

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. V, No. 1



In this issue

Rabbi David Minkus
on undoing midrashic damage

Benjamin Usha
on his grandmother's long journey

plus Mindy Schwartz,
Joan Neal, Jeff Campbell, and more....

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Introduction to Volume V Number 1

During the High Holy Day season we tend to reconnect, with both our Jewish community and our Jewish traditions. But is the connection the result of inertia, drifting back as we've drifted every year?

The name of our Congregation reminds us that we're not about drifting: *Rodfei* is a form of the verb

לרדוף

to pursue, suggesting active and directed movement. The authors in this issue inspire us to renew our pursuit.

The interview with Rebecca Fradkin, another in our series depicting pathways to Rodfei Zedek, reminds us of comforts and opportunities we may take for granted, and it impels us to appreciate anew.

Through their participation in This American Shabbat discussions,

physician Mindy Schwartz, attorney Joan Neal, and economist Jeff Campbell, model active engagement with text. Their talks show both the intrinsic value of Torah study and its potential for helping us improve society and elevate our own lives.

Chemist Susan Meschel applies scientific knowledge to understanding the Torah. All these authors illustrate once again how rich is the range of talent and experience in our Congregation, how actively and effectively so many of us engage with Jewish texts, and how much we find to apply in the wider community.

And Rabbi Minkus warns us about uncritical interpretation of familiar Torah stories. He delivers an urgent call to look more thoughtfully at both our traditions and our world and to act on what we learn.

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Korach: Undoing Midrashic Damage

by Rabbi David Minkus

On July 9, as Rabbi Minkus began his third year at Rodfei Zedek, he confronted a Torah reading which has puzzled and troubled many of us: What is the nature of Korach's rebellion and how do we understand the terrible punishment he suffered? Rabbi Minkus takes a hard look at the relationship of Torah and commentary. He asked that this sermon be included in To Learn and To Teach to prompt further discussion on topics that are of the utmost importance for us as Jews and as Americans. How do we balance honor and reverence with privilege or prejudice? This question can be projected onto the task of understanding troubling, difficult or hateful parts of our Biblical or religious tradition, but equally onto our history and lives as Americans. The tragedies that have been mounting over the summer of 2016 require each of us to engage and assess how we can contextualize those events and work to eliminate the pain and the suffering at their roots.



Each week for the past 112 weeks I have looked at the parasha with an increasingly keen eye, becoming more critical of midrashic interpretations (ancient commentaries)

or rabbinic overstepping of the Torah. Commentaries condemn such characters as Ishmael and Hagar and Esau, while the Hebrew in the Torah seems to reserve judgment. If we had a tradition devoid of commentary, if all we had was the text, how would we feel about these individuals? Or, the more apt question, how would we feel about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Moses? What does it say about us, about society, that we need to condemn or relegate some to a lower rung of our community?

I think that since Judaism is so far from the religion of the Bible, these questions do not bother us. Convenience, also, plays a role. After being taught the midrashim and commentaries of rabbis alongside the text throughout the generations, we come to believe them not as interpretation but as something akin to a

morally understandable translation, one we do not challenge. Of course Ishmael was bullying his younger brother. It must be Hagar's cruel treatment and superior attitude towards Sarah that merited certain death in the desert. But this is dangerous; and we have all, at least at some point, been victims of this approach to reading the Torah.

I have stated many times that it was not until rabbinical school that I realized that Abraham smashing his father's idols was nowhere to be found in the Torah (this was the midrashic understanding of why Abraham was chosen by God). We laugh at this because it is cute, and it is these stories that make rabbis endearing, I hope. But what are the ramifications? We come to think that we, as descendants of Abraham and Moses rather than Ishmael or Korach, merit the privileges we enjoy. We consider ourselves as blessed with a sanctity that was earned from birth rather than from deeds and actions.

Here is what the Torah tells of Korach (Num.16) "1 Now Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth — descendants of Reuben

— 2 to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. 3 They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have too much (*rav la’hem*)! For all the community (*edah*) are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?”

We can certainly, without any help from the rabbis, read Korach’s actions as the tradition has. Here are some of the words that I found to describe him or his motives: base, disreputable (Yeshayahu Leibowitz), unholy, selfish (Malbim), he removed himself from the community, i.e. not holy (Onkelos). And Rashi takes Korach’s words to mean that he was concerned that Moses received all the greatness for himself. An early Midrash compares Korach to those in Psalm 1 and says he “led people in the path of sinners and scorn.” We can see him as someone who was out to further himself and his cause, to complain and campaign against others getting the glory when he wanted it. If all we had was the text, we could write those same damning comments and midrashim. But is there another way to read him? Should our morality dictate reading this story in another way?

The Israeli intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz (z’l) read this parasha and asked what connects Korach with last week’s parasha, that concluded with the Shema and specifically with the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. He pointed out that, although *tzitzit* and Korach have little in common, both speak to or about a sense of holiness. But *tzitzit* is aspirational; it is, as Leibowitz states, “a

goal.” In the Shema we are not told “you are holy;” we are commanded to be holy and hopefully over the course of our lives we meet that goal, if only through our striving. But Korach said everyone is holy. On the surface and the plain sense of the text, it seems he is saying that holiness is embedded in our DNA as *tzelem elohim* (made in the divine image).

The rabbis in the Mishna (Pirkei Avot 5:17) say, “any *mahloket* (disagreement) carried out for a heavenly cause is sustained or destined to endure.” The rabbis continue with the question, “What constitutes a heavenly cause? These are the disagreements between Hillel and Shammai.

So what would not constitute a holy disagreement? That of Korach and his followers.”

if we had a tradition devoid of commentary... how would we feel about Abraham and Sarah?

Malbim addresses this Mishna by saying that Korach simply wanted the High Priesthood, which illustrates that he simply had selfish goals. And, ultimately, the *mahloket* was not going to be between him and Moses but rather between him and his followers, since they were all out for themselves. Malbim completely abuses and misinterprets the term *edah* (group or community) in order to serve his hermeneutic goals, inserting a sense of division into the word that is not actually there.

Often we see a group of rebels, or protesters, of those who are oppressed, and their message gets scrambled by those on the fringes of the group. What starts as sensible and well-intentioned, turns in the minds of those in power from something understandable to something chaotic and radical, something that needs to be suppressed. The voices of those on the

margins become the loudest; and the leaders and ordinary citizens who believe in those leaders shout them down out of fear, hostility and, I think above all else, a complete inability to see their perspective – an inability to see what it must be like to walk in their shoes, or perhaps more maliciously, a desire to look away.

I find it hard, now more than usual, to read Korach demanding dignity and equality from Moses and in the face of God as something that needs to be suppressed and vilified by the tradition. Holiness is a word for which we do not know the true meaning or Biblical sense. We all know how to separate ourselves for a sense of good, for a sense of personal and communal meaning – kashrut, Shabbat. But what about when we separate ourselves out of a sense of fear, enmity, and a desire to maintain the status quo because that status quo works for us?

What if we read Korach's words "*rav la'hem*" not as you are so great and I want that greatness, but as "you have so much" and WE ALL SHOULD HAVE THAT, or we should all share in that wealth and power? What if we read the word *edah* not as his "band of malcontents" but rather as his community, his supportive group. His supportive group who knows what it feels like to be less than, yet is unwilling to maintain that position of inferiority?

The hardest thing to do when you are comfortable, when you are safe – and that means privileged – is to identify in a meaningful way with those who are oppressed. To understand what drives their actions, their bold and courageous acts and likewise their misguided and often tragic ones. We need to fight the natural urge to demand justice because police officers were killed and neglect what preceded that killing.

Please fight the urge to offer antidotes to violence or moral prescriptions for those whom you see as weak or poor. Embrace the challenge of listening! Embrace the struggle to see the hearts of the oppressed and fight so that you can see the origins of this struggle – the hatred and racism on all levels that brought the recent myriad of tragedies.

God cries anytime an innocent person dies, whether they died while doing their job or while harmlessly sitting in their car or standing outside late at night. God can stand in judgement of their actions and intentions, and we hope our legal system can mirror that. We must stand with the gavels of empathy.

We have a natural desire for hierarchy. We see this in parashat Mishpatim. Immediately after being freed from Egypt we will, ourselves, turn to enslaving others. That is also in our DNA and we must spend energy fighting that desire. Others will not, and we must then spend equal time fighting their evil desires. I am reading Korach as demanding that we, if not fight, speak and speak out loudly—whether on the Dan Ryan Expressway or at the office water cooler—for the humanity of everyone in the face of the law.

I want each of us to be challenged to see Korach not rising up against Moses in a power struggle but rising up against a system that might have held him down. I recognize that, given different world circumstances, I might have had a completely different read of this story. But I am asking of each of you, as I am demanding of myself, that we see the other in our text, see the other in the face of our neighbors and most important, see the holiness and humanity in the eyes of those

who live beyond the physical or metaphoric boundaries of the term neighbor.

What can we do to help in this very present, yet old struggle for freedom? What will we do to prevent our community from being swallowed up like Korach?

Rabbi David Minkus and his wife Ilyssa came to the Congregation in June, 2014, where they were joined in September by baby Raia. He earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana in 2008 and also studied at Hebrew University and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. In 2014 he graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in Jewish Education and received ordination.

Long Journey from Russia

An Interview with Rebecca Fradkin

by Benjamin Usha

The editors invited Benjamin Usha, to interview his grandmother. He recounts his experience: "I was originally asked to prepare this interview last summer. I put it off until March. During that time, I was stressed out by the idea of doing the interview because I thought it would be too overwhelming. After all, my grandmother has a lot of stories to tell and I wasn't sure how/if I would record, translate, and transcribe the interview. With the help of my mother, Lydia, I was able to focus and write up this interview for the congregation at Rodfei Zedek. I learned some new stories that I hadn't heard from my grandmother before. More importantly, this interview, although difficult for me, helped me bond with the rest of my family as we worked together to create something special. It felt fulfilling to be a part of something that was greater than myself." Here is Benjamin's presentation of his grandmother's words:



I was born in Moscow in 1925. My mother Menuha Dobrin was born in 1893 in the town of Vitebsk, the same town that Mark Chagall was born in. This was in the Pale of Settlement under Czarist Russia.

Gorky in modern-day Belarus He was born in a poor Jewish family, which ran an inn in Gorky, also within the Pale of Settlement. Although he was not able to get an education, he was very clever and entrepreneurial. Later on, he became a successful businessman and a manager of a large tobacco firm with headquarters in Moscow. Even though he was a manager in the company, he could not visit its office in Moscow because of the Pale of Settlement laws. In fact, he was once arrested because he tried to go to Moscow for business. He could never forget the humiliation of that moment.

The Pale of Settlement laws severely restricted where Jews could live or even travel. Only two percent of all Jews were allowed to go to school in Czarist Russia, the so-called "Jewish quota," another anti-Semitic law. My mother had to go by herself to another town called Porkhov at the age of nine to get an education. Despite lack of resources and multiple barriers, she eventually graduated from a dental school in Warsaw, Poland. My father, Yosef-Shlomo Fradkin, was born in 1888 in a shtetl of

Both my mother and father welcomed the bourgeois Revolution of February 1917, that abolished the Pale of Settlement and gave Jews access to education. One of the ideas of the Revolution was to set everyone on an equal footing. After the Revolution, for the first time, the younger relatives of my father could finally leave Gorky and get an education.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in October of 1917, my mother was drafted into the Red Army as a medical professional and participated on the battlefield in WWI. She was released from military service after the war and went to Moscow to find a job. My father also moved to Moscow where he could now work at the main office of his company.

Since she could not find work in the dental field, my mother had to take a clerical job and ended up at the tobacco firm in which my father worked. The two met there and got married shortly thereafter. However, within a few years of the Revolution, all businesses and private properties were confiscated by the newly established Soviet power. The tobacco firm in which my mother and father worked was shut down. People were not allowed to have any property, including real estate.

It was very difficult to find a place to live and the only place they could obtain was a room in a communal apartment owned by the government and shared with strangers. In the early 1920s, the Soviet government announced a piece of economic reform titled "New Economical Policy" (NEP) which allowed private businesses to develop. During the brief period under NEP, my father was able to setup a dry fruit business while my mother took care of my younger



Moscow, 1929

brother and me. The NEP did not last long and ended in the late 1920s. All businesses were once again shut down and business owners like my father were put in prison. With a great effort and appeal, my mother miraculously got my father out of jail. However, the government still confiscated my family's small room in the communal apartment. In 1931, with no place to live in Moscow, my family and I had to pack our bags and move to Leningrad, where my parents had relatives.

The Soviet Government claimed that "Religion is the opiate for people," and thus, prohibited the practice of all religions. Anyone who was caught observing their religion was heavily punished or even executed. Yet some of the older observant Jews from the shtetls could not abandon their religion. For instance, Yehil, one of my great uncles who observed Judaism strictly, could not eat without a head covering. When he was put into a hospital where he was not allowed to observe his religion, he could not bring himself to eat without a yarmulke. Because of this, he left the hospital against medical advice and died.

In 1931, for a few months, I went to a Jewish school, one of the many ethnic schools in Leningrad at that time. My family and I lived in a relative's attic during that time and I had the opportunity to go to a Jewish school for the first time in my life. The children all came from Jewish families and we studied Yiddish and Russian but we did not, under any circumstance, study or practice Jewish religion, which was banned. During this brief period, I don't remember experiencing much anti-Semitism. At home, although my parents were not observant Jews, they spoke Yiddish to one another, especially when they did not want us kids to understand. My father thought in Yiddish all his life. Even though I did not get a Jewish

education, we sometimes celebrated holidays like Passover with older relatives. There was also one synagogue in Leningrad, a city of about 100,000 Jews, where the elderly observant Jews worshipped. I remember a couple of times when my great uncle Yehil showed me around the synagogue. I learned a little about the history of the synagogue and even about the prayer shawls (*tallis*). I watched how my great uncle prayed. This synagogue, however, did not play a big role in my life. Afterwards, we moved into our own place, which was still just a couple of rooms in a communal apartment; and I went to the closest public school for a few years. Then came 1937, also known as the year of the Great Purge. Stalin's repressive politics put to death and exiled hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Many of the people I knew became victims of Stalin's repressions and we lived in constant fear of being the next targets. There were some people who denounced their neighbors in an attempt to get their jobs, rooms, or belongings.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, I had just finished the 9th grade. The war quickly reached the city of Leningrad and in August of that year, the nine-hundred-day Siege of Leningrad began. The city's suburbs were occupied by the Nazi soldiers and the Holocaust started infiltrating into these areas. Many Jews were murdered there. Jews inside the city itself were horrified by what might happen if Leningrad surrendered. Furthermore, the Nazis dropped fear-mongering flyers from airplanes on the city. They warned the Jews that once they took the city, no Jews would survive. During the siege, all utilities broke down. Lack of electricity, heat, and running

water made life almost impossible for everyone within the besieged city. Many residents were killed on the streets as a result of shelling and bombing from the air. However famine was the worst: people got a 125-gram ration of bread every day and no other food. My family survived thanks to my father's friend, who brought us some leftover corn bran from the horse stables. My mother was able to make pancakes from it to feed the family.

Leningrad is located in the northern part of the Soviet Union and winters are generally very cold there. However, the winter of 1941-1942 was unusually cold even for that climate. Because of the incredibly cold temperatures, the Neva River and the nearby Ladoga Lake froze over. This gave the people inside the city a chance to escape at the end of that winter.

**in a truck riding over the frozen water
my family and I escaped the besieged
Leningrad in February of 1942**

In a truck riding over the frozen water, which later became known as the Road of Life, my family and I escaped the besieged Leningrad in February of 1942. This escape

road proved to be very dangerous as the Nazis bombed the Soviet trucks and the frozen water around them in an attempt to sink them. I watched some trucks go under water. Our family was eventually evacuated to the village of Chernushka in the Ural mountains. Later, I enrolled at a university in the city of Sverdlovsk in the Ural mountains.

Before the war started my father's two cousins and a daughter of one of them were still living in their birthplace, Gorky. All of them were murdered during the Holocaust as Belarus was one of many Soviet territories occupied by Nazis. Even the street where they lived in that former shtetl was destroyed beyond recognition.

In 1945, my family and I returned to Leningrad, where our rooms in the communal flat were seized by the director of our district bureau of food rations (obviously, she had tremendous power in the war time). For the next three years, we couch-surfed between friends' and families' houses. During this time, I transferred to Leningrad University, where I continued my studies in Russian philology and linguistics. My father managed to find a room in another communal flat for us in 1948. In that same year, while studying for one of my classes, I met my future husband, Anatoliy Usha, at a library.

Meanwhile, Stalin had started a new wave of persecution against the so-called "cosmopolitans." In essence, these were people of culture who were highly educated and who also happened to be predominantly Jewish. I knew of many professors, scientists, and writers in my university who were accused of being "cosmopolitan" and "unpatriotic," put on trial, and sent to prison. When Anatoliy and I were dating, we went to open hearings where my professors often "confessed" their "sins" against Stalin's ideology.

In 1949, I finished school and I was assigned to work in a small village in Belarus teaching Russian language and literature. The director of the school told me, "I cannot have someone named Revecca Shlomovna (in the Soviet Union I was supposed to be addressed this way, by my first and patronymic names) come to my school and teach Russian language to children." He gave me a new name, or rather a nickname, "Rita Simyonovna". Personally, he treated me well, but a Jewish name was still taboo in the Soviet Union. "Rita Simyonovna" sounded much more Russian and I got used to being called that by my students and peers. He, of course,

had no authority to change the name on my birth certificate or passport; my official name stayed the same in my documents.

In 1950, I got married in Leningrad. During this time, my husband was struggling to get a job as a journalist or a theater critic, fields in which he had received a degree. Since he was Jewish, many of the intellectual careers were closed off to him. Eventually, he abandoned the prospect of being a journalist and became a factory worker in Leningrad.

When I returned to Leningrad in 1952, I moved in with my husband and found a temporary job as a night-time teacher. On a couple of occasions, I accompanied my husband's grandmother to the synagogue. I was so delighted to be in a Jewish environment because I am a Jew. I felt sense a connection and belonging to both my husband's family and other Jewish women in the community. I have always felt that our community, despite everything that was thrown at us, was able to stay together. We are the people of the book; I remember seeing everyone reading a Siddur inside the synagogue. I felt proud of my people when I saw these old people who were so engrossed in their religion and one another. I knew that if my boss had learned about what I was doing, I probably would have lost my job. But, I wanted to help my grandmother-in-law get to the synagogue.



Leningrad, 1970

Once my contract expired, I had to find another job. But no matter how hard I

tried, I could not find a job as a Russian teacher because I was Jewish. A Jew could not teach a "subject of ideology." However, there was a shortage of math teachers at the time, so I went to a university again to become a math teacher. I graduated in 1957 and taught math in a high school for over 30 years. My husband also eventually received another degree and became an economist. In 1957, I had my daughter Lydia.

After perestroika started in 1985, the practice of Judaism became permitted and I went to the synagogue a number of times. Also, perestroika led to the fall of the "iron curtain." Many Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate from the Soviet Union and travel abroad, including travelling to Israel.

In 1990, in the wake of the Soviet Union's downfall, my daughter Lydia Usha left Russia for Israel. We had some relatives who were sabras (born in Israel) and lived in various parts of Israel including Jerusalem. In the following year, I went to visit my daughter in Jerusalem. At that time, my daughter became ill and I stayed for ten months to help her with her recovery. We didn't have a lot of money so we struggled to make ends meet. Some relatives and Jewish organizations helped us stay on our feet. I felt like I was at home. We had many different people invite us over for the Shabbat. This experience was totally new for us. I also took up Hebrew lessons with a volunteer teacher named Tzilyah, whom I met twice a week. Within a few months, I could speak, read, and write Hebrew. I really liked learning and using Hebrew. I don't know why but I believe that Hebrew is embedded within our genes. I love learning Hebrew grammar. I like the difference between the Hebrew and European languages as in word of *pam*, *pamayim*, *pameem* ("one time," "two times," and "multiple times"). I stayed during the peak of

the *aliyah* from Russia. American Orthodox Jews and rabbis came to help Soviet *olim* to transition into Jewish and Israeli life. I liked their company; they treated me with respect and attention. I made new friends in Israel. We discovered Jewish life (e.g. businesses were closed on Shabbat), the natural flow of Jewish holidays, and how to live within a Jewish community for the first time.

Lydia moved to the United States in 1992 because of her personal situation. I later moved to America with my husband after my daughter got a green card and right before she gave birth to my grandson, Benjamin. We felt proud when he had a *brit mila* and when we sent him to a Jewish day school. We're Jews, and for the first time ever we could build a Jewish life and foster a Jewish upbringing.



Rebecca Fradkin and Anatoliy Usha

In the US, I graduated from a college with an Honors Associate degree, again as a teacher of math. Fast forward to 2009, when my grandson was having a bar mitzvah. We wanted to make sure that the bar mitzvah was meaningful; we had never experienced a bar mitzvah in the Soviet

Union or Israel. My grandson was a student at Akiba Schechter and we became members of Rodfei Tzedek. Because this meant so much to me, I wanted to make sure I was ready. We were unfamiliar with Shabbat services, and I took private lessons to be prepared for his bar mitzvah. I decided to attend Shabbat services at Rodfei Tzedek with my family, not only because I wanted to learn about the services, but I just really liked them. I became so fond of the service and people at Rodfei Zedek, that I continue to come there every Shabbat. I try to never miss it. I enjoy the Torah reading and keep my own Torah in Hebrew with Russian translation at the synagogue (I never had the Torah before). I really like Rabbis Gertel and Minkus as well as Cantors Solomon and Rosenberg. The community at Rodfei Tzedek is very educated and intelligent but at the same time, they are down-to-earth and caring. Women are a part of the services (I get to have an *aliyah* sometimes and I even get praise from the community) and we have many newcomers from various backgrounds. Plus, there is a great amount of camaraderie at lunch time. Over these past few years, many community members have given me rides home which I greatly appreciate. There are lectures and classes in Hebrew that pique my interest. It's like a different world for me; I have experienced warmth and kindness unlike any that I've experienced before. I find my experience at Rodfei Tzedek meaningful and delightful at the same time. I enjoy learning Judaism and being among my people.



Graduation, 2001

Benjamin Usha is the son of Dr. Lydia Usha, a medical oncologist at Rush University Medical Center and an Associate Professor at Rush Medical College of Rush University. He is now a sophomore at DePaul University.

This American Shabbat: Mishpatim

The talks printed here represent another 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 the parsha with him for a few months. Their conversations culminated in presentations during services on Feb. 6, 2016.

by Mindy Schwartz



I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate and share in the experience of this American Shabbat.

This week's parasha is Mishpatim, which deals with a myriad of laws from that of how to treat slaves,

crimes of murder, kidnapping, witchcraft, idolatry, adultery, bestiality and even injuries resulting from a neighbor's ox. Clearly, as in the entire Torah, there are a multitude of themes that one can call on to form a *devar torah*. It has been exciting to see how the same material speaks to different individuals.

Personally, It has been a fascinating process to explore this not only with Rabbi Minkus but also with Joan, who is both an attorney and a law professor, and Jeff, who is a U of C-trained economist who works at the Federal Reserve Bank.

For me, one theme that had particular resonance was that of the treatment of the stranger – in Hebrew known as the *ger*. This is an important and topical theme that is reiterated in many sections of the Torah, twice in the parasha:

Exodus 22:21 You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any woman or orphan – if you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me.

Exodus 23:9 You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt.

In the Torah the word *ger* means a guest, a foreigner, alien, sojourner or stranger. The admonition to treat the stranger kindly comes across loud and clear. Remembering that we were slaves in the land of Egypt should make us more humble and kinder. However, Nechama Liebovitz in *Studies on Shemot* warned against a paradoxical response: The following interpretation was suggested for the words “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Psychologically, people who have been through difficult circumstances sometimes want others to experience what they had to experience. When they see someone else who is in the same situation, there is a tendency to say “Listen, I had to go through a lot to get where I am today and now you have to suffer a little also. It's good for you, Adversity builds character.”

The concept of treating the stranger fairly is a powerful theme, as is its converse, the cost of exploiting the stranger. Taking

advantage of the most vulnerable in the Bible, namely the widow or the orphan, is dealt with harshly and stirs the wrath of the Almighty.

The reading and the re-reading of this parasha caused me to reflect in a deeper way about the concept of being a stranger. On a basic animal or Freudian level, a basic ego level, it is natural to want to be in your “comfort zone.” When one moves to a new place or even goes on vacation there is a reassurance in finding the things that feel familiar, comfortable and predictable. We have a natural instinct to make things homey.

There are lots of aphorisms about home: There is no place like home. Home is where the heart is. Home is where you hang your hat. Home is where you feel comfortable and where you can be yourself. So it’s clear that when the Israelites went to Egypt, they were strangers in a strange land, they were clearly not at home. Obviously, we know that the Egyptians did not make us feel welcome and we were mistreated and treated harshly. We all know how that story ends.

This concept of being a stranger and dealing kindly with outsiders is one that is powerful on so many levels.

Over ten years ago, the Rodfei Zedek bar mitzvah class went on a trip to “Jewish New York.” At that time, we saw a host of incredible synagogues, went to the Jewish Theological Seminary, saw a Broadway play, ate knishes and went to my second favorite adventure that weekend – the Tenement Museum. But one of the most powerful experience of that weekend was that of going to Ellis Island, to stand in the Great Hall where millions came through this building to make their home in the U.S.

Being there took on a striking immediacy and powerfully conveyed the experience of being a stranger in a whole new country. We had a terrific tour guide who led us through the building, up the stairway to the warren of hallways that could hopefully lead to a whole new life.

Over 12 million immigrants came through Ellis Island from its opening in 1892 until it finally closed in 1954. The experience of being there captured my imagination in a way nothing else could. It made me appreciate my grandparents and great grandparents in a new and personal way. Visiting Ellis Island opened my eyes and more importantly **my heart** to the immigrant experience.

Yet, immigration issues are never far from the surface in America. Even to this day, America has always both welcomed and feared the newcomer. One needs look no further than the newspaper to hear about the latest group of displaced persons trying to become part of the American Experience, from South or Central America, the former Soviet Union or the war torn Middle East.

How we deal with strangers is very much a mark of our humanity. As Rabbi Shay Held wrote in the 2014 for the American Jewish World Service *Dvar Tzedek*: “One of the Torah’s central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility. Appealing to our experience of defenselessness in Egypt, the Torah seeks to transform us into people who see those who are vulnerable rather than looking past them.”

What I would like to leave you with today is the idea of looking at the *ger*, the stranger, in a whole new way. As Rabbi Minkus reminds us, for the Torah to be alive it must be lived. As it was for our

grandparents, our ancestors, it is now for us. We must always understand the vulnerable position of the stranger, never forgetting that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Mindy Schwartz grew up in Commack (Long Island), NY and attended Cornell University before beginning medical school in Chicago in 1978. She currently practices general internal medicine at the University of Chicago where she also teaches at the Pritzker School of Medicine. She is married to David Ehrmann, who is an endocrinologist at U of C. Both of their children Ari and Emmy Ehrmann went to Akiba Schechter and grew up at Rodfei Zedek. In her spare time she can be found at Regenstein Library or riding her bicycle on the lakefront bike path. She likes to travel and cook.

by Joan E. Neal



When Rabbi Minkus asked me to participate in this week's This American Shabbat, I had to say yes – not only because Rabbi Minkus is very persuasive, but because how could a lawyer

turn down speaking about *mishpatim*?!

My first reaction to this week's parasha, though, was not a legal one but was a literary one – upon reading this portion I found it extremely jarring in the context in which it appears. My reaction was due not only to the fact that the content is substantively jarring to our modern sensibilities, in the sense that this detailed

discussion of selling our daughters as slaves and paying bride-prices for virgins seems completely anachronistic and irrelevant to our modern lives (at least here in the U.S.). Rather, and beyond that, my reaction was to the complete shifting of gears in the narrative story. After all, we are in the middle of a sweeping epic story of the history of the Jewish people. In previous weeks, we have read portions about slavery in Egypt, the ten plagues, the exodus from Egypt, the Song of the Sea, and the Ten Commandments. These are all grand, inspirational and deeply emotional events. Suddenly, in this week's parasha, we are plunged into an incredibly mundane and detailed listing of very specific civil and ritual laws to be applied to day-to-day life.

As a lawyer, I am used to reading such laws, but why were they placed here in the midst of this sweeping narrative? Doesn't this suddenly ratchet down the grandeur of the story in Exodus? Of course, other works of literature have done much the same thing – Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* famously and repeatedly steps aside from its grand epic to devote many chapters to such arcane topics as the history of whaling, the anatomy of whales, the use of ropes on a ship, and how to strip blubber. Yet *Moby Dick* is considered a great work of literature – but why did Melville do this? At least one Melville commentator has opined that these realistic economic, social and cultural details were crucial to the narrative story because they created a full world or context in which the reader could more fully understand the story, because the world at sea was far from the ordinary life experiences of most readers. So perhaps this could be part of the explanation of Exodus – for later readers to fully understand the story being told, they needed to understand the economic, social and cultural relations of the Jewish people at that time. But does this parasha flesh out

such details? Not really, as it is providing a prescriptive set of laws that the Jewish people are to implement when they reach the Promised Land and set up their society – not a descriptive set of laws that describe the society as it is while they are wandering in the desert. So perhaps this isn't the explanation....

My second reaction to the parasha – and you knew I would get here eventually – was from a legal perspective. Much as our own founding Constitutional principles had to be translated by legislatures and administrative agencies into more specific statutes and regulations in order to have more concrete meaning and be more readily and clearly applied to daily life, perhaps the Ten Commandments needed to be translated into these detailed civil and ritual laws to be applied to the ordinary aspects of day-to-day life of the Jewish people at that time. Reading these details is not inherently interesting – while, as a telecommunications lawyer, I am quite familiar with the five volumes of the Code of Federal Regulations that apply to entities regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, I would never recommend the Code of Federal Regulations as a gripping read. But without this mapping of the guiding legal principles to the detailed and specific rules, perhaps the people would not have been able to translate the lofty principles of the Ten Commandments to their daily lives. Without this translation, these principles might have remained philosophical ideals disconnected from ordinary life. So perhaps this is what is going on in this week's parasha – a necessary administrative implementation of broader divine principles to give them more concrete meaning and make them enforceable. In other words, bringing the divine down to earth. So in a sense, God is also acting as the administrative agency here and setting forth

the detailed rules as well, with the expectation that the Jewish people would then administer them and designate judges. (Indeed, when Moses went up on the mountain to receive these rules in this parasha, he left the elders behind and designated Aaron and Hur to judge any legal matters in his absence.)

My third reaction to this week's parasha was a religious reaction that follows quite closely from my legal perspective, but looking at it in the opposite direction in a sense. Perhaps this text was an attempt to link the divine and the ordinary and thus make the ordinary (at least somewhat more) divine. With only the Ten Commandments, people might have viewed them as something heavenly and divinely ordained, but not particularly connected to their daily lives. With the *mishpatim*, perhaps the intention was to bridge this disconnect in order to make even the more mundane aspects of day-to-day life more holy. In other words, perhaps the intention was to ensure that the Ten Commandments weren't something to consider only on Shabbat, but something to weave into all of the details of people's lives the rest of the week – how we treat our neighbors and community members, how we do business, etc. By creating this linkage, the *mishpatim* created a system in which people were to consider the divine on a daily basis in their routine interactions in the community. The rabbis further extended this idea in the Talmud, which specifies the particular blessings to be said at various points of the day and in connection with various activities. So instead of – or in addition to – bringing the divine down to daily life in the sense of legal implementation of the principles, perhaps this parasha is elevating daily life to be more intentionally divine and thus closer and more connected to God.

I have no idea which – if any – of these possibilities were intended when the *mishpatim* were inserted at this point in the epic history of the Jewish people, but I certainly enjoyed considering the possible reasons for this somewhat jarring portion we read today. My study with Rabbi Minkus, Mindy and Jeff certainly made me think much more deeply about a portion that I otherwise might have simply dismissed as substantively irrelevant to our modern lives.

Joan E. Neal is the Class of 1949 Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago Law School, where she teaches courses in Telecommunications and Internet Law and Contract Drafting. She and her husband David Weisbach have been members of CRZ since 2005. Both of their children, Jamie and Ilana Weisbach, become b'nai mitzvot at CRZ. In her spare time, Joan is a member of the rowing team Recovery on Water, a group of breast cancer survivors.

by Jeff Campbell



I wish to tell you a tale of a king and his slave. It starts innocently, with two farmers. One farmed east of the mountains, and one farmed to their west. Living off the produce of your own land seems idyllic, but it can be risky as

well. In a good year, both farmers' fields were fertile, but in a bad year the rains only graced one side of the mountains while the other was dry and unproductive. The mountains sometimes blocked the rain, but

there was a passage through them, so that the farmers could move produce from one side to another. When food was plentiful, such movement was pointless. The produce in the west was just as delicious and varied as the produce in the east. However, the passage could be useful when the rains failed one of the farmers. Then, his counterpart could send a portion of his crop to alleviate his hunger.

By enabling the shipment of food aid, the mountain passage made hunger obsolete. However, this charitable solution to hunger ran into the stubbornness of both men's hearts. Both were fiercely independent; and so they wanted neither to give nor to receive such aid. Nevertheless, they were both practical men as well. Neither of them particularly liked going hungry, so they came up with an alternative solution: credit. When one farmer faced famine, he could borrow food from his counterpart. He could repay out of his future harvests, and this repayment would be especially valued when the rains failed his lender. This seemed like a much better solution than charity to them. Hunger was alleviated, and neither farmer felt he owed a debt to the other's kindness. Self-interest supported their relative prosperity.

At first, the farmers bounced in and out of debt to each other. The eastern farmer borrowed from the west a couple of years in a row, but the debts were manageable and he eventually discharged them. Then it was the western farmer's turn to borrow when the rains fell only in the east. Again, the debts were manageable. However, without either of the farmers quite noticing, the eastern farmer's debts eventually grew and grew. It was not a steady progression but rather something more random. Sometimes the rains were good and he dug a bit out of his hole, but

then the rains would fail and he would fall further into it. Eventually, his debts became so large they threatened to exceed any conceivable amount he could repay with the produce of his land. Both men being proud, they then did what their culture's custom demanded. The eastern farmer became the western farmer's slave. All of his produce — excepting the minimum necessary to feed the eastern farmer so he could continue working — went to the western farmer. In perpetuity.

I hope this story sounds plausible, because mathematics and economics say that the farmers' credit arrangements made its outcome inevitable. The extreme inequality directly arises from Milton Friedman's Permanent Income Hypothesis and its close corollary, Robert Hall's celebrated (in my quarters) random walk hypothesis. When a self-interested farmer can borrow or lend at a fixed rate, his lifetime purchasing power (sometimes called "permanent income") evolves according to a random walk. You have probably heard of "A Random Walk Down Wall Street," but this random walk behaves differently from a stock price. In the long run, one farmer must have wealth equal to the maximum amount the other could repay.

If my tale does not depress you at least slightly, then I have failed as a dismal scientist. What began as voluntary exchange that reduced inequality on the dinner table ended with the most extreme inequality imaginable. Why should we care? In agricultural economies, one man's gain is another's loss; and so whether inequality is to be fought or enhanced depends on values that necessarily come from outside of economics. Here, the beginning of Mishpatim speaks: When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; In

the seventh year he shall go free, without payment.

If my tale's farmers replaced their customs with this piece of Torah, economic inequality would fall. Nobody would ever get into more debt than they could repay with six years of slavery, and such states of penury would be temporary. So it seems obvious to us that the farmers of my tale have made a grave mistake. But they don't see things that way: If they start on an equal footing, then each of them prefers to gamble on eventually becoming the other's slave to the Torah-augmented system, because it better insures food risk in the short run.

So again, why should we care about this extreme inequality if those who made it would do nothing to prevent it? My personal answer is that we should care simply because the Torah cares. But that just raises a second question: Why would the Torah compel two people to act contrary to their own interests? My personal answer is that the Torah's interests are in our freedom and (to some extent) equality; not in our happiness as we conceive it. Our story repeatedly features liberation from bondage. God liberated Abraham from the idolaters of Ur, and later He liberated all of us from Egypt. The Torah, like any other good idea, looks out for its own preservation. If it requires a free people to pass its lessons from generation to generation, then it will compel us to be free.

Apparently, some kind of charity is essential for maintaining our freedom. That will probably always have a private side (being charitable with our own money) and a public side (being charitable with someone else's money). I personally find the private side more ennobling, but if only the public side is working — either because of donors' stinginess or recipients' pride — so be it. I

also believe that we will be more prosperous as a people the more we accept our economic failures. In *Start-up Nation*, Dan Senor and Saul Singer write, “Israeli culture and regulations reflect a unique attitude to failure, one that has managed to repeatedly bring failed entrepreneurs back into the system to constructively use their experience to try again, rather than leave them permanently stigmatized and marginalized.

Perhaps we can look past the split infinitives in this quote, see the wisdom within, and apply it here.

Jeff Campbell lives in Hyde Park with his wife Barb Cohen and daughters Carolyn (17) and Sarah (14); and he works as an economist for a large central bank in the Loop. He is proud to be one of Rabbi Minkus’s first converts at CRZ, and he loves slowly learning Hebrew at Rodfei’s many services. In his spare time, you can find him in his workshop with his friends and family building robots and quadcopters.

A Metallurgical Approach To The Golden Calf

Encouraged by Rodfei Zedek's Rabbi Elliot Gertel, Susan Meschel published her scientist's reading of Torah. In the Spring issue of To Learn and To Teach we printed her discussion of Biblical ironworking. Here is the second installment of her work, adapted from an article in the Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol. 42:4.

by Susan V. Meschel



An extensive literature discusses the Golden Calf, which we read about in the Book of Exodus. The issues arising usually deal with the moral concerns and

social development of the Israelites. My focus is on a scientific problem: How did the Israelites dispose of the statue?

The Book of Exodus describes the making of this idol: *And all the people took off the golden rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf* (Ex. 32:3-4). The plain meaning of this text is that the Golden Calf was made of cast gold. However, pure gold is too soft for the production of durable artifacts, copper-gold alloys being normally used in making jewelry. The percentage of gold in the alloy is reflected in the karat rating assigned. One gold alloy used in the biblical period was electrum, consisting of 50 percent gold and 50 percent silver. The jewelry that the Israelites gave to Aaron was

probably gold alloy, and so, too, the Golden Calf.

How was the Golden Calf destroyed by Moses? Exodus and Deuteronomy describe the same process: *He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it* (Ex. 32:20). *As for that sinful thing you had made, the calf, I took it and put it to the fire; I broke it to bits and ground it thoroughly until it was fine as dust, and I threw its dust into the brook that comes down from the mountain* (Deut. 9:21).

The reference to burning the gold, as opposed to the more normative process of melting it, is puzzling. Furthermore, how was the burned metal ground into dust? These texts have been subject to different interpretations, most of which are not consistent with our modern scientific understanding.

Ibn Ezra (on Exodus 32:20) explains that the Golden Calf was melted down and a chemical was added to blacken and char the gold. This is what the Bible calls "burning" the gold. However, Ibn Ezra does not say which chemical was used. The whole purpose was to make the gold unusable,

and it was then reduced to a powder. This idea is also found in the commentary of Hizkuni. William Bird Herapath, a 19th-century scientist, also suggested that chemical methods were used, but with the effect of dissolving the gold, and he believed that aqua regia (a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid) was employed. There is no evidence, however, that the Israelites knew of such a reagent. The production of these acids synthetically is a 20th-century development. According to another 19th-century hypothesis, the Golden Calf was fused with a mixture of potassium nitrate (niter) and sulfur, yielding a soluble compound. This is a more plausible idea, since KNO_3 (niter) and sulfur were known in the biblical period, and they could certainly fuse metals in furnaces.

Ibn Ezra further explains that once the gold had been chemically blackened, it was beaten into thin sheets and shredded, to make it seem pulverized. Thus, the Golden Calf was not really ground to dust but cut into shreds, or the shreds were then reduced to powder. Radak explains that iron tools were used for this purpose.

Alternatively, the calf was not made of solid gold but of wood overlaid with beaten gold. When the wood burned, the gold would have melted into granules and these were scattered over the water. Abrabanel and Isaac Arama interpret Exodus 32:20 to mean that wooden objects used with the idol were burned, while the Golden Calf itself was ground to dust.

There is a further complication: gold powder would sink in the brook before the Israelites could drink it. Nahmanides, commenting on the same verse, writes that either the gold was ground so fine that it did float, or that only a little was thrown into the water at a time and the Israelites quickly

drank it, or that the whole outcome was miraculous.

David Frankel, in his study of this question, hypothesizes that an ancient editorial or copyist's error occurred and suggests reversing the two parts of Ex. 32:19-20 as follows: *He became enraged and hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain; then he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it*, followed by *He took the calf that they had made and burned it*. In this reading of the text, it is not the gold that is pulverized and scattered over the water but the tablets. Assuming that the tablets were of limestone or marble, the process is technically quite reasonable. Limestone can be broken and powdered without the use of any sophisticated equipment. Such powder would mix with the water and could float on it, since its density is not high, whereas the gold powder would sink to the bottom.

Frankel also points out that in ancient Ugaritic and Sumerian cultures the total annihilation of a god was achieved by burning it in fire, grinding and strewing the ashes in a field or in water, or by allowing birds to eat the remains. However, the requirement to drink the ashes was not part of these rites. Frankel compares Moses forcing the Israelites to drink water with the powdered tablets suspended in it to the rite of the *sotah*, the wife suspected of adultery (Num. 5:11-31). There, the suspect woman was tested by having to drink water mixed with curses from a text washed off a holy scroll: *The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness. He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness that induces the curse so that the curse inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness* (Num. 5:23-24). In this case, the tablets

themselves served as the scroll that was mixed with water in order to determine who had sinned. Since this approach is based on reordering the biblical verses, it is not surprising that traditional commentators never suggested anything of the kind.

As a scientist, I find Frankel's proposed segment switch appealing. The physical and chemical process of crumbling limestone or marble and dissolving it in water is simple to perform by ancient technology. The melting of the gold is also consistent with the level of ancient technology available to the Israelites. Thus, Moses compelled the Israelites to drink the water with the powdered tablet suspended in it as a test with God's words. This alternate approach frees the contemporary reader from having to assume that advanced

chemical and technological processes (or miracles) would be needed to explain how Moses disposed of the Golden Calf.

Susan Meschel attended the Technical University in Budapest, Hungary. In 1956 she escaped from communist repression and antisemitism in Hungary and immigrated to the U.S., where she studied chemistry at the University of Chicago (M.S., PhD). She taught chemistry at the University of Chicago and Roosevelt University and is currently an Adjunct Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the Materials Science Department. In addition to active involvement in research at the James Franck Institute (University of Chicago), she pursues the study of the scientific aspects of Biblical text, her long term hobby.

One Book, One Rodfei Zedek

by Stephanie Friedman



In 5776, the Congregation launched a new program, One Book, One Rodfei Zedek, which offers people the chance to come together over a compelling read at various events over the course of the year.

The purpose of this program is to stimulate ongoing conversations, both formal and informal, and if the first year is any indication, the program is doing just that.

The selection of the book which would be the focus of the program for the year was actually part of the conversation itself, as congregants had the opportunity to consider different options and then vote. The Adult Education Committee discussed a long list of various possibilities, and then committee chair Stephanie Friedman presented to the congregation a short list of four candidates, each of which was chosen for its distinctive characteristics, readability, and thought-provoking content: Israeli literary lion Amos Oz's memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness*; local author Dina Elenbogen's memoir *Drawn from Water: An American Poet, An Ethiopian Family, An Israeli Story*; philosopher and fiction writer Rebecca Goldstein's novel *Mazel*; and, historian Beryl Satter's blended family and urban history *Family Properties*. The books themselves were available in the atrium during the Days of Awe for people to look over, and congregants received an email describing the program and each possible candidate as well, with quotes from and

about each book. After discussing the nominees with much enthusiasm and care, a majority of congregants voted for *Family Properties* as the inaugural selection for One Book, One Rodfei Zedek (although the Amos Oz and Dina Elenbogen books were also serious contenders).

We had a series of events inspired by *Family Properties* throughout the year, which were open to both congregants and members of the wider community. First, in the fall, a large and diverse group gathered for a potluck dinner at which they discussed the book's exploration of segregation and housing discrimination in postwar Chicago, and how Jewish and African-American communities in the city were affected by the events and trends that unfolded. Many people had their own personal stories to share about "white flight" and urban renewal on the South Side, which added a deep sense of engagement to the conversation.

Second, as a way of observing Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, people came together to discuss the "King in Chicago" chapter, which focused on the Freedom Movement, when King came north to Chicago and settled in Lawndale in order to draw attention to urban poverty and segregation outside the south.

Last but not least, in the spring, Beryl Satter herself came to Rodfei Zedek to share "behind the scenes" family photos and anecdotes (which also touched on the Glick family, to whom she is related – something the committee didn't know until after the book was voted as our selection!), and to talk more about the larger context of the issues discussed in the book, including how

housing discrimination still plagues our cities today, in forms both old (contract buying) and new (subprime mortgages). All of the events were well-attended and lively – thanks to everyone who participated! Thanks, too, to the Sisterhood and to the Nonfiction Book Group, who had their own discussions about the book, thereby adding to the larger conversation in which everyone was engaged.

Once again, during the High Holy Days, congregants will have the opportunity to consider a new selection of One Book candidates for 5777, with information available via email, the website, and at the Synagogue itself, and then vote for their choice. Watch for more information in the weeks to come.

Stephanie Friedman chairs the Adult Education Committee at Congregation Rodfei Zedek. She lives in Hyde Park with her partner, Miriam Friedman Parks, and their daughters Shira and Julia.

The Ten Greatest Jewish Movies

by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby



When I was ten, my parents dragged me to see *The Chosen*. All I remember was that it came out just after *The Empire Strikes Back* and instead of spaceships and lightsabers, it appeared to involve the Torah. The appearance of tzitzit on the poster was enough to turn me against it. I made a big point of falling asleep, and when *Yentl* came out the following year, my parents did not repeat their mistake. I never saw *The Chosen* again, but as an adult searching for his identity, I find myself drawn to films with Jewish themes. So I compiled a list of the ten greatest Jewish films of all time and how they shaped me as a Jew. (I did not bother to include *The Ten Commandments*. Do we really need to rank God the number-one deity?)

Early in our courtship, my future wife, Sarah, found out I had never seen *Exodus* (1960). I wasn't slightly interested, but I loved Sarah. We watched it together and the movie worked the same miracle on me that it has for so many other Jews. It romanticized Israel, transforming it from the dusty, fussy pain in the ass I believed it was for my first 25 years, into an intriguing place. Suddenly this mythical land contained a million juicy and profound stories about blood and betrayal and hate and love. I wouldn't be making Aliyah any time soon,

but for the first time I couldn't wait to visit the Middle East.

In Darren Aronofsky's brutal and bizarre indie nightmare, *Pi* (1998), a headache-prone mathematician searches for a key number that could unlock the universal patterns in nature. On one side, an unscrupulous Wall Street businesswoman hounds him for the number, imagining it's the key to beating the stock market. On the other, fundamentalist Jews kidnap him, assuming he's found the true name of God. His head nearly explodes from the pressure. The movie taught me to steer clear of religious fanaticism, overzealous capitalism, and power drills.

Ushpizin (2004) humanized the most devout Jews for me. I saw the charming movie—in which a poor Orthodox couple wants nothing more than a child, then ends up welcoming two escaped convicts into their home for Sukkot—shortly after visiting Jerusalem. On that trip I had walked through Mea Shearim surrounded by Haredi Jews whom I barely recognized as earthlings, much less members of the same faith as mine. After seeing *Ushpizin*, I took it upon myself to learn about the culture of Mea Shearim. On my next trip I took my kids, and together we saw the people as fully rounded human beings. It was a start.

Waltz With Bashir (2008), an animated Israeli documentary about the country's 1982 war with Lebanon, further deepened—and complicated—my attitude toward the Middle East. While the main

character, a modern-day middle-aged man, sifts through his distorted memories as a soldier in hopes of understanding his complicity in the massacres of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila, I reckoned with my recent blind acceptance of Israel. Somehow, it had never before occurred to me that I could question the country's actions and policies and still be a good Jew.

Chariots of Fire (1981) put a chip on my shoulder. Then it taught me to use the chip as a weapon rather than a crutch. Ben Cross's character, the British sprinter Harold Abrahams, runs not to glorify God—as does his Christian missionary teammate on the 1924 Olympic team—but rather to get even for the systematic racism he endures every day of his whole life. Though I have never faced that level of prejudice, I've always used that nagging paranoia, whether real or imagined, to fuel myself.

In ***The Pianist*** (2002), based on the memoir of Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, Adrien Brody's title character undergoes impossible levels of terror and danger, grief and humiliation and starvation, while trying to survive the Holocaust. Roger Ebert's review describes Szpilman as "a survivor but not a fighter or a hero—a man who does all he can to save himself, but would have died without enormous good luck and the kindness of a few non-Jews." *The Pianist* may be the purest example of the uncanny survival instinct that Jews have had to cultivate over the years. And it shows that not everyone on the other side was inhuman.

There's a great scene in the Coen Brothers' ***A Serious Man*** (2009) in which a rabbi tells Larry Gopnik, the confused protagonist, about a dentist who finds the words "Help me, save me" engraved in Hebrew on the mouth of an unsuspecting

Christian patient. The mystery of the words temporarily drives the dentist to distraction. Is the message directly from God to him? Eventually, he loses interest and gets on with life. That's the rabbi's whole story. Larry, who wants clarity, cannot accept this and demands an answer about the words. The rabbi's tepid response: "Hashem doesn't owe us the answer. Hashem doesn't owe us anything. The obligation runs the other way." In a random universe, things happen for no reason. Another character in the film sums it up more succinctly: "Accept the mystery."

"If you ridicule [dictators], bring them down with laughter, they can't win," Mel Brooks said in a 2001 interview. "You show how crazy they are." That's ***The Producers*** (1968) in a nutshell, the crudest of satires and a movie that never fails to make me cringe. It's also the blueprint for a coping mechanism that has sustained me for as long as I can remember: When in doubt, ridicule. Laugh to keep from crying. Or even better: laugh until you cry.

Schindler's List (1993) came out when I was in college and I saw it with a Catholic friend. While I had already obsessed over the Holocaust for years, he'd not given it much thought one way or another. I found myself watching much of the film through his eyes, watching firsthand as he saw the shoah as the unfathomable horror that it was. I watch *Schindler's List* every few years, and find a dozen new lessons with every viewing—most often involving the decency in human hearts even in the most difficult moments, the dark impulses given free reign in others. And I always feel grateful that Steven Spielberg had used his clout to make the Holocaust forever "real" to masses of people who had either forgotten, or never knew.

I suppose I have to include ***Fiddler on the Roof*** (1971). Somehow, it's always been there in my life. As a child, the lesson was: Man, this movie is long. As a young man, it was: I hate musicals. Now that I have kids, the story's truths finally appear to me. And "Sunrise, Sunset"—even with its ham-fisted lyrics about how you should relish your children now because they'll be adults before you know it—brings me to my knees every time. Swiftly fly the years, indeed.

Jeff Ruby has served since 1997 as chief dining critic of Chicago magazine and is the author of the forthcoming middle school age novel, Penelope March is Melting (2017, Random House/Delacorte). 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.