

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. VI, No. 2



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Yael Hoffman on growing up as an Israeli American

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Introduction to Volume VI Number 2

This year on April 19, Yom Ha'Atzmaut, we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. We're made conscious of the Land of Israel, both in our secular lives – by the daily news – and in our religious lives. In synagogue as we near the shema we speak of being brought to our land from the four corners of the earth; sometimes we sing those words to the tune of Hatikvah. On Shabbat we all recite a prayer for our country and then pray, "Bless the State of Israel, [that it may be] the beginning of our redemption."

Our relationships to Israel are complex and evolving, as our Rebel Jeff Ruby recounts. While his story is his own, it has elements in common with each of ours. In this issue members of our Congregation describe all sorts of ties to Israel. Some, like Yael Hoffman, were born there. Some, like

Irene Glasner, lived there for a time. Some, like Elliot Gershon have lived there and maintain professional relationships. Some, like Shelley Kaplan and Robert Hutchison, have visited. Some, like Leah Basa, have made aliyah. Our different backgrounds are reflected in the contents of this issue.

As we celebrate with Israel, we may be guided by our community to new understandings. One starting point is suggested by Rabbi Minkus: "Israel needs to begin with joy. We have the land of Israel, not a longing or a hopeful prayer but a place.... our concern is understandably protecting its borders, but we can never neglect the necessity to protect its soul."

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When Aspirations Meet Reality: Connecting to Israel, Past, Present, and Future

by Cantor Rachel Rosenberg



When I was very young, my mom would often tell me stories. Entertaining and true enough to maintain her credibility, her original stories would also convey an important life lesson, thrown in for extra impact.

One of my favorites was the story of a cousin I had never met (true), a girl my age living outside of Tel Aviv. This particular story conveyed more than one life lesson, including the importance of connecting with family, the importance of connecting with family members living in Israel in particular, and the importance of relating to Israel itself – as family.

These stories helped me grow to understand that Israel's land, history, people, and culture were parts of our extended global Jewish family. Our connection to Israel was inseparable from our Jewish American lives and was to be valued, nurtured, and cherished.

Ours was not a large family (at least not since after World War II), so any relatives living anywhere in the world were especially significant. My mom would tell me about our family's background and how some of our relatives had emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States, while

others had made their way to the young State of Israel. A cousin in Israel was not only a relative I had not yet met, but part of the emerging story of the Jewish state – a place I had dreamed of visiting as long as I could remember, a culture whose modern Hebrew language I was learning and whose music was sung to me as lullabies. I was hoping to make the dream a reality as soon as the opportunity and resources arose.

Through my mother's portrayal of the young country whose birth she remembered, I felt especially connected to my far-away cousin, whom I considered my Israeli counterpart. We were, after all, the same age. We were both named after the same common ancestor, our great-grandmother whose name was Leah. My middle name was Lea (without the final "h" to be "modern") and my cousin was named "Liora." I had no idea what Liora looked like, but in my mind's eye, she had the same dark hair and dark eyes as I did and we could be mistaken for sisters. I imagined, however, that unlike me she had an added glow from the Mediterranean sun, growing up in the pioneering spirit of building and cultivating the Land, the country, and its emerging culture.

Fast-forward to the summer before I started college when I was fortunate to embark on my first trip to Israel with a small group called "The Chicago Community Project." Besides making a fast-paced tour of ancient and modern destinations across the country, we would also visit social service agencies in Israel to compare how our two countries responded to those in

need. By agreeing to volunteer back in Chicago on a variety of Jewish social service initiatives, I was lucky to receive significant subsidies to defray the cost of the trip.

Equal to my eagerness to see Jerusalem's Old City, explore the ancient ruins of Masada, and hike in the hills of the Galilee, was my anticipation of seizing the opportunity finally to meet my cousin, Liora. Upon arriving in Israel, I contacted her family to see if we might get together on my free weekend. This was no small feat in a world before cell phones, so I was excited to succeed at using the now defunct "asimonim" – the small metal tokens that were used at that time in Israeli payphones. I managed to find the right bus to take me to their home in Bat Yam, a small community outside of Tel Aviv.

When I entered the modest yet charming home, I was warmly welcomed with open arms, something cold to drink, and too much food. I was excited to meet my grandmother's siblings for the first time, recognizing the familial similarities through their faces and Hungarian accents – the Hebrew counterpart to my grandparents' combination of Hungarian and Brooklyn English. But where was my cousin, Liora? After what seemed like an eternity, she finally descended the stairs from the second floor wearing her army uniform. She gestured in my direction with a dismissive wave (if that), and immediately left the house to join her friends for the remainder of the day before returning to army duty. That was it, my only exposure to my idealized Israeli cousin (to this day), lasting all of twenty-two seconds.

Although the reality of gaining a new best friend in my "twin" cousin fell devastatingly short of my aspirations, the

reality of experiencing Israel for six weeks that summer started a love affair that has only grown stronger with time. I returned two years later to spend nearly a year studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Most of my classes were in Hebrew and I was fortunate to study with some of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the time including Rabbi David Hartmann and Professor Nechama Leibowitz, both of blessed memory.

During this pivotal year, I continued to be amazed and thrilled at how much the various facets of Jewish life were infused into day-to-day Israeli culture. I never grew complacent seeing Hebrew on street signs and storefronts and hearing "Shabbat Shalom" from everyone you would meet on Fridays in the open-air markets and on the streets, Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and secular. Jewish holidays were celebrated by the entire country, as much in secular settings as in religious communities. On the festival of Sukkot, the colorful *sukkot* would be visible on balconies up and down the buildings on the streets of Jerusalem. On the darkest days of the year during Chanukah, those same streets would literally light up as homes, schools, and businesses would all be displaying countless eight-branched *chanukiyot* from their windows and even on the street outside their front doors. On Pesach, the potato rolls brought to the table in kosher-for-Passover restaurants would be even more delicious than the leavened variety.

All year round, I enjoyed the availability of good kosher cuisine while marveling at how many restaurants in Tel Aviv, in particular, went out of their way to be open on Shabbat and offer non-kosher delicacies. I was inspired by the openness and diversity of Israeli society, as seen through the huge variety of people,

language, religion, music, and culture from around the world. I saw the motorcade moving through the Jerusalem streets during the historic visit of President Anwar Sadat from Egypt, and felt the promise of peace it represented. On a person-to-person level, the peaceful coexistence of those from different backgrounds and religions was evident more often than not. It was special but not unusual when I visited an Israeli Arab village in the Galilee, home to a pair of sisters from my dorm. It felt natural and wonderful to be welcomed into their family's home through the hospitality of hot tea with mint leaves and homemade sweets.

Fast-forward yet again, and after many visits to family and friends in Israel over the years, including trips to celebrate our sons' B'nai Mitzvah, my husband, Chuck and I made the impulsive decision to purchase a small condo in Jerusalem itself. This changed our already close relationship to Israel by converting it from a wonderful place to visit, to a second home. Other friends from Chicago were part of the trend as they also moved to apartments on the same floor. It was comical and exhilarating to encounter typical Israeli bureaucracy as we built and furnished our new apartments together from afar, and then enjoyed visiting them on overlapping vacations whenever we could.

From our balcony in the Western part of the city, you can see the expanse of the new city of Jerusalem, including the tennis courts of the Israel Tennis Center, and Teddy Stadium where raucous soccer games are played. We can see the Knesset across the valley, and

the gleaming white building nearby, the Shrine of the Book, where the original Dead Sea Scrolls are kept. In contrast to the dry heat of summer days in Jerusalem, the evening breezes on our balcony always feel refreshing, made sweeter with a glass of wine in hand.

Over the last ten years or so, we have managed to get to our condo once or twice a year, noting each time how much it feels like home in spite of the lapses between the visits. That feeling of homecoming is boosted by the increasing numbers of family and friends who live in Israel, evidenced by the many family weddings we have attended over the last few years, including the wedding of our own son in the Jerusalem hills. Over this same period of time, we have also experienced the anguish of periods of war, increased tensions between Jerusalem neighborhoods that had once lived in harmony, and rocket attacks from Gaza that required the short but agonizing use of the protected "sealed room" in our apartment.

As I look back at my relationship with Israel and think about the future, I am often aware of how my original idealistic aspirations can be now seen through a more mature and realistic lens. I some-

times encounter situations where those aspirations are out of sync with the painful realities of this unique country struggling with issues of freedom of religious ex-pression, threats of violence and unrest, challenges to

respecting the human dignity of its peoples, and other expressions of the democracy its citizens so



Cantor Rachel with Chuck at the Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

dearly want to maintain. On a personal level, I have struggled to find opportunities to express my own Judaism through ritual and music in ways that feel authentic and natural.

At the same time, I continue to be proud of Israel's achievements and contributions to the world and how it continues to express and refine its uniquely Jewish character against the backdrop of more than 3000 years of amazing history. I feel privileged to live in a time where I can not only visit the modern version of the Jewish homeland, but have a home there as well.

And as with family, the encounters can sometimes be painful and challenging. But also as with family, the love, devotion and countless gifts are felt each and every day.

Rachel Rosenberg has served as Cantor at Rodfei Zedek since 2011, the same year she was invested as Hazzan through the Cantors Assembly after completing its four-year internship program. Previously she had studied psychology and music at the University of Illinois, pursued Jewish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and earned her Masters of Management degree at Northwestern University. Rachel worked as a Professional Development Manager at IBM and then as Ritual Director for Congregation B'nai Tikvah in Deerfield. Rachel has served on the Cantors Assembly Executive Council and Education Committee and is past president of the Chicago Milwaukee Association of Synagogue Musicians. With her husband Chuck she is a founding member of the ensemble, Shakshuka, which features Israeli and Sephardic music "spiced with jazz." Look for Shakshuka at the upcoming outdoor Greater Chicago Jewish Festival on Sunday, June 10, 2018.

The Listening Wall, a poem

by Shelley Kaplan with art by Robert Hutchison

The Listening Wall

*The listening wall is caulked with prayers
of a quiet, private hope
and greening growths of dusty bushes
not ready to burst into flame.*

*Some petitioners come on foot.
Others send a willing neighborly hand
on their errand of mercy.*

*The heart of this mission is
a wall of antiquity
embedded in the soul of a nation
whose conversation
is directed inward.*

*Others may hear a sigh, a wail.
But to them,
they hear a breath,
an uplifting of stones, one by one,
a reconstruction,
upon its foundation
at the listening wall.*

May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

AMEN

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Shelley Kaplan has had a strikingly varied career since her studies at the University of Chicago. She taught Hebrew School at Rodfei Zedek, substituted as a math teacher, performed as a clown, served as a Chicago police officer, and earned a law degree. For the Congregation she has a long history of participating in Torah and haftarah chanting, cooking

for Shabbat luncheons, and creating and writing poems for Sisterhood events. She has written poems and books for children, including *Chameleon* (1992), and *Songs for Scratching Mosquito Bites and Petting the Cat* (1998), illustrated by her husband, Robert Hutchison.

Robert graduated from Oberlin College and works as an artist. He has taught art at Robert Morris University and exhibited there and around Chicago. He created a painting on commission for display at The Medici restaurant. He has been generous in contributing his talents to the Congregation. When the building was under construction he created a beautifully painted portable ark. For many years the Havdalah Hoedown was decorated by the fanciful animals he designed and he joined a Hoedown band playing banjo and guitar



Growing Up as an Israeli American by Yael Hoffman



The subject of Israel is so complex today that many synagogues, such as ours, largely avoid it. This contrasts sharply with the days of my early childhood

in the 1970's, when Israel controlled not only the West Bank and Gaza but also the Sinai Peninsula, but the settlements were not yet built, the Sabra and Shatila camps were unknown to us, and the word intifada had yet to make headlines. The Holocaust ended 26 years before my birth in Israel, Jewish existence still felt precarious, and the Zionist project still felt righteous. Two years after my birth, Israel was very nearly lost in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

My maternal grandparents, members of youth Zionist organizations in Poland, were part of Aliyah Bet and came to British Palestine in the early 1920s, leaving behind wealth and many creature comforts for a harsh life. My grandfather, a yeshiva boy and heir to brewery wealth, was one of 12 siblings; he saw no future for Jews in Europe even then and traveled alone to Palestine where he traded books for asphalt and paved some of the first roads in Petach Tikva. One of his brothers joined him, but the primitive life was too much for him to bear, so he returned to Poland and perished with rest of my great aunts, great uncles, their children, and my great grandparents. My grandfather in Palestine, for whom my son Ezra is named, was the sole survivor of his enormous family. My grandmother came to Palestine and worked in the orange groves. Her mother and sister managed to join her while it was still possible; her

brother survived the Holocaust working underground forging passports, while her sister-in-law was captured and gave birth to my cousin in Theresienstadt in the final days of the war. They were reunited some months after the war and all later made aliya, and that small family remains in Israel. Israel saved the remnants of my family; without it, I would not be here.

My mother, for whom my son Avi is named, was born in British Palestine in 1929. The War of Independence was vivid for her; she would show me her kindergarten class picture, naming each of the boys, every last one of whom had died fighting. Hostilities with Arabs were no abstraction for her; it was very much an “us or them” reality, with immigration quotas for Jews firmly in place everywhere, including in the US and British Palestine. Jewish survival literally hinged on Israel winning independence, hinged on the Law of Return. My mother served in the Israel Defense Forces in 1949, a year after independence was won, and not long after the Exodus ship debacle. Her job was to teach Hebrew to Holocaust refugees in the armed forces. It was a country of hardscrabble, traumatized survivors, with no emotional bandwidth to empathize with the Arabs they conquered. The new Israelis had faced death several times over in the 1940s. They saw an enormous Arab world that could absorb the displaced Arabs, whereas they had no place else to go. That was my mother's perspective until the day she died, and of course, that perspective is shared by many today.

I learned to be a human rights advocate from my parents. My father was a

Reform rabbi who raised funds in the US for the fledgling Jewish state, who marched and protested in the Civil Rights Movement, and who was arrested while protesting against Soviet oppression of Jews. My mother participated in charitable organizations, and both of my parents donated what they could to organizations promoting human rights. But their world was Jewish and insular, and while they could extend concern for non-Jews, that excluded Arabs. Disdain for and prejudice against Arabs was passed down to me along with many lessons on the importance of human rights, and that did not seem contradictory to us, since “Arabs threatened Jewish existence,” and we had to choose our own survival first and foremost. I know I share this experience with many of you who are reading this.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, seeing non-Jewish friends sympathize with Arab students demonstrating against Israel as the first intifada raged was shocking. I took an interest in the campus chapter of AIPAC and sought solace in my tribe. It was difficult for me to justify soldiers shooting at children who were throwing rocks, but I nonetheless tried to explain it to non-Jewish friends. The ensuing peace process was a huge relief to me; I no longer had to defend Israeli actions that looked indefensible (although surely they were not!).

But in graduate school at the University of Michigan for social work and public health, the second intifada was in full swing and the peace process in tatters. And while the Palestinians played their role in that failure, Israel continued appropriating land and building settlements. As a social work and public health student, I was now training — alongside Palestinian

students in my classes — to be a human rights professional with a full commitment to uplifting the oppressed and advocating for the disadvantaged. But for the first time, I wasn’t just reading *about* Palestinians in the Jewish press. I was hearing *from* actual Palestinians about the inhumanity of life in overcrowded refugee camps meant for temporary use and now inhabited by generations for 60 years. I was hearing about how Israeli land confiscation affected the families of my classmates, and about power, water and food shortages mere kilometers away from settlements that had plenty. I was hearing about nighttime home incursions, humiliation of elders, brutality against children, rampant unemployment... I was asked to contribute to medical relief in the West Bank after a particularly brutal

military incursion during the second intifada, which was detailed by the student organizing the fundraising whose family was affected in

Ramallah. I watched a film in which a Palestinian family showed the filmmaker the original key to the family home in Jerusalem, now inhabited for decades by Jews, which they are not even allowed to visit.

Firsthand, I heard Palestinian fury over Israeli laws that welcome Jews from all over the world whose only ties to Israel are conceptual, but prohibit entry to displaced Palestinians with *material* ties to the country, and keep families separated. I heard much of the same from Jewish American friends who made aliya and worked as journalists in Israel alongside Palestinian colleagues, for whom they felt deep affection and sympathy. These friends regularly worked in the West Bank, covering the conflict and witnessing injustices perpetrated by Israel firsthand. They did not trivialize the challenges of dealing with entities sworn to Israel’s destruction,

**Our love of Israel
isn’t blinding**

...

such as Hamas, yet they also personally knew many well-educated and moderate Palestinians, and they spoke of how Hamas attracted more adherents as living conditions grew more desperate, people were increasingly humiliated by the IDF, and Palestinian casualties rose with the use of excessive force. And in the media, Israelis began speaking out about the trauma they experienced secondary to the violence they committed against Palestinians during their army service. Increasing numbers of Israelis began conscientiously objecting to service and demonstrating against the occupation. The name Israeli Defense Forces, once so befitting of the righteous Jewish nation that had faced down so many would-be destroyers, seemed less fitting now; defense no longer characterized all of the military activity in the territories.

The subject of Israel is so complex for many of us because we love Israel deeply, want to ensure her sustainability, and want to stand proudly by her. We also know that anti-Semitism is alive and resurging across the globe, including here in the US. I myself am Israeli and feel viscerally connected to Israel. I obtained dual citizenship for each of my children, work hard to maintain their knowledge of Hebrew, and we visit as often as possible. My children may one day serve in the IDF, and I care deeply that they should love Israel as I do. Many of my American friends have made aliya, aligning the fates of their families with that of Israel.

Our love of Israel isn't blinding, however. For me, it no longer makes sense to protest against oppression in every corner of the globe except Palestine and Israel. Like most of my Jewish friends and family, I protest vociferously against human rights abuses in this country and else-

where. Why, then, should criticism of Israel be blasphemous?

While anti-Semitism persists, Jewish survival is not precarious at this moment in history. It's clear that Egypt will not absorb Gaza, and Jordan will not accept millions of Palestinian refugees; Israel's fate is intertwined with that of Palestine. Indeed, what does feel precarious in modern Israel, given the occupation, the orthodox hegemony and now the African migrant crisis, is her moral integrity, her commitment to human rights, and her democracy. Criticism and protest may save Israel from drowning in the military might she exerts against a subjugated population denied its self-determination, the suppression of religious diversity, and the expulsion of non-Jewish migrants seeking asylum and seen as perceived threats to maintaining a Jewish majority — an extension of the Palestinian problem.

For those of us who love Israel, including my friends and relatives raising families there, criticism of unjust government policies is more important than ever. Criticism, the exertion of pressure to uphold human rights so that Israel can once again be a light among nations, seems to us to be the actual key to her survival.

Yael Hoffman is Project Manager of the REACT Program: Recovery and Empowerment After Community Trauma at the University of Chicago Medicine. She is a public health social worker, and also substitutes as a crisis worker at the Cook County Health System Stroger Hospital ER. Yael and her husband, Andrew Skol, joined Congregation Rodfei Zedek in 2007 and have three children, Yoni, Ezra, and Avi.

Making Aliyah: An Interview with Leah Basa

by Rhea Basa, her mother



Q: When and why did you first decide to go to Israel?

A: After high school, I went for a gap year to study engineering at the Technion.

Q: Why did you want to go to the Technion?

A: It sounded like fun to study in a different country and Israel was a logical choice because I was familiar with it from my visits. Also, I had grown up in a Jewish environment – my home life, Rodfei, Akiba, Camp Tavor.

Q: When did you first think of making aliyah?

A: After a couple of weeks at the Technion, once I got to know my classmates and roommates – most of them had already made aliyah. I'd never talked to anyone who had made aliyah before. I'd always kind of wanted to do it but didn't understand the mechanics of it. When I went to Camp Tavor in the summers, I was interested; but it didn't seem like something that was really possible. There were issues of timing and programming in the Habonim Dror movement that weren't working for me. But once I got to Israel I learned about other ways of doing it.

Q: What were the influences that led you in that direction?

A: Mostly it was summer camp. Visiting Israel was some influence, especially the trip with my family in 2015.



Shira, Leah, Eva, Rhea, and Andrew

Q: Please describe some reasons for making aliyah.

A: I like it here. I really like Israeli culture. I like how everyone talks to everyone and everyone looks out for each other – it's part of the culture. I like that it's a Jewish country. Though because it's easier to be Jewish some people [in Israel] become less observant.

Q: Is it unusual for a person your age to make this choice?

A: Definitely not. From my perspective a lot of people do it at this age. Young *olim* are a big part of Israeli culture.

Q: What have you done in Israel so far?

A: I went to college for a year. I played soccer on my college team, which included a National Tournament in Eilat. I hiked Yam l'Yam from the Mediterranean Sea to the Kinneret – it took four days!

I lived in an absorption center in Ranana. I went on a trip with the Israeli Scouts and Lone Soldiers from Garin Tzabar to the concentration camps in Poland. I lived and worked in a Moshav in Nachariya.

And I joined the Army.



Q: Why did you join the Army?

A: I wanted to feel Israeli, and being in the Army is part of the Israeli culture. It also improved my Hebrew!



Q: Do you have friends or family in Israel?

A: I have friends I made when I got to the Technion, friends from Garin Tzabar and friends in the Army. I've also run into friends from camp and Akiba-Schechter. Coincidentally, one of my close friends on the army base was a close friend of mine at Akiba-Schechter! As for family, I do have some distant cousins but haven't had much contact with them.

Leah on the army base with Akiba-Schechter friends Talia Yahav and Davida Gordon

Q: How are you getting along when it comes to speaking Hebrew?

A: Pretty good. It got better when I worked in a *gan* at my moshav because the children did not speak English.

Q: How do you view your connection to the US as you make Aliyah?

A: I'm only really connected to my immediate family in America. Most of my friends are in Israel. It's hard to keep up with my American friends because of the time change and my limited free time while in the Army.

Q: Do you participate in "religious" life in Israel, and, if so, how does it compare with what you experienced at Rodfei Zedek?

A: When I was at the Technion, my roommates were Orthodox and so I went along with that. On the Army base, I'm not as observant. On my moshav, my host

family is secular but we always have Shabbat dinner. Shabbat has a similar vibe to Shabbat at Rodfei.

Rhea Basa has been a member of Congregation Rodfei Zedek since 1986. She led the Family Minyan for many years and also served on the Board at CRZ. She is a teacher at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School, heading the Music Program as well as directing the Mathematics Curriculum at the Elementary and Middle School levels.

A graduate from the University of Michigan, Northwestern University and DePaul University, Rhea lives in Hyde Park with her husband Andrew and 33% of their three daughters!

Leah's Vocabulary

Olim (עֲלִיָּם) are people immigrating to Israel, or making aliyah (עֲלִיָּה). Both terms are related to the word for "ascend," the same word used when one is called to the Torah.

Camp Tavor is a Jewish overnight camp located in Three Rivers, Michigan. The camp is affiliated with Habonim Dror, a Labor-Zionist youth movement which promotes the ideals of communal living and sharing, in a kibbutz-like environment.

The Yam I'Yam (Sea to Sea) hike is one of the most popular hiking trails in Israel.

Garin Tzabar is a program that provides services to Jews aged 18-24 who make aliyah and serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as Lone Soldiers. Participants are adopted by an Israeli community that becomes their home away from home before and throughout their military service.

Gan (גן), the Hebrew for "garden," is the Israeli term for kindergarten.

A moshav (מוֹשָׁב) is a cooperative agricultural community of individual farms, pioneered by the Labour Zionists during the second wave of aliyah.

A Family's Bumpy Road

by Irene Glasner

It has never been easy to be a Jew in the Diaspora. Back when I was a child, it was also confusing: why didn't we – my two brothers and I – have a tree? How come all my friends had presents when it was not their birthdays? And who was this bearded guy who supposedly brought them? On a sleigh – when for us it was summer?

Little by little, we learned the answers. Sometimes on our own (through the school grapevine), sometimes they were explained to us. The result was that we experienced that mixture of attraction to the forbidden and fear of angering the grownups, that children often experience. We were born in a Catholic country, Argentina, simultaneously the sanctuary of Adolf Eichmann

and of the Jews he victimized. An equal opportunity immigration policy. A country that recently had its profile raised in our city by yet another lucky citizen, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's music director Daniel Barenboim. At the time of my story, in the early 60s, there were many Jews in Buenos Aires, the capital, maybe up to a quarter of a million. We were growing up in that country, but we were not supposed to be going to church. (Among others, we Jews were guilty of being Christ-killers then). We had learned the words of the Pater Noster from our Catholic nanny, but



Irene (sitting second from the left) and her class in Ramat Gan

she made us promise not to tell. This was in the forbidden column. Clear. Our family was then a member of Beit Tikvah, where we saw our extended family only for weddings and funerals. Confusion. Our parents allowed us to celebrate "Kings' Day," the Russian orthodox day celebrating the Three Kings bringing presents to the manger. (Also known as the 'Epiphany'). We would leave our shoes at night outside the door, and they were filled with presents the next morning. More confusion.

But all that was going to change. Unwillingly, mind you. Our "aliya" was the result of some grownups' shenanigans, around which our young minds could not wrap. These political

upheavals would eventually

define our lack of Jewish observance for a long time. We didn't know it then, but we were growing up as secular Jews. In any event, we had the Law of Return on our side, and, secular or not, our parents had a ketuba, so although temporarily foreign, we would eventually "belong," the aspiration of all children.

Israel was young and poor at the beginning of the 60s. Unlike our orderly and disciplined observance days at the

synagogue in Argentina, religious services were noisy and chaotic in Tel Aviv. Children were running around in the aisles, seemingly without any adult supervision. Could the freedom of Israeli children compensate for the horrors their parents went through during World War II? This was but one aspect of our adaptation. We also had the language to contend with – my uncle sent us a Hebrew-Spanish bible which my brother and I dutifully lugged on the bus to our teacher’s home. The principal, of our school in Rehov Talpiot, Mr. Wallenstein, had volunteered to teach us. The learning was arduous and slow, but not as slow as the one that our parents went through in the Ulpan. Later, it became clear that we children had “ulpan duty” as well as our own homework. My parents were not adapting to what was then an even less developed country than the one they had emigrated to from the European chaos. The Hebrew language, this marvelous testament to Jewish life and survival, would forever remain a mystery to them.

We children, the older of my two brothers and I, were attending school. Well, to be accurate, we were thrown into a class of kids that were our age. Another penance since we couldn’t make heads or tails of what was being said. But we also had pleasant things; Purim was one of them. It did not matter that we did not know the story of queen Esther, this was like Carnival, right? We knew about that. Beit Sefer HaGefen was well represented and our Hebrew was good enough by then to comment on all the children’s costumes.

Sadly, “yaradnu” - the contrary of “alinu”. Just when we were getting used to the noisy synagogues and the absolute could-hear-a-pin-drop silence of the whole country standing still in remembrance of

Yom HaShoa. Just when we understood that no gifts made in Germany would be accepted. Just when this inscrutable language was lifting its veil. “Yaradnu”. *In 1966*. Important distinction that we understood when we came back to visit. No, we did not avoid the war. We left long before it.

Paris was our next – soon to be temporary – stop. With a shaky legal status. So shaky, in fact, that it would not be possible for my brother to have a Bar Mitzvah. Those were dark times. Less for us, children, than for our parents who bore all the responsibilities on their shoulders. Our previous stint in Israel hadn’t made our European travel easier: there remained enough fear, among Jewish travelers, a few years after the Holocaust, not to want to stand out. And Israeli authorities had scribbled in red ink all over our documents, so they conveniently disappeared. The events of May 1968 in Paris were a life altering experience for the 16-year-old that I was, but there were no Jewish experiences. Yet maybe this was one, indeed, in an old-world sort of way: staying in the shadows, avoiding being carted away in one the infamous police vans.

The breathing was easier in our next stop: Brussels. Moving around was also becoming easier, although leaving friends behind became harder the older we grew. Belgium was then starting to face the consequences of colonialism, so we had to struggle to understand these different realities.

The clouds lifted in our next stop: the French speaking part of Switzerland. We were proud members of the only synagogue in that city, and we had a Hungarian rabbi there (to whom my Dad

could relate to, being Hungarian himself). Our rabbi always performed very fast during his services. Being able to follow – no page numbers were announced – was made easier by our previous study of the Hebrew language but it was still a challenge. He was stern in his sermons – in my view at least. He said we – the whole congregation – were “three-day-Jews.” Well, how could it be otherwise, for us, secular Jews? I always resented this guilty feeling he instilled in me. Especially when he insisted on all the children getting out of the sanctuary during Yizkor. It felt like being kicked out, “you don’t belong here.” My younger brother managed to celebrate his bar mitzvah under our stern rabbi, testament to my family’s enduring sense of belonging to a nation without borders. We also had a communal Seder there; but my Dad was so hungry (or impatient) that he would start eating matzah before we were supposed to. He was no leader in Jewish observances.

The sun finally shone when I decided to leave the old continent behind. Still in the Diaspora, a benevolent one, but it will not bring back the feeling of “belonging” when our family is so far away from the land of milk and honey.

Irene Glasner came to America to marry her American-born love. She has lived in the same country, the same city, and the same apartment since 1983. In 2000 she became a U.S. citizen, and she chose to reconnect to her roots by joining Rodfei Zedek. After retiring from working at the Chicago Board of Trade she now leads a much calmer life. She has been widowed since 2012.

A The National Institute for Psychobiology in Israel: A 46 Year American-Israeli Collaboration to Support Research into Nervous and Mental Disorders by Ronen H. Segman and Elliot Gershon



Elliot Gershon and his wife Debby have been members of Rodfei Zedek for 19 years, taking part in study groups and classes. Elliot has served on the Board and been active in leading services, and Debby is a member of the Sisterhood.

They have a long and close connection to Israel. They lived in Israel from 1971 to 1974, their younger son Ethan was born at Hadassah Hospital during that time, and their older son Ari and his family live there now. They visit often.

Starting in 1970, Elliot began to forge a professional relationship with Israel. In that year Elliot was in his final year of Postdoctoral Fellowship in Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. Joel Elkes, of Johns Hopkins University, heard that he was interested in moving to Israel the next year, to set up a research facility in clinical and translational studies of mental disorders. Joel made the 40 mile trip to tell him about the National Institute for Psychology in Israel (NIPI), then in formation, and to encourage him to get involved with it. The next year after Elliot had arrived in Israel and become Director of Research at what is now the Herzog Hospital in Jerusalem, he applied to NIPI for funding. His first meeting with the NIPI Scientific Board, in 1971, was a disaster – he made some very

funny mistakes in his Hebrew presentation, but a year later he was among the first Young Investigators funded by NIPI, and shortly after became a member of the Scientific Advisory Board.

The Department of Research in Jerusalem that he had set up between 1971 and 1974 was a first of its kind in Israel, and it had a favorable effect on development of translational neuroscience research in mental illnesses in Israel for some years after he left. Debby, Elliot, and their children returned to the US in 1974, and Elliot became an independent researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health research facility in Bethesda. Elliot kept in touch with researchers in Israel, and got to know others who came to the US for Fellowship training. He had gotten to know Charlie Smith, and his family, from their visits to Israel with Joel to see how NIPI was developing, and to continue their very generous philanthropic support. Joel remained Chairman of The Board of Trustees of NIPI for many years, and Elliot was very pleased to be named his successor as Chairman in 2003, by the Board and by the Smith family. Joel continued to be intellectually active for many years afterward, and had another career as an artist of watercolors, with considerable success. He died at 102 years of age, in 2015. David Smith, grandson of Charlie, serves as President of NIPI and continues the family tradition of supporting it.

In 2017, Ronen Segman, Director of NIPI, and Elliot as Chairman wrote an article describing the history and work of NIPI for public release, which is reproduced here.



Co-author, Ronen Segman, is a Sabra, born in Petach Tikva and raised in Haifa. Ronen has come up through the ranks of NIPI. He was first awarded a Young Investigator grant from NIPI in 1996, while he was a Psychiatry resident at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. His grant funded a very successful research project on the genetics of Tardive Dyskinesia, and Elliot came to know him through his work. Ronen was mentored by Beni Lerer, who headed (and still heads) the Biological Psychiatry laboratories at Hadassah, and who served for about a decade as Director of NIPI. Ronen served as a grant reviewer for NIPI during those years, and got to know the organization through Beni. In 2012 the then-Director of NIPI, Shaul Hochstein, retired from the position, and Ronen became Director. Apart from his other responsibilities, he chairs the Scientific Advisory Committee very ably, and is responsible for organizing and managing the competitive review process for all grant applications.

The editors of To Learn and To Teach are delighted that Elliot and Ronen have agreed to share their work with our Congregation.

The National Institute for Psychobiology in Israel (NIPI)

was founded on the pioneering leadership of the late Charles E. Smith, a philanthropist in Washington, DC, and Professor Joel Elkes, who was Chairman of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. They clearly saw the necessity for a broad integrative clinical – basic approach for tackling brain disorders, the most complex of all medical disorders. Based on this vision set forth in 1971, NIPI became the only national nongovernmental philanthropic activity in Israel whose major goal is to support clinical and translational research in the neurosciences. Its goals are to increase our understanding of basic mechanisms underlying brain disorders and the discovery of novel disease modifying treatments. Collaborative research and dialogue between basic and clinical scientists is fostered through the establishment of dedicated calls for collaborative clinical – basic research grants, and NIPI's annual symposia inviting international and local brain scientists and clinicians to present novel approaches.

Maintaining the highest standard of research has been and remains NIPI's main criterion for funding. The rigorous and competitive process of identifying the most promising ideas to fund each year is led by NIPI's prestigious Scientific Advisory Committee, composed of top researchers from clinical and basic research settings throughout Israel. The committee evaluates grant applications, and submits them for external peer review to leading experts in the relevant field in Israel and abroad.

AFNIPI's and NIPI's volunteer team of Board and Scientific Advisory Committee members, who are all senior research

faculty at major Israeli institutions, ensures the impartial distribution of grants to all universities and research institutions in Israel based on scientific merit and potential contribution to the understanding and treatment of brain disorders. For over four decades NIPi has been the only Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that has funded brain research in every major university, hospital and research institute in the country, leading to vital scientific discoveries. This has led to multiple discoveries pertinent to causes, prevention and treatment of brain disorders. NIPi has helped reshape the neuro-psychobiology community in Israel by deepening the translational commitment of basic neuroscientists, and collaborative clinical – basic brain disorder research over the years.

Since its founding NIPi has had a major impact on the quality and volume of neuroscience in Israel. It has awarded over 600 grants since its first grants in 1971. What began as a fledgling discipline with 56 scientists in Israel is now a dynamic and vibrant scientific community of over 1,000 expert researchers and clinicians, with a wealth of basic and clinical scientific findings. Basic neuroscience in Israel is at the forefront of prestigious scientific and international research highly regarded worldwide, as evidenced by its representation in leading journals in the field. Israel's small size enables inter-institutional collaboration and productive research synergies and Israel's start-up culture allows new ideas and research to flourish in an unparalleled way. NIPi is also proud that it is addressing Israel's brain drain by making successful careers in high-end research in Israel possible and desirable and by establishing Israel as a center of excellence in psychobiology.

Collaborative Initiatives between Clinicians & Basic Neuroscientists.

Among NIPi's central goals has been an effort to eliminate the 'disconnect' between clinicians and basic researchers by breaking down barriers, increasing dialogue and promoting collaboration between clinicians and basic neuroscientists around major themes representing unmet needs. To help achieve this goal, we initiated a new class of grants that requires collaboration between two senior investigators, one clinical and the other basic, that has sparked great interest in the Israeli scientific community.

Research into Alzheimer's and Other Neurodegenerative Diseases

Israel is making a name for itself in research into neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's. A most important finding of one of our Young Investigator grantees, Ina Slutsky who is now Professor at Tel Aviv University, was that amyloid-beta peptide, which was thought to be only harmful to nerve cells and a cause of Alzheimer's, actually had important physiologic roles. Her paper published in Nature Neuroscience in 2009 proved that neuronal cells in a part of the brain involved in Alzheimer's, hippocampus, actually depended on this peptide for regulation of their signaling activity. This finding anticipated the unfortunate results of clinical trials in Alzheimer's patients of antibodies to this peptide, which were disastrous.

An article appeared in Ha'aretz newspaper in the spring of 2016 about a NIPi Young Investigator award recipient in 2009 - 2011. Prof. Daniel Offen, a neuro-

scientist at Tel Aviv University Medical School working together with Prof. Bilha Fischer, a chemistry professor at Bar Ilan University, have been developing a new drug to fight Alzheimer's disease. They were now able to obtain the complete disappearance of dementia symptoms in mice. The mice demonstrated similar cognitive capabilities to healthy ones after taking the drug. Although it is early days, the scientists say that their "preliminary findings present a worthy candidate for a future treatment for a disease that is incurable today." Prof. Offen's NIPI grant also funded his research into a treatment for reducing the symptoms and progression of Huntington's disease. NIPI is proud to have supported Prof. Offen's laboratory and career.

American Friends of the National Institute for Psychobiology in Israel

AFNIPI is a public charitable foundation, recognized as a 501 (c) (3) charity by the US Internal Revenue Service, which provides financial support, grant opportunities, and fellowships to scientists, laboratories, and research centers in the field of psychobiology in Israel. We bring together physicians who devote their lives to the diagnosis and treatment of patients suffering from brain disorders and basic researchers in medical sciences, including neuroscience and genetics. AFNIPI supports the ongoing research and activities of NIPI, and similar Israeli research.

Ronen H. Segman, MD, is Director of the National Institute for Psycho-biology in Israel and Professor of Psychiatry at Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Elliot S. Gershon, MD is Chairman of the National Institute for Psychobiology in Israel, President of American Friends of the National Institute for Psychobiology in Israel, and Professor of Psychiatry and Human Genetics at the University of Chicago.

Impurities and Sacrifices, Israelites and Israel

by Rabbi David Minkus *adapted from a devar Torah on Tazria-Metzora, originally presented on April 29, 2017*



Since the Hyde Park Yom HaShoah program, Israel has been on my mind. As I sat down to think about what to write about this portion, it was Israel that was filling the pages of my notes. Despite the political and internal difficulty it presents, it may be easier to speak about Israel than to parse the meaning of white and yellow hairs on skin and its ritual implications (the double portion of Tazria-Metzora deals with physical issues, bodily fluids, and ailments stemming from ritual impurity). Or maybe I have simply convinced myself of that. But before I return to Israel, I want to offer a brief thought on where I am now after a week of studying this difficult and distant double portion.

Part of me feels that we should become a little more comfortable letting the text be. We should gain a comfort with the inherently uncomfortable; perhaps squirming from unease should not be divorced from other forms of biblical study and the experience they yield. We need to learn to undo our instinct to write off, discard or rewrite a text or passages in the Torah that offend us or no longer make sense to us; that was the prevailing mode of Torah study for much of Jewish history. As progressive, modern Jews who look to scholarship and are critical consumers of bible, we have broken it down—and in many or most places for the right reasons. In

many places the text does not make sense to us; it also offends our moral outlook on the world, betraying our vision of what is right and wrong. Amending the way we see the text here is a good thing. While it has led to the Torah having less authority and sway in the lives of Jews, those who have engaged with it engage on a deeper level—no longer being mere passive readers or being beholden to its literal meaning. But it is ok to say that the text is hard, not as relevant or resonant, while sanctifying just that, making holy the recognition that it may not move us today, it may leave us feeling empty or angry, but this is a part of the process of maintaining its centrality and furthering the tradition. We need to resist the urge of introducing drashshot/sermons or ideas solely to make it work for us today—much of the Torah does, these portions may not, at least this Shabbat—but that does not mean we neglect it and, God forbid, skip over it.

Perhaps you can see the Israel sermon coming... But, specifically what has made me think of Israel in the parasha was that much of the afflictions were based upon speech and moral failures. Speech on Israel consumes so much of our energy, so much of our time—yet that energy leads not to building up but to breaking down. And we as a community have spent far less time on recourse, on how to bring each other back from such negative, and often, mean-spirited talk (not discussion or dialogue). We break each other down because of where we stand on Israel, leaving each individual isolated with no place to go other than deeper into that originally held position. Keep in mind the

isolation felt by the person who has contracted tumah/impurity in our portion. He/she was placed outside of the camp, but the Priest would come and routinely check on him/her and bring that person back into the community himself!

My teacher Rabbi Danny Nevins wrote a great dvar Torah about where Jews were 70 years ago today, not next year when Israel will celebrate its 70th birthday. In 1947 the Jewish people were at an all-time low because the horrors of the Shoah were now fully known, at least to Jews. Survivors of this incomprehensible trauma were being repatriated by the very people who had turned them over to the Nazis (or were at least complicit). Immigration to British Mandate Palestine had always been difficult, and now its policies were constricting. And even if you safely immigrated to the US or Australia or even Palestine, the shame of being a Jew as well as the guilt of surviving must have been too much to bear. It must have felt not only dire but also that being a Jew was hopeless, that this was the cataclysmic low-point to Jewish history, a history littered with low points.

But then the UN partition plan was signed and a year later, after the War of Independence, Israel was real, a reality. How easily that sense of hopelessness can be forgotten, which I think is a good thing. Yet, how quickly have we become habituated to Israel existing? This is not a good thing, as we have quickly neglected several thousand years of an ever-present vulnerability for a few decades of strength. I bristle with discomfort when Hatikvah is sung at Yom HaShoah programs. These two days and realities need to be separated for the dignity of both – for the dignity of the people they memorialize and the people they celebrate. I understand

the instinct, which is right, but they are different and distinct days; conflating them is a mistake. We need to hold onto to both, while honoring them independently. Previous generations have gotten the education of both Yom Ha'Atzmaut and Yom HaShoah wrong. There has been too much blind joy and too much loss: the joy keeping us from seeing beyond our particular joy while the Shoah has been transformed into communal guilt, and guilt that has often been translated into an educational policy. And, perhaps worse, that loss – on all sides – has been given short shrift because now we can rejoice in our Zionist reality.

For me, and I think for the Jewish community too, Israel needs to begin with Joy. We have the land of Israel, not a longing or a hopeful prayer but a place that we are only a few clicks away from, which must never be overlooked. But now that we have it, and our concern is, understandably, protecting its borders, we can never neglect the necessity to protect its soul. That means having difficult conversations and protecting the "Nahshon ben Aminadovs" (people like the Hebrew who, as the Egyptians were closing in, went into the water first and initiated the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea) of the Jewish community – those brave enough to begin those very conversations, those strong enough to speak for but also to the Jewish community.

Israel's being a reality means the luxury of choosing a book for One Book, One Rodfei that is an Israeli book by an Israeli Arab. That means not being threatened by the truths and realities of that book or by the author. Only a people in power, a people in control have that luxury. We should relish that responsibility, not cower in fear of it; nor can we deny that

it is a luxury. And while I resist, fervently, the urge to conflate the birth of Israel with the Shoah, historically accurate or not, the truth that it taught us must never escape us and are bound in the same book of memory.

Theodore Herzl did not dream up the idea of Zionism out of nowhere, nor did it come about because of what he saw or realized with the Dreyfus Affair. But he knew of the threat of anti-Semitism, and he knew that the Jews needed a state because of it. The Zionist thinkers that followed him put together a far more compelling reason and vision for Zionism, one that allows for Judaism and Jewry to be not only sustained but also furthered.

Israel represents many things: the rebirth of Hebrew, a Jewish food culture, entirely Jewish cities – not ghettos but metropolises. And Israel also represents the acknowledgement that we are here and Israel is there to ensure that. Yet we cannot forget how quickly things can be taken away – wealth, dignity and, ultimately, life.

For those who do not feel the pull of Zionism, challenge yourself to acknowledge its essential nature in the life of Jews and Judaism – we need to see the timeline of Jewish history before and after emancipation, as well as before and after the Holocaust. Challenge yourself to think of the security and self-confidence we have as a Jewish community and as Jews simply because Israel exists; being a Jew since Israel was born is unequivocally different from before. For those of us who have Israel coursing through our veins, remember it is our national representation of what Jews have been called on to do, to be the living embodiment of mitzvot – and we must use our voices to demonstrate

when it fails. We must have the courage to say it has contracted tumah/impurity, but we must also be willing to be the priest and bring it back into the community. We must be strong enough to acknowledge its need to be purified, while overcoming the fear of standing with it because of that impurity.

We as a Jewish community in the diaspora need to recognize how important Israel is for us – whether or not you as an individual are a Zionist. Those are two separate conversations that should happen internally and communally. Good or bad, Israel exists, which is like the woman who has given birth in our parasha. Whether we like it or not, the Torah has demanded that she make an offering because of the impurity she has contracted during labor. I think, like with the offerings she is to give, we as community are too hesitant to offer praise, joy, and love for Israel – we certainly know of communities who fail in the opposite direction. We should begin by offering blessings, which does not and cannot trivialize or gloss over its real failures – its impurities. But let's start by elevating this essential and miraculous development of Jewish history while always having an ever-present eye on its need for purification.

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 daughter Raia, who attends nursery school at Akiba Schechter. As of this issue's publication date they await a new baby.

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 three talks on Parashat Vayishlach were originally presented on December 2, 2017.

by Jonathan Lear



In this parasha we read about the reconciliation of the two sons of Isaac and Rebecca, Essau and Jacob. The Torah tells us that the sons began their struggle in the womb, and that so troubled their mother that she asked of the Lord, "Then why do I exist?!" God answers Rebecca and the translations give Jacob the upper hand. So, from *Etz Hayim*: "Two nations are in your womb / Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; / One people shall be mightier than the other, / And the older shall serve the younger." But Robert Alter (in his *Genesis*, 1996), following the lead of Richard Friedman (in *The Disappearance of God*, 1995), points out that in the last line the Hebrew is ambiguous and thus oracular in structure. It can be read either as "the elder shall serve the younger" or as "the elder, the younger shall serve". On the standard reading, Jacob's coming out triumphant is in accord with divine plan. But if we take seriously the oracular reading, then Jacob's triumph is a trickster's outcome: a wrestling with the divine utterance itself that won't let go until he comes out on top.

What should we think of Uncle Essau? He *is* our uncle – if that is, we are the children of Israel. Or, is this another case of ambiguity? On the one hand: if we are children of Israel and Essau is Israel's brother, he is our uncle. On the other hand: if Israel is assumed to be our *entire* family -- if all our aunts and uncles fall within Israel -- then Essau is not our uncle, even though he is Jacob's – Israel's – brother and we are children of Israel. But what are we to make of this exclusion, denying that Essau is our Uncle Essau?

It is not difficult to read the Torah as depicting Essau as ugly at birth and coarse to the point of oafishness in his judgment. We are told he "emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over".¹ And we know that he was willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. I am not a Hebrew scholar, but Robert Alter says that the language is coarse:

'Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished' -- which is why he was named Edom. Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' And Essau said, 'I am at the point of death, so what use is my birthright to me?'

But is it not possible also to glean hints of unjust prejudice hidden in our tradition? Why should we judge a man by his

physical appearance at birth? If we had been told that the first-born would be a great servant of the Lord, would we not hold those same looks with kind of reverential, perhaps bewildered, awe? In terms of trading his birthright for lentil soup, what are birthrights anyway? Are they more than human confections: cultural inventions that perpetuate systems of injustice amongst siblings? It could be a sign of the beauty of his soul that Essau was indifferent to the birthright-institution, even though in a worldly sense he stood to gain from it. By comparison, lentil soup is real; it is truly health-giving.

The greatest injustice that Jacob perpetrated on his older brother is stealing father Isaac's "innermost blessing". In terms of an act that can destroy a family, this is a real lulu. As you know, Isaac in old age tells Essau he wants to give him his innermost blessing. Rebecca overhears and intervenes. Let's face it: Rebecca is a terrible mother. She explicitly plays favorites with her children; indeed, she plots with one to deprive the other of his due. She is also an unfaithful wife: she acts deceptively to ruin the last wishes of her husband. Jacob's only concern in this scheme is that he might get caught.

When the deed is done and Essau finds out, his cry is as heartrending as any you will find in the Torah, if only you will let it affect you: "*Bless me too, Father!*" Isaac, who was bound in childhood, in old age considers himself bound. Instead of declaring his previous utterance null and void because it was intended for Essau and extracted under false pretenses, he takes his innermost blessing to be irrevocably gone, given to Jacob. He says to Essau, "What, then, can I still do for you my son?" – and Essau repeats his appeal: "Do you have but one blessing my father?

Bless me too Father!" Isaac bestows a lesser blessing. We are told that Essau seethed with resentment over this incident and vowed to kill Jacob after Isaac died. Rebecca somehow knows this, warns Jacob, and he takes off – and we can fast-forward twenty years to Jacob's return and the moment of reconciliation.

Both brothers want reconciliation, but for different reasons. It is fair to say that only Essau has reconciliation in his heart. For Jacob, the Torah suggests that his reasons are instrumental: he has left Laban and wants to return to Canaan, he is afraid that he and his family will be attacked and destroyed by Essau, he would like to live in peace and have his family prosper. He devises a strategic approach with many gifts, an elaborate procession, much bowing and many repetitions of "your servant" directed in obeisance to Essau. It is *almost* as though the other version of the oracular pronouncement is fulfilled – the younger nation serving the older. But there is no indication that there is love in Jacob's heart, any fellow-feeling for his estranged brother. By contrast, when Jacob bowed before his brother, "Essau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and they wept." This is a stunning act of *non-retaliation*: a willingness to abandon 'eye-for-an-eye' retribution out of love for his brother. Essau suggests that they continue on together: 'Let us journey onward and go, and let me go alongside you.' If this is Essau too simple to hold a grudge for long, we could use a bit of his 'simple-mindedness'. Jacob makes an excuse and lies. He says that his children, sheep and cattle are tired, which may be true, but he says that after a rest he will follow Essau and join him in Seir. Instead Jacob headed off in a different direction, to

Succoth and then on to Shechem where he set up his home in Canaan.

The Torah is explicit that Israel – that is, the people Israel – is founded on exclusion. If *our* history is the history of Israel, then hairy Essau does not count as part of us. The rabbis and commentators have been resolute in building a wall around Israel and placing Essau on the other side. They look for reasons why oafish Essau got what he deserved. He made some bad marriages and went his own way. And subsequent history purportedly vindicates this outlook. Ancient Edom, of which Essau was the supposed founder, was a perpetual enemy of Israel. In the *Tanakh*, King Saul defeats Edom and then forty years later King David defeats them again. Later, in the time of Nebuchadnezer II, the Edomites plundered Jerusalem and killed Judeans. Thus the prophets denounce Edom.

Here is a question worth pondering: does this subsequent history of strife between Israel and Edom vindicate the Torah account or is it rather the reverse: namely, that the subsequent history of strife retrospectively influenced an unnecessarily harsh reading of Essau in the Torah? This *is* an important question. It is one thing to think that a loutish oaf with bad judgment was excluded in the formation of our people; perhaps that is what needed to happen for us to become Israel. It is quite another to think that a good-hearted, simple-hearted innocent person was kicked out by deceit, and that we as a people are formed on the basis of unjust treachery and unjust exclusion. And all this has been covered up by later one-sided interpretations. I am inclined to go against the rabbis and accept this thought.

Essau's exclusion is, I think, based on a crime. God had not yet given the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, but He might have felt the need to by reflecting on Jacob's behavior. Jacob dishonored his father by tricking him out of his innermost blessing; he stole that blessing from his brother Essau; he coveted Essau's birthright and all his privileges of being first-born. That is three Commandments violated -- and if they had been honored it would have been Essau, not Jacob, who would have received Isaac's innermost blessing. If that had happened Essau might well have become one of our patriarchs.

So what? There is little point in dwelling in might-have-beens for events that occurred in the ancient past. The question is whether a legacy was created that has worked its way down through the ages and somehow now confronts us, here in the present. It seems to me that the reconciliation between Jacob and Essau remains unfinished business. It began long ago with Jacob and Essau, but was flawed by Jacob's deceit and lack of full-hearted participation. True reconciliation is a possibility held open, yet is still to be fulfilled. But if reconciliation is unfinished business, then I cannot see whose unfinished business it is, if not our own: we the children of Israel, that is, Jacob, who began reconciliation but fudged it.

What would it be for us to accept this inheritance? There is much to be said about this, but I shall leave you with one thought. When we see a people *over there*, on the far side of some wall, whether literal or metaphorical, instead of thinking of them as having nothing to do with us, or as going their own way or perhaps as being hostile, might there be a way to envisage them as our long-lost cousins –

descendants of brothers who did not quite achieve the reconciliation that was called for long ago. And may we not see the burden of reconciliation as falling on us, we the children of the patriarch who snuck away when he had a chance to go further? This may at first seem an unusual lesson to learn from this Torah portion, but I am convinced this could be our inheritance if only we choose to inherit it.

Shabbat shalom -- to you and to Uncle Essau and all our unknown cousins!

Jonathan Lear teaches philosophy at the University of Chicago. He currently serves as director of the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society. Before coming to Chicago, he taught philosophy at Cambridge University and at Yale. While teaching at Yale he also trained as a psychoanalyst and he currently serves on the faculty of the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute. He is interested in conceptions of the human psyche that trace their way back to Socrates. In particular, how does our understanding of who we are help us understand how we ought to be, ethically speaking? Among his books are: Aristotle: The Desire to Understand (1998), Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation (2006) and Wisdom Won From Illness (2017). His book Freud was rated number one by the Guardian newspaper (UK) in its top ten books on psychoanalysis. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has received the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Award. Jonathan is married to Gabriel Lear who currently serves as Chair of the Philosophy Department and works on ancient Greek ethics and aesthetics. His daughter Sophia writes comedy and is

currently writing for the television show "Living Biblically". His son Sam is in fourth grade at Lab School. The family is grateful to be part of the Rodfei Zedek community.

by Joanna Martin



I appreciated the chance to study this Torah portion with David, Jonathan and Anna. As I explained to the group, I have found biblical analogies more profound, as of late, due to our current political climate. I have watched with shock and disgust, as biblical themes of hatred, prejudice, and greed are constantly affronting us in the news.

I grew up in a Cleveland suburb attending a reform Jewish congregation and a public high school with a sizeable number of Jewish students. I was a history major in college and fortunate to have the opportunity to study abroad at Tel Aviv University for a semester. As an adult, I found my limited experiences with reading from the Torah often left me wondering more about the experiences of girls and women in ancient Judaism, because they are usually without voices. This Torah portion really surprised me with its relevance to current events. I was immediately drawn to the story of Dinah. Many readers of this passage take away

that Dinah was raped. Some rabbis in the past have interpreted this passage as a warning to girls and women not to go out on their own, thus blaming the victim. How can we give Dinah a voice? How can we put into words her feelings about her predicament? And all the Dinah's who came before her?

Society is now confronting sexual violence and exploitation of women. Women are coming together to share personal experiences of sexual exploitation and violence and how these experiences impacted their lives. It is possible that this moment now will prove to be more than just a moment, and permanently change the way women are heard. Why now? In part, it is due to the collective anger women experienced after the election of our current president, who, prior to the election, had been not only been accused of sexual assault by over a dozen women, but had also been recorded on tape, bragging about sexual assault. The current climate emboldened some brave victims to come forward and some brave reporters to capture their stories. Moreover, social media has allowed for a collective voice and a platform to quickly amplify this issue. While our current president was rewarded and elected despite numerous accusations of sexual assault, many women have now stepped forward sharing their experiences of sexual assault or harassment, leading to the shaming and professional downfall of a handful of powerful men.

Dinah was likely a young teenager, around 12 or 13. The story is messy because, although her brothers take revenge on her behalf, they kill many people and then take ownership of the murdered men's women and children. Dinah was likely relieved to be rescued by

her brothers, but how did she feel watching other women and children share her fate? The cycle of violence continued. The story is even more confusing in that her presumed rapist wants to marry her and negotiates a "price" with her brothers. Her father, Jacob, is noticeably absent from these negotiations. It turns out that her brothers negotiate a steep bride price, insisting that all the townsmen get circumcised. Their cunning plan leaves the townsmen physically incapacitated and thus easy targets. Jacob is dismayed with what happens saying to Simeon and Levi, *"You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed."* But they answered, *"Should our sister be treated like a whore?"*

This biblical story touches on our current national discourse about sexual violence that has also included a Senate candidate, Roy Moore, preying on teenaged girls. It is hard to believe that we are still having a national conversation about what is appropriate behavior towards children and what is the legal age of consent. Many have spoken out against this politician's behavior, but it is important to note that we still have a lot of work to do educating adults and children to speak out if they witness or are subjected to inappropriate behavior. In their indignation, some of Moore's critics have said that they would commit violence against Moore if he tried something like that on their own daughters. These are the modern day descendants of Simeon and Levi. And Jacob's inactions are a model for people like Alabama's Governor, Kay Ivey, who have said that while Moore's actions were reprehensible, people shouldn't do

something rash. Like voting for a Democrat. Think of the consequences before you try to right a wrong.

We know that Simeon and Levi are furious at the treatment of Dinah, but why? It is unclear if they are angry that she was violated and taken for a wife against her will or if they were more angry that Shechem didn't ask their permission first. We can only wonder about Dinah's voice here. Was she fearful and sad? Maybe she had friends or relatives to confide in? She may have felt guilty at the revenge her brothers took or she might have felt vindicated.

There is a lot to learn from our ancestors. Their lives were very different, but the range of human emotions are the same. We all are capable of anger, betrayal, greed, joy and celebration. Our leaders are still highly fallible. Power and patriarchy are running themes in the bible. Society has changed in many ways, but powerful people still exploit the vulnerable. Social media has changed our lives in the past ten years, but social media, like the bible, is complicated. Vulnerable people can use social media to gain power and find a collective voice. Social media is also a place for very negative things, like anti-Semitism, misogyny, racism, and the spreading of propaganda.

Social media can allow people to come together and start controlling their own narrative. On twitter, the hashtag #metoo has become the rallying cry of women sharing their experiences of sexual violence and exploitation. #Hertoo was created by Alyssa Milano and UNICEF to recognize those women and girls who don't yet have a voice on social media, an effort to raise awareness of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Women who live in places with extreme poverty, where

access to food, shelter and water may not be stable are at high risk of exploitation. Their stories need amplification and awareness from the world.

Like many people, I am a big fan of the musical *Hamilton*. When reading this Torah portion, I kept thinking about the final song in the hit musical that is sung by Hamilton's wife, Aliza. She sings about her husband and his early death at the hands of Aaron Burr: "Who lives who dies who tells your story?" I like to think about what Dinah would look like if given a song by the musical genius of Lin Manuel? But after the events described in this Torah portion, the Torah says little about Dinah, and there are varying accounts in the midrash of her eventual marriage, perhaps to her brother Simeon, or perhaps to Job. The Torah's narrative shifts to other characters and other branches of the family tree. The immediate aftermath of the rape is discussed in detail, but its long-term consequences for Dinah are thought to be not of much interest to the audience. So the spotlight goes elsewhere. Dinah must have a lot to say if only she could tell her story.

Joanna Martin MD is a palliative care physician at the Jesse Brown VA and a clinician at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Joanna and her husband, Lior, have two children, Eli and Iris. They have been members of Rodfei for four years.

by Anna Siegler



In a short passage from our parasha – only three verses – we learn that Rachel goes into labor and dies giving birth to Benjamin, her second son. In thinking about Rachel, I decided to explore the theme of divine intervention in conception and birth. Today I will discuss the stories of three women who conceived sons with the intercession of God or his messengers, either late in life or after many childless years.

First, Rachel’s story. We recall that Rachel was the much beloved wife of Jacob, who worked an additional seven years in order to win her father Laban’s permission to marry her. Laban had tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel’s older sister first.

Rachel is deeply saddened, though, as her sister Leah bears son after son (and a daughter Dinah, as a mere footnote). Even the two handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpha, bear sons, while, still, Rachel remains childless. After many years, God remembers Rachel and opened her womb. With the birth of her first son, Rachel exclaims, “God has taken away my disgrace.” Curiously, she names the baby “Joseph” – meaning “May the Lord add another son for me.” That prayer was fulfilled with the birth of Benjamin, as we read today.

In addition to Rachel’s story, the stories of three other women come to mind:

First, the story of Sarah and the birth of Isaac, which we read in Vayera a month ago. And second, in the Haftarah for Vayera, we read about the Shunammite woman. If I were not standing between you and lunch I would have talked about Hannah, the mother of Samuel. But time pressures win out and Hannah’s story must wait.

The story of Sarah and the conception of Isaac is delightful. Divine intervention comes from three strangers, whom Abraham hastens to welcome and feed. The strangers ask after Abraham’s wife, Sarah (how did they know her name?). And then, out of the blue, one of them says “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” What an extraordinary announcement, given that Sarah has been in menopause for well over 50 years. Sarah laughs at this news. She is incredulous. The messenger seems miffed that Sarah would doubt his word, saying, “Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?” Sarah then denies that she laughed.

Consider Sarah’s state of mind: the news that she will have a child is both stunning and embarrassing. We can easily imagine a number of reasons for her laughter: her advanced age; her husband’s advanced age and even the thought of enjoying sex with Abraham since both of them are almost 100 years old by now. Lucky for us, 100 is the new 50!

When the baby was born, Abraham named him “Yitzchak,” Sarah said: “God has brought me laughter: everyone who hears will laugh with me.” The name Isaac evokes a wonderful event, full of joy and laughter.

In contrast, the story of the Shunammite woman is dark and complex; the gift of a son is terrifying rather than comforting. The Shunammite is a wealthy woman who treats the prophet Elisha with great generosity and kindness, and in return, he asks her what he can do for her. She does not answer directly. It is Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, who observes, “She has no son and her husband is elderly.” When Elisha says to her, “At this season next year you will be embracing a son,” she replies, “Please, my lord. Man of God. Do not delude your maidservant.” [2 Kings 4:16] Rather than being amused at the idea – as Sarah was – the Shunammite reacts with denial and anxiety.

As the story continues, we learn that her sense of foreboding was well-placed. The boy – perhaps about seven or eight - is with his father in the field when he says to his father, “Roshi, roshi,” – “my head, my head,” and collapses in pain. The father has the boy taken to his mother, who perceives that he is dead. Then the mother seeks out Elisha and rebukes him. She says, “Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn’t I say, ‘Don’t mislead me?’” [2 Kings 4:28] Remarkably, the prophet gives the lad mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and brings him back to life. According to Mark, my in-house consultant, this miraculous event is one of the earliest, perhaps the first, reference to resuscitation in history.

Rachel, Sarah, the Shunammite. And now, Hannah, the wife of Elkanah. [Book of I Samuel 1: 1-2:10] In the Haftorah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we find Hannah in deep despair because she is childless. Elkanah’s other wife Peninah bears many children and cruelly taunts Hannah. Her husband tries to comfort her: “Hannah, why are you crying and why aren’t you eating? Why are

you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?”

Hannah goes to the temple to pray for a child, making a silent vow that if she is given a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord. When the priest Eli observes her moving her lips but not speaking, he chides her for being drunk. “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” Really, will the indignities never cease! When Hannah explains that she was praying out of deep sadness and distress, the prophet responds, “Then go in peace. May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.” With these words, Hannah’s despair leaves her and she returns home. The text tells us that her husband “knew her” [that wonderful biblical euphemism] and “the Lord remembered her.” She conceived, bore a son and named him Samuel, meaning “I asked the Lord for him.” When the child reached the right age, Hannah took him to the prophet Eli, keeping her vow, saying, “I hereby lend him to the Lord.”

Here we have four stories about women who are childless – some in old age, some because they were unable to conceive – and all three are granted the gift of a son seemingly through divine intervention. I was drawn to the stories of these individual women because each experiences a personal and distinct range of feelings: the spectrum runs from disappointment, disgrace, pain and fear, to joy and laughter.

As a modern audience, we can identify with these experiences surrounding conception and the gift of children. It’s important to note, though, that our biblical sisters were limited in the roles they were expected to fulfill, even to the point of bearing sons rather than daughters.

Women today have choices and more control over their reproductive capacities. Women can choose not to have children. And, some women cannot have children. But, in our culture and in ideal circumstances, women can enjoy personal and career achievements on an equal footing with men. Our congregation is filled with women of great accomplishment in science, medicine, law, education, business, and the arts. We are fortunate that we live in a time that values and promotes our individual achievements, even as we find fulfillment in motherhood and – importantly – and especially important, even as we value daughters equally with sons.

In conclusion, I feel gratitude for a life that allowed me to balance motherhood and a career. Some of you know that in the 1970s, I was one of five women to write a book called “The Balancing Act.” My co-authors and I felt like pioneers in a strange land back then, struggling to pursue careers while also being mothers.

In my case, I had difficulty conceiving, a fact that explains why the stories of Rachel, Sarah, Hannah, and the Shunammite woman so fascinated me. Mark and I sought medical help and felt fortunate to live in a time when science could contribute if prayers were not sufficient.

Our first born were – not one but two! Twins Dillan and Alison. Our son Richard was given the Hebrew name of Yitzchak very deliberately. And Jessica, our treasure, was born when I was 40.

Thank you for giving me the honor to speak and to share my thoughts and my gratitude for God’s many blessings.

Anna Siegler grew up in a suburb of Chicago and came to Hyde Park to study at the University of Chicago, where she earned her BA and a PhD in History. She is currently Secretary of the congregation board and is proud of her long association with Rodfei Zedek, where she and her husband Mark have been members for over forty years. Their four children all live in Chicago. For some years, the children attended Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School, where Anna taught middle-school English and Social Studies in 1980-81.

When she turned to fulltime work, Anna spent ten years in administrative positions at UChicago in the office of a medical school dean, the president of the Hospitals and the chair of surgery, then another ten years in the office of the CEO of Nuveen Investments. Now retired, she pursues her interests in music, art and reading and treasures her time with family and friends. Anna and Mark celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in June 2017. One fun fact: In the 1970s, Anna and four friends published a book, The Balancing Act, on the challenges women face in balancing careers and families (first edition, 1976; second edition, 1982). Guess what? It’s still a challenge.

A Date with a Dusty Piece of History

by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby



Years ago, I went on a date. As a blind date *and* a double date, it was awkward on multiple levels. The fact that we seemed to have nothing in common was just the cherry on top. She was a budding young Zionist working as a waitress in Chicago only long enough to sell her things and make *aliyah*. I was a nihilistic young editor who had just broken up with his longtime girlfriend and was not fit for public consumption at the time.

For whatever reason, the two of us tagged along with another couple and their 8-year-old son at a restaurant in the Loop. The food was *eh*, the conversation stilted, and I wore a mock turtleneck. Which she roundly mocked.

Though I've blocked out much of the evening, I remember that she wouldn't shut up about Israel. She loved Israel more than I'd loved anything, ever. She went on and on about the Negev, *kibbutzim* and *madrachim*, the schwarma at the Haifa bus station and the Israeli soldier she'd dated who rode a motorcycle and had an M-16 under his bed. The only dialogue I recall from that night went something like this:

Her: You ever been to Israel?

Me: No.

Her: (angry) You interested in ever going to Israel?

Me: (angrier) Not really.

At the end of the date, the other couple gave us both rides home. They

dropped me off first, and I had to lean over the eight-year-old in the back seat to say goodnight to my date. Needless to say, there were no sparks. Whatever the opposite of sparks are, that's what we experienced. Lumps, maybe.

I still don't know why I did it, but I sent her an e-mail the next morning: "That was weird. Wanna try again without the chaperones?" To my surprise, she said yes, and a bizarre courtship began. Periodic dates followed, usually as friends, often ending in high fives.

At some point, I'm not sure when, we become boyfriend and girlfriend. It wasn't exactly Romeo and Juliet, but we clicked. And yet, it was obvious to us both that our connection to each other was on a collision course with her connection with Israel. I didn't know her well enough to make a commitment, let alone move to the Middle East together, so I was honest. "If you still want to move to Israel, I'd understand," I said. "But I won't move there with you. And I would miss you."

She cried. Sometimes to me, sometimes to others. She tried to sell me on Israel: its history, its beauty, the miracle of its existence. I was not swayed. To me, Israel was little more than a dusty piece of history—a word in a prayer book.

In the end, she did not move to Israel. I had won, which pleased me to no end. *I am more powerful than the toughest country in the world.* Or so I thought. She began to work on the idea of a trip there together. No fool, I realized that if I said no to this, I was also saying no to the future of

our relationship. So I said yes. Not for me, not for Judaism, not for any reason other than I wanted to stay together.

So, in the summer of 2000, we spent two weeks in Israel. We did the usual stuff: floating in the Dead Sea, wandering the Old City, Yad Vashem, the Kotel tunnels. Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The grottoes at Rosh Hanikra. The beach in Tel Aviv. We smoked a hookah, drifted in and out of souks, and ate a lot hummus. I got the worst food poisoning of my life.

But she also took me to the places that meant something to her personally, like her aunt's home in Jerusalem where we shared a Shabbat meal with countless cousins, almost all of whom beat me at ping-pong on the rickety table in the backyard. We traveled to Revivim, the kibbutz where she had once lived, and tended to the ostriches with Goldie, a sunburned farmer who had been doing it so long he'd begun to look like an ostrich himself. There were buses and boats and bikes, waterfalls and deserts. An old lady yelled at me in Arabic at the Temple Mount. I even put my own prayer in the western wall. It was the first time I had ever prayed. Did I feel a connection to the land? I'm not sure. But I felt something.

As if sensing an opening, my girlfriend took me to a jeweler in the Old City to get rings made. Cluelessly, I agreed. When she tried to get me to propose to her, the dim light bulb over my head finally flickered. I told her I wasn't ready. "You don't get to control when someone asks you to marry him," I said, and she didn't like that. The two of us sat in angry silence at a felafel place on Ben Yehudah Street. Eventually, we got on with things and enjoyed the rest of the vacation.

Back home, Chicago suddenly seemed bland and predictable. We repeated stories about our Israeli adventures and looked at the photos constantly. I knew we'd had an unforgettable time, but it took me months before I fully understood the importance of that trip. She was saying: *You want to know who I am? What stirs my heart? Here. This is it. It's a country that's far away, but it's beautiful and maddening and complicated and I want to share it with you. Will you share it with me?*

I did. And I realized that Israel had come to mean something completely different to me than it did to her. In my mind, the country became forever intertwined with this remarkable woman, her passion for life. Her curiosity. Her empathy. For me, the country became a symbol for falling in love.

That fall, I proposed to Sarah at a B & B in Lakeside, Michigan. Got down on one knee and everything. It was probably not what she envisioned, but she said yes. Thirteen years later, we took our young children to Israel for another extraordinary trip, and I saw the place in a new light: through their eyes. I can't wait to see what it ends up meaning to them.

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 last November. 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.