In Time of Trouble  ביוומ צרה

We learn together
Gavi Eskilson, Stephanie Friedman

We pray together
Rabbi David Minkus, Edward Hamburg

We act together
Margo Criscuola, Nancy Jacobson

.... and more
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Every morning at minyan we read Psalm 20, "... answer in time of trouble," one of many elements of our tradition that have taken on new meaning and urgency in recent months. The Hebrew word for trouble, *tzarah*, is the source of the Yiddish word, *tsores*, always used in the plural "because Jews don’t do trouble in the singular" [Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, former assistant director of the National Yiddish Book Center, in *Moment* 12/31/2012]. We and our world have certainly been overwhelmed by *tsores*.

Many of us have turned to Rodfei Zedek in our time of trouble. Our clergy and leaders have been steadfast and generous in offering support and understanding. Cantor Rachel Rosenberg has led us in musical prayer from her living room and Rabbi David Minkus has brought us insights from Torah to help us now. In sermons, such as those included here, he applied his recent experience to interpreting the text. His meditation on the pandemic fifty days before Rosh Hashana echoes his thoughts on COVID fifty days before the story of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

In this issue, as always, we share the wealth of insight of our members from our youngest, like bar mitzvah Gavi Eskelson, to Rabbi Laurence Edwards, from long-time leaders, like Ed Hamburg and Margo Criscuola, to less familiar participants like Ruth O’Brien and Laura Hoffman. Their subjects range widely, but all our authors are touched by and help us respond to the miseries of our current crises – pandemic, political upheaval, injustice. All look for and discover support in our traditions and our community.

In the beginning of holocaust survivor Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* he quotes a Yiddish proverb,

"*Ibergekumene tsores iz gut tsu dertseylin.*

Troubles overcome make good stories to tell." May we speedily reach the time when we, too, can say that.

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Past and current editions of this publication are online at http://www.rodfei.org/To_Learn_and_To_Teach
Here I am, on a screen, preaching to you on your screens. We are wandering our homes in search of connection, a connection to the real world beyond the walls of our homes, beyond the quarantined life that the coronavirus has built for us. We are cocooned in a life that is at once utterly familiar and completely foreign.

Pesach may have been foreign in how the seder was done, but much else was the same: it came and we felt unprepared, the cooking felt like a burden and the cleaning an unwanted disruption. And, it may have been the most meaningful Passover ever. It might not have yielded the best seder in terms of particular memories (remember that time… oh the brisket was…) but it was, I am sure for many of you, a year where you focused on the text of the haggadah, the theme of the holiday, the ideas to delve into, more than most years – I know I did.

When we recounted plagues that, before, had always felt symbolic at best, they now felt relatable. When we dipped our finger in the wine to represent each of the ten plagues, that, too, was bitter-sweet; just as we remember the Egyptians who perished (you do not lick your finger because God sacrificed one people for another) we cannot become too comfortable now as we may not make it safely through the period of wandering – surely we know of others who will succumb to this modern contagion.

Despite wonderful recipes spiked with warm memories, we may have been the only ones eating the dish. Yet it is not the memory that we continue to go back to which is the essential Jewish value, but hope. We end with opening the door to a better time, a messianic vision not of Egypt but of Jerusalem, not of isolation but of boundless physical connection. We open the door, pushing out against darkness and past painful memories, out in order to find the soothing, difficult and elusive idea that things will get better.

Passover came to offer us a new twist on its eternal gift of freedom: a reminder that freedom must be earned and a command to acknowledge but not accept that not all of us have it. The hope is that we earn it, that we recognize that hope is, as we should have learned from The Shawshank Redemption, something that can never die. Even though he is conspicuously absent from the haggadah, Moses represents, in the Exodus story, the fact that the hope of freedom can never be taken
away from us regardless of the impediments which we place in front of ourselves or which have been placed before us. Freedom is embedded within us, and the Exodus is as much about searching our souls as about a physical fight for survival.

We end this festival of freedom with yizkor, with our head on a swivel, looking backwards as we try to wander into the haze of the future. Yet today I do not have any particular thoughts on memory, on love and loss, only what we can bring to each other. Yizkor is said, perhaps observed, on the three festivals, the moments in the year when we should be most aware of what we have, of our fortune; and saying the words of yizkor with tears running down our cheeks may seem incongruous with the joy that is commanded for these days. Yizkor comes to add depth and nuance to that freedom, to show us, yes, we have lost loved ones, our lives are not the same without them, but only a free person can fully comprehend what is missing. Had we been in shul this morning, we would have read that when you (the ancient Israelite) come before God on the festivals, you must not come ra’kam, empty-handed (i.e. bring a sacrifice, but a free-willing offering) but whatever comes from your hand (heart?) is a gift to the Lord.

We carry memories with us, through the story our tradition tells, the ones passed down to us, and the ones we weave for ourselves. When we keep them inside, buried, they become isolated in place; but when we unearth them, offer them as sacrifice, elevating them to the level of prayer, of heartfelt yearning, we form connections not only to our past and loved ones but to each other. In this time of social isolation and the wholly un-Jewish phrase of social distancing, remember to embrace memories. Place them on the altar of hope and the smoke from that sacrifice will yield a freedom that is richer than before.

Growing up at Camp Ramah I always looked forward to Tisha B’Av. That may sound strange, but I really did. On Tisha B’Av the basketball courts were closed and the mood did not allow for the general socializing that usually captured my interest; we read Eicha (Lamentations) as an entire camp and the atmosphere was distraction-free; we were all engaged in prayer, discussion groups, and often towards the end of the day, watching Holocaust or Israeli films dealing with loss.

The devastation of the Holocaust or terrorism in Israel. These were issues
we could, at least on some level, relate to. Yet I really dislike that Tisha B’Av becomes another stand-in for Holocaust remembrance. There is a time and a place for the Shoah, but this is not that time. I will say we would probably benefit from having a day or practice to reflect on and come to terms with anti-Semitism because, tragically, it has not gone away. But that should not be the focus or the central focus of this day; this day is here to remember the destruction of both Temples. And recently I have come to realize, that not only is it wrong to treat Tisha B’Av as dealing with all aspects of Jewish memory and Jewish sadness about the Holocaust – or in earlier generations the Crusades or the Inquisition – to do so gets the point and impact of the day fundamentally wrong.

Camp Ramah, at the very least, was in line with the historical (modern?) practice of observing the day as one of palpable and communal loss. The general atmosphere instilled in us a sense of tribal connection to those we didn’t have a name for or a face to conjure and I am a big believer that tribalism can be a very good thing; as kids we wanted to be sad for the loss of life but since it was amorphous and abstract, we came to understand that this was a day of Jewish sadness “the saddest day on the Jewish calendar” as it is generally described.

My first two experiences of the day outside of Conover, Wisconsin were instructive of what we get wrong about this this solemn day on the calendar. The first was when I went to Israel with Camp Ramah and I thought that this would be the most special, moving, and meaningful Tisha B’Av I had ever experienced. It was not. Right or wrong, there was a sense among us, as there can be on any fast day, of enduring it, of counting the hours. But on a meta level, the experience of saying Eicha at the Kotel or elsewhere in Jerusalem sparked a feeling like, well this day is no longer relevant. I am here at the broken Temple in a very unbroken experience of the Land of Israel, as close as I could get to God’s home with God’s people. There certainly is that Zionist read of the day, and it’s one, to my Zionist core, I relate to and embrace on some level.

The other was the first summer that I was not at Camp and I was interning for Rabbi Carl Wolkin at Beth Shalom in Northbrook. I showed up midday and, lo and behold, it was a normal day except we did not get lunch. I found out, the world and even the Jewish community does not stop for or on the 9th Day of Av. Both of these experiences clearly painted how we miss the mark on honoring this day solely through the lens of the loss of the Temple. It is too distant and most likely beyond our desire to care.
Simply put, I think this is a day about mourning, specifically for institutions and in general, for the loss of systems that die either abruptly or simply with time. We as Jews are very good at mourning for individuals; our mourning rituals just as often work for the pious as they do for the unaffiliated, unengaged or the otherwise ritually uninterested Jew. But we have no ritual to remember the losses to our institutions, no way to mourn for the systems that we have lost, the systems that gave shape and meaning to our lives yet are not coming back. We have rites of passage for shedding an identity and to mark growth, but no breaking of the glass, no shiva and no candy throwing for the communal losses we experience together. And I think it is not hard to see in Judaism and society in general how destructive it is not to have rituals to honor what has gone away, ignoring that we need to give voice to those shut out from a way of life they need or were given meaning from.

We literally have manuals and guidebooks on how to do nearly everything in Judaism, yet we have no guidebook and certainly no ritual for dealing with the sadness we feel for the disappearance of something that we once held dear. What if that is what Tisha B’Av is really about? What if Tisha B’Av is a 25-hour period to mourn the loss of a life that we cannot return to and, secondly and more instructively, do not want to return to?

I was talking about this with my aunt, Rabbi Benay Lappe and she is quick to point out that we look back upon Temple Times as the epitome of our connection, the peak experience of spirituality. Yet we know it was a broken system, crumbling, perhaps through attrition and corruption. Most likely, it was failing because of the lack of meaning it provided, except maybe for a Priest or Levite. The transformation from Temple rites to rabbinic Judaism was not instantaneous. During the last 300 years of the Second Temple, the Sages and Rabbis whose discussions became the Talmud were already operating on
the sidelines. These were people who knew that the end was coming.

The Rabbis were the winners here, they were not those who wanted a part in the cultic system in the Temple, yet they knew we need to remember it, because in the future other institutions will go away, too. Whether or not we miss those institutions, we want to remain connected to them. Dan Libenson rightly points out that we can become guilt ridden over moving forward without these practices or institutions, so we need to ritualize the loss. Without ritualizing the loss we cannot grow personally and as a people.

Loss is inevitable, disruptions happen, some are small like discarding the Kohen aliyah for a more egalitarian rishon and some are massive like COVID. If Tisha B’Av is only about mourning the loss of the Temple then its impact becomes, well, like Tisha B’Av, an incredibly important day on the calendar observed by a select few. Yet, if this 25-hour fast is actually about getting a day to sit in our sadness and/or guilt over lessons learned and times past, over institutions or systems gone, then we have a playbook for how to deal with the losses that we will experience as people and as a community.

The shabbat following the 9th of Av is called nachamu, comfort. I hope we can take comfort in knowing that discarding the past for a brighter and more engaging future is very Jewish, but only if we put those memories in our back pocket, if we place their picture on the mantel and tell our children, this is what we used to do, but now, we do it better.

Rabbi David Minkus has been with Congregation Rodfei Zedek since June, 2014. He earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana and also studied at Hebrew University and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. He graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in Jewish Education. He lives in Hyde Park with his wife Ilyssa and daughters Raia and Adira. Raia is beginning kindergarten at Chicago Jewish Day School.
On June 2 our Rabbi and members joined a peaceful demonstration of solidarity for George Floyd

A broad coalition of religious organizations in Chicago, including synagogues representing all three major denominations gathered at the Bronzeville Statue, 26th Place and MLK Drive and walked to 51st Street.

Rabbi Minkus invited congregants to "gather together at this difficult moment in our nation's history to show that our congregation, whose very name connotes the pursuit of justice, is committed to the ongoing struggle for racial equality in America."

Clockwise from upper left: the march, Rabbi David Minkus, Ed and Stacey Hamburg, Ezra Skol and Yael Hoffman, Andrew and Avi Skol.
Thoughts on the Amidah in a Pandemic

By Edward Hamburg

Like so many congregations around the world during the corona virus pandemic, mine on the south side of Chicago has maintained the responsibilities, disciplines, and gifts of a daily morning minyan.

The format is, of course, quite different. Video-conferencing platforms designed for business meetings imperfectly replicate the context of regular minyanim. Parts soulfully sung in unison are rendered painful as software sound delays combine with variations in microphone and voice quality, kavanah is elusive as participants fiddle with their computer cameras, and rhythms are interrupted by barking dogs, crying children, and task-oriented spouses unloading dishwashers.

But the positives clearly outweigh the negatives. These electronic gatherings enabled Hallel to be recited on Rosh Chodesh, Passover, and Shavuot, Kaddish to be said by mourners and for yahrzeits, Torah portions to be read each Monday and Thursday, and communities to have a sense of normalcy and solidarity during a prolonged time of fear and isolation.

As I’ve settled in as a regular electronic minyan participant, my reading of the Amidah portion of the daily morning liturgy has changed with each passing week of the pandemic. But not with all of its 19 blessings. I’m still good with recalling our ancestors, anticipating the resuscitation of the dead (although it’s a little creepy), and thanking God for granting us intelligence, welcoming repentance, forgiving our sins, redeeming the people Israel, sustaining righteous scholars, sending (at some point) the Messiah, and bestowing the gift of peace. I still delight in affirming my appreciation of the daily miracles around us and how they attest to God’s goodness. A few years ago, when davening on my own, I started skipping the requests for the restoration of the Temple and the return of God’s presence to Zion. Past, present, and future circumstances in Israel only reinforce my decision to continue these exclusions.

Since the start of the pandemic, however, my connections to six other Amidah blessings have deepened considerably. These connections have little to do with their underlying rabbinic explanations, but reflect instead how the words of the liturgy resonate with me at this point in my life.

The first of these six is an obvious one:
Heal us, God, and we will be healed. Help us and save us, for You are our glory. Grant perfect healing for all our afflictions, for You are the faithful and merciful God of healing. Praised are you God, healer of your people Israel.

All of the Amidah blessings are expressed in the plural, but in this one for healing we are invited to insert personal entreaties for people we personally hope will benefit from our supportive thoughts. I usually try to remember as many names as I can, and have recently focused on my best friend and a wonderful cousin who are going through rounds of chemotherapy.

The pandemic has broadened the scope of this blessing for me. While asking many times for God’s help in healing particular people or groups, I can’t recall ever requesting such assistance for everyone on the entire planet. I do now. Every day.

God, make this a blessed year. May its varied produce bring us happiness. Grant dew and rain for blessing upon the earth, satisfy us with its abundance, and bless our year as the best of years. Praised are you, God, who blesses the years.

Every reading of this second blessing makes me think about the terrible imbalance with which the “varied produce that brings happiness” is actually distributed, and that too many persist through years that have never been blessed. The prevailing levels of economic inequality in this country should distress every one of us. That it doesn’t — even when the odds of dying in this pandemic are so much determined by one’s socioeconomic status — testifies to how such injustice is tacitly accepted and embedded in our lives.

The pandemic has heightened my already profound appreciation for the share of abundance I’ve received throughout my life. With this Amidah blessing, my appreciation is now expressed with renewed and deeper meaning, along with a renewed and even deeper sorrow for those whose daily struggles have become living nightmares.

Sound the great shofar to herald our freedom; raise high the banner to gather all exiles. Gather the dispersed from the ends of the earth. Praised are you, God, who gathers the dispersed of the people Israel.

For me, this third blessing has always been about my own Jewish community. Situated on the south side of the city, worlds away from the kosher markets, large synagogues, and gleaming JCC’s to the north, we work very hard to sustain what was, until recently, a very fragile congregational entity. Divine assistance has been required to keep us together over the years, and this blessing enables me to regularly appreciate my community as a
gift that should never be taken for

granted.

How we and other Jewish
communities have responded to the
pandemic is nothing short of remark-
able. Extensive efforts providing care,
comfort, and support are only matched
by innovations in how we worship,
celebrate, and educate ourselves and
our children. It’s exciting to think about
how these experiences might be inte-
grated into our future post-pandemic
Jewish lives. This blessing to gather the
people Israel now provides regular
moments for me to contemplate such
opportunities and possibilities.

*Restore our judges as in the days
of old; restore our counselors as
in former times. Remove sorrow
and anguish from our lives. Reign
over us, God, You alone, with
lovingkindness and mercy; with
justice sustain our cause. Praised
are You, God, Sovereign who
loves justice with compassion.*

Even before the onset of the
pandemic, this fourth Amidah blessing
consistently made me think of our
current troubled period in American
political history. I can’t recall a time
when so many of our judges, coun-
selors, leaders, and advisors have been
dedicated to serving the interests of
established powers, and doing so in the
most imperious, harsh, and destructive
ways imaginable.

Underlying these efforts are
beliefs that prioritize the preservation of
traditional social hierarchies, the
protection of private wealth, and the
defense of individual rights to pursue
desired ends through whatever means
are deemed necessary. The harsh con-
sequences are evident in the racism,
misogyny, pollution, education in-
equality, inadequate health care, urban
and rural blight, and economic des-
pondency that has been so prevalent,
for so long, in American society.

The pandemic has only further
revealed and exacerbated these harsh
consequences. The call of this Amidah
blessing for the restoration of judges
and counselors committed to addressing
such anguish consistently reminds me
of the imperative to support the election
and appointment of leaders guided by
the principles of lovingkindness and
mercy — and who, like God, love justice
with compassion.

*Frustrate the hopes of all those
who malign us. Let all evil soon
disappear; let all your enemies
soon be destroyed. May You
quickly uproot and crush the
arrogant; may You subdue and
humble them in our time. Praised
are you, God, who humbles the
arrogant.*

Although I’ve confronted arro-
gance many times in my life in many
different contexts, these last few years
conjure images of bad historical periods
I’ve only read about. But this fifth
blessing regularly encourages me to
recall how, in other times and cir-
cumstances, such arrogance has indeed
been subdued. And it strengthens my
hopes that the arrogant can again be
humbled in our time.

*Hear our voice God. Have
compassion upon us, pity us.
Accept our prayer with loving
favor. You listen to entreaty and*
prayer. Do not turn us away unanswered, our Sovereign, for You mercifully heed Your people’s supplication. Praised are You God, who listens to prayer.

To this sixth blessing I say, as never before, “Amen.”

Edward Hamburg serves on the boards of directors of high technology companies after a career as a senior executive in the computer software industry. He also serves on the boards of Sicha and The Institute for the Next Jewish Future, and is a past president of Congregation Rodfei Zedek. His essays, The Ten Protocols of Electronic Davening, Thoughts on Prayer and Liturgy, and Thoughts on Saying Amen, appeared in eJewishphilanthropy.

Ed received a Ph.D. from the department of political science of the University of Chicago. Ed and wife Stacey raised their sons, Michael and Adam, in this community; they live in the South Loop.

Steve Yastrow, Cantor Rachel Rosenberg, Chuck Rosenberg, and Yael Hoffman leading a streamed Na'aseh v'Nishma service
To Heal a Fractured World – a book review

by Margo Criscuola

At the end of his term as Rodfei Zedek’s president, Lou Phillipson presented each Board member a copy of this book by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Lou’s way of expressing appreciation. This review is my opportunity to thank Lou for his thoughtful, energetic dedication to Rodfei Zedek.

We know that it’s a fractured world that needs repair, tikkun olam. We are familiar with the kabbalistic idea that the imperfect world, unable to contain God, was shattered by His presence. But what should we, can we do about it? Should our attention be focused on the “tikkun olam” as originally described in Mishnah, where it means small legal adjustments to mitzvot, made to avoid unintended harmful consequences? That’s surely not enough. But we can’t aim for the “tikkun olam” we hope for in Aleinu, which God will bring about in Messianic times. Sacks offers as a model Isaac Luria’s teaching that small human actions can repair some of the broken fragments. Valuing our human-sized, often fallible actions is, Sacks holds, a precondition for us to take responsibility, and we need to. Sacks’ goal in this book is not to review lists of mitzvot and traditional ethical teachings, but to help us set realistic ethical expectations for ourselves, and train ourselves to really achieve them.

Yes, there are mitzvot concerning right treatment of the poor and of pleaders at law. Sacks points us to another source of guidance — the actions of God in the narratives that dominate Tanakh. For instance, there is God’s dialogue with Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah, which opens with God’s saying, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do . . . ?” Sacks wonders why God speaks this way: “Could there be something Abraham might know [about the cities] that God himself does not know? There cannot be.” Sure enough, there are not ten righteous in the cities; why then does God “think aloud” to Abraham? “There can be only one reason. God wants Abraham to respond.” God is teaching Abraham to pray, and in his think-aloud God even makes clear what the prayers should be about—tzedek (righteousness) and mishpat (judgment). Abraham is mistaken about the cities, but God wants Abraham to question him based on those values, to seek justice. Since we cannot know what God knows, we are incapable of divine justice. Keeping the key values always in mind even to question God’s acts is essential to doing right in our own imperfect way, knowing that it is imperfect.

Applying rules or values impartially without regard to persons, as with tzedek and mishpat, is just one kind of good behavior. Chesed (grace) or rachamim (compassion), another good, requires empathy, taking account of each individual’s needs. Sacks follows Avishai Margalit in defining morality as
“universal principles we use in dealings with humanity in general,” and ethics as guidelines for “relationships with those with whom we share a special bond.” Sacks traces many examples of ethics in the actions of human beings and God in Tanakh, counterpoising the value of tzedek. Sacks notes how in the course of Biblical history the demands for chesed widened as Jewish bonds with others broadened from the familial, to tribal and national. Now we Jews have grown from an isolated people centered on our own community to citizens in free societies with responsibilities toward many strangers. We need to be aware that key ethical demands such as “the sanctification of the name” have only changed form, not become obsolete, and we must be ready to undertake the new actions that are relevant to us today.

Knowing the ethical demands on us is only a starting point. Answering the question, “How can we be able to do them?” is of greater concern. One answer for Sacks is that belief in God supports ethical behavior. Monotheism has shaped our worldview and our internal awareness; a single power governs the world, not many distinct powers (gods and goddesses) in conflict with each other. Sacks invites us to consider how a polytheist might tell the story of Adam and Eve. What if God the creator, God the reprover, the snake, maybe the tree of life, were all competing gods who caused the human beings’ disobedience and punishment? Then humans would simply be victims. If just one creator made, commanded and punished Adam and Eve? Then humans acted, wrongly, and now must deal with the consequences. Of course science is born when the world becomes something we can understand and control to some extent; but Sacks focuses here on how, when we see our-selves as actors rather than mere victims, we become aware of our own internal conflicts. We to some extent shape what befalls us, so we must consider which impulses to follow and which to check, which actions to take, and which corrections to make on our course. From this follows a long train of human experiences — anguish over choices, guilt, and repentance, including reconciliation with God and reordering of our purposes. Finally there is hope, because our free will enables us to change direction.

Sacks sees what we might call the “character” of God in Tanakh as resembling that of a good parent. The narrative focuses on the way God tries to nurture and guide fallible human beings while letting us experience bad consequences, maintaining our great purpose of being free creators, made in God’s image. Loving God therefore involves more than being faithful to the mitzvot; it includes responding to God’s actions. “Biblical truth,” Sacks argues, is “a movement from acts done by God for the sake of human beings, to acts done by human beings for the sake of God.” Reproving yet forgiving, not abandoning his people, is, Sacks holds, the character of God that emerges throughout the “plot” of Tanakh. The human response should be learning, repenting, not giving up on trying for the right. We are led to ask, “What should I do?” and are steered away from, “Oh, woe is me!”

“What should I do?” is hard.
“What should I do?” is hard. We often need to act promptly, with little time to ponder; we sometimes face hopeless situations; and we never can know the all the results of our actions. Therefore, Sacks urges, we need to cultivate habits and insights that shape “how to do it,” as well as “what to do.” That means deliberately aiming for a character and habits in what Maimonides called “the middle way” between devotion to God and dedication to human action. Our lives should vibrate between “the holy and the good,” between “prayers, texts and rituals that hold before us a vision of how the world might be,” and our own work, community service and social lives in which we try to act on that vision. The first rests on firm observance and love of God; the second requires readiness for action that will enable us to move forward in spite of uncertainty. To guide us to the one, we need mitzvot; for the second, we need narrative, drawn from Tanakh, from our history, and from people we know. Inspired and comforted by these narratives, we will be able to act in response to the needs around us, repairing the world in the small ways humans can.

This book is a unified, and to me a very satisfying exploration of the human possibility and responsibility for right action, but it also can be seen as a rich compendium of short “takes” on the subject, from classic Jewish sources, past and contemporary thinkers with whom Sacks agrees or argues, and accounts of exemplary individuals. These many examples give Sacks many opportunities to connect with the knowledge or concerns of a wide variety of readers, and to win us over from understanding ideas to applying them in practice. There are his beautiful interpretation of the Book of Job, his treatment of Jewish humor, his account of his own decision to become a rabbi—so many passages in this book that spoke directly to me, and probably many others that will speak directly to you. We have the choice to read this book straight through as an exciting, highly organized tour, or to make visits to one or another chapter, each very coherently explained. Either way, I think most of us will come away with greater knowledge of human responsibilities and more insight into how to choose and carry out our own tasks.

Margo Criscuola has had a career in literacy teaching and curriculum development. She served as Director of Research and Evaluation for the Great Books Foundation, then worked as a field instructor for the Michigan State University School of Education, supervising graduate teaching interns in local elementary schools. After retiring, she has volunteered to lead reading groups at Jackie Robinson Elementary School. She holds a BA in English and an MA in Humanities from the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. in English from Washington University, St. Louis. She has been a member of Rodfei Zedek for more than 25 years, and has served on the board and as an officer. Her daughter Esther grew up and was married at Rodfei, and she, her husband, Andrew de Laix, and their son Roger are frequent visitors.
Helping Each Other to Understand and to Act

Chesed

by Nancy Jacobson

In February of this year, I met with Rabbi Minkus and Diane Altkorn to discuss organizing Chesed activities for the congregation. We knew that people at CRZ generally run to do a mitzvah if they know one needs to be done. The problem we saw was that people didn’t always know. Often, we relied on word-of-mouth to learn who needed a visit, a meal, or a minyan for shiva or yahrzeit.

The goal of the Chesed project was to make it easy for people to let us know what they need, and easy for people to make themselves available to help out. We hoped to create a clearinghouse for mitzvah opportunities, connecting those who could help with those who needed a hand. We imagined facilitating good deeds ranging from communal cooking, to driving a neighbor to the doctor, to showing up for morning minyan.

Then came March. Before the Chesed project was off the ground, the synagogue closed down, along with our workplaces, schools, and everything else “non-essential.” Pivoting fast, Rabbi Minkus emailed the congregation to ask if people needed assistance or if they were available to help others. The response was tremendous. Congregants shopped and ran errands, helping each other prepare for the strangest Pesach most of us have ever known. We connected congregants who were flush with matzo to neighbors who had not been able to find any. A cadre of volunteers checked in with fellow congregants by phone, sharing some cheer in the lonely first weeks of shutdown.

Now, months later, we know that coronavirus will take a while to vanquish. We won’t be planning communal cooking or in-person shivas soon, so we want to think creatively about Chesed in the time of COVID. In June, volunteers worked with staff to coordinate a food drive in partnership with the First Unitarian Church and local food pantries. We can plan more similar projects that reach our broader community. But we also want to understand and meet the needs of our own CRZ community. For that, we hope to hear from you.

Please reach out to me or to Rabbi Minkus if you want to help plan Chesed activities, if you have ideas about the community’s needs, or – most especially – if you could use any kind of help right now. The Rabbi’s email in March elicited many, many more offers of help than requests for help. We have the resources; we want congregants’ help to deploy them as meaningfully as possible.
Nancy Jacobson came to Rodfei Zedek in 2017, looking for a place to say daily Kaddish for her father and finding a home at morning minyan. She has lived in Hyde Park since 1982, and has been blessed with multiple Jewish affiliations connected to the neighborhood. She worked at the University of Chicago Hillel. Her sons, Aaron and David, grew up at KAM Isaiah Israel. She is also part of the Mishkan community founded by former Hyde Parker Rabbi Lizzi Heydeman. These past and present ties intersect with Rodfei Zedek in so many ways that Nancy feels she has always been part of this community. She works as an Ethics and Compliance lawyer at United Airlines, having started her legal career after a long path that included graduate school, work at non-profits and the University of Chicago, and time at home with her children.
We are surrounded by racial inequity, as visible as the law, as hidden as our private thoughts. The question for each of us is: What side of history do we stand on?

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, p. 22

For its first four years, the pattern for One Book, One Rodfei Zedek has been that every summer, I put together a longlist of books around a certain theme – Global Jewry or Contemporary Israeli Fiction, for example – which I winnow down to four contenders which congregants vote on over the High Holidays. At the close of Sukkot, I announce which book has been chosen, and we commence a yearlong exploration of that book and its themes. This year, like so much else, this pattern has been disrupted by the tenor of our times, and the theme has been suggested to us by the sound of helicopters overhead and chanting in the streets, as protesters in Chicago and across the U.S. expressed their rage and frustration with the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, and all of the attendant racial inequities in our society which have made it possible for Black Americans to account for 28% of those killed by police officers since 2013, despite being 13% of the US population overall. [https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/](https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/). The rate of fatal police shootings stood at 31 per million of the population between 2015 and July 2020, a much higher rate than any other ethnic group [https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123070/police-shootings-rate-ethnicity-us/].]

At the request of many congregants who wanted an opportunity to reflect on this moment and how to move forward, we began reading Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* in July. Kendi’s aim was to craft a book that would strike readers as forthright and accessible in both its content and its rhetoric, blending memoir and scholarship to reveal how racism and antiracism can play out on both the individual and societal level. In discussion, many congregants said they appreciated how Kendi grounded his analysis in historical and empirical evidence, as well as in an unflinching examination of the lifelong evolution of his own understanding of racism and antiracism. He frames the entire book, and each chapter within it, with definitions of key terms, because “[d]efinitions anchor us in principles,” but
also because he believes that racist power maintains its control by “constantly redefining what it means to be racist in a way that exonerates one’s changing policies, ideas, and personhood,” so that “the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it -- and then dismantle it.” (pp. 17, 9). For Kendi,

racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what -- not who -- we are. (p. 10)

This means that “the movement from racist to antiracist is always ongoing,” both for American society as a whole, whose history has been a “duel” between “racist progress” and “antiracist progress,” and for individuals who, like the author, choose to take up the “lifelong mission to be antiracist” (pp. 10, 33, 226).

Kendi’s claim that “there is no neutrality in the racism struggle…no in-between safe space of ‘not racist’” animates his approach, and increases the pressure on author and reader alike to recognize when policies and ideas promote racist power’s self-interest, but also to articulate and pursue antiracist ideas and policies (p. 9). As in the verse which gave our congregation its name (“Justice, justice shall you pursue” Deut. 16.20), antiracism is something that must be actively sought after and brought into being in order “to give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free” (p. 238). For Kendi, this has meant pivoting from “researching and educating for the sake of changing minds” to “researching and educating for the sake of changing policy” (p. 231). Toward this end, he has founded the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University in Washington, D.C.

In our second conversation about the book, the group broke up into pairs to discuss what steps they might take in their own lives. Many agreed that we need to keep this conversation going, and we will do that in subsequent One Book events throughout the year. Keep an eye out for announcements in the weekly bulletin for discussions about books such as Isabel Wilkerson’s Caste, as well as documentaries such as Ana DuVernay’s 13th. As we uncover more about our society and ourselves, we can begin to take more considered and impactful action, and understand how each of us might “struggle for antiracist power and policy in [our] spaces” (p. 226).

Stephanie Friedman holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MA in English from the University of Chicago. She teaches writing and serves as Associate Director of Summer Session Programs in the Graham School at the University of Chicago. Stephanie and her family belong to Rodfei Zedek, where Stephanie has chaired the Adult Education Committee.
An Arab Shepherd is Searching for His Goat on Mount Zion – a poem of Yehuda Amichai

presented by Rabbi Larry Edwards


An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
and on the opposite mountain I am searching
for my little boy.
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
both in their temporary failure.
Our voices meet
above the Sultan’s Pool in the valley between us.
Neither of us wants
the child or the goat to get caught in the wheels
of the terrible Had Gadya machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes
and our voices came back inside us, laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or a son
has always been the beginning
of a new religion in these mountains.
In her remarkable study of Yehuda Amichai’s poetry, *The Full Severity of Compassion* (Stanford, 2016), Chana Kronfeld puzzles over the “accessibility” of Amichai’s poetry:

> In the hands of another poet, this poetry’s steady diet of allusions, parodic midrashim, pseudo-commentary, textual meditations, and other modes of intertextuality would result in a dauntingly difficult body of work. Yet Amichai continues to be a phenomenally readable poet, accepted and admired—or derided and rejected—as the crafter of the “easy” poem. … Amichai’s own poetics of simplicity and the “wisdom of camouflage” with which he veils his complex artistry have a lot to do with the persistence of this opinion. (p. 119)

This poem strikes me as a fine example of what Kronfeld is talking about.

Amichai lived near the Montefiore Windmill, above the Sultan’s Pool, across from Mt. Zion. It is easy to imagine him in that setting, having the experience described in the poem (or, imagining himself or a neighbor having such an experience). A simple account of a moment of anxiety on an otherwise uneventful day. A moment of anxiety, he notices, that is shared by an unseen Arab from the opposite hill. In fact, Amichai chooses to begin the narrative with the Arab shepherd, who has temporarily lost track of one of his goats. Though they are neighbors, they are strangers to one another, united for a moment in the poet’s mind by their “temporary failure.”

Their voices meet, but they themselves do not. And now the poet’s rumination on the circumstance turns from a pastoral story to religious contemplation. Neither man wants the goat or the child to be caught up in “the terrible Had Gadya machine.” The image will be immediately familiar to most Jewish readers from the Passover song, in which a father’s purchase of a goat leads to a chain of calamity. The goat is no doubt what prompts the association with Had Gadya. But Passover is not the occasion that immediately springs to mind.

The conclusion of the poem evokes (for me, anyway) the Binding of Isaac (a different, though equally terrifying, story). Especially when the goat and the child are both found “among the bushes,” I picture the ram caught by its horns. Interestingly, though, Amichai does not choose the word used in Genesis 22:13, s’vach, a “thicket.” Aha! He is more clever: he chooses to use the word siaḥ – another word for bush – which is found in the previous chapter of Genesis. When Hagar, expelled from the household of Abraham and Sarah, believes that her son Ishmael is about to die of thirst, she places him *taḥat aḥad hishım*, under one of the bushes (Gen. 21:15). Abraham found a ram in a *s’vach*; Hagar placed her son under a *siaḥ*. Amichai, with that subtle choice of shrubbery, brings the Binding of Isaac into direct relation with Hagar and Ishmael – just as Jewish tradition does with the Torah readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah.
There may be another wordplay going on here as well. *Siah* (or *siyah*) is also the word for conversation, as in *du-siah*, dialogue. Of course, no actual dialogue takes place – the Arab shepherd and the Jewish father go their separate ways.

It was Gershom Scholem who said that it is impossible to make Hebrew into a completely secular language – there will always be connections, intended and unintended, to biblical language. Hebrew is a *lashon kodesh*, a holy tongue, even when it is used for daily newspapers and television ads. Amichai knows this, and plays with it constantly. Even the subtitle of the original collection in which this poem appeared – *Sh’eilot Ut’shuvot* – refers to the classic rabbinic modality of responsa literature: questions and answers about points of halakhah.

Just as the Hebrew language will always be fraught with religious echoes, so too the Land of Israel and especially the hills of Jerusalem. Thus, finally, his punch line: be careful – even the most common stumble, in this place, may spark a new religion!

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.
Uniqueness and Connection during Quarantine

by Gavin Eskilson

In the fifth aliyah of Shemini, the longest parasha, the Torah resumes its account of the dedication of the mishkan on the first of Nissan almost a year after the yetziat Mitzraim, the Exodus from Egypt.

The nesiim, the tribal leaders, wished to bring inauguration gifts. Collectively they brought six covered wagons and twelve oxen to assist in transporting the mishkan when the Israelites traveled. In addition, as representatives of their respective tribes, they wished to offer individual gifts and offerings. Although each leader brought identical gifts, the Torah describes each one individually.

That is the cause of the repetition you may have noticed. This definitely made my preparation and reading easier. However, we know that every word in the Torah is unique and there are no extra words. Many a complex chapter of Torah law is derived from a choice of context, a turn of language, even an extra letter. Yet in our parashah, the Torah seemingly “squanders” dozens of verses by itemizing the gifts. The gifts they each brought were identical in every respect, down to the weight of the silver plates and the age of the five lambs. Nevertheless, the Torah recounts each tribe’s gift separately, repeating the 35-item list twelve times in succession.

Surely, there must be a significance and a lesson we can learn from it.

Those that know me may know that I am a sports fan. This year we tragically lost a basketball legend, Kobe Bryant. Even though I am a Bucks fan, Kobe had a great impact on me. I always admired him. What made him stand out was that even though most of his moves were from Michael Jordan, when he played, they became his own, adding his unique talent and skill.

Kobe used to say: “I don’t want to be the next Michael Jordan, I just want to be Kobe Bryant”.

The lesson I learned from him is, even when I find myself doing something that has seemingly nothing unique about it, when I put my all into it, it becomes unique.

Sorta like Grandma Gail’s matzo ball soup. I am sure there are others who use the same ingredients and recipe as her, however, when she makes it, it is especially good.

Each and every individual has their own flavor, a special touch that only they can add.
Even though there may be many others who read this parasha today, when I read it, it is unique and special. The same applies to the repetitious description of the offerings in our parasha.

When the mishkan was inaugurated, the nesiim brought up a korban – an offering. Each nasi brought the very same korban in the very same manner. Yet the Torah goes ahead and lists every korban, because although it would seem that all the korban were the same, the truth is that every tribe brought its own special gift with its unique flavor. This unique flavor was dependent on the nasi of the shevet, the tribe.

It was who was bringing the gift, not what was being brought.

When I think about Kobe I know that this is what drove him to win all those championships.

Personally, there are many who can mix me up with my brothers, as we all look alike. However, if only they knew the difference in the video games we play, then they would surely see that we are all unique in our own way.

In sixth grade, each student in the entire middle school had to make a historical project for the history fair.

I remember working hard on my project which was about the reverse flow of the Chicago river. As I brought my project into the cafeteria, to display it among more than fifty projects, I feared my unique insight and hard work might get lost. From that moment on, I realized how important it is to pay attention to each student's unique insight into their project and not overlook it.

When we recognize that we each have something to offer that nobody else in the entire world has, we are strengthened to give it all we’ve got, because we are special!

The lesson I would like to take for myself on the day of my bar mitzvah is to always recognize and utilize the power of the individual.

During the period of quarantine I was forced to celebrate many holidays without my community. It made me realize how important it is to have my own unique connection to Hashem and Judaism.

This way, when we use our full potential individually, the collective power of the community is so much stronger.

And finally, each of you here individually and collectively, thank you for joining me and making my day so special.

Gavin Eskilson is entering 8th grade at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School. He lives in Lincoln Park with his parents, Stephen Eskilson and Jordana Friedman, and brothers, David and Jack.
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. The talks on Parashat Terumah were originally presented on February 29, 2020, those on Parashat Beha’alotekha on June 13, 2020.

by Edward Hamburg

Parashat Terumah comprises 96 verses, but my comments this morning will consider only the second: “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved.” “Whose heart is so moved.”

It's on this second part of the verse that I'll focus — on the exclusive role God assigns to the heart in this decision making. For unlike the very specific subsequent instructions detailing exactly what gifts should be given, the quantity of these gifts — and the decision to give any gift at all — was left entirely unspecified. Instead, these responses were left up to the people themselves, with the only stipulation that their decisions be made not in their minds or souls, but in their hearts.

I think this stipulation was essential. Gifts given to construct God’s first recorded earthly residence should not have been responses to top-down directives to which slaves were accustomed, or motivated by such mind-driven calculations as favorable income tax deductions or the desire to have a part of the Mishkan named in one’s honor. These gifts should also not have been soulful yet visceral responses to the moment, like to the thunderous theophany the people just experienced at Sinai. Instead, God wanted these terumot to come from deliberations made much deeper in the human spirit — in the province of the heart.

I have long been intrigued by how Jews are urged to understand this role of the heart as a guide to human thought. Take for example, in the Shema:

“You will love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words that I command you this day will be on your heart.”

suggesting that the heart is entirely capable of capturing the force of our souls and energies of our bodies in the fulfillment of this command.
As we continue reading in the Book of Exodus, we are introduced to yet another example of how the Torah speaks to the centrality of the heart in guiding human thought. The craftspeople who take the terumot of this week’s parasha and actually construct the Mishkan are described as “wise hearted” — an unfamiliar term because many chumashim simply translate the Hebrew as “skilled,” which is reasonable given the context of the readings, but it’s a translation that leaves me terribly unsatisfied.

Because the Hebrew is “chachmat lev” — “wise hearted” — which to me suggests qualities more profound than those associated with being a very capable sewer of cloth, hammerer of metals, and shaper of wood. Scholars indeed maintain that this term distinguishes individuals distinctly capable of deepening their capacities for thought and action — that becoming wise hearted is only possible after a lot of hard work.

I find support for this view when I hear the 90th Psalm recited at many Jewish funerals, particularly the verses that say:

*Seventy years our days may number, Eighty years if given the strength. Teach us to account for all of our days That we may attain a “l’vav chachma” — a heart of wisdom.*

I don’t think with these words that the Psalmist was aspiring to the goal of becoming a skilled craftsman by the end of his life. I suggest instead that he understood how there is no greater task in our development as people than in the development of our hearts. Perhaps this is because it is in our hearts that the logic and confusion of our minds confront, wrestle with, and ultimately refine the raw dynamic spirit of our souls. That it is in our hearts where empathy is stored to be drawn upon at just the right times, where kindness sits latently awaiting activation when it’s needed most, and where the most positive experiences of our lives are poised for remembering when despair sets in. If our hearts are sufficiently strong, we can, on occasions, experience wisdom.

I’ve thought a bit about this stuff over the years, and probably more as I get a lot closer to the end of my life than the beginning. Perhaps this is me starting to account for all of my days, and appreciating the times when my heart is doing a good job at guiding my thoughts. Like:

- when I hear myself repeating to others the words of guidance and support so thoughtfully given me by mentors and teachers; or
- when I’m dismayed every time I see a veteran begging from his wheelchair in front of Walgreens; or
- when I marshal the strength to not avert my eyes as I absorb the injustice of people living under the Columbus Street overpass; or
- when I recall almost every time our granddaughter Ruby tells me that I’m “the best Zeyda in the whole world.”

I also recount the days when my heart is not doing its best job at thought-guidance, like:

- when I throw my tennis racquet out of frustration; or
• when I get caught in downward spirals that result in despondency. As Rev Yoda the Jedi says: “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering;” or

• when I neglect to tell the people I love how much I love them; or

• when I fail to forcefully respond to reprehensible political leaders advancing reprehensible policies, as well as to their complicit supporters who insist their prioritized ends justify these reprehensible means.

So it’s with these thoughts that I affirm how in this week’s parasha it was essential that God only accept gifts for the Mishkan from “every person whose heart is so moved,” whose decisions were guided by the wisdom of their hearts. Unlike other offerings, these terumot were not contributed to enable censuses, preparations for military campaigns, the expiation of sins, or expressions of personal gratitude. These gifts were the elements that came together for the Israelites to build, for the first time in their lives, something for them that was sacred — something that should not only be made of the best of what they had to give, but also reflected the best of who they were.

I so appreciated how the opportunity to study with David, Thalia, and Ruth provided me the context and motivation to explore these thoughts. I’ve learned a lot from this one line of Torah. But most importantly, this opportunity to study enabled me to understand how developing the strength of our hearts may be the best terumah we can ever give to ourselves.

(Edward Hamburg’s background is described on p. 15.)

by Ruth O'Brien

So, I’m Ruth O’Brien and I am intimidated, I mean, delighted to be here talking about Terumah.

Let me begin with a set of thoughts and associations to the portion today that dealt with the construction plan for the Tabernacle —

A gift

A conversation (ok, one-sided)

A set of plans—including some nice decorative touches (love that)

Some moments between G-d and Moses

Quite a gift registry

Is it kind of dull or really fascinating?

What am I doing talking about a passage that’s been read/heard chewed over for thousands of years?

Oh right, I’m Jewish — that’s what we do. But how did that happen? I was indeed raised a Catholic...and I am an O’Brien.

But first back to Terumah. When in New York in December with my husband, Stuart, we went out to lunch with a dear old friend, Benjamin Marcus, the younger brother of a college
boyfriend. Benjamin is an architect, an old-movie buff and a conservative Jew. We were talking and I asked him how things were at his shul, Congregation Or Zarua. Strangely enough he groused a bit about his rabbi who several times a year asks congregants to speak on the portion at Sat am services. Yes, you know where I’m going. He and I were asked to speak on the same portion! Of course, I did not grouse about our rabbi!

I was thinking uh oh—he’s an architect, he’s been going to shul forever, he’s fluent in Hebrew. Oi. It’s not so much that I feel competitive, but I am taken with HIS modesty as he says to me--- “What can I add to this looooong discussion?”

Hmmm. He sent me his comments (finished two months ago, what can I say? He’s that guy.) and they’re wonderful—not overtly scholarly though he certainly used words I had to look up but nice and reflective of him/his knowledge and interests.

So, it got me thinking... what can I say? In part his comments were freeing.

OKAY

Aside from the d’var torah coincidence why bring him up? Who is Benjamin Marcus in my life? Who am I in his life?

Thanks to him, his family, his mother, of very blessed memory, I am here today. I converted for a few reasons, but I wanted to be Jewish because of Estelle Marcus.

I lived with her and her family during the summer of 1980. Their life, their home, their practice of their religion was revelatory — Perhaps she was my Naomi. No she was my Naomi, despite my never marrying her eldest son, Benjamin’s brother.

Just as Terumah was a blueprint of how to construct God’s dwelling place, the Marcus family and their home was a blueprint for me. Their life was a blueprint, not quite so detailed, and yes, the colored curtains and decorative touches are more relatable to me than the details of how exactly to build the mishkan. (Now I know what a cubit it— huzzah!)

How they kept Shabbat, how Estelle kept kosher, how they spoke to each other, how they discussed everything. Quite a radically different approach to religion.

The Marcus back story: Estelle made 315 Bala Ave an observant Jewish home for her sons. They came back to the house from their Jewish day school when they were young and asked to have a kosher home. Estelle did that and with commitment and aplomb and a vodka with a twist of lemon. I wish she were here to ask her more about that decision. But I lived that summer in a house of mutual respect and affection, trust and daily expression of deeply held values. Including humor. One day while putting away dishes with her I put some milchik silverware into the fleishik drawer. She laughed and told me not to worry. We washed it again and she told me about coming home one day to some forks sticking out of a potted plant. Her
cleaning lady had made a similar error and so "buried" the fork to make it clean.

These are old memories so forgive me if I am touching on sensitive matters. I understood from her that there were rules and meaning behind rules and even room for error and humor and affection.

I had discarded my Catholic faith some few years before 1980: it really drove me crazy (ages 10-14) that I couldn't ask questions about the tenets of faith with which I was raised, we had to take things "on faith." Why couldn't I be curious? Curiosity seemed like a good thing in other parts of life.

Anyways It's a long story how I got here to Rodfei Zedek – or maybe not. I was named Ruth by my father. He loved her loyalty and hard-working ingenuity. I was raised to respect those qualities.

Did Estelle know that she was to be a "blueprint?"

In a way, she did. She knew who she was and what mattered to her.

As I wrote these reflections, It flashed through my head that to me Judaism has kept much of the simplicity/directness of Terumah. Of course, we struggle with where we pray and how we pray and live. There's lots to discuss and even (hooray) argue over, but much remains the same. It is here at Rodfei that I have found a welcoming congregation – thank you for that welcome and for listening as I have ranged far from Terumah.

This week is the yartzeit of my dear mother-in-law's death at 105. She raised a wonderful son who helped me get here today.

*Ruth O'Brien lives in Hyde Park with her husband Stuart Rice, emeritus professor of chemistry at the University of Chicago and their son David, a junior at Reed College. She has been a member of Rodfei Zedek twice. A professional fundraiser, she has worked most of her career for her alma mater, the University of Chicago (College and SSA). Ruth served on the boards of Akiba Schecter, Hillel and the Quadrangle Club.*

*by Jo Reizner*

I would like to begin by saying how much I miss our wonderful Rodfei Zedek community, and how much I'm looking forward to being together again, to share the ruach and hugs we've been without for way too long. I do realize it's probably easier delivering this talk to a silent, non-judgmental camera, but I would really much rather welcome, or maybe risk, your real-time reactions in the sanctuary!

Each Friday, I look forward to reading the “Reflections” email Cantor Rosenberg sends, and I realized pretty quickly that I would often notice a correlation between the weekly parasha and something that was going on in my life. Though I do believe our lives proceed along some kind of path, I really
don’t believe in coincidences. As I love to say to my children when something unusual occurs, which prompts the question: “What are the odds of that happening?” my response is: the odds are 100%; it happened! I will admit that, sometimes the connections between my life and the weekly parasha are tenuous, but, at other times, they’re almost spooky.

In reading, and re-reading this parasha, then reading it again, the thing that kept jumping out at me was the disconnect among the chapters. Plus, even with five themes in five chapters, a connection to my life remained elusive. The ever-changing narrative kept me a little off-balance; in each chapter, I waited for the return of something familiar to tie things together, until I realized that Beha’alotekha was not a neat package just waiting for a bow on top.

When I finally abandoned my need for a GPS route through the parasha, I did, in fact, recognize among the disparate accounts being told, a definite analogy to my life as a whole, and also, more narrowly, to our collective life experience today.

Generally, I think it’s safe to say that one’s life, and I know especially mine, is not a neat bundle of relatable experiences that move along a predictable timeline. It’s really much more analogous to the fits and starts of Beha’alotekha, with varied and sundry events strung together over time to form the entirety of our life experience. While the themes of each of the five chapters seem distinct from all the others, they are all part of the larger narrative of the Torah.

Similarly, especially in retrospect, many chapters of our lives appear to be quite distinct and unrelated to each other. How do our experiences in nursery school relate to our experiences in college, and how do either of those relate to our experiences as parents or working professionals? On the surface, the answer may be “not so much,” but, especially as we become older, and if we are open to examining our lives, we realize that all these disparate parts actually do have a role in making up the whole of who we are.

During the many stages of our lives, it may be almost impossible to discern how those moments, that “present,” if you will, may reappear. Whether it is in a recognizable, or totally hidden way, it is, nevertheless, part and parcel of our journey. I am reminded of one of the most meaningful and profound pieces of advice Jim and I ever received. When Hillary, our older daughter, was born, our pediatrician told us to consider her mind a blank slate, and to try to write on it as many different and varied experiences as possible, even if we thought that, at that moment, she couldn’t possibly take them in, let alone understand or remember them. Jim and I thought this was both the most incredible concept, and also the most frightening; what if we made a mistake, what if we didn’t do enough? Though it can never be proven, we’re convinced that having taken that advice seriously with both Hillary and Jessie as infants absolutely had an effect on their lives. For the better, we hope!

A more specific analogy to the present can be found in an early part of the parasha. The Israelites are in the
second year following the exodus from Egypt, and are completing the construction of the Tabernacle. We learn that, upon completion, the Lord lowering and raising a cloud over it would dictate the movement of the Tabernacle. The Israelites had no idea how long they would travel with the Tabernacle during any given leg of their journey, no idea how long they would rest when the cloud lowered again, nor how long their ultimate journey would be. They were, therefore, always kept off-balance, never able to establish a sense of place because they didn’t know when they would be commanded to move on again.

This seems to be a very close analogy to how we are living today, with our daily freedoms still substantially under the control of an authority, or set of authorities, which we are, if we’re law-abiding, helpless to defy. Many of us share, I think, a sense of not only being personally off balance, but of the world being out of balance, while we wait for things beyond our control to dictate our actions.

Unlike the Israelites, we are, for the most part, able to maintain the security that comes with a sense of place. However, the homes we have established over time have become, in some ways, less a manifestation of our security than our physical containment. At the same time, we share with them the unrelenting uncertainty of what comes next; how long will we have to travel through this unfamiliar, and unforgiving, territory until we are once again safely in a place of comfort and community? As William Falk recently wrote: “Any ordeal can be endured if you know what you must do to survive, and for roughly how long.”

We’ve certainly been given lots of information about what to do to survive, though the ability to use that knowledge does not fall evenly upon all members of society. I know that my family is, and feels keenly, the privilege we have to be able to avoid unnecessary exposure to Coved-19, only because others less fortunate than we, are willing to, and in so many cases, must work through this time due to their economic circumstances. The analogy here to the parasha is a little more opaque, though still applicable: when we think about complaining right now about anything having to do with our privilege, it feels a little bit like when the Israelites complained about only having manna to eat. It may have become standard fare to them, but according to the description here, it “tasted like rich cream;” certainly not something to be taken for granted!

Clearly, there are analogies between my life, our lives, and this parasha. However, knowing what’s ahead for the Israelites, let’s hope there is no similarity between our current open-ended journey and theirs of 40 years – this has certainly gone on long enough!

Rabbi Minkus, Jim and I want you to know how much we appreciate all your efforts to retain and maintain a semblance of normalcy for all of Rodfei Zedek during these unprecedented times; you’ve really done a terrific job. Cantor Rosenberg and Chuck, our deepest appreciation for the joy you bring into our homes each Shabbat; Na’aseh V’nishmah has been pure sunshine penetrating through these very gray times.
Jo and her husband, Jim Gimpel, have been members of Rodfei for just over 30 years. As their family expanded with daughters, Hillary and Jessica, and now son-in-law, Daniel, they have all happily stayed within the Rodfei fold. During these years, Jo has been involved in various volunteer activities, including a stint on an ad hoc Hebrew School Board, and, most recently, as the gabbai for Na’aseh V’Nishmah, a “job” she loves and to which she hopes to return in the near future.

Subsequent to spending eight years establishing and growing a boutique Real Estate property management firm, she worked at the University of Chicago for 23 years, running the Real Estate Operations Department. During that time, she acted as the University’s liaison to the Hyde Park community, served two terms as President of the Hyde Park Chamber of Commerce, and was Vice-Chair and then Chairman of then-Alderman Toni Preckwinkle’s 53rd Street TIF Advisory Council. She is now gainfully, and happily retired!

by Miriam Parks-Friedman

Hi, I’m Miriam, and I have a confession to make. I have been to almost all of the This American Shabbat events at Rodfei Zedek. I have heard friends and acquaintances give beautiful d’var Torahs, that were both wonderfully spoken and eloquently written. I did not expect at any point to be speaking to the congregation as a participant in this project. (I would insert a pause here, since this is the true confession – one many will identify with) I’ve never actually given a d’var Torah. Despite years of theatre training, and the acquired ability to shmooze almost anyone in a ten foot radius, the idea of writing a d’var and speaking my own words in front of a large group of people absolutely terrifies me, and I’ve managed to avoid ever having to do it. That being said, technically I’m still not doing it because I can’t see any of you and this is completely pre-recorded.

It has been a surreal experience to study parashat Beha’alot’kha with Rabbi Minkus, Jo Reizner, and Laura Hoffman. As a group we had two in-depth discussions of parashat B’ha’alot’kha and a formatting discussion about how to write and deliver a d’var, all on Zoom.

A few months ago, the only Zoom I had ever heard of was the public television show from the 1970s, completely run and organized by kids out of WGBH in Boston. Now I spend hours each day on Zoom as a part of my work at Akiba Schechter Day School, attending meetings and announcements, teaching and learning from students, chatting with parents and basically doing all of the things that we used to do in person before Covid-19.

I’ve tried to find something in the parsha to catch and hold on to, that I would want to study more in depth; there was so much to wrestle and think about in this tongue-twister of a parsha (great line). Beha’alot’kha moves so fast, and has so much ground to cover. I’ve referred to my notes, and a variety of supporting texts to illustrate two specific points in the parsha.

Those texts were: The Eitz Chayim Tanach, The Women’s Torah
Commentary, and the My Jewish Learning website.

I’ve focused on the paragraphs that bookend the parasha, because there are two descriptions and events that I found very interesting. The portion begins with G-d dictating to Moses a detailed description of the menorah, which leads to the various instructions that are given throughout Beha’alotcha such as instructions regarding Passover, creating a council of elders, and finding leaders and influencers from among the people. Also, the incident at the end of the parasha leading to Miriam being struck with “white scales,” which illustrates some of the complaints of the people throughout the parasha, at an intimate level and how G-d reacts to them.

The Israelites are told how to light the menorah, how it is made and patterned according to G-d’s design; how to climb up to it, how to light it correctly, and in what order. This description seems clear and simple yet it merits almost an entire page of explanations In the Eitz Hayim commentary as to why all of this detail is important. The one commentary I found the most interesting was an explanation that R. Isaac Luria taught. It was that six of the seven branches of the menorah illustrate scientific and academic disciplines, and that the seventh branch illustrates the light of Torah tying them all together. As someone who sees both secular and spiritual learning as complementing each other even when they disagree, I find this to be a powerful image.

In Isaac Luria’s mind secular learning and faith are not rivals. Each has its own concerns and questions, each compliments the others. This is what has always attracted me about the study of Torah. It was because of this idea that years ago I was one of the founders of a queer study group that met weekly to discuss the parasha against the backdrop of our own experiences, ranging from Orthodox to secular, and that each of those backgrounds and study methods was valid, and respected within the group.

We met for about two years, cycling through each of the parshiyot in the Torah twice, discussing minute details of instruction and construction over Shabbat dinners before Friday night services. Indirectly, out of that study group and the synagogue grew my relationship with my now wife of twenty years, and my children, as well as our eventual membership in Rodfei Tzedek.

At the other end of the parasha is the experience described in The Women’s Torah Commentary as “the silencing of Miriam.” “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman.” As in earlier parts of the parasha, once again the Israelites are complaining, and now it is not just the general rabble complaining about the lack of meat, it is those closest to Moses, his brother and sister, who are speaking direct Lashon hara about his wife, seemingly about her race or ethnicity with no evidence in the parasha that his wife is problematic. Miriam and Aaron are described as fellow prophets, figures that have influenced Moses and the Israelite people from the time of slavery in Egypt until the end of this parasha. G-d directly
rebukes Miriam and Aaron for their complaints against the wife of Moses, yet since G-d has already punished Aaron, by the death of two of his sons for lighting a “strange fire,” G-d punishes only Miriam. Miriam is afflicted with what is described as “white scales”, interpreted as a form of leprosy, which is only healed after Moses cries out to G-d, and Miriam is exiled from the camp for seven days.

In *The Women’s Torah Commentary* it explains that not only is she singled out for punishment due to her complaints, but that she is also silenced in the Torah. She is described as a leader of the people, but after these voiced complaints, and her exile, there is no record of her in the Torah again, until her death. We know nothing additional of Miriam or her prophecy after the end of this parshah, other than midrash, which is created from the imagination of other people, it is not really Miriam’s voice, but other people’s interpretation of what she thought, felt and believed. Interestingly, despite Rabbi Luria’s interpretation of the menorah as representing branches of both secular and spiritual learning, Luria wrote down very little of his teachings. His voice like the voice of Miriam the Prophet was mainly a spoken voice left to the transmission and interpretation of others.

I thank you for the gift of time to study and speak about this parsha, and I hope that you will be able to read between the lines to find the nuggets of wisdom that Torah has to offer even when it seems as mundane as the description of a menorah or as silent as the prophecy of Miriam.

*by Laura Hoffman*

The title of this week’s Torah portion, Beha’alotekha, is quite a mouthful to pronounce, and in reading and reviewing the portion, it has proven to be a lot to digest as well. Each chapter is seemingly disconnected from the others, sometimes causing whiplash with the abrupt transitions, and some chapters are more action-packed than others. There are plenty of exciting events in this portion that I could talk about, but being the language nerd that I am, I was drawn more to a familiar element of the writing in the Torah: the repetition. The Torah is full of repetition, and this portion is no exception. Why is the Torah so repetitive? What purpose does it serve, and how does it help people?

We see this repetition right off the bat in the first chapter of this portion. It says, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say to him, ‘When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand.’” Aaron did so; he mounted the lamps at the front of the lampstand, as the Lord had commanded Moses.” If I were an editor, I would advise the writer to consolidate this into a single, concise sentence, but for some reason it was thought that this needed the extra repetition of where exactly the lamps were positioned, and that this positioning was a direction from God to Moses. Later on in the portion, we see the same type of repetitive language. God tells Moses,
‘Let the Israelite people offer the Passover sacrifice at its set time: you shall offer it on the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, at its set time...’ It then goes on to say, “Moses instructed the Israelites to offer the passover sacrifice; and they offered the passover sacrifice in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight...” Again, the Torah is really making sure we understand that the sacrifice was offered in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. This is on top of the fact that we’ve already learned about the Passover sacrifice in great detail in previous portions. I’m not a seasoned scholar of Biblical texts, but I have a feeling that these parts of the Torah were written this way for a reason. Why might it have been written this way?

I have a few ideas based on my past and present careers. After college, I enrolled in the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), a teacher training program in the Chicago Public Schools. After a year of student teaching and concurrent graduate school, I taught first grade for a year, realized teaching wasn’t for me, and retired early. However, I learned a lot in my brief teaching career. One of the most important things I learned was the value of repetition, especially when it comes to small children. One of the first strategies we were taught was providing explicit directions and having students repeat things back to you to check for understanding. For example, “When I ring the bell, stand up, push in your chair, and walk quietly to the rug. That’s three things you’re going to do when I ring the bell: stand up, push in your chair, and walk quietly to the rug. Who can tell me what you’re going to do when I ring the bell?” At which point I would call on a student (or sometimes two or three in succession) to repeat the instructions back to me. It sounds excessive and definitely felt that way at the time, but the idea was that repeating these things over and over would eventually make the instruction stick in the kids’ minds and reduce all potential for confusion. So, in the Torah, maybe if we’re told several times where Aaron was instructed to position the lamps, it will be drilled into our brains and we’ll not only remember, but obey the command, too.

Repetition is also an important element of my current field of work, oncology research. I work with doctors, nurses, statisticians, and numerous other team members to coordinate the development of research protocols, which are cohesive governing documents for clinical trials; you could think of it as a rule book for how to conduct a particular trial. Since there are several safety elements to keep in mind when conducting these trials, especially those involving new investigational drugs, it is not uncommon to list critical instructions in several different places within the document. For example, one page might say, “Conduct liver function blood tests on days 1, 8, and 15 of each month on treatment.” Another page might say, “Since this drug might cause liver toxicities, liver function blood tests are required on days 1, 8, and 15 of each month on treatment.” There is often also a nice clear calendar of required tests that includes those same instructions. In this case, it’s not that people don’t understand what they read the first time; it’s that they might miss it, and another opportunity to encounter the information will help ensure that they see it (and for
safety’s sake, we definitely want them to see it). Perhaps this was the intention of the instructions for when to make the Passover sacrifice: maybe if it’s mentioned more than once, people will be less likely to do it on the wrong day of the wrong month, at the wrong time of day, thus avoiding any potential consequences like being cut off from their kin and bearing guilt.

So, maybe the Torah was on to something with all this repetition. While the writing may sound clunky and awkward to our modern ears, it ensures that people understand, remember, and do things how they are supposed to be done, leaving little room for error. It also benefits the giver of the instructions, in that if the instructions are not followed correctly, it cannot be blamed on lack of clarity. Perhaps the repetition in the Torah was the biblical equivalent of the bolding and underlining we use for emphasis in writing today. If so, it certainly served its purpose.

Laura Hoffman grew up in Hyde Park with her parents, Halina and Philip, and brother, Andrew. She grew up at Congregation Rodfei Zedek and continues to be a part of the Rodfei community. She works as a research protocol coordinator at the Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology.
Within the Confines of My Laptop

by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby

Not that anyone asked, but here, in no particular order, is basically what I want out of Judaism:

1) a code of values that will give me guidance as I face the challenges of my daily life;

2) a connection to my ancestors—those I have known, and those that go back generations before I was born;

3) an understanding of historical events that shape our world;

4) an empathy for all people and animals that surround me;

5) a feeling of peace at the knowledge that my own weaknesses and faults are universal and nothing to be worried about;

6) the slightest explanation for the larger inner workings of the universe, including, but not limited to life, death, God, and afterlife; and

7) a physical community full of people I know and trust and feel drawn to.

I’m 48. By this point, I’ve accepted the fact that I will never achieve all seven of these things. If I can nail down even three or four of them, I edge myself ever closer to contentedness with life. But in the end, if I had to choose one, it would be a community of people I know and trust.

COVID has obviously changed everything about our lives. What seemed at first like a temporary thing, an annoying intrusion into my cushy days as a middle-aged white man, has morphed into something much more sinister and all-encompassing. No, no one close to me has died of the virus, a fact about which I feel extremely lucky. But my luck and privilege have given me the luxury of hating COVID for other reasons.

The virus has stolen from all of us. Many of the losses—the cancellation of summer camp for my son, the lack of a proper eighth birthday party for my daughter—hardly qualify as tragedies in the grand scheme of things. But they are moments gone forever, potential memories that never got to breathe, and when you add them up they leave significant blanks on the canvas of their childhoods. The multigenerational milestones, cancelled or diminished, hurt in a different way. My nephew’s bar mitzvah, which he studied hard for in Cincinnati, never happened. Friends of mine who had a wedding planned in June could not do that either. I have not been able to meet the new baby of a close cousin, and when my aunt died in July (of causes unrelated to COVID), the family was not able to have a funeral. A birth, a death, a bar mitzvah, a wedding. Without a community to commemorate
or mourn, the saddest and most joyous occasions can only feel hollow.

Being Jewish means participating in communal affairs. It’s a religious obligation that’s central to everything. In fact, if you believe the midrash, to remove yourself from the community and live in isolation is to destroy the world. A sense of shared destiny, whether it involves joy or sorrow, is part and parcel of what it means to me to be a Jew. We’re meant to care for each other, to grieve and celebrate. To argue and learn.

I have not set foot in Rodfei Zedek in months, and little by little, I can feel it slipping away. The warm, familiar smell of the sanctuary. The weird paint stain in the elevator. The mysterious gift shop that never seems to be open. The fact that I can walk in the door and immediately hear the echo of the basketball bouncing in the gym and the footsteps of kids scampering on the second floor. I want to go over to the corner of the foyer and grab a kippah and a tallit, and maybe, along the way, receive one of Rabbi Minkus’s smiling handshakes, an exuberant gesture somewhere between a bro-slap and a low-five. I think about these details, as clear and familiar to me as anything in my adult life. I don’t want to lose them.

The social and medical limbo we’re in at the moment will not last forever, but a part of me worries about what is waiting for us on the other side. Life will inevitably feel different, more fragile. The physical proximity essential to synagogue life may feel impossible. Irresponsible. I’m not talking about hugging, exactly, though hugs are nice. I’m talking about the comfort of being together, the reassurance that comes with looking around the sanctuary and seeing “your people,” forgetting about the outside world for a few hours and just being Jews together. But the outside world has gotten in, and things will never feel the same.
Without the community, I am a different me. As I’ve retreated into my home, and found a new appreciation for those closest to me, an unexpected another side effect has emerged: I have forgotten how to be around people outside my family. My social muscles have already atrophied to the point where nearly every face-to-face interaction threatens to become an awkward exchange full of missed cues and disconnected wariness. The longer COVID is in my life, the more slippery this slope becomes.

I don’t want to put anyone at risk. People are dying, and I’m whining about what I miss from my old life. I can think of few things more profane than trading the health of fellow congregants, especially the elderly and more vulnerable, for my own comfort and desires. In the end, if this is our new reality, I’ll forge something new that works for me. If I don’t, I’ll be left behind, because Judaism will adjust as it always has. We’ve been through worse. Until I can expand my notion of what “community” means, and accept it, perhaps it’s time for me to start focusing on some of the other items on my list. Or learn to settle for a Zoom high-five from Rabbi Minkus.

Jeff Ruby is the chief dining critic of Chicago magazine and is the author of the middle school age novel, Penelope March is Melting, which was released in 2017. 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.