ללמוד וללמד

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TO LEARN AND TO TEACH FALL 2015

In this issue

From Generation to Generation:

On the cover of this issue are panels of the Lanski Windows depicting their theme: God, the Torah, and Israel are One. Designed by Rabbi Ralph Simon z"l and stained-glass artist Adolfas Valeška and dedicated to the memory Abe H. Lanski, the windows originally graced the Lanski Chapel of Rodfei Zedek's previous building. In 2000, the windows were reinstalled in the sanctuary in our new building

Volume IV Number 1

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Introduction to Volume IV Number 1

לדור ודור (l'dor vador), from generation to generation, is a phrase we sing at the end of the Kedusha. We may be inclined to regard it with nostalgia and sentimentality, as we think of our grandparents or grandchildren. But at this time of year, our High Holy Days, the phrase may take on a more challenging tone. As we realize that another year has passed, as we examine our lives we reconsider: What is it that has been passed down to us? What is important that we pass down? And, of course, how do we accomplish this?

What we transmit to future generations includes the concrete and the abstract. In this issue David Weisbach considers threats to the climate, while his son Jamie writes about the risk of misunderstanding a Jewish concept. Starting at very different points, they both end up discussing Jewish law, how it is made and applied. As you read their pieces together, consider perhaps that the concept of tikkun olam (as interpreted by Jamie) may not be a motivation for our individual acts of environmental conservation (although those are good things), but is perhaps a motivation for entering into a global climate change treaty (as described by David).

For our educators, Cantor Rachel Rosenberg, Aryeh Bernstein, and Rhea Basa, the task is central to their profession, but all our authors contemplate Jewish texts and history and the obligation of transmission. In this issue Sarah Winitzer, Stacey Hamburg, Amy Blumenthal, and Andrew Skol present the fruits of their study and discussion, contributing their interpretations of Torah portions to the living tradition.

What we inherit may be difficult to grasp or to face or to accept. Our Rebel Without A Clue addresses the problem more soberly than you may expect of him. But Jewish humor is certainly a vital part of our tradition, and resident expert Stephen Cohen offers insight on conveying it to new generations.

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

Is there a Jewish view on climate change?

by **David Weisbach**

Last June, the Pope issued an encyclical on climate change. He argued that Biblical sources, mostly from the Tanakh, require Catholics and people generally to reduce emissions and slow down climate change. The Pope's encyclical was timed to be issued about six months before what may be the single most important negotiation on the climate, the treaty negotiations in Paris in December. If there is any time to speak on climate change, it is now. So let us ask, what do Jewish teachings tell us about our obligations to combat climate change? What special duties do we, as Jews, have with respect to the climate?

Before discussing what Judaism has to say about climate change, it is important to understand exactly what the problem is. Unfortunately, even someone who carefully reads the best of the media is not likely to have a good sense of the issue and what needs to be done.

Most people know that emitting greenhouse gases, largely carbon dioxide, causes the planet to warm and the climate to change. The changing climate is likely to cause significant harms to humans and most other living things. On our current course, the environment we leave to our children, grandchildren, and beyond, will not be like the one we live in. If temperatures increase significantly, the harms will likely be terrible.

This much seems to be widely known and accepted. What is perhaps less appreciated is the persistence of carbon in the atmosphere and what that means for climate change policy. About half of the carbon we emit gets absorbed by plants and the earth quickly, but a portion stays in the atmosphere for a very long period of time. For our purposes, we can think of it as permanent. And the more carbon dioxide there is the atmosphere, the more warming and the greater the harms from climate change. These two facts combine to mean that the longer we keep polluting, the worse the problem becomes. The climate is not like a forest or a fishery, which, if left alone, regrows, and where there is a "safe" level of harvesting or fishing. The use of the atmosphere is a strictly limited resource on human timescales. The only way to stop climate change is to stop emitting carbon dioxide entirely. There is no "safe" level of emissions.

We don't know exactly how long we have until we need to stop polluting. There is great uncertainty about the extent of temperature increases we will see and the extent of the resulting harms. Nevertheless, projecting from current trends, most estimates show that we have between 50 and 150 years

before we must stop carbon pollution altogether. If we continue increasing emissions, as we have over the last 40-50 years, we could have less than 50 years before we face catastrophe. Current discussions, such as the treaty negotiations planned for Paris this December, the European Union's ambitious goals, and Obama's Clean Power Plan, only aim to reduce emissions. These are at best temporary measures. Our real goal has to be to stop carbon pollution altogether.

Carbon dioxide, unfortunately, is not like other pollutants such as mercury, sulfur dioxide, ozone depleting chemicals, or lead. While these other pollutants are dangerous and expensive to eliminate, they are the product of discrete manufacturing processes that can be changed without changing the way we live. Carbon dioxide is different. The overwhelming majority of carbon dioxide emissions comes from the use of fossil fuels. Reducing emissions means reducing the use of fossil fuels. Stopping emissions means no more fossil fuels, ever.

This is a problem because fossil fuels are the basis of modern life. We get about 85 percent of our energy from fossil fuels. The rest comes from hydroelectric power, biomass, and nuclear, with less than 5 percent coming from wind and solar. And just about everything we do depends on energy. It is so pervasive and so reliable that it is almost invisible. It is not an exaggeration to characterize the last 200 years as a quest to transform energy into useful products and services. Essentially, everything we do in our daily lives requires energy, from heating and cooling, transportation, manufacturing, and building, to simply taking a shower and making a cup of coffee. If you graphed income versus energy use for all countries in the world and for any period after the start of the industrial revolution, you would see that no country has ever achieved modern standards of living without massive use of energy. The two are connected essentially one-to-one. If you take any country in the world and tell me its income, I can tell you its energy use. Energy is the basis of modern life.

Stopping climate change while maintaining the types of lives we live now requires replacing our energy system with a new one. Our energy system is huge. It is probably the largest and most complex machine humans have ever built. In the US alone, there is about $6 trillion of large, durable energy assets, such as refineries, pipelines, utilities, and the like, not counting shorter-lived assets, such as the 250 million automobiles we drive, or tens of millions of home and commercial heaters. All of this has to be replaced—soon. The same is essentially true of all developed countries.

We could try to use less energy – conservation is a step forward – but we can't conserve our way out of the problem. No nation, no matter its green credentials and its love for the environment, is able to escape the connection between wealth and energy. We could also live with a little less, but if you want a hot shower, a cup of coffee, a roof over your head, light at night in your home, and if you commute to work (even on public transportation), you are going to need energy, and not small amounts of it. If you want to keep living in Chicago, you are going to need to heat your home. The problem of climate change in the United States and other

developing countries is replacing a vast, durable, and reliable fossil fuel infrastructure with an alternative. Moral imperatives and marches on Washington should be thought of as support for this massive engineering project, not a substitute.

The problem is very different in developing countries. Developing countries – poor countries – do not use a lot of energy (remember that energy and wealth go together). But they don't want to and shouldn't have to stay poor. Growing less poor, however, means using more energy. The cheapest and most reliable source of energy is fossil fuels. The cheapest fossil fuel in most parts of the world is coal. And coal is by far the worst fuel: per unit of energy using coal produces about twice as much carbon dioxide as natural gas. For developing countries, the problem is not replacing a massive infrastructure. It is building an energy system that is affordable.

There is a middle group of countries such as China, India, and Brazil, which have sizable energy systems but will also need more energy if they are to have income levels like the West, income levels that they aspire to and have a right to aspire to. China in particular has been using massively more energy over the last several decades as it has grown and its current energy mix is highly dependent on coal. China has a per capita income that is about average for the world – neither rich nor poor – and its emissions per person are also almost exactly the global average. Because they have so many people, however, China emits more than any other country. These middle income countries did not emit very much in the past even if they are high emitters now. They believe that they are not responsible for climate change so far and they also want to increase their energy use as they continue to grow.

The problem is getting these different groups of countries to all agree on a plan to stop emitting greenhouse gases. Each of these groups of countries and indeed, each country within each group, has different interests because of their differing sources and uses of energy. Each country alone would also be better off if the other countries reduced their emissions first. Agreement on emissions reductions under these circumstances has been elusive. Since 1992, when the first global treaty on climate change was signed, annual emissions have increase by almost 50 percent. We have moved in exactly the wrong direction notwithstanding years of negotiations.

What does Judaism have to say about this? We cannot expect that traditional sources such as the Torah or the Talmud directly address the problem. The global energy system and the resulting climate harms would have been beyond the imagination of anyone living thousands of years ago, when these sources were received or written. Instead we must look for more general guidance about how to behave.

There are two basic ways Jewish teachings might address the problem of climate change. The first is they can help us understand how to value the environment and how to balance environmental concerns with other goals. This is the approach taken by most Jewish commentators and is also the approach taken by the Pope. We find many Biblical and Talmudic sources

suggesting a concern for the earth, such as the creation story. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life has compiled a list, which includes, among others, Leviticus 25:23: (The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me), Deuteronomy 20:19: (When you besiege a city . . . do not destroy any of its trees . . . you may eat of them but not cut them down), and Genesis 2:15 (God placed the human in the Garden of Eden, l'ovdah (to serve/till) u'l'shomrah (and to guard/tend) it.)

The Pope mostly referred to the Tanakh or his "Old Testament" to find obligations to the environment. Like the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, he cited Genesis 2:15 (till and tend) and Leviticus 25:23 (strangers and sojourners). He also referred to Deuteronomy 22:6: "if you chance to come upon a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young."

This approach can be fruitful and inspiring, but there are also problems. One is that we find what we seek rather than seeking whatever it is we find. If we are inclined to want to find solutions to climate change, we come to Jewish teachings with pre-existing environmental values and risk doing the necessary excavation to find supporting sources. If we are inclined to oppose solutions to climate change, we might do a different excavation job and find support. For example, those opposed to action on climate change argue that the dominion clause in Genesis ("have dominion . . . over every living thing") supports the idea that man is free to exploit the Earth. Others, including a substantial number of Jewish commentators and the Pope, argue that this is not the correct reading of the dominion clause. I'm not fit to judge this particular debate, but I worry that some see what they want to see.

This is perhaps unavoidable. The study of Torah is a several-thousand-year conversation where each generation brings different values and views. If we did not bring something new to the conversation, we would not be doing our job. But it is also something to be cautious about. The bigger problem is that because climate change is an entirely modern problem – it arises only because of our use of fossil fuels in the last two hundred years – Biblical sources are often a poor fit. For example, in response to the Pope's process of developing the encyclical, seven rabbis representing a broad spectrum of Jewish denominations including Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist (but not any version of Orthodox) drafted a letter on climate change. Around 350 rabbis have now signed it. Here is their argument:

The texts of Torah that perhaps most directly address our present crisis are Leviticus 25-26 and Deuteronomy 15. They call for one year of every seven to be Shabbat Shabbaton – a Sabbatical Year – and Shmittah – a Year of Restful Release for the Earth and its workers from being made to work, and of Release for debtors from their debts. In Leviticus 26, the Torah warns us that if we refuse to let the Earth rest, it will "rest" anyway, despite us and upon us – through drought and famine and exile that turn an entire people into refugees.

They take from this that we are overusing the earth's resources through the burning of fossil fuels and need to let the earth rest. But the analogy is not good. The earth can support growing crops, even if every seven years it must rest. It cannot support the continued use of fossil fuels. Instead of resting for one year out of seven before resuming as before, we must entirely stop using fossil fuels. Stopping climate change is not like the Shmittah, a mere resting. There is a safe, necessary, level of agriculture. There is no safe use of fossil fuels.

These rabbis might say, "If we could have the equivalent of a Shmittah for fossil fuels, it would at least be a start. Before we entirely kick the fossil fuel habit, we must start by reducing use. Let us start with a rest." True enough, and if the rabbis' letter moves us in the right direction, they have done a mitzvah. But still, the Shmittah is not a good description of the problem, and misdiagnoses in the long run do not serve us well.

All of this leads me to wonder whether there is a different and second source of Jewish teaching that can help us think about climate change. Here is the idea. We need all nations to agree to reduce and eventually stop polluting the atmosphere with carbon dioxide. But each nation can be better off if the others stop and it does not. One nation on its own, even a large one, will have only a modest effect on climate change if all other nations stop polluting. But if each nation believes this, nobody will agree to do anything, each one hoping the others bear the burden. Economists call this the free rider problem. We might think of it as the problem of a common good: unless everyone contributes perhaps nobody will contribute.

Climate change is a big and important example of the free-rider problem but free rider problems have arisen since the beginning of civilization. Many of our governing institutions can be thought of as ways to solve the problem, including such basic things as property rights and mandatory taxes to pay for national defense. Grazing animals on common land is an old example – everyone has an incentive to use too much because others bear the cost – and societies throughout history have solved the problem in many different ways.

To my surprise, the Torah and Talmud appear to be mostly silent on the free rider problem, although I'm sure there are many examples that I've missed. Here are two but, admittedly, they are reaches. The first, which I owe to Rabbi Michael Broyde, is the set of rules governing the return of lost property. Like many rules in Jewish law, these rules distinguish between Jews and Gentiles. Jews have an obligation to return lost property only to Jews. How do we make sense of this? The idea is that obligations must be reciprocal. If you have an obligation to return someone else's lost property to them but not vice versa, they are free riding. If the United States expects China to reduce emissions, we have to become part of the group that agrees to reciprocal obligations. Other parts of Jewish law that distinguish between Jews and Gentiles may have similar explanations.

A second example is Rachel's water well. When Jacob first saw Rachel, he rolled a stone off a well to water Laban's flock. The stone, say the sources, weighed so much that it normally took three men to move it, but Jacob managed it alone. Why, though, would

there be a stone on a well that took three people to move? It is a solution to the free rider problem. The well would have taken many people to dig. If everyone has free access to the well, each has an incentive to withdraw too much. By requiring multiple people to be there before anyone can withdraw water, nobody can take water without being observed.

I am sure there are other examples. Regardless, understanding Jewish teachings about the value of the environment and our duty to care for it, and Jewish teachings about one's obligations to contribute to the common good, can help us understand our obligations and the world's obligations to combat climate change.

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Rethinking Tikkun Olam

by **Jamie Weisbach**

This summer I had the incredible opportunity – to study at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. It was an intensive six-week program of Torah, Talmud and Tefillah, with Jews of all ages and from all over the world. One of my most interesting classes was Intermediate Talmud, where we studied the fourth chapter of Masekhet Gittin. This chapter makes extensive use of an ancient term that has become a buzzword in modern liberal Judaism—tikkun olam. However, the way the Talmud uses this term is quite different from how we use it today. The evolution of meaning is an essential part of the Jewish tradition, but in this case, I think something has been lost in the redefinition.

The fourth chapter of Gittin begins with talking about the sending of a *get* (a document of divorce), and at what point a man can invalidate a *get* after sending it to his wife. The Mishnah explains that in previous times, a man could invalidate a *get* at any time, in any place, and without his wife's knowledge. This poses obvious problems. Under this system a woman who received a *get* could never be certain that she was halachically single and free to remarry. Fortunately, Rabban Gamliel ha-Zaken stepped in and changed the rule. Now, invalidation of the *get* can only happen by either preventing her from receiving it in the first place, or telling her directly that the *get* has been invalidated, and once the *get* is in her hands, it can no longer be invalidated. This creates clarity and ensures that once a woman receives a *get*, she can feel confident that she is truly divorced. Rabban Gamliel justifies this ruling with the phrase "mi'pnei tikkun ha'olam" – for the sake of tikkun olam.

This is the first of many legislative acts taken by Rabban Gamliel that are justified with the phrase "mi'pnei tikkun ha-olam." He mandates that a *get* be signed by two witnesses, and that the *get* make clear which man and which woman are getting divorced. In other areas of law, Rabban Gamliel also clarifies the status of one who is half-slave and half-free, and forbids Jews from ransoming captives for more than they are worth or buying religious articles from non-Jews for more than they are worth. All of these decrees, covering a wide range of legal areas, are made "for the sake of tikkun olam".

The power of tikkun olam as a justification is quite expansive. In the Gemara, Rebbi pushes back against Rabban Gamliel's rulings, pointing out that if you follow Gamliel's ruling, and invalidate a man's invalidation of a *get* (thus ruling that his ex-wife is single when before she would have still been married), you permit a woman who is married, according to strict Torah law, to consider herself single and marry

another man. Therefore, according to Rebbi, this concept of "tikkun olam" is being used to permit married women to commit adultery! And yet the rulings of Rabban Gamliel stand despite this objection–a testimony to the power of this concept to alter Halakhah.

But what does he mean by "tikkun olam"? First off, it's not an action. Tikkun olam isn't something that one does or that Jews are obligated to do. Rather, it is a legal principle that can be invoked by Rabbis (legislators) to justify halakhic innovation (legislation), usually the banning of an activity that is not forbidden by the Torah, but which seems to have adverse effects. While the cases are disparate, the uniting features seem to be clarifying cases of unclear legal status and preventing behavior that is unproblematic on an individual level, but potentially destructive if done on a systemic level. The Gemara debates whether it is more about preventing individual tragedies or societal problems, but the thrust of the debate and the majority of cases in the Mishnah seem to be aggregate, society-wide problems, rather than individual tragedies.

Clearly the term "tikkun olam" has been redefined since the time of the Mishnah. When used by contemporary Jews, it refers to good deeds and acts of kindness, often volunteer work or environmental advocacy. This differs from the older understanding in three main ways. First, it is now understood to be an action taken by individuals rather than a legal principal invoked by Rabbis. Secondly, it refers generically to almost any act of charity, kindness or volunteerism, rather than the specific cases of legal uncertainty and unclear categories. Lastly, it is talked about now as an obligation on all Jews, whereas in the Mishnah, it is simply one legal principle of many which can be used to justify legislation, and not an action, much less an obligation.

While encouraging people to do good deeds is obviously both good and important, I think this definition of tikkun olam creates several problems. First off, it is so broad and vague as to be meaningless: "tikkun olam" can be used to refer to almost any nice thing a person can do. This lack of specificity is convenient, but also means that it can refer to such a wide range of actions that encouraging people do to "tikkun olam" is more of a cliché than a specific moral imperative.

Secondly, this broadness often ends up justifying intellectual laziness. Rather than investigating in a serious way what the Jewish tradition has to say about different forms of charity, our obligations in charity, or how we should understand what it means to do good deeds, we invoke the principle of tikkun olam and leave it at that, having failed to delve into all our tradition has to offer.

Additionally, tikkun olam isn't actually an obligation according to any Halakhic literature, though we often imply that it is when talking about Jewish volunteerism. This leads us to ignore of a large number of real mitzvot relating to specific aspects of social obligation and charity, either by lumping them all under the category of tikkun olam or failing to study them at all.

Lastly, by treating tikkun olam as an action rather than a legal principle, we lose one of the tools that a Rabbi can use to effect halachic change and

make our Halachah more in line with our values.

It is more useful to reframe the discussion about Jewish volunteerism around specific texts discussing our obligations in different forms of charity, and to keep tikkun olam as a legal principle – one of the many tools in our toolbox for effecting legal change. This would lead both to more nuanced understandings of our volunteer work and to new avenues to understanding how Halakhic change can happen.

There's nothing wrong with redefining words and coming to new understandings about what our traditions mean, but let's do so in way that is nuanced and encourages serious engagement with the Jewish tradition, not generalization and loss of meaning.

J*amie joined Rodfei Zedek at age 10 when his family moved to Hyde Park and has been involved in synagogue life ever since. He is the son of David Weisbach and Joan Neal and brother of Ilana. Currently a senior at Bowdoin College, Jamie is studying English, Theater, and Religion. This summer he studied at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem*.

Jewish Humor: Beyond the Punchlines

by **Stephen Z. Cohen**

A thorough analysis of Jewish humor would require a look at humor in the literature of Sholom Aleichem, Philip Roth, etc., the films of Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, etc., the plays of Neil Simon, Wendy Wasserstein, etc., the TV of Mollie Goldberg, Jerry Seinfeld, etc., the parodies of Mickey Katz, Allen Sherman, etc. and a variety of other artistic forms. However, the most common and most frequently experienced transmission of Jewish humor is the Jewish joke. While the joke's creator may be long gone, its simplicity allows for anyone to be the jokester, only one other person need serve as audience and both can share the laugh. In fact, sharing jokes has served as an important and useful connection between Jews, and over a period of hundreds of years, as an important coping mechanism during a long and painful history. "Laughter Through Tears" has been a significant mantra of the Jewish experience.

Here are three examples of truly Jewish jokes and an explanation of their uniquely Jewish elements.

Let's examine two nearly identical jokes from the turn of the 20th century. Each features the same two people, in the same location, at the same time, engaging in the same behavior. The first could be told about people from any other culture. The second could only be a Jewish joke. Both stories feature the renowned actor, director and ladies' man from the early 1900s Yiddish theater, Boris Thomashevsky (who, by the way, was the grandfather of Maestro Michael Tilson Thomas).

The Thomashevsky Jokes

I. Boris Thomashevsky has just finished his intimacy with his current lady of the evening. As he is putting on his clothes, he says to her (and this would certainly be said in a heavy Yiddish accent): "Instead of giving you your usual fee, here is a ticket for my performance tonight."

His lady friend holds the ticket and angrily says, "With this, how can I put bread on the table?"

Thomashevsky sneeringly replies, "You want bread? Sleep with a baker!"

That joke would be no different if it were told about John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino or any other theater idol from that era. The only reason that joke appears in several anthologies containing stories from the so-called "Golden Age of Jewish Humor" (approximately 1880-1950) is the Jewish name of Boris Thomashevsky and his accent. Compare that to:

2. Boris Thomashevsky has just arrived at the apartment of his current lady of the evening. He has undressed and slipped into the bed. He says, "OK. I'm ready. Blow out the light."

She says, "I can't."

He says, "You know I have to do this in the dark. Blow out the light."

She says, "I can't."

He asks, "Why can't you blow out the light?"

She replies, "I've got Yahrzeit!"

This can ONLY be a Jewish joke and represents a truer and richer example of Jewish humor than does the baker story. Perhaps you, the reader, can recall jokes you have heard or told and think about their essential content. Are they truly Jewish in concept and behavior, or merely "flavored" with a Jewish name or dialect?

The Golden Age of Jewish Humor coincided with the arrival of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America between about 1880 and 1920. The Golden Age was marked by the beginnings of radio and Hollywood, dominated by Jewish writers and performers; the popularity of the Yiddish writer/humorist Sholom Aleichem; the flourishing of Yiddish theater on 2nd Avenue in New York City and Ogden and 12th Street in Chicago; and the over 600 New York Catskill mountain resort hotels known as the Borscht Belt, where hundreds of Jewish comedians wrote and performed Jewish material - in the early years, mostly in Yiddish to Yiddish-speaking audiences. The end of that Golden Age coincided with the decline of the Borscht Belt hotels in the 1960s, fewer restrictions on vacation sites open to Jews, the broader availability of TV as an entertainment form, the assimilation of second- and third-generation Jews into American life, greater Jewish income and mobility and air travel. Moreover, as many Jewish comics sought wider exposure, their material content changed to appeal to the mass television audiences and advertising sponsors of shows like Ed Sullivan, and they went on to become the famous standups we all know from radio, TV, films and Las Vegas. The jokes from that early Golden Age can be found now only in anthologies of Jewish humor.

The origins of American Jewish humor resided in the Ashkenazi world of Eastern Europe and most of our Jewish jokes are extensions of that prior (mostly) Russian shtetl experience.

A Joke from the Old Country

In a little shtetl, two families have approached the shadchan (matchmaker). "Find us a husband for our daughter." Each girl is 14 or 15 years old and not engaged. Finding no suitable young man for either girl in this tiny shtetl, he writes his friend, the head of a Yeshiva 40 or 50 miles away, a place filled with eligible young bachelors. "Send me two boys for these two girls."

The Rosh Yeshiva selects two older students and sends them on their way. En route, they are attacked by Russian bandits and tragically one of them is killed. The other hides in the woods. When he feels it is safe, he continues on to the home of the shadchan and tells what happened. Distraught by this news, the shadchan informs both families that only one boy is now available. Both sets of parents say, "Too bad about the boy left in the woods, but the one that's here belongs to our daughter."

Caught in the middle, the shadchan tells the Rebbe of his dilemma. The Rebbe says, "Send everyone to my house." Into the Rebbe's living room come the shadchan, the boy, the two girls and the two sets of parents.

The mother of the first girl says,"That boy belongs to MY daughter" and gives her reasons.

The mother of the second girl says, "He belongs to MY daughter" and gives her reasons.

They all turn to the Rebbe. He ponders a while, strokes his long white beard and finally says, "There is only one thing to do." He goes into the kitchen and returns with a big butcher knife. "I'll just have to cut him in half and give half to each girl."

The mother of the first girl says, "Rebbe, don't do that. You'll kill him!"

The mother of the second girl says," Go ahead and cut!"

The Rebbe says, "Aha. That's the mother-in-law!"

This joke is replete with special Jewish elements; a shadchan who makes matches-a ubiquitous presence in every Jewish community; the existence of a yeshiva where many boys study is uniquely Jewish; the fact that a rabbi is used to solve problems is, of course a Jewish element, and the rabbi's drawing on the biblical story of King Solomon threatening to carve a newborn claimed by two mothers to determine the real mother is yet another feature that makes this such a truly Jewish joke. And, of course, there is a long folk tradition in the old country of harsh Jewish mothers-in-law.

Alas, this joke was not likely to be a part of a Jewish Borscht Belt comic's routine, since their agenda was usually to get a quick laugh and a lengthy rabbinic tale such as this was probably not what a resort crowd was seeking. However, it is a joke that might be appreciated more (I hope) by a congregation of learners such as those of CRZ.

Of the many hundreds of Jewish jokes that I have heard and told, this, I believe, may be among the most profound. And it's funny as can be, as well.

A Classic Jewish Businessman Joke from the Golden Age

Two business partners have just let go their last employee since the depression has wiped out their little company. They lock the door and go to lunch. After lunch they discuss; "Shall we go back to the shop?" "What's the use?"

"Let's just go for a walk."

After walking a few blocks, they come to a church. In front is a sign: "CONVERT TODAY. RECEIVE $300." Excitedly they discuss: "300 dollars." "We could be back in business." "Will you do it?" "Should I do it?"

Finally, one agrees to go in while the other partner stays on the sidewalk. A half hour later the first partner comes out of the church.

"Well? Did you do it?"
"Yeah, I did it."
"How do you feel?"
"OK. I guess I feel OK."
"Did you get the 300 dollars?"
"Is that all you people think about?"

Here is an American Jewish joke rich in meaning:

a) Partnerships were a common protective business arrangement for new Jewish immigrants.

b) Despite the usual stereotype, the story reflects the reality that not all Jewish enterprise was successful and Jews, too, became victims of America's hard times.

c) Innovation was an important part of Jewish entrepreneurship and securing largesse from the church is yet another

creative way to keep the business afloat.

d) The joke conveys a continuation of the Christian Church's 2000 year old desire to convert the Jews. At least it allows for a gentler inducement than an inquisition or other popular brutal Church conversion methods.

e) After being a gentile for only five minutes, the partner has already taken on the familiar anti-Semitic attitude toward Jews. Or, perhaps, the new convert is, indeed still Jewish, and therefore is intending to keep the money for himself, a hidden yet still anti-Semitic trope, known only to the joke's creator. Either way, the punchline is loaded with possible meanings, and the entire joke, I believe – beyond being one of the funniest, in my repertoire, at least – is filled with a trove of meaningful Jewish content.

There you have it. Even an innocent joke can find itself subjected to some Jew's effort at Talmudic analysis.

I hope you got to smile a bit and enjoyed looking beyond the punchlines.

Dr. Stephen Z. Cohen received his A.M. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago. He taught at the U. of C. School of Social Service Administration, the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv University. Among numerous publications, he co-authored The Other Generation Gap: The Middle Aged and Their Aging Parents. He served as consultant to the former Drexel Home for the Aged, the Council for Jewish Elderly, the Illinois Department of Mental Health and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals and Nursing Homes. His parents Hi and Celia R. Cohen joined Congregation Rodfei Zedek in 1936. He had his Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation with Rabbi Ralph Simon, was a CRZ Vice-President, and continues as a Life Trustee. For over 30 years in a second career, he has travelled the country lecturing and entertaining on the subject of Jewish humor. His children Joshua and Judy were Bar/Bat Mitzvah-ed at Rodfei Zedek. He lives downtown with his wife Leslie Fox. They have four grandchildren; Eli and Asher Cohen in Evanston and Mosey and Tali Brown in Seattle.

From a Kipah in my Hand to a Kipah on my Head

by **Cantor Rachel Rosenberg**

Cantor Rosenberg wearing her tallit entitled, "Matriarchs in Paradise." The tallit is designed by Israeli artist Yair Emmanuel and has become the "official" tallit of Women of the Wall.

I looked out at the colorful sea of women gathering in the crisp Jerusalem morning, glad I had forced myself to wake up at 5 am to celebrate Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon, with the Women of the Wall. I marveled at the diversity of the group whose numbers were growing, from the spirited modern Orthodox girls in their long skirts and free-flowing hair to other women wrapped in a tallit around their shoulders, some with and some without the head covering of a kipah. As I adjusted my own tallit and kipah, I noticed my reflection in the sunglasses of the woman standing across from me and took note of how I identified with the first group from my younger days while my ritual attire created an affiliation with this latter group. As the melodies of Hallel began and the women's voices joined together to create a pure and magical sound, I couldn't help but reflect on the path that had guided me to this moment and the gratitude that I felt for following it.

I'll never forget that morning in high school when I knew a shift in my Jewish world was ahead. I had recently moved to Chicago from New England, where my father had been a pulpit rabbi in a Conservative synagogue. I saw it as a privilege to be studying in the "big city" of Chicago at the Ida Crown Jewish Academy – a modern Orthodox high school with high standards in both Jewish studies (taught in Hebrew) and college-prep secular studies (everything else), where we attended classes from 8:00 am until 5:30 pm every day except Friday, when we ended early for Shabbat. I got a great Jewish education at the Academy and grew to especially love the "davening" we did with the entire school each morning, full of exuberant singing and led by male students.

For Jewish subjects, the girls studied separately from the boys. The curriculum was essentially the same with one major difference: Boys would study Gemara from the Talmud each day, while girls would not. This would sometimes trouble me, as the rigorous study of Gemara is central to Jewish learning throughout our rich history, and I had found it fascinating during the brief encounter I had had with it previously. So when my classmate and kindred spirit piped up one morning in our girls' class entitled "How to Keep a Jewish Home" I paid close attention. "Mrs. 'Cohen,' " she said inquisitively of ourlearned and respected teacher, "Why don't the girls at this school learn Gemara?" "Yes," I chimed in, "I studied Gemara in my old school and loved it."

Mrs. Cohen responded to both of us with a look and tone I did not expect: "Girls," she said, "Why would you *want* to study Gemara? It's very *hard*."

While we both knew that Mrs. Cohen thought the girls in our class were certainly smart enough to tackle the difficult subject, it was startling to hear her imply that we shouldn't bother if it was not necessary.

I looked around at the other girls in my class, expecting them to join with Sara and me in expressing the desire to take on this important Jewish learning challenge. Instead -- and this was even more unexpected -- the other girls in my class were silent. Most of them simply continued with their frequent in-class pastime: crocheting a knitted kipah (head covering) for a favorite male family member or friend.

I am still waiting for a fashion-forward catalog to offer a version of tefillin in purple.

While I myself had crocheted an occasional kipah or two, it was at that moment when I sensed that my path would likely diverge from that of my high-school classmates in terms of how we would relate to our future lives as Jewish women. Several went on to participate in Jewish studies programs for women in Israel and some married at a young age. For me, I sensed it would be important to seek out opportunities not traditionally open to girls, such as studying Talmud, chanting from the Torah, and learning to lead prayer, when and if such opportunities would become available to me at a later date.

Fast-forward several years to my college days, and although by this time I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to lead High Holiday services and chant from the Torah, I was not yet comfortable with the idea of wearing a kipah or tallit; the image of these ritual objects and their association with men was too strong. But a few experiences began to change that.

First, I came to know a few women, mostly from the Reform movement, who were studying to become rabbis and who each wore a kipah and tallit. Women in the Conservative movement began to join this trend as the Jewish Theological Seminary accepted its first women into the rabbinical and cantorial programs of the Conservative Movement. These role models whom I admired caused me to view my relationship with Jewish ritual through a different lens; it seemed that a Jewish woman could be smart, strong, and feminine simultaneously. Finally, I noticed a tallit in a catalog that came in purple and had the names of the four matriarchs on each corner. That changed everything! I ordered the tallit and began to wear it on Shabbat mornings.

The tallit blessing took on new meaning as I said it for the first time: Praised are You, Adonai our God, who has added to our holiness through the mitzvot and has commanded us to be enveloped in the tzitzit, the fringes of the tallit. What a privilege it was to experience the feeling of being wrapped in the tallit and take on this mitzvah as my own. A few years later, I began to wear tefillin at morning minyan and although I was once again uncomfortable with the gender association, I overcame my discomfort and was glad to be able to fulfill the words of the Sh'ma and V'Ahavta prayers: "You shall bind them as a sign about your hand and wear them as frontlets between your eyes." I sought

and found new meaning in the ritual of tefillin and the "mitzvah marks" it left on my arm afterwards, although I am still waiting for a fashion-forward catalog to offer a version of tefillin in purple.

It turns out that the first tallit I had chosen was the same design that was subsequently chosen as the official tallit worn by the Women of the Wall, the group that has been gathering each Rosh Chodesh at the Kotel in Jerusalem for the past 25 years. While I don't usually subscribe to the sentiment, as I stood as one of the Women of the Wall on Rosh Chodesh wearing my tallit, I couldn't help but feel that somehow this was meant to be. I felt inspired about my taking my place among this varied group of women on the first day of the new month and was buoyed by the presence of a few supportive men standing behind us and joining in the powerful melody from Hallel: "Ozi v'zimrat Yah, vay'hi li lishuah" – Adonai is my strength, my song, my triumph. It was good to feel strengthened by the presence of this unique community, diverse yet united in its expression of Jewish ritual and identity in the heart of Jerusalem.

I continue to be strengthened by this experience, and appreciate the ways it carries forward as I experience Jewish life in Chicago. Just as the diversity of the group at the Wall was energizing while contributing to its unique strength, the diversity of our community at Rodfei Zedek continues to energize and strengthen all of us as we deepen our learning of tradition while exploring new models for Jewish expression in Hyde Park.

Not long ago, I was glad to hear the news that there is now a Talmud track available for girls at the Ida Crown Jewish Academy, further opening the door for all students who want to engage in the richness of Jewish learning.

And as we sing the words and melody "Ozi v'zimrat Yah" each month at the Na'aseh V'nishma minyan, I am strengthened by the presence of our unique and diverse community joining our voices in song while seeking and embracing the many ways we celebrate Jewish life.

Rachel Rosenberg has served as Cantor at Rodfei Zedek since 2011, when she was invested as Hazzan at the Cantors Assembly Convention. She had previously studied psychology and music at the University of Illinois and Jewish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and earned her Masters of Management degree at Northwestern University. Rachel worked as Professional Development Manager at IBM and then Ritual Director for Congregation B'nai Tikvah, Deerfield. She serves on the Cantors Assembly Executive Council and Education Committee and is past president of the Chicago Milwaukee Association of Synagogue Musicians. With her husband Chuck she is a founding member of the ensemble, Shakshuka, which features Israeli and Sephardic music "spiced with jazz." Rachel and Chuck recently moved to the city of Chicago to be closer to their children and to the Rodfei Zedek community!

Introducing the Hyde Park Teen Beit Midrash

by **Aryeh Bernstein**

I am excited to announce the creation of the Hyde Park Teen Beit Midrash,a new program for 6th-10th grade Torah study, housed at Rodfei Zedek on Sunday mornings. As we prepare to launch after the holidays, I want to give you some background about what this is and where it comes from.

I grew up in this congregation in the 80s and early 90s, and it was here that the embers of my own hunger for Torah learning were stoked. My own desire to understand things, including in my Jewish life, was nurtured through the natural rhythms of a community of intellectuals, in which the world of ideas was inhabited with joy,

Nevertheless, by adolescence, as Judaism became more central in my life, I became acutely aware that I lacked the Jewish tools and literacy that I was developing with regard to fiction and politics, history, science, and poetry. I was constantly challenged and nurtured into a more literate and critical student at Kenwood Academy, but my Jewish literacy remained elementary. One of the most significant features of my college years, at Columbia University, JTS, Hebrew University, and a yeshiva in Israel, was my introduction to and love affair with the Talmud and other texts of Rabbinic Judaism, and with the relationships forged poring over those texts in learning pairs (chavruta), joining voices with a room full of other learning pairs to create a cacophonous symphony whose over-arching theme seemed to be: *This Matters*.

At the same time, though, a cloud hovered, throwing shade on this excitement: that high bar for literacy, the culture of learning as spiritual practice, and the assumption that scholarship was not reserved for professionals, were usually accessible only by passing through sexism, historical dishonesty, and sometimes racism, whereas in the more honest and egalitarian environments in which I participated, which reflected what I believed to be Torah's core values, learning was not expected and often not available, and what there was tended to be frontal, shallow, and not empowering. A life project emerged: proliferating Torah learning culture in egalitarian spaces.

Fifteen years ago, I co-founded a Beit Midrash Program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, an opt-in track in Jewish learning focused on skill-building in Talmud study. We had strong support of the camp leadership, but also much doubt from the rank-and-file as to whether more than a handful of teens would be interested. Immediately, 28 teens, boys and girls, from different social groups, chose the program and found it the most enjoyable learning experience of their camp careers. Within a few years, as many as 55 campers,

aged 12-15, opted in, significantly enriching the learning culture throughout the whole camp, and cultivating all sorts of unexpected relationships through the prism of Torah.

Twenty years followed during which I graduated high school, moved away from Chicago, lived in Israel for 14 years, had adventures in Jewish learning and teaching at the Hartman boys' high school in Jerusalem and the Drisha girls' high school summer yeshiva in New York, taught and counseled college students and recent graduates at the liberal Orthodox Yeshivat Ma'ale Gilboa in Israel and at the egalitarian and independent Yeshivat Hadar in New York.

Now back in Hyde Park, I have been delighted to jump into the fresh and vibrant community life. It quickly became clear, though, that one population not yet well served for Torah learning is teens.

The Teen Beit Midrash aims to fill the gap. Operating independently, in strong partnership with Rodfei Zedek, It is open to enrollment by any Jewishly identified 6th-10th grader with Hebrew phonetic reading capability and interest in learning.

Program Goals and Philosophy

The goals of the Teen Beit Midrash are:
• developing literacy in reading core Jewish texts, particularly Mishna, Midrash, and Talmud;
• nurturing a mature attitude to learning that builds on sociality and collaboration;
• motivating excitement about Judaism through the creative energy of Torah study.

The key component of the program addressing all of these goals is that the bulk of learning time will be spent not with the whole group in one class together, but in chavruta. Everyone will study the same text in the original Hebrew, in the same room, side by side, but with differentiated learning tools, so that participants from a wide range of backgrounds will simultaneously improve their skills at decoding and drawing out ideas in age-appropriate ways fitting their skill level. Students who are new to text study and at early stages of Hebrew proficiency will be right at home, as will Akiba-Schechter graduates and everyone in between. Everyone will come together for guided discussion on the content learned. In this way, we will strive to fulfill the Talmud's teaching that

אין תורה נקנית אלא בחבורה

"Torah is acquired only in fellowship" (Berachot 63b).

Whereas many schools implicitly or explicitly set students in competition with each other, the Teen Beit Midrash perceives that the real world works in the opposite way: knowledge and understanding anywhere raise the entire pool and it is in each person's interest for everyone to know and understand more. Chavruta pairs will be encouraged to communicate with each other as they work through the texts. Multiple modes of creative expression will be invited. For the Teen Beit Midrash, cultivating a fun and social environment is not a concession intended to lure kids into education, but a critical component of learning.

Program Structure

The Teen Beit Midrash will meet Sunday mornings throughout the year, from 10:00 to 12:15, including time for snacks, schmoozing, group check-in and introduction, chavruta learning, group discussion on the Talmud text

learned, and brief, closing nuggets from the weekly Torah portion. The program will be tuition-supported, with some anticipated funds from Jewish educational innovation microgrants and individual donations.

Educational Leadership and Context

I will serve as Director of the Teen Beit Midrash and lead teacher, and will be joined by Avital Morris, a rising junior at the University of Chicago, a budding Torah scholar in her own right with rich experience with Jewish teens from years as a counselor and teacher at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires.

A Beit Midrash is not a new concept. It is a long-cherished institution of Jewish life. Pronounced Beis Medrash in Ashkenazi style, the "House of Learning", or "House of Inquiry", has been an idea-laboratory and intellectual public square of a Jewish community, a home often open day and night for both public instruction and private studies, a library bustling with noise and energy.

In recent years, our Beit Knesset ("House of Gathering", synagogue) has grown into a fuller meaning of this term, well beyond a Beit Tefillah ("House of Prayer"). This includes Torah study: to understand the Talmud's teaching that

אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל

הבל תינוקות של בית רבן

"the world exists only on account of the clamor of children in the Rabbinic House" (Shabbat 119b), one need only spend an afternoon in the Rodfei Zedek building. Let's aspire to extend this learning energy to the fullness of adult life, so that any time one comes into the building, s/he will find at least two people learning Torah in the library/Beit Midrash. Meanwhile, let's set a model with Sunday mornings and our precious teens, and invite them to become a community through the portal of Torah study.

We will not be alone. Some dear friends and students of mine in Boston have built a successful program of this sort called the Cambridge Teen Beit Midrash, now entering its third year. On Chicago's North Shore, five stellar scholar-educators, including Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell, who spoke recently at Rodfei Zedek, opened the Orot Center for New Jewish Learning, a center for adult Torah learning and mindfulness practice, where I taught a Talmud series this past spring. This fall, they, too, are opening a teen program. And there are more. Our teens want authenticity, to be taken seriously, to be stimulated, and to feel that what they are doing *matters*. I look forward to the buzz of Talmud study from these smart, budding community members this year and invite us all to piggy-back on their energy.

To find out more about the Teen Beit Midrash or to register your child, please email me at:

aryeh.bernstein@gmail.com

Aryeh Bernstein is a 5th-generation South Sider. Son of Charles and Roberta Bernstein, he serves as a Torah educator at Mishkan Chicago and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, is a Senior Editor of Jewschool.com, and has led High Holiday services for fourteen years at New York's Kehilat Hadar. He is a founding board member of Jewish Public Media and the Sermon Slam series, and has independently released a hip-hop album in 2011, " A Roomful of Ottomans."

Celebrating Rhea Basa and the Family Minyan

Last spring Rhea Basa "retired" from Family MInyan, a service she created eight years ago. A teacher of mathematics and music at Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School, Rhea, was the leader and mainstay of the group, which davened monthly on Shabbat mornings and on some holidays, as well. Her husband Andrew and daughters Shira, Leah, and Eva were core members of the minyan.

Leah, Shira, Eva, Rhea, Andrew at the Dead Sea the evening after Eva's Jerusalem Bat Mitzvah

With the development of new services and educational programs, the Family Minyan will no longer be meeting, but Rhea has earned the acknowledgment and gratitude of the Rodfei Zedek community. The following tributes were presented at the last service:

on behalf of the Campbell/Cohen family:

When we joined Rodfei Zedek about six years ago, no one in our family knew anything about how to participate in a synagogue. In fact, none of us had ever set foot in a synagogue. Ignorance was truly the order of our day when we started attending services at CRZ.

Rhea Basa welcomed us into family service with open arms. One of the things I most appreciate about her is that she invited us to participate but gave us the space to become more fully involved as we became more comfortable. I remember the first time Jeff carried the Torah, Carolyn opened the Ark, Sarah read from the Torah, and I said my first Aliyah. I was the most reticent of the family, but Rhea never pushed me when I shrank from a request. Her goal for all of us in family service was to bring us into the congregation and into a lifetime of participation. She was in no hurry.

Rhea's aim for the family service particularly concerned developing in the children an understanding and appreciation of the ritual. At every service children were called up according to grade level to perform parts of the service. Preschoolers marched behind the Torah bearer, bearing their own plush Torahs. Usually the first and second graders led the Shmonah Esrei, mumbling the Hebrew under their breath because they were so nervous; older kids led the Sh'ma; sixth and seventh graders recited the Hatzi Kaddish. As the children got older they had the opportunity to leyn from the Torah (and their parents were forced to recite their first Aliyah).

Discussions of the week's portion invited full participation from the children as well, and at times they helped to lead that discussion.

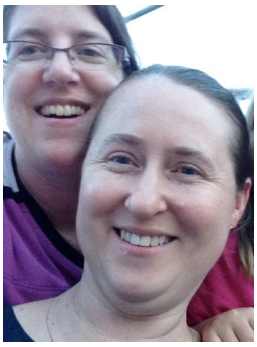
By the time Sarah became a Bat Mitzvah last November, she was ready to read with confidence before the full congregation. Jeff, Carolyn and I were ready to participate along with her. We thank Rhea for teaching us so well.

Barb, Jeff, Sarah, and Carolyn

Jeffrey Campbell holds a PhD in economics from Northwestern University and works as an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago; Barbara Cohen earned a Master of Arts in Teaching degree at Brown University and a Master's degree in political science from the University of Rochester. She advocates for families of children with special needs. Carolyn, avid quilter, is a junior at Jones College Prep; and Sarah, avid swimmer, is in eighth grade at Akiba-Schechter. They have been members of Rodfei Zedek for six years.

on behalf of the Friedman-Parks family:

The Family Minyan services on the High Holidays were our first introduction to Rodfei Zedek. Our experiences at those services were part of the draw that pulled us into this congregation's orbit, and the Family Minyan services throughout the year were something we all looked forward to. Rhea's ability to engage all members of the family while still using the traditional nusach, to give children a sense of ownership and leadership in their davening, and to draw out lessons of Torah through discussions and parsha plays, have made Family Minyan a unique aspect of this congregation's spiritual and educational life. Thank you so much to Rhea for the dedication, creativity, and heart she brought to this and so many other endeavors. We are fortunate to have had the experience of worshiping with her.



Stephanie, Miriam, Shira and Julia

The Friedman-Parks family are proud Hyde Parkers and members of Rodfei Zedek. Stephanie Friedman holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MA in English from the University of Chicago. She teaches writing and serves as Director of Summer Session Programs in the Graham School at the University of Chicago. Miriam Friedman-Parks holds a BA from Northeastern Illinois University and is currently working on a Master's degree in early childhood education there. She works as an administrator at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School, where Shira and Julia have just started the 8th and 2nd grades, respectively

This American Shabbat: Shelach

The talks printed here represent the second installment of This American Shabbat. Created by Rabbi David Minkus in his first year at Rodfei Zedek, the concept grew from the NPR program, This American Life. Rabbi Minkus selected three congregants to study Parshat Shelach with him for a few months Their conversations culminated in presentations during services on June 13. Although the speakers studied together, they responded to the portion from dramatically different standpoints. The same parsha elicited one reaction from a teacher, one from a lawyer, and one from a medical researcher.

by Stacey Hamburg

There is a lot to think about in this week's parsha. We know it primarily for the story of the spies sent to scout out the land that was the final destination of the Jewish people after their journey out of Egypt. The parsha also tells us why the Israelites were consigned to wander 40 years in the desert, talks about why we use tzitzit, and elaborates on sacrifices, offerings, and what happens in particular if there is any inadvertent as well as "brazen" wrongdoing.

As I studied it with Rabbi Minkus and my colleagues, I was continually reminded of how from those 40 long years of wandering a community developed, and how we are not only the recipients of this community but also its caretakers for the generations yet to come.

Many Torah scholars suggest that a central theme of this week's parsha is leadership. I very much agree, and even more so, I think it speaks to which qualities are absolutely essential for good leadership. I want to speak to only one of these qualities this morning — the way that leaders deal with fear, in themselves and among the people that they lead. For to me, fear sets the context of this parsha narrative.

The narrative begins, "Send out for yourselves men to scout the land." To paraphrase God, Moses is told that he can send spies out to inspect the promised land if the people feel they have to verify the integrity of his promise about what the land will provide.

Moses, as usual, is put in a tough spot. He feels the insecurity of the people, their doubts, and their simmering fears. Moses wants to keep this situation from spiraling out of control, so he tries to cultivate consensus among all the tribes by appointing respected members from each one in an attempt to ensure that all were properly represented in gathering the information that would provide confidence that the land was good.

It is important to note here that God never said that entering the land would be easy — only that it would be worth it.

At the outset the spies who ventured into the land already seemed skeptical, if not discouraged. These dispositions are very problematic, for we all know that fear and doubt creates a dangerous

context when receiving and processing new information, often leading to flawed judgements when, in particular, considering new things and the unknown.

Returning to the camp, all the spies agreed that the land was indeed as good as God had advertised, but ten of them, unable to contain their fears, focused only on the difficulties involved in conquering it. Their fears blocked their abilities to appreciate the remarkable opportunity before them. In contrast, Joshua and Caleb see past these difficulties and plead with the people to persevere on their mission, reminding them that "God is pleased with us, he will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey."

How the people respond at this point in the story is critical. Although Joshua and Caleb behave like leaders, they are not recognized as such; the people choose instead to recognize the leadership of those who reinforce their own fears and insecurities — an occurrence that so many of us have experienced in our own lives. It is interesting to also note the behavior of Moses and Aaron in this situation. For whatever reasons, neither steps up to support Joshua and Caleb; they only do a nice job of damage control in negotiating afterwards with an understandably very angry God.

When I reflect upon my own experiences with what makes a good leader, I immediately think of brains, empathy, strength (both physical and emotional), a certain amount of charisma, an ability to connect to others, someone who can manage many moving parts at once, someone who exudes confidence, and is a decision-maker. But for me at the top of this list of attributes is that effective leaders have the ability to manage the fear that every one of us experiences during tough times in difficult situations. They have the ability to confront their fears, pushing themselves and others to gather the strength that we all have within us, to realize our aspirations as a community.

I have seen these kinds of leaders even in the early childhood classroom. The classroom is an environment that presents countless opportunities to children, but for many it is also one that engenders fear — of new people, new ideas, new ways of doing things. As a teacher, I watched as some children somehow summon the confidence and curiosity to readily tackle and enjoy the adventure. They become the "leaders" in this small community. Their fearful colleagues come to model their behaviors as they open up and integrate the new information to become contributors. Successful communities cannot develop without fearless leaders playing integral roles.

> God never said that entering the land would be easy — only that it would be worth it.

God understands this. This parsha is about the start of a transition in leadership within the Israelite community, from a council of men distinguished by their tribal positions and, yes, from the brave and steady leadership of Moses and Aaron that is just not up to the task ahead.

It is Joshua and Caleb who are elected to be at the head of the Jewish Leadership 2.0 initiative. For God recognizes their ability to handle the the weight of leadership with the level-headedness needed to really listen to everyone and be leaders of the many and not just the few. God also knows

that much uncertainty lies ahead for the Israelites as they enter the land, and that leaders will be required to effectively confront this uncertainty with courage and strength.

It is always amazing to me that each time I read Torah how much of what it teaches, these tellings of long ago, are still so incredibly relevant to what we face as Jews and people today. This portion reminds us of the recurring struggles we- just human!- encounter with our fears as we seek leadership, community, purpose, connection, and hope!

Stacey Poland Hamburg is a spouse to one, a mother to two sons, two daughter in laws, a grandmother to Ruby, and a retired nursery school teacher devoted to helping children tap into their innate curiosity to become learners and teachers as they navigate their ways in the world. She has been a member of CRZ since the 1970s and studied Torah for the very first time this past spring!

by **Amy Blumenthal**

In the parsha God told Moses:

Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them:
When you arrive in the Land to which I am bringing you,

And you eat from the bread of the land, you shall set aside a gift for the Lord.

The first portion of your dough, you shall separate a loaf for a gift, as in the case of the gift of the threshing floor, so shall you separate it.

From the first portion of your dough you shall give a gift to the Lord in all your generations.

This directive lacks specificity and leaves us with many questions. What does this mean and why does it matter? How we consider this speaks to how we address or ignore the continuum of American Jewish observance.

I will approach this analysis as we lawyers are taught in law school, through the Socratic method—with more questions!

"When you arrive in the land"
"When you come to the land"

So…as soon as you arrive?
But not only upon arrival, right?
And only upon arrival in Israel? Or is the Land to which God is bringing us: any land we go to settle and live?

"And you eat from the bread of the land"

So not as soon as you arrive, but when "you eat from the bread of the land,"
well, probably soon after arriving.
So only when you eat bread?
That's unclear, right? It doesn't reference the fruits of the land or a similar phrase that would make us think God meant something other than bread.

"You shall set aside a gift for God."
That seems clear enough—or does it? You "set aside"…? A gift for God?

"The first portion of your dough"
"you shall separate a loaf for a gift…"
Sounds clear—ok, so the first part of your dough you separate a **loaf.**
Well, that sounds like a contradiction. Do you separate some dough or part of the bread—(the dough after it has baked)?

A wise person suggested it likely means a loaf pan of challah.
So a loaf pan of raw dough? But how much?
And then what are we to do with that part of the dough, or the loaf pan of dough, or the piece of the raw dough?

Well, the next verse should tell us, right?

"From the first portion of your dough you shall give a gift to God in all your generations."

So compare/contrast that with "the first portion of your dough you shall separate a loaf for a gift."

When we lawyers draft language, we avoid saying the same thing in two different ways: say it once, clearly.

Well, so God is elaborating, not restating?
a loaf for a gift vs. from the first portion, you shall give a gift?

So, ok, it is from the first portion, so not the entire dough—but we still don't know the quantity.

We did just hear an answer to one of our earlier questions: "in all your generations." Ah, so not only from the first dough we produce upon arrival in the new Land, but for always, in all our generations.

Well, sounds simple, right?

But is it every bread, dough, loaf that each Jew ever makes?

So let's review our questions and the few answers we have.
Upon arrival in Israel: check.
And forever, in all our generations: check.

But only in Israel? Not elsewhere? Forever, wherever God sends us to settle? But not places we merely visit?

From every dough we ever knead? (Or is it from *baked* bread, but *every* baked bread?)
Or just from our challah on Shabbat?
And how much?
From the dough, or the baked loaf?
And then what are we to do with the dough, or the piece of bread, or the whole extra loaf? How do we give it to God?

And I am not addressing the consequences if we don't that arise later in the parsha.

What is the law?

I married into a family with many traditions different from mine.Every Friday night, Blumenthals gather together in Hyde Park. Whoever says motzi over the challah makes a single cut, breaks a piece off from that part, sets it aside, and then distributes the remaining first part in fairly equal pieces to all around the table.
What size? Well, it depends who is slicing and where the knife falls.

Is that correct?

A wise woman we all know pinches a portion off from the dough she is kneading to bake challah for Shabbat.

But Liesel didn't. And Milt (or whoever makes motzi) pinches it from the first slice.

From the baked bread?
What size?
Only on Friday night?

What are *your* traditions? Do you follow the law? Well, what is the law ? What does the law mean?

Is this a religious observance question or a cultural question?

As American Jews, we make choices about our Judaism all the time. With the exception of the tiny number of ultra orthodox American Jews, we are all picking and choosing what and how we observe.

Tradition versus law; cultural versus religious.

Are we all sitting at just another of the many levels of interpretation of the "law?"

Which are more important, our traditions or our laws?
A wise young man said, "You can't set a law in stone if no one is following it."
But, if we bend too far, we can break, right?

In law, we analyze the slippery slope—if you allow too many exceptions to the rule, each a step down the slope, you can slip down the slope and fall.

But if you allow no exceptions—well, we may have a law set in stone that no one follows.

Is one side of our continuum of observance inherently better or worse than the other? Do our intentions matter? Or just our observed level of observance? Do we need to understand the *reason* for the level of observance?

For those that have attended services exclusively or almost exclusively at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, all may seem quite, well, Kosher.

But for example: men here all must wear kippot in the sanctuary. So if they don't wear a kippa all the time, they are expected to put one on before entering the sanctuary.

But women are not required to wear a kippah or a chapel veil in the sanctuary.
But women must don something on their heads to come to the bimah.
Whether reading Torah, or opening the ark, or dressing the Torah.

This didn't make sense to me, and I choose to put one on when I enter the sanctuary.

Why? I don't have the deepest understanding of the Torah, but this isn't logical. Or is it?

I learned in the process for This American Shabbat that this was part of a compromise agreed in broadening the egalitarian process here at Congregation Rodfei Zedek.

So—not based in "the law." But a compromise. And now, a tradition.

Very few of us wear a head covering always. Some men wear a kippah to sit down to Friday night dinner, but the women don't.

Some women throw a paper napkin on their heads to bless the Shabbat candles, but remove it to say Kiddush. Does it matter?

I offer to you that what matters is that it matters **to you**.

Jews are technically the children of Jewish women. Period. Simple. Hitler and Mussolini had broader definitions, but Jewish law on this is clear.

But how we *choose* to be Jewish—to feel Jewish, to live Jewishly—is so important.

I was reminded by Rabbi Minkus, Stacey, and Andrew through this process that each point of the American Jewish continuum is important; that being thoughtful and analytical about our Jewish observance is important; that being respectful of each other's Jewish traditions is important; and that preserving each family's Jewish traditions is important to our survival as a Jewish community.

A native of New Hyde Park, N.Y., Amy Blumenthal has been a familiar face at Congregation Rodfei Zedek for almost 30 years. Amy is a partner at the law firm of Gould & Ratner LLP, where she represents real estate owners and developers in all areas of commercial real estate and has been recognized as an Illinois SuperLawyer as well as an Illinois Leading Lawyer. Amy currently serves on the Board of Directors of CREW Chicago, the leading organization for Commercial Real Estate Executive Women. Her Hyde Park family includes her husband Mark and children Rachel, Emily, and Samantha; along with Milt and Liesel, Linda and Jeff, and David, Daniel, and Ethan.

by **Andrew Skol**

I don't mean to boast but I'm pretty sure my Dvar Torah is pretty good. Rabbinic even. I know this because I asked my wife to read over an early draft. And when I came back in the room 15 minutes later. . .she was asleep. I'm not kidding.

But seriously, I'd like to talk about what spoke to me, or really what troubled me, about today's parsha. In a word . . . God. I found that my perception of the God of the Torah, and the one we read about today, are very much at odds. So, I'd like to spend a little time relaying to you how I tried to understand God's behavior, and his relationship with Moses and the Israelites, at least as it relates to today's parsha.

…..To put it bluntly, I find God's behavior in this parsha disappointing. Not just disappointing, but troubling. So troubling, in fact, that it made me start to question God's purpose in the Torah. Who are the Israelites and Moses to God? What purpose do they serve? Why does he need them? I don't claim to have found answers to these questions, or even to have looked particularly hard to find them, but they do seem like questions we rarely ask, and ones that may help us better understand how to relate to God and Moses. To begin this exploration, I will start by explaining why I'm troubled by God's interaction with the Israelites, and postulate an idea or two that may motivate God's behavior.

Today's parsha begins with the Israelites finally arriving at the threshold of Canaan. Upon arrival, Moses, as instructed by God, sends 12 "spies" into Canaan to, in essence, provide an atlas-like account of the land. The spies uniformly report that Canaan would be a fantastic place to live in terms of the agronomy, but that it is not an empty land and contains many daunting foes, such as the sons of Anak who are descendants of giants and the Amalkites who previously attacked the Israelites in the desert. The people are clearly dismayed by this report, but Moses encourages invasion anyhow, saying: "We can surely go up and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it." This stirring speech is undermined by the spies, who report that "The land we passed through . . . consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature."

I don't know why the people were swayed more by the spies than by Moses. But perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, given their rather poor track record with God and Moses, what with the golden calf and all. They are even referred to, both in Exodus and now, as being "stiff necked"; an opinion shared by Moses AND God. However, is there not reason for the Israelites' apprehension? While God promised the land to the Israelites, as far as I know, it wasn't promised without sacrifice. How many years were the Israelites slaves in Egypt before God came to Moses? How

many lives were lost there? Perhaps this is my own conflict avoidance or cowardice speaking, but to me trepidation seems warranted. That being said, the Israelites' reaction is pretty shameful, and sounds more like your Bubby in Florida than a chosen people hardened by slavery and a forty year trek through the desert, saying things like: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this desert," and "Why does the Lord bring us to this land to fall by the sword; our wives and children will be as spoils. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?" Caleb and Joshua try to convince them that God will protect them and make victory certain, to which the mob responds by threatening to stone them. This puts God over the edge and he laments to Moses: "How long will this people provoke Me? How much longer will they not believe in Me after all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with a plague and annihilate them. . ."

Thus for their lack of faith, God proposes not just death, but disease and then death. God's frustration is understandable, I think. I imagine it to be akin to what parents experience when, after investing years of energy and money in their kid's education, their child decides she doesn't want to go to college. Or, after waiting in line at Hot Doug's for an hour and a half, your spouse decides she's not in the mood for a hot dog. While a part of me might be crushed, and the disappointment palpable if this were to happen to me, physical harm would not be my way of expressing it. Why is it God's? Perhaps we should just shrug and say, well, at least this is a one-time incident. But it isn't. God often plays the angry father of the 1950s; taking off his belt to teach his children a lesson about disobedience. Fortunately for the stiff-necked Jews, Moses plays the role of the wise and compassionate spouse, who can steady the father's rage. In fact, after the threat of plague and annihilation, Moses makes a two-pronged appeal to God for leniency, which is only partially granted; the ten spies who questioned the ease with which Canaan could be claimed were plagued and killed, and the Israelites who kvetched were denied entrance to Canaan and wandered the desert for another forty years.

So how do we explain God's rage, and his tendency towards retribution and violence instead of reason and understanding?

One possibility is that God is manipulating Moses and the Israelites. Under threat of the death of much of his flock, Moses is forced to be not just the people's leader, but also their protector; becoming a necessary liaison between the Israelites and God. And don't forget that Moses is not a natural leader. He had exhibited tremendous self-doubt; he hesitated to act as God's representative to free the Israelites from Pharaoh. Moses' appeal to God on behalf of his people would, I imagine, engender gratitude and political capital. He clearly had been lacking them; he needed Caleb to quiet the people before they would listen to him. Thus perhaps God puts up straw men for Moses to knock down, making him both a hero to his people and a tool of God.

A second hypothesis is that God needs the Israelites for his own existence in a literal sense, and that the Israelites' lack of faith in him threatens this. Moses' argument for God showing compassion toward the mutinous is: "if You kill this nation like one man, the nations who have heard of Your

reputation will say as follows: Since the Lord lacked the ability to bring this nation to the Land which He swore to them, He slaughtered them in the desert." Thus it appears that Moses is appealing to God's vanity, or at least God's desire to be viewed by others as powerful. So why does Moses' argument sway God? Why does God care what these people think? Is it that God recognizes the peril that the Israelites may be in if the people of Canaan don't fear him? Or does God's power actually diminish as people's perception of his power diminishes? This isn't a novel idea. A lauded science fiction writer, Neil Gaiman, in his book *American Gods*, presents the gods and mythological creatures of U.S. immigrant cultures slowly losing a battle with new "gods" of media, technology, celebrity and drugs. As belief in the former wanes, obsession for the latter waxes. Similarly, in Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume*, the author shows Pan slowly disappearing from Earth as Christianity gains in popularity. Perhaps this may also explain God's tendency towards spectacle, such as when, after the first plague, God manipulated Pharoh to withstand the anguish God's plague wrought until his people had endured ten plagues, the last being male infanticide?

Which, if either, of these hypotheses is correct? Who knows? But one thing that is interesting about them is that although they change the motivation for God's anger, they don't change the motivation for Moses' actions. God's threat of plague and annihilation of ten of the 12 tribes of Israel causes Moses to do something rather remarkable; stand up to God to save the lives of his people. Moses seeks compassion for his followers, as he did after the incident with the golden calf. Although Moses likely wasn't putting his neck on the line, his life probably would have been simpler with the culling of the stiff-necked of the lot. And thus it is Moses, who by questioning God's unjust decree and allowing compassion to win out over blind faith, becomes this parsha's redeemable character – a character whose principles we, as member of his tribe, and members of the world, should try to emulate. If we, as a community, and as leaders, could advocate and demonstrate compassion for all people, even when, or perhaps especially when, they are at their worst, then I think our communities, our cities, our country, and our planet would reap fantastic benefits.

OK, you may wake up now.

Andrew Skol grew up in Erie, PA, located conveniently between Pittsburgh, Cleveland, OH, and Buffalo, NY, and which perhaps explains his lack of enthusiasm for professional sports. He attended universities in New York and Michigan and has degrees in Animal Science, Animal Breeding, and Biostatistics. He works as technical director of GREAT KIDS, a project launched by the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Chicago that aims to use DNA and RNA sequencing and bioinformatics to help identify personalized treatments for children newly diagnosed with cancer. He and his wife, Yael Hoffman, and three children, Yoni, Ezra, and Avi, have been members of CRZ for at most seven years.

Dvar Torah: Parshat Shemini

by **Sarah Winitzer**

Parshat Shemini deals with two main topics, temple sacrifices and the laws concerning animals permissible and prohibited for eating. These two topics are almost evenly divided by verse; I actually counted: there are 43 verses in the first half, and 47 in the second. The section about sacrifices contains a peculiar and troubling story about Aaron and his sons, who are killed for bringing a strange fire into the mishkan. But I will be focusing on the part of the parsha concerning the laws about the animals, and more specifically some ideas found in the section, especially **kedusha**, which I will explain later. I will refer to the animal laws as laws of kashrut, even though they are not the later laws we know from the rabbis.

Parshat Shemini introduces the laws of kashrut by describing four categories of animals. These are: land animals, water animals, birds, and insects. Each of these categories describes which animals are considered ***tahor*** or ***tamei***, meaning pure or impure, or in this case, permissible or prohibited for eating. Land animals with split hooves and which chew their cud are considered *tahor*. Water animals with fins and scales are considered *tahor*. For birds, there is a list of twenty of which one may not eat, and I assume that the rest, not appearing on the list are *tahor*. The matter gets complicated, for instance when Jews arrive in America, and meet the turkey, and try to figure out whether they can be thankful for it or not. But let's move on! Non-bird winged animals, or insects, with four legs, but two of which are jointed, are *tahor*. So for example, we can eat grasshoppers!

I spent some time thinking about the logic behind these laws, and read an interesting interpretation of this. Mary Douglas, a famous anthropologist, discussed the reasoning behind some of the laws of kashrut. These laws emphasize the place of the animals in nature, as it is described in the Torah. According to Douglas, animals that are *tahor* have their characteristics match the environment in which they live. Those not fitting in their natural environments are *tamei*. For example, the *shratzim,* or swarmers, like snakes, are *tamei because* they neither walk nor swim; their in-betweenness is no good. On the other hand, grasshoppers, for example, which fly and which have four jointed legs that look like two, are *tahor* because they were seen as birds, and therefore fit into their own category of flying animals. What becomes clear is that animals must have the proper bodily features for movement in their natural environments. This explains, for example, why fish with fins and scales,

ideal for swimming, are considered *tahor.* To summarize, animals that fit into their environments are considered tahor. And ones that do not are *tamei*. It is important to recognize that in the Torah, these environments, the land, water, and sky, are all created by God.

One gets closer to God when following the laws that He gives about Kashrut. Therefore, when God says that following the laws of kedusha brings one closer to Him --

והייתם קדשם כי קדוש אני

"And you shall be kedoshim because Iam kadosh" -- then it seems that the parsha ultimately emphasizes through kedusha His difference. The question is, difference, or kadosh, from what? It seems that God is different from other people's gods. Think about it, in order for something to be different, there need to be other options, or else there's nothing to separate *from*. For example, my favorite color is purple, but in order to come to this conclusion, I needed to have known and seen the other colors! All of this leads to one asking, well, what does *kedusha* actually mean? I think I am finally ready to answer the question.

As it appears in this parsha, kedusha is the act of differentiating between suitable and unsuitable things, which are both created by God. In parshat Shemini people are able to gain holiness by separating themselves with regard to their diet. Various other examples in the Torah likewise ask for this type of separation in order to achieve kedusha. There are important consequences to this.

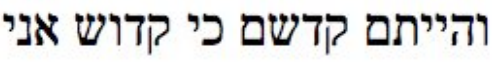
Owing to Kedusha, Jews keep boundaries of different kinds in the world. A big example of this is Shabbat, which is also done for the purpose of becoming closer to God. But this is not as easy as it sounds. When people choose this way, they are missing out on experiences in life. Kedusha is lots of work. When dedicating your life to being kadosh, you are also limiting yourself from all sorts of things. Sometimes you must give up important things, in order to dedicate yourself to what matters most to you.

But a harder question should be asked about kedusha and its insistence on separation: Why is separation 'better' than inclusion? In our culture, inclusion is almost always considered preferable to separation. There are many examples of this. For instance, one relates to what I talked about before: Mary Douglas's work about kedusha. Should her ideas not be included in a D'var Torah like this one, just because she is not Jewish? The fact of her not being Jewish should not limit her interest towards the matter, and if she has such great ideas, then why *shouldn't* we use her work?

Another example of this involves a topic I am currently writing about in my History Fair paper, involving an African-American woman, Ida B. Wells, who dedicated her life to ending segregation against African-Americans in America. Segregation was a form of separation, believed to be right by some. Its ending helped further with the push towards equality and fairness in this country for African-Americans. These examples and many others certainly suggest that inclusion is the right way to go. So what should be done with kedusha and its insistence on separation? *Just because we live in a society that believes so strongly in inclusion, does it mean that*

we must throw away all ideas of separation?

In order to answer this, we must understand that there are different types of separation. In contrast to the examples I have just given, the idea of separation is not always bad. For instance, the commandment to keep Shabbat separate from the rest of the week does not mean that Wednesday or Thursday are bad days. Another example from this parsha having to do with the laws of kashrut. Fish that are *tahor*, like salmon, which are allowed to us, are no better than shrimp, which is tamei, and forbidden. And unlike the case of segregation, it should be clear that all of the days of the week, and all of the fish in the sea are God's creation. Our observing of these separations is meant for the purpose of bonding with God. Now we can understand the full purpose of kedusha: to be able to bond with God. And we may also understand the main point in this parsha:



"And you shall make yourselves kedoshim, because I am kadosh". God's point is that if we can make ourselves kedoshim to mirror Him, then we will be able to accomplish our ultimate goal of bonding with him. In the process of becoming kadosh, one begins to unite with God, and therefore to discover more about Him. This applies to oneself as well: because in the process of becoming kadosh, one hopes to see additional aspects of God, such as His: בינה, discernment, חוכמה, wisdom, צדק, justice, and רחמים, kindness. How's that for a couple lousy fish?

Sarah Winitzer is the daughter of Avi Winitzer and Rebecca Feinstein, and sister of Shammai Winitzer. They have been part of the Rodfei Zedek community since 2006, and have participated in the Family Institute. Sarah attends Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School across the street. She enjoys playing the viola and running.

Rebel Without A Clue

by **Jeff Ruby**

I am not a victim.

I have to remind myself of this fact over and over, though it shouldn't be necessary. I was born into a happy family in a safe and prosperous country. I'm healthy. Educated. Married to a good woman. Together, we're raising three happy, strong kids of our own in a comfortable home. I've never experienced real oppression, or even mild suffering. And I'm the beneficiary of great historical luck. I have no Inquisition, no Crusades. No expulsions or pogroms. No Holocaust.

Victim? If anything, I am a victor.

So why, nearly every day, do I battle against an illogical tendency to enjoy some level of victimhood? A raging persecution complex runs so deeply in my veins that I find myself perpetuating it constantly, even when it makes not a lick of sense. I know I'm doing it, I understand that it's morbid and stereotypical and counterproductive, yet I can't resist the urge to feed the perverse pleasure that accompanies being wronged. The petty part of me enjoys *not* being invited to the party, because then I am entitled to grumble about it, and that childish indignation scratches an itch far better than attending the party ever would have.

And so I read about Nazis and Hamas instead of Jews. And when I see a story about Israel, more and more often, I find myself skipping over the story and going straight to the message boards that follow the story. Because that's where the readers' comments invariably devolve into anti-Semitism. And that's what I'm looking for. I get to feel angry, insulted, and wonder how so many seemingly rational people all around me can harbor such irrational hatred. I *wallow* in it. I only end up feeling horribly sad about the state of the world and my people's place in it, when it would have been simpler to not click on the story.

So, you might ask, why do I do it if the perverse pleasure doesn't feel so good after all? I don't know. I used to think I did it because the victim angle has always been built into our story as Jews.

We've been persecuted for more than 2,000 years and yet we survive.

We've been kicked out of every country in the world!

Israel is surrounded by nations that want to see it driven into the sea.

Never forget the Holocaust. It could happen again.

I internalize the depressing lessons of many of today's Israelis and Palestinians, who work harder to garner worldwide sympathy for their cause through victimhood than they do to attain peace. Instead of seeking success, I've learned to pursue sympathy. And somehow I think I'm going to get it by having people feel sorry for my plight, as though I have any.

But I realize my easy station in life comes by a pretty slim margin. Had my great-grandparents not immigrated to America in 1902, my family most likely would have died in the Holocaust; had my grandfather not fought in World War Two in 1944, the world might look very different right now. Had my mother not risen above poverty and neglect to go to college, where she met my father, who knows who I'd be? Or if I'd be at all?

Of course, I was not responsible for any of this, any more than a kid born into disease in straw hut in a war-torn country is responsible for his fate. But every time my ancestors made a brave or smart move, their decisions shaped a path, and that path led to me. I was the beneficiary of it all. They could not have known how they were affecting the future; they simply did these things because they were the right things to do at the time. They faced far greater obstacles than I have, and not once did they play the victim card. Nor did the pioneers who built Israel out of barren land. They simply took responsibility and acted.

I don't believe in fate, or in God's will, nor can I accept the notion that people have only one path in life. With every choice I make, the possibilities branch off into millions of potential directions. The thought of such responsibility scares me. If it scared my forefathers, it certainly didn't stop them from moving forward. I don't mean to suggest that I will ever ignore anti-semitism, nor should I. But I cannot allow it to be the foundation for my worldview.

"Suffering is part of the destiny of the Jews," said the 20th century historian Salo Wittmayer Baron. "But so is repeated joy as well as ultimate redemption." Which part I ultimately focus on—the suffering or the redemption—is my choice. And every time I choose, I'm doing so not just for myself but also for my children and theirs as well.

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.