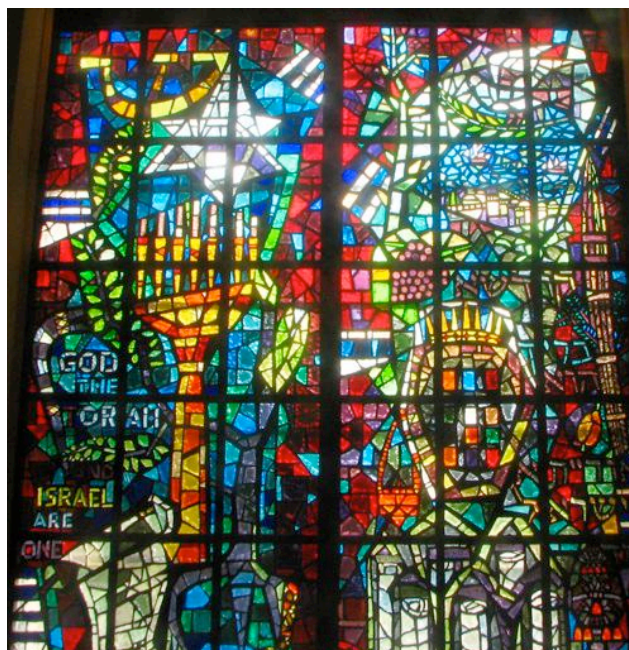


ללמוד וללמד

Vol. IX, No. 2



In this issue

Hamantaschen!

Matt Klionsky

Because We Were Strangers

Susan Boone

Yehuda Amichai's *B'terem*

Rabbi Larry Edwards

... and more from Nancy Peltzman, Scott Stern,
Reyna Levine, Ryan Pinkert, Yoni Hoffman-Skol,
Sam Lear, and the Rebel

Volume IX Number 2

Contents

Introduction	3
Hamantaschen! by Matt Klionsky	4
Because We Were Strangers by Susan Boone	13
Yehuda Amichai's <i>B'terem</i> by Rabbi Larry Edwards	16
This American Shabbat Nancy Peltzman, Scott Stern, Reyna Levine	21
Bar Mitzvah Talks Ryan Pinkert, Yoni Hoffman-Skol, Sam Lear	28
The Moment That Rodfei Zedek Became Home by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby	35



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Introduction to Volume IX Number 2

Our Spring edition usually appears just before Pesach, but there has been nothing "usual" about this year. While we look back with sorrow for all that has been lost, for all the opportunities missed, we can also reflect with gratitude on what we've managed to preserve and accomplish. So, as spring approaches, we prepare for the joyous celebration of Purim. With the help of Matt Klionsky we will celebrate in our homes, where many of us have found renewed satisfaction in cooking and baking.

Each of us has a story of how we found a home in the Rodfei Zedek community. In this issue our Rebel shares his. However we came, we have turned to the Congregation for sustenance this year. We have taken particular comfort and joy in our recent b'nai mitzvah, Ryan Pinkert, Yoni Hoffman-

Skol, and Sam Lear. They exemplified the determination to embrace unorthodox approaches to ritual in order to transmit our traditions.

Some of us simply carried on with the important work of the Congregation. Rabbi David Minkus mustered an outstanding group of speakers – Nancy Peltzman, Scott Stern, and Reyna Levine – for the ongoing This American Shabbat effort. And Rabbi Larry Edwards offered another installment of his analyses of Yehuda Amichai.

Throughout, we have been reminded of the mission proclaimed in the name of our Congregation – to pursue justice. Social Justice initiatives, spearheaded by committee chairman Mark Sorkin, have indeed been pursued. In this issue we read about involvement in the Hyde Park Refugee Project.

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Hamantaschen! – Recipes and Related Stories

by Matt Klionsky



ORIGINS

My father's maternal grandmother – my great grandmother 'Bubbie Bluma' (born 1879) – was revered as a great baker. But she relished that role too much and, perhaps for fear of competition and to retain her reputation, did not share her recipes and generally banned others from her kitchen when she was baking. She also didn't measure ingredients, and had limited literacy; and these factors too may have been impediments to sharing.

The last time she visited us (maybe, 1964, when I was about 11), her mobility and eyesight were limited, and she didn't know our kitchen, but she still wanted to bake. My mother had anticipated this - it meant that Bubbie would have to allow someone in the kitchen with her, someone to fetch ingredients; as a consequence of this realization, my mother spent several days prior to the visit teaching herself how to estimate ingredient volumes. She figured out the range of how much flour was in a 'handful,' what a half-teaspoon of salt looks like on one's palm, how long it took to fill a cup by pouring oil from a bottle. The strategy worked, and the result was a rough estimate of ingredients and processes. Then, after the visit, my mother made repeated attempts to duplicate the recipes, working by trial-and-error until my father said things tasted right.

My hamentaschen dough in its original incarnation was the result of that process. It was actually used, on the occasion of Bubbie Bluma's last visit, to bake babka - but her daughter later told us that the same dough was used for hamentaschen. So, that's what I've done ever since.

It is a rich yeast dough. In the original version, the only liquids were butter, sour cream, Crisco, milk, and eggs. In recent years I created a pareve version and even a vegan one. All of these will be described in the recipe. Fillings have a slightly different origin – but only in some senses. My mother's mother – my Bubbie Rose – (incidentally, from the same Lithuanian shtetl (Baltermans/Butrimonys) as my father's Bubbie Bluma), while not much of a cook, did know how to make the 'mun' and 'lekvar' that constitute the most classic hamentaschen fillings. So, in the end, while my hamentaschen aren't pure Bubbie Rose or pure Bubbie Bluma, they're pure Baltermans – or at least they were until I began to create fillings in addition to those two classics.

I started baking these myself as a teenager, and have made at least 20 dozen every Purim since then. I made over 600 for my son's bar mitzvah, and for about a

decade led yearly fund-raising projects with Akiba Schechter students, producing hamentaschen for the annual UChicago Hillel Latke-Hamentasch debate, as well as for Purim, using these recipes and producing over 1000 pastries per year.

Notes before you begin:

Technique matters a lot in this recipe, and there are actually reasons for just about every instruction. That's why there are technique notes throughout. There's no way to speed things up. The dough really does need to rise for many hours or overnight. They really do taste much better if the dough is rolled very thin. You cannot close the triangles by pinching the dough edges together instead of using the overlap technique I describe - they'll open up when you bake them. Substituting liquid oil or margarine for Crisco will make the dough fragile and difficult to work with. If you roll the dough-balls or otherwise over-handle the dough, it will shrink rather than cooperate when you're trying to fill the pastries.

Your production skills will develop with practice – faster if you're already experienced with pastry baking, slower if you're 'all thumbs.' But I think people who have tasted the results will tell you that it is worth the effort.

The dough recipes as published here are designed for use of an electric mixer with dough hooks and 5 qt bowl capacity. That said, I made them 'by hand' for many years, and the batch size here (which makes 5 - 6 doz.) works by hand as well. If you are using a mixer with sufficient power and bowl capacity, you can multiply the recipe by 1.5.

.....

DOUGH

The dough is a rich yeast dough which takes about a day to rise. After one day, any unused dough may be refrigerated for use one or two days later. If refrigerated, allow to warm thoroughly at room temperature before using. The same dough makes an excellent "babka" (coffee cake). Although the dough is very rich, one batch goes a long way. It is rolled very thin (a little thicker than a CD); one batch makes five to six dozen triangular pastries with 3 inch to 3 1/2 inch sides, or 6 - 7 dozen with sides of 2 1/2 inches.

Prepare for baking by having 3 eggs, 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter or margarine, 1/2 cup milk and 1/2 cup sour cream at room temperature. (See below for vegan and pareve options)

MIX (in cup or small bowl) and let mixture rise until doubled in volume.....:

- 1 T (=one 1/4 oz. foil pkg.) dry baker's yeast with
- 1 t sugar, and stir until completely dissolved in
- 2 T lukewarm water;

MEANWHILE, mix together (sifting if lumpy) in a large bowl:

- 6 cups flour (preferably a high-gluten, "bread" flour, unbleached)
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 t salt

THEN, pour the risen yeast into a depression you create in the middle of the flour mixture.

NEXT, add all room temperature ingredients to the flour mixture, then knead:

- 1/2 cup butter or margarine (not the "light" variety)
- 1/2 cup solid Crisco
- 1/2 cup sour cream (stabilizers/preservatives will inhibit yeast)
- 1/2 cup milk
- 3 previously beaten XL eggs (if smaller, compensate with more milk)

[For pareve dough, use these substitutions in recipe below:

7 1/2 oz unflavored soy milk + 1 T vinegar + 4 oz coconut oil) instead of sour cream, milk, and butter; can also use emulsion of ground chia seeds instead of eggs (i.e., 3T ground chia plus 2T oil plus 7 oz warm water) for full vegan dough version.]

Beat and knead until the dough is homogeneous, soft, smooth, and quite elastic. When done, lightly oil the dough surface, place in a large bowl, cover with a clean cloth, and let rise at room temperature for a day (12 hr minimum; 24 is better; more is OK)

The dough is not punched down or allowed to re-rise before using. If a crust forms when rising, gently turn the risen dough over just before using, even though this will cause the dough to deflate somewhat.

WHEN READY TO BAKE, make small dough balls, a few at a time, each about the diameter of a film canister or medium-size walnut (i.e., ~1 1/8"). (Do NOT roll the balls in your hand! That would deflate the dough and make the rest of the process difficult. They don't really need to be balls, just the right amount of dough - minimal handling is best! If you have a food scale, you can check ball size easily – they should be about 20 grams each.

Then, follow ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS

Baked pastries may be frozen for several months without loss of texture or flavor. If frozen, thaw in open air so dough doesn't get soggy.

ASSEMBLY AND BAKING

Hamentaschen are baked on lightly greased baking sheets, and are prettier if glazed before baking. It is best but not necessary for the dough to rise for an additional

hour or so after pastries are formed but before baking. Each batch takes about 20 - 25 minutes baking time in a 375 degree (F) oven. Pastries can be spaced fairly closely on the baking sheets, as they don't rise much.

As previously noted, the dough should be quite thin. This can be achieved (with a bit of practice) by pressing and stretching a dough ball on a hard surface with fingers and palms. Rolling out a large sheet with a rolling pin and cutting circles in it with a cookie cutter doesn't work very well. The best and fastest method I've found requires a tortilla press. (see Note 2 below). The goal is to get the dough thicker than a shirt cardboard but thinner than the cardboard on the back of a pad of writing paper, 4" diam.

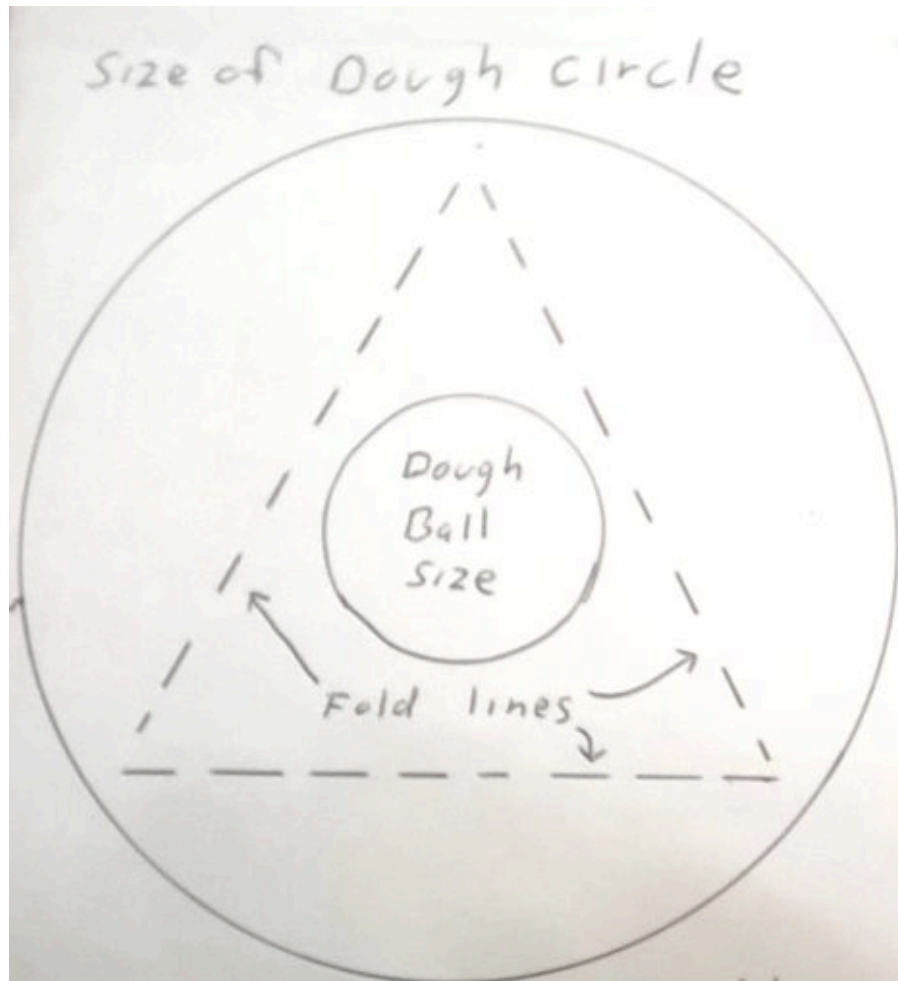
- 1) Gently make 1 1/8" dough balls (the size of small walnuts or a little smaller).
- 2) Use your preferred method to flatten a dough ball into an approximate circle, around 4 inches in diameter – see diagram. Handle dough as little as possible – if over-handled, dough circles will shrink and thicken and become hard to fill and fold.
- 3) Place about a tablespoon (20 gm; 2/3 oz) of filling in the center of the dough.

Shape filling into a rough triangle, approx. to dotted lines in diagram. (Use spoon to shape filling, not fingers! Sticky fingers will cause pastries to open when baking! And, KEEP FILLING AWAY FROM EDGES OF DOUGH.

- 4) Fold one edge of dough over the filling along one edge of the filling triangle. Then, fold another dough edge over a second filling edge, partially overlapping the first dough fold. Finally, fold the third dough edge so it overlaps the other two and completely enfolds the filling, making a triangular pastry about the size of the dotted-line triangle in diagram. Lots of overlap is good - it keeps them from opening. Do NOT pinch!
NOTE1: no need to try to get perfectly round dough circles – shape and size of pastry depends on where you make the folds, not on initial dough shape.

- 5) Move raw pastry to very lightly greased baking sheet, folded edges up, not down
- 6) (optional) Glaze lightly with equal-parts mix of egg yolk, honey, and orange juice
[a soft feather-baster (from a cooking store) works better than a brush]
- 7) Sprinkle with something to identify filling (e.g., poppyseeds, chopped cranberry bits, or whatever else is appropriate to the filling you're using)
- 8) Allow to rise for 1/2 - 1 hour (if possible)
- 9) Bake 18 - 25 minutes at 375F until golden on top and bottoms are beginning to brown. (in professional convection oven, bake at 300F rather than 375F)
- 10) Immediately remove to cooling racks

Note 2 on tortilla presses (also known as a puri makers to Asian Indians) – press should be at least 5 inches in diameter and with evenly spaced face-plates (CHECK before you buy - Some are even, some are not – even of the same brand/model.) Cost is about \$10 - \$15 in Mexican or Indian stores. Make sure that the faces of the press are stiff, non-flexible, smooth, and absolutely parallel when closed. Proper spacing is very important. My standard 20 gm dough ball should get flattened into a circle about 4 inches across. If the spacing between plates is too wide, the dough circle will be too small; this can be corrected by make shims out of wax-paper covered cardboard, cottage-cheese-container tops, or whatever, and placing them along with the dough between the press-plates. (i.e., trial and error to find right thickness for shims)



FILLINGS

Hamentaschen can be tastily filled with almost any fruity/nutty confection, but the filling must be stable enough not to melt and get runny at baking temperatures. And, somewhat tart fillings work particularly well to contrast with the sweet dough.

Each of the following filling recipes is enough to use up about one batch of the dough. I suggest that each pastry have about equal weight of dough and filling; my preferred size is about 20 gm (2/3 oz) each. For fillings, this equates to about 4 dozen per quart.

Leftover fillings can be frozen for future use, or used to spread on bread (or whatever).

As with the dough, the fillings are best prepared the day before the baking project.

POPPYSEED (MUN) FILLING

Prepare for baking by having a food grinder or processor, a large fine-pore sieve or piece of cheesecloth, and a citrus-rind grater, as well as common utensils.

This filling is also perfect for poppyseed cakes or coffee cakes.

Place 1/2 pound dry poppyseeds (= 1 1/3 c.) in a 3 qt. pot with at least 2 qts. water. Bring to a boil, and allow to just simmer for 15 minutes, then turn off and allow this to cool completely at room (or refriger.) temperature.

When cool, rinse well – there will be a lot of scum to remove. (Pour water from pot, refill, stir, and re-drain; at least five times until rinse water is almost clear). Then drain fully: tightly tie fine cheesecloth over pot and turn pot on side and drain until no longer dripping.

While poppyseeds are draining, finely grate the peel from half a lemon, then squeeze the juice from the lemon and mix both lemon components with:

- 1/2 cup honey [substitute Agave Nectar for vegan version]
- 1/2 cup raisins (about 3 oz, by weight)
- optional:-1/2 cup dry pitted prunes (about 4 oz, by weight)
- 1 cup walnut pieces (about 4 oz, by weight)

Put the above mixture through a course food grinder. (Or, use food processor as follows: First, process walnuts to about the size of sesame seeds. Remove nuts, and then process raisins, prunes, honey, and lemon juice into a thick paste. Finally, combine this paste in a bowl with nuts and drained poppyseeds and mix thoroughly.) Refrigerate for use in the next 1 - 3 days, or freeze for future use.

(NOTE 1: The prune option has gastrointestinal benefits particularly appreciated by people who tend to eat too many poppyseed hamentaschen, which tend to be constipating.)

(Note 2: Prepared like this, poppyseeds have a mild flavor...if you like a more pronounced poppyseed taste, grind them into a meal first. This requires either a grain mill, a very fast/powerful device like a Magic Bullet blender, or a LOT of time by hand with a mortar and pestle.)

PRUNE (LEKVAR) FILLING

This is a classic.

Place 1 1/2 pounds of pitted prunes in a 3 quart pot with plenty of very warm water, and let soak for a couple of hours. (Alternative, if a faster process is desired: simmer prunes briefly, then allow to cool.) While prunes are soaking, finely grate the peel from half a lemon and half an orange, then squeeze the juice from both and save all citrus components for later use.

When prunes are soft and plump but each fruit retains its integrity, drain completely and mix in:

- 1/2 cup brown sugar (optional)
- citrus zest (rind) and juice
- 1 cup walnuts (4 oz by weight)
- 1 1/2 cups raisins (8-9 oz, by weight)
- Cinnamon to taste

Put the entire mixture through a food grinder or processor so that it becomes a thick, homogeneous paste. Refrigerate until ready to use.

(Note: There's always a warning on packages of pitted prunes saying 'may contain pits'. I have found this to be a reasonable warning, and I've learned to squeeze each prune by hand after soaking to check for (and remove) any pits. You do NOT want pits going through your food grinder/processor!)

TROPICAL FILLING – Apricot/Pineapple/Coconut

Empty 20 oz can of chunk/sliced pineapple (with juice) into bowl, bring to boil, and turn off. (This kills enzymes that would otherwise destroy flavors during baking.) Drain off juice and reserve. Then, combine drained pineapple with:

1 1/2 lb dried apricots

Zest and juice of 1 orange.

1/2 lb dry coconut (sweetened, or not)
ginger powder, to taste (1/2 – 1 tsp)

Put all through food processor or grinder to obtain a thick paste.

If resultant paste is too thick to work easily, add some/all of the reserved juice.

NEW WORLD FILLING – CRANBERRY

This can be converted to a more classic cherry filling by using pitted cherries and dried cherries as substitutes for the cranberries. As neither fruit is in season at Purim time, canned or frozen may be used. This cranberry version requires additional foresight (i.e., a stockpile of frozen cranberries) as whole frozen cranberries aren't easily available in March. If using canned cranberry sauce, reduce sugar in recipe accordingly. **OPTION:** mix cherries and cranberries.

Place contents of 24 oz (two standard bags) of fresh or frozen whole cranberries in a microwave oven in a lightly covered container and heat on HIGH until all the berries split (5-10 minutes) [If done on stovetop, use a steamer; don't boil or add extra water.]. While cranberries are cooking, finely grate the peel from an orange, then squeeze its juice and save for later use.

When cranberries have popped, and while still hot, mix in

- 12 oz (by weight) dried cranberries (OK if sweetened)
- orange rind and juice
- 2 cup finely chopped walnuts (8 oz by weight)
- 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 cup white sugar (to taste)
- 2/3 to 1 cup packed brown sugar (to taste)

Mash mixture with hand tool, or put through a food grinder or processor so that it becomes a thick, homogeneous paste. Refrigerate until ready to use. Leftovers can be eaten like cranberry sauce.

FIG WITH ANISE (This is REALLY good)

1 1/2 lb. dried figs
3/4 C honey (or Agave nectar)
Juice and zest of 3 oranges and 3 lemons
1 T ground anise seed

Mix above together and heat/simmer (I do it in a microwave), then put warm mixture through grinder or food processor to make a thick paste. Add in and mix well: 3/4 C ground nuts (almonds preferred, others OK)

If too thick, add a little more citrus juice or honey

DATE WITH CARDAMOM AND FENNEL – (Exotic and excellent!)

Soften 1 lb date paste (this is just a mash of pitted dates; available in middle eastern stores; much cheaper than buying dates). To soften, heat in microwave on 'high' for 1.5 - 2 minutes; this will greatly soften the block of date paste and make mixing possible. When done, you will have a homogeneous thick paste that can be spread fairly easily even once it returns to room temp.

Mix in:

1 1/2 t each ground fennel and ground cardamom

2 t cinnamon

3/4 t ground cumin

1/4 C chipped/shredded coconut

zest of ~2 oranges

~1/2 C orange juice (add half at the beginning; reserve other half to use at end to adjust consistency)

~2 T pomegranate molasses

a pinch of salt

If paste is too thick for easy working, add more of the reserved OJ as needed.

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Matthew Klionsky holds degrees from Brandeis University, the Hahnemann Medical College (now part of Drexel University in Philadelphia); and the Booth Graduate School of Business of the University of Chicago. Before retiring he worked as Senior Scientist for The Health Data Institute and Director of Research for FirstHealth and co-founded HealthGnostics. His work involved development and application of analytic systems to elucidate issues pertaining to quality, effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of care, as well as identification of fraud and abuse, in medical care databases.

Matt has been active in the Hyde Park community, serving on the University of Chicago Medicine Community Advisory Panel and the boards of a community health center, his condo association, the University of Chicago Hillel, and Akiba Schechter.

His other interests include baking (especially Jewish cultural specialties), urban foraging (about 300 lbs of fruit per year), cycling (over 3000 miles/year), and the collection and use of tools (enough to fill his basement and fix most repairable things). He's married to Susan Rosenberg, and they raised four children here, Gideon, Abigail, Naomi, and Devora.

Because We Were Strangers by Susan Boone



As I have described in congregational emails, a large Congolese refugee family was resettled in Hyde Park this summer by World Relief (WR). WR contacted the Hyde Park Refugee Project (HPRP) asking for assistance. I have been involved with the HPRP for some time now and agreed, because of the immediate and serious need, to be the contact person for the family, supporting, mentoring, and guiding their introduction to the neighborhood and resources of Hyde Park. I am happy to say that Hyde Park – the Hyde Park Kenwood Interfaith Council, HPRP, the schools, churches, synagogues, food pantries, neighbors, sororities, and restaurants – have responded with generosity and kindness and a warm welcome. A bright beacon of hope in an otherwise dark and erratic 2020. I am grateful to the many members of Congregation Rodfei Zedek who contributed to Thanksgiving and Christmas meals, who made sure each member of the family had a Christmas present, whose families played soccer with the children, and who contributed funds that will help to pay the green card application expenses.

I had never been involved in hands-on refugee resettlement. And here is what I have learned: there is no real roadmap. It is the biggest and earliest lesson. I became, in the parlance of the day, a *fixer*. I assessed and figured things out, doubled back, regrouped, doubled down, reassessed, sought out professional advice, ran interference, advocated, prioritized and listened. And listened some more. There was also, and continues to be, a whole lot of schlepping involved. And often a whole lot of fun. I was fortunate in all of this to have the most amazing partner in the eldest son of the family. A truly courageous 20-year-old; a devoted, reliable, and gentle young man, and the only member of the family of nine whose English was good enough to set us on our course and to facilitate all the work that needed to be done.

Certainly, mistakes and missteps happened, and will again. But here is the second lesson. You cannot fail in this work. Or rather, the only way to fail is not to try. The following is one small example of omissions that occurred along the way, how they tripped us up, and how we fixed them. It might even serve as representative of the whole experience. The eldest son was starting a new job. I had helped him with the paperwork and other pre-employment steps (like the drug test: “they give me drugs? No, they check to see if you use drugs. Afterthought: You don’t use drugs, do you? He draws back, eyes wide, “NO!”). Time now for his job orien-

tation. His regular shift will be 10PM to 6AM, but orientation day begins at 8AM. All goes well. Next day training begins, and here was his omission: he does not tell me he has to be at work at 6AM. At around 7AM that morning I saw a text from him that expertly managed, despite English being his second language, to communicate his panic. It was sent at 4:15AM and he was telling me he did not know what to do. He had been at the bus stop since well before 4AM, it is cold and dark and he is frightened and no bus is coming. I text him when I learn this at 7AM and ask where he is now. At home. He had waited at the stop until after 4:30AM and then raced home. He did not know who to contact at the company. He is just waiting. I know, since he spent 18 years in a refugee camp, that he is on intimate terms with waiting.

So, this was my blunder: I hadn't shown him how to use bus tracker or Google Maps. I contact his employment person at WR to explain the situation. Will the company give him another chance? He was trying after all. Yes, it turns out, he should go the next day. I head to his apartment and show him bus tracker, but for the next 4 mornings order a Lyft so he can relax about making it to work and practice using bus tracker on the way home. Then we are ready to try again. I am up at 4AM and I text him. Are you up? Yes, he is waiting. I look at bus tracker, and it indicates *no service on this route at this time*. I watch and wait with him, and suddenly the bus pops up. I text him. Yes, he sees it. He heads to the bus stop and I tell him to text me when he is on the bus. He is on the bus. I tell him

to text me when he is on the train. He is on the train. I remind him where to get off and what bus to catch next. He texts me when he is on that bus. And then the elated conclusion: I will make it on time!

Simple omissions. But they matter less than having someone to text at 4AM (even if she is sleeping). We are working together, and he knows he is not alone. That is all of it really... the whole megillah. Trying to understand, wading through the questions, trying to explain, trying to figure out, trying to anticipate, trying to move things along. Just trying. It can be a lot of work, and it can be vexing (on the order of one step forward and two steps back variety). And then there is this: from the beginning I admit to a feeling of encroachment. 2020 was already a year of undoing. Why take on the additional effort and uncertainty that comes with working with a refugee family—especially during COVID? I had a choice about this.

It is true the life of refugees can be quite precarious, certainly in the camps, which is the experience of this family, but also once they hit the United States. If you work to support them it is impossible not to be a bit jostled by this vulnerability yourself. As the months went on, I occasionally thought back to the relative calm I had given up—stepping outside of my bubble as it were. And in something like *bashert* fashion, that is precisely when I came upon a long forgotten *drash* of mine. It mentioned, as an addendum really, not as its main topic, the *zevach sh'lammim* offering from parshat Tzav. This is

often translated “peace offering,” an offering brought either in thankfulness for, or in hopes of, ensuring one’s own well-being. But it is sometimes translated as “the sacrifice of well-being”. Something recognizable clicks into place with this other way of reading the phrase. However variously the offering has come to be interpreted, I recognize that the notion of sacrifice of well-being could simply and literally be taken to mean my well-being. So understood, it illuminated my question of “why take this on?” in a new way. It also recalled for me a line from the memoir *The Return* by Hisham Matar, “It thinned the walls of our privilege a little and taught me something of the injustice and humiliation of being in need.” A voluntary breach of my comfort. A modest offering of my peace. A little thinning of my privilege. Baruch Levine alternatively calls the *zevach sh’la-mim* offering “the sacred gift of greeting” (could we equally think of it as the sacred gift of welcome?). Robert Alter indicates the root can also mean *shilem*, to repay. Could what I was perceiving as an unsettling encroachment, also be recognized as an indebtedness, an obligation, come to roost?

Some years ago, my husband, Larry Edwards, gave a *drash* about obligations and considerations related to indebtedness. He wrote the following, referring to this line in Exodus 22:

If you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate. (Ex. 22:25-26)

“In what else shall he sleep?” The Hebrew is even more terse, two words: Bameh yishkahv? Why is this phrase inserted here? What is it doing in this commandment? This is an extraordinary moment in the Torah. The commanding Voice reaches into us, claims us, expects our sympathetic response to a fellow human being, compassionate behavior based on our own ability to think and to feel. It does not, of course, assume that we will always do the right thing, but it does here expect that, once the right thing is pointed out to us, we will immediately recognize its compelling moral logic. It is so obvious: bameh yishkahv? In what will he sleep?

The self-evident nature of the question “In what will he sleep?” has penetrated some deep layer of my psyche, a challenge, maybe even an accusation. And in similar fashion, working with this refugee family seems so obvious. Maybe a different question. Who will help them? But just as obvious.

Susan Boone earned a PhD in ethics from Syracuse University, with a dissertation on post-Holocaust ethics. She taught for two years at St. Bonaventure University and worked as a federal bank examiner, a stock broker, and portfolio manager for a bank in Providence RI. In 1997, after life on the east coast she moved to Chicago with her husband, Rabbi Larry Edwards. Susan and Larry have been with Rodfei Zedek ever since. Susan worked at the University of Chicago for 20+ years, retiring from the President’s and Provost’s Offices in 2017.

B'terem – בטרם – Before, by Yehuda Amichai
presented by Rabbi Larry Edwards



In a deeply learned (and somewhat humorous) essay of 1985, Jacob Petuchowski discusses “Some Laws of Jewish Liturgical Development.” His opening comments are quite suggestive:

The traditional Jewish liturgy, in its diverse manifestations, is an imposing artistic structure...It is more like a medieval cathedral, in the construction of which many generations had a share, and in the ultimate completion of which (if, indeed, it ever was completed) the traces of diverse tastes and styles may be detected.

One way we might think of a Prayerbook is as a multi-layered anthology of poetry. Consider the inclusion of many biblical psalms interspersed with the rhythm of Talmudic *berachot*. Then add the various *piyyutim*, as described by Reuven Hammer:

The institution of the *piyyut* (from the Greek *poietai*, poem) is an ancient one dating to early liturgical poets such as Yose ben Yose, Eleazar Kalir, and Yannai, all of whom lived in the Land of Israel sometime between the third and sixth centuries. Their work was emulated by the *payytanim* of Spain, Italy, France, and Germany during the Middle Ages. These poems were composed to add variety to the service and were intended for the use of the leader of the service, rather than for the congregation (except for refrains which the congregation could repeat). Worshippers would often come to a service expecting to hear a new poetic work of devotion that would enhance the experience of worship.

The kabbalists of Safed, in the century or so following the expulsion from Spain, added some now-familiar poems, such as *L'cha Dodi*. The invention of the printing press tended to stabilize the text, or, as Rabbi Petuchowski states it, “The ultimate authority in matters liturgical is the printer” (p. 163).

In contemporary prayerbooks, especially those published by the liberal movements, we can notice a conscious (and accelerating) effort to include the work of contemporary poets. Some of these works have been written with the clear intention of liturgical use – think of Debbie Friedman’s *Mi She-beirakh*, which has become a staple in many congregations. A quick perusal of the “Sources and Credits” in the back of our High Holiday Mahzor reveals the names of writers both familiar and less so: Marcia Falk, Merle Feld, Yankev Glatshteyn, Charles Reznikoff. The occasional non-Jewish poet shows up as well, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke. Some of these writers are

practicing Jews; others might have been in conscious revolt against traditional religion. A major difference, of course, is intention: the classical *payyotanim* wrote specifically for the synagogue; contemporary poets generally write for their own reasons. Nevertheless, the editors clearly find in their words a sensibility that they believe resonates with the beliefs and anxieties of modern Jews. Their words may be relegated to the margins, but there they are – another layer added to our poetic anthology.

Yehuda Amichai has become a regular fixture in our prayerbooks. He was born into a traditionally observant family of German Jews, and so is quite conversant with the language of the Bible and of rabbinic literature. After making aliyah in the 1930s (and changing his name from Pfeuffer to Amichai) he became increasingly secular but, as we have seen before, his poetry, while often playful and even downright ironic about religious ideas, still retains a deep connection with traditional language and thought. A graceful review essay about Amichai in *The New Yorker* by James Wood is entitled simply, “Like a Prayer.” Wood writes,

His work, like his life, is closely bound up with contemporary Israeli life. His poems have been called the nation’s “secular prayers.” He is quoted at funerals and weddings, in political speeches and ceremonies, in rabbinical sermons and in a Jewish American prayer book. The Israeli journalist Eilat Negev tells the story of how Amichai was once watching a soldier’s funeral on TV only to discover that the woman standing over the grave was reading from his poem “God Full of Mercy,” his fiercely ironic version of the “El Malei Rachamim,” the memorial prayer recited at funerals and on certain holidays. There is no counterpart to this popularity in American letters, though perhaps Robert Frost once approached it.

Wendy I. Zierler points out in a recent essay that Amichai himself, in his last recorded interview, said, “*Ani bikhlal choshev shehamilim shel shirah hem kemo tefilah*” – “I generally think that the words of poetry are like prayer.” (Zierler makes a number of observations in her essay which are very helpful and insightful.)

So it should not be surprising that “Amichai” is one of the larger entries in the “Sources and Credits” of our *Mahzor Lev Shalem*. One of the poems included there (p. 410) fits beautifully in the margin of the Ne’ilah service, alongside a more ancient *piyyut* that takes center stage. (Thank you, editors, for including the original Hebrew!) In this poem, Amichai riffs on the biblical word בטרם *b’terem*, “before.” *B’terem* (or, as it often appears, simply *terem*, seems to be a uniquely Hebrew word. The Brown, Driver, Briggs *Lexicon* says, “adv. of time: not yet, ere, before that (derivation unknown: not found in cognate languages).” The word’s first appearance in the Tanakh is almost at the very beginning (almost “before” the beginning):

No shrub of the field was yet (*terem*) on the earth, no plant of the field had yet (*terem*) sprung up... (Gen. 2:5).

To the ear of the regular synagogue-goer, the word is probably most familiar from *Adon olam asher malakh, b’terem kol y’tzir nivra...*

Eternal Lord who reigned **before** anything was created...

Now let us consider the poem itself.

בטרם
בטרם השער יסגור,
בטרם קליהאמור יאמר,
בטרם אהיה אחר.
בטרם יקריש דם גבון.
בטרם יסגרו הדברים בארון.
בטרם יתקשה הבטון.
בטרם יסתמו קלינקבי
החלילים.
בטרם יסגרו קליהכללים.
בטרם ישגרו את הכלים.
בטרם החק יכנס לתקפו.
בטרם אלהים יסגר את־כפו.
בטרם נלך מפה.

On the left below is a translation from the Conservative Mahzor, Lev Shalem. A quite different translation comes from the Reform Mahzor, Mishkan Hanefesh, where it is also incorporated into the Ne'ilah liturgy:

Before

Before the gate closes,
before everything is said,
before I become estranged.
Before the discerning blood dries
up,
before things are boxed in,
before the concrete hardens.
Before all the flute holes are
blocked,
before all principles are explained,
before everything is broken,
before the law goes into effect,
before God's hand closes,
before we go away from here.

(trans. Alan Lettotsky)

Before

Before the gate is locked and shuttered
Before every word is said and uttered
Before I have become something different –
Something other

Before the mind has lost its way
Before possessions are packed, and put
away
Before the pavement hardens –
Here to stay

Before the apertures of flutes are sealed
Before the laws of nature are revealed
Before the vessels break –
And can't be healed

Before decrees and edicts are imposed
Before the hand of God has closed
Before we rise to leave this place –
And go.

(trans. Sheldon Marder)

The Yom Kippur imagery of the heavenly gates about to close is the poem's immediate connection to the Ne'ilah service of Yom Kippur. Amichai is well-aware of this imagery, and so it is easy to see that – even if he did not compose the poem with the intention of including it in some new edition of the Mahzor – it fits easily into that setting. A gate is a quite secular, everyday object, transformed in the traditional prayers into a poignant symbol of that which admits us to or blocks us from the Divine Presence. Amichai plays with the religious/secular dialectic, going back and forth between words that are often freighted with religious significance (“ark,” “God”) and the purely everyday (“concrete hardens”).

But already we begin to see that much of his vocabulary does not fit smoothly in one category or the other. What I just translated as “ark” – *aron* – can also simply mean closet. That seems to be the choice of both translators: “before things are boxed in” or “Before possessions are packed, and put away.” Translators always have to make choices, but here we really miss in the English the multi-layered resonance of the Hebrew. In the same line, *devarim* – “things, possessions” – can also mean “words.” There is quite a difference between things being packed in boxes and put away in the closet – a perfectly accurate rendition of the original – and the equally plausible translation (mine), “Before the words are enclosed in the ark.” Especially in those last minutes of Yom Kippur, with the congregation standing before the open ark, the line could powerfully suggest that it is not only God who is open to our prayers, but that we are still open to the words of Torah – until we close the ark and leave them behind in their “closet.” There is, of course, yet another layer to this simple Hebrew word, *aron*. It is also the word for coffin, so could also be heard as a reminder of our own mortality – just as the very last line of the poem could be read as simply leaving here (the synagogue?) and going somewhere else (home?), or just as plausibly signify leaving this life.

Another line with clear religious symbolism is “*B'terem yishb'ru et hakeilim.*” Lettofsky keeps it as plain as possible: “before everything is broken.” Marder's version allows those with basic familiarity with kabbalistic tradition to recognize the imagery of “the shattering of the vessels” (*shevirat hakeilim*) – what Isaac Luria imagined as the cosmic catastrophe that took place even before (*b'terem*) the world was created, and which leaves the world in need of *tikkun*.

Marder chooses a rhyme scheme that echoes some of the rhymes of the Hebrew. Lettofsky chooses as secular and de-mythologized a reading as possible. Meanwhile, Amichai plays with all of it – language, myth, religious sensibility thoroughly mixed with the everyday.

One question: I searched everywhere for the Hebrew phrase, *yakrish dam navon* – “the discerning blood dries up” or “the mind has lost its way.” In Hebrew it sounds like a citation from some ancient source, but I cannot find it. Does anyone recognize it?

Finally, one last observation about the setting of the poem in two contemporary Mahzorim. In *Mishkan Hanefesh*, published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) in 2015, the poem is centered on the left-hand page, opposite a traditional piyyut, centered on the right-hand page -- as if to say that this is fully part of our liturgical repertoire. In *Lev Shalem*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) in 2010 (the RA used it first!), the poem is in the margin of the page, as if to say, here is a commentary – a more “conservative” approach, perhaps, to the incorporation of new material.

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.

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Music

Yet another level of interpretation is offered by three different musical settings of Amichai's poem. I thank Na'ama Rokem for pointing me toward the surprisingly pop/rock version by Hanan Yovel (1974) at https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=VTs6KY_6o1Y. Wendy Zierler lists two others as well: there is a hauntingly beautiful version by Maureen Nehedar, much more in keeping with a Ne'ilah mood: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WKb-KyUwQU>. Also mellow is one by Karni Postal at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppIMK33LFHA>.

This American Shabbat

Since arriving at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, Rabbi David Minkus has created and nurtured a program originally suggested by NPR's This American Life. Invited by the Rabbi, participants in This American Shabbat study together and discuss, then present their interpretations at a Shabbat service. Over and over participants express their appreciation for each other's insights, and the entire Congregation thrills to the rediscovery of its members' talents and commitment. The talks on Parashat Miketz were originally presented on December 19, 2020.

by Nancy Peltzman



As David, Reyna, Scott and I talked about this portion, it seemed that Joseph's coat was not singular in being of many colors. Joseph himself seemed many-complexioned in our various readings. Who was Joseph, this patriarch whom David reminds us has more visibility in the Torah than any of the other patriarchs or matriarchs?

My family discusses the Joseph story on Passover because it is the prelude to the Jews forming themselves as a chosen nation with a unique spiritual destiny in the exodus from Egypt to Mt. Sinai and the subsequent receiving of the Torah. How intriguing, then, that the Joseph who plays a critical role in our origin story is a figure drawn with blazing strokes of emotion so recognizable he might be any of us, or a character as universal as any who ever wept on a Greek stage.

Joseph is 17 when we see him basking in his Father's exclusive love, content to glory in an outsized portion of his father's favor and enflame his brothers' feelings of dispossession. We next see him wailing with outraged desperation once their hatred takes a murderous turn and he needs their compassion. By the time he is 30, he has matured into an administrator but been unjustly accused. We see the wisdom he has gained when he tells Pharaoh that his dream-prophecies will be God's, not his own. Fourteen years later, his brothers appear before him begging his favor. The narrative has told us how hatefully Joseph represents them in his mind, telling himself they are spies.

So far the portion has been narrating its story and Joseph and his brothers are like a tableau seen from afar. But now there is a shift in the narrative voice and focus: no longer distant and descriptive, the camera zooms in and the events are presented as Joseph experiences them. We say to writers: show, don't tell. Don't describe feelings, show them. In this remarkable parashah, we have a showing as dramatic as any Renaissance picture. We hear Joseph's words, and not just any words, but words of anguish, yearning, longing, and desire.

Tell me about my father – is he okay? Is he yet alive? Tell me, please. And what about my brother? Bring him, I beg you.

I realized when I thought about this portion that I am often unconsciously searching the stories of our ancestors to find people whom I recognize. In Joseph we have a patriarch whose anguish is undisguised. When Joseph hears Reuven recount his protests of their murderous intentions, he retreats to a private room because he cannot control his weeping – Joseph, a man now in mid-life and the vizier of Egypt. We are left to guess at the complicated mix of feelings that Joseph may be reliving. But we are allowed to believe they are the feelings we would have. Later, when Benjamin is brought to him, Joseph again must rush away to weep unrestrainedly: with joy, remembrance of the years of missing him, sadness, relief after longing, satisfaction, surely. And yet in private.

Eventually Joseph will reveal his identity and bring his family to live with him. But right now he must do something else. He must address the tangle of emotions inside him before he acts. Joseph is revealed to be a reflective individual, a man who allows himself intense expressions of passion while he sorts out issues of anger, hatred, revenge, love, compassion, loyalty, and right. In the end we see Joseph choose righteously. Earlier we had been told Joseph gave his first child the Egyptian name meaning in part: "... for the Lord has made me forget my father's house." Joseph tried to forget his family, but we see him succeed in overcoming that forgetting when his brothers appear,

reckoning with his relation to the past, and remembering in a new way when he establishes a new life with his family after bringing them to Egypt in the next parashah.

We recognize Joseph because we are like him. Who among us has not felt rivalrous competition that ranged from anger to hatred and even to fantasies of violence? How many actually choose to cut off some part of their family when things become too difficult? How many of us have not felt longing to be reunited with family members from whom we have strayed? How much more accessible could this story of our beginnings be?

Writers are also told: the universal is in the particular. The more specific, the more idiosyncratic, the more concretely colorful your story is, the more it will paint a picture which can be recognized to have universal truth shining through it. The Joseph story shows us favoritism, envy, anger, hatred, murderous rivalry, cunning, destruction, resilience, mastery, identity struggles, sorrow, longing, anguish, yearning, fraternal love, forgiveness, generosity, loyalty, filial love, internal conflict and the resolution of internal conflict. Joseph is a man we can know intimately because he is universal – he is entirely like ourselves. And so we find our very selves in the lines of this revered text which is building to our coming out of Egypt and coming into our building the particular nation that we are. And that is just as it should be, because the Haggadah says: "in each generation, each person is obligated to see himself or herself as though he or she per-

sonally came forth from Egypt.” How can Joseph not move us to do just that?

Nancy Peltzman is a psychoanalyst in private practice and Faculty at the Chicago Center for Psychoanalysis. She is a mom to Shira and Talya, both raised at Rodfei, and wife to Sam Peltzman. Almost two generations of guests have reveled in discussion of this parashah at their Passover table.

by Scott Stern



Spoiler alert...Joseph forgives his brothers.

My first impression of this passage, not unlike my first take on some other Torah portions, was ‘give me a break’. Those of you who know me very well, know that I can get pretty angry and when it comes to carrying a grudge, I’m like an elephant... I never forget.

But since we were in classes with the Rabbi, I felt obligated to think about this passage some more... And we see that initially Joseph is angry with his brothers... he speaks “harshly” and tells them they are spies. But something happens, Joseph hears Rueben’s regret as Reuben says

“Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood.’”

And Joseph turns away and wept. And later when he sees his brother Benjamin he hurries out “for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was [again] on the verge of tears”. [and] later still... his sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear

As you know Joseph then reveals himself to his brothers. He does not say how horrible or evil you are, he does not banish or imprison them but rather says, “Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. ... to insure survival on earth. [and tells them]... you will be near me... there I will provide for you”... and with that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. Only then were his brothers able to talk to him....

WOW

Surely, we could argue with Joseph’s interpretation. The choice that he made. Was he right or was he wrong? But maybe that is not the point. In making this choice to interpret the events as the will of God and forgive his brothers, he is reunited with them, they sob in reunion, they sob in love, and they banish their anguish.

That is the power of choice.

Of course, we see things in stories that speak to us. And this story speaks to me.

As some of you know, I lost my mom last year. After a series of medical complications, she reached that point in life where death was truly inevitable. But unfortunately for me, she was not in our hospital, where my friends, colleagues and her physician would have cared for her in the true sense of the word and guided her passage. No, she was in another hospital where she would not get the kind of care I know that she wanted, and that I wanted for her. And so, at her request, I made the choice to make sure she did not suffer. I managed her morphine drip, and when she was unconscious and not suffering, I her only son, “the doctor,” withdrew the medical support that kept her alive and I, the only person awake in the room, watched her die. My choice.

For over a year, I grieved for her loss, and I carried such shame. Almost unbearable shame. That I had helped my mother die. But then with the help of others, I too made choices.

I chose to remember that she did not suffer, that my pain allowed for her to die peacefully, as she wanted.

I chose to appreciate that her death allowed my sister to attend to her ailing children when they needed her.

I chose to ponder how her death taught me...

—Even more about my patients and how to care for them, than I knew before

—And about how even long lives are too short at the end

—And about the stupidity of one of our most common habits... to ask those we know how old was your loved one who died, as if that matters in the least to them.

And I chose to reconnect to my religious background, come back to temple, to learn and get solace. And through this choice I have learned much. I take note in my grandfather’s 1950s prayer book that we are instructed “to open our eyes to the nobility of life and our sacred opportunity for service” and I try to use this everyday in my work.

I would like to share with you another story of choice. Years ago, I cared for a really remarkable man. Maybe the most remarkable I have ever known. He had three cancers in his life. This last cancer spread, and after many experimental therapies it became clear that we had nothing left to offer him. Fortunately, he had a lot to offer himself. You see, he lived near me, and so from time to time I would stop by his house on my way home. And each time I would find him sitting in his living room or bedroom kibitzing with family or friends, passing on advice or just having fun. And after a while, I realized how surprised I was. Here he was, DYING, and yet he was ok. In fact, he was still LIVING. And so, I asked him ‘how is it, ____ that you are OK?’. And he said ‘look Scott, my life has been wonderful. My job was so much more than I dreamed of, my family has been wonderful, and I am just grateful for the life that I have had’. And so, despite dying in his early 70s he made his

choice and lived life to the fullest until the very end and what a powerful choice it was.

And so, to me the story of Joseph is not that we can control our lives. Horrible things happen. And sometimes they are so hard to overcome. Nearly impossible, and I can imagine some losses that would be impossible to overcome. But while we can't choose what happens to us, with effort we can often choose what comes next.

Like my patient and like Joseph, if we can work through our grief, our frustration, our shame, our hate, we can choose how we move forward, at least sometimes. Maybe this is man's most special gift, that which separates us from the animals and the machines. And perhaps the greatest choice we have to make, is a spiritual one. We have a choice to view this world as one with or without God. Perhaps there is no God, perhaps a series of random events led to life, and evolution to us. Such a choice could free us from some of the obligations that we may feel religion imposes, but it also leaves us alone. Another choice, a different choice, sees a world created by God, associated with purpose and us as agents of that purpose to fulfill some divine piece in this grand scheme, however small that piece may be. That choice does create obligations. But also, purpose and belonging. A sense of being part of a whole.

Our choices define us. They can comfort us or ruin us. They can guide us or leave us empty. The choice is ours.

Dr. Scott Stern is Professor of Medicine at the University of Chicago. He practices general medicine, teaches medical students at the Pritzker School of Medicine, and creates software and textbooks that teach medical students the art and science of diagnosis.

He and his wife Laura Stern have been married for 39 years and they have three children, and two grandchildren. Their youngest, Elena, heads off to college next year and he and Laura will finally be empty nesters! When he is not at home or work you will usually find him on his bicycle.

Scott's religious background started in Chicago's South Shore Temple, a reform synagogue. He joined Rodfei Zedek last year thanks to his connections with Rabbi Minkus, as well as many congregants who are both close friends and colleagues. He is grateful to be involved once again in the religious community to which he feels connected.

by Reyna Levine



At first, the prospect of being quarantined in my apartment did not bother me at all. It sounded downright blissful, albeit confining — no pressure to engage socially, an air-tight excuse, and limitless acceptable Door-Dash orders.

That excitement lasted about three months before the novelty wore off



and was replaced by apathy, isolation, and frustration.

Since quarantine began nine months ago, the only people I have spent any appreciable time with in-person are my parents, my sister, and my brother in law; I live in a one bedroom apartment downtown. I am emotionally exhausted – from awkwardly navigating in-person errands, shouting through my mask at the dog park, and silently negotiating space in elevators.

Quarantine turned out to be the opposite of what I imagined... an emotionally turbulent and enduring journey of introspection.

This week's parashah, Miktez, focuses on inner worlds and personal journeys. From Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, to the emotional journey Joseph takes to forgive his brothers, forge a new relationship with his family, and reconcile his own Egyptian assimilation.

When he is reunited with his brothers, Joseph is conflicted about how to talk to them, and he fails the first few times he attempts to engage; the story nearly ends in disaster when he sends

his brothers on a fool's errand in the midst of a food shortage.

However, each time he confronts his brothers, we witness his emotional growth marked by cathartic tears. Joseph cries four times during this story (each a pivotal moment):

1. Joseph overhears his brothers talking about him, "They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. He turned away from them and wept" (Genesis 42:23 - 24);

2. When he sees his brother, Benjamin for the first time: Joseph "was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there." (Gen. 43:30);

3. When he invites his brothers to a meal: Joseph "washed his face, reappeared, and – now in control of himself - gave the order: 'serve the meal.' (Gen. 43:31);

4. And finally, when he reveals himself to his brothers: "his sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear...He embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them." (Gen. 45:2, 14, 15).

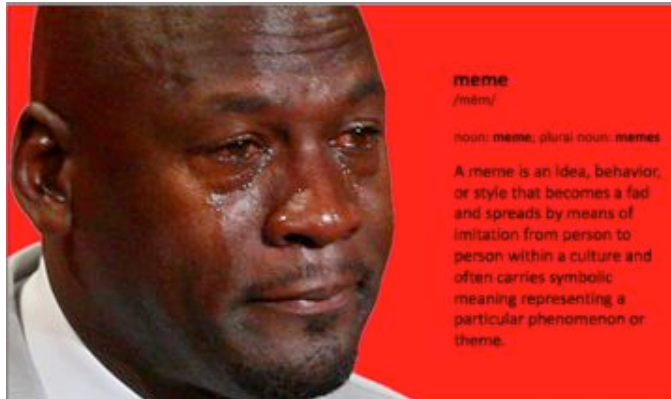
When Joseph cries for the last time, he weeps openly and the mask of harsh stoicism melts away. Joseph's tears transform him; we get a front row

seat to his maturation – from denial, sadness, and anger to softness, reconciliation, and authenticity.

During quarantine, I found myself seeking out moments of authenticity and vulnerability within the public sphere. It is hard to find something real in the digital age where nothing is as it seems. Enter modern-day hero and emotional train wreck – Michael Jordan.

During Michael Jordan's Hall of Fame induction speech in 2009, Jordan famously took the stage and started bawling. His speech was raw, emotional, and fiercely competitive – it was a dissonant and confusing pop-culture moment. One of the modern-day heroes of the 20th century – and the picture of masculinity – weeping openly at a public engagement – it was arresting to say the least.

So naturally, the internet enshrined this moment of public vulnerability by birthing what I would argue is the greatest internet meme of all time: 'the crying Jordan'.



This meme is one of the Internet's greatest phenomena. There is even an app for that – a meme generator called, "The crying Jordan meme generator" (I know, original title).

But the reason this unit of culture endured is because of its authenticity and vulnerability, not despite. It reminds us that even heroes cry – and that it is OK – it is a sign of progress and growth.

In the absence of physical closeness, I feel lost. Like Joseph, I want my family and friends around me – I want to see them, laugh with them in the same room.

COVID stole a lot from us, but I am banking on being stronger once this is over; I am hoping I will have gained some emotional endurance and can move past this time with grace, compassion and love in a way that I can be proud of – even if it means shedding a lot of tears.

Reyna Abigale Levine is a Millennial living and working in downtown Chicago. She is currently the Executive Broadcast Director at beedance, a virtual communications agency. She has lived in Western Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., and Israel, and has been active in a variety of Jewish communities throughout her life. She originally came to Rodfei with her younger sister, Maura Levine, who is also a member, when Maura was in Law School at the University of Chicago. Fun fact: Reyna and Maura's grandmother, Norma Schulman-Waltzer, was a member of Rodfei when she went to the University of Chicago in the 1950s.

You can catch Reyna walking around South Loop sharing a Stan's donut with her Yellow Lab, Daisy.

Bar Mitzvah Talks

In these months of pandemic, we have missed being together in person for services. And we've missed being in the presence of a Torah scroll. We are grateful to bar mitzvah families for giving us a glimpse of the Rodfei Zedek sanctuary, complete with Rabbi, Cantor, scroll, and celebrating family.

Below, a picture from the November 7 bar mitzvah of Ryan Pinkert with brother Charlie and parents Daniel Pinkert and Laura Schwab.



Pandemic or not, our bar mitzvah speakers bring us new insight into the Torah.

by Ryan Pinkert



My Torah portion is Parashat Vayera, which is an extremely eventful and important portion with many great lessons. The parasha begins with Abraham en-

countering men approaching his house on a journey, and little did he know that they were men of God. He invited them in, gave them some food and washed their feet. And because of his goodness and hospitality the men said that Abraham's wife, Sarah, will be blessed with having a child at that same time the

following year, after many barren years of her life.

This is where the story begins. As Abraham sees the men of God leaving his home, God confesses his plan to wipe out the cities Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham because those cities were filled with terrible people. But Abe was not a fan of this plan. He tried to negotiate with God about the fact that there were innocent people in the cities and kept saying, “if there are a certain number of innocent people, then will you still wipe out the cities?” God and Abraham continued to negotiate until they agreed that if there were ten innocent people, God would not wipe out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the end, God decided there were no innocent people and despite all of Abraham’s objections, the cities were destroyed. Clearly the “strike three and you’re out” philosophy wasn’t valid back then. If I had been the ref I would have challenged that call and given them all a second chance.

This brings us to the famous and shameful story of The Binding of Isaac. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Sarah’s only son, who came from the blessing from the Men of God. Abraham agreed to follow God’s instructions and took Isaac to the top of the mountain to sacrifice him. When I read this I could not decide whose decision was worse: God’s or Abraham’s? In the end, God said it was a test of Abraham’s faith and let Abraham sacrifice a lamb instead of his son.

Why did God put Abraham in such a terrible position? Why would

God, supposedly the best being in the universe, make a person decide between keeping his faith and saving his beloved child?

Abraham decided to choose his faith over his son, but thankfully God was only testing Abraham. I wonder, could Abraham have been conducting a test, too? Could Abraham have wondered, if God lets me sacrifice my son, then this new religion is terrible?? As a result, would Abraham have dropped his faith in God? I would not have blamed him for that decision.

Lucky for us, God made the choice to keep Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. As a result, I am here before you all today as a Jewish person, carrying on God’s faith in Abraham, and Abraham’s faith in God.

This parashah also made me wonder, why did Abraham debate with God that he shouldn’t kill everyone in Sodom and Gomorrah, but why didn’t Abraham argue with God to save his OWN son??? Was it because Abraham wanted to test God or was it because he felt those citizens deserved a second chance??? But why not his son? Therefore, I wonder why Abraham is considered a great person because he argued for the sake of terrible people but not his innocent son.

While I do have a lot of questions about this parasha and what was going through these people’s minds, I can do my best to accept the outcome. In general, maybe bad events can lead to a good outcome, and we need to focus more on the results.

While I can question or disagree with the decisions God and Abraham made, what is there to complain about? I am here before you today having a bar mitzvah with all my family and friends watching. If Abraham decided to argue with God about sacrificing Isaac in the first place, would we be here at this temple today? Abraham developed a stronger faith in God because God decided to allow Abraham to keep his son. Because of Abraham's stronger faith in God, he carried on the Jewish religion. Without this event, Judaism may not have continued.

I think we can apply this idea to the real world and today's circumstances.... We all wish that we would have acted faster to fight the spread of Covid in the U.S. and world-wide.... We cannot understand how some of our fellow citizens responded, but we can learn from the event. We can make sure Covid does not go on for much longer- that would be a good outcome resulting from a bad event.

One outcome to this parashah that appeals to me, is that God didn't ask anyone to sacrifice someone else after this event. So maybe God decided he was wrong. Maybe God learned from the test he gave to Abraham and decided sacrificing a loved one is NOT the right way to test a person's faith. We need to make sure that we learn from what happens and create better outcomes in the future. So we just have to make sure that we learn from what happens in the pandemic, hope that we don't have another one, and hope we

have leaders, like Abe, who care about our country.

Ryan Pinkert attends 7th grade at Oscar Mayer Public Elementary School in Lincoln Park, along with his brother, Charlie (age 8). His bar mitzvah marked the 4th generation Pinkert bar mitzvah at Rodfei Zedek. His great-grandfather Joseph, a past president of the Congregation, had enjoyed a "second Bar Mitzvah" here to mark the occasion of his 80th Birthday.

Ryan's passion is baseball: he has competed on the same Oz Park travel team since the age of 9 and shares a close bond with his coaches and teammates. A spirited White Sox fan, he predicts success for the Chisox and is excited about the upcoming season.

by Yoni Hoffman-Skol



In my portion, Vayetze, Jacob is leaving Be'er Sheva after having stolen his brother's birth-right and is all alone. That night it grows dark so he finds a rock and puts it under his head and sleeps there. He dreams of a ladder that goes up to the sky, and going up and down the ladder are the angels of God. He wakes up the next morning and puts a rock in the ground and pours a little oil

over it and prays to God that he will make it to Haran alive and well and still have food to eat. If he does he will believe in God.

He makes it to Haran and there he meets a shepherdess who is very beautiful, Rachel, his cousin. Rachel takes Jacob to her father Laban. Laban invites Jacob into his house and they agree that if Jacob works for Laban for seven years then he can marry Laban's youngest daughter Rachel. Seven years pass and it's the day of the wedding. Jacob raises his bride's veil but it is Leah, the other daughter of Laban. Jacob is very angry. Laban and Jacob make an agreement that if he works for Laban for another seven years then he can marry Rachel. Another seven years pass and Jacob marries Rachel.

After that wedding Jacob and Laban agree that whichever lambs from his flock of sheep are speckled Jacob can keep. Laban ends up giving all the sheep he promised to Jacob to his own sons instead of to Jacob. Jacob finds out that Laban is yet again cheating him, and fixes the problem himself by giving the white flocks of sheep water with bark and sticks in it so that their babies will be speckled making sure that he still gets the payment Laban is cheating him of. Jacob finally has enough of being cheated and leaves with his wives, children, and flock.

This parasha highlights three injustices done to Jacob by Laban:

1. Jacob got cheated by Laban when he had to work for Laban for seven years to marry Rachel and then Laban switched brides so that Jacob would marry Leah.

2. Laban made Jacob work for another seven years after Jacob got cheated the first time.

3. Laban promised Jacob all of the speckled and spotted sheep but ended up giving them to his sons so in the end Jacob would have no pay.

The themes that stand out to me are cheating people and mistreating immigrants and foreigners, because Jacob was a foreigner alone in Haran. There are injustices that are going on today that are similar to what is going on



Yoni at the Torah with parents Yael and Andrew and brothers Ezra and Avi

in the Torah portion.

Today we see the rights of undocumented workers cheated when they are not paid enough and their health and safety is not protected. Today we see migrants separated from their children at the border and not being able to get asylum or even get the opportunity to sign up for asylum. We see migrant farm workers getting COVID and dying because of their bad living conditions. Our president's actions

against foreigners reminds me of Laban's mistreatment of Jacob.

Americans also get cheated in America today. For example, we have high rates of homelessness, people without healthcare, people without jobs, people with jobs that don't pay enough for them to live, and people without enough food to eat. I met many of these people because my bar mitzvah project was to go to a church and give out food to people with food stamps. Getting enough food for you and your family should be a basic right. Laban tried to cheat Jacob of this when he took the sheep that he promised to give to Jacob and instead gave them to his sons. It is even more crazy that after he had been cheated of marrying Rachel after working for Laban for seven years that he had to work another seven years. Jacob didn't have much power and the rules kept unfairly changing on him.

By protesting with my family for immigrant rights and Black Lives Matter, and by canvassing and writing post cards to get good candidates elected so that people without power can get what is fair, I am trying to help ensure that all people in America have the same rights, can be safe and healthy, and be able to have jobs that pay enough.

Yoni Hoffman Skol is a 7th grader at Kenwood Academy's Academic Center. He enjoys playing baseball and soccer, going to camp at OSRUI, and playing baritone in school band. Yoni lives in Hyde Park with his parents, Yael Hoffman and Andrew Skol, and younger brothers Ezra and Avi.

by Sam Lear



In my Torah portion Vaera, the issue that really stood out to me was God and the way God related to the Israelites and the Egyptians, specifically Pharaoh. I

want to talk about how God sometimes teaches lessons that have such consequences that it makes you wonder: Could this have been avoided? And, was this lesson worth learning?

In my portion we observe the first few plagues that take place. We also learn of the lineage of the Levites, which includes Moses and his brother Aaron. I want to talk about a tradition of arguing with God that goes all the way back to Genesis, that was not present in my portion. Specifically the story of I am thinking of is that of Sodom and Gomorrah. For a quick recap: God plans to destroy these two towns because they have one thing in common: they are filled with evil people. When God sends his messengers down to Sodom and Gomorrah to punish them, Abraham is with God. Abraham proceeds to argue with God that if he can find 50 just people then God should not destroy the towns. He keeps getting God to lower the number all the way to 10 just people. But God cannot even find 10 just people and ends up destroying the towns.

So my question is: was it fair to punish the Egyptians rather than just Pharaoh? I cannot understand why all the Egyptians were wrapped up in Pharaoh's problem. One could make the argument that the Egyptians were complicit in Pharaoh's actions and worshipped him. But, on the other hand, you also have to realize that if they did not do that, then they would be killed. So, that does not necessarily mean they agreed with him or his views-- as Vito Corelone

would say they were given "an offer they could not refuse." Might there not have been innocent Egyptians living there?

sort of combination of their parents. The parents teach their kids what in their eyes is the correct way to live. So Pharaoh was taught that this was ok by his parents. So maybe God should have punished the parents instead of Pharaoh. Also, why was the idea of just sneaking the Israelites out not even brought up? It would accomplish the same purpose and it would mean fewer days that the Israelites were enslaved and fewer lives would be lost, both



Sam reading Torah flanked by parents Jonathan and Gabriel

I also wonder why God did not intervene sooner. It is not like the Israelites had just been enslaved. They had been enslaved for 400 years! I mean, I am glad we got out but it raises the question, what was so bad about the current Pharaoh? No human can last for 400 years so there must have been multiple Pharaohs before him. But let's just say that the current Pharaoh had been Pharaoh for 400 years. Why did not God intervene earlier? How about Pharaoh's parents? People are some

Egyptians and Israelites.

I think God decided to make this decision because he did not have someone like Abraham who was not afraid to argue with God. Moses did lead the Israelites out of slavery and he did follow God's word -- which is great! - - but so far he has not argued with God about saving innocent Egyptians- unlike Abraham, he will only argue on behalf of fellow Israelites. Perhaps this was because slavery was horrible, but

maybe God could have used the questioning of someone like Abraham?

In conclusion, while I cannot think of another way to resolve the situation aside from sneaking the Israelites out, I am positive that there are many other ways to go about the situation. We may never know what they all are. But it raises the question, Might the solution have been more permanent if a different and less brutal method was used?

Sam Lear was born in Hyde Park and has lived here ever since. He is in seventh grade at the Lab School. He is interested in all aspects of computers. He likes comedy. His sister Sophia lives in Los Angeles and writes for television. His parents Gabriel and Jonathan both teach at the University of Chicago. Sam has been going to Rodfei Zedek with his family since he was a toddler.



We all join with Rabbi Minkus in acknowledging the accomplishments of our b'nai mitzvah, and we share their joy.

The Moment That Rodfei Zedek Became Home

by *Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby*



My wife and I were the first people to get married in the current Rodfei Zedek building. It was 2001, and I wasn't especially connected to Judaism. In fact, I don't recall particularly caring where the wedding was — only that it was Sarah I was marrying.

Of course, Sarah cared greatly and passionately, in the same way that Sarah always cares about anything that matters to her. She'd had her baby naming in the old building, and her bat mitzvah. Her parents had been a part of the community for more than 30 years. She couldn't imagine standing under a chuppah anywhere other than Rodfei's bima.

When Sarah and I started dating, the new building was still under construction. The first time she took me to high holiday services together, Rodfei was squatting at the most temporary of locations: the Ramada Hotel at 49th Street and South Lake Shore Drive. Trust me when I say there is no place on earth more impersonal than the Ramada Hotel at 49th Street and South Lake Shore Drive. I remember the shofar blast battling with the sound of vacuum cleaners. The people around me were strangers, and I did not feel the slightest sense of belonging. But I belonged to Sarah.

So there I was, on October 21, 2001, 29 years old and ready. It was a warm, sunny day and I was not at all nervous about Sarah. That part had felt right for some time. But the whole world was still shell-shocked from 9/11 and what it all meant, and I wondered if anyone would even be brave enough to get on a plane for Chicago. And for those who did, could they possibly feel the kind of joy you're supposed to experience at a wedding. Could I?

The building that morning still smelled sterile and new; a lingering mix of sawdust, cleaning supplies, and emptiness. The space had no history, no memories for me. It felt like there were still corners where not a single foot had tread yet, and I still didn't know the people very well. Some of the faces were familiar, but most of their names eluded me.

As it turns out, everyone showed up to our wedding. "I think we all needed something to celebrate," said one of my old grad school friends as we made our way upstairs with the rest of the men for my *tisch*. Back then, a *tisch* was a traditionally male thing (*hassan's tisch* literally means "groom's table"), but Sarah, being Sarah, wanted one too. "Why is it just for boys?" she asked. "That's not fair." Considering I had never heard of a *tisch* before July, I had no answer. The males took over one empty classroom and the females took another across the hall.

I found myself at a table, surrounded by people waiting for me to say

something. Anything. I remember my great-uncle George, a no-nonsense World War Two veteran who had built a massive real estate empire in San Francisco, watching me closely. Next to him was my father-in-law, who could wither me into a 175-pound bowl of Jell-o without so much as a word. I had fasted for 24 hours and was already light-headed, but I began talking about the torah portion. I don't know, something about Abraham and Isaac. And every time I started to get into it, someone around the room would interrupt and break into song while someone else poured me a shot of cheap scotch. My father-in-law drank with me. My brothers wrapped their arms around me. Uncle George cracked a smile.

A half hour later, after having taught the men exactly nothing, I was drunk and being danced across the balcony hallway, where Sarah was waiting in front of the stained glass mosaic in her wedding dress, her veil, and her white sneakers. She could not stop smiling.

She may have been drunk too, but she was in total control. She was funny and charming and relaxed, like this whole thing was just a great party, and it made perfect sense for her to be the center of it all. By this point, I had already loved Sarah for a year and a half — or least I thought I had. What I felt for her at that moment instantly made every moment that preceded it feel silly and small. When I saw her there in front of that mosaic, she was beautiful and clever and more alive than any person I'd ever known. And she was smiling at me, waiting for our lives to begin together. I couldn't wait to marry her.

Something hit me deep inside. It went beyond my heart, beyond my brain, beyond the warm river of cheap scotch

sloshing within me. The feeling wasn't déjà vu, exactly, because I knew for certain that I had never experienced this before, but the moment felt familiar and comforting in a way that I will never forget. Because that was the moment that Rodfei Zedek became home. It's not that I heard generations of Jewish ghosts singing out from the past or felt an immediate, unbreakable kinship with 6,000 years of history. Nothing that cinematic or profound. I'm just saying that when Sarah became my home, so did Rodfei.



Someone must have signed a ketubah in there somewhere, I don't really remember. But I do recall feeling sweaty and happy and fumbling with the veil so badly that my mom tried to put it on Sarah for me. "Hey," I snapped. "Who's marrying her—you or me?" I don't remember if my mom laughed, but Sarah did.

The ceremony itself was short and sweet. My bride circled me seven times under the chuppah, and then we were wrapped in a surprisingly warm wool tallit. The alcohol began to catch up with me and for a moment, I thought I might collapse, but Sarah held me up. I held her up, too. Our bodies balanced each other out.

At some point I looked around the sanctuary. I saw cousins side-by-side with old high school buddies and congregants I was still getting to know; I saw geezers and yentas smiling at the familiar ritual of it all; I saw little kids with their shirts already untucked, looking at me like I was a rock star. The room felt as warm and euphoric as the feeling in my belly, like something new was beginning and nothing would be the same. And when I kissed Sarah, I knew . . . what did I know? I have no idea what I knew.

But *I knew*.

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