in a legacy that was embraced by his grandson Chuck who embodies these same traits.

The Talmud states in Pirke Avot (4:13): "Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all." Shabbsai Dov bears the crown of a good name.

Rabbi Edward Bernstein is the eldest son of longtime CRZ members Charles and Roberta Bernstein. He serves as Chaplain at Boca Raton Regional Hospital in Boca Raton, Florida.

Chuck Bernstein, second from right with (l to r) granddaughter Esther, daughter-in-law Ariella, wife Roberta and son Rabbi Ed

Reflections from a Family of Leaders – Two Essays

Lou Philipson raised his family in our community and served Rodfei Zedek in many capacities, including as president. The Congregation welcomed his mother, Thelma Plesser, during frequent visits, especially during holidays. We were delighted when she moved from New York to live in Montgomery Place and take a more active part in our community. During the pandemic, our Zoom services attracted Lou's cousin Diane Okrent and her husband and they became a regular part of our services, continuing occasionally even after the Synagogue returned to in-person worship.

In the first essay in this section Diane reflects on shared backgrounds and the sources of leadership.

Last June the community suffered a sad loss with Thelma's death. Just before her last illness she had written a Father's Day piece for the Montgomery Place newsletter, The Montgomery Messenger. *We include Thelma's article after Diane's as a memento of a beloved member of our extended family.*

by Diane Okrent

Two first cousins, raised on Long Island, were recently presidents of their respective Conservative synagogues in New York and Chicago – at the same time.

Diane Okrent, immediate past president of Congregation Or Zarua in New York City grew up in Wantagh, NY about 10 miles from her first cousin, Dr. Louis H. Philipson, past president of Congregation Rodfei Zedek in Hyde Park, Chicago, who grew up in Syosset, NY. Lou's late mother, Thelma Plesser, and Diane's late father, Meyer Okrent, were sister and brother.

Diane and Lou, and their siblings and cousins, were raised in two Long Island Conservative synagogues — Wantagh Jewish Center (now Congregation Beth Tikvah) and Midway Jewish Center. The cousins each left Long Island soon after college. Diane moved to Manhattan after graduating from Smith College. She and her husband, Aaron Shelden, live on the Upper East Side where they raised their son, a graduate of Heschel High School and Ithaca College. They have been members of Congregation Or Zarua from its early months in 1989. Diane was president from 2011 to 2014 and again from 2018 to 2021. Lou graduated from Harvard University and received his MD and PhD from University of Chicago. He stayed at University of Chicago where he is Professor of Medicine and Director of the Kovler Diabetes Center. He and his wife, Lynn, raised their two sons and one daughter at Congregation Rodfei Zedek in Hyde Park. Two of Lou's children were active in USY and are alumni of Camp Ramah Wisconsin.

Diane and Lou come from a long line of Jewish communal leaders. Their great uncle, Hyman Cleon z"l, the family's first to join a Conservative synagogue, was president of Congregation Mount Sinai (Brooklyn) in the early 1960's. Their grandfather, Louis Okrent z"l, was president of his landsmanshaft, the Kishinever Sick Benevolent Society, in the 1950's. Diane's father, Meyer Okrent z"l, was the last president of the Kishinever Society and oversaw its dissolution in 1993, ninety years after its founding. Lou's mother, Thelma Plesser z"l, and Diane were both been presidents of their respective Hadassah chapters. Thelma was a member of Midway Jewish Center for more than 60 years and a member of Congregation Rodfei Zedek for 4 years.

The cousins have always been close and continue to be. Their grandmother lived with Lou's family and visits and family gatherings were frequent. Seders were always big and joyous. When they were young, Diane's parents would often drive her and her brothers from Wantagh to Syosset. Then, when they were learning to drive, Syosset was an easy destination and by taking the streets, they could practice on the stick shift.

While New York and Chicago are not as close as Wantagh and Syosset, the next generation has continued the family ties. Lou's children and Diane's son and her nieces are continuing the close family relationships.

Diane Okrent and Thelma Plesser

Oh, My Papa!

by Thelma Plesser

Pop! That's what we called my father. Sometimes, just plain Papa. As we grew up and became more sophisticated, we often called him Dad. My father came to the United States from Ukraine, where he had graduated gymnasium. It was like a junior college. He was a watchmaker. He was nineteen years old. However, here he started an ornamental ironwork business.

He was introduced to my mother by a family friend. They fell in love and married. They looked like the cartoon characters Mutt and Jeff. Papa was tall, almost six feet. Mama was tiny, maybe five feet. They were happy together and started a family, two boys and then me. I remember being carried in his arms. Papa was very proud of his ornamental

ironwork. Mostly he produced fire escapes. He would borrow my uncle's Chevy and drive us to see his installed productions. After dinner (we called it supper), Papa would sit at the table with a pad of paper and doodle. In his shop those doodle circles became ornamental iron!

Thelma's parents, 1921

When I was in elementary school, I had an experience I still vividly remember. In third grade my teacher said that name should have an apostophe, O'Krent. However, we were not Irish and no apostrophe was necessary. Every time I omitted the apostrophe, my teacher would break my pencil over my head. (Imagine that being done today! Maybe it accounts for the way I am!)

Papa came to school, dressed up, shining, not like an ironworker. It was surprising to the teacher inasmuch as we were in a neighborhood of immigrants. He strongly informed my teacher that there was no apostrophe in our name. He said that if she continued to punish me, he would see to it that she would be punished by losing her job. I cowered in my seat. She obeyed!

Papa was very generous. In the summertime, when it was very warm in the apartment building we lived in, many of the tenants would sit outside. Papa would give me one of Mama's big glass pitchers and a dime. I would go to a nearby deli, and the owner would fill the pitcher with beer {on tap}. He would also give me several paper cups. When I returned to our building, Papa would fill the cups and treat our neighbors to beer. They loved him!

Papa would help an uncle who had a store in New Jersey by driving my uncle's big Pierce Arrow to wholesale markets. That car had six seats, including two jump seats. Papa drove the car and my uncle shopped. Sometimes, he would take us along; and we would sit in those little seats and sing as Papa drove.

Papa never traveled far out of New York, but he encouraged us to see the United States. In the movie Yentl Barbra Streisand sings a song, "Papa, Can You Hear Me?" I recall when I traveled to Arizona with my family in 2019, I sang, "Papa, Can You See Me? I'm in Arizona!" When I traveled around the world with my husband for his business years ago, I wondered what Papa would think. His little girl, shopping in Iceland! buying dresses in London! getting lost in Paris! having dinner in Brazil! visiting the Taj Mahal in India! Machu Pichu in Peru! Papa can you see me?

Father's Day celebrates the contribution that fathers and father figures make in their children's lives. In 1972 President Richard Nixon, the father of two daughters, proclaimed the third Sunday in June Father's Day, a federal holiday. Happy Father's Day to all our dads!

Words of Torah

Since arriving at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, Rabbi David Minkus has created and nurtured a program originally suggested by NPR's This American Life*. Invited by the Rabbi, participants in* This American Shabbat *study together and discuss a parasha, then present their interpretations at a Shabbat service. Over and over participants express their appreciation for each other's insights, and the entire Congregation thrills to the rediscovery of its members' talents and commitment. These talks on Parashat Vayechi were originally presented on January 7, 2023.*

... from This American Shabbat

by Miriam Hirsch

When studying the parasha, we reviewed the events and conversations taking place leading up to the death of Jacob, our patriarch, and right after his death. What I found amazing was how easily Joseph forgives his brothers – remember it was they who years before threw him in a pit and wanted to kill him, only to sell him into slavery in Egypt. As a contrast, we see Jacob still hold grudges against some of his sons for way less egregious misdeeds. Isn't it unbelievable how Joseph treats his brothers with kindness, and even weeping when he sees his brothers fearing they will face his retribution?

How is Joseph capable of being so gracious and generous? He stated that it all worked out for him, and he was able to save many people, including them. As we know, Joseph was able to forewarn the Pharoah of an impending famine, and the Egyptians were able to prepare accordingly. He tells his brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good .... " (Gen. 50:20)

Think about this: if someone showed such animosity towards you that they wanted to kill you, and then sold you into slavery in a foreign country, wouldn't you hold at least some kind of grudge? I know I would, if only out of protection for myself, to be careful not to trust those people again, and to keep my guard up. Even if many years had passed. But that's me. Yet, did Joseph really need to keep his guard up? He was practically untouchable as he'd achieved a highly protected rank in Egypt. So, there was no way his brothers could really hurt him again. Is that why it was so easy for him to forgive?

To show such forgiveness and grace is not impossible, but unusual. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon."

Then there's the Buddhist teaching which tells us that holding on to anger is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemies to die.

What does it mean to forgive? I think this is a very difficult question to answer. Does it mean the slate is wiped clean, and it's as if the transgression didn't even happen? Or does one forgive but not forget? To me the latter indicates that the victim still keeps their guard up.

We've seen what happens, over and over again, when people or nations hold grudges. Wars, terrorism, gang retribution, etc. On a less violent scale, a close relative of ours held grudges for years against many very close lifelong friends who she perceived as having offended her. In her old age, she was basically alone except for a couple of "surface" friendships. But to me, it didn't seem as if this bothered her much. But I think I would be very bothered and sad. I would hate to feel friendless and alone at any age, and especially during my old age. So, there may be something of value to mustering up whatever it takes to forgive and understand, rather than holding on to anger and resentment.

Here is another amazing example of someone who was able to forgive. In 1995, Sharletta Evans was a mother of two living in Denver when her 3-year-old son, Casson, was killed in a drive-by shooting. Ms. Evans ended up forgiving her son's killer and has even embraced him as if he were her own child, by visiting him in prison, and sometimes replenishing his canteen account. She shared her story in hopes of letting others know about the closure and healing that forgiveness has brought her.

I want to shift my focus for a moment and share that my study partner Michelle made an excellent observation and posed this question: Why isn't Joseph considered to be one of our forefathers? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were extremely flawed people who exhibited weakness, jealousy, cruelty, and other not-so virtuous traits, whereas Joseph seems pretty likeable and human! In my view, the only less-than-ideal traits he exhibited is that he let praise go to his head, was somewhat of a braggart, and lacked the emotional intelligence to really understand how he was being perceived. But he showed mercy and kindness when it would have been so easy for him to seek revenge.

This wasn't the only virtuous behavior that Joseph exhibited. He rebuffed the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife out of respect for Potiphar. It's possible that if he gave in to the wife's advances, he could have gotten away with it, but he still chose to be honorable. Let's compare this to Abraham, who we consider to be our first forefather. He allowed the Egyptians to take pleasure in his wife Sarah because he was worried about his own safety. He seemingly didn't care what happened to her, as long as no one hurt him. And Abraham is our first and main forefather!

Although it seems that Joseph was a bit spoiled and favored by his father, he was extremely humble and hardworking when the time came for him to be so. But maybe being imprisoned humbled him? And yet, Joseph shows no animosity or resentment even when his fellow prisoner, when the cupmaker seems to forget about him and go back on his promise to help free him from prison. He continues to have faith in God and hope for the best.

There obviously was something different and exceptional about Joseph, a trait that both his father and Pharoah recognized. I think for his brothers though, he was viewed as a rival. I attribute this to very poor parenting by Jacob and Rachel. No good can come from outwardly showing favor to one of your children above the others.

Getting back to my first point, the ability to forgive so readily and to accept whatever life brings is strongly connected to complete faith in God, according to a source I came upon in Chabad.org. To hold on to bitterness and resentment makes one a bitter person and can lead to completely consume one's psyche with thoughts of revenge and doing evil to others. We see over and over again what a faithful person Joseph was, and what his character was made of. Not just with his ability to forgive and accept, but also with his respect for others like his father, or for Potiphar.

If we always expect something bad to happen, we may not notice when good things happen, or we might minimize them. How does the law of attraction work? "Essentially, the energy of your thoughts manifests your experiences. Negative thinking is believed to attract negative experiences, while positive thinking is believed to produce desirable experiences." (Verywellmind.com) I believe there are people who inherently understand this, like Joseph, and live their lives accordingly.

We can all learn much from the way Joseph related to others, and how he lived his life. He has much to teach all of us about humility, faith, hope, and the belief that all things happen for a reason, and that each of us has a divine purpose, even if that purpose is sometimes not apparent.

Miriam lives in Chicago with her architect husband Howard. They have been members of CRZ since 2017. They have two grown daughters; Lea is an astronomy professor who lives near Toronto, and Anna is completing her ob-gyn residency in Los Angeles. Miriam earned her B.A. from U. of I. in Champaign, IL, and her M.A. in Health Psychology from National Louis University. She has been a case manager at The Ark in Chicago since 2016. Miriam loves to travel and pursues health-related activities.

by Michelle Gittler

Perhaps like most of us, I am cursed with impostor syndrome. When the Rabbi asked if I would be a part of the study group in anticipation of this American Shabbat, I was really excited and really nervous.

I was excited because the opportunity to study just for the sake of studying is so rare for me. Usually, I am learning about evidence that supports, redirects, or sometimes refutes what I am doing with my practice. Or, I am studying for recertification, which creates a whole new level of anxiety.

I was nervous because what could I possibly know about a Torah portion that the rest of you do not know way more about. As I read together with Miriam and Aaron, it was apparent that while the specific mothers and names of the children of Jacob and Joseph may not be familiar to me, what was very familiar to me was an immediate sense of knowing that something wasn't right as the scene unfolded of a family gathering around their father's death bed. What I felt was significant discomfort in the very un-fatherly way that I perceived he spoke to his children.

None of us are perfect. All of us make mistakes. Some mistakes are small like grabbing the cumin when you think you have cinnamon. Some mistakes result from an initial intention which seems on target but just goes too far, like when your little sister is getting bullied, and you decide to beat the crap out of a little kid who is six years younger than you in the alley.

Some mistakes are borne out of how we tell the truth, like when you are nominated by your cousins to ask your grandfather for money to fix the roof on the family summer house. And when you do ask him, he says no, and then what you say is, "maybe if you spend more time with our family and not the family of your girlfriend, you would know why this is important." And then he of course definitely does not help fund the new roof….

It is when these mistakes happen, and we take the opportunity to learn from them, we grow. We learn to check the labels on the spices. We learn, after tearfully calling our parents after meeting with our grandfather, that sometimes we need to bite our tongue, and say the truths of the facts, not necessarily the Truth of our feelings.

Often, we learn more from our mistakes than from having done something correctly. We are lucky when we get feedback and guidance when we have made a mistake. To be given the opportunity to reflect and think about what we might have done differently. To be given the opportunity to make amends. This is what makes us grow into better people.

On his death bed, Jacob not only denigrates many of his children, ostensibly for things that they had done in the past, but also does it in front of his other children. It is unclear what his intention is. Is it his intention to create division amongst his family? Is he again playing favorites with his children, which is how this whole story with Joseph started anyway?

Reuben is called on first, as he is the first born. And Jacob immediately identifies an error committed years ago by his son, something he had apparently never spoken about, and takes away the birth right of his first born exactly the way he took away the birth right of his own first born brother. He does it on his death bed which ensures there is no opportunity for his son to explain or apologize.

Jacob strips Simeon and Levi of their leadership roles because of their lack of values. But why didn't Jacob discuss with them why their behavior was unacceptable at the time? And why not give him the opportunity to explain why they did what they did?

He then lists, in my opinion, meaningless things about his other sons, as though he does not actually know anything about them as individuals. He gets sentimental when he talks about Joseph, and it is a wonder he did not give him another multicolor coat.

This section ends by saying, "this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a departing word appropriate to him." This man did not know his sons as people, and with the exception of Judah and Joseph (Joseph as proxy for his 2 kids), he did not identify their specific, personal attributes. And then he died.

I have really struggled with why an important father figure would be depicted this way. What is the lesson?

Where would he anticipate individuals/siblings go from there? In this situation, where do they go as a family? And yes, perhaps I am focusing too literally on the words of a dying father to his children. I cannot imagine if the last words my father said to me castigated me for one of my many mistakes. I would wonder if that was what he thought of me my whole lifetime? Something like that would turn my mourning into anger.

I am more comfortable viewing this as a lesson of what we should not do. This is not the way that you should act. You should not wait until your deathbed to let your family know about your disappointments. Nor should you take away from people the opportunity to apologize and explain.

Jacob potentially had the power to knit his sons more tightly together. He could have discussed their interdependence, celebrated their unique strengths, and directed them to protect each other from falling into the traps of their weaknesses.

It is often said that we identify our own strengths and weaknesses in others. Perhaps in identifying the specific issues with each of his sons, he is taking measure of his own life as its end nears.

Does Jacob want to see himself in Judah and Joseph, whom he extols? And in doing so he perhaps longs for reflection of the ideals that he values?

I feel passionately that my role as a sister, mother, wife, friend , and physician is to uplift and protect those I care about, no matter the personal consequence. I have spent my lifetime trying to be courageous in advocacy for my loved ones and for those in need. And in case you are wondering, I did apologize to my grandfather immediately. And, on his death bed, I was able to tell him that in spite of it all I did love him. And he told me the same. I just don't see that value when I think about Jacob. And so I must confess that I am still struggling with the lesson, or the moral of this part of the story.

Michelle grew up in Hyde Park. She remembers attending Junior Congregation in the chapel of the old Rodfei Zedek building and being mesmerized by the stained glass windows. She celebrated her bat mitzvah at Rodfei Zedek, and was the second woman to read from the Torah. (People walked out, but she was so proud.)

After attending the University of Michigan Michelle returned to Chicago

for medical school and met her husband, Lee Francis, there. Lee and Michelle both work as physicians in and for communities that are underserved and struggle with multiple social determinants of health. They have two daughters, Hannah and Laila. Michelle loves playing in her garden, playing in the water, reading, hiking and cooking. And after fifty years she's still mesmerized by the Rodfei Zedek stained glass windows.

by Aaron Midler

We're reading this parasha at a fortuitous time, right after the secular New Year, when many of us may be doubling down on promises we made to ourselves during the high holy days or even taking on new year's resolutions about behavior we want to change for the year ahead.

In preparing for this dvar, I for one reflected on my irritability. I have two wonderful daughters, aged two and five, but if you talk to me, you'll know I'm not shy about sharing the challenges of getting them out the door in the morning, brushing their teeth, or just about any task that involves coordinating, managing time, or establishing routine.

Some days I deal with this better than others. Even though I'm pretty sure I'm not alone here, I'm not proud to say that when faced with pressure, with a time constraint, with the mental demands of thinking through problems I have to solve at work, I'll sometimes yell. I'll lose my cool. I might threaten consequences, like the loss of TV privileges or treats, even when I know that the issue is not necessarily anything they did intentionally at that moment. Even if there's another path; I can see it, I just can't quite get to it then.

It was with this in mind that I began studying this parashah with Rabbi Minkus, Michelle, and Miriam. For my part, I want to focus on that strange poem breaking up the text, in which Jacob tells all of his sons what he thinks is going to happen to them in the future. In a certain light, it looks like a deathbed airing of grievances, with, for example, Jacob telling off Reuben for sleeping with his concubine many years ago; Jacob lamenting Simeon and Levi's proclivity to use violence in solving problems; and Jacob mocking Issachar's inclination to domesticity, rather than conquest.

In our discussions, we talked a lot about how this all reflects poorly on Jacob's character. Imagine hearing that your father is fatally ill. You rush to his bedside to be with him in those final moments only to have him talk about how disappointing your life has been. That he thinks you're lazy, or a coward. Or that he's been harboring a grudge against you for years. And that's the last thing he ever says to you. What does that say about him?

Despite all of the resonant family drama on display and Jacob's questionable rhetoric, I still wondered whether the Torah itself condemns Jacob's behavior

toward his sons as strongly as we were condemning him in our group. Re-reading the text, the Torah is not so clear; I watched Jacob transform right before my eyes.

If we first zoom out to the big picture, the Torah tells us that Jacob has experienced significant personal hardship in life. Deceit, death, famine, and sexual assault are a part of his story and his family's story. And Jacob is bitter. He tells Pharaoh explicitly that the years of his life have been difficult and shorter in comparison to Isaac and Abraham.

The Torah also tells us there are good things about Jacob. Aside from his ability to navigate the world, to be a survivor, to be clever, we know he can be loving, as seen in his devotion to Rachel. And the Torah tells us there is also something special about him; some significant evolution in his character is marked when Jacob's name is changed to Israel after his wrestling match with what appears to be an angel. There is a change in name from something with connotations of crooked or heel to something with connotations of nobility and struggle with the divine. And we as a people of course bear that namesake.

I mention all this backstory because it helps to understand this deathbed scene. Here we have an elderly man, still pining for his lost love, who has run from danger and death, who has experienced sublime and terrifying religious encounters, who has suffered through famine and exile, and on top of this, has been charged with the destiny of an entire people.

What comes out of Jacob in this moment is not merely cruelty or simple venting of emotion. It is also a last effort to fulfill a mission made with failing strength. In gearing up to speak to his sons, Jacob exhorts them: "assemble and hearken, O sons of Jacob; Hearken to Israel your father." From his use of his two names, we can infer that Jacob is at least partially aware of his own failings, in fact that he believes he bears some responsibility for the traits that he dislikes in his children, and that this speech is intended to change that. Contrary to what it sounds like, Jacob is trying to care for his children, the seed of the future Israelite people, and push them to follow God's path – Israel's path – which is not merely destined ownership of a tract of land, but a destined way of being that is epitomized by Jacob's wrestling with the angel. At this last moment of his life, Jacob is struggling with the difficult task of passing all this on.

It may well be that Jacob is not a perfect transmitter of God's will to his children or even his affection and that there's more than a little of good intention, poor execution at work here. Much like Jacob himself, the Torah frequently shifts back and forth between reference to Jacob as Israel and Israel as Jacob. It feels like a subtle hint that Jacob's transformation into Israel never finished, that the struggle to become something significantly better than you are is hardly won in a single wrestling match, and that there is no guarantee you will not stumble through an important moment, as Jacob seems to here.

At first, imagining myself as one of his children, I condemned Jacob in

reading this parashah. Now, in imagining myself as him, I feel for him, as well as his children. I empathize with his problematic poetry and the almost-but-not-really-good-enough way he tries to accomplish something meaningful right up until the last second. I fail a lot of the time, despite my good intentions. Particularly with New Year's resolutions. And I suspect that, more often than not, my intent may not fully materialize in my words or conduct.

I find comfort that, in this foundational text, at least in this particular story, there is room for Jacob's messiness, for nuance, context, and history. In talking about this parasha with me, Rabbi Minkus used the word frailty, and I think that's what we find here; not simply an ogre of a father, but a fallible human being, with attributes and desires that are sometimes in conflict with one another, a single human being trying to live up to a divine plan.

Of course, I'd like to think I'll take this moment of close study from the parasha to help me in the future in taking that other path. That more patient one, more cognizant not only of my own messiness, but the messiness of others, particularly my own children. I'll try to keep it close, especially on school days.

Aaron Midler is an aging millennial with a wonderful family – his wife, Esther, two young daughters, Sylvia and Ada, and cuddly black cat, Kaiju. He's currently a lawyer with the consulting firm, West Monroe, and has the pleasure of serving on the Rodfei Zedek board. He's an avid reader and watcher of movies and occasional receiver of "thank you for submitting..." notices from literary magazines.

...from a Bar Mitzvah

Words of Torah come to the Congregation from many sources. The following essay is excerpted from a bar mitzvah talk given on March 25, 2023.

by Ezra Skol

I was gifted with a parasha that is, well, not the most exciting one in the Torah, parashat Vayikra – which is the first portion of Leviticus. It is all about God telling Moses what animal he should sacrifice in every situation. Since sacrifices aren't the most interesting topic and I didn't want to give you guys a step by step tutorial on how to decapitate a bull, I focused on the small details in the parasha. One detail that caught my attention was making sacrifices to ask for God's forgiveness, so I decided to talk about forgiveness.

Having to say sorry in a more active and sincere way makes you think about what you did a lot more. Making sacrifices was how the people in my parasha said sorry more actively. Rather than performing rituals and making offerings to God like in my parasha, today we ask forgiveness directly from the ones we offend. So if you think about it, sorry was much more valued in my parasha than it is today. Nowadays we usually say sorry just to patch up our mistakes real quickly and go on with our life. People say sorry when they bump into someone, maybe when they drop a glass of water, and especially when they forget to bring the hummus to the party! But the word "sorry" can still have power and meaning, and can be very impactful. For example, maybe you messed up your friend's science project and they were furious at you, but then you apologize, and because saying sorry can be so impactful, you could be joking around at lunch just like you usually would an hour later. Rather than performing rituals and making offerings to God like in my parasha, today we ask forgiveness directly from the ones we offend.

An interesting thing that I noticed is the timing of my parasha – it is nowhere near Yom Kippur, a holiday for forgiveness. The main message that I got about this timing, although I doubt that it was intended in the text, is that saying sorry in a sincere and thoughtful way shouldn't just be on Yom Kippur. Rather, you should apologize whenever you have done something wrong.

In addition, the Torah also tells us that one of our commandments is to not bear a grudge against someone who has wronged you. I think that this is to maintain relationships and keep communities strong. Therefore, when someone asks for our forgiveness, we should accept the apology and forgive them.

My parasha also shows how much Judaism has changed from back in the Torah ages when Judaism centered

around people bringing sacrifices and offerings to the Temple and priests performing ceremonies on behalf of the community. Today, Judaism is centered on our synagogues and community life. Also, today there are many streams of Judaism with which people identify, which has created more diverse participation in our religion and community.

Now on to the larger question: what does Judaism mean to me? I had times in my life when I didn't think anything of Judaism, and sometimes I thought deeply about it and tried to understand it better. All of those times and reflections have brought me to this moment while I stand here. Having this bar mitzvah has been something I've wanted to do not only to be considered a Jewish adult and drink that sweet sweet wine but also because it is a milestone in Jewish life. A big part of Judaism for me, although it was the last thing I expected, is my sleepaway camp, OSRUI. It was a whole new experience for me and got me thinking about the fact that there is so much more community, tradition, and culture to Judaism than I thought, and this fact shows itself when you experience Judaism in different ways and in different communities, like at my sleepaway camp.

Another big part of Judaism for me is being part of my synagogue's community here, which is so very close. We come here and have so much spirit singing, talking, and eating bagels. The music especially in this community is incredible. I have woken up some Saturday mornings feeling tired, drowsy, and overall just wanting to crawl back into my bed, but when I come into this building with my family – about ten minutes late, a good family tradition – I hear the joyful music coming out of this room; and am set to a completely different mood. Being part of this community makes coming to synagogue meaningful for me.

Judaism is a bit of everything: community, prayers, songs, remembrance, joy, and mitzvot, but let's focus on the real stuff… kugel. Okay, although kugel is pretty scrumptious, I want to talk about community. Community is a sense of belonging that everyone wants and needs. I have a community at my school, on my soccer team, at my camp, at synagogue, and I'm also part of larger com-munities here in Hyde Park and in Chicago. Being part of communities also means taking care of one another, and that is where my bar mitzvah project kicks in.

For the last year and a half, I have gone with one of my parents most weekends to collect leftover food from mobile food pantries, shlepped the food to the synagogue, and stocked the Love Fridge. Filling the Rodfei Zedek Love Fridge has helped connect me to our Jewish community here, to Judaism itself through thinking about mitzvot, and to our larger community in Hyde Park. If anybody has left over groceries or other food, you can drop it off anytime at the Love Fridge and it will be greatly appreciated.

The Love Fridge –
Please contribute!

Ezra Skol is an 8th grader at the Kenwood Academy Academic Center and at the Jewish Enrichment Center. He enjoys playing soccer at school and with his club team, drawing, biking, playing the trombone, working on his Spanish and Hebrew on Duolingo, playing chess, cooking and baking, spending time with his friends, traveling, and spending his summers at OSRUI. He lives in Hyde Park with his parents, Yael Hoffman and Andrew Skol, and brothers Yoni and Avi.

Are Dogs Jewish?

by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby

I grew up thinking that Jews didn't own pets. That was something other people did, like oil changes and golf. I based this on nothing other than my own household, where the only other living things my parents allowed in the home were my brothers. I don't even remember us having any plants. Every now and then I would bring home a plastic bag filled with tepid water and an anemic goldfish I had won at a Purim carnival, but as soon as he entered our home, he was a goner. He rarely lasted long enough to even get a name.

A dog? Out of the question, an absurd possibility along the lines of a motorcycle or firearm. I vaguely recall learning in Sunday school that dogs were unclean—unholy even—and that while rabbinical law did not necessarily frown on keeping dogs as pets, there was something other about dogs, something violent and dangerous. A neighbor's terrifying German shepherd, who once sunk its sharpened incisors into my six-year-old rear end during a game of hide-and-seek, seemed to prove this point.

So did a closer read of the Torah and Talmud, which both seem as though they were written by someone whose pre-adolescent butt had suffered a similar fate. Deuteronomy 23:19 is particularly harsh on the subject: "You shall not bring the fee of a whore or the pay of a dog into the house of your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both are abhorrent to your God."

The Zohar ramps up the anti-canite propaganda even further by stating that evil in the world is like a vicious dog on a long leash. My favorite thought on the topic comes from Jacob Emden, an opinionated rabbi in eighteenth-century Germany who said that while a Jew could own a dog for economic or security reasons, having a dog merely for pleasure was "precisely the behavior of the uncircumcised." Ouch. Safe to say, dogs needed a better publicist back in the day.

A lot of this vitriol stems from the fact that once upon a time, many of the dogs people encountered were scavengers living beyond the walls of cities, living on garbage and even human remains. Queen Jezebel, whose name still gets dragged through the mud 3,000 years later, was famously thrown from a window, trampled by horses, and fed to stray dogs.

The strangely intolerant attitude has been passed down from generation to generation. If the Talmud describes people who raise dogs as "cursed," perhaps it should come as no surprise that as recently as 2019, when Sephardic Rabbis in the Israeli city of El'ad signed a law banning dogs from the city, they cited the Talmud for their decision—and invoked no higher an authority than the Rambam himself.

This is all preamble to the obvious: I now own a dog. How it happened is beside the point, though I will say it involved much emotional manipulation by various members of my family. I was not equipped as an adult to make this mental shift, and I admit I reacted badly at first. I never played the But-Dogs-Aren't-Jewish card, though I certainly would have if I had thought of that angle.

Instead I focused on the "unclean" part: the mats of hair everywhere, the drool, the constant public dishonor of dealing with random pee and vomit and picking up poo with the humiliating little plastic bags. To say nothing of the fact that I could no longer lie on my own couch without a germ-infested tongue pasting my whole body in a sticky sheen. (As if my own children weren't putting me through the same bodily fluid-related misfortunes every hour.)

None of this seemed to bother the rest of my family. Instead they enfolded Easy, a goofy 45-pound Australian shepherd mix with intense blue eyes, into everything: family photos, movie nights, Shabbat. Easy was everywhere, and effortlessly became the center of our home. If I had walked in on her playing Xbox with my son, I wouldn't have been surprised. And little by little, she won me over: with her fierce protectiveness of our entire family, with her stoicism in the face of pain and chaos. She was always just there, the same as always, reliable and unchanging even while the rest of us emotionally pinballed over the place.

When Easy got sick and died in my arms on the floor of a veterinarian's office, no one was surprised that I cried the hardest. I had long given in to the messiness of life. She would be central to many of my happiest memories, of my children when they were young and vulnerable but also strangely fearless and comfortable with the world and their place in it, partially because each one of them had done what I had not as a child myself: Become a Dog Person.

And I realized that there was a wider range of opinions in Jewish texts, and I had cherry-picked all the dog hate. What about the dogs during the Exodus from Egypt? I could be reading this wrong, but it sounds like God worked out a deal with the country's dogs, promising that if they didn't bark or snarl at the Israelites silently escaping undetected—then God would reward them by letting them freely interact with people without any religious penalty, and even access to ritually unclean food, in return for their silence on that night. Sounds like a pretty sweet deal for the dogs.

In all but the most extreme cases, Judaism's approach to dogs as pets has softened. It's telling that Tel Aviv, the closest Israeli city to El'ad (the municipality where they tried to ban dogs), reportedly has one dog for every 17 people: the highest number of dogs per capita in the world. For the most part, the Jewish attitude toward dogs has changed over time.

These days, my family is well into the slobbery regime of our second dog, a skinny Black Mouth Cur named Sammy. He's an endearingly awkward oaf who bumps into light posts and would happily sell out our family for a pile of leftover Harold's, but no matter. Sammy is as hilarious and omnipresent as Easy was, an anchor in a world of unpredictable

waters—and the one thing all five of us can all agree on. Even me.

Jeff Ruby is currently working on his masters in Social Work and is the author of the middle school age novel, Penelope March is Melting*. He is a graduate of the University of Kansas journalism school and also has a bachelor's in philosophy from the University of Colorado. He is the husband of Sarah Abella, who grew up at Rodfei Zedek; and they are the parents of Hannah, Max, and Abigail.*