

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. VIII, No. 1

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Introduction to Volume VIII Number 1

Yizkor – it is fitting that we dwell on remembrance on the Holy Day for which it was originally designated. At this season when we remember the events of the year, when we review our deeds, when we recall loved ones, our Fall issue gathers the insights of our community. Rabbi David Minkus analyzes the Yizkor service, while Rabbi Larry Edwards interprets an evocative poem. In his bar mitzvah talk Jonah Vaang demonstrates how remembrance of family illuminates concepts of holiness.

Our member-contributors, from beginning writers to professionals, help us reflect. Benjamin Usha's meditation on his grandmother presents a personal example of how a death can influence religious belief, connection to community, and feeling for the land of Israel.

Novelist Joe Peterson's new short story brings the special empathy that fiction offers.

And in a year which marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of World War II events, the war letters of Roberta Bernstein's father reflect one way of dealing with terrible memories. Rebel Jeff Ruby discovers another.

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Yizkor – Remembering: A Pesach D'var Torah

by Rabbi David Minkus



Yizkor means literally "remember." We recite Yizkor not only on Yom Kippur but on the three pilgrimage festivals.

What is the interplay between

our festivals and memory? Where does the communal and national memory intersect with the personal? When we are celebrating our festivals, remembering the rites and rituals of our Israelite ancestors through liturgy and service, is that all we are remembering? And when we say Yizkor, as we do on all of the Shelosh Regalim, are we implying that we forget the rest of the time? Are we including this service because we are all together, spending time with family and friends on these festivals? And when we are at these celebratory reunions and at these meals, do the empty seats or wrongly delivered jokes, missing temperaments or accents become clear or more pronounced?

At the Seder, the most religiously significant reunion, we put out a cup out for Elijah the prophet. Why do we do this? The simple answer is because he is not there. Should we have a cup for our loved ones whose place at that the table is now vacant? Probably not – that could end up feeling less like an altar and more like a shrine. But the sentiment is nice and, perhaps, subsumed within the idea of Elijah's cup.

These nice ideas may make sense to us, but in some significant way they are wrong. What does the Yizkor prayer actually say? Yizkor Elohim et-nishmat/ May God remember the soul of _____ – the tradition knows we (my italics) remember! This is a reminder, maybe even something stronger, that this is not all about us. We are here because of someone else, many people, that is why the liturgy of Yizkor can be said in the plural, for many people, and for many souls we could never have known. Whether that was for a family member or friend for whom you are named or for those who died kiddush ha-shem as martyrs. We are here and they are not; if you think you came to remember for yourself, I think the tradition is saying you are not wholly correct.

The bittersweet or just bitter memories that swell at a Seder when you realize how proud a parent would be to see your child recite the four questions, those emotions are there. You do not need any liturgy to remind you. Nor is the holiday moment so intimidating that the words must be fixed for us in the same way that on these days pilgrims would be given the text as they offered their crops. We are saying Yizkor both for our departed loved ones and for God.

One thing I say to a family as they prepare for the funeral of a loved one – something I have been saying too much lately – is that a funeral is not for you, it is for them. The period of shiva is for you, for the mourners, but a funeral is a parting gift to your loved one and a gentle nudge to God. *See, how much*

we loved you; this is how I felt about you. And Watch over my loved one. Shiva is hold my hand, tell me a joke, sit in silence with me, make me a plate. Yizkor is the tradition of telling God not to forget our loved ones up there.

But, of course, we cannot be absent from the Venn diagram of liturgy and memory, tradition and love. A Seder resonates so deeply in our minds and in our history because, in part, we do it with our family. And continuing that tradition, is in varying degrees, honoring those who are not there yet who instilled in you the value of that practice, of this tradition. And this leads to the very next part of the Yizkor liturgy. We pledge to give tzedakah in their memory. We give something of ourselves, yes time, but also money. Why? The mystical answer would be that this gift elevates their place in the world to come, raises their status and God shines more brightly on their soul. This is very nice but it may not resonate with everyone.

The liturgy says:
heneni – here I am, and we know this is never a neutral word choice

no'dev(et) – I pledge – the same word and root used in the Torah for free will offerings –

tzdekah – generosity.

We say this because you are pledging to give; had the people for whom you are saying Yizkor not lived then that gift would not be given. Usually, if you do not give to a cause someone else will, presumably many others. But giving on the basis of the memory of a loved one, giving of yourself and of your resources is telling God to **remember** (!) You are

reassuring that loved one that they still and will always matter to you. So, God, they better matter to You.

As the sun sets on Pesach we say Yizkor to remind God of the gifts that God gave us in the form of our loved one. We say it to reconnect in a *makom*, in a holy place with the lingering spirit that lives in us. We say it to be compelled to do something tangible about that memory. And, I hope, we say Yizkor to recalibrate our hearts and minds to live in a way that is righteous, in memory of those we love.

Rabbi David Minkus has been with Congregation Rodfei Zedek since June, 2014. He earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana and also studied at Hebrew University and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. He graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in Jewish Education. He lives in Hyde Park with his wife Ilyssa and daughters Raia and Adira. Raia attends preschool at Akiba Schechter.

Holiness in Everyday Life

by Jonah Vaang



My Torah portion, kedoshim, or holiness teaches us how to be holy in our everyday lives. Some of the laws at first might seem obvious, such as, you should not insult the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind. What this **really** means though is that you should not take advantage of people's weaknesses. Other laws might require more effort and thought, such as the law that says, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

That law has relevance to both sides of my family. My grandmother, Vanya, and her family fled the Communists in Yugoslavia after World War II. They first spent time in a refugee camp in Italy, before coming to America. When my grandmother, whom I call Nonna, and her family first arrived in Chicago they had to start a completely new life. My great-grandparents needed to find work. Nonna, her sister Milena and her brother Spiro had to learn a new language, a new culture, and get used to a new school. Nonna has told me stories about how their first many years were difficult but made easier by the kindness of others. A girl in Nonna's 5th grade class became her friend, and would often lend her a pencil because Nonna's family did not yet have enough money to buy extras. That same friend

invited Nonna over for her first Thanksgiving dinner. It was especially generous because her friend's mother was a single parent and did not have a lot of extra money herself. Nonna's teacher also made a special effort to make sure Nonna felt welcomed. Sometimes people wrongly assumed that immigrants did not have many skills. Nonna's father Milos loved painting. When Nonna's teacher found out that Milos was a painter she hung his artwork in the school, to show the other students how talented Nonna's father was. Seeing her father's artwork also made Nonna feel incredibly proud.

About twenty years after Nonna arrived in Chicago, my grandparents Lydia and Kenneth, and my mom, came to Chicago from South Africa. They had no family or friends here before they arrived, but had been told to look up a couple, named the Gethners, who had helped other South African immigrants. The Gethners took care of my grandparents like they were family. They took my grandparents to the grocery store, to buy furniture and a car, and made my grandparents promise not to sign any checks until they could make sure that my grandparents were getting a fair deal. The Gethners took my grandparents to synagogue, and introduced them to other families. After hearing these stories about how other people helped my family, I will try to be more aware of how I might be able to help someone who is a newcomer.

Another part of my portion that is meaningful to me is where it says, "you should leave the corners of your fields

for the poor so that they can have the fallen fruit of your crops.” I think this is teaching us that we should care for people who are hungry. It is also teaching us how to help people in a way that makes them comfortable. By leaving the *corners* of your fields open you make it easy for people to come and gather the crops, without embarrassment.

This concept came up during my family’s Passover seder when we read a Haggadah written by Elie Wiesel. He told a story about how Jews from his town would raise money for people who needed it.

He wrote, “One by one, they would enter a room in the community house. There was a dish of money, and those who had extra money left some, and those who needed money took some. No one knew how much each person gave or took from the dish. Therefore, the people who needed help were taken care of with *dignity*.”

One memory that has always stuck with me was from when my brother and I were little. Our babysitter, Sara, who is here today, would say to us “make sure you eat all of your food and don’t waste it because there are people who need it.” Being that young, I couldn’t really comprehend what Sara was trying to teach us. People in need? What does that mean?

I saw what Sara meant, firsthand, when I started volunteering at a food pantry in Hyde Park for my Mitzvah

project. I would help unload the food before the people arrived, and then the people would come through the pantry one by one. They would show me what food they wanted, and I would bag it for them. I would ask them how many people were in their household so that I knew how much food to give them. Sometimes there were a lot of children in the house. It would be hard to be at school if you were hungry. If the kids’ parents don’t have enough money for food then the kids probably can’t get a lot of the toys that they want, or have extra activities. I felt

good being able to help families in our community. I think that’s part of becoming a Bar Mitzvah. As Beast Boy, in a cartoon I like, called *Teen Titans* says, “adults have more of the R-words – responsibilities.” As a young adult, it is my responsibility to help people in need.



Grandmother Vanya and her family in Serbia.

Jonah is the son of Eric, a managing director in the Investment Department at the John D. and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, and Tammy, a cardiologist at the University of Chicago and CRZ member since childhood. He has been a student at the Jewish Enrichment Center since its inception and at the Lab School, where he will be in 8th grade and his brother Simon will in 5th.

Somewhere in Europe – Excerpts

by Roberta Bernstein from letters of Sam Lesner

Sam Lesner had been writing for the *Chicago Daily News* when he was drafted in 1944. For the next twenty months, while serving in the Army Medical Corps, he wrote daily letters to his wife Esther, discussing the war in all its aspects, including his encounter with a Belgian relative of Bob Channon. He had intended his letters to serve as the basis for a book, but after the war he packed them away in a box and never mentioned them to anyone. In 2004, his daughter, Roberta Bernstein, accidentally found them, and, with her sister Judy Holstein, decided to create the once dreamed of book. They added excerpts from a 1986 interview by Sam's eldest grandson, Rabbi Edward C. Bernstein, to fill in gaps, material proscribed in battlefield letters. *Somewhere in Europe, the World War II Letters of Sam Lesner*, was published in April, 2018.



Basic Training



Sam, Esther, and Roberta

Feb. 13, 1944 I can't tell you much about what is going to happen. All I know is that I'm classified as a medical soldier, which means being thoroughly prepared for everything short of combat.

Maybe your ma can find me a mezzuzah or a "mogen david," on Maxwell Street. I'd like to have one and a chain to go with it since no medallions can be worn on the same chain that holds the dog tags.

Awareness of Jewish identity weaves through the letters.

April 6, 1944 We were granted a pass from Friday noon to Monday morning for the Passover and I was sorely tempted to have you come down, but the same situation prevails about living quarters, and know you would want to bring the baby so I have passed up the whole thing. Passover without my own means nothing to me. Well, Angel the best information I can get is that I am classified as class 3 whatever that is, and unless some law is passed about over age, I'm afraid I'm available for overseas duty.

Somewhere in France

Sept. 17, 1944 Jewish services for Rosh Hashana are to be held in a nearby town for us. I expect to go to all the services planned for today, Monday and Tuesday. Yom Kippur, too, will be observed here. It is a great moment for us, Darling. Freedom of worship is fast being restored to Nazi paganized Europe.... How can we ever doubt that there is a righteous God?

Sept. 18, 1944 The service was poignantly beautiful.... This morning having again attended service --- there are more twenty-five officers and men of the Jewish faith in our outfit -- and all attended -- I discovered that the young, fine-looking lad who warmed our hearts with his cantorial brilliance is a Chicagoan and lives at 4300 W. Van Buren Street. Bill Blumenthal is his name. He worked in Mark's Jewelry Store on State St. It might be a mitzvah to see if you can find his family listed in the phone book and convey to them the great spiritual pleasure their boy gave us. Service is held in a tent with an improvised, but beautifully decorated, altar. Gorgeous petunias flanked the altar, and, ironically, are kept fresh in huge shell casings filled with water. The shells were retrieved from the pasture battlefields. The censor informs me that it is permissible to say that is within an afternoon's visiting distance.... We have no regular rabbi to assist the cantor, but several high-ranking officers from the various units in this area fill the bill intelligently and efficiently. Our young "cantor," though, is the messenger of our prayers.

Sept 19, 1944 The cantorial work of our fellow Chicagoan... was remarkable in

its power to sustain the spiritual mood of the great occasion throughout the three days. We all were moved by his eloquence and spiritual power. I hope he will be able to "sing" the Yom Kippur service, too.

Somewhere in Belgium

Oct. 16, 1944 We are as near to the front as we'll get for a long, long time, and all I can say is that extraordinary peace and calm prevails here, a condition which is unlikely to change.

Nov. 25, 1944 The war news is good. Our hopes are high. Our morale, and mine in particular, is excellent. Today we enjoyed the spectacle of seeing our batch of war prisoners take over most of the field work we've been doing the past weeks. I'll write more illuminatingly on this subject later..... Our joy was short-lived. Our "charming guests," however, continued to work in the rain as we watched them from under canvas. They have no choice, but they do work steadily, doggedly. When they first appeared, the blood rushed to my head. But as the day wore on, we began to single out faces and study them. There is nothing super about them. The faces range from stupidity to middle class smugness. We are forbidden fraternization with them. That is very wise. They are being treated fairly. That's sufficient. Since, by their own "admission," they have done no independent thinking for many years, they can't possibly understand our good-natured bickering, which is so much a part of our daily lives. They can keep their "Order" through which they have accomplished so much mass murder and suffering. We have nothing to learn from them. We can teach them something, though, but

only through refraining from prying into their empty minds. They are no enigma. They invited in the gangsters and then fell in love with the business of playing "Robber Barons." Very well, they have played the brutal game long enough. Trap them and squeeze them and they turn out to be small, fry indeed.

Nov. 29, 1944 The day is filled with the usual administering of medications, preparation of various solutions, and, of course, the many cleaning and washing details necessary to maintain a ward up to standard. I don't mind this at all. To acquire knowledge, one must start from the bottom. The Army, Dear, commands the best and the most revolutionary results of medical research. It is a liberal education, just being exposed to the workings of the "miracles." I wish you could hear the discussions in barracks when we gather around the stove. These boys, who didn't know an aspirin from a horse's behind before they entered service, now talk with astonishing authority and scientific awareness. I don't mean that we (they) strut around playing Louis Pasteur, or anything like that, but it is astonishing what they have learned and how much they can do.

Dec. 28, 1944 The grim reality of war sweeps in ever-widening circles. The peaceful valley is no more. The poppies will be well nourished again. It's a great wonder to me that Mother Earth doesn't belch in agony with her gullet over full with blood....



Jan. 3, 1945 What can I say to ease your anxiety? As long as you have letters from me in my hand you must believe that all goes well with us. I have never known you to indulge in false sentiments or prop yourself with phony religious concepts, but I do feel that in this great time of distress you are finding a measure of hope in our Gracious God.

Jan. 7, 1945 To add to my linguistic difficulties, we made the acquaintance of a poor little Jewish shoemaker, and his nice little wife and child. The man has lived in Belgium for twenty years, but the past five have been lived in the particular hell Hitler designed for all European Jews. Now, of course, after years of torture and terrible privation, they have found some peace and security in their hovel of a shoe repair shop. The little cobbler discovered us.

We were passing his shop ... when we realized that someone was frantically beckoning to us to come in. Being four strong, we went in and discovered this harmless little man who somehow sensed that two of us were of his faith. My Yiddish, of course, is very rusty, but I get by.

Jan. 8, 1945 Our little Jewish cobbler is delighted with having discovered us, and I, too, am glad to talk to him for an hour. One of the Gentile boys and I dropped into his shop today. The lad speaks German haltingly. While we were there, two French-speaking

Belgians dropped in. Then true democracy went into action. The cobbler speaking French to his customers, translated their replies in Yiddish for my benefit. In turn, I enlightened my friend through English and German so that he would get the full flavor of what was said. There we were, a small group of men, worlds apart in background, education, purpose, finding a bond of brotherhood, of understanding.

Jan. 18, 1945 Now, I don't know what you have been able to deduce from my letters of the past three weeks, but whatever you think, it's not that. I had used phrases and words such as rubble pile with hesitancy, lest you imagine terrible things. Frankly, Angel, we had to go away for a while when things got very hot. That going away, and all that it cost us in spiritual, emotional, and material things, I cannot tell you now. It was rough, it was tremendously exciting, and it was terribly frightening at times.

Jan. 19, 1945 The prisoners assigned to me are good workers, so I find I can keep orders to a minimum. I think they are a bit surprised when I tell them to do something in fairly good German. Frankly, I wish we were rid of the whole lot of them for good. You know that you dare not give in even for a moment to their smiles and boyish attempts to ingratiate themselves, but damn it, maybe they can be reeducated. They're an unkempt, unwashed bunch in their ragged uniforms, but there is no evidence of the monstrous sadism with which they have been imbued, sticking out on them. You can't be neutral in handling them. You either snarl and treat them with contempt or else you find yourself being moderately patient and tolerant. That's the rub. We have

boasted how we will reeducate them. But snarling contempt isn't a very good educational medium.

We cannot play the Nazi game. We can't wipe a people off the face of the earth. The Nazis tried it with the Jews. It didn't work. It will never work as long as a handful, even two, survive. That is our job, then, as I see it. We must make them go back to living as a people, not as a menacing horde.

Jan. 29, 1945 Where shall I begin? You have my letters of the period Dec. 15 - 31, and you are quite right. "Critical" is the word for that unforgettable two weeks. "Somewhere in Belgium" for that period meant "somewhere in hell" for the fighting boys and "somewhere in purgatory" for the rest of us. For our fighting men, the issue was clear: "Dig in and hold and fight as you've never fought before." How well they fulfilled their mission is told in the reduction of that monstrous bulge to a pimple and finally to a mere discoloration.

March 28, 1945 No letters from you today, but I won't fret since I have something to write about. First, there was the wonderful GI seder last night at which more than five hundred officers and E.M.s [Enlisted Men] sat down at the flower-decked, candle-lit tables to hear the story of Passover, interpret the symbols, and dine sumptuously. It was the most extraordinary affair in that the Army went to great lengths to make it a real seder. The wine, the soup with kneidlach, the chopped liver appetizer, the chicken, matzos, the tea all were manna from heaven. It wasn't just soup. It was traditional Jewish soup with all the marvelous aroma and flavor we have known since infancy....

Acknowledgments of the day and its meaning, particularly in this day of human bondage and persecution of minorities, were read from all the commanding generals in the E.T.O. Truly, it was our evening to be proud of our contribution.

Ciney, Belgium

May 13, 1945 It frightens one to know that now one can say so many things which were well guarded secrets for so long. We are slow to realize just what has happened, having become accustomed to endless restrictions. Well, Darling, this is the little town in the middle of nowhere that stemmed the tide of the Nazi might in that eventful Christmas week of 1944.

Oral History details of meeting a family of Belgian Jewish survivors:

We spent almost two years in Belgium. Every time we would get a weekend pass or a furlough, a couple of the Jewish boys in the outfit would take off for Brussels. We had heard that in this city there was a Jewish serviceman's club. It was so wonderful. It was in a beautiful building. The food was marvelous and the Jewish soldiers were treated so well. Some of the non-Jewish soldiers got wind of it and they wanted to go too. They even offered to be Jewish just to go to this club. We met the woman who was directing the activity, Mrs. Chanania. Before the war she had been the Belgian Correspondent for the New York Jewish News Agency. But of course, during the war this job had been disbanded. She was such a gracious host. She would always invite two of us to come to her home, a lovely flat. They were somehow

able during the war to maintain some semblance of civilization, and they were very active also in helping other Jews. The husband, Mr. Chanania, had been a very respected diamond merchant and cutter in Belgium, which is a seat of the diamond cutting industry. When the Germans came in and grabbed him, they threw him in one concentration camp and they threw Mrs. Chanania in another one. But word came out that she had been a recognized world correspondent, so for some reason they didn't get too rough with her. But the children—the young boy, 13 or 14, died of a ruptured appendix because the Nazis would not allow a doctor to come to a Jewish home. The young daughter, age 14 or 15, was spirited away to a nunnery where she was protected by the nuns. At any rate, now Belgium had been liberated more or less so they were back in their home and able to retain some of their things, lovely furniture and so on, and they were very kind to us. In time I learned that Mr. Chanania had a brother who lived in Chicago near where I lived [in Hyde Park] just before taking off for the war. When I found out about this, I wrote home and asked the folks to go over and get acquainted with the Chanania's relatives who were called Channon in America. Dr. Benjamin Channon was the brother of Mr. Chanania. I acted as an intermediary because they, as Belgian citizens, could not receive any property from America, so the packages would be sent to me and I would deliver them to the Chanania's. I've never forgotten that gorgeous hospitality. They were so kind.

June 3, 1945 Our hosts, the Chanania's, continue to overwhelm us with their hospitality. I am enclosing a letter

written by Mme. Chanania to her brother-in-law, Dr. Channon. Please put it in an envelope and forward it at once. This will bring the letter to them much quicker than through civilian mail channels here. They are so gracious I asked them to let me do this small favor. We were given a key to the house and when we returned at a late hour we found two beds made up with the most beautiful bed linens I have ever seen. We were like a couple of princes in royal beds.

June 18, 1945 I can't begin to tell you how nice these people are. My friend Max and I call them Aunt Rose and Uncle Elias and they refer to us as their American nephews.

June 25, 1945 The pleasure of having your letter of June 8 in which you tell me of the contact with Dr. Channon sustained me.

July 2, 1945 Aunt Rose learned today that her only brother and one child of the family who were in the concentration camp in Holland died on the train that was carrying them to freedom. Aunt Rose is trying desperately to get to Amsterdam to help the widow and the surviving children. But red tape is such that I'm afraid she's doomed to disappointment. You see, Angel, the war isn't over for these people. Now the searching for loved ones begins only to end in the utter despair of finding unmarked graves....

July 10, 1945 Antwerp, Belgium This noon, while taking our after-lunch walk, a little gentleman rushed from a door and hailed me. It was lovable Uncle Elias who had come to Antwerp on business and was dining in a restaurant

which I passed in my walk. I have a genuine affection for this cheerful little man. We hope to see them on Sunday, perhaps for the last time, if what we hear comes to pass. By the 20th, it is said we must be on the move. This is a good thing.

Sam Lesner's post-war career included award-winning movie criticism for the Chicago Daily News and commentary for the Hyde Park Herald. A member of CRZ, he spoke, for the 1984 Breakfast with the Rabbi series, on the history of the Yiddish Theatre in Chicago.



Roberta Bernstein was born and raised on Chicago's south side. She earned a BA from the University of Chicago and an MA from Roosevelt University, both in French. She and her sister Judith became teachers. After teaching English at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School, Roberta moved into temple administration at K.A.M. Isaiah Israel congregation. She served as Executive Director at Rodfei Zedek, then worked in administration at the University of Chicago.

Roberta and husband Chuck have been members Rodfei Zedek since 1974, and sons, Eddie, Aryeh and Henry, celebrated their bar mitzvahs here.

Two Deaths Foretold

by Joseph G. Peterson



years from now.

You and the bartender watch the weatherman go through his routine —it's part of your routine. When it's snowing out, the weatherman tells you with satellite images; when the weather is 75 degrees and cloudless with five-mile-per-hour winds, he tells you that this weather will last for the next three days and then it will either spike or collapse depending on what's blowing in from the northwest. He will tell you when you can no longer bear the heat that the heat-wave is due to an *El Niño* effect —and it will continue on for the next seven days. He will also point out that we are in the middle of a three-year drought, and that lake levels are at an all-time low; he will advise those who have breathing issues to stay indoors. While he tells you these truths, you drink your martini. You and the bartender like to talk about the weatherman as if he is a friend that is right here with you. I like his suit today, the bartender might say. Or you might point out: Who else but a local weatherman can get away with wearing such ties? But the weatherman's voice, his gestures, the way he combs his hair

You sit at the bar every afternoon and avidly watch the local weatherman not knowing that you and he shall die at exactly the same time, three

into a combover, his gentle sense of humor are all so pleasurable avuncular. It's one of the great amenities of this place, you think, that the bartender understands the importance of keeping the television tuned to the local and not the national weather station.

One day in the not so distant future, let's say in nine-hundred-and-seventy-two days, it will come to pass that this very weatherman will be at the ninth hole at the Kemper Golf Course for a benefit. In the days leading up to the benefit he will predict thunderstorms and a plague of hail and yet he will defy his own predictions and show up on the golf course because the benefit is to raise money for leukemia and his own son suffered and died of that dreaded disease. All this information will come out later in the news: that the weatherman's son had died of leukemia, that the weatherman was at the ninth hole at a leukemia benefit when, as he predicted, a tremendous thunderstorm blew in from the northwest; but the news accounts will also say how even our very own weatherman had lost his life, killed by that thing his charts couldn't contain: bad weather. The weatherman was striding across the golf green with putter in hand when a bolt of lightning hit him.

But you don't know this yet, nor does the bartender, nor even does the weatherman. Everyone at the present moment is still alive and overwhelmed by the quotidian: you by your worries how you're going to pay for your next drink, the bartender by his worries how he's going to make rent, and the

weatherman by his worries over his terminally ill son.

Nor do you know that at the very instant the weatherman is struck by lightning, you too shall be struck though by some internal electrical storm which shall lead to stroke, and with the hail battering your window, you will breathe your last. You and the weatherman shall die together, though he on the golf green and you alone in your own bed and in your sleep, and it will be several days before your dead body is discovered in the wreckage of your apartment. During that period of time — from the moment you die until the moment you are discovered — the bartender will gossip with anyone and everyone who walks through the bar and he will talk about the weatherman with whom he has become obsessed. Can you believe, the bartender will say, that the weatherman was struck down by lightning? The weatherman couldn't even avoid his own death by storm! And how many times has the great Trevino been struck, but never once killed! Maybe it was his outrageous ties that tempted Zeus to strike him down with a thunderbolt.

It goes without saying that the bartender won't even notice that you stopped showing up at the bar. Nor will he know why you have stopped, and when he discovers why: that you had a stroke and that you had lived in pecuniary tenuousness, he will hardly care. He has only room in his heart for the tragic death of the weatherman.

Nevertheless, today is a typical day and you and the bartender are lost in the quotidian. You are drinking your

martini; he's drinking a beer out of a glass. You smile with the bartender at the silver lightning bolt on the weatherman's red tie; you comment on his messy combover.

It's such a mop!

Yep, that's the way with these local guys, the bartender says in agreement.

At commercial break you gaze out the window of the bar and you see in the distant sky a long shapely V caused by Canada geese. They are flying high in an azure blue broken up by giant puffs of white clouds. It is the longest such V of Canada geese you have ever seen. It is so long a V that at some point you simply lose its thread.

Joseph G. Peterson received his B.A. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. He currently works in publishing at the University of Chicago Press. He is the author of several novels. The story, Two Deaths Foretold, appears in his latest book, Ninety-Nine Bottles, which was published in July 2019. He and his family live in Hyde Park and have been members of Rodfei Zedek for 20 years.

In Jerusalem, Hope...

commentary on a poem of Yehuda Amichai

by Rabbi Larry Edwards



Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) from *Open Closed Open: Poems* (1998)

Some years ago, a number of us spent a few hours discussing the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, by far the best-known Israeli poet of his generation. One Yom Kippur afternoon we studied several poems from his last collection, *Open Closed Open*. (A short bio is available at

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/yehuda-amichai>.)

Born in Germany in 1924, he moved with his family moved to Palestine in 1936. Amichai was a long-time resident of Jerusalem, and the city figures significantly in many of his poems. Often he draws on traditional religious themes and phrases and then refracts them through a modern, ironic lens. In contrast to the more formal and elevated Hebrew of the previous generation (e.g., Bialik or Alterman), Amichai constructs poetry out of colloquial Hebrew, a Hebrew that has evolved since the founding of the State of Israel. This combination of hints of the sacred coming up against the language of everyday life is surely part of what accounts for his great popularity.

בירושלים תמיד תקנה לטוב. התקנה כמו כלבה נאמנה
לפעמים היא רצה לפני לבדק ולהריח את העתיד
ואז אני קורא לה, תקנה, תקנה, בואי, והיא
באה אלי, אני מלטף אותה והיא אוכלת מיד
ולפעמים היא נשארת מאחורי ליד תקנה אחרת
ואולי להריח את מה שהיה. ואז אני קורא לה "יאושי"
וקורא לה בקול
"יאוש, יאוש, בוא אלי", והיא באה ומתפנקת
ואני קורא לה שוב תקנה.

In Jerusalem, hope springs eternal.
Hope is like a faithful dog.
Sometimes she runs ahead of me
to check the future, to sniff it out,
and then I call to her: Hope, Hope
come here, and she comes to me.
I pet her, she eats out of my hand.
And sometimes she stays behind,
near some other hope, maybe to
sniff out whatever was.
Then I call her my Despair,
I call out to her:
Hey, my little Despair, come here,
and she comes and snuggles up,
and again I call her Hope.

(Trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld)

Amichai's final collection, *Open Closed Open*, comprises some 23 sections. In the above poem (#17 in the section titled, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem?"), the great theme of hope (*tikvah*) versus despair (*ye'ush*) is rendered through the everyday experience of a man walking his dog. (A dog!? Since when do Jews have dogs? This is itself a marker of Jewish modernity.) In the meantime, Jerusalem, which has seen conquerors come and go, persists. In more recent years, the hope for peace has come and gone, but never disappears completely.

When the dog "runs ahead," the name Hope seems to fit, for hope lies in the future – always, it seems, in the future. But when, as dogs so often do, she "sniff[s] out whatever was," then her name becomes Despair. Why? She is sniffing "some other hope" that remains behind. What are these past hopes that remain stuck in the past? I believe they are the multiple narratives and claims for modern Jerusalem, the claims of Israelis and Palestinians to ownership of the city, absolute claims that hold back hope and turn it to its opposite. Am I over-reading? You decide. Perhaps next time, we'll consider an earlier poem of Amichai, "The Place Where We Are Right."

Rabbi Laurence Edwards is Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Or Chadash. He was a Hillel Director (Dartmouth and Cornell) and has served several other congregations, including, in 2014, Rodfei Zedek. He has worked for the American Jewish Committee (Inter-religious Affairs), and currently teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago and at DePaul. Larry is married to Susan Boone, who retired from administrative work at the University of Chicago. Since moving to Chicago in 1997, both Larry and Susan have participated in the life of Rodfei Zedek in many ways, including serving on committees, teaching, and supporting the daily minyan.

Hebrew:

Yehuda Amichai, *Patuach Sagur Patuach* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998), p. 148.

English:

Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*. Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, 2000), p. 141. (In the English edition, the poem is #16 in the section.)

Onward – Three Pilgrimages in the Land of Israel

by Benjamin Usha



Benjamin Usha attended Akiba Schechter then became disconnected from Jewish life until his college years, when he started accompanying his grandmother, Rivka Fradkin, to Saturday morning services. He graduated from DePaul University in 2018 and took a gap year program affiliated with Masa Israel Journey. When the program began in January, Rivka became sicker and Benjamin came home. Rivka passed away on February 21. Her passing profoundly shaped Benjamin as he continued on the journey in Israel for the remaining few months of the program. This is his reflection on the journey.

Beginning

Beginning this journey, it was difficult to leave behind the family to go to Israel, not knowing what to expect in the five months I would be on the program. In our family, we have a tradition of sitting down all together before a person travels to wish them well, especially for a faraway destination. Little did I know that this would be the last time we would all sit down as one complete family. Shortly thereafter, I started my journey onwards to Israel.

I would be staying in Haifa. My roommates came from Germany, Uruguay, Argentina, and the U.S. I have some fond memories of our first weeks in which we spent all of our time together as a new family.

My internship site was the Human and Biodiversity Lab at the Technion Israel Institute of Technology. For the first two weeks of my internship I traveled with Gal, a master's candidate in ecology who was running a project on desert ecology. We stayed in Bedouin tents, going around different campsites in the Negev and surveying plants. It

was an arduous but once-in-a-lifetime experience as we would spend hours exploring the Negev searching for plants and identifying them. On the very last day of our journey, as we had finished our plant surveys early, we stayed to witness a huge flooding of the desert which happens once every three years and lasts for a mere few hours. This caused the desert to come to life by filling the channels that were previously bare and causing nature to overpower the manmade roads.

During the desert expedition, I got a phone call from my mother at night time. We were faced with the choice of going through a difficult surgery for grandmother. Given what everyone from the medical team had said, I supported the surgery, but it was not an easy call. Sometime later, I received another call from my mom describing my grandmother in a poor condition, turning people away. This was not like her. I had such a hard time imagining her turning everyone away yet, even when I tried to talk to her, she turned me away. Things were looking bleak, but there was a small sliver of hope as she would be discharged back home soon.

In a big sign of foreshadowing, my roommate had come home from his internship around this time with a little pocket Yizkor prayer book. He brought the little book to the shelf over my bed and said that we could start a little library of books that we collected to share with one another. We went to bed shortly after.

Passing

Monday February 18th around 3:00am: My mom called me, and in a soft and sorrowful voice shared with me how Babushka did not think she would survive past the week. After the call, I knew I had to go back.

With no time to lose, I packed my bag with all the essential items. I also took the Yizkor book with me, beginning to feel that something powerful was happening. When I purchased an airplane ticket, I discovered that I was the last one to check-in with just a few minutes to spare: I had made it in the nick of time buying precious hours with Babushka. When I arrived in Chi-cago less than 24 hours after the call, I called my mother and surprised her in returning so quickly. As I made my way back to our house, the blankets of white snow covering the buildings and the gray winter sky came into view, bringing me back to the reality of home life.

No words can capture the surreal moment of seeing Babushka again. I saw her and she saw me. There was a piercing rawness to the moment as if the whole world had melted away. It was

just me and her as she was hanging by a thread and I was my little child self. She was turned to the door, beady dark eyes wide open connecting with mine.

Babushka: What? Sinochik is that you? You came home? (Sinochik is an endearment for son that my grandmother used. I learned later that this term was also in reference to my name Benjamin, Son of the Right Hand).

Sinochik: Yes it's me Babushka.

Babushka: Why did you come home?

Sinochik: [I start approaching closer to Babushka.] I had heard that you were sick, so I came home.

Babushka: I probably ruined your trip. This old lady is always bothering people's lives.

Sinochik: No you did not you are so important to my life. What would I do without you Babushka? [I lay next to my grandmother] I am so happy to see you Babushka.

Babushka: I am also happy to see you Sinochik. What can I do? I became sick.

Sinochik: It's ok I am now with you.

Babushka: When I came here, I understood that I have little time left. I had hope that I would still be able to see you one more time. I did not know if I would see you but I had hope... Tell me, who told you to come here?



Benjamin and Babushka 2001

Sinochik: I decided on my own to come here. I wanted to come and see you. I can make my own decisions I am an adult now.

Babushka: Thank you. Praise God that you have become an adult.

She not only felt a sense of relief seeing me again but also in the fact that I had grown up into an adult. Her mission during the last 23 years of her life had been to raise me and she felt a sense of peace knowing that her purpose had been fulfilled. From then on, she had told me some of her own feelings looking back on life. She held my head with all of her remaining strength and gave me blessings for a good, happy, successful, healthy, long life. I was humbled and overcome with a sense of power flowing from her through me. She made some requests from me as her final wishes. One of her wishes, she had always wanted me to buy a car and she had saved up some money for me to do so. Babushka would always say “Living in America without a car is like living without legs.” Another wish she had of me was to take some of her gold and melt them down into a bracelet for my future daughter. She also hoped and asked for me to name my future daughter after her, as Rivka. I gave her my word that I would do just that along with a previous request she had made to name a future son after her younger brother, Arkadiy, who had passed away 23 years earlier. Babushka also requested for me to take care of my mother as my mother was on her own and we were all we had. Finally, my grandmother recalled me enjoying tennis and suggested for me to start playing again.

Throughout the next couple of days, my grandmother and I spent more time together. At some point, I had asked for her forgiveness for everything I had ever done that hurt her. She thought I was silly for asking but she granted her forgiveness and asked for my own which I gave as well. Close to midnight on the 20th of February, my grandmother passed away in her sleep. Everything happened so fast after her passing. From the morticians taking her away, to the funeral home, to the consultation with Rabbi Minkus, and to the funeral it was all less than 48 hours. We asked grandfather, who was sitting in a wheelchair, to talk to her one last time. He sang her the Russian song he serenaded her with when they first met over 70 years ago: “Girls, tell your girlfriend.” When our family arrived at the cemetery, we were greeted by everyone with hugs and condolences. We did not have the words for a eulogy at the time, but our rabbi spoke for us with grace and strength, honoring the memory of Babushka.

For the next week, we held *shiva* in our home. This was our first time ever opening the doors to our home for an extended period of time. Each night, friends, family, and members of the synagogue would come to visit and express words of comfort, share memories of Rivka together, and say Kaddish with a full Minyan almost each night. The joy and comfort that filled our homes was a big relief for the family as we looked forward to each evening. Meanwhile, each day, my mom and I came to synagogue in the morning to pray Kaddish with a Minyan. Our community supported us in our time of need and helped ease the pain of Babushka’s passing.

I experienced a special moment a couple of days after my grandmother passed away. After coming to synagogue, I had decided to visit the nearby bakery for a cup of coffee by myself. I happened to sit by the window overlooking the street. I was wearing a leather jacket that my grandmother had given to me not long before. It was a cloudy day and I was holding onto heavy thoughts about my grandmother. All of a sudden, I see the sun peek through the top of the window, emerging from the clouds. The sun shone brightly, bathing me in its rays and forcing me to cover my eyes from the blinding light. My spirits were uplifted as I associated the source of light with Babushka; a wave of comfort emanated through me as I received the light. I got up from the table as a different man with a profound sense of connection, recognizing that she was a part of me in a new way.

Pilgrimages

As *shiva* went underway, many who came to our house posed the question of whether I would go back to Israel. I was unsure: I felt compelled to be with my family and the synagogue that comforted us in our time of need. Yet my grandmother would have wanted me to continue the journey. Toward the end of Shiva, I made up my mind to go.. I took all that I had brought with as well as my Tallit, Tefilin, and the jacket that Babushka had given me before flying back to Israel.

I remember on my journey to Israel, I stopped over in the London airport. It was approaching the time of Mincha. I had come with a Siddur, and I saw some religious Jewish people waiting for their flights. I worked up the courage to ask when would be the time

for prayer and whether there was a Minyan being formed. But, I was not the only one. Jews from all over the world were searching and gathering for a Minyan. We were able to gather a group of ten men and pray together for Mincha. When it came time, I was the one who recited the Mourner's Kaddish for my Babushka to the group and they responded to me with the power of communal Jewish prayer. I felt the inner power of the words for the first time as a leader of the group of my long lost Jewish family. The men of the Minyan affirmed my prayers and wished me well on my journey.

Back in Israel, I had a new mission to honor my grandmother. It began with becoming more involved at the nearby Mount Carmel Synagogue, trying to say Kaddish with the minyan as often as I could. The desire to honor Babushka evolved into three small pilgrimages: one to Natanya, one to Jerusalem, and one to Yad HaShmona.

My grandmother had related to me two stories that she had read in the newspapers. She told me about the story of how Natanya and Yad HaShmona, towns in Israel, got their respective names. For the first one, a younger brother living in Palastine lost his older brother to the Titanic and decided to develop a new town in Palastine, naming it Natanya after his older brother Nathan. For the second town located about 30 minutes west of Jersualem, the name was dedicated in memory of eight Jews who were denied asylum in Finland during the Holocaust. I was struck by the deep response these stories evoked from Babushka. I remembered these stories, and I decided to

take it upon myself to visit these places in her memory.

I began with Netanya as I had some family there on my grandmother's side. After spending the day with them, around nighttime, we walked over to the edge of the beach and peered out to the sea. I stared into the dark waters, mystified by the white waves washing up the shores. I got teary-eyed as I remembered my grandmother and I felt her guiding presence bring me to that moment in time. Though she had passed onwards, she was still with me even in dark times. After a personal prayer of gratitude, I took the mental image of the pitch-black night sea with me as I parted ways with my family and went back to Haifa.

The second pilgrimage was to Jerusalem. At Babushka's funeral, we had lowered her coffin into the ground and my grandfather, his caregiver, my mother, and I all went up for our final farewells. We each poured a bit of sand from the Mount of Olives onto Babushka's coffin. Later, when I looked into the little bag, I discovered that a few final grains of dust had remained at the bottom of the bag. Since I had the option of returning to Israel soon, I decided to make it a personal mission to restore the last grains to Jerusalem. A dear family friend from Jerusalem and I went to a Jewish cemetery in Jerusalem where his father was buried. On top of the balcony next to his father's grave, we recited Psalm 91, a traditional mourning passage, and I released the last grains of sand. Afterwards, I covered my eyes and recited Shema Yisrael with all of my heart as Babushka's spirit became reunited with Jerusalem. When I finished, I felt a gust of wind back in my

face with great strength, letting me know that the prayer had been heard. This was another powerful affirmation of her presence staying with me and guiding me. Upon leaving the cemetery, I left a small rock on top of the balcony railing signifying that she had been visited.

Finally, for my third pilgrimage, I took a bus down to Yad HaShmona by myself one evening. When I arrived, I found myself in the middle of nowhere. There were breathtaking views of uninterrupted nature as far as the eye could see. I decided to recite evening prayers as the sun set and became a crimson red. That evening in the town hotel's reception area I noticed a notebook for visitors to write in. I wrote about how much the story of the town impacted my grandmother and what an amazing person she was. I signed it with my name and my grandmother's name, Rebecca Fradkin, sealing her story with Yad HaShmona, and thus bringing a close to my pilgrimages.

Epilogue

Babushka has played a tremendous role in my life as she spent the most time with me growing up. From her cooking, to her teaching, to her disciplining, to her loving care, to her smile, and to her kind nature, she helped me flourish here in the United States, a culture completely foreign from what she knew. We had a special relationship and I am truly blessed to have been her grandson. Though it is painful to see her go, it is meaningful that she was able to live her final hours in peace and dignity. Rodfei Zedek brought great meaning into Babushka's life and she shared what she felt with the rest of the community. Whenever any congregant at Rodfei Zedek says

the blessings of the Aliyah with all of their heart turned toward God and the community, just the way she did, her memory lives onwards.

"Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My Name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will rescue him, and bring him to honor. With long life will I satisfy him, and make him behold My salvation." –Psalms 91:14-16

"Life comes with soaring peaks and deep valleys. We stood in the shadow of the valley of death. A slash on the top of my heart sends me tearing up in pain. The emptiness squeezed me, keeping me awake the first nights as my health and rest deteriorated. The solace came through the company of my family and friends. God is here with me even now while she lives on as the sun and watches over us." – Journal entry 3/3/19

Benjamin Usha has been a member of Rodfei Zedek since childhood. The son of Lydia Usha and the grandson of Anatoliy Usha and late Rivka Fradkin, he is an incoming first-year law student at UIC's John Marshall Law School. He has also been accepted to UIC's masters in urban planning and policy program with the intent to pursue a dual degree. His mission is to promote environmental sustainability through policy, planning, and law.



Yad HaShmona, 2019

Introducing Julie Ratowitz

by Mark Sorkin

Julie Ratowitz, who joined Congregation Rodfei Zedek as Executive Director this past April, comes to us with extensive experience in catering and event management. Prior to joining our community, she started a company called JSR Enterprises, which coordinated parties for families and corporate clients in the Chicago area. She also served as the Director of Events for Lake Shore Country Club in Glencoe. Throughout her over 20-year career, she has had the pleasure of working with dozens of Jewish families to fulfill the social rituals of their life cycle events.

Julie learned how to cook when she was a girl. The oldest of three children, she grew up in Hazel Crest, a south suburb of Chicago, with her parents Ruth and Ernie, her younger brother David and sister Miriam. Ernie worked as an engineer at General Mills, and Ruth taught cooking classes out of their home. For years, Julie and David assumed that everyone had a mirror in their kitchen just like the one their mother installed as an instructional aide. The cooking classes were popular, and soon Julie's mother was teaching for the local park district. Before long, she had opened a catering service, and by twelve Julie was essentially on staff, assisting at dinner parties and weddings. When her mother's job required working at night, Julie cooked dinner for the family.



12-year-old Julie making her famous lemon tarragon chicken



Julie (center) organized an event of Les Dames Escoffier to launch a Joan Nathan (right) book. Ina Pinkney (left) emcee'd.

By the time she entered college, Julie was ready to try her hand at something new. She majored in journalism and publishing at Drake University and took an internship with Margie Korshak, at her PR firm in Chicago. Celebrity encounters were a nice perk. She collected recipes from the city's top chefs for a cookbook. She shook Walter Payton's hand while staffing an event for the Michael Jordan Charity Golf Tournament. She escorted Paloma Picasso to the makeup counter at the grand opening of Bloomingdale's on Michigan Avenue. "I met a lot of cool people at that job," she recalls. "It was fun."

After college Julie took her place in management at restaurants around the city and surrounding suburbs. A decade later she had come to realize that she loved the events and catering side of the foodservice world. At Lake Shore Country Club she organized large events that required extensive collaboration, honing a set of skills that serve her well in her current role, whether working with institutional partners in the building or managing programs, holidays, and family simchas. She was often the first point of contact for new members, a role she has taken on with extraordinary grace at Rodfei Zedek.

Before coming to Rodfei Zedek Julie already had Hyde Park connections. Her maternal grandmother grew up here, and her maternal grandfather ran Becker's department store. At Lake Shore Country Club she had bonded with many members who had roots in Hyde Park. "All of a sudden there were all these people who wanted to talk to me about their parties and events," she says. "There were lots of ladies who played bridge all day, and men who sat around the table playing cards. I'd walk through and chit chat, and they were always happy to see me."

The skills that have traveled with Julie through a successful career directing and consulting on catering and event management now work to the benefit of the Rodfei Zedek community.

A top goal for her first year at Rodfei Zedek is to establish herself as open and responsive to all members of

our congregation. "One of the keys to being a good executive director is understanding people's needs and concerns," she says. "The simple art of listening is really important. I'm spending a lot of time listening."

Julie is also focusing on team-building among the maintenance staff, empowering them so that they can accomplish their goals. Lately, members may have noticed, the team has been tidying up quite a bit: reorganizing the administrative office, grooming the grounds around the building, clearing out junk from the closets, replacing the water fountain on the first floor. These tasks serve immediate needs, but Julie also has her sights on longer-term goals for the congregation. "We're going to have a 150th anniversary in a few years," she says. "I'm already thinking about what it should be like."



Mark Sorkin is associate director of communications at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, a research center at the University of Chicago. He and his wife, Janet, have two children: Adele comes to the Jewish Enrichment Center for after-school programming, and Ari attends Akiba Schechter. Mark is currently serving as a vice president at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, chair of the social justice committee, and an editor of To Learn and To Teach.

This American Shabbat

Since arriving at Congregation Rodfei Zedek Rabbi David Minkus has created and nurtured a program originally suggested by NPR's This American Life. Invited by the Rabbi, participants in This American Shabbat study together and discuss, then present their interpretations at a Shabbat service. Over and over participants express their appreciation for each other's insights, and the entire Congregation thrills to the rediscovery of its members' talents and commitment. These talks on Parashat Emor were originally presented on May 18, 2019.

by Judy Chernick



This is one of the *parashot* during which my eyes and mind have glazed over. Studying the *parasha* with Lisa, Andy and David opened a perspective that will inform my experience of *Emor* and other readings in the future as we make our way through the Torah. Many thanks to them for their patient and generous insights and support.

My initial reaction to *Emor* was a distinct inability to connect to the Israelites, to the circumstances of their lives in the Holy Land, and to the grab-bag of proscriptions, prescriptions, and instructions. Not only was the early Israelites' an agrarian economy, but they lived long before common modern public health practices, much less antibiotics. Reading the text closely in our study session, I thought that some of those proscriptions probably served contemporaneous public health purposes, whether by Divine decree or from the knowledge of those who wrote down or edited the Torah.

Because the sacrificial system ceased with the destruction of the Second Temple, I became increasingly curious about how prayer *could* replace sacrifice. This has become not only a significant part of Jewish history but also is the entirety of our personal experience. I have tried to wrap my mind around the meaning of the sacrifices to the Israelites in order to think about what is relevant about prayer in my life.

In Numbers 13:27 Israel was described by the spies sent out by Moses as a Land that Flows with Milk and Honey, but this was probably most meaningful to the Israelites in contrast to the wilderness they had traversed since leaving Egypt. When finally established in the land, raising animals and growing crops were always dependent on the challenging local weather conditions. That is, agriculture was subject to drought, wind, temperature variations, and locusts and other pestilence. Herdsmen and farmers must have been constantly preoccupied by the state of their pastures and fields. The herdsmen would have had to scrupulously tend their herds and flocks, being aware of the health of the animals. Their *livelihood* – literally the means of having food, shelter, and clothing – was agriculture, in a way unknowable to me

as a modern city dweller. Here in Leviticus 22:17-24 the people are commanded to bring faultless gifts so their sacrifices will be holy, acceptable to their Holy God. Selecting perfect, unblemished animals of the right age and not offering an animal and its young the same day required detailed knowledge of each and every animal. The holiness of the animals would confirm the Israelites' connection with God, important since they were dependent on God and involved in a reciprocal relationship as they worked the land.

Complicating the matter, how was I to make sense of the fact that Prophets including Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah railed against sacrifices offered by people acting unjustly and immorally?

Convinced that the Israelites felt a direct connection to their sacrifices, I had to consider how I can relate to prayer – to our prayers. These were recorded in the Mishnah, the first major work of Rabbinic literature, redacted at the beginning of the third century of the common era. Our prayers come from tractate *Berachot* (Blessings) in *Seder Zeraim* (Order of Seeds) – *aha!* – which deals primarily with laws about plants and farming. Here are the Shema, the Amidah, Blessings for Food, the Birkat Hamazon, Kiddush, Havdalah, and special blessings such as those that may be said when one sees lightning or a rainbow. How can I relate to these prayers, developed by the Rabbis so long ago on the other side of the world to substitute for agricultural sacrifices?

By the study group's second meeting, I had turned up online re-

sources that included not only a 1906 entry in the Jewish Encyclopedia by Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch (a Chicago connection) and six other rabbis but also contemporary writings from Rabbi Shmuel Kogan of Chabad and Natan Aviezer, a physicist professor emeritus at Bar Ilan University. These writings augmented my deficient knowledge base and expanded my thinking, but they didn't resolve my difficulties – and there was no reason to think further research within my reach would turn up anything that might help me. Just at this critical point, Rabbi David subtly nudged me toward Maimonides.

I was thus reminded that, when Maimonides recorded the laws of sacrifices and prayers for their eventual restoration, he also posited that God had initially ordained a program of sacrifices different from contemporaneous idolatry to wean His people from away from other gods. This idea had its critics in Maimonides' time and still does today. However, if Maimonides suggested that the relationship of the people to God would not require sacrifices forever, how might I approach God for atonement and other communications now?

Like the ancient Israelites carefully choosing their offerings, I am trying to think seriously about relying on our prayers to connect to the Holy One, blessed be He. This appears to be a way for me to feel a sense of commonality with our ancestors, who wanted to please and to draw near to God, and thereby for me to do the same. In recent years with more time (and need) for reflection and more perspective, I

have given a good deal of thought to the necessity for gratitude to God. It would be ridiculous to ascribe the good in my life either to random chance or to myself. Attending services is always uplifting, and I perceive that the degree of lift is very much a function of my attitude. I am always buoyed up by services, maybe especially on those shabbat and festival mornings when attending has required real effort. Furthermore I realize that individual prayer is an expansive field I've scarcely explored. Clearly prayer is a challenge and an opportunity for me going forward.

Studying *Emor* to participate in "This American Shabbat" has moved me to reflect on my experience of prayer. I count myself fortunate to be a member of Rodfei Zedek, which is rich in congregants committed to prayer and in knowledgeable, dedicated clergy and lay leaders to teach and lead us!

Rodfei Zedek has been a spiritual home for Judy since 1972. She particularly enjoys Shabbat morning services and sharing many friendships through Sisterhood, through service on the Board, playing mah jongg, and discussing books. She celebrated an adult bat mitzvah here in 1997, and for about fifteen years managed the synagogue's website. A native south-sider, after some years in Arizona and Southern California she returned to Hyde Park as a University of Chicago staffer, working in seven offices over 30+ years.

by Andrew Kirschner



In Chapter 23 of Leviticus, Moses is instructed to tell the Israelites about The "fixed times of the Lord that you shall proclaim as sacred occasions (they are my sacred occasions)."

It was about this time of year, five years ago when my wife, Rose and I were preparing for a different sort of sacred occasion, the birth of our first child, John. He was actually born the day before Shavuot, making his Hebrew birthday the 49th, and final day of the *omer*. Ellie, our younger child, incidentally was born on Hoshanah Rabbah, at the end of Sukkot. And this remarkable connection of our sacred children to our sacred calendar is not lost on me. And I mention it here, in relation to this week's *parasha*, because the moment we became parents, how we marked sacred occasions as a family raising Jewish children was changed forever.

As any parent who has or has had young children will tell you, a lot of your energy day in and day out is devoted to survival. How can we keep these tiny creatures alive while maintaining some degree of sanity? When John was a newborn, and we were juggling late night feedings, doctors' visits, family coming to stay and so much more, I remember calling my Dad and saying, I'm sorry. Growing up, I always thought that you and mom were

a little bit crazy, but now I realize that we made you that way.

So as I read the regimen of sacred occasions with this perspective, I notice how brief it is. And I take it to mean, that these are the most essential things you need to do when it comes to each of these holidays. You eat *matzah* on Passover, you practice self-denial on Yom Kippur, you shake some pagan symbols on Sukkot in the most monotheistic, non-pagan way possible because, "I am the Lord your God." Also, what seems to be common for all of these sacred occasions is that you take off work, come together with your community, and worship together.

A little over a month ago, we were trying to figure out the cleaning and shopping and all the minutiae that come with preparing for Passover, so this was a helpful reflection to me. I mean, maybe it would have been more helpful when I was literally wondering how anyone with a two-year-old could have prepared for that first Passover, and actually made it out of Egypt. But in all seriousness, it is helpful to know that there are many customs, traditions, obligations that have been added on over the last 2,000 years, and each with its own important reason. And equally helpful to know, that in the beginning, this is what mattered most: take a break from work, come together with your community and worship.

And knowing that to be true, the next question then is why? One possible answer we uncovered together as a study group came about as we examined the last holiday on the list-Sukkot. Here we are told to live in booths because we were made by God

to live in them when he brought us out of Egypt. It dawned on us, that the Hebrew says this final sacred occasion was directly connected to the Exodus. Thus Passover, the first annual festival of the year, is connected to the last. In fact in Exodus 12:37-39 it says:

לֹא וַיֵּסְעוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִרַעְמֶסֶס,
סִכְנֹתָה, בְּשֵׁשׁ-מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף רִגְלֵי
הַגְּבָרִים, לְבַד מִטָּרֶף.
לֶחֶם וְגַם-עֵרֶב רֹב, עָלָה אִתָּם, וְצֹאן
וּבָקָר, מְקֻנָּה כְּבֹד מְאֹד.
לֹא וַיֵּאֲפוּ אֶת-הַבֶּצֶק אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאוּ
מִמִּצְרַיִם, עֶגְת מִצּוֹת--כִּי לֹא הָיָה
כִּי-גִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, וְלֹא יָכְלוּ
לְהִתְמַקְמָה, וְגַם-צֹדָה, לֹא-עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.

The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

There are two things that I want to note here. First of all, the Israelites didn't just dwell in huts called Sukkot, they went to a place called Sukkot that was known for having huts. And it is referred to in Genesis when Jacob is reunited with his brother after their reconciliation. They go their separate ways, and Jacob stops in Sukkot, where he built stalls for his cattle – *sukkot* – hence the name. So when Parashat Emor talks about Sukkot the festival, it is not just commemorating the time spent

dwelling in huts, but time spent in a specific place.

The second thing is that once they arrived in Sukkot, they baked the dough from Egypt that hadn't had time to rise. We often tie Sukkot to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur because of its proximity on the calendar, but this event of baking the matzo, seems to tie it just as much, if not more to Passover. While I think we all connect Passover to the celebration of our journey from slavery to freedom, I am also suggesting that Sukkot is, at least in part, a celebration of the completion of that process.

It's the moment we ate matzo, our first meal after leaving Egypt and slavery for good. The text actually is clear, that the Israelites made the dough as slaves (in Raamses, no less, one of the two storage cities that they built as slaves) and then traveled to Sukkot. There in Sukkot, they baked that dough and ate their first meal as a free people. Wait – so is Matzo the bread of affliction or the bread of freedom? One explanation is that it could be both and that is the tension we sit with at the Passover Seder. I think *Emor* also acknowledges this tension in the way it lists the 14th of Nissan at twilight as *Pesach* for the Lord and then separately lists the Feast of Matzos, starting on the 15th of Nissan. At the same time, that “freedom” comes with some obligations around how and when we spend our time. The very first mitzvah given to this newly freed nation upon exiting Egypt is to make a calendar, so we don't forget any of these sacred occasions. It's kind of like when you finally nail that long awaited promotion to executive director only to realize you still have a responsibility to answer to the board.

So in effort to tie this all together, I would like to return to *Parshat Emor* one more time. At the end of Chapter 22, right before the list of sacred occasions begins in 23, we read:

You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I the LORD who sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I the LORD.

When we were slaves, Pharaoh controlled the time we spent, but in freedom, so does God; however, our reward is that He will dwell in our midst. When we find ourselves falling back into our old habits and mundane routines that enslave us, perhaps we come together in community for Shabbat and all these festivals, to create sacred space between us that is literally filled with God. That's that magical, feel good stuff that you feel (or at least the leadership here hopes you feel) when you come to shul – whatever the occasion.

Some say that monotheism is Judaism's gift to the world. Lately, I have read a lot about how the idea of Shabbat and rest is too. Regardless, it is through community that the Jewish community has ensured the survival of both – And it's for that reason we find it to be an essential component of all our sacred occasions.

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performing improv comedy, to engage and grow leaders, so they can bring about positive change in their communities. His most recent professional endeavor is working as the Director of Community Engagement at KAM Isaiah Israel. Andy also serves on the Board of Directors at Challah for Hunger, a national nonprofit working to build communities inspired and equipped to advocate against hunger.

Along with his wife, Rose, and two kids, John and Ellie, he joined Rodfei Zedek about two years ago and served on the Youth Education Committee last year. Even though he works at KAM Isaiah Israel now, Andy is grateful for the entire Hyde Park Jewish Community and feels completely at home at either congregation.

by Lisa Salkovitz Kohn



My first thought upon reading Emor was Oy! What a mishmash! From laws about what the priests can and can't do with respect to the dead; whom they can marry; who can eat of which sacrifices; the physical purity of both the animals to be sacrificed and PRIESTS who may offer those sacrifices – that's pretty cohesive; but *then* we move on to the schedule of the celebrations of the Sabbath, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the pilgrimage festivals, and the familiar verses listing the sacrifices to be made; there's a brief digression on the

ner tamid; and finally we come to the story of the half-Israelite, half-Egyptian blasphemer and his punishment by stoning. That at least provides a reasonable segue to *lex talionis* in its fiercest expression: "life for life," "fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" and most firmly and apparently unambiguously, "one who kills a human being shall be put to death."

Small wonder that a commentator in *Etz Hayim* observes: "Leviticus is a difficult book for a modern person to read with reverence and appreciation."

For me, I got stuck on the first chapter of Emor, about the priestly caste.

Full disclosure – I am a *bat Levi*, the daughter of a Levi, and my sons are kohanim, so there's a certain identification here. But how can we stomach spending time learning about this hierarchy of elites in an egalitarian community? Is there any value to being reminded that there was, and in some communities continues to be, this segmentation of our community, Am Yisroel, when we don't have a Temple anymore, and we don't make tangible temple sacrifices?

In fact, Leviticus is known as *Torat Kohanim*, the Torah or Instructions for the Priests, and it is a historical fact that there was a hierarchy. The Levites were the priestly class, and were assigned responsibilities on behalf of the whole community, particularly sacrifices. In Emor we learn of many of the restrictions imposed on the kohanim so that they would maintain the purity required of their station.

But I keep thinking - WE DON'T DO SACRIFICES! and I for one consider my recitation of the prayers for the restoration of the Temple to be purely metaphoric - we're not going to return to making sacrifices. So what can we preserve from this notion of priestly purity, and what does it say to the rest of us?

"The rest of us" - that's the key. Emor can be read as describing holiness in terms of separation and contrast: The priests' holy responsibilities mandate that they remain undefiled by death, divorce, deformity. Those requirements and responsibilities DID separate the kohanim from the rest of us. Even in the designation of Shabbat, the High Holy Days and the festivals, holidays were separated from the rest of the year by proscriptions on work and prescriptions for sacrifices and particular rituals and practices. Again, holiness is defined as a separation from the quotidian, the mundane.

And this notion of holiness defined as a separation provides a link to the story of the blasphemer and his punishment. By defiling the name of God, the blasphemer separates himself from the ideal holiness of the Israelite community, and his eventual punishment is dramatic separation - He was separated - placed in custody - until his punishment was decided by God - and his eventual punishment, stoning by the entire community, was administered while he was outside the camp, separated from his home.

So I come back to the hierarchy of Kohen, Levi, and the "ordinary" Israelite...is this merely a dry anachronistic elitism, separating the

priestly castes from the hoi polloi? Is it antithetical to our non-animal-sacrificing, egalitarian community? Is there nothing we can relate to in this stratification?

I found the key to my answer in a commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who pointed out a parallel between a verse in Emor and one in the previous parshah, K'doshim. In K'doshim, chapter 19 begins with God commanding Moses to speak to "the whole Israelite community" - KOL Edah - and say "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." All are commanded to be holy, and all can be holy. In Chapter 20, "You shall faithfully observe My laws: I the Lord make you holy." That's not a commandment only to the priests.

After those psukim, Emor's apparent elitism loses its sting. Paraphrasing Sacks, in these pronouncements, holiness is democratic, not reserved to an elite. Yes, holiness is separation; it separates us from the profane and mundane; but it also joins us together as a people in our relationship to God.

At CRZ we have relinquished one holdover from the hierarchy, by switching our call of aliyot from kohen, levi, yisroel to rishon/ shayni, etc. For me, that's bittersweet, not because I assume my sons as kohanim (or me as a bat levi) to have a special status within the Jewish community, but because I feel that I honor my father, and his father, and all the way back, when I identify myself as bat Yitzchak Isaac ha-Levi. In fact, I get to do that whenever I have an aliyah, at any point in the reading, so I don't mind the switch to rishon and shayni. Nevertheless, I empathize with those kohanim and levi'im

who feel slighted, and they or anyone who opposes relinquishing a long-observed tradition, even a rabbinic rather than biblical one, without apparent justification in their eyes. The priestly distinctions have survived since the days of the Temple. Even physical distinction survived: I have read that there is an identifiable DNA marker among many who identify as kohanim – that’s saying quite something about our continuity, not just as kohanim or levi’im, but as Am Yisroel, the nation to whom God gave these laws and aspirations.

The biblical rules and distinctions may be anachronistic now, but they served a purpose then, both for the priests and for the laity, to provide a guide to the holiness that would separate them from the quotidian and profane, but join them with God, and with each other. To be sure, in Emor, God says specifically of the kohanim, “For they are holy to their God, and you must treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God;” and this passage has been cited by the rabbis as the basis for the kohen aliyah and a custom of having a kohen lead BirkatHaMazon. But God continues immediately, “[T]hey shall be holy to you, for I the Lord who sanctify YOU am holy.” (Lev. 21:7-8) In other words, despite the special status of kohanim, and the provisions for their support and honor by the community,

we are all sanctified by God, Kohen, Levi and Yisroel alike. Keeping that in mind, we can value the historical significance of these portions of the parshah.

There was a priestly elite, when the priests had the tangible physical role of making sacrifices brought by individuals to the temple. Without a temple and sacrifices, we still learn from Emor that we all are charged to be holy, to separate ourselves from the profane. Without priests to make sacrifices on our behalf, it is entirely our individual, democratic, and shared responsibility to fulfill that charge.

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Evil Doers, Evil Deeds

by Rebel Without a Clue /Jeff Ruby



It was snowing the day I visited Dachau. Everything felt bleak, but also bland and ordinary. The grounds of the notorious concentration camp, which had been turned into a museum, looked more like a dilapidated factory than a death machine. Just beyond the walls of the camp, I spied houses — which may well have been there during the war — looking utterly average. As far as notorious historical landmarks went, it was a far cry from what Hannah Arendt, the German-American philosopher, had called “medieval pictures of Hell.”

But 41,500 people died right where I’m standing, I thought. People just like me.

The possibility seemed so far away. So obscure. Like an old Polaroid that years had faded into near nothingness, soon to be a blank white card tossed into the garbage. I desperately wanted to hear ghosts in the cold Bavarian wind that day, or fading moans of misery. Echoes of orders being shouted in German. Something. Any hint that something unholy and inhumane had happened here. I heard nothing.

It was 1993, and I was a tourist on spring break. Not fifty years had passed since the camp had been liberated, and I was 21, a ridiculously free man wandering around Europe with

four Catholics. We drank cheap beer on trains and marveled at our passport stamps, laughed too loud and grew pathetic beards. And now, here we were, in one of the worst places on earth, the longest operating concentration camp during the most terrible war in recent history, wandering at will around the gas chambers, the crematoria, the barracks, the jail cells with the peeling paint on the walls. And we took pictures.

What had changed since 1945? Everything, it seemed to us. From Berlin to Munich, Germany had welcomed us with open arms, even as we shook our heads and tut-tutted self-righteously at the country’s horrific past. We were Americans! These atrocities were unthinkable to us, made possible only by historical madness and some kind of sadistic glitch in the German psyche.

I was raised on stories of It could happen again. To every Jew in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was our birthright, the responsibility our ancestors had been lugging around in their old suitcases and heaped on our strong shoulders. And I didn’t get it. I thought it was silly Jewish guilt, unnecessary emotional baggage that would only drag down my life. Never again? Of course! We’re not bloodthirsty maniacs.

Twenty-six years later, I want to cry when I think about how naïve I was. If our current political situation has proven anything, it’s that the evil that made Dachau possible is obviously not an abstraction or an aberration. It’s a trait embedded deep inside every

human — and it doesn't take insanity to bring it out. It takes only weakness. Manipulation. Nationalist fervor. Scapegoating. All those abnormalities that I considered vicious relics of history in 1993 were stirring in us all along.

Can one do evil without being evil? It's one of history's oldest questions. Once, I would have said of course not. The very idea was unthinkable. I would have reasoned that since we cannot ever really know the thoughts in another person's head, the only possible way to define that person is through their actions. Good actions = good person; evil actions = evil person. Now? It seems fairly obvious that I've been looking at the concept of evil all wrong. By reserving the term solely for the worst monsters of history, serial killers and mass murderers, I have placed ordinary people like myself at a convenient distance away. The notion that "bad" people lurked around me at any given moment was too terrifying to imagine, and an impossible way to go through life.

But humans are by nature impressionable, susceptible to both good and bad, and any attempt to sort them into "good" and "bad" is reductive and pointless. I prefer Arendt's conclusion that evil is simply "thought-defying," that a person who commits evil acts does so simply by turning away from that which makes us human, by ignoring feelings of conscience or morality. Often they do it temporarily or for the sake of convenience, rather than with any pathological malevolence. It's that simple, and often, it can be achieved by doing nothing, like the people during World War II who presumably lived in the houses just

outside the concentration camp at Dachau. "It is only rarely that an individual chooses evil for its own sake," Ada Ushpiz wrote in Haaretz (Oct. 12, 2016)*. "For the most part he chooses ideologies, clichés, convenience, half-truths and lies, new and old types of ethos ... some of which even gather momentum through some type of 'historical necessity.'"

As Americans, we're doing a whole lot of nothing right now. We're shrugging at constant mass shootings, at the abhorrent detention camps at our southern border. What am I supposed to do? you might ask. Storm the camp and free the prisoners?

Arendt and Ushpiz would say that we need to free ourselves. That we've got to accept that the capacity for maliciousness is in us all, and that the most important battle, the one between good and evil, goes on inside us every day. That every moment is a chance to correct, to transform, to think about what we believe and why. To take responsibility for the choices we make at each moment. Every one of us needs to look into our own hearts and honestly answer the question: Am I doing good in the world? Yes, this never-ending weighing of thoughts sounds exhausting, but it is crucial. It is by far the most human work we can do. And until we do it, nothing on this earth will change.

* Ada Ushpiz wrote and directed the movie, *Vita Activa: The Spirit of Hannah Arendt*, a documentary which appeared in 2015.

If I returned to Dachau today, I suspect it would be too much for me to bear. I would no longer need to hear the agonizing screams of history to make it real. And when I looked at those houses just outside the grounds of the camp, I would understand that in 2019, each of us is living in one of them.

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