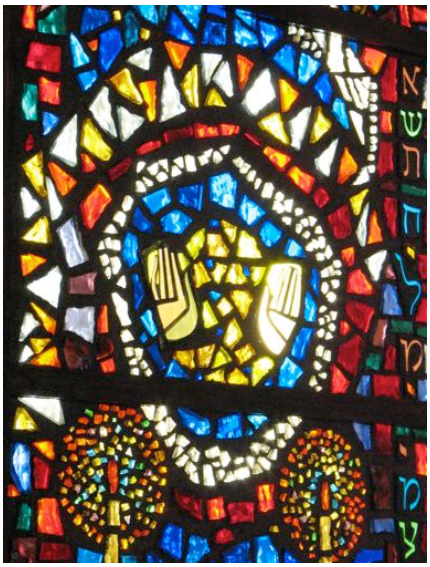
TO LEARN AND TO TEACH SPRING 2019

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. VII, No. 2



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Our families -

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Volume VII Number 2

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CONGREGATION
RODFEI ZEDEK
ONE COMMUNITY,
MANY VOICES

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Introduction to Volume VII Number 2

לדור ודור (l'dor vador, from generation to generation) – these words rank among the most evocative in our liturgy. They appear at the end of the kedushah, the high point of every service. Sometimes we sing them together in a responsive, echoing version. When Cantor Rachel Rosenberg and her father Rabbi Ted Gluck sang them on Rosh Hashanah they evoked tears. (Hear that duet at https://rodfei.org/node/2215.)

We reveled in continuity at the wonderful חי celebration, with young and new members mingling with those of long standing to celebrate 18 years in our reimagined synagogue. Observing the procession of generations reminds us of challenges in conveying tradition. How do we decide what still matters? How should we contend with outside forces? As Rabbi Rebecca Milder writes, "it can't be as simple as *telling* a child what to believe and how to act."

In this issue we share personal stories and professional experience. As always, we discover the impressive breadth and depth of commitment and understanding to be found among us, whether in the teachings of Rabbi Milder, of "ordinary" members on This American Shabbat, or of bar mitzvah, Shammai Winitzer.

We recognize anew the many paths people have taken to reach Rodfei Zedek, none of them more surprising than that of our new bookkeeper, Ana Gilboa.

Together we rejoice in the contributions of our fellow congregants, even, and especially, of our Rebel.

Introducing Ana Gilboa

People who have called or visited the synagogue office in recent months have been greeted by Ana Gilboa, the new bookkeeper and administrative assistant. They have probably noticed her Russian accent and have certainly experienced her welcoming manner. But no one could have guessed the path that brought her to Rodfei Zedek.

Ana's grandparents came from the Ukraine. But during World War II they had sought safety in Uzbekistan and on their return after the war had found their home taken over by a local policeman. They turned to new opportunities in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Established by Stalin in 1928 in Birobidzhan near the Chinese border, the settlement was intended as an alternative to Zionism and as a useful military and economic outpost.

In the Jewish Oblast after WWII Ana's great grandmother Basia Itkin (seated left) with her children, Rebecca and Yakov (standing rear). Her third child (lower right), Ana's grandmother Maria Itkin now lives in Israel. Rebecca's daughter Anna (lower center) lives in Israel and Russia; in Russia she hides her Jewish identity.

When Ana's mother was born, Jews sometimes faced restrictions and discrimination throughout Russia. Birobidzhan was about 40% Jewish, although many Jews disguised or ignored their identity. The small town near Birobidzhan where Ana's mother lived had only two Jewish families. Then at age 17 Ana's mother moved to Komsomolsk na Amure, where Oksana Udalova, known to us as Ana, was born. Ana lived in Russia until the age of 19. She studied merchandising and marketing at a technical college. The Jewish Agency (Sochnut) located her family and offered Ana and her sister the possibility of moving to Israel. Although she hadn't been aware of her Jewish identity Ana was eager to leave Russia. After she completed her studies, she passed the arduous test process with Sochnut and left for Israel in 1998. Over the next months members of her family began to follow her there. For some it took years.

Having known only Russian, Ana learned Hebrew in an Ulpan and began to explore Jewish life and observances. Her new life included a new name. As many who go to Israel choose Jewish names, she replaced Oksana by Osnat. She chose the last name Gilboa almost at random. During her first few years in Israel she completed a program in practical industrial engineering at Ariel University Center of Samaria, also studying economics and business administration. Meanwhile she worked as part of the fraud team of the Information Security Department at Internet Zahav.

In 2005 an American citizen, originally a Ukrainian Jew, repatriated to Israel to find a Jewish wife. He, too, had changed his name – to Ran Fridman. He and Ana met online. Rather than continue his search in Israel, Ran decided not to look further than Ana.

Ran and Ana both loved Asia and decided to move to Thailand. After living there less than a year they returned to Israel for the birth of their first daughter Sarah. Then business opportunities drew the couple to Shanghai, where they found a wonderful community, including a Jewish community of about 3,000 people centered at Chabad. In 2010 they officially got married. The wedding took place at the historical Ohel Moshe Synagogue in Shanghai. This was the first wedding at the synagogue in 60 years after Jewish refugees left China. The wedding, led by Rabbis Shalom and Avraham Greenberg, was made possible through the relationship of the rabbis and the Chinese government.

Wedding at Ohel Moshe

Ana learned Chinese at Shanghai International Study University and worked on different projects. She worked for the movie industry and helped to cast foreign actors and extras for Chinese movies. One of her biggest projects was movie *Dong Feng Yu* (*East Wind Rain*, 2010) where she recruited many foreign extras including about 50 Jewish (or Jewish looking) actors for the part about the Jewish ghetto in Shanghai.

Ana in a non-speaking part as a seamstress in *East Wind Rain*.

Her daughter Sarah was one of the most popular child models in China and Ana was her manager. Ana also worked in trading and quality control.

In Shanghai in 2010 Ana had a second daughter, Michelle. Concerns about her health led the family to leave Shanghai in search of cleaner air. They tried the Philippines where they helped to open a Jewish community center in

Shanghai 2011
Sarah, Ran, Ana, and Michelle

Cebu City; but after a year went back to the China they loved, this time to the city of Shenzhen. There Ana completed a course in Business Chinese at Shenzhen University. She worked in trading, while Sarah continued modeling, and Ran made sheitels.

In 2015 the family felt they needed to be near Ran's mother, who was living in Chicago; and soon they moved. When Ana arrived in the U.S. in 2016 she worked first as office manager at Gil Sewing and then as payroll manager at Paper Street Realty. But she always wanted to work in Hyde Park, where she lives, and was happy to find a job at Rodfei Zedek. Now, in addition to her work at the synagogue, she helps her husband manage Fridman Properties, which deals with Airbnb properties and short-term rentals around the neighborhood.

Looking back over her many moves, Ana finds she values the stability she hopes to achieve here but also appreciates all the varied cultures she has experienced. She has found that Judaism gave her admittance to a "big family" with branches all around the world.

Celebrating חי (Chai)

On December 8, 2018 Rodfei Zedek celebrated the 18th year of its new building. Organized by Rabbi Minkus, the festivities brought joy and inspiration. The evening featured acknowledgment of leaders, long-time and new, and gratitude for happy transitions. *(See the video at youtube.com/watch?v=KiybyJ0JFdQ*&feature=youtu.be)

Lighting of hanukkiot, large and small. Left to right: Christine Kelner, Judith Phillips-Balter, Daniel Blumenthal, Larry Krucoff, Carole Krucoff, Bryon Rosner, Martha Roth, Halina Brukner, Cantor Rachel Rosenberg, Laura Hoffman, Philip Hoffman, Daniel Wolff, Hillary Gimpel, Sally Fohrman, Jonathan Dennis

Past presidents, l to r: Shirley Holbrook, Robert Channon, Sara Segal Loevy, Diane Altkorn, Edward Hamburg

L to r: Megan Schwartz, Douglas Kelner, Rabbi David Minkus, James Gimpel, Robert Channon, Cantor Rachel Rosenberg, Louis Philipson

L'dor Vador

We asked young people how their families transmit Jewish traditions. Here are their contributions.

Koyners

Henry is the son of Jay and Robyn Koyner and the brother of Ruby Koyner. He is in the 8th grade at the Lab School. His family have been members of Rodfei Zedek for about 7 years.

Henry asked his mother, "What are you trying to teach me about being Jewish?" and heard, "It's an important part of our culture and who we are, and it tells us a lot about the experiences of our family members and friends and I think it's important to share our traditions with our family and friends. My parents/grandparents taught me about the importance of traditions and spending time with family on holidays, and making and eating food together which I have hoped to pass down to my children and grandchildren."

Henry with mother, Robyn

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Waltzers

Bella Waltzer is the daughter of Yasmin Spiro, an artist and design-world consultant, and Ben Waltzer, a musician and program director at UChicago. Bella is in 7th grade at the Lab School. The family has been with Rodfei Zedek for about two years. Bella spoke with Ben's parents.

Bella and Nana Sandy

Bella: What might you teach me about being Jewish?

Sandy: I would start by giving you the cultural foods of yiddishkeit: latkes, matzoh brei, boiled chicken, and chopped liver. Then I'd talk about how the iconography that has seeped into America. As a matter of fact I just heard someone say on the internet, "What am I chopped liver?" That's Jewish, but the person who said it was not Jewish by any stretch of the imagination.

Ken: I would emphasize the long history of the Jews in the world, how we've hung on and been able to survive for three, four millenia, that staying power, that endurance,

being able to thrive despite all the bad things that have happened to Jews in history, that we're still going on. I'd also emphasize the Jewish mission, which is to be oriented to repairing the world, to trying to make things better than they are, to remedy injustice, poverty, all the bad things in the world.

Sandy: In other words, a band-aid.

Ken: No. I don't need commentary on what I said.

Sandy: (Laughs) If you're Jewish you need commentary. Someone has to comment on what you say and write. Next question! (Laughs)

Bella: What did your grandparents or parents teach you about being Jewish?

Ken: My grandmother lived with us and I learned how not be Jewish from her. We became kosher when my grandmother came to live with us. She would sit in the kitchen and I would make dinner for the family. She'd watch me. She pretended she was praying. But she really wasn't praying. She'd look at me and if I by mistake took a milk...hmmm, do you know milk and meat stuff? If I took a milk utensil and put it on piece of meat she'd jump up very fast, faster than a football player. And she'd grab the utensil from me and stick it in a plant.

Bella and Papa Kenny

Bella: (Laughs) What?

Sandy: The plant, well, represented what was left of the earth, the good kind of dirt, the utensil had to stay there seven days and would be good again. That's why I didn't like her very much. My parents said "we have to respect your grandmother" and that stayed with me. I didn't respect my grandmother.

Ben: This is going in the Rodfei Zedek magazine. The annals. Be careful what you say.

Sandy: You can keep all that.

Ken: Pardon me – I'm going to stick a utensil in the dirt.

Bella: What did you learn from your parents?

Ken : I learned about the importance of family in Jewish life, the nuclear, small, intimate family and also the big extended family. My father was one of 8, and he was 7th, next to the youngest. Everyone doted on him, and he would take us to see everyone who had doted on him, on the weekends to visit his family. And that was really important to be close to all of his brothers and their husbands and wives and their cousins. We had more than 20 cousins. And it wasn't always peaches and cream.

Bella: And how was that Jewish?

Ken: Because it was a Jewish family that would gather on Jewish holidays and recreate the family according to the Jewish rhythm and the Jewish calendar of the year. That stuck with me and is part of the culture of being Jewish.

* *

Rosenbaums

Craig Rosenbaum, his wife and daughter have been members of Rodfei Zedek since 2011. Craig grew up in Los Angeles and then moved to Chicago in 1982 to attend the University of Chicago where he graduated with a BA in both Political Science and Economics. After a two year stint as a sports broadcaster, Craig graduated from Indiana University School of Law. Craig and his family moved to Hyde Park in 2013. Craig's daughter Leah (now in 6th grade) has attended Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School in Hyde Park since she was in pre-K.

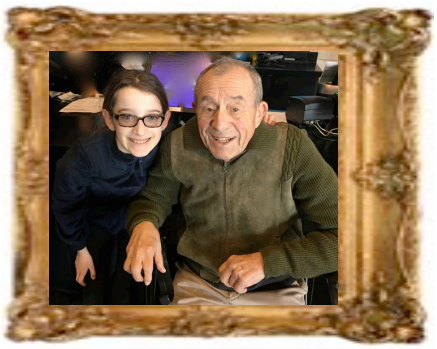
Leah says, "My father taught me a lot about being Jewish. As a family we celebrate all the Jewish holidays (Hanukah is my favorite). Dad also flies me to Israel to see my cousins and friends. My dad has also taught me how to be kind, grateful and enjoy life, which is really important in Judaism. I also think my dad's brisket is amazing!"

Lillian and Kasriel Kaplan

And Craig writes, "My maternal grandfather, Kasriel Kaplan, who was a rabbi and cantor, had the most influence on my Jewish identity. He was affectionately known to me as my "Zayde." Born in Suwalki, Poland, Zadie taught me so much about Judaism. In Suwalki, Poland, he studied talmud and became a rabbi at the Yeshiva in Suwalki. He then moved to Berlin in the 1920s, where he studied and also became a cantor. Thankfully before the rise of Hitler, he left Berlin and permanently migrated to the United States, settling in Canton, Ohio. A few years later, he moved to Pittsburgh and married my grandmother Lillian where they hatched my mother Esther Lee. After a two year stint in El Paso, Texas, they permanently settled in Los Angeles, where they hatched my Aunt Judy.

"I had the two best male role models growing up. I think how fortunate I was to have not just a caring, loving and devoted father Malcolm (still alive at 92), but also another generous warm and loving Zayde. Growing up in L.A. I spent many shabbats with my Zayde. He taught me how to read Hebrew, lay tefillin, and sing haftorahs for his congregation. But more than the rituals, my father and Zayde taught me that to be a Jew is to have a conscience and fight for social justice. They are the primary reason why

have decided to devote my professional life to advocate for better wages and working conditions for workers as a labor professional and attorney.



Leah and Malcolm Rosenbaum

The other element of Judaism I learned from my Zayde and his daughter Judy, is my love for Israel and Zionism. My grandparent's daughter, my Aunt Judy, gave up a life of relative luxury in the United States to make Aliyah when she moved to Israel in 1968. I will never forget the worry and concern our family had for our Aunt Judy and our other Jewish brothers and sisters when Israel was attacked on our most holy day of the year, Yom Kippur. But Judy, like most Israelis, persevered, working as a speech therapist with Israeli soldiers.

Now I am passing my love of Judaism and Zionism, which my Zayde and Aunt taught me, to my 11 year old daughter Leah. Like my father Malcolm and Zadye, Leah has a heart of gold, always wanting to help others, and do what she can to make people feel good. Every year or two my goal is to take my wife and Leah to Israel so we can visit our family and the Israeli friends Leah met at Akiba Schechter. As Leah matures, I also hope she will love and appreciate Israel as such a special place – our ancestral homeland that we finally have returned to after 2000 years of exile. I hope to have Leah appreciate the miracle of Israel as it espouses democratic principals in a region of the world that has little if any tolerance for free speech, labor rights, religious diversity, women's rights and the rights of the those in the LGBT community.

Craig, Leah, and cousin Chaya Duchin in Israel

How Can We Teach Our Children?

by Rabbi Rebecca Milder

Ultimately, our children will choose how they express their Judaism. They'll keep certain traditions and leave others behind; they'll fall in love and negotiate their Jewishness with a partner; they'll recognize new ambitions within themselves, be moved by experiences and ideas, shift priorities, learn new skills. How can we prepare our children to make choices about their Judaism, and to let their Judaism change and grow as *they* grow and mature?

Proverbs offers a clue: "Train up a child in the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not depart from it (Prov. 22:6)." Yet it can't be as simple as *telling* a child what to believe and how to act. (With a middle schooler in my house, it's crystal clear to me that children really do have minds of their own. Toddlers, too.) Nor can it be as straightforward as centering a child in a single Jewish community. Our children are bombarded with examples of what it looks like to express Jewish identity, from synagogues and Jewish camps and offhand comments at school and on TV (whoops, YouTube) and in books…. No child is taking in exactly the same inputs, and they're not experiencing them in the same way, either. At some point, they'll have to make their own way.

What if we aimed not for knowledge, but for understanding? What if a child's Jewish learning were focused on the development of the *whole* child, on growing within a child capacities to listen to and dialogue with self, peers, and our tradition, to grapple with complexity, and to make meaning?

Then our familiar proverb would mean we are to treat children as immensely capable, trust them to ask questions they need to grapple with about their world, and simultaneously forge an educational environment that shouts of our interconnectedness, our Jewishness, and the dignity we must show each other. We'd trust children to make meaning for themselves, at the very age they are. It's what we want them to do as adults.

What might it look like to have children's learning that does that? For the past eight years, I've had the privilege of leading the Jewish Enrichment Center, a laboratory school that develops tools and strategies for children to make meaning for themselves, as part of their families and communities, and connected with our ancient and ongoing Jewish conversation.

Last winter, we thought our fifth- and sixth-grade children were ready to engage directly with the decision-making process that had formed the basis of their Jewish learning. For the past seven years, these children had been growing skills to bring self, peers, family, Jews near and far, and Jewish tradition, into close dialogue. Three times each year at the Jewish Enrichment Center, through an extended project, or "theme," with Jewish text at its core, each child realized a new personal understanding of self, relationships, Judaism, God, or the world. Children's inquiry was at once rooted in Jewish text while reaching far beyond it. The children had been living a decision-making process of dynamic relationship between self, others, and Judaism; could they see its implications outside of the classroom?

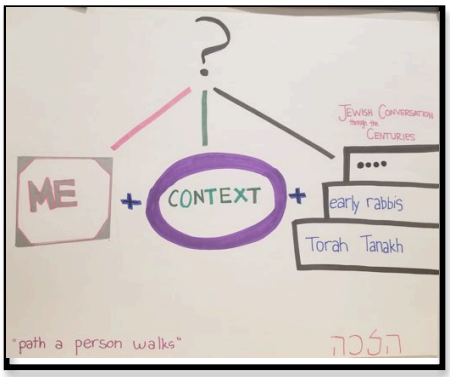
All children at the Jewish Enrichment Center, ages 3 - 12, were exploring a ten-week theme on the intersection of Jewish tradition with the human need for Shabbat: that all of us need breaks, that Shabbat is an opportunity to make a pause that refreshes us.

"Do not do any work," children read in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. "You, your son or your daughter, your servant or your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor the immigrant who is in your city (Ex 20:9)." What constitutes work? children wondered. They raised questions about power ("If you choose not to rest, your servant can't rest," a child said) and communal responsibility ("What about doctors? If there's work to be done and you want to rest, do you have a choice?"). We climbed inside the text in *chavrutah* (partner text study), we built small models of the text to look closely at it, we drew, talked, listened, and wondered. Children were setting the Jewish text inside them so it would be part of their decision-making.

Next, we shared our decision-making process with the fifth- and sixth-grade children in a simple graphic. We theorized that when we are faced with a Jewish decision – e.g., *How might we make Shabbat (a "pause") in a way that refreshes us? What rituals and experiences should be part of our Passover seder this year?* – we are balancing three voices:

1. "ME" – myself as an individual
2. My Context – identifiers that describe and influence me, e.g., my family's background, where I live and go to school
3. Jewish Conversation Through the Centuries – Jewish texts, traditions, rituals, history, and customs

Here's a drawing a sixth grader made of our graphic:



How difficult! We looked back at some of our own Shabbat choices: What balance of the three voices had we chosen? How were our varied contexts influencing our decisions? Could we identify any decisions we made differently when we'd changed, or our contexts shifted? The children's response was, "What?" They tried valiantly to make sense of the graphic, but it was so new (whereas text study felt so familiar), and somehow distanced from their lived experience.

What if the children made up imaginary characters, people different enough from us that we could see their context and their personalities influencing their Shabbat decision-making?

The room exploded with children's energy and ideas. Characters' backstories, intimately tied with children's private worries, came tumbling out. We met imaginary Edna, a lonely grandmother who lost her husband to cancer two years ago. We met Big Shaq, a somewhat forgetful Roman soldier who wishes people would see him for the great fighter he is. A child whose parents were divorcing created Jennifer, a busy pediatrician with three children, now happily on her second marriage. Children began designing a small room to represent their characters' Shabbat choices.

It felt so simple to figure out how our characters might make a Shabbat pause that refreshes them. Jennifer, so busy

during the week, takes time on Shabbat to be alone, early morning in her sunroom while her family sleeps. She also spends time with her family, playing games or taking walks together on Shabbat.

The decision-making process soon grew in complexity. What if not working on Shabbat will slow down my progress on meeting a personal goal? On Shabbat Big Shaq, our foolish Roman soldier, switches his guard duty with a fellow soldier, but he exercises at home with his son. He figures that if he's a great fighter, he will provide well for his family and dampen talk about his foolishness. Imaginary Jackyn, at Indiana University, wonders: What if I loved that Shabbat break from technology my family used to take while I was growing up, yet now that I'm at college, the only way I have to connect with my boyfriend and my family on Shabbat is through technology? She Skypes with her boyfriend, Bartolo, on Friday nights to light Shabbat candles together. Then she uses an app called "Shabbat Shalom Phone" to turn off her cell phone until noon the next day, when she calls her family.

Jackyn's Dorm Room

Children saw clearly that as our contexts change, our Shabbat choices may change. Jackyn, navigating her new college life, figures out how to retain what she loved from Shabbat as a child; Edna, redesigning her life after the death of her husband, finds new ways of making Shabbat peace. The imaginary characters allowed children to see that there's no single answer to our question "How might we make a Shabbat 'pause' in a way that refreshes us?" Our answers are as varied, and as personal, as we are.

Yet the children's learning stretched far beyond their characters' Shabbat choices. The project process itself gave children a chance to grapple with individual choices within a larger community. For example, many of the children created their imaginary characters as a pair. That is, *two children* collaborated on a single character: they worked through disagreements, decided what to hold strongly and what to let go, let themselves be influenced by what mattered to a friend, and asserted their own views when they felt strongly. Inside the cloak of their characters, children explored the joys of parenthood and love of a boyfriend or spouse that they wondered about, testing different ways of being a family, of meeting responsibilities to self and to others. The sense of intimacy within our group grew, our imaginary world spilling over into the kindness with which the children helped each other design their projects.

One day, as children put final touches on their characters' Shabbat rooms, the classroom exploded once more. Children started linking their characters' backstories: John, the medieval poet, would marry within two years, and one of his descendants would eventually be Henry "The Eighth" Hamstead! Grandmother Edna was now pediatrician Jennifer's mother, and college student Jackyn became Jennifer's niece. Our imaginary characters were becoming an extended, centuries-old, Jewish family.

Then, the children announced, their characters needed to get ready for Passover!

Astonishing. The children knew what they needed to do next: for themselves as learners, and for their characters' Jewish lives. The children were ready for the next round of Jewish decision-making.

Our simplified graphic, with its mix of self, context, and Jewish conversation through the centuries, resonated with the children's own decision-making process. It felt real to them, and it eased anxieties around our own varied Shabbat choices. No longer were there children in the room who "did Shabbat" and children who "didn't." Instead, we recognized a wide variety of Shabbat practices as equally authentic, to the children as individuals and to their families and Jewish communities.

On a special Sunday morning, children shared their Shabbat rooms with parents and grandparents. Our conception of Jewish decision-making resonated with the grown-ups, too. And as parents and children discussed the imaginary characters' Shabbat choices, grown-ups, too, began to feel less anxious about their real-life Shabbat choices. We openly acknowledged that there isn't one "right" way to make Shabbat. We can change how we make Shabbat throughout our lives.

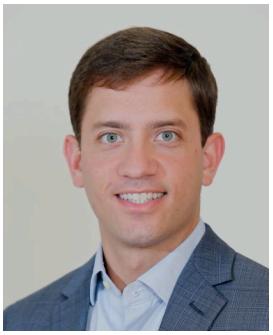
Ultimately, we choose how we want to express our Judaism. It isn't easy to navigate the complexities of commitments to self, family, communities, and fellow humans across our planet. Yet by setting our Jewish lives in a framework of understanding, rather than one of knowledge or "right" answers, through listening and respectful dialogue and recognition of our interconnectedness, we make it possible for our children, and for us, to express our Judaism in ways that offer dignity to all.

Rabbi Rebecca Milder is Founding Director of the Jewish Enrichment Center, a laboratory Sunday and afterschool in Chicago that raises the child's voice in Jewish learning. Her professional work centers on creating pathways for Jews of all ages to recognize themselves as powerful agents in a dynamic Judaism. Rebecca and her family, Ethan, Abe, and Hannah, have been active members at Rodfei for over a decade and can hardly believe it's already time to celebrate Abe becoming Bar Mitzvah with our Rodfei community.

This American Shabbat

Since arriving at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, Rabbi David Minkus has created and nurtured a program originally suggested by NPR's This American Life*. Invited by the Rabbi, participants in This American Shabbat study together and discuss, then present their interpretations at a Shabbat service. Over and over participants express their appreciation for each other's insights, and the entire Congregation thrills to the rediscovery of its members' talents and commitment. The first two talks, on Parashat Chaye Sarah, were originally presented on November 3, 2018. The second three, on Mishpatim, were given on February 2, 2019.*

by Daniel Blumenthal



Two weeks ago I returned from Israel, where I'm fortunate to travel quite often. Following fruitful discussions in Hyde Park with the Rabbi, Nancy and Sherry, my travel this time was particularly meaningful in preparing for This American Shabbat as I stayed in a town about halfway between my company's office in Beer Sheva, where Abraham dwells at the end of last week's parsha, and Hevron, where our parasha begins this week. With the parasha in mind, as I traveled through the mostly dry and barren land, I had to wonder why the Torah shares so many details of Abraham's purchase of a specific site here as a burial plot for Sarah. But, if anything, the Torah elaborates not on the importance of the site but on the purchase itself. The Torah tells of the people of Chet who seemingly wish to treat Abraham with great respect, calling him a *Nasih Elohim*, a prince of God, and offering their land to him at no cost. Abraham, however, deals nobly with the people, honoring Sarah with a burial plot fit for a matriarch and thus insisting on paying a fair price for the land even with the offer and, although not mentioned here, even with God's promise of the land to his descendants.

That promise has, in essence, been fulfilled in our time, though certainly not without ongoing struggle. Today, this parasha may seem useful to base ownership of the land and I don't doubt that it has made its way to official Israeli-Palestinian negotiating tables. Is it possible the Torah so well documents this purchase knowing the weight it might hold at a negotiating table thousands of years later? Perhaps this is a relevant question, but mostly because of our modern context with the current discourse in Israel, and I find focusing on it to be missing the more crucial and timeless lesson the Torah is sharing.

Although I spend the majority of my time in Israel in Tel Aviv and Beer Sheva, I most look forward to visits to Jerusalem. If the timing works, I spend Shabbat there with my cousin James who was, until recently, Director of the Israel Museum. I have enjoyed many behind the scenes tours of the museum and reading this week's parasha made

me think of an exhibit, Pharaoh in Canaan, which highlighted through archeological findings the economic activity and cultural influences which crossed between Egypt and Canaan in the second millenium BCE. These were two distinct regions with ever changing leadership yet from jewelry to household goods, buildings to sculptures, the evidence of shared materials and design were visible, clearly enriching the lives and culture of the people. This exhibit provides a glimpse into a world likely not too different than the one in which Abraham lived, one in which a fairly constant flow of people, for different economic or political reasons, moved back and forth in the region, interacting with each other along the way - just as Abraham does with the people of Chet, and his servent does in search of a wife for Isaac later in the story.

These interactions do not necessarily suggest a desire for assimilation, and they certainly don't in our parasha. Instead, we learn lessons of independence and nationhood as Abraham describes himself to the people of Chet as a *ger toshav*, a stranger and settler. And later, he specifically sends his servant far away to his birthplace to make sure to find a wife for his son from a familiar people, knowing the future of the nation God promised would be, quite literally, carried by the woman his servant would find. But these interactions do set the stage for our wandering path as Jews and the countless places and people we've lived among throughout our history.

Although the Israel Museum provided a glimpse, perhaps no place in the world better showcases our wandering past than the Old City in Jerusalem. An area roughly a quarter the size of Hyde Park, the Old City holds some of the holiest sites for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. But more than that, although it is constantly evolving, the area still functions today as it has for thousands of years - as a place to live, now for well over 30,000 people, a place to study and worship, and a place to shop and work. Within a five minute walk are fanatical Jews dressed in long black coats and fur hats gathering for a minyan, Muslims racing through the narrow streets after hearing the call to prayer, and Christians speaking every world language waiting in an endless line wrapped around an ornate tomb. For those who haven't experienced Jerusalem and Israel in this way – not just visiting the Western Wall but shopping in the Arab market or walking the Twelve Stations – it is powerful to interact with such diversity literally on top of itself and to understand that day to day, this somehow works.

What works is not some carefully crafted momentary photo-op for us to capture as we tour the streets of Jerusalem. Rather, it is the evolution of Jerusalem and our people – the tastes, the sounds, the dress, the art, the religion and on. And this is exactly what our parasha, and the Torah more broadly, sets the stage for.

Our parasha ends with Abraham's death and his two sons Ishmael and Isaac burying their father. Why does Ishmael reemerge here? An answer might be that it shows how the brothers reconciled with one another, opening the door for peace between Jews and Muslims today. But again, this explanation requires modern context. What do we actually know about the interaction? One has to imagine an awkward and tense interaction between the brothers, two words which can also be used to describe the interaction between Abraham and the people of Chet. With historical context, these interactions may take on a whole different meaning, perhaps to understand family relationships, burial practices or the value of currency. Although their exact nature in the Torah is rooted in historical context and our interpretations of them can take on modern context, it's crucial to recognize that the very fact that these interactions took place and are included in the Torah leave us with a timeless lesson to explore.

Ishmael's reemergence though may take on an even more practical and timeless role – the Torah doesn't linger on the interaction between the brothers and our parasha ends with details of Ishmael's descendants whom we are told settle as neighbors to the land of Canaan. Although our narrative shares nothing more on Ishmael's descendents, continuing instead with Isaac, Jacob and beyond, Ishmael's descendants are worth mentioning as we will go on living among them for thousands of years – almost surely to this day even – as we journey through the region and ultimately settle back in Israel.

As I perused the halls of that exhibit in the Israel Museum, the story before me was certainly, at least in part, of the relationship between descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. And it's the same story unfolding today on the streets of Jerusalem. It's the story of our wandering past and the diverse interactions we've faced which have been so integral to our rich lives and culture today. It's the enduring story of the Torah; the legacy of Abraham our forefather, a *ger toshav* in his time.

Yes, Abraham bought land in what is now the State of Israel, the same land God promised to us, and we must recognize its importance to us as Jews and champion it. But more than the land itself we must not forget the details the Torah shares of how Abraham dealt with the people of Chet, the timeless quality of nobility he showed the people in his time of mourning; and we should champion it, bringing such nobility into our lives and our interactions whenever and wherever we are – including at a negotiating table – for it is the path to a continued rich and hopefully peaceful future.

That was what I had prepared, but with Pittsburgh on our minds and after reading the Rabbi's note, talking about timeless lessons in our parasha made me think of Shabbat itself, for nothing in the Torah is more timeless than Shabbat. Each and every week we are commanded to rise above our day to day lives, our modern context, and celebrate Shabbat. Last week that gift was stolen from 11 people who clearly cherished it. But Shabbat comes again.

On any given Shabbat, just as we interpret the parasha with our modern context, we may find special meaning which connects us to the day. But one thing the Torah makes clear – and I have to add for me one thing my

grandmother whose yahrzeit was just last week made clear – is there should always be at least that moment when everything stops and the candles are lit. The moment when Shabbat stands alone; a moment nothing can ever overshadow; a timeless gift we should always cherish.

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by Nancy Jacobson

The events of this week's parasha – Sarah's death, Isaac's betrothal, Abraham's old age – are ordinary life stages that we all know. And, in contrast to what we read about the rest of Abraham's life, the events unfold on a human scale. God does not speak in this week's Torah portion. Abraham handles Sarah's death and burial; he marries off Isaac; creates a new family in his old age; and finally is buried by Isaac and Ishmael together – all without a word from God. Almost like an ordinary person.

Up until now, Abraham's life was punctuated by God's commands and promises, culminating in the command to sacrifice Isaac. God does not speak to Abraham again after that. Why does God fall silent? That may seem like a question for last week's parasha, but it stayed with me as I considered Abraham's ordinary social and domestic activity in Chaye Sarah. I recently heard several discussions about God's testing of Abraham, and whether Abraham passed God's test. Someone argued that Abraham, Isaac, and God all failed the test that was before them. Another person viewed the Akedah through the lens of his own anxiety about test- taking and his fear of being defined by test results. It got me thinking – as a former Ancona Montessori parent – about what tests are for, and whether the pass/fail result is the point.

When I went to law school, testing loomed larger than it ever had before. My grade would depend on a single exam, graded blindly so that the professor couldn't be influenced by my in-class wit. I hated that idea – but law school exams turned out to be different from what I expected. The grades themselves seemed pretty arbitrary, rarely reflecting how well or poorly I understood the material. But that turned out not to matter much, because I discovered that studying for and taking the exams was the learning process, or at least a large part of it. What I learned through that process, rather than the

final grade, became the point of exams to me.

Granted, that was the privileged experience of a student who was not flunking out of law school. But Abraham too was in a privileged position to learn from his test in the Akedah, because it turned out he was not bound by the answer he chose. The angel stopped him from finishing his task. So when I look at Abraham's actions and God's silence in this week's parasha, I wonder not so much about whether Abraham passed his test, but about what he learned in preparing for and taking the test of the Akedah, and how that learning shaped the last segment of his life, as described in this week's portion.

Throughout Chaye Sarah, Abraham is engaged in important but ordinary family activities, with their characteristic mix of the personal and the economic. Sarah dies and Abraham bewails her. At the same time, he faces the practical social and economic task of buying a burial plot in a land far from his own people. Although God has promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, Abraham does not rely on that promise to claim a plot of ground there. He is not going to bury Sarah on property that – by secular legal rights – belongs to someone else. Rather, Abraham identifies himself as a resident alien in the land God has promised him, and he seeks permission from the locals to buy land there. He pays 400 shekels for the cave where he will bury Sarah. He's operating here in the secular world. He uses material wealth, not his special promise from God, to lay claim to the piece of land he needs.

After he buries Sarah, Abraham engages in his next piece of domestic business, dispatching his servant to find a wife for Isaac. He tells the servant to go and bring back a woman from the land where Abraham was born. As with the purchase of Sarah's burial plot, this story unfolds in a social context, facilitated by Abraham's material wealth. God does not speak or intervene directly. We see the economic and the emotional side of another life cycle event in Abraham's family.

The economic aspect is clear. When the servant sets off to find Isaac's bride, he takes with him ten camels, a retinue of men, and all of Abraham's bounty. But we also see moving and familiar emotional moments as Rebecca leaves her family and goes to Isaac.

When we were studying this parasha, Daniel noted that Rebecca's may be the least dysfunctional family in Genesis. They do come across as caring people with ordinary family feelings. They want their daughter to marry well, but are reluctant for her to leave them too soon; they ask for more time together before she departs with Abraham's servant. When the servant objects to the proposed delay, they ask Rebecca – with noteworthy consideration – what she wants to do. She is ready to leave with the servant, and so she does. When Isaac sees Rebecca for the first time, his response is poignant and personal. Although this is the moment – meeting his wife – that will allow Isaac to become father to a great nation, his emotional needs are far removed from that epic destiny. He takes Rebecca to what had been Sarah's tent. We are told, "Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death." As when Abraham bewailed Sarah, we see Isaac's human-

scale grief. And now we see the comfort of human love.

So why does this happen here – this domestic interlude? Why is the Akedah followed by stories of family affection and loss, of social interactions and economic exchange? What happened to God's voice? Maybe God had nothing left to say to Abraham. Or maybe Abraham stopped listening for God's voice after the Akedah. He may have been frightened of what God would ask next. He may have been angry. We don't know.

The Torah does not describe Abraham's feelings after he narrowly misses killing his son. We know just that Abraham stays in Beer-sheba, and that he hears his brother Nahor has fathered many children, one of whom will be Rebecca's father. That news of Nahor's offspring reintroduces Abraham's family of origin, and forms a bridge from the trauma of last week's portion to the mostly secular domesticity of this week's. After he is tested, Abraham thinks not just of the great nation ahead of him, but also of the family he left behind when God commanded him. Abraham embraces his covenant with God. By burying Sarah in the land God promised him, he stakes his people's future there. But at the same time, he reaches back to the land of his fathers, to the life before God set his extra-ordinary path.

That two-directional reach encompasses both the epic destiny ahead of Abraham and his need for ordinary human relationships. The Akedah – Abraham's test – embodied the torturous tension between those two. Before the Akedah, Abraham followed God's voice. But in Chaye Sarah, a more attenuated relationship replaces that direct communication from God. Abraham and his servant still invoke God, and look to God for help. The servant seeks God's sign to identify the right woman for Isaac, asking God to let it be the woman who will water his camels. But the certainty of God's voice is gone. Is Rebecca's offer to water the camels evidence that God stepped into the action? Maybe. But crucially, we don't know. That uncertainty is the difference between hearing God's voice and getting a sign.

In the test of the Akedah, Abraham must have experienced that uncertainty as never before when following God's voice. As in the past, God commands and Abraham obeys. But, with the knife in his hand, can Abraham have felt certain? When the angel stops him, Abraham learns that God's spoken command may not mean that you were meant to accomplish the thing commanded. In this case, it meant something more complex – that you had to show your willingness to do it; or perhaps you were meant to show your unwillingness to do it. Whether Abraham passed or failed, the test moves him into a world where the purpose of God's spoken command is uncertain. After that, Abraham is less single-mindedly driven by the destiny God set for him; he more actively shapes the way that destiny will unfold. Abraham decrees that Isaac should stay in the land God promised them, but he also decides that the mother of the next generation should come from his original homeland. He integrates his earlier human-scale family ties into the new land.

Before he dies, Abraham re-marries and has more children. I imagine this as one of those late-life marriages that makes children from an earlier marriage say, “Can you imagine Dad that relaxed and happy when we were kids?” The Torah says that Abraham left everything to Isaac, but to the children of his late-life marriage, he gave gifts while he was living. Those living gifts, so much less than what Isaac inherits, suggest to me a live human-scale relationship that Abraham and Isaac could never have. Abraham dies, we are told, content. He is buried by Ishmael and Isaac, who embody the God-driven life that produced great nations. And he is gathered to his kin – to the forebearers he left behind, and to whom he later reached back.

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by Martha Roth

I will begin with (a) reflections on the nature and impact of translations; (b) muse on an interesting grammatical/lexical structure, the cognate accusative, that plays an outsize role in this parshah; and (c) close with some more personal observations.

I am an Assyriologist, a philologist and lexicographer, most interested in the primary and secondary meanings, uses, and deployments of lexemes and idioms, and in com–positional histories and manuscript variations. And as a student of the socio-legal history of the ancient Near East, the regulations (mishpatim) in this parshah in Exodus have served as basis and foil for my investigations of Meso–potamian legal history; for decades, I’ve parsed and analyzed the minutiae of these passages, seeking original meaning and original historical context: What legal precedents are envisioned in the regulations about rape, bribery, assault, goring oxen? How would — or could — such regulations ever operate on the ground, in what kind of state, with what sort of judicial apparatus?

Philology has long been my way of approaching any text, no matter how sacred or profane, and I did the same in our study sessions for this Shabbat with my wonderful group. As we read the Etz Hayim translation, my study-partners saw me returning to the Hebrew, worrying about the variant manuscripts for key and troubling passages, asking where else a particular word appears in the Bible, and certainly interrogating the English translation. And in the last few years, I’ve found myself less interested in dissecting the text either as an end in itself (the joy of the hunt!), as a way to understand better the ancient world, and more interested in philology as a pre–condition to seeking a literary appre–ciation of the received text in and for the modern world – a little less Julius Wellhausen and a little more Robert Alter. I attribute at least some of this to my experiences teaching in the Uni–versity’s freshman curriculum, leading students through an exploration of material new to them and often far outside of my scholarly comfort zone. We just finished four weeks of reading

Homer's Odyssey, for example, and to help explore the enduring value and lessons of Odysseus's spatial and emotional wanderings, of Telemachus's maturation, of Penelope, Clytemnestra, Nausicaa, and Helen's strengths and (in)fidelities, I used four English trans–lations and consulted (in my limited capacity) the Greek text.

And thus my attention has turned more and more to the phenomenon of translations – thinking about moving from a source language (in our case, Biblical Hebrew) to a target language (here English); about the tensions between literal and literary translations; about how a translator needs to have a deep grasp of the store of knowledge the original audience held in order to construct a new text (the "translation") for a new audience with a very different set of experiences. In fact, a translator's task is to create a new reality, one that has new meaning for a new audience. And when the new audience engages successfully with a new translation, when the translation resonates with the audience's perceptions of their world and gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own prior assumptions and to build on their prior knowledge, then the original text endures and lives.

Please indulge me for a moment while I talk about a particular gram–matical construction, the cognate accusative, and its force in our parshah. Now I know this is probably boring to most of you, but the cognate accusative – in which a verb and its object are etymologically related: to die a death, dream a dream, sing a song – appears twenty times in mishpatim, and is illustrative for our concern about trans–lations. The force of this construction is almost always lost in our Etz Hayim translation, perhaps because of some idea that it is awkward or archaic. So mōt yumat is translated passim in our parshah simply as "he shall be put to death," a rendering that misses out on the force of the construction in the Hebrew and should rather be translated something like "he shall be put to death by a death" or "put-to-death, yes, death" (Everett Fox, William Propp) or "he is doomed to die" (Robert Alter). Alas, it is not possible for the reader of the Etz Hayim translation to perceive the variations in the intentions of text when encountering the rhetorically and legally emphatic mōt yumat in, for example, 21:15, for the person who strikes his father or mother, against the simpler yumat in, for example, 21:29, for the owner of the goring ox -- both of which Etz Hayim renders "he shall be put to death." This is a not a minor point; the different articulations in the Hebrew text signal differing levels of legal culpability and communal moral outrage for the elder abuser (mōt yumat) and for the owner of a wayward beast (yumat) and hence indicate something important about the values and assumptions of ancient Israelite tribal and agricultural life.

Translation – good translation -- is both literal, capturing the legal, social, and cultural reality of the original, and literary, conveying the beauty and flow of a text and making it relevant for a contemporary audience. Indeed, the entire Exodus narrative is both literal and literary. For some readers, the Exodus story is literal: the Hebrew people did indeed, at a historical moment, leave Egypt for the Sinai desert. A good translation will allow other readers to consider the Exodus as

a literary trope, a narrative of enslave–ment and liberation that can inform the reader's own life's struggles.

For me, the professional is per–sonal and the personal is professional – the literal and literary blend and reinforce one another. So allow me to close with some more intimate obser–vations.

Today, February 2, is my father's birth date; he would have been 105 today. He was one of six siblings in Hungary, four of whom survived the Nazi labor camps and death marches; most of the rest of the nuclear and extended family, including my father's first wife and his son, my brother Paul Ivan, perished. The last of his brothers, my Uncle Eugene, died just last week. They were the generation that ex–perienced first emancipation then slavery in Europe and then liberation in America, just as did the Hebrews in Egypt, the desert, and then Canaan. For my father, the Hebrews' liberation nar–rative was ever-recurring and deeply personal. For him, the Hebrew text held deep personal meaning; even without knowing what a cognate accusative is, for him, the text was a foundational narrative for his ancestors and a for–mative text for his own life's journey. I have never come close to achieving the intimacy with the biblical text that my father did; for me, it remains a cultural artifact. But I do recognize that through my career and life as a philologist, the years of learning and teaching about texts has been part of my own attempt to seek meaning, to honor the paths of those who have gone before me, and, if I'm lucky, to help others in their own self-discovery.

Martha Roth earned her bachelor's degree from Case Western Reserve University and her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania before coming to UChicago in 1979, where she has served as Deputy Provost and Dean of the Humanities Division. She is the Chauncey S. Boucher Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civili-zations, the Oriental Institute, and the College. She was Editor-in-Charge of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, a 26-volume, 90-year project completed in 2011. She studies the legal and social history of the ancient Near East. Martha and her husband Bryon Rosner have two daughters, Helen and Lillian, and a son, Joseph, and are long-time members of Rodfei Zedek, where Martha has served on the Development Committee.

by Rachel Schine

Because I have a unique idea of pleasure reading, this past summer I leafed through the Wisdom of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot). While reading through the second chapter, I came upon the verse, "The more flesh, the more worms. The more possessions, the more worry. The more wives, the more witchcraft. […]." Initially, I thought this was a quixotic piece of evidence of something we all already know: the pre-modern world, including our beloved sages, has a patchy record on the "woman question." However, when we started reading Mishpatim

together, we ran across the line that likely inspired this rabbinical remark: 'you shall not tolerate a sorceress,' or, in common parlance, 'you shall not suffer a witch to live.' These words have echoed through history wreaking havoc (if only the people of Salem had read just a bit further, to the part where we're commanded in Mishpatim not to make false reports or follow mobs into evil). The witches verse is situated amongst other prohibitions related primarily to types of perfidy and seduction: don't ravish virgins without a promise of marriage, don't lie with beasts, don't sacrifice to other gods, etc. Here, the sorceress seems to represent a seducer of minds, calling people to false prophecies and false methods. The fact that the sorceress is a "she" reflects historical probability—female soothsayers and occultists have a centuries-long history: Mesopotamian myth preserves a record of the "Wise Woman" Sagburu, who conjured animals; in Greece the witches of Thessaly could command the moon; in pre-Islamic Arabia the blue-eyed soothsayer, Zarqā' al-Yamama could "see" people who were days away from reaching her tribe.

In legend, such women were often older and more experienced in the ways of the world, and commanded a sort of public authority outside their households that was admired and feared. They also exercised a form of creative genius that women were otherwise not given much opportunity to display; aside from rare outbursts of poetry and song, women in the Hebrew Bible generally receive the most plaudits for creating children, or occasionally for devising clever schemes for hiding scouts or killing Philistines, but female intellectual production qua an art or a science is largely absent. But the existence of these witches speaks, in my view, to a specific form of women's knowledge and its transmission (the more women, the more it proliferates) that is being inveighed against in the nascent Hebrew state and later again in rabbinic literature. Women's chatter and imagination are treated here as dangerous and seductive, and branded as superstitious or even alien. One piece I read on Biblical witches said that in Judaism, witchcraft has been understood as a "vice that virtually every woman would indulge in." Moreover, educated men in rabbinic literature are often encouraged to traffic in what, when enacted by a woman, looks a lot like witchcraft, from making tinctures and amulets to performing minor miracles. In other words, a dichotomy is being set up between men's learned charms and women's folk fixes. Banning such things strikes me as a loss of greater social significance than the quashing of pagan practices that Mishpatim seems to be primarily targeting.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf talks about the relationship between creative suppression and women's malaise, saying: "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [i.e. in the age of Shakespeare] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." For much of history, having special abilities as a woman would either get you killed if you flaunted it or slowly kill your spirit if you hid it. Moreover, ancient models for public expressions of female power have a long legacy of extirpation. Most of the monotheisms have aggressively replaced prior cults that were not only

pantheistic, but that prominently featured many goddesses: a handful of Mesopotamian goddesses are mentioned by name in the Bible, and some have noted the relationship between Marian devotion in Christianity and goddess worship — perhaps most visible to us today in Mexico's patron saint, the Virgen de Guadalupe, who first descended upon a Nahuatl goddess' temple. The only other deities mentioned in the Qur'an are three women: Allat, Manat, and 'Uzza. Women's centrality in public ritual — even in mundane ways — seems to have gone the way of these figures. So, the reason witches are on my mind is because their condemnation in Mishpatim seems not to be a mere one-off, but rather to dovetail with a lot of other considerations about how women should conduct themselves in religious spaces that have been engineered to be traditionally male.

One need look no further than the remainder of Mishpatim to find traces of a system that implicitly does not center women in encounters with the sacred: men are commanded to approach the alter three times a year for festival days, and Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, along with seventy elder males from among the Israelites even get to see God. As a conservative Jewish woman, I have often been struck by the fact that much of what a woman does in egalitarian Jewish spaces to reify her inclusion is essentially to take on the same commandments that men follow in a way that is supererogatory, at least in view of the law. Much of this practice is dear to my heart: intensive study, taking aliyot, reading publicly from the Torah— these are hard won victories for women in (some corners of) Judaism. And yet, some scholars have argued around these ambitions with assertions that though women are not prevented from doing things like, say, donning tzitzit, there is no reward in doing so because there is no basis for it being a mitzvah when done by a woman. Viewed alongside the spurned witches of old, this state of things makes me wonder: what would it look like to have female-centered rituals publicly enacted and daily celebrated? What would it look like to have something that the men could supererogatorily adapt, so that the direction of emulation flowed both ways, and so that (in the words of a scholar I admire) equality means more than "a seat at someone else's preset table, or the mere re-articulation of the dominant view in some hip pentatonic key?" Does it consist in singing Miriam's song in the liturgy? In collectively sanctifying women's supposed refusal to give up their jewelry for the golden calf at Rosh Chodesh? In my husband and I passing the match between us when lighting Shabbat candles?

I'm honestly not sure how to answer my own question, and it vexes me, because I want to feel there is something simultaneously precious enough in the woman/woman-identifying ritual repertoire to be shared with my community and that is also uniquely mine. I don't think this is a desire that— at least for me—is fulfilled by revisionist exegesis, the substitution of God's male pronouns with female ones, or women-only Megillah readings in celebration of Esther's girl-power (all of which I've seen and tried). It lies not in separation of the genders or replacing one with another, but in recovering a sense that men can and should be able to universalize female models and roles in

equal measure to the way that women are casually, consistently nudged to see the male as the universal standard. For examples of where such models lie, as well as cautionary tales, I can perhaps regard the sorceresses falsely accused, the everyday magic overlooked, or Virginia Woolf's unsung creative geniuses. I can uphold the wisdom of women, with all due respect to the Wisdom of the Fathers.

Rachel Schine is a PhD candidate in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, focusing on Arabic literature. You've probably seen her (literally) running around Hyde Park. She and her spouse, Nathan Schine, have been attending services at Rodfei Zedek since early in their graduate careers, but became more involved last year after the passing of Nathan's father, Peter. Though they won't be in Chicago much longer, they've immensely appreciated the congregation's love and support.

by David Mayrowetz

I studied Mishpatim with Martha, Rachel and Rabbi David – and I want to thank each of them for sharing their insights and for teaching me. It was fascinating to dissect a Torah law code with scholars of ancient and really ancient Near Eastern culture and a rabbi.

So what did I discover? In a nutshell I found a perplexing paradox. On one hand, we are encouraged to follow laws unquestioningly and on the other hand, some of the laws are simply unworkable. Come hold these ideas in tension with me and maybe during lunch you can help me resolve it.

Idea #1 *Na'aseh v'Nishma*. Chapter 24 Verse 7 reads: "And they said, 'all that the Lord has spoken we'll do and we'll listen.'" I know I'm not the only person in this congregation that's attracted to the phrase (Note its prominence on our Aron). *Na'aseh v'Nishma* encapsulates our ancestors' willingness to embrace Torah and their deep faith in God.

For me, *Na'aseh v'Nishma* connotes a Judaism that is appealing. Action first. Pray with our feet, as Heschel would say. It's an articulation of faith that allows me to minimize my questioning about God whose presence feels intermittent to me. *Na'aseh v'Nishma* also symbolizes a Judaism of social justice which is prominently displayed in Chapter 23.

For example, verse 4. "When you encounter your enemy's ox or ass wandering you must take it back to him." In other words, property rights should extend to even the people we despise or fear. Verse 6, "You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes," into which I read, don't allow yourself or others to take advantage of relative privilege. Verse 9, "You shall not oppress a *ger* (a resident alien) for you know the feelings of being a *ger*, having yourselves been *gerim* in the land of Egypt." That command needs to permeate the halls of power in this country. Verse 11, "In the seventh year, you shall let the earth rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it…"

Provide for the needy, respect the planet.

These ordinances exhort us to pursue justice and to empathize with the poor and the resident alien. And presumably, as we "*Na'aseh*," as we do, we "*Nishma*" we listen and appreciate the whys.

Former Hyde Parker and Lab School Founder John Dewey told us that we learn by doing, or more accurately by reflecting on what we do after we've done it. I've seen this in my educational research career. When 4th grade math teachers are told to change their practice by some distant lawmaker they may shrug at the shiny brochure or webpage and go about their business. It's typically only after they get a new textbook and are forcefully and hopefully lovingly cajoled to have their students engage different kinds of tasks that teachers can start to really see and understand why a different type instruction may be better. It's a secular version of the same theory. Let teachers do it first with their students, reflect on it and if all goes to plan then they will learn to teach in new and better ways.

So Idea #1 – *Na'aseh v'Nishma*. Appealing and Research Approved. But here comes idea #2...

Ayin Tachat Ayin, an eye for an eye, and many other laws of Mishpatim are simply not feasible when read for their plain meaning because they don't account for the variation of contextual and mitigating circumstances of individual cases. The four of us returned to this idea over and over again in our study sessions.

For example, we start the parasha with a law that Hebrew slaves must be released in 7 years unless they elect to stay, in which case their ear is pierced and they are enslaved for life. As I dug into commentary, and a similar law from Leviticus, I learned that our Rabbis skillfully undercut this command without explicitly rejecting the clear meaning of the text. Long story short, they concluded that Jews can't be enslaved forever but must be released in a Jubilee year. Command eluded.

Another example. Chapter 21, verse 12 "He who fatally strikes a man shall be put to death." Rabbi David told us all about how our sages in the Mishnah constructed an elaborate procedure in the Sanhedrin for capital cases that make the likelihood of actually executing a murderer very remote. Again, Command eluded.

If the Rabbis knew some of these laws cannot or should not be obeyed as written, doesn't that obliterate the whole idea of *Na'aseh v'Nishma*? If many, maybe most of the 3 chapters of law code in this parasha aren't there for us to follow literally, then why are they here?

The four of us tossed around the idea that these laws need to be read at deeper levels. When I look over the parasha as a whole, I think we can't just *Na'aseh v'Nishma*. We can't just DO and then LISTEN. We first need to listen carefully to what is being signaled and internalize the spirit of these laws before we figure out how to reasonably and pragmatically follow them, if at all. Otherwise we'll fail to heed Gandhi's admonition that, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind."

Here's a particularly troubling piece of text that begs us to bust our scuba gear and go deep! Chapter 22 Verse 17. *Mchashefa lo T'Chayeh*, charitably translated in our Chumash as "You shall not tolerate a sorceress."

Take that command literally and add abuse of power and healthy dose of sexism – you get over 25 women killed in 17th century Massachusetts.

Take that command metaphorically and maybe one might see it as a warning to avoid charismatic leaders who seduce our minds and undermine our relationship with God.

Take that sentence in the context of commands that precede and follow it and perhaps it is as admonition against deception with intimate partners, albeit a sexist version thereof.

And finally, this parasha contains the sentence that forms the basis of one of the central elements of Kashrut. *Lo Tvashel Gdi BaChalev Emo*. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk or maybe fat, but let's say milk. Take the command literally and my daughter Maya's response makes a ton of sense. Don't worry about eating a cheeseburger if the cow is from Iowa and the cheese is made in Wisconsin. And if you're really concerned she suggests designing a quick read DNA testing kit to test beef and cheese for kinship of the originating cows.

Take the command metaphorically and we see the prohibition against the perversion of killing and cooking a young animal within a liquid that is supposed to nourish it. Thus, going deep, we are commanded to avoid cruelty to living beings.

So I gleaned these two paradoxical ideas and as I said, I continue to hold them in a tension that I haven't yet resolved. These words of Torah are commands for us to act (or not act). AND they carry deeper moral messages. But what do we do unquestioningly? What must we reinterpret to abide deeper moral truths while trimming away outdated notions like androcentrism and sexism?

I don't know that I'll ever know the answers to these questions. Maybe they simply aren't answerable. Torah, American law, 21st century social structures and strictures which we navigate daily are all supposed to guide us down the "right path." But sometimes the conventional rules or Torah rules DON'T work, CAN'T work, and at least for me, the truth is that I don't always recognize that because I can be in too deep to see it. Today, all I am sure about is that only through active and close reading of the rules and structures that surround me, including mitzvot, am I actually in a position to make the call on when to *Na'aseh v'Nishma* and when to challenge, reinterpret, or even reject.

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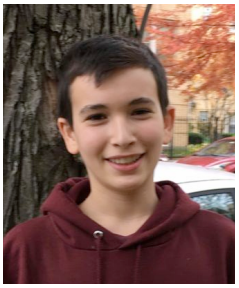
Struggling with a Story of Struggle

***by* Shammai Winitzer**



My parasha, תולדות, begins with the statement

אלה תולדות יצחק בן אברהם
ואברהם הוליד את יצחק

which, in one translation I looked at, appears as "This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac." Now, this parasha does not actually focus on the story of Isaac, but rather on his children, Jacob and Esav. Isaac's childhood, or certainly the most important experience of it, is described earlier, in the עקדה, or The Binding of Isaac, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is clear therefore, that the Hebrew word, תולדות cannot be translated here as "story"; or at least, the word cannot be taken in the sense that we find for it elsewhere, for example it is not in the case of Noah. In that parasha, the Torah mentions his three children, but then spends far more time on the memorable story of the flood.

So, we see that in its storytelling, the Torah can make use of the same word in unusual and different ways, and these ways show what it really wants to stress. In this devar Torah, I would like to explore this issue a bit further. In other words, I want to see how the Torah builds its stories.This parasha describes the early life of Jacob and Esav. In its beginning, the parasha turns to Rebekah's pregnancy with the twins and their eventual births.

Let me consider the pregnancy first. One detail that caught my eye is how the Torah talks about Rebekah's period of pregnancy; actually this is the only detail it mentions about the whole thing. When describing the children in the womb, the Torah says that they "התרוצצו," which is typically translated as, "they struggled," but this is actually just a guess. After all, the root of this word, רוץ, means "to run," and in the form we see it, it has the sense of "running around." Now let's move on to the birth. Here we find that memorable detail, of Jacob, the second born, grabbing Esav's heel, or עקב, as Esav comes out of the womb. (As you may remember, from this Jacob gets his name, יעקב.)

These two details caught my eye as I began studying. I thought to myself whether these stories really happened exactly how they are told. Could Jacob and Esav actually struggle in the womb with each other? And is it really possible for a fetus, at the brink of its birth, to grasp onto the heel of its newborn twin? I must say that when I first thought about the answers to these questions, I was doubtful about the possibility that these things could really occur.

So how, exactly, did they Jacob and Esav struggle or run around? And how could the Torah tell us that they were boys, before they were even born? And how could Rebekah, or, for that matter, anyone observing her from the outside, know that she was carrying twins?

As you can see, there are many problems here. So, in order to answer these, let us first focus on the other topic I mentioned earlier, when Jacob grabs the heel of Esav. To appreciate the challenges involved in this matter, let's talk about a newborn's developments briefly. When it comes to motor skills, it is possible for a newborn to open its hand and close it around something. This, I guess, could be thought of as grasping. The description we are given is of one newborn grabbing – in midair – the heel of another. This, to put it mildly, is unlikely. But even if it were possible, there is another, bigger issue to consider. And this involves intent. The Torah, after all, presents Jacob's action as intentional, the product of his thinking. And this, from what I learned about Jean Piaget's ideas of development of this stage of the newborn is not possible. (Don't be impressed, it was mainly Wikipedia, and not in French.) We've got the same problem of intent in the other case we discussed, if we understand "התרוצצו" as struggling with one another.

However, here is a question to consider: since when does a story have to be true according to the standards of science? Is there no truth in a story such as Huck Finn just because it is not science? Is the depiction by Mark Twain of the attitudes around slavery not in a sense truer than true – even though the story is in fact fiction?

I turned to Erich Auerbach, a German-Jewish scholar who wrote a famous essay called "Odysseus's Scar," which compares a highly detailed story about Odysseus in Homer's Odyssey with the Akeda. By comparison to this Greek tale, Auerbach is struck by the utter bareness of the Akeda story. Auerbach first notes this in Abraham's response to God of "הנני", which people think means "here I am," but actually, as Auerbach explains, is not about a physical place, but rather "... a moral position of respect to God…." In other words, Abraham's actual location does not really matter; what does, is his willingness to answer God.

What becomes clear, then, is that not every detail that could make up a story actually needs to be there. Sometimes, less is more; and what really matters in the telling of a story is not the reality behind it, but rather, its representation. So why does the Torah offer so little background in the case of the Akeda? Apparently, the Torah believes that the details it omits are not important to the overall story it is trying to tell. And this, the story's overall message, is its expression of profound belief. Just recall the story's repeated depiction of Abraham's and Isaac's silent journey.

When we come back to my parasha, we can now better appreciate its details in contrast to what we just saw. The Akeda uses the fewest details possible to tell its story. In Toldot, something of the opposite is true. This is how I understand those little details that the Torah includes about the pregnancy and birth of Jacob and Esav. What is left for us to explore then, is what these details mean. What is the Torah ultimately trying to tell us when adding the note about the kids' "struggling" in Rebekah's womb, and later, about Jacob's grabbing of Esav's ankle? Just to remind you, this is not the way things need to be. For example, with Sarah's birth of Isaac, which is also not exactly a

typical birth, all the Torah has to say is summed up in just two words: "ותהר... ותלד," "she conceived and bore." So why does the Torah add that the kids "התרוצצו," and the bit about the heel?

I thought about this for quite a long time, and though I am not completely sure, here is my interpretation. The struggling in the womb, as I am sure you can appreciate, raised concerns for the expecting couple. This in ancient times was seen as very ominous. But note just who reacts to this, it is Rebekah who yells out loud, "Why is this happening to me?" and immediately afterwards turns to God and inquires further. God does answer, but that is not even the point. What's far more interesting here is the absence of a certain someone. We hear nothing from Isaac: he has no questions to ask and nothing to say. And this is the same Isaac, who, just a little earlier, in the Akeda, sought to know what was going on. At that time, he needed reassurance. He was scared. Not now. Not anymore. He believes now. And even if trouble should arise – and inevitably in life, trouble does arise, as we learned again recently – Isaac is at peace. And those omens the Torah reports – those added details that would have been alarming to anyone – well, these do not faze him. He knows their ultimate interpretation. And that is his story – his Toldot. And that is the greatest story of all.

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Liking Joseph – And Does It Matter?

***by* Stephanie Friedman**

I have always felt frustrated when someone, whether in a writing workshop or in a book discussion, criticizes a story by talking about how they don't "like" the main character. Is there anything less interesting to discuss than whether or not one particular reader can "relate to" a fictional entity? This like or dislike usually says more about where the reader is coming from than how the character has been presented.

So imagine my chagrin, then, when I found myself stymied in my approach to parashat Va-yeishev by the fact that, well, I just don't like Joseph, that golden boy who goes on glowing no matter what pit he gets thrown into. Yes, his brothers took it too far, selling him to passing slavers and making their father think he was dead, but you've got to admit, you can see where their resentment comes from: that precocious loudmouth with his fancy coat, blabbing on about his dreams of grandeur and reporting tales to their father while they are out in the hot sun tending sheep, taking them from one rocky wadi to another, getting grubbier and more sun-weathered and less well-formed and comely with every passing day. And sure, Potiphar's wife wrongly accuses him of trying to assault her, which gets our upright hero thrown into another lowly place, but we are told the Lord is with him there, so we know things will turn out all right for him in the end.

Compared to Moses, Joseph isn't humbled to quite the same degree as he learns to become a leader: Moses, with his halting speech, gives up his privilege at Pharaoh's court, while silver-tongued Joseph solidifies his power and position there. Joseph is clever, yes, but not necessarily wise, given that he sets the wheels in motion for Israelite slavery. In so doing, he could be said to have grasped for short-term comfort at the price of long-term values, which is the opposite of what Moses is after during his wanderings in the wilderness with a stiff-necked people.

Joseph and his mother Rachel may be described with the exact same phrase regarding their physical attributes, but Joseph gains more benefits from these than she does in the end. The Hebrew words are the same although the English translations reveal what might be a discomfort with this similarity, or at least a slightly different conception of physical attractiveness in men and women, by rending the phrase differently in each instance. To use Etz Hayim as an example:

Rachel was shapely and beautiful. (Gen 29:17)

Joseph was well-built and handsome. (Gen 39:6)

However you render it in English, their comeliness in both cases is a cause for sibling rivalry, but from there the similarity begins to diverge. Rachel's shapeliness and beauty makes her desirable to Jacob, despite the fact that she is the younger sister, but this

younger sibling does not supplant the older as thoroughly as Jacob does Esau. Years of rivalry, bitterness, frustration, and finally death in childbirth are Rachel's portion. Whether or not, as midrash would have it, she had a hand in the subterfuge that made Leah Jacob's bride first, Rachel must wait fourteen years to marry Jacob. When she finally gives birth to a son of her own, after Leah has had six, she gives Joseph a name that at once looks back at the shame which she now hopes is erased, but looks ahead to another hoped-for son. Even in death, she lies apart from Jacob, while her sister lies beside him in the cave of Machpelah.

Joseph's comeliness attracts the attention of Potiphar's wife, but, even though he is a slave, he has the agency to refuse her repeatedly and the ability to flee. Joseph's physical presence and the confidence it gives him, not just his facility with dream interpretation, help him to rise up out of the dungeon by winning the favor of his cellmates and finally Pharaoh himself. Midrash has taken the similar description of mother and son to mean that Joseph is vain or even effeminate, with curled hair and kohl-rimmed eyes – in other words, to be attractive and shapely like a woman is to have the other supposed negative characteristics of one – but it seems to me that Rachel doesn't derive the same benefit from her physique that Joseph does.

At every turn, when I think about the story of Joseph, I can't help but ask myself what there is to learn from a story about the boy who always comes out on top, no matter how many reversals befall him along the way, and who bears no lasting outward sign of his struggles, unlike the limp of his father after wrestling with some man or angel all night on the banks of the River Jabbock or the childbearing death of his mother after years of rivalry with her more fertile but less beloved sister. But my desire for Joseph to experience some humbling or scarring says more about me than about him. What did he have to live on but his charm and his cleverness, his ability to win confidence and woo fortune? Our notions about psychology and literary conventions foster expectations of emotional growth in narrative, but the Torah does not seem to be as invested in this as a story's aim. The Lord is always with Joseph, providing him with an unshakable confidence in himself and his ability to know the right course of action in any situation. This confidence can be seen as either trust in God or vanity and arrogance, but either way, God's will is done.

So if the Torah doesn't care whether or not I like Joseph, what can I make of his story, which is surpassed in length only by that of Moses? Perhaps the proximity of their stories provides us with a clue. Joseph's story acts as a kind of bridge between those of the patriarchs and those of the prophets, of whom Moses is the prime exemplar. You could argue that Joseph is not really a patriarch, or at least doesn't fill the role as well as his father does, since the twelve tribes mostly descend from Jacob, rather than from Joseph himself. He isn't quite a prophet either: the Lord is with Joseph, but does not talk to him face to face or even through angels, only through dreams, his own and then other people's. Joseph can read situations and turn them to his own (and by extension his family's) advantage, but he doesn't intervene or intercede with

God the way Moses and Abraham do. Unlike the figures who come before and after him, Joseph does not fit neatly into either category of community leaders with special relationships to God.

Joseph's not quite one or the other quality brings the Torah's story of the people Israel from one phase into another. With Joseph, the kind of relationship the patriarchs have had with God has come to an end. When a new Pharaoh emerges who does not know Joseph, the people no longer even have Joseph's kind of connection to God to help them. After many years of human-divine distance and silence, they need to come closer to God in a new way, with a new kind of leader. Joseph reads the signs portended in dreams and directs earthly affairs accordingly; Moses, on the other hand, wrestles with both God and the people Israel to establish the mitzvot-filled way of life spelled out in the final four books of the Torah, a constant and complex back-and-forth between the human and the divine.

My discomfort with Joseph's unshakable self-confidence may be, as Oscar Wilde would have it, criticism which is the sincerest form of auto-biography, but I think it is also informed by the legacy of Moses and the practice rather than belief-based systems which Rabbinic Judaism developed out of that legacy. Every time we enjoin ourselves and each other to take a leap of action rather than a leap of faith, as Heschel put it – every time we live out the principle of *na'aseh v'nishmah*, as the people at Sinai put it – we take a step away from merely preserving a people, as Joseph did, and travel further along the less certain but necessary path established by those who came after him, to live lives of meaning through doing. Joseph's story is pageantry, more tightly structured and dramatic than the lists of laws and practices which come in the books that follow, but it is in those less glamorous but more active ways of being, rather than in his golden glow, where we must live.

Stephanie Friedman holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MA in English from the University of Chicago. She teaches writing and serves as Director of Summer Session Academic Programs in the College at the University of Chicago. Stephanie and her family belong to the Rodfei Zedek and Akiba-Schechter communities.

Interpreting a Nightmare

***by* Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby**

I used to have a recurring nightmare that took place at my childhood synagogue. The dream was ominous and choppy, in a sort of hyper-real technicolor, like an ultra-violent film shot on hand-held cameras. But it's not clear what's happening — just a vague threat involving an outsider or outsiders surrounding the building and various members of the congregation held hostage within. There is lots of running. I don't know who the bad guy is, or what he wants. And I never do find out. Before any actual violence begins, I wake up full of dread and fury.

For years, I could count on this dream returning at least once a year. The details would shift — sometimes weapons would be involved, or there'd be a bus parked on the synagogue's playground where the slide ought to have been. But the alarming dread remained. All I knew was someone wanted to hurt the people inside that synagogue, and though I never actually saw the threat come to fruition, it always felt inevitable and terrible.

The visceral anxiety that followed that nightmare usually faded into some dusty corner of my brain as I went on with my life. But at odd moments, an image from the dream would hit me with a sudden, sharp pain, like a needle shooting into my heart, and I'd suddenly feel vulnerable and angry all over again.

At some point, when I was in grad school maybe, I asked my father, a clinical psychologist, what he thought this dream meant. I expected the obvious interpretation: That it was all about my anxiety regarding being Jewish. That was an interpretation that I was prepared to accept immediately. Though I had no conscious fear of antisemitism at the time, nor had I ever been the overt victim of it, I assumed that that age-old unease — always remember, they hate us! — had been implanted in my subconscious, lurking under the surface of everything, a kind of periodic alarm to remain vigilant.

Instead my father responded by asking a question that took me by surprise:

"Where are you in this dream?"

I didn't understand what he meant.

"I mean, were you inside the synagogue, or outside it?"

I couldn't answer. The truth was, I was nowhere and everywhere at once, watching the events unfold like a passive observer in a movie theater or a bird flying overhead.

I don't remember much of the conversation beyond that. At the time, being Jewish was not all that central to how I defined myself, publicly or privately, and I'd never had the conviction to stand up for much of

anything. The threat of the dream felt like an abstraction—one that didn't have a whole lot to do with my day-to-day life. Like being afraid of snakes, or heights.

This fall, shortly after a white supremacist opened fire on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, I had the nightmare again. And this time the dream felt different. The outsider had a face, and a gun, and a reason. (See? They do hate us!)

The main difference, though, was not one of context but perspective: I was inside the synagogue now. And the congregants, it turned out, were not huddling in fear. Yes, they were afraid — of course they were — but they were doing what they always did. Laughing and singing, arguing and praying. The faces around me felt familiar, like old friends, people I knew and trusted even if I could not recall their names at the moment. But we were together. And the bad guy did not get inside.

I woke up confused. At the Tree of Life synagogue, of course, the bad guy did get inside. The damage he did is incalculable and will be felt for years to come. On the other hand, seen through a new lens, this version of the dream felt strangely, personally affirming. Empowering, even. The faces of "old friends" I saw in the dream were yours. I have been a part of the Rodfei Zedek community for more than 20 years now. It's an ongoing part of my life, which means I get the good stuff but also the periodic terror and sadness. We will continue to laugh and sing and pray and argue, and a shooting will not change any of that.

Two nights after the tragedy, I saw several of those faces at a candlelight vigil in the quad at the U of C. Together with nearly 200 people—some Jewish, some not—we sang songs in Hebrew, Arabic and English. I stood with my wife and kids, listening, sad but also comforted to know that similar vigils were happening all over the world. And that more than $10 million would be donated to victims' funds, Holocaust centers, and various other causes because of the tragedy. I was proud to be a Jew.

What happened in Pittsburgh is not about me. But it made things clear to me. The dream, I know now, was not about my anxiety toward antisemitism but about my longtime ambivalence toward Judaism in general. My unwillingness to join a group, take a stand. To be willing to say, I'm a Jew, and I'm not afraid to say so. Yes, it felt good to stand with people of all faiths—but for me, standing with my fellow Jews was the hard part. Now that I have you, and I'm finally inside the synagogue, I can do that.

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.*