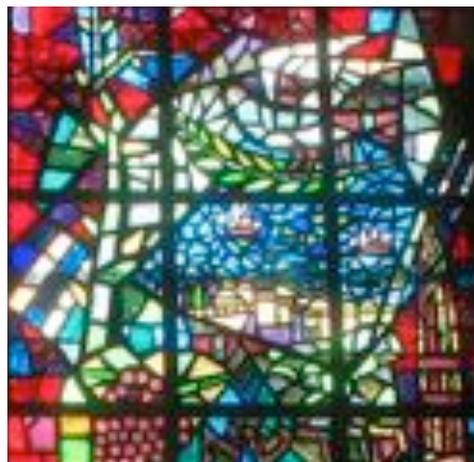


# ללמוד וללמד

Vol. VIII, No. 2

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## **In This Issue: Words and Music**

**Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel on the Goldfarb Legacy**

**Rabbi Larry Edwards on Yehuda Amichai**

**Divrei Torah by Jonathan Denis, Sara Segal Loevy,**

**Gabriel Lear, Zetta Mrizek, Zachary Deutsch,**

**Avery Rosenberg, Bella Waltzer, Miriam Niestat,**

**and Eli Strahilevitz**

**.... and more**



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# Introduction to Volume VIII Number 2

In *To Learn and To Teach* we celebrate the words of our members, old and young, long-time and new. This issue is remarkable for the number of young contributors, who became bar and bat mitzvah during the past year. Both these teens and the participants in *This American Shabbat* help us grapple with the challenges of Torah.

Yet as we recognize the centrality of text in our tradition, we note that when we pray our text is linked to music. How

music works in our services is the focus of writers ranging from Rabbi Emeritus Elliot B. Gertel to our Rebel Jeff Ruby, recognizable even with a new avatar.

The beautiful poetry of Yehuda Amichai, analyzed by Rabbi Larry Edwards, reminds us, too, of the closeness of poetry and music.

We wish you a wonderful Pesach, complete with meaningful words and evocative music.

## **Editorial Board:**

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## The Music of Our Prayers

by Shirley Holbrook



Many of us love music, whether in the concert hall, the stadium, the living room, the earbud. We play instruments, we dance, we hum along. But how those experiences relate to what happens in synagogue may not be obvious. Some of us may feel that listening to the High Holy Day choir or the Na'aseh V'nishma guitars is just like attending a concert, whether for good or ill. Is music something grafted onto prayer to make it more palatable? Does music actually distract us from prayer? How does music work in our liturgy?

***Music makes people rhythmically united. Even without instruments. Instruments help. Rachel and Chuck have created beautiful arrangements, creative ways to add to services. It's not a performance – the goal is to make it easier for people to have kavana, be engaged.***

***Steve Yastrow, new member who plays guitar in our services, author of business books and advisor to senior executives.***

Jewish services have always been musical. Although the particular selections of music may seem eclectic or haphazard, the function of music has been carefully thought out.

The origins of the Jewish approach to music, like everything else,

are found in the Tanakh. From beginning to end it is poetic, including the Song of the Sea, the Song of Songs, the words of the prophets, and of course the Psalms. While we may not have a record of the melodies, the words themselves are musical, rhythmic, alliterative. We picture the Israelites dancing and singing the Song of the Sea, and we still have a very old tune for it. We imagine the Levites singing Psalms and playing instruments in the Temple. Our own services grew out of these texts and practices.

Recognizing how ancient our musical prayer traditions are does not in itself clarify the role music plays in services. To understand better, we can begin by considering the work of the Masoretes. Beginning around the 6th century C.E. these scholars worked, many in Tiberias, to standardize and preserve the pronunciation and grammar of the Tanakh. To them we owe the vowel markings that we still use to help us read our central text. In addition they created the system of tropes for cantillation. The tropes tell the reader which syllable to emphasize, how to group words in phrases, and where to end a verse. When you hear Torah and Haftarah chanted you are hearing, not music per se, but music in the service of meaning. Similarly throughout services, tunes serve to help pronounce and phrase the words.

Thus music can serve simply as a mechanical device. Not only does it clarify the text, it fills a pedagogical role. We learn our liturgy by singing it, remembering the words before we understand them. And the music teaches us distinctions. The tune for the Shabbat kiddush differs from the one for the holidays. The melody for the Shacharit service differs from the one for Mincha. A person can walk into a synagogue building and know what point the service has reached simply by hearing the tune, before being able to distinguish words.

These applications of music are important in Judaism. Note that we have a special word, *nusach*, for our liturgical practice, a word which encompasses both text and music. When we speak of *nusach* we imply that the words and their tune are inseparable.

*Music helps me bring kavanah to the t'fillot, and it doesn't matter if the melodies are "old school" Ashkenazi, contemporary, or Sephardic – it's just the music itself that helps me connect and feel spiritual. Music also helps me learn the prayers, remember them, and keep up with rapid davening. So for me, music has both spiritual and practical utility during services.*

*Yael Hoffman, public health social worker, singer, Minyan Katan leader, long-time member*

But using music in services to phrase and pronounce, to teach and to organize, is just the beginning. Services are structured to foster a particular kind of experience, one not commonly available in everyday life. The idea that music is central to that effort is acknowledged in the liturgy itself.

Morning services begin with a section called *p'sukei d'zimra*, verses of song. Page after page we chant psalms. We begin our prayers with efforts to express overwhelming gratitude and praise, and the poetry of the psalms is our aid. The entire section begins with a bracha addressing God as "celebrated in Your people's voices... and in your servant David's songs." In the verses that follow we find, "Sing to Adonai, all the earth," "let the meadow and all that grow in it exult, let the trees of the forest sing," "play a new song to God, and let the shofar's call inspire the music," "I will praise Adonai as long as I live, sing to my God as long as I am here."

*P'sukei d'zimra* closes with the *birkat haShir*, the blessing of song, praising God "who delights in the chorus of song."

*The melodies of the sung prayers operate on a different level for me -- one that feels more immediate and emotional than simply reflecting on the text. The musical side to prayer at services is what does the most to move me from thinking primarily about myself as an individual to someone being part of a larger Jewish people. I'm a bit partial to the more traditional chants and melodies -- not that there is anything wrong with more contemporary expressions of Jewish music on an acoustic guitar. I'm just more of a traditionalist by nature.*

*Zach Winters, grad student, new member*

Thus music, whether sung or silently contemplated, is essential preparation for the main service. That service centers on the sh'ma and the amidah, especially the k'dushah, crucial words

offered in an attempt to sense transcendence. Being ready is very difficult, but music is seen as a powerful aid. As we approach the amidah, once again we recall singing songs of praise after the Exodus.

It is the words of the liturgy that are essential, but it can be music that impresses us with their importance. We may find concepts of God difficult, but when we sing *avinu malkenu* we reach out. Our relationship with Torah may be a struggle, but when we sing *eitz chayim hi*, we move closer. We may not know how to pray, but when we sing *beih ana raheitz*, we feel that we can try. We may be overwhelmed by troubles and find it hard to be satisfied with prayer, but when we sing *oseh shalom* we feel glimmers of hope. Through music words can reach us.

After the central parts of the service, we close with more songs. Songs such as *ein keilohenu*, *adon olam*, and *yigdal* illustrate a final important function of music. These songs are familiar. We sing them together. Sometimes they are led by groups of children. Singing together is a way of feeling close to the community and contained in a historical tradition.

The music of our prayers has changed over the centuries and is still changing. Sometimes we use instruments or choirs, sometimes not. Some of our music is inadequate and ineffectual. Some of our singing is out of tune and annoying. We must continue to work to learn more about our music and

to improve the quality and variety of our music and singing.

***Music keeps the service from becoming too rote week after week, even when we always use the same melodies. It allows the congregation to daven together at the same pace. My favorite melodies may have been written fairly recently but they feel the most traditional to me. I also enjoy setting Adon Olam to different melodies like “Sink the Bismarck” and “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General.”***

***Samuel Milner, Ph.D, law student,  
new member***

No, music in our services is not like a concert. Yes, it should be appealing, even beautiful. But it is not an added frill and it is not an end in itself. Rather it is a cherished element of our liturgy, a portal into prayer.

*Shirley Holbrook, a founding editor of To Learn and To Teach, retired after teaching mathematics at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. She and her husband Richard have served on the Board and children Daniel and Nina grew up at Rodfei Zedek. Shirley is a past president of the Congregation.*

## The Goldfarb Legacy in American Synagogue Music

by *Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel*



While leading services during a morning minyan, Shirley Holbrook reintroduced a melody for Shomer Yisrael (“O Guardian of Israel, guard Your people Israel”).

I have been impressed that at all our daily services, congregants offer spontaneous words of Torah or readings of commentaries on the Torah toward the end of services. Shirley’s use of that melody inspired me to offer, instead of a d’var Torah, a word about the Torah portion, a d’var nusach, a word about synagogue melodies. I asked the congregation if they knew where that melody for Shomer Yisrael came from, and offered some historical background and connections to Rodfei Zedek’s history.

As a reward for my spontaneous presentation, Shirley asked me to write down what I said for Rodfei Zedek’s journal, of which she happens to be an editor. Hence, this article, a somewhat expanded version of what I said that Sunday morning.

That morning, no one knew who wrote the melody for Shomer Yisrael which is widely used in American synagogues, especially in Selichot services. The composer was Rabbi Israel

Goldfarb (1879-1967), one of the first graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, a pioneering Conservative rabbi who spent most of his career, some fifty-one years, as the spiritual leader of the Kane Street Synagogue (Baith Israel-Anshei Emes) in Brooklyn Heights, New York.

The great American composer, Aaron Copeland, who became bar mitzvah at that synagogue in 1913, wrote in his autobiography that without Goldfarb’s encouragement, he might not have expanded his musical tastes and may never have pursued his musical studies in Paris.

Born in Galicia, Goldfarb immigrated to the United States in 1893. He graduated from Columbia University, studied at the Institute of Musical Art (later, The Julliard School of Music), and, for twenty years, taught Torah and Haftara tropes and nusach (the basic weekday, Festival and Sabbath chants) to rabbinical students at the Seminary.

Musically gifted and dedicated to fostering appreciation for the traditional prayers through services of dignity and beauty, Goldfarb wrote many melodies for congregational singing. In the early twentieth century, synagogue music was limited to English hymns and brief refrains in the Reform temples and to rapid chanting in the Orthodox synagogues, with the nascent Conservative

congregations adapting bits and pieces from both. Mainly, the Reform services emphasized choral settings, often by non-Jewish composers, and the Orthodox featured virtuoso cantors who were sometimes accompanied by choirs of men and boys. Orthodox choirs offered elaborate choral music, as well, whether by European or (mostly Lower East Side) American composers, along with flourishes of congregational singing of certain phrases.

It was the genius of Israel Goldfarb to set entire prayers to music in ways that enabled the whole congregation to learn those prayers, allowing those who do not know Hebrew to learn the words in transliteration.

Though Goldfarb's name might not be known to many, his settings of the Hebrew prayers are known to anyone familiar with synagogue (and some home) Jewish music. Most famous is his melody for Shalom Aleichem, the ancient Friday night hymn welcoming the angels who accompany us home on Sabbath Eve. In a letter (May 10, 1963) to Hazzan Pinchas Spiro of Des Moines, Goldfarb described how that melody for Shalom Aleichem was written:

*I composed the melody forty-five years ago this month (1918). While sitting on a bench near the alma mater statue, in front of the library of Columbia University in N.Y., I began to hum to myself. I fished out a sheet of music-paper from my briefcase and jotted it down. It was on a Friday, which may be the reason why the... words came to my mind spontaneously. Besides, I was working at that time on my "Friday Evening Melodies" which was published in 1918, in which it was printed for the first time. The popularity of the melody traveled not only throughout the country but throughout the world,*

*so that many people came to believe that the song was handed down from M't Sinai by Moses. (letter published by Hazzan Spiro in "The Journal of Synagogue Music," December 1986).*

In that early book of Friday Night Melodies are found many familiar settings for the prayers that we take for granted, including Goldfarb's Magen Avot, Vay'chulu, and Bayom Ha-hu. The universal melodies for the Kiddush and Aleinu Prayers are Goldfarb's adaptations of the works, respectively, of the great nineteenth-century Viennese and German Jewish composers, Louis Lewandowski and Salomon Sulzer.

Later, Rabbi Israel Goldfarb collaborated with his much younger brother (one of many siblings who immigrated with their parents), Samuel Goldfarb (1891-1978). Samuel sang in synagogue choirs and studied composition, conducting and voice at Teachers College of Columbia University. He took private lessons in piano and organ while playing piano in Yiddish theater and in vaudeville and in nickelodeons. He was for many years a choir director and organist at synagogues, including New York's Temple Emanu-El, and later, for many years, at Temple De Hirsch Sinai in Seattle .

While in New York, Samuel Goldfarb was the first to head the Music Department of the Bureau of Jewish Education, where he remained for thirteen years. He compiled the two-volume classic, The Jewish Songster, and wrote two songs that everyone knows: "I Have A little Dreidel" and "Oh, Once There was Was a Wicked Wicked Man."

In the High Holy Day songbook (1926) of the Goldfarb brothers are



*Rabbi Gertel attended the Joint Program of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. At the Seminary he received an M.A. degree and rabbinic ordination and an honorary doctorate. His first pulpit was Beth El-Keser Israel Congregation in New Haven, Connecticut.*

*Since 1979 Rabbi Gertel has been film and media critic for the "National Jewish Post and Opinion" (Indianapolis), and has contributed hundreds of essays and reviews to newspapers and journals, both popular*

*and scholarly. His book, What Jews Know About Salvation (2002) prodded the Library of Congress to rethink the cataloging system to list "salvation" as a Jewish concept. Another book, Over the Top Judaism (2003) explores the treatment of Judaism in film and on television. The anthology, Jewish Belief and Practice in Nineteenth Century America (2006) grew out of his interest in American Jewish history and pulpit thought. His most recent study, "On 'Blessing' and 'Salvation' in the Tanach [Hebrew Bible]" appeared in the Winter 2018 issue of the CCAR Journal.*

### **Goldfarb melodies on youtube**

Shomer Yisrael (Beth El, Rochester NY concert)

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=shomer+yisrael+rochester&&view=detail&mid=DB38DAC3E3D091205556DB38DAC3E3D091205556&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dshomer%2Byisrael%2Brochester%26FORM%3DHDRSC3>

Shalom Aleichem (played by Itzhak Perlman)

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=shalom+aleichem+goldfarb&&view=detail&mid=4C70E7558E58F84466024C70E7558E58F8446602&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dshalom%2Baleichem%2Bgoldfarb%26FORM%3DHDRSC3>

Magen Avot (Cantor Marcus Feldman, Sinai Temple , Los Angeles)

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=israel%20goldfarb%20magen%20avot&FORM=O1HV4>

B'sefer Chayim (from a Prairie Home Companion broadcast)

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=b%27sefer+chayim&&view=detail&mid=16E30446CC4841BEF15B16E30446CC4841BEF15B&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Db'sefer%2520chayim%26qs%3DWebSearch%26form%3DQBVRMH%26sp%3D1%26pq%3Db'sefer%2520%26sc%3D6-8%26cvid%3D073C2AF809514CBCBE683DC6F0BA0E37>

## Another poem by Yehuda Amichai

by Rabbi Larry Edwards



The following translation is by Stephen Mitchell. It is included in Robert Alter, ed., *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 66. The original Hebrew version is in *Shirim (Poems) 1948-1962* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1977), p. 217.

הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁבוּ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים  
 מִן הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁבוּ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים  
 לֹא יִצְמְחוּ לְעוֹלָם  
 פְּרָחִים בְּאֶבֶיב.

הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁבוּ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים  
 הוּא רָמוּס וְקָשָׁה  
 כְּמוֹ חֶצֶר.

אֲבָל סִפְסוּקוֹת וְאַהֲבוֹת עוֹשִׂים  
 אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתַחוּם  
 כְּמוֹ חֲסֵד־פָּרֶת, כְּמוֹ חֲרִישׁ.  
 וְלְחִישָׁה תִּשְׁמַע בַּמְּקוֹם  
 שֶׁבוּ הָיָה הַבַּיִת  
 אֲשֶׁר נִחְרַב.

### The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right  
 Flowers will never grow  
 In the spring.

The place where we are right  
 Is hard and trampled  
 Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
 Dig up the world  
 Like a mole, a plow.  
 And a whisper will be heard in the place  
 Where the ruined  
 House once stood.

In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1992, Yehuda Amichai (born 1924, Germany; died 2000, Israel) speaks of being part of a generation that bears the weight of the twentieth century:

*...I've always believed, as a general remark, that those born after World War I until, I would say, 1926, bear the weight of the twentieth century. We are the generation that inherited the aftermath of World War I and came of age during World War II. In my case, as an Israeli, I was still young enough, after World War II, to be actively involved in three additional wars. I really have the feeling that I am the result and very contents of the twentieth century.*

[<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2095/yehuda-amichai-the-art-of-poetry-no-44-yehuda-amichai>]

Such a weight might turn one bitter, or aloof. But Amichai always came across – in person as well as in his poetry – as friendly and engaged, and with his trademark sense of ironic humor. One of the most distinguished literary figures of his generation, he wore his distinctions lightly. At the same time, he clearly took quite seriously his responsibilities as a citizen of Israel, fighting in three of Israel's wars and devoting himself to efforts at peace-making.

The present poem expresses his sense of the vital (and vitalizing) necessity to see things from more than one point of view. One teacher, Dara Steinberg, uses this poem as a text in a longer discussion of the rabbinic principle "*Elu v'elu*" – these *and* these are the words of the living God. [<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/50127?lang=bi>] (The poem comes at the very end of the

study sheet.)] There are facts, of course, but there are also individual narratives of the experience of those facts. These different experiences of historical events also become part of the warp and woof of history. To make peace – between individuals, between peoples, between nation-states – it is necessary to hear the other, and not to insist from the beginning on the absolute correctness of one's own version of events.

A couple of notes on Amichai's choice of words:

צודקים – If I say in Hebrew, "Atah tzodek," it simply means, "You are right." But Hebrew is never quite so simple! The root is *tz-d-k*, as in *Rodfei Zedek*. And *tzedek*, as we all know, means justice or righteousness. Thus the colloquial, everyday way of saying "right" or "correct" carries deeper resonances for those who are alert to ancient meanings. Amichai seems to want me not to insist on the absolute "justice" of my own sense of being correct, for that can lead to barrenness.

רמוס – "trampled" A place that is "hard and trampled" like a yard, or courtyard, might be a meeting place, but it is not well-tended and fruitful, not a space of careful attention. In the Bible, prophets often use this word sarcastically. "Who asked you to trample (*r'mos*) my courts?" (Isaiah 1:12 – read on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av). Ezekiel compares the wealthy of God's "flock" to rams and bucks: "Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample (*tirm'su*) with your feet what is left from grazing?" (Ezek. 34:18)

I am wondering also about the moles and plows, and their relation to love and doubt. (The Hebrew word for “digging up” can also mean “crush” or “crumble.” The word used for mole is unusual: Amichai seems to choose it for its connection to another root for digging and trenches.) Moles and plows represent two kinds of unearthing. The digging of moles may seem destructive, but does it also contribute to the fertility of the earth? And doubt, too, may at first seem destructive, but might it, in the long run, contribute, like the plow, to opening the hard ground for possible resolution of conflict?

Finally, Amichai makes reference to the whispering that is heard in the place of the House (הבית) that is ruined (נהרב). This could, of course, refer “simply” to a house that was once a home, now destroyed by an insistence on “rightness.” And, “the House that is destroyed” also refers to the Temple. The Talmud reports that Rabbi Jose entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. The prophet Elijah met him there and asked what he heard. “I heard a divine voice cooing like a dove, and saying: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world...” [Babylonian

Talmud, Berakhot 3a (Soncino translation).]

The Rabbis tell us that the Second Temple was destroyed because of “groundless hatred.” Amichai here suggests that destruction may be the result of groundless certainty, the unfruitful, barren place where we are right.

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

## This American Shabbat

*Since arriving at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, Rabbi David Minkus has created and nurtured a program originally suggested by NPR's This American Life. Invited by the Rabbi, participants in This American Shabbat study together and discuss, then present their interpretations at a Shabbat service. Over and over participants express their appreciation for each other's insights, and the entire Congregation thrills to the rediscovery of its members' talents and commitment. These talks on Parashat Vayera were originally presented on November 16, 2019.*

**by Jonathan Dennis**



As I read this portion and labored to understand what it means to me, I was first struck by the audacity of Abraham and the lengths he is willing to go to obey God's will. He will become "a great and powerful nation and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him." He has been singled out for an extraordinary mission that has grown to mythic proportions.

But first, let me back up, I try to imagine that actual day in the remote past when Abraham leaves his home and uproots his entire family to travel hundreds of miles to a land he has never seen and knows little or nothing about. I can't even get my family to go on a vacation! But there Abraham goes with Sarah, packing up the camels and all! He has unshakable faith in a new idea, something he can't see, but knows

he must follow. It's hard for me to comprehend that kind of resolute faith.

But... why Abraham? What traits in his character make him worthy of this calling? What raw material does he possess? In this portion, some answers are revealed to us. The first, I believe is intrinsic. Abraham is open and receptive to hearing God's call. Remember – he lives in a time and place with competing faiths, full of noise and confusion, yet Abraham is able to hear the clear signal that will change the course of his life. and ours. But hearing it is not enough.

How many of us have heard the call of our conscience but done nothing? How many times do we tune out our higher moral calling and focus on the mundane aspects of our lives? I know I do. Abraham, however, moves. He takes action. He obeys the call and sacrifices the known and the comfortable for the unknown. It is easy for us today to take this great act for granted because we know the rest of his story. We know all the incredible things that will happen to the descendants of Abraham, including the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation of the Torah. But Abraham cannot know or even comprehend events that will follow. He

sees only the first thread of this larger tapestry. But, even though he may not have full knowledge and understanding, he still takes the leap. He seems to have the predisposition to hear, and above all, to trust God – maybe it’s the “Faith Gene.”

Later on, in Exodus, the rest of us will become the people who follow God’s laws “**first by doing**” and **then** “by learning and understanding” (*Na’seh ve’nishma*). It’s not that we or Abraham blindly follow, but rather that action, doing the Mitzvot in itself, can lead to a deeper appreciation and more full understanding than we may have initially. I believe that Abraham is the forebearer of this trait. But his reverence for God alone is not sufficient, and as he is tested in this portion, it is his right actions time and time again that demonstrate his worth. With unprecedented “chutzpah that will become the hallmark of his descendants Abraham negotiates with God to prove that just a few innocent men can redeem a whole population of sinners in Sodom. He reminds God that even “He” too must be just. Finally Abraham passes the most painful test is and is willing to do the unimaginable and sacrifice his son, Isaac, confirming with blinding clarity his submission to God’s will. I could not even fathom such an act, and most normal people couldn’t, which is perhaps why God intercedes and saves Isaac. God seems to say, you have gone far enough. He acknowledges Abraham’s willingness, but stops him short of completing a terrible act.

So, that is Abraham as I understand him – a man unique in his time, open and receptive to the call of God, willing to change the course of his life to

obey that call, and imbued with the moral fortitude to do whatever God asks of him. He is almost superhuman in his force of will.

But what about Sarah? What about the rest of us? If Abraham’s good actions are the inheritance that have been passed down to us and have preserved us as a people, what about our genetic inheritance? Sarah was also blessed as the Mother of our Nation, but how does this story describe our Mother?

Sarah is seen first as an instrument for keeping God’s promise to Abraham to make a great nation of “him.” She bears him a son in old age, demonstrating the power of God to create biological miracles. She does not believe it is possible and laughs at the very idea of it, but God keeps his promise and brings her Isaac. At first blush, she is the backdrop on which the drama unfolds. But is that really true? Or, is she much more?

Once she receives this gift of Isaac, she naturally wants to protect him and ensure Isaac’s future. So, she pushes Abraham to cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael. She will not have the son of Abraham’s “other wife” carry on the family and receive the inheritance. This is natural human behavior, which we recognize immediately but also can see as gravely flawed. Casting Hagar and her child into the desert – to what seems to be certain death! It is an action that we see for what it is, one of jealousy.

So, if Abraham’s moral conduct, his faith, and his will are the example of how we should behave, then maybe

Sarah's conduct is the reality of how we flawed and normal humans actually behave. She laughs at the thought that God is capable of performing the miracle of giving her a child in old age. At first, she does not demonstrate the resolute faith of Abraham. She, like so many of us is cynical and doubtful, and who could blame her?

When Sarah actually does conceive, she is sincerely grateful and joyful. We share her joy, but then she reverts to normal human nature to protect Isaac at the expense of Hagar and her child, Ishmael.

How many of us have been given a blessing and somehow failed to recognize it, or worse yet, misused it. How often do we somehow believe that life is a "zero sum game" and that in order to protect our own blessings, we have to take the blessings of others.

But all is not lost. God knows both the refined and baser parts of our human nature. He does not punish Sarah for these actions. Rather he answers bad with good. He saves Hagar and her son and makes a nation of them. In fact, he goes on to bless Sarah and makes a great nation of her as well, which is often overlooked. As they say, it takes two to "daven". She is half our human and moral inheritance just as Abraham is the other half. And let's not forget that Sarah set out across the desert into the unknown too. She left everything behind in search of God.

So... these two parents of the Jewish People make us who we are. We all know relatives who have given us different kinds of character traits, and it

is up to us to amplify the best of these qualities through our actions.

Perhaps, Abraham shows us a glimpse of our moral and spiritual selves as we could be. He is an archetype, doing the "right" thing and obeying God regardless of the price. But is that achievable? Sarah, no less our Mother, is who we actually are. We are all capable of receiving and performing miracles, worthy of God's love and blessing, just as we are flawed, entirely human with our jealousies and doubts.

We sometimes can't believe or don't want to believe that we should receive these blessings and we laugh, like Sarah. Even when we do receive gifts from God, we still fail to recognize them and don't know what to do with them.

And yet, here we are today, the "remnant" of these two parents with equal inheritance from each, so many generations later,

- still struggling with the two poles of our human nature,
  - still fumbling with the gifts we are given,
  - still trying to find the RIGHT path on our own,
  - still HOPING to be a light to ourselves, let alone to other nations,
  - even though... we already have the App – the GPS of our inheritance... our Torah.
- Maybe our kids can teach us how to use it?

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tees. His family is also active in the Jewish Enrichment Center and values its innovative approach to youth education. Jonathan is a commercial real estate developer and broker and has served as Adjunct Professor in the M.B.A program at Roosevelt University. He is proud to have contributed to the successful redevelopment of 53rd Street while he was with the University of Chicago.

**by Sara Segal Loevy**



There is a line in this week's parasha, Vayera, that I read with horror for the first time a few weeks ago. Shortly into the parasha, the

strangers who enjoyed Abraham's hospitality at the beginning of Vayera journey to Sodom, seeking Lot. Lot welcomes them into his home. The townspeople, fearing these strangers, gather as a mob at Lot's gates, demanding that Lot turn his guests over to the mob. He refuses to do so, but offers to give this raging crowd his two, unmarried, adolescent daughters instead, presumably to satisfy the mob's unbridled anger by letting them gang-rape two young girls. The picture is clear: a father ready to protect two male strangers by thrusting his two adolescent daughters into the midst of a rioting crowd.

I read this, and, as I have asked myself over the years, why is it that Bereshit, the first book of the Torah,

packed with family narratives, lays out for us such difficult family relationships – painful relationships between fathers and their children as well as between siblings. How is it that we as people who, perhaps stereotypically, focus so much on family, have been raised on tales of intrafamily dispute and hostility?

Consider the following. This is only the fourth parshah of the annual cycle, and we have already read about

1. Cain killing Abel,
2. Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, thrust out of his father's household,
3. the binding of Isaac, and
4. yes, those two adolescent girls who are almost pushed out of their home to be raped and brutalized.

And there are more tales to come.

These are all stories that have fascinated me for the last thirty years or so. My interest began when Rodfei, under the guidance of Rabbi Gertel, became egalitarian. At that point, I decided that I needed to accept the responsibilities of being an equal member of this congregation by undertaking a new sacred task. So, I learned to *leyn* – to read from the Torah. It has been a gratifying choice for several reasons:

First, I tested whether I could learn a new skill in early middle age. (The alternative was to go to business school, but the thought of sitting in a lecture hall made me weary.)

Second, it allowed me to sing in public, an opportunity I would not otherwise have.

Third, I discovered that reading Torah was, unexpectedly, a tactile experience – the parchment, the *yad*, the *aitzim* – that linked me to some unknown *sofer* in some unknown country, hunched over his work with a quill and specially prepared ink. This in addition to it being a visual and auditory experience.

Fourth and finally, it made me think about the text that I was reading; and it made me realize that I was more satisfied reading a narrative, a story, than reading lists of rules or lists of begats.

And then, early on in my years of reading Torah, I read the story of Cain and Abel, which I have read almost every year since then. Roughly twenty years. And every time I read it, I reinterpret this story in my head, this story of the first murder, brother killing brother. The original story of sibling rivalry.

But, in those years, I still accepted Torah as history, Torah as a narrative based on some level of truth or reality. Real families, real people. Then, one Sunday morning, my friend, Dan Libenson, taught a superb class on the management and leadership lessons to be learned from the story of the ten spies and he casually referred to the story as a myth.

MYTH – a flashing neon sign – like The Education of Hyman Kaplan written in red and white stripes with sparkling stars in between each word. These stories from the Torah were not history, they were myths. Instead of Icarus and Dedalus, Hermes and Apollo,

we have Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's twelve sons, and so on.

Dan's observation changed the way I read the narratives in the Torah, turning them from tales based on historical reality to myths whose meanings and symbolic value exist as puzzles for us to turn over in our hands and in our minds.

Shortly after that revelation, I heard Jonathan Lear tell a story about a talk he was asked to give to the Crow Nation in Montana. The group asked him about the story of his people and after some explanation, they asked Jonathan how his people tell their story. He said, we tell the whole story every year. Within a year, we cycle through the entire Torah.

So, a second epiphany: these myths are so important to us that we have been telling them annually, in public, be it in the marketplace or in synagogue, for the last 1800 years. *V'zot ha'torah*, we say at the end of each reading. This is the Torah – these are our myths which we recite using the same words year in and year out.

So, let us circle back to where I began, with a dozen or more myths of terrible relationship between fathers and their children. Why are these myriad myths so essential to us?

- Lot, willing to throw his daughters to the rapists.
- Abraham, who turns Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness.
- Abraham, who is an arm's movement away from slaughtering his son.

- And then Isaac, who has experienced being betrayed by his own father, who has looked into his father's eyes as his father raised a knife to cut his throat as a sacrifice to God. Isaac, terrified by his father, duped by his wife and one son.

Isaac, as an aged father, has no blessing for his older son, Esau. Is there a more mournful, wrenching sentence in the Torah than Esau asking, 'Have you not a blessing for me, father?' And the blessing that he is given can hardly, in my opinion, be called a blessing: "And by thy sword will you live!" Indeed, Esau says to himself that after Isaac dies, he will kill Jacob.

And finally, in this abbreviated list of poorly treated offspring, Jacob, who imperils the life of one son, by favoring him over his other sons.

And then the myths about siblings.

- Cain and Abel. Abel dead and Cain marked for life, all over offerings to God.
- Ishmael and Isaac, separated by Abraham at the insistence of Sarah, always to be enemies.
- Jacob afraid to meet the brother from whom he has stolen the birthright.
- The fractious sons of Jacob: willing to throw the favored brother into a pit to die but selling him instead.
- The same brothers, scheming to kill the kinspeople of their sister, Dinah, from whom we hear nothing about her response to the offer of marriage.

And many other, smaller stories.

What are we to make of these often terrifying, frequently violent and bloody stories? In discussions with Rabbi Minkus, Gabriel, and Jon, we talked about the parallels between the myths of Bereshit and the Greek and Roman myths, filled with trickery and deceit. But in the Greek and Roman myths, we are removed from the action because we are dealing with gods and goddesses whose foreheads split open or who are stuck rolling boulders uphill day after day after day.

In the Torah, we are presented with real people. Except for the snake in the Garden of Eden that talks, these fathers and their offspring, these siblings, are very real. But they don't get along – not petty squabbles, but deep divisive disagreements or trickery. Almost unfathomable anger and violence.

Perhaps, as my TAS group suggested, good, kind, well-behaved people are not very interesting. So what we have, instead, are myths we listen to, year in and year out, the stories of the fractious families in Bereshit – siblings who cheat and lie and kill and parents who do the same. Perhaps we have these myths so that in the moments of our own familial terrors, we have the myth as the comparison point, as the extreme. I ask myself, do we remember the extreme in Bereshit to lessen the pain of a parent's criticism, a sibling's hurtfulness?

Do we hope upon hope that 20 minutes, or 20 days, or, in the case of Jacob and Esau, that 20 years later, we will have the opportunity to reunite, perhaps forgive or be forgiven, for past wrongs? Can we be Joseph, and tearfully embrace our brothers despite

having been abandoned by them? Is the message of all of this cruelty the hope of some kind of resolution or reconciliation?

*Trained in public health, Sara has done teaching and research and now conducts her own consulting business, The Loevy Consulting Group with husband, Steven. Her professional experience with fundraising, board development, and strategic planning have proved useful to her as a 40-year member of Rodfei Zedek, where she has served on the Board and held offices including President. She loves reading Torah (a skill learned at Rodfei) welcoming people on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and swinging and swaying at Na'aseh v'Nishmah.*

**by Gabriel Lear**



I have felt very welcomed at Rodfei Zedek. You have all acted like Abraham at the beginning of this week's parashah: you saw me arrive and rushed out to invite me in. I now feel a part of this community. I especially love coming to Na'aseh V'Nishma and getting there early, to do all the "warm-ups." And I whole-heartedly belt out all the prayers, doing my best to follow the transliterated Hebrew, slowly coming to hear the meanings of those words directly.

But there is a point in every service when I step back, out of the group,

the point at which we are supposed to thank God for making us Jews. I am not a Jew. I am a gentile and I am a Christian. My husband is a Jew; we are raising our son as a Jew; and I often wish I could become a Jew, too! Ever since I started attending services with my husband, Jonathan, first in New Haven and then here, I have found deep wells of spiritual sustenance in Jewish prayer, like cool drinks of water offered to a traveler in the desert of life. But I am not a Jew. And so every Saturday, when I step back and fall silent, I wonder: what is it to be a Jew, such that one would thank God for this gift?

This week's reading seems to have an answer to that question: to be a Jew is to be a descendent of Sarah and of Abraham, who was chosen by God to enter into a covenant. This idea that the Jews are the chosen people is probably the best-known fact about Judaism to those outside it. And by the way, Christians believe—or at least are supposed to believe—that Jews *are* the chosen people: they were chosen way back then and they continue to be chosen now. I know from conversations with Jewish friends that the idea of being chosen is something that makes some of them feel uncomfortable. And certainly, it is an idea that many people in the modern, secular world blame as divisive. But I've always felt that the idea of chosenness contains deep ethical and theological insight. And I'm fascinated by the accounts of God establishing the covenant with Abraham. The stories of God choosing Abraham continue in today's portion. So one thing I hoped in studying it, is that I would get more clarity on what it means to be chosen.

One question I think it's natural to ask is, what is it about Abraham that led God to choose *him*. But another question is, why would God want to choose any human being *at all*? One thing that struck me about this week's portion is that it is the first time we hear anything about *God's* motivation. Here's the passage I'm talking about:

Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do [in Sodom], since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (*Genesis* 18:17-19)

One thing that immediately leapt out to *me* is what God says the result of the covenant is supposed to be: not just that Abraham will father a nation, but that *all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him*. This idea, that the covenant with the Jews is supposed to have implications for gentiles goes back to the very first time we hear about God choosing Abraham: I will bless those who bless you; And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you." *Genesis* 12:1-3

Naturally, since I am not a Jew, I want to understand what this means. In the commentary, Hirsch says the point is that nations who treat the Jews well will be blessed and he goes on to point to the United States as an example. This suggests that the blessing to the

nations is supposed to be material prosperity and power.

I find that interpretation disappointing. I don't want in any way to suggest that material prosperity is not important; it is. But the idea that this is all the gentiles will get leaves me feeling a little like Esau: "Bless me too, Father!" *Etz Hayim* endorses Hirsch's interpretation, but also makes another, and I think importantly different, suggestion: When God says that "all the families of the earth/ Shall bless themselves by you," the point is that other nations will pray to God to be blessed in the way that Abraham was blessed. That is to say, Abraham will serve as the model for everyone of what to pray for.

That seems right to me. But surely the greatest blessing to come Abraham's way is the fact of being in a covenant with God. Being in a covenant is a blessing in itself, over and above the material blessings he receives. And this is what shines out to the nations as something to pray for.

But the whole idea of a human being making a covenant with God is kind of strange. And it's not evident what good comes from it beyond each party getting what the other has promised.

Reading about God's covenant with Abraham, we are very likely to think of it as a contract. God says, repeatedly, you follow my ways and I'll give you fertile land and a very large, successful family. Inevitably, when we read an ancient text, we bring our modern concepts to bear. But sometimes those modern concepts obscure what the text is saying. This is a problem I'm very

familiar with as a teacher of Ancient Greek philosophy. And it can happen when we read the Torah, too. Studying with Rabbi David, Sara, and Jon, an insight hit me like a bolt of lightning: stop asking what Abraham gets out of the covenant and start asking what God gets out of it. Because when you look at what God says in today's portion about *why* he chose Abraham, you can see that our modern way of living with contracts is not what God has in mind at all.

Normally, people enter into a contract from self-interested motives. It helps to know enough about the other person to be confident that they can keep their end of the bargain, but in our modern life with contracts, our interest in the other person is purely strategic. We don't need to know them all that well; and we mostly don't *want* to know them well. Once the papers have been signed and the house has been bought, we want the realtor and the former owner to just *go away*.

But clearly this is not what the covenant between God and Abraham is like. God's covenant-making with Abraham is much more like a marriage agreement: the two parties may agree in advance about certain features of how their shared life will be, but not because each wants to protect their own interests. Instead, people who are getting married want to be sure they have a shared understanding of what they're getting into *together*.

So why does God want to enter into such a relationship with Abraham? Well, listen to what God says: "I have singled him out"...Why? "...[so] that he may instruct his children and his

posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."

What strikes me is this: God doesn't choose Abraham just because he wants someone to follow His ways; he wants Abraham and his children to follow His ways *so that* He, God, can give Abraham land and success. In other words, part of what God wants is the opportunity to give to Abraham in *response* to Abraham's doing what is just and right.

According to the Torah, God has always wanted to shower human beings with good fortune. He made us and looked at us and found that we were "very good" (*Genesis* 1:31). But unfortunately our bad behavior hides that goodness. God doesn't simply want Abraham and his descendants to behave justly; God wants them to behave justly because He wants to be in a relationship in which human goodness will show itself and inspire God to an outpouring of loving generosity.

I want to suggest that this is true on Abraham's side, too. No doubt, he wants the land and the long line of descendants. But that doesn't seem to be the *reason* why he follows God. Instead, his following God seems to a spontaneous response to the splendor that God shows him. The name of our portion today is *Va-yera* — the Lord appeared. And repeatedly we are told that God appears and Abraham immediately follows. I'm suggesting that Abraham enters the covenant because he wants a relationship in which God will keep showing himself, so that Abraham will be inspired to righteousness in re-

sponse. It's much easier to do what is just when we can feel the glory of God and the goodness of the world He has made.

The covenant God makes with Abraham binds them into a shared life of responding to each other's goodness with generosity and justice; and the promises they make to each other specify what the living of that life amounts to on each side.

So, what does Abraham promise when he promises to follow God's ways? I ask you to notice the very next thing that happens in the story: it's not an account of *Abraham* going out and doing some just action; it is an account of Abraham challenging *God* to act justly: "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? ... Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (*Genesis* 18:23-25) If God has just said that he's chosen Abraham to do what is just, then I think we should treat Abraham's next act as a model of the sort of behavior God had in mind.

What this story shows, I think, is that following in the ways of the Lord is not necessarily about *doing* justice all the time. The standard Abraham sets is a matter of holding others to a standard of justice. God appears to Abraham and because of what Abraham sees and hears, he tells God to treat Sodom and Gamorrah justly, that being just is in keeping with who God has shown himself to be.

When I noticed this, I noticed that this is the way Abraham behaves with human beings, too, for example with King Abimelech—a gentile, by the way.

The point here is that holding others to the standard of justice is not treated a precondition of relationship; it can be an expression of relationship, an expression of respect and of wanting to continue living life together.

I began by wondering what it means that the Jews are chosen and how this might be a blessing for *all* nations. What I'm trying to say is this: according to Vayera, the Jews were chosen *for* a certain kind of relationship with God, a relationship in which the goodness of God and of human beings can be seen, a community not necessarily of always getting it right about justice, but of holding each other to the standard of justice precisely because you can see and know each other as the fundamentally good people you are. It is the sort of relationship in which one says to the other: "I can see that you are good and that makes me want to do good, which is why I am telling you to act like the good person you are."

I think you all — we all — at Rodfei Zedek demonstrate this sort of community. We hold ourselves to standards of righteousness in debating what services should be like, what our relation to our city and to Israel should be like, but also, most fundamentally, by participating in the age-old Jewish practice of reading the Torah. I think it's extraordinary that it is an *accepted* part of Jewish practice — what you are *supposed* to do — to debate and often excoriate the matriarchs and patriarchs. That really took me by surprise when I first started attending services. At first, I thought this was the behavior of a group of highly-educated, 21<sup>st</sup> c. skeptics. But no! When you look in the commentary, you see that Jews have been blaming

Sarah and even Abraham forever! Jews show, through the practice of reading Torah, that you can debate and judge the moral behavior of others while still holding them close as your own, that this is a part of striving for justice in ourselves. Having a community like this is indeed a blessing that far exceeds whatever material success, God willing, comes our way. And I think it sets a standard for the nations of what it means to be blessed that our nation in particular needs right now.

*In the summer of 2003, Gabriel Lear married her husband, Jonathan, and moved to Chicago. About that time, they began attending High Holy Days services at CRZ and liked it so much, they came back for more. She regularly attends Na'aseh V'Nishma and, as her son Sam has grown up, has enjoyed first, Minyan Katan and, now, Minyan Gadol (which she appreciates as much for the Jewish education they have given her as for her son). She loves CRZ and is so grateful to have it as a part of her life. Gabriel was born in Baton Rouge and raised in Sewanee, Tennessee. She is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, where she specializes in Ancient Greek philosophy. She's written a book, Happy Lives and the Highest Good, about the relationship between moral virtue and contemplation in Aristotle's ethics and also many articles about the Greek concept of moral beauty and why Plato and Aristotle thought it was so important.*

## Teachings of Our Children

*In the last year Rodfei Zedek was rich in Bar and Bat Mitvah celebrations. In one talk after another the Congregation heard how our teens appreciate their family, their teachers, and each other. And, in the excerpts offered here, in order of parasha, they demonstrate how seriously they think about Torah. Whether sober, provocative, or playful the talks prompt fresh thinking.*

**by Zetta Mrizek**



My Torah portion is Bereshit, which means "in the beginning." Bereshit is the very first portion in the Torah. I think the name is pretty self-explanatory, but if you haven't

figured it out yet, my portion is about how God created the world, and everything in it, in seven days. On the first day, God separates light from dark. On the second day, God separates the waters from the sky. On the third day, God gathers the waters and dry land appears. On the fourth day, God creates the sun to rule over the day and the moon and stars to brighten the night. On the fifth day, God creates the animals who fly above the land, birds, and the animals that live below the waters, fish. On the sixth day, God creates the animals that live on the land and also creates the first man and woman. On the final day, day seven, God rests and looks over his accomplishments from the past six days. He blesses the

seventh day and makes it a holy day of rest, known as Shabbat.

While I was reading my Torah portion I came across many confusing things. First of all, there are two very different creation stories. God seems to create humankind and the animals twice, and in a different order each time. In the main creation story, on the sixth day, God creates the animals first and man and woman at the same time. In the second creation story, Adam is first made from the dust of the earth. God then creates the animals to find a helper for Adam. But Adam did not feel connected with any of the animals, so God made a woman, Eve, out of Adam's rib. Just think about how Eve was the second choice, after the animals, as a partner for Adam.

Many people say that the second story is just a more detailed description of the main creation story, but honestly, after studying this portion, I don't believe that is true.

To me it seems that two different people wrote the separate stories and people just say it was God who wrote both. I think that one person wrote the main creation story, the one about creating everything in seven days, and another person picked up where they left off without fully looking at what the first person had written. If the second

story were really just a more detailed description, then why would the order of creation completely change?

This seems like human error to me, not a mistake that God would make. The reason people say that God wrote the creation stories is so people take the Torah seriously. If people thought that the Torah was just written by other people, they wouldn't take the rules in it as seriously. But since there are two stories that don't line up with each other, I'm convinced the Torah was written by ordinary humans, not God. I know this is all a lot to think about and understand, but from looking carefully at my portion, this conclusion seems to make a lot of sense.

Another thing that bothered me was why God would put the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden with Adam and Eve if he didn't want them to eat from it. It's like putting a treat in front of a dog and expecting him not to eat it. God also tells Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit of the tree they will die. Instead, when they do eventually eat the fruit, they gain knowledge. Before, they acted more like animals, but after eating the fruit they become more human, and start to think like God.

I think the reason God didn't want them eating the fruit is because it made them think more like him and become more independent. God later kicks them out of the garden completely to prevent them from eating from the tree of life and becoming immortal. He is scared that if they eat from both the tree of knowledge of good and evil and from the

tree of life, they will become exactly like him.

Something else that bothered me in my portion was that Eve got the most severe punishment for eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. I think if anyone should get the worst punishment for eating the fruit it should be the snake, because he convinced Adam and Eve to eat the fruit in the first place. Instead, Adam is punished by having to work for his food. And for the snake's punishment, God took away his legs and forced the snake to crawl on his belly.

But God reserved the worst punishment for Eve. That punishment was for Adam, her husband, to rule over her. That seems really unfair. Why should Adam get to rule over Eve if he was even more gullible than her? He is even more gullible because Eve had to be convinced to eat the fruit, whereas Adam only had to be told to eat it. And why should Adam get to rule over Eve when she is a deeper thinker than him? It is also unfair for God to grant Adam power over Eve because God is punishing Eve for something that God himself caused to happen.

But the most unfair thing about Eve's punishment is that the knowledge Eve gave all of us when she ate from the tree is a positive thing. If Eve hadn't eaten from the tree, there would be nothing to distinguish us from the animals. Sure there wouldn't be evil, but there also wouldn't be good, or anything in between. We would literally know nothing. The knowledge we gained from the tree is what separates us from the animals and makes us more like God

himself. Bringing us that knowledge may make Eve deserving of punishment in the eyes of God, but to me it makes her a hero.

When I first met with Rabbi Minkus, and we were talking about my d'var torah, he asked me what being Jewish means to me. He said that I didn't need to have an answer, but I thought about it and I came up with an answer. To me being Jewish isn't really about God or the Torah, it's about the community. Being Jewish has made me connect with so many people and has given me so many great friendships that I hope will last forever. If I were not Jewish, I definitely would not be the same person I am today. I am so grateful to be Jewish and to be part of such an amazing community with the most wonderful people. It has been such a great experience to be able to study this portion.

*Zetta is an eighth grader at Lab and studied at the Jewish Enrichment Center since its founding. She and her sister Mira are in the third generation at Rodfei Zedek. They are granddaughters of Mark and Anna Siegler. Their mother is Alison Siegler, a Clinical Professor and Director of the Federal Criminal Justice Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School, Their father is Rich Mrizek, an attorney with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission."*

**by Zachary Deutsch**



My Torah portion is B'har. B'har talks about the concept of returning the land to its original owner every 50 years. This prevents the separation of society into the wealthy

and the poor. This 50-year cycle gives the land back to families who had originally owned it but lost it due to acquiring debt. This plan has two assumptions. The first is that since earth and all of its inhabitants belong to God, no human can truly possess either the land or its people. The second assumption is that no human should have to be a permanent servant because they serve and belong to God. No person should become too rich or too poor.

Archaeologists have found records from the late Biblical period of people naming the 50th year in this 50 year cycle the Jubilee year. The purpose of the Jubilee Year was to restore the unity that had once been in Israel and to restore the self-respect in the people who had been stuck in poverty. We do not have this anymore, but we celebrate Shabbat weekly, which allows people to shape themselves in non-economic ways. The Jubilee year enables an entire society to shape themselves and define their values, putting aside how wealthy or impoverished they are.

One thing in my Torah portion that caught my attention was that even though society became polarized there is the Jubilee year that makes everyone financially equal once again. This gave the people who were once poor a second chance, a chance to change their lives and to dig themselves out of the hole that they fell into, but also that everyone needs to help and it is not only the duty of the poor.

Right when I read this, I felt like it was reminiscent of something: That was the story of Robin Hood. Robin Hood stole from the rich and gave to the poor. The poor were all for this, but how did the rich feel? They were working hard but lost what they had gained at the Jubilee year. Although this is true, this is not the most important reason for the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year was mainly intended to clean the spiritual slate. Any sorrow you were hanging on to would be forgotten and any shame would be let go of. You and the whole society would reset.

Another thing that sparked my interest in my Torah portion was that since God owns all the earth and all of its inhabitants, people cannot truly own people or land. Whether you own a lot of things or just a little bit of things, the Jubilee year teaches us that these things do not matter because all of it belongs to God.

Learning this about my Torah portion helped me better understand my volunteering for the HoneyComb Project, a program that I worked with for my Mitzvah project. With them I spent multiple hours doing a variety of different projects. For instance, I distributed food

to lower income families at the Ravenswood Pantry, made mats out of plastic for the homeless, and wrote letters to the military overseas. Getting to some of these people from lower income families showed me how similar our personalities really are.

To me, being a Bar Mitzvah marks a milestone in my life. I consider this only one of many milestones that I have in my life to look forward to. They track my progress in life. There is all this build-up and anticipation until becoming a Bar Mitzvah. I have climbed this mountain for so long. When climbing I wanted it to end, and when I finally reach the top, I looked down at the lengthy, challenging path that I endured. I feel proud at the top of the mountain; the milestone reflects accomplishment. But later, after I have returned home, I look back on the climb, remembering the positive, notable moments during the climb. Looking back, I do not know why I wanted the climb to end so quickly. But it did, so I keep going, conquering more and more mountains. In the future I look forward to looking at the tops of more mountains and then later looking down from them.

*Zachary Deutsch is an eighth grader at Chicago City Day School. He participates in basketball and soccer teams and is an avid piano player. His parents Danielle and Harel Deutsch have been affiliated with Rodfei Zedek since moving to Chicago in 2003, and he has siblings Ilana and Aiden.*

by Avery Rosenberg



My Torah portion is called B'hukkotai, which means "if you follow my laws," and it is about Moses and the laws that God gave to him, which he then

taught to the israelites. Moses tells the people of Israel, "if you follow my commandments, good things will happen, but if you don't follow my commandments bad things will happen." Some of these "good things" include: rain when it is needed, having enough food, being safe and having peace in the land of Isreal, being safe from vicious beasts, and defeating your enemies in battle. This sounds like a pretty good list of things and if I were an israelite I would probably do what God says. How about you?

God believes that he is present in your life, and is the Lord who brought us out of the land of Egypt, so that he can make your life better if you follow his commandments. Some of the bad things that might happen if you reject God's laws or do not observe his commandments include: making you miserable, sickness, you will be routed by your enemies, your foes will dominate you, God will discipline you, and he will break your spirit. So, I wouldn't want to break any of these laws. Doesn't God sounds like a pretty mean parent? So then, God tells the people of Israel that if they still survive these bad things, they will be banished

from the land and they shall atone for their sins.

The thing I found most interesting in my portion was when Moses retold the Israelites that a good person should not ask "If I perform these commandments, what reward will I get?" Moses is trying to make us understand that we should not do something just to be rewarded, we should do it because it's the right thing to do, which makes sense to me; but that is hard. It is interesting because I have to do chores. When my mom or dad ask me to do a chore, I usually complain. When I complete a chore, I am looking for that reward. I cannot be alone in this, our first instinct is to do this chore for the reward and not because it's the right thing to do. It's normal, just like with the Israelites, and, spoiler alert: they did a lot of complaining.

Next time I am about to do a chore, an act of kindness, or a mitzvah, I will try to do it not for the reward, but because it's the right thing to do for your parents, your friends, or your community. I do hope that God is more understanding of the Israelites' complaining and mistakes just as I hope my parents are as understanding of when I complain about doing a chore.

Another thing I found interesting was when Moses said that becoming a number of unconnected individuals rather than a special people will be the worst punishment imaginable. I believe by a special people he means community. Moses is trying to tell us that not becoming a community is the worst thing that can happen to the Israelites. We must stick together instead of abandoning each other. I found this interesting because there have been

instances in the past where we, all people, have discriminated against each other instead of being one community, and sticking with each other by choosing kindness as human beings rather than hate. And this is the message that I will take from my Bar Mitzvah, that the Torah is teaching us to stay connected and treat each other with kindness and respect.

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**by Bella Waltzer**



My portion is B'haalot'cha. Yeah, I know that's a mouthful. The basic point of my Torah portion is Moses telling God to take a chill pill. Moses is playing the peace-maker, being the rational one, and trying to keep everything from falling apart while the Israelites try to start a nation of their own. To give a little context, my portion is from the book of Numbers, which is the fourth book of the Torah. The previous book is Leviticus, and that deals with issues of holiness for the Priests and for the Israelites and describes the period right after the Israelites were freed from bondage in Egypt.

In B'haalot'cha the Israelites are figuring out how to get the hang of things as free people. And of course, what do they do? After the miracles, the Exodus, the division of the sea, water from a rock, the revelation at Sinai and the covenant? They start complaining about the food! “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free—and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled.”

The Israelites only have manna to eat, which is coriander seed, ground, boiled, and made into cakes. They complain that they don't have any meat but they had meat in Egypt. And of course, this REALLY angers Adonai. He tells them that if they were to whine to the Lord that got them out of Egypt about wanting to go back to Egypt for the meat, then they could eat it until it came out of their nostrils. Yes it really does say that in the Torah: As it says in my portion: “You shall not eat one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you.” And of course in the end Adonai kills the people who complained about not having meat.

I think it's safe to say Adonai had some serious anger issues. I kind of see Moses as a therapist for Adonai. Moses tries to convince God not to take vengeful actions and talks him through his problems. Without Moses everything probably would have gone up in flames

An example is when Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses marrying a Cushite woman. Miriam then gets stricken with scales (which is a plague, in case you didn't know!) and Aaron pleads with Moses to talk to the Lord

about saving her and not letting her die. So Moses appeals to the Lord, “please heal her!!!”. So even Moses was like stop and save her! When Moses was the one who was insulted in the first place. And the Lord says, “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?” and so Miriam was locked out of the Israelites’ camp for seven days and they did not march on until she was readmitted. Better than dying in my opinion, even though it’s still pretty bad. Family is more important than petty drama.

I think this is like a fight with a friend in school or when a parent intervenes between you and a friend. For example, your friend says something a little mean to you and you get mad. Their parent finds out and take a privilege away from your friend that you know is hard for your friend to deal with. Even though you are mad you don’t want extra drama and it wasn’t really that big a deal, so you try to mediate and lessen the punishment. Sometimes if it’s more drama for someone else, it’s more drama for you, and no one wants extra drama. It teaches you a lesson that sometimes you just gotta let some things slide. People go crazy and they say stupid things. But that’s just life.

Now the big question, why have a bat mitzvah? Well, for one thing even though you are not required to have a bar or bat mitzvah, it’s an important part in growing and becoming an adult. It was important to me to have one because it seemed like something I could gain knowledge from. It puts you in a group of people that had an experience like you and it’s an easy thing to relate to. A lot of my friends were having one and my parents had

one so why not? I mean you learn about the Torah, how to read Hebrew, and you get a party! Pretty cool, am I right? Seemed like something I would look back on and find meaning in and it produces great memories. Having one is something important and it connects you to other Jews in other places and across time. Because in the end we’re all one big complaining family.

I remember old conversations I had with my parents about having a bat mitzvah. It feels like the other day that I had no idea how to chant and I couldn’t stay in the same key. Maybe it was. It’s tricky to stay in the same key. Anyways, the conversations I had with my parents consisted of how to read Hebrew, how to engage with Jewish history, what it means for my family to watch me become a bat mitzvah, and stuff like that. Sometimes it’s hard to come up with reasons on why you want to do things. You just do. And that’s fine! As long as you enjoy it and are really interested in the topic.

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**by Miriam Niestat**



In my parasha, Sh'lach Lechah, the Israelites have been journeying through the desert, having just received the

Torah a few months ago at Mount Sinai; and Adonai, God, tells the people He has found a land for them. God tells Moses to take one person from each of the twelve tribes, to go into the land of Canaan to survey the land, search to find out about its resources, and check for any problems within the area.

The Torah goes to great lengths to lay out the names of each and every scout and many places in the Land of Canaan. My parasha is not at the beginning of the Torah, so it doesn't make sense to be learning names now, but I think it's because this is the start of a new chapter in the life of the Israelites. Learning about and entering the land of Canaan is a new book or section in and of itself, so therefore there are many new people and places to learn about and give names to.

When the scouts come back from the land, they lie about what they saw, claiming that it was a bad land with extremely strong armies. Two of the scouts tell the truth and stay "loyal" to Adonai. When I first read this parsha about two years ago, it didn't make such a strong impression on me. I thought, "Oh this makes sense, God wanted to make sure the land was safe for the Israelites," but as I have gotten older I have become able to think more critically and deeply about the meaning behind this story.

The big question I have been thinking about is why did God send scouts to a land that He had already chosen? One would think that because it was chosen as the "Promised Land" God would have made sure it was safe, right? This led me to think that maybe God didn't really need to have scouts look over the land at all. This was a test,

and one person was chosen from each of the tribes to represent that tribe as a whole. This is how God judged the Israelites, to see if they were worthy of the land that God had chosen for them. When certain scouts came back and lied to everyone, God saw this as a fault of the whole entire tribe, and when the scouts from the tribes of Ephraim and Judah came back and told the truth, God made these the two main tribes of His people.

This idea that one person represents a whole tribe in some ways, makes me think of the zodiac signs or astrology. If you think about it, in astrology there are certain signs that someone is born into solely based upon their birthday, they don't get to choose, and there are all these stereotypes and expectations of you even if that's not who you are. As an example, I was born in early April, which technically makes me an Aries. Aries are "known" to be feisty, aggressive, and jealous all the time. Although there are definitely times when I am feisty, aggressive, and even jealous, I don't feel like those are all of my personality traits by any means. I'm sure there is someone who is an Aries who fits all of these stereotypes, but I personally do not. Just as another Aries doesn't represent me, why should the Israelites be judged by the actions of one person in their tribe? In Judaism, we are not supposed to believe in these kinds of things -- idol worship or believing in other gods, and astrology is very similar, but in my parasha, it seems like God is doing the exact same thing. So, shouldn't we as Jewish people push back on the things we are not supposed to believe in even when they're in our holy text and our community?

Sometimes, people try to justify all of God’s actions even if they seem to contradict God’s own teachings, but I feel lucky that in my community, here at Rodfei Zedek and at the Jewish Enrichment Center, I am able to question all these things. I’ve learned that in a parasha like this when God seems to be judging the whole Jewish people based on the mistakes of a few people who don’t represent everyone, it may not be only them who made a mistake.

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**by Eli Strahilevitz**



My portion is R'eih which in Hebrew means “to see.” In R'eih, Moses is giving a speech to the Israelites before they enter the promised land and leave Moses behind.

Moses’s speech to the Israelites is about all of the rules, blessings, and curses that Adonai had instructed them about earlier in the Torah. These cover topics ranging from idol worship to holidays and even the rules about keeping kosher. These rules led me to questions like: what is the ratio of curses

to blessings that you need to in order to become “pure or impure?” Is it one, half, all or some form of a three strikes system, and is the Torah’s definition of a blessing what you would do to be blessed by God or the act of God blessing you?

One larger idea that I had was that there are two types of rules. I named them 1-sided and 2-sided rules. 1- sided rules are where refraining from the wrongful act is not a blessing, just neutral and failing to do a blessing is just neutral too. An example of a 1-sided rule in the Torah is stealing. Stealing is a violation of the commandment in the Torah “do not steal,” therefore it is a curse to steal. But refraining from stealing is not a blessing. To do a blessing you need to do an act of good. Sure it's better than stealing but everyone for most of their lives is not stealing. Also God would have to give out so many blessings if things like not stealing counted.

An example of a 2-sided rule might be keeping kosher – observing the Jewish laws regarding what you can eat and when. Keeping 100% kosher can be hard to do, therefore it is a blessing to keep kosher. However keeping kosher is a rule in the Torah, therefore not following the laws of kashrut by Torah standards would be a curse. Following some rules of kashrut but not others isn’t really enough as far as the Torah is concerned. The rules of kashrut seem to be all-or-nothing. However, some 2 sided rules in the Torah, like don't place a stumbling block before the blind, have a neutral zone where it is not a blessing or a curse. An example of this rule is that it would be a curse to hurt the disabled and a blessing to help them

move around an obstacle placed by another, but if there is nothing in their way, not intervening would be neither a blessing nor a curse.

My Torah portion connects to my life because I have always wondered what rules in the Torah you need to follow to be a Jew in 2019. And I have also wondered which non-religious laws you need to follow to be a good person. My Torah portion, my 2018-2019 year at the Jewish Enrichment Center, and watching every single episode of *The Good Place* helped me find my answer.

To me, being Jewish in 2019 is about community, family, and being a good person. So using those three ideas I came up with my own answer to which laws you need to follow. My answer was that you have to follow any laws or rules for which following them would make the world a better place and positively affect the people around you. Lots of times, helping those around you makes the world a better place. So there is usually no conflict between those two values.

But we can imagine situations where making the world a better place and helping people around you are in conflict. What if the people around you are making the world a worse place? In that situation, the right thing to do is to try to get the people around you to behave less selfishly. Like if you and your friends were doing some activity that brought you closer together but also harmed the environment you could suggest doing something else that wouldn't harm the environment but that you would still have a good time doing with your friends. If that's not possible, then your obligation to make the world a better place takes priority.

So far, so good. But then I started wondering whether helping those around you and making the world a better place are 1-sided or 2-sided rules. Obviously, helping other people and helping the world is a blessing. But is it a curse to just do nothing good or bad? Suppose you're just taking up space. I think it depends on what your opportunities were. Say that throughout your life you had only opportunities to do bad things, and you didn't do any of them. You should not be cursed, and maybe you should even be blessed. But suppose that throughout your life you had only opportunities to do good things, and you didn't do any of them. You should be cursed. People grow up in very different environments with different influences around them, and I think you have to take this into account in deciding what to expect of people.

To conclude my d'var Torah I want to ask a question to everyone. Has there ever been a rule that you had to follow but you didn't agree with? And, if so, did you ask yourself, should this even be a rule? My answer is breaking the rule is only okay if it has a positive reaction on the people around you and would make the world a better place. . Otherwise, you need to follow the rule.

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## Jewish Music? Hallelujah!

by *Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby*



I am no musician and have long been in awe of those who are. My early attempts to imitate the sounds I heard on the radio came in the form of piano lessons on Wednesday afternoons, on a bench next to the endlessly sunny Mrs. Lewis, who believed everyone could learn to play. She was wrong, so wrong, but also kind enough to pretend not to notice that I, even after months of lessons, had not learned to read music. Her fake enthusiasm for my musical promise made me ashamed.

“Don’t make me go,” I told my mom. “I hate it and I want to quit.”

“Stick it out for a year,” she said. “If you still want to quit, you can.”

*Stick it out for a year* was the story of my childhood. Everything, I hated. Everything, I endured for a year then moved onto something else that I would quickly learn to dread. But I loved music, and was no dummy. If brains far dimmer than mine had become proficient in this strange language, couldn’t I learn?

No, I couldn’t. So I learned to memorize music. But as the music got harder so did the memorization.

Variations of the *Stick it Out For a Year* conversation went on for months.

Finally my year was up, and then my parents dropped the bomb that if I wanted to quit, I had to tell Mrs. Lewis myself. But I had the backbone of a bowl of pudding, so it took me another year to get up the nerve, an endless year of grumbling and fumbling and lying about half notes and quarter notes until finally I was free. “You know I never learned to read music,” I told Mrs. Lewis on the day I finally pulled the trigger.

She smiled. “Of course I knew. But I assumed you *thought* you knew how. I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

I still wanted badly to create, and my instrument became a tape recorder, into which my mouth attempted to make the music my fingers could not. That, of course, failed too. I felt consoled by the fact that no one else in my home was much better. My brothers dutifully did their year at Mrs. Lewis’s house then got the hell out; my parents were profoundly tone-deaf and had no rhythm.

Amazingly, when we went to synagogue, I found that the Rubys were no worse than the others in the sanctuary. The rabbi himself was such an abysmal and unselfconsciously loud singer that the congregation’s president often was forced to put his index finger

in his ear in order to get himself anywhere near the right pitch for the kiddush. I began to assume that Jews had something in them that prevented musical proficiency, much less greatness. The man who led the congregation in song, a mustachioed gentleman named Vernon, had a majestic and soaring voice that reached to the sky-high ceiling and bounced back with twice the strength and feeling. He was Lutheran.

When I turned on the radio, the only Jews, it seemed, were the unabashed shlockmeisters who embraced their worst cheeseball tendencies—guys like Billy Joel, Neil Diamond, and Barry Manilow. Others felt like inherent punchlines, like Barbra Streisand and Neil Sedaka. Talented but terrible, all. Even the Jews who landed in hard rock bands tended to be the most embarrassing members (see: David Lee Roth in Van Halen and Gene Simmons in Kiss.)

But as I got older, I realized how wrong I was. Judaism without music is not Judaism. And music without Jews is . . . well, it would still be music, I suppose, but we would barely recognize the landscape.

I could tell you about the Jews that dominated classical music, like Mendelssohn and Mahler, or make a case for Berlin and Gershwin being the two greatest composers of the twentieth century. Or bloviate about Goodman and Getz, who changed the face of jazz. I could plug great songwriters like Carole King, Randy Newman, and Leiber & Stoller; give props to Beck

doing whatever Beck does. I could even give Phil Spector a pass on that nasty murder to wax ecstatic about how he reshaped pop music to his own peculiar liking. Name a genre. Folk music? Simon and Garfunkel took it to new levels of profundity. Punk rock? Without Lou Reed, Jonathan Richman, two fifths of the New York Dolls, and half the Ramones, it would not exist. Hip-hop? Beastie Boys, Rick Rubin, and Drake have been crucial. And of course, the biggest macher of them all: Bob Dylan, a poet with a talent so far beyond that of his peers that no one in the music industry even *tried* to compete with him. To call Dylan a rock star is like calling Picasso a painter; it's technically true, but the word is too reductive, too small to contain his absurd abilities.

So, Jews rock. This may be familiar news for anyone with the slightest knowledge about popular music. But for a kid like me with no inherent talent, it was my equivalent of watching Hank Greenberg or Sandy Koufax dominating a sport traditionally ruled by goyim. I wasn't going to be a musician any more than I would become an athlete, but at least I could see myself reflected in the music I loved. The kids call it "representation."

The kinship that I felt to all the above musicians, even larger than life figures like Dylan, made me feel like less of an outsider, an underdog. Or, at least, I imagined that we were together in being outsiders. It's not like Lou Reed was wearing a kippah and davening at Velvet Underground shows, but neither was I when my parents dragged to shul.

If I could not make my music, they made it for me.

Leonard Cohen's 1984 song, "Hallelujah," is one of the defining compositions of the twentieth century. Cohen struggled mightily with the song—a haunting mix of lust, regret, and biblical allusions—going through about 80 draft verses of the song and reportedly finding himself banging his head on the floor of a New York hotel room in his underwear. The first verse, which he sang in his haunting, stoic baritone, went: "Well I've heard there was a secret chord/That David played and it pleased the Lord/But you don't really care for music, do you?/Well it goes like this/The fourth, the fifth/the minor fall and the major lift/The baffled king composing Hallelujah."

King David's voice was described as entrancing—powerful enough to win over man, beast, and nature alike, all of which would come together to praise God. His musicianship landed him in the royal court, which led to his rise and the ultimate uniting of the Jewish people. And now Cohen was building a bridge between David and modern musicians. "Amid the resurrective clamour, few grasped the leap that Cohen had made into the past," wrote Norman Lebrecht in a 2014 article in *the Guardian*. "In the depths of despair, he had sought the 'secret chord/That David played, and it pleased the Lord' across three millennia of human creation, appealing as one lost Jew to an ancestor for the primal gift of music."

Heady stuff. But in 1984, Michael Jackson and Madonna were ruling the

charts, and "Hallelujah" landed with a thud. Only in the years following did people recognize the song's uncanny ability to stir the soul. Now it's been recorded by more than 300 artists, to each of whom it means something different.

When I first heard "Hallelujah," it was like a bolt of lightning that carried everything central about the importance of music to Judaism. Music is ours, and has been ours for a long time, or least a piece of it. If it cannot unite us across time and space, it can at least give us hope. Even those with no talent.

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