To Learn and To Teach

ללמד וללמד

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In This Issue:

Congregation Rodfei Zedek www.rodfei.org
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Introduction to Volume III Number 1

It can be daunting to face the High Holy Days and the new Jewish year. The year 5775 begins amid troubles flaring up all around the world and calling via our media for constant attention and concern. As we examine our lives during the Days of Awe, we ask ourselves how to go on.

In the midst of uncertainties we can take comfort in knowing we have found a new Rabbi. In his interview with Rabbi David Minkus, Steven Loevy highlights the Rabbi's role and ours in moving forward with imagination and confidence. And at the Back of the Book, the Rebel Without a Clue welcomes the new Rabbi in his unique style.

As we welcome Rabbi Minkus, we acknowledge with gratitude the help of Rabbi Larry Edwards during our time of transition. Among his contributions were Shabbat divrei Torah. In this issue we publish his talk on Korach, with a message particularly suited to this time: "Religion is not about being perfect, but about how to do teshuvah – turning, ever returning to the path toward the goal of holiness."

We take inspiration, too, in how the work of our members is inspired by Jewish values. Yael Hoffman provides an example of תיקון עולס (tikkun olam) in action. Read about her experience with the American Jewish World Service. Our younger members, too, are reaching out to help. The new מדרכים (madrichim or leaders) program enabled two teens, Leah Basa and Ramona Myers-Cohen to provide unique support in the Rodfei Zedek community. Their account of their work, couched as a devar Torah, impressed and motivated the Congregation.

In this issue, for the first time, we include excerpts of fiction and poetry, the writing of our member Joseph Peterson. Joe may not have intended to incorporate anything Jewish in his writing, but in reconsidering his work he has discovered some remarkable and beautiful connections. To learn more about Joe's new book, Gideon's Confession, visit his website, www.josephgpeterson.com, and listen to his talk with Rick Kogan on Youtube.

As our Jewish tradition provides us support and direction, so too may this issue be a source of beauty, comfort, and encouragement.

לשנה טובה ומתקה !

This publication may also be accessed at http://www.rodfei.org/To_Learn_and_To_Teach

Submissions and responses may be sent to crzwritings@gmail.com

Welcome, Rabbi Minkus! An Interview

by **Steven Loevy**

In this issue we welcome Rabbi David Minkus and his wife Ilyssa to the Congregation. Rabbi Minkus was born in Evanston and grew up in Skokie. He attended Camp Ramah from 1997-2003 as a camper and 2004-2010 as a counselor and unit head. He met Ilyssa in 2004 at Niles North High school and they married in 2011. She received her Master's in Special Education of children with severe and multiple disabilities. She graduated from Indiana University with a degree in both General Education and Special Education. They expect their first child in September.

Rabbi Minkus earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana in 2008. In May 2014 Rabbi Minkus graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in Jewish Education and received ordination. He also studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem (2007) and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem (2010-11). His rabbinic experience included work at Temple Israel of South Merrick, New York (2009), Congregation Beth Shalom in Northbrook, IL (summers 2011 - 13), Park Avenue Synagogue, New York City (2012 - 13), and Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation, Fitzgerald, Georgia (2011 - 13). He also taught at Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale, Bronx and Congregation Rodeph Shalom in New York.

Recently Steven Loevy explored with our new rabbi his thoughts upon joining our community.

1. What are some of the indicators you would look at to measure your success at CRZ?

Pairing a rabbi with a community is truly a marriage. I know this from other rabbis I have observed, congregations I visited, and from serving the Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation (FHC) in Georgia for two years. We were right for each other. We challenged each other to grow while reflecting on who we were and who we want to be.

I asked the members of FHC to confront their Judaism and their traditions, not to change how they act as Jews but to better their actions by adding new layers of meaning. I asked them to make Judaism relevant by creating a personal as well as a communal connection to Judaism, which can be a daunting task. I brought them Talmud which they had never studied (and they brought me drinks from their synagogue's bar!). Most important, through our discussions and prayer, we formed lasting relationships and because of that we learned from each other.

My experience in Georgia confirms what Dr. Ron Wolfson says about Relational Judaism: our synagogues and our institutions succeed on the basis of relationships and community as much as on tradition or prayer.

God willing, success here in Hyde Park will be as much about you as it will about me. I will strive every day to help you take even greater ownership of your personal and your communal Judaism. I pray that I am able to make lasting relationships here like the ones I made in Georgia. If I do, I know that we will be successful.

2. What do you intend to accomplish for yourself as the man David Minkus, and what do you intend to accomplish for CRZ as its Rabbi?

Sometimes I struggle to differentiate between my goals as a rabbi and my goals as David Minkus the Jew. I am not immune to the struggle of finding meaning within Judaism. I have to reflect and question constantly, to teach and be taught in order to keep Judaism relevant and meaningful for me, and this struggle informs my role as a rabbi. I strive to live a life that is in line with the Judaism our Rabbis from the Talmud created and I want to teach that form of Judaism: one that is inclusive, one that is challenging and one that is eternally engaging. Judaism is hard work. Keeping the mitzvoth of Judaism is not easy. But I try to be a shomer mitzvoth Jew (literally one who guards the laws). And this is where my rabbinate is greatly influenced by my personal observance. I think our Halacha (Jewish law) is dismissed too often as archaic or illogical, a relic of an unenlightened time. But I dispute that and I strive to demonstrate through both teaching and personal observance just how relevant our legal system is and how impactful it can be in making our lives more meaningful.

I decided to become a rabbi because I formed personal relationships with rabbis and teachers who challenged me to find my "distinctive Torah." At my Bar-Mitzvah my aunt, Rabbi Benay Lappe, said it is the duty of every Jew to write his/her own Torah. As a rabbi it is my task to do what I can help each and every one of us write that Torah.

Rodfei Zedek is a lay-led synagogue. This is not true of most synagogues and it intimidated me at first. But a mentor of mine taught me that the best leaders are ones who surround themselves with the best in order to be challenged every day. I am humbled to be surrounded by congregants and community members who will help me write my own Torah. I am so lucky to be at Rodfei Zedek, knowing that I can never mail it in, never teach a simplistic version of a text, never stop listening to the people around me.

3. If you had had 12 months instead of just 2 months to prepare yourself for this position, what might you have done that you did not have time to do?

I certainly do wish I had more time to just listen and observe. It is easy to spend my week now writing sermons and studying,

An interview with Rabbi Minkus - cont.

going to meetings and working on classes, while being on guard for the various lifecycle occasions that pop up. In addition, I have been trying to call each member of the synagogue. And if I had 12 months rather than two to prepare for my first full-time job, I would make time to meet with every person, spend time with families before the weight of the High Holidays is upon us. I would spend shabbatot as an observer as well as observing meetings and classes before diving into the deep end.

4. What are you looking forward to studying and learning in the next few years, assuming you can make time to do it?

I have been a student my whole life and I will miss the life of a student. I may miss conventional weekends. I will miss carrying a backpack (as opposed to a brief case). Most of all, I will miss being immersed in an environment of constant learning and scholarship. At the Jewish Theological Seminary I had some of the greatest professors and I will miss learning with and from them.

For my graduation I received the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides' code of Jewish law. It is my plan to study this code on a weekly basis. I have already begun studying the weekly parasha with my colleague and friend who is a rabbi in Suburban New York. I am also looking forward to teaching courses that I have never taught and fielding questions I cannot answer, forcing me to continue being a student. I am, also, very excited to utilize all of the resources that Hyde Park has to offer!

5. What books are you reading? What's on the bed table? And what's in line for reading soon? And, what do you read to relax? What's your escape reading?

One of my struggles with regard to personal reading is to branch out. Several summers ago I read American Pastoral and have become a serious Philip Roth junky. Ilyssa nags me, rightly so, to read something else. I try to have two books at a time: a novel and a work of non-fiction. Right now I am in between reading a collection of short stories by Amos Oz and Shai Agnon's Only Yesterday. I am about to start a book about Lewis and Clark as well. I also love my pile of New Yorkers. I am a slow reader and like to read every article in the newspaper (yes, I still read a print newspaper) so my magazines get relegated to a stack under my bed. I take great solace in knowing they are there.

I am also a big sports fan. You can often find me on tennis courts on 53rd street, and hopefully in the gym after minyan on Sunday mornings. And my Sunday nights have never been the same since The Sopranos and The Wire concluded. I love Philip Roth. I can name the last 30 NCAA champions of March Madness. The Wire may be my greatest passion in the entertainment realm.

6. What do you expect from us as your congregation, or perhaps what kind of commitments do you believe you need from us for you to succeed?

I believe that our success requires a two-way street. I need to be told if I am doing well or if I make a misstep and how I can do better. I need you to continue to be dedicated to Judaism and your traditions while being willing to challenge them with new or different approaches.

* * *

Steven Loevy and his wife Sara Segal Loevy have been active members of CRZ for almost 35 years. Although raised on the north side of Chicago, they moved to Hyde Park in 1975; their son, Nathaniel, attended the Hoffman Religious School and became a bar mitzvah at Rodfei. Nate, his wife Amy Katz Loevy, and their newborn son, Jake, live in Lincoln Square.

Steven and Sara are the principals of The Loevy Consulting Group, which advises nonprofit organizations on fundraising, strategic planning, and related issues. Steven received a PhD in American Civilization from the University of Iowa. He held administrative posts at the University of Chicago, Urban Gateways, and DePaul University. He served on the faculties of the University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Chicago, Beloit College, Columbia College (Chicago), School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and DePaul University's Fund Raising Management Certificate Program.

Steven, along with Lisa Landes, co-chaired the capital campaign to build our current building. Steven was honored to be a member of the Rabbinic Search Committee that recommended hiring Rabbi David Minkus.

In the Dominican Republic with the American Jewish World Service

by **Yael Hoffman**

Yael Hoffman is an independent consultant in the fields of public health and social work. Recently she has worked with the American Institutes for Research, the Midwest Access Project, and the Heartland Alliance's Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture. Yael has taught on the subject of human rights at the University of Chicago and worked with Save the Children on psychosocial interventions following Hurricane Katrina. Prior to that, she worked as a psychiatric emergency services social worker at the University of Michigan. Yael and her husband, Andrew Skol, joined Congregation Rodfei Zedek in 2007 and have three sons, Yoni, Ezra, and new baby, Avi.

This past May, I traveled with the American Jewish World Service to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic as part of its Chicago Global Justice Fellowship. The American Jewish World Service is the leading Jewish human rights and development organization working to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. It pursues lasting change by providing financial support to local grassroots and global human rights organizations working in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing American Jews and others in the U.S. to advocate for policies that will benefit people in the developing world and advance the Jewish obligation to work for tikkun olam.

Our trip was focused on one of its three program areas: its commitment to advancing the rights of women, girls and LGBT people. As such, we visited with several Dominican non-governmental agencies promoting the health and political rights of women, sex workers, transgendered people, and people living with HIV and AIDS. We also met with the US Agency for International Development in Santo Domingo, and with the US ambassador to the Dominican Republic, James Wally Brewster, and his husband, Bob Satawake; their very presence in that conservative Catholic country is a political boon for the Dominican LGBT community.

One issue that permeated the work of every agency with which we interacted was the November 2013 Constitutional Court decision stripping 25,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent of their citizenship. This decision effectively renders many thousands of people—all those who emigrated to the Dominican Republic since 1929—unable to work, study, receive healthcare, marry—in short, it denies them their basic human rights. The agencies with which we met are focused on promoting legal challenges for the affected population, providing services for them, or advocating on their behalf to help them obtain papers necessary for their livelihoods and health.

Below is an excerpt from a reflection I shared with my fellowship group during this experience abroad, on day 4 of our week-long trip:

Today is the 37th day of the Omer. For our ancestors, it was the 37th day of freedom from Egyptian slavery, during which they prepared themselves to receive the Torah at Sinai on Shavuot. How did they do this? Were they purposeful? Courageous? Faithful? Yes and no. They challenged themselves to leave their status quo in search of an abstraction called freedom, but they also quickly lost faith in the G-d they couldn't see and of whom they had no prior knowledge, and they built a golden calf. They doubted their purpose, and the possibility of success. They faltered.

Our journey to Santo Domingo has demanded far less of us than our ancestors' journey to freedom and to Israel demanded of them, but for many of us, it has brought us to a place far, far beyond our comfort zone. We've come here because we seek to be righteous, to contribute to Tikkun Olam. But we also falter. Some of us can't visualize success, and have minimal faith in our ability to make change. Some of us are suffering physically--we can't sleep, our bodies hurt, we are used to a different standard of travel and nourishment. Some of us are emotionally distraught, having never before seen such abject poverty and suffering first-hand. Some of us are trying to negotiate our priorities: how do I care about my important social justice work in Chicago and also about this? How do I reconcile the life of privilege I'm giving my kids at home with those of the children of Bate Lecheria? How can I possibly do anything to help here?

During the Omer counting period between Pesach and Shavuot, our ancestors in Israel during the Roman occupation also knew great hardship. 12,000 chevruta pairs studying under Rabbi Akiva, or 24,000 souls, perished either at the hands of the Romans, or due to a plague. And here in the Dominican Republic, almost 25,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent were stripped of their citizenship this year by the Constitutional Court. During the Omer, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Elazar were forced into hiding from the Romans, surreptitiously studying Torah in a cave. Here in the Dominican Republic, so many of our brethren live in the shadows of society. People denied citizenship, education, healthcare, sanitation, basic resources and livelihoods--all based on ancestry, skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, and other distinctions that should be of no importance.

But from Shimon bar Yochai came the Zohar--the kabbalistic text. And Kabbalistic tradition tells us that this week, the 6th week of the Omer, is the week of Chesed of Yesod, or the good deed of bonding. So this is where our opportunity for chesed comes into play. Here on this trip, we bond with one another during this experience, to support one another in the various stages of this journey. Perhaps more importantly, we bond with our Dominican brothers and sisters, holding and honoring their stories. We listen, empathize, hug and kiss them, and stand in awe of their courage and accomplishments. And we also leverage existing bonds with powerful allies in order to support our marginalized partners in the Dominican Republic.

Yesterday, we manifested chesed of yesod in multiple ways. Thanks to the bonds of friendship between Ambassador Brewster and several of our fellowship participants, we were able to connect our embassy to the important work of AJWS in the country and to our non-governmental organization partners here. These connections can be a first step toward greater exposure, legitimacy, and resources for them. We also heard ways in which we can support the human rights priorities of the embassy. And

In the Dominican Republic - cont.

throughout the entire experience, we were heartened by the incredible subtext that the ambassador himself, a man of immense power, also comes from a marginalized and discriminated community. His very presence and position here gives faith to the downtrodden and weary, and certainly to many of us. And it puts human rights issues for the LGBT community in a glaring, shining, international spotlight.

We continued on to COTRAVETD, where we witnessed incredible resilience and strength of spirit. Our transgender partners there were eager to bond with us, to explain their hardships, and received us with such grace and warmth. They explained the multiple levels of discrimination they regularly encounter because they are trans, because they are sex workers, and because some of them are HIV+. They told of their suffering, their coping through addictions, their work to realize their basic human rights. Their courage and strength bolstered my faith--if they can work for and believe in change even during nightly exposure to degradation and danger, then who am I to lose faith of purpose and wonder what I can do? We also encouraged them by sharing stories and telling them of the reality of one of their dreams as it's been manifest in Chicago--the Center for Trans Life.

This time of the counting of the Omer is a time of personal tragedy for me. The day before we embarked on this journey marked the one-year anniversary of my mother's death on the solar calendar. Week 6 of the counting, this week of bonding, last year was the beginning of the end of my physical, earthly bond with my mother. She suddenly, inexplicably became ill, and I left my husband and children for three weeks to accompany her on her journey to death, and perhaps to her next life, and then to sit shiva for her in Michigan. It was a time of great sadness, of course, but also a time of important bonding for us. And I wasn't the only person accompanying her on this journey. There were many invaluable medical staff members supporting her and us. At hospice, one of them, Debbie, was a person transitioning from male to female. I shared this with Nairovi, the executive director of COTRAVETD. She marveled, telling me that a trans person could never work in this field in the Dominican Republic. Perhaps this story also gave her hope for a better future.

The rabbinic literature describes the exodus from Egypt as an unearned gift from God, and the subsequent seven weeks, or the counting of the Omer as a time during which the Hebrews were to work on their spiritual potential in order to be able to receive the Torah on their own merit. Last year, during the last two weeks of the Omer, I prepared myself spiritually for a profound loss. My mother waited until the end of Shavuot to die--she died the day after, and so her first yartzheit and the unveiling of her headstone are ahead of me. But so is revelation--the revelation that I can survive life without her, however painful it is sometimes.

During this counting of the Omer, we are all doing our own spiritual work, as a group, and as individuals. We are testing the limits of our comfort zones. We are reexamining our priorities, our realities, and opening our eyes to the realities of others. We are thinking about the bonds we are forming, and how we can maybe capitalize on our existing bonds--via social media, via fundraising channels, and via political connections and activism. But the counting of the Omer will soon end. And we are asking ourselves, what next? So what? What will we do with these stories? What will be the revelation in all of this? We will soon celebrate Shavuot, and commemorate receiving the Torah, the story of our people, at Sinai. How will our Shavuot also commemorate the stories of MUDHA, MODEMU and COTRAVETD? How will we make this happen?

AJWS Chicago Global Justice Fellows, 2013-2014:

Editorial notes:

In the Dominican Republic - cont.

The Dominican Republic sits on the eastern five-eighths of the Carribean island of Hispaniola, with Haiti occupying the rest. Since 1492, when Columbus landed on the island, it has been fought over by Spain, France, and Haiti. In recent history it has had interludes of dictatorship, civil war, and U.S. intervention. Haitian immigration and the integration of Dominicans of Haitian descent remain major issues. Today the Dominican Republic is a popular vacation destination in the Caribbean.

Websites of the organizations mentioned in Yael's article provide the following background:

AJWS (American Jewish World Service) is the leading Jewish human rights and development organization working to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world, providing financial support to local grassroots and global human rights organizations working in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and mobilizing American Jews and others in the U.S. to advocate for policies that will benefit people in the developing world.

The AJWS Global Justice Fellowship is a selective, year-long program designed to inspire, educate and train key opinion leaders in the American Jewish community to become activist leaders in support of global justice. The fellowship includes an 8-10 day educational trip to a developing country, during which participants witness the power of grassroots efforts to overcome poverty and injustice. The trip is preceded and followed by a series of educational programs that prepare participants to mobilize and organize their communities and networks in support of AJWS's campaigns and other efforts to promote global justice.

COTRAVETD (Comunidad de Trans Trabajadoras Sexuales Dominicanas) is an organization for transgender sex workers in the Dominican Republic.

MODEMU (Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas, or the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women) is an NGO comprising former and current Dominican sex workers.
MUDHA (Movement of Dominican - Haitian Women) The movement, which includes women from Haiti and Dominican women of Haitian descent (many of whom are workers in sugar mill communities), promotes democratic, supportive, sustainable, and fair development, as well as respect for human rights. It advocates the tolerance of differences among people, like gender and race.

Cloud Kaddish

by **Joseph Peterson**

Joseph G. Peterson attended Wheeling High School and received his B.A. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. He's worked in an aluminum mill, carried the hod for bricklayers, tended bar, and taught high school in the inner-city. He currently works in publishing. He is the author of the epic poem, Inside the Whale, and of the novels, Beautiful Piece, Wanted: Elevator Man and Gideon's Confession. He lives in Chicago with his wife and two daughters.

Life is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.
Life is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.
Life is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.

So goes a conversation between friends in my novel, *Beautiful Piece*. In truth, you might substitute prayer and ritual for life, and therein lies part of the Jewish influence on my work.

The Amidah is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.
The Amidah is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.
The Amidah is repetitious.
Oh, I know. That's what I love about it.

This conversation is repeated again and again in the novel, as are phrases, paragraphs and whole scenes with subtle variations. In the repetition, the meaning of the words dissipates, leaving the mnemonic husk of the words and the chanted rhythm of the lines until ironically, by the dissolution of their meaning, the words start to sound strange and less familiar rather than the other way around.

I am attracted to repetition as a writer for the same reason that I am attracted to ritual prayer as a Jew: because it obliviates meaning. Add to the mix that Jewish ritual prayer is chanted in Hebrew, and the meaning of what is being said disappears completely until all that is left for a convert like me is the comfort that comes with repeating over and over again a beloved prayer.

There are few phrases in the prayer service or in the Torah that move me more than this phrase... *you keep faith with those who sleep in the dust...* When I encounter this phrase over and over again in the service and throughout the year I begin to feel a humility--a movement away from my own self--to an encounter with myself as dust: one with all things. Ritual and repetition reminds us that the broader arc of all things in their iterative gestures, both in the present moment and across time, is itself a reminder that something larger -- call it g'd if you will -- is there. By our natural participation in this ritual, we become less ourselves and more like dust motes subsumed and dancing into the broader light of the world.

Something of this nature is alluded to in my novel, *Wanted: Elevator Man*. Barnes, the main character, is trying to divine the empty words, *"love you . . . won't forget you"* spoken by a potential love-interest back to him from her answering machine. The words, *love you... won't forget you,* haunt each of us. We say them to our beloved and we long to hear them spoken to us in return, and over the course of our life they may lose their meaning like prayer loses its meaning. As Barnes wonders in the book, "I love you? I won't forget you? And the way she said those words, the way her voice sounded--mumbling intimate tones. It was as calming as water rushing over smooth stones. As if her words "love you . . . won't forget you" were themselves stones smoothed over by years of use."

And so too those lovely words from the Amidah, *you keep faith with those who sleep in the dust...* are as calming as water rushing over smooth stones. As if those words *you keep faith with those who sleep in the dust...* were themselves stones smoothed over by years of use.

At another point in *Wanted: Elevator Man*, Barnes sees the dust motes kicked up by his beloved cat, Clem. The dust motes seem to dance like a sort of wild disembodied dervish. It causes Barnes to think of the Turkish mystic Rumi who wrote cryptic poetry popular among acolytes. Barnes gazes at the dust dancing before his eyes: "Was it cosmic dust from a distant meteor or was it the microscopic detritus left behind by him and Clem as they slowly declined towards death? With a little patience, Barnes thought, we'll both be more dust than this." Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The consolations of ritual prayer embody this reality.

Then there is the mourner's kaddish. It is a great repetition, which to the ear of a convert, comes across an inscrutable shibboleth. There is the gloss in the margin that keeps me apprised of what is being said in the prayer (I almost wrote poem) but that's not the point. For me, the point of the mourner's kaddish is that I can't understand it: that it is a chant so inscrutable it becomes a meaningless metonym. Who are we, I ask, while listening to the mourner's kaddish. We are a meaningless iteration of words whose boundlessness and fathomlessness are as inscrutable as a dancing dervish swirling in the cosmic dust motes of time. And therein lies the profound consolation of the ritual gesture. It enacts the swirling dust we are to become in the embodiment of a repeated chant.

Cloud Kaddish - cont.

It was with the mourner's kaddish in mind when I wrote recently of a man, Moore, whose father died (in *The Woodsman*). Whenever Moore thought of his father and of the profound loss that was enacted upon him by thoughts of his father and of how his father died, Moore quickly switched to an iteration of cloud types. His father, after all, had been a member of the Cloud Appreciation Society of Iowa, and his father had taught him all the names of the clouds. By re-iterating a list of the cloud types, Moore discovers he is able to purge himself of hurt. The great scroll of clouds rolling in from the prairie's horizon and the simultaneous iteration of cloud types becomes, for Moore, his own private mourner's kaddish:

"...cumulus fractus, cumulus humilis, cumulus mediocris, cumulus congestis...."

D'var Torah: For the Sake of Heaven

by **Rabbi Laurence Edwards**

Rabbi Laurence Edwards completed his service as rabbi-in-residence for Rodfei Zedek in June but continues to be an active member and respected teacher in the Congregation. On Shabbat, June 21 he offered the following as a devar Torah on the portion Korach,
Numbers 16:1 - 18:32

The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt was recently brought to my attention. I've been reading his book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.[1] Haidt studies the psycho-social foundations of morality. Moral psychology branches off from developmental psychology, and asks why people respond so differently to certain issues. In a recent TED talk, for example, Haidt discusses two issues that threaten to overwhelm us. Global warming will almost certainly erase major coastal cities, yet those generally labeled "conservative" do not see this as an emergency. At the same time, the coming spike in entitlement spending as we baby boomers age will almost certainly overwhelm the economy, yet those generally labeled "liberal" do not see entitlement spending as a crisis.

At one point in the book he summarizes two of his arguments as follows:

Reasoning can take us to almost any conclusion we want to reach, because we ask "Can I believe it?" when we want to believe something, but "Must I believe it?" when we don't want to believe. The answer is almost always yes to the first question and no to the second.

In moral and political matters we are often groupish rather than selfish. We deploy our reasoning skills to support our team, and to demonstrate commitment [allegiance] to our team.

We tend, for a variety of reasons, to lean in a particular direction on issues, and we then come up with (or adopt from others) arguments to support our preferences. It is obviously a lot more complicated and nuanced than my little summary makes it. Haidt, who spent some time here at U of C as a post-doc, himself leans liberal, but what he is really interested in is how we as a society can get past our current polarization and political paralysis.

This week we come to perhaps the most dramatically polarized conflict among the Israelites of the wilderness generation.

Of all the episodes of dissent, rebellion, mutiny, and general kvetching in the wilderness, the revolt of Korach and his allies has always struck me as the most fraught, most pivotal, and most ideologically pregnant. It is surely because, on the face of it, the claim made by rebels seems fair, egalitarian, proto-democratic. The entire people is holy, each of us stood at Sinai, therefore who are Moses and Aaron to be in charge? Sounds like a good argument – so much so that we need a very dramatic gesture on God's part, the opening of the earth and the swallowing of the rebels, to signal clearly that they were on the wrong side.

Korach *et al.* are remembered as demagogues; their argument was NOT for the sake of heaven, but for the sake of their own power and self-aggrandizement. This is the understanding of the well-known mishnah in Pirkei Avot:

Kol mahloket she-hi l'shem Shamayim, sofah l'hitkayem; v'she-aynah l'shem Shamayim, ayn sofah l'hitkayem. Eizo hi mahloket she-hi l'shem Shamayim? Zo mahloket Hillel v'Shammai. V'she-aynah l'shem Shamayim? Zo mahloket Korah v'khol adato. (5.17)

A debate/disagreement/argument/dispute for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure; a debate not for the sake of Heaven is not destined to endure. What is (an example of) a debate for the sake of Heaven? The debate of Hillel and Shammai. And one not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his company.

I have wondered why a dispute for the sake of Heaven – the dispute itself –should be said to "endure." Is this a good thing? Should we not prefer that it be settled? Then there could be peace, and we could move on. But no, it seems that life is not like that. The truly important arguments are not so easily disposed of; disagreements persist. If both sides of a dispute are honestly seeking the truth, the dispute itself has lasting value. We learn to live with the tension of an argument that continues to reverberate without full resolution.

So what made the rabbis so sure that Korach's argument was not for the sake of Heaven?

The wilderness rebels were a loose coalition of disgruntled individuals: disaffected Levites who were jealous of the priests, members of the tribe of Reuben who resented being displaced from the status to which they felt entitled as descendants of Jacob's first-born, and various other whiners and complainers. Their only program was complaint: they had no policy suggestions, but only the sense that they did not like what was going on – and that if they were in charge they could do a better job. Everything was better before; now we are headed in the wrong direction. But the only direction they wanted to go was backward, to some romanticized past in which they would be in charge (in charge, but without responsibility).

There are always demagogues ready to step forward, but they must find fertile ground if they are to gain any traction. Conditions must be right to recruit followers: some

For the Sake of Heaven - cont.

combination of fear, feelings of dislocation, and prejudices against one or more groups of people who can be "othered" in ways that tap into our deep-seated need to blame someone (someone else – never ourselves!) for what is bothering us.

Often, religious language is brought into play: in Korach's case he invokes the concept of holiness. His stated platform is that "all the people are holy, so who are Moses and Aaron to lord it over us?" Korach attracted followers with this populist-sounding claim, but his program – insofar as he has one – is to go back to Egypt! Faith, religion, the struggle toward the holy should help lead us toward a better future, not keep us mired in the longing for an idyllic past that was never as beautiful as the demagogues – and sometimes we ourselves -- pretend.

And yet, there is another truth here that deserves some attention as well.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Order Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to remove the fire pans—for they have become sacred—from among the charred remains; and scatter the coals abroad. [Remove] the fire pans of those who have sinned at the cost of their lives, and let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar—for once they have been used for offering to the Lord, they have become sacred— (Num. 17:1-5)

How did the fire-pans of the rebels become holy, holy enough to be made into the outer layer, the skin of the altar? The text suggests that it was a warning:

and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel. Eleazar the priest took the copper fire pans which had been used for offering by those who died in the fire; and they were hammered into plating for the altar, as the Lord had ordered him through Moses. It was to be a reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider—one not of Aaron's offspring—should presume to offer incense before the Lord and suffer the fate of Korah and his band.

A warning, OK, but still – they have become sacred. This suggests more than just a warning. Among the rebels, especially the rebel leaders, were those who were only interested in power for the sake of power. Yet some among their followers were motivated by something deeper: a sincere, if misguided, longing for holiness. The *Etz Hayim* commentary cites Ha-amek Davar[2] to this effect. And Rav Kook[3] goes so far as to say "that the holiness of the firepans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy."[4]

Martin Buber and Yeshayahu Leibowitz argue that Korach's error was defining the holiness of the people as a *fait accompli*. Moses understood that holiness is a goal, a journey, not a state of permanent being.[5] (In this they profoundly disagree with Rav Kook's mystical faith in Jewish holiness.) *Kedoshim tih'yu*, we are told in Leviticus: You shall be holy. It is in the imperfect tense, uncompleted action, future potential. As Leibowitz puts it, "The holiness of Israel is not a reality but a task."[6]

In our struggle toward holiness, our mistakes can become paving stones, markers on the road. Religion is not about being perfect, but about how to do teshuvah – turning, ever returning to the path toward the goal of holiness. The scorched copper of the rebels' fire-pans is not just a warning, but a recognition that even what begins as a dispute not for the sake of Heaven can become holy, does in fact endure. Korach, after all, is not excised from the Torah, his name is not blotted out and forgotten. He even gets his name on a parasha – way better than any memorial plaque in a synagogue!

On one level, this story is simply about the establishment of the role of the Aaronide priests over the rest of the tribe of Levi. But biblical stories are never only about one thing. Moses tried to avoid being put in charge; he did not seek power for the sake of power. The fate of Korach reminds us, warns us, to act for the sake of Heaven. The goal is not personal gain, or power, not self-aggrandizement or even public thank-you's (though they are appreciated), but to try our best to move in the direction of what is sacred.

The copper fire-pans, misused but touched with sacred fire, are beaten and re-forged and made into part of the altar. So too are we, doers of many mitzvot but also committers of many mistakes, beaten and re-forged and led homeward. May we faithfully remind each other – even when we deeply disagree about important issues -- to keep going, together… for the sake of Heaven.

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[1] New York: Pantheon, 2012.

[2] The Netziv, Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th C.

[3] Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook, Chief Rabbi of Palestine during the British Mandate.

[4] Rabbinical Assembly, *Etz Hayim* (2001), p. 866. Thanks to Robert Channon for bringing this to the attention of the morning minyan.

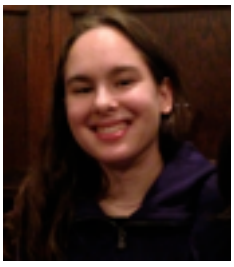
[5] See Martin Buber, "The Contradiction" in *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 182-190.

[6] See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "The Uniqueness of the Jewish People" in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. by Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard, 1992), pp. 79-87.

Introducing the Madrichim Program

by **Leah Basa** *and* **Ramona Myers-Cohen**

Leah Basa went to Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School and in the fall will be a junior at Whitney Young Magnet High school. She has been a member of Rodfei Zedek her entire life, along with her parents, Andrew and Rhea, and sisters, Shira and Eva.



Ramona Myers-Cohen attends Jones College Prep.She attended religious school at Rodfei Zedek, where her sister Thalia is now a student. Her mother, Jennifer Cohen, and grandparents, Ed and Toba Cohen are members of the congregation.

Editor's Note: Two of our teens who participated as madrichim look back in this article (which is a composite of their voices) on their year of teaching and learning. As you read this article, you can see how the interactions between the madrichim, the children and the adult staff -- as well as the interactions amongst the madrichim themselves and the interactions between their religious and secular educations -- created a rich learning experience that was more than the sum of its parts.

* * *

In this week's parsha, Nasoh, we read about the division of responsibilities given to specific Israelite families relating to the Mishkan. The Mishkan was the portable place of worship, used during the 40 years in the desert. The Gershon family was responsible for the tapestries, veils and coverings, while the Merari family oversaw the supports and structural beams and walls.

We'd like to think of the modern day Mishkan as being part of the community here at Congregation Rodfei Zedek. We take things we learn from all over and bring them back here to try to create a better social and educational environment. The way we bring things back is through service of some kind, and that is one part of the Madrichim program. The word "Madrich" or "Madricha" means a guide or a leader, and that is what we have spent the past year trying to be. We are a (relatively) new program! This is our first year with four teenagers assisting and working as teacher's aids in both the Jewish Enrichment Center and Family Institute of Jewish Living and Learning, each Sunday morning. We also meet on Sunday afternoons for lunch and a discussion of further leadership training and Jewish learning.

Each of us had different expectations starting this program back in November. Some of us were interested in continuing Jewish learning and others thought it just looked cool to interact with other teens and children. One of us didn't even have expectations as all! It just seemed like something interesting to try.

We focused on three topics within our leadership section of the program. First we took a look at childhood development. This focused on how children act and engage in each age range on a social, physical, intellectual, and moral level. While we worked with the children at both children's programs, we began applying what we learned and discussed in our lunch and learning hour. For example, how do we act when a child wants to challenge authority or if a child needs to be more active rather than sit in a circle? How much does a child understand at each age and what are they able to process?

The second topic was the structure of a peulah (which means an activity). We studied a sample activity and analyzed the different components that made it work so well. After studying the sample, we split into pairs and wrote our own activities. This challenged us to think not only about connecting the activity with Jewish content, but also made us aware of time, and the importance of organization, prep work and materials.

I learned that creativity and enthusiasm are necessary to fully engage and lead young children. Among the things we considered was how to deal or manage the situation if something unplanned occurs. What if one group ended early? What if someone forgot some materials? How can we connect the Jewish learning in multiple ways so that no matter what age, location or budget was given, the learning would still be possible in a fun way?

I benefited from learning how to write a peulah in several ways. At summer camp I learned how to run activities for younger kids, but never really learned how to connect them to any Jewish learning or lesson. I was given the opportunity to plan and lead activities with the Family Institute. It was interesting and fun learning how to engage the kids in an educational game followed by smaller activities to assess if they retained the educational information. I had to be organized, enthusiastic and creative.

The third and unexpected leadership topic came up around Purim. We were asked to lead an emergency Megillah reading rehearsal and it was the first time we put our individual Madrichim skills to the test. Leading part of the Megillah rehearsal was unexpected but valuable, especially because I don't speak Hebrew. It wasn't easy for me but the goal was to help others feel comfortable reciting their portions of the Megillah whether or not I understood what was coming out of their mouths. I valued the experience to help practice and lead a group in the process.

Introducing the Madrichim Program - cont.

by **Leah Basa** *and* **Ramona Myers-Cohen**

I enjoyed leading the Megillah reading but in a different way. I speak Hebrew and was paired with a group of children from Akiba Schechter, who are also very comfortable with the language. They were prepared and finished practicing very quickly, which left my group with extra time. This challenged me to improvise an activity to keep this group of 4-5 year olds engaged, entertained and still quiet enough to let the other groups keep practicing. I was proud that I achieved my goal of not only having them practice their parts, but also to help them overcome stage fright. The experience itself was enriching and gave me more confidence in my leading ability.

Jewish learning was the other major component of our weekly meetings. We held discussions on two topics throughout the year. The first was the Jewish perspective on tattoos and piercings, and the second was seeing genetic cloning and related technologies from a Jewish point of view.

We started the year off by reading controversial texts from the Torah about piercings and tattoos, really analyzing the text and how different sects of Judaism interpret them. We learned about stories passed down about Jewish burial regarding tattoos and how contemporary fashion and social changes conflict with not only piercing the body, but body image as a whole. Discussing the concept of being made in God's image, and not marking ourselves with some ink or piercing one's ears is on the same level as not getting a nose job or dying our hair.

We read and discussed an article about the younger generation in Israel getting tattoos of their family members' numbers from the camps tattooed on their own forearms. They do this not only to remember, but also to spark dialogue everywhere as the number of holocaust survivors dwindle. Each of us had a different reaction to the article, but raising a contemporary Jewish issue on the topic sparked great conversation about our opinions and feelings towards it.

Genetic cloning and related technologies from a Jewish point of view was also a fascinating topic for us. We dove into hypothetical ideas that could someday become legitimate issues. We also discussed the morality of cloning under Jewish law. When do Jewish values and mitzvot like "being fruitful and multiply" and "rofe cholim" (healing of the sick) become too dangerous or not worth it, medically? It's a struggle to apply laws and morals that we believe are right and good to problems they are not designed for, but are still governed by. What was really amazing about this topic was that we were able to bring knowledge from our science class at school. We also could then view the material in school from a different perspective as we learned it.

I know that the morality of cloning and certain genetic procedures are being questioned by the scientific community. However, it never occurred to me that as the world evolves, new controversies arise and new problems are born that require interpretations from a Jewish perspective. When something new is discovered or a scientific procedure is developed and made public, what Jewish values can or should be applied? Applying Jewish law to science presents fluid, ever-changing dilemmas, but also provides a never-ending opportunity for in-depth discussion and analysis.

We read a few articles and considered several scenarios that sparked discussions, but the conversations themselves were open and gave us room to think freely. We discussed how Jewish law might apply to a certain scenario regarding genetics in a human versus an animal, and our conversations included movies, stories, and books we had watched or read that evoked similar moral dilemmas. Yes, we went on crazy tangents, but they were relevant and always worked their way back to the original topic. This fluid, open style of discussion allowed each of us to bring outside information into our individual arguments and felt more like a relaxed conversation rather than a formal class.

We are really glad that we participated in the Madrichim program this year. We felt like we were not only part of the community but were respected as "grown ups" by the children, as part of the educational team by the staff and as individuals through Jewish learning. The style of Jewish learning that we were engaged in, as well as the content of the Jewish learning itself, felt interesting, exciting and applicable. We are glad we are able to be part of and share our experiences with the community and hope to continue to do so in the years to come.

Madrichim with the Family Institute.

Rebel Without a Clue

by **Jeff Ruby**

Jeff Ruby is the chief dining critic of Chicago magazine, his employer since 1997. 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.

When I was growing up in Kansas, I believed I would go to hell if I criticized a rabbi. That they were somehow holier and more important than the rest of us, and if you badmouthed one, it was like badmouthing God. Soon I learned that as a Jew, I didn't believe in hell, which came as quite a relief. Then I learned that a big part of being in a synagogue involved passing judgment on rabbis.

Around bar mitzvah age, I began to blame my reform congregation's rabbi for my lack of interest in religion. He was an easy enough scapegoat. A distant and uninspiring man with a massive ego and withering indifference to anyone else's opinion, he gave bland and predictable sermons. His advice was always wrong. He had the bedside manner of a chainsaw. In my mind, he was at least 130 years old, and was as comfortable with kids as a vegan with a lamb chop. If he taught me anything at all, it was that you got the best parking spot if you were in charge.

By the time he got ousted in the mid-1980s, the damage was done. Rabbi Ego Von Snoozenstein had become my symbol for rabbis, and for Judaism in general: A religion of and for boring old men who didn't know how to talk to me.

While serving on Rodfei Zedek's rabbinical search committee this past winter, I was forced to re-evaluate that prejudice. I've met my share of rabbis since childhood, of course, and I'm fully aware that they come in all shapes and sizes and genders—and equipped with various levels of inspiration. But I had never allowed myself to make much of a lasting connection with any of them.

Worse than that, I didn't know exactly what I wanted from a rabbi. Should he or she be a Torah expert? A skilled teacher? A wise and trustworthy listener? A bridge between Israel and me? Dynamic enough to provoke and inspire from the bima but sensitive enough to visit my grandfather when he's sick? I hadn't the first idea.

So I asked Jews I respected: What do you want most from your rabbi? Their responses covered a lot of ground.

"I need someone who inspires me."

"A person who knows everyone in the community."

"All he needs to do is name my baby and bury my father."

"He—or she—should be a mensch, a supporter of Israel, and a leader."

"I want someone who knows every inch of the Torah, and can make those stories applicable to my life."

I wasn't sure that I desired any of these qualities. It was this ambivalence, I imagined, that landed me on the search committee. I represented a certain type of congregant: active member, young family, still searching for the heart of Judaism. I listened as the committee talked about nuts and bolts—halachic issues, Kashrut, intermarriage—and pored over resumes. While considering candidates, we saw plenty of people like my old rabbi: aloof and traditional. We also saw energetic kids fresh out of rabbinical school—all passion and no wisdom. There were brilliant but inflexible scholars, adaptable but mild milquetoasts, people full of personality and lacking gravitas, and everything in between. At some point in the depths of winter, I lost hope.

One of the ideas that kept popping up was that we needed a rabbi who understood that Rodfei Zedek was "on a journey." In other words: a leader that accepted the congregation as a work in progress and was willing—and able—to go on the journey with us. It hit me that I was after the same thing personally: a rabbi who understood that I was on my own personal journey and wanted to feel energized by the uncertainty rather than scared. When we found David Minkus, a young, whip-smart Skokie native who did a lot of listening and chose his words carefully, I sensed that he understood the changes taking place in conservative Judaism, and that he understood people like me. People who still didn't know how they fit in.

In July my family and I invited Rabbi Minkus and his wife, Ilyssa, to our summer house in Harbor Country along with a handful of other young Rodfei families. We ate together, drank together, and played football on the beach. We talked about the Bulls and Hyde Park and food. Basically everything but Judaism. He got to know my family in the most relaxed atmosphere possible. And I found that I liked Rabbi Minkus a lot—so much that I eventually forgot he was a rabbi. Instead I thought: This guy could be a friend.

Is that what I needed all along? A rabbi who also happened to be a friend? Not necessarily. But a rabbi who understood and respected me, and one who knew what made my family tick, certainly seemed like a promising start.

After the Minkuses left, of course congregants began to gossip. (We could atone later; Yom Kippur was coming.) But instead of getting catty and passing judgment, the conversation took on a strangely positive tone. Optimism and enthusiasm charged the air. "I know I'm not at synagogue much," one person said. "But I like him, and I look forward to creating something together." For the first time, I felt the same way.