

CyberTorah

Torah Commentary by Rabbi David Booth

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THE SITUATION IN ISRAEL

JULY 14, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

How disorienting to begin a day hearing of God's covenant of peace with the Jewish people and then to hear of bombs falling on Safed and Haifa! The story of Pinchas started last week in violent fashion. This week, by contrast and by intentional emphasis, it ends in peace. In breaking the story into two weekly readings, Torah teaches that we are inheritors of a tradition of peace. With Israelis again thrust into another violent confrontation, we cast about for the peaceful ending of our own story of violence.

As lovers of peace and pursuers of peace, this moment in Israeli history is particularly discouraging. With Israeli soldiers being kidnapped along the borders, with terrorist governments in both the Palestinian Authority and as part of the Lebanese government, it's hard to know where we should turn for peace. The newspapers say violence begets violence. The truth in the heart of Israelis: every choice begets violence.

The rockets falling in Safed and Haifa have killed and wounded dozens but they are body blows on the peace process. Internally, they weaken those Israeli voices calling for continued withdrawals from Palestinian areas because those withdrawals so far have only led to more and continued violence. Those most committed to peace are discouraged, disheartened and silent in the face of such conflict.

Externally, those rockets strengthen the terrorists by making them look heroic. Arab armies have never before struck Haifa. But Hezbollah – or whoever fired that rocket – did. The people cheer in the streets even as Lebanese infrastructure is destroyed. They perceive victory in a symbolic but strategically meaningless act.

I see no answers. I see only problems, violence, and bloodshed. In our tradition, that is a moment to turn in prayer towards God. For “they put their trust in chariots and horses, but we trust in God.” For us, thousands of miles distant, this a moment for prayer.

A Prayer for Israel at this Time

May the God of our ancestors protect and sustain the land of Israel. May God offer comfort and a sheltering embrace to those held in captivity. Heal those wounded and they shall be healed. O Healer of shattered hearts offer comfort to those in mourning.

At this time of violence and hopelessness, we remember that You are a Redeeming God. Even in the darkest exile of Egypt, the light of Your hope remained. Shine upon us the light hidden from the beginning of Creation and help us to see the path that leads to peace and security for Israel. Bring peace into the hearts of the Arab people so that they reject and turn away from those who would only bring about more violence. Enlighten the leaders of Israel with wisdom and insight so that they can find the answers for which we all, as disciples of Aaron who loved and pursued peace, seek.

Praised are You, God, Redeemer of Israel.

Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

IT WAS A TIME OF BLESSINGS AND TIME OF CURSES

AUGUST 17, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We live in the time of the blessing and the curse. The blessing is the wonderful land of Israel in which we are blessed to dwell as a gift from God. To walk its length and breadth is to encounter beauty and goodness, a true blessing in this veil of tears. The desert has truly been made to bloom, the cities come alive. Silicon Valley and the Yeshivot of Eastern Europe both send their best scholars to this place. Praised is God, the source of blessing.

And yet, the curse is also read out to us from the cedars of Lebanon. Every day we read of violence and devastation. We read of a ceasefire barely holding that even the most optimistic observers see as only a pause for all sides to take stock and see how they can achieve their objectives in the future. It is hard to imagine the U.N. and the Lebanese Army disarming Hezbollah. Limited military actions continue, including Hezbollah's thankfully failed efforts to launch missiles into Israel and Israeli action against Hezbollah positions. This is the curse, the curse of God who makes light and dark, creates harmony and also evil.

Moses says to the people, "See this day I place before you blessing and curse." The blessings are read out from Mount Gerizim and the curses from Mount Eval. It is a commandment to read out the blessings and the curses, as Rashbam is careful to point out. We might prefer to ignore the curses, or not say them at all. No, says the Torah, you must confront the bad as well as the good. You have to read the whole of it.

It is a time of blessing and a time of curse. A time of blessing when we begin to see the possibility of peace in the Middle East. Jordan is becoming a true friend of Israel. Even Saudi Arabia was horrified in the first few days by Hezbollah's acts of war against Israel. It is a time of blessing too because peace with Israel will bring such great benefits to the Arab world.

All the problems of illiteracy and poverty that plague the Middle East are a curse but a curse that Israeli development and resources could begin to address. Peace with Israel will never solve all the internal problems facing Arab society but it would be a first step. This is the world of blessing – a world on the brink of peace.

It is a time of curse. When a withdrawal from Lebanon creates only rockets rained down on Haifa and

Tzfat. When a withdrawal from Gaza seemingly leaves only chaos in its midst. On the brink of additional withdrawals we are met overwhelmingly by violence and terror, kidnappings and gunfire. This is the curse read out to us daily by friends, by family, by the New York Times and the Associated Press, calling out to us from their mountains of curses. This many Israelis killed. These Lebanese civilians tragically cut down. And on and on.

The curses and blessings are read out on our way into the Promised Land. It is easy to give up hope when hear the curses, but easy to become hubristic when we hear only the blessings. This day we find placed before us a blessing and a curse. It is our job to find the means to choose blessing.

May God soon and speedily grant peace to Israel and all her neighbors.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

THE GOD OF MY SALVATION

AUGUST 24, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

To be Jewish means to wrestle with God. Israel is the one who wrestles with God and prevails because it is through the willingness to struggle that we discover our true selves. Jacob wrestles with this strange man or angel and comes away marked and changed. Had he failed to wrestle, however, he would have faded out of history. We would never have known the story of Jacob.

For 2000 years Jews lived outside of history. The moral dilemmas associated with administering a state were the challenges of other nations. We dwelt among them and sometimes even became of them, but we left the problems of government, of war, of kings, to those in whose midst we dwelt.

It is this exit from history that prompted Rav Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel, to say, "Divine Providence has kept Israel out of history because sovereignty required wars to uphold that sovereignty. Wars require slaying the righteous along with the wicked. Now that the League of Nations has made warfare obsolete, the time has arrived for a redeemed Israel."

Leaving aside Rav Kook's mistaken optimism about the League of Nations, he demonstrates how political redemption means a return to the problems of history. The Hebrew word Geulah, redemption, means to be lifted away from a place of persecution and poverty and brought out to freedom. It is in this sense that God redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt. This same meaning underpins the Rabbinic prayer for God's geulah that we have recited over 2000 years.

What Rav Kook forgot about, however, is the Hebrew word yishuah, meaning salvation. David prays to God for yishuah while living in a free Israel. He has enemies and problems – he must struggle with the challenges of a dangerous and frightening world. At the same time he is in control of his own destiny. As Soloveitchik would say, he has the ability to speak.

We have finally, after 2000 years, gained the ability to speak. We are a redeemed people back again in history, struggling with the challenges of the world. Shoftim, the Torah portion for this week, also struggles with politics and warfare. It warns us of the avarice of kings and suggests a morality of war. We are instructed to respect property boundaries and how to establish just courts.

Torah is hopeful because it offers instructions on how to pursue justice as a people are ready to enter a

promised land. Justice shall you pursue – because through justice geulah, redemption, becomes yishuah, salvation.

I am afraid for Israel. Israel is strong, with the mightiest military in the Middle East. Israeli F-16s can fly anywhere in the Middle East with relative impunity. Israel could probably send ground troops to Damascus, Beirut, or even Tehran and hold territory there. Our struggles are far from over.

Like King David, I pray to the God of my salvation. The God who helps in the world of history, in the challenges we face from Hezbollah and Hamas and the new type of warfare they have innovated. I know too that this God of salvation listens only when my prayer is focused on justice and not vengeance, mercy and not hatred.

Israel is in a struggle for survival. We wrestle in the world of history to find a path of survival that includes justice and mercy because only then can we be brought from geulah to yishuah, only then can we have a victory in which we remain a people who wrestle with God and pursue Justice.

May God protect the land of ancestors, and may God protect also the soul of my people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

AUGUST 31, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Shofar may be the least musical instrument invented. It has a shrill piercing sound, effective for calling troops to order, but not particularly musical. It is discordant rather than pleasant, startling rather than relaxing. Generally, when I listen to music I do so to unwind. The Shofar is much more about getting me to be wound, nervous, uncomfortable and startled.

The Shofar was originally a call to battle. Its shrill sounds could be heard at a great distance. Its call meant: Danger! Help! It is one of the oldest instruments and its essential primitive quality can still be heard in its piercing blasts. It is that primitive quality that draws our attention. This is why children are so riveted by the Shofar. They cannot help but pay attention to it.

It's time to start listening to the Shofar. With summer still upon us, it seems too early. We are comfortable, settled, content in our merits but also in our failings. To listen to the Shofar means to hear that uncomfortable call. Danger! Help! All is not well inside or out. We resist that call because we don't want to be startled.

People resist being startled and made uncomfortable. Human conservatism means that people will live in great discomfort for years before making a break with the past that offers hope. Moses frees the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, creating a moment of change and geulah, redemption. As each challenge is faced, the Israelites murmur and complain, asking again and again, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt?" They cannot see the opportunity presented by each challenge and instead see only death when they should see geulah. They would rather find the graves in Egypt than the hope of Israel.

I once saw a medical practice choose to keep a management company that had been stealing money from them. They kept this company because they were afraid of someone else being worse. Human nature means we avoid change and startling experiences even when our present situation is filled with its own discomfort.

The startle reflex, though we resist it, is potentially a creative moment. The flood of adrenalin, the breaking down of old connections, creates an opportunity for new. The Israelites can only be redeemed through a moment of change. Only by leaving Egypt can they enter Israel. How many of us choose to remain in Egypt?

A month before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we start sounding the shofar every morning. It is time to become startled, to become uncomfortable, to leave our settled places behind. During this month of Elul, it is time to begin challenging ourselves to be startled. We don't want to hear it, we don't want to be jostled out of our places of comfort, but redemption of self cannot occur until we are startled.

That discordant sound of the shofar makes us jump and get nervous. It reminds us that we are comfortable with our failings, that we have allowed ourselves to choose ease over good. In that moment of being startled, we wake up. Like Naval in the story of King David arising from his drunkenness, we see in an instant more clearly than we have all year. And then we can change.

Come hear the blasts of the Shofar. We are sounding the Shofar at Kol Emeth on Thursdays mornings after our 6:45 a.m. service and on Sundays following the 9am service. It is time to hear, to be startled, and to change.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This is the time of year to remember. Rosh Hashanah is called Yom Zikaron, the day of remembrance because the great mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is memory. Torah knows how easy it is to forget. This is why we wear a tallit – in order to remember that Hashem brought us out of the land of Egypt. Like a string tied around a finger, the tallit reminds us that we are children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and therefore are expected to live up to that legacy. What the tallit is on a daily basis, Rosh Hashanah is on a yearly basis.

We forget all the time. The practice of the traveler's prayer calls our attention to one occasion of forgetting. When we are in other places, surrounded by strange noises, smells, and temptations, we may find ourselves doing or saying things that we know to be wrong. Thus the businessman on holiday who puts away his wedding ring. That reminder of himself is hidden, allowing him to forget his family and descend into the pit.

But we forget even in the safety of our home. The confines of our lives today encourage isolation. Big screen televisions allow us to be pleasantly numbed and entertained every day. Internet access means we can gain access to a whole community of like minded people without ever actually meeting them. It's easy to forget our immediate community and what that community asks of us.

“When you enter the land that God promised...and you come to the third year of Ma'aser, of tithing, give it to the Levites, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.” (Dt. 26:12). We have to remember those we would prefer to forget, specifically the levites (meaning the poor), and widows and orphans. We would rather live safely in our own homes and not worry about how close we are to poverty or tragedy.

To help the orphan or widow is to remember the fragility of our own lives. When someone loses a spouse, especially earlier in life, that person's friends often disappear. The couples who previously went to the movies, or dinner, or opera together are suddenly too busy to make time for this widow. Better to forget and go about our lives as though nothing is different. The widow cannot hide – but we can.

To feed the hungry is to remember that our own wealth and comfort is tenuous, as much a gift of God and social conditions as it is a reward for hard work. There go I but for the grace of God. Easier to sit and watch “reality” TV.

This is why God reminds us of blessings and curses when we enter the land. It is in the time of blessing that we can disappear into our own homes and forget about everyone else. Forgetting is a disease of affluence. Thus Torah reminds us of our wider responsibilities as human beings in the midst of affluence.

Rosh Hashanah is getting closer. Mahzor Vitri, one of the earliest prayer books extant, recommends an especially engaging mitzvah during Elul. In particular, Vitri suggests praying early in the morning and feeding those who are hungry. This gets us in the habit of encountering those less fortunate and seeing that we must help them, but also of encountering our selves in the silence of prayer and so seeing how much we need Hashem.

This year, as Rosh Hashanah draws close, let us make the emerge from our cocoons and remember. It is past time to help those in need and remember that the power of blessing placed by Hashem in Abraham's hands has come to rest with us. Carol and I donate 3% of our grocery bill to Mazon, the Jewish response to hunger. It reminds us of our blessings and the responsibility to share those blessings with others. Come help make sandwiches on Sunday the 17th at KE.

It's time to remember. The Day of Remembrance is upon us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

5 YEARS LATER

SEPTEMBER 14, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I remember exactly what I was doing on Sept 11, 2001. At 9am that morning I had a meeting scheduled with a couple to discuss their upcoming baby naming. We were reviewing the details of the ceremony, which only takes a few moments. Then we began to discuss the sacred nature of the transition from couple to family.

About midway through the appointment, the office staff knocked on my door. "Rabbi, you have to come listen to this. A plane just flew into the World Trade Center." I hate being interrupted in an appointment. I want to be totally focused on the people currently in my office. So I said, "Keep listening and let me know if anything else happened." At this point the radio reports were suggesting that a private plane had accidentally crashed into the WTC. So it sounded awful but not life changing.

By 9:40 the second plane had crashed into the South Tower. The radio reports now were saying that American Airlines flights were involved and that fires were raging in both towers. The father with whom I was meeting became upset. He was a pilot for American Airlines. He knew people flying in the air on that horrible Tuesday, though as it turned out later not these specific pilots.

When the North Tower fell at around 10:30, I lost most of my radio and television reception. I felt like the only person in America who didn't see the images themselves as they were happening. There was a geographic immediacy for me, however. I could see the haze over New York because I was only 50 miles away. I could even smell the odor when the winds were in my direction. But I didn't see the images themselves for several days.

As a result, I had a different experience than many others. Where many on the radio or television likened these images to scenes from an action movie in their real unreality, I saw them echoed in the Torah reading that I did two days later. In Nitzavim, Hashem enumerates curses that will befall us when we turn away from Torah. The land will be filled with sulfur and ash and people will wander around as if blinded.

How accurately Torah described the catastrophe. The land was filled with the smell of sulfur and flame and people wandered aimlessly in the dust and the confusion. I found those words exceptionally painful to read both because I imagined the perpetrators rejoicing in those same verses and because they so

aptly described the scenes in New York. It wasn't an action movie taking place; it was a destruction of Biblical proportions.

There was also heroism. There were firefighters who went up into a burning building to save lives. Where the terrorists chose to imagine enemies needing to be killed, the firefighters understood there were real human beings with lives and families to be saved. That purpose gave them the courage to risk, and in far too many cases, to lose their lives. The rescue workers saved thousands. Initial counts of the dead numbered in the 10s of thousands. The final toll was horrible – just over 3000 souls – but so much less because of those rescue workers and heroic people.

Five years later all I know for sure is that those events have little meaning in and of themselves. The Rabbi at the memorial service that year said, "It isn't 5000 (the number at the time, since lowered to around 3000) people murdered – it was one person murdered 5000 times." The number and magnitude become overwhelming and we forget the individual stories and losses, the catastrophes and destroyed lives.

What 9/11 has meant for me is to treasure more fully the life and the moments I am granted. To see in my own hands the power to destroy or to preserve. And so to hear the words of Torah read on that Shabbat following 9/11 (and to be repeated this Shabbat) to choose life.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT DOES GOD ASK OF US?

SEPTEMBER 21, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have to remind myself often of what I cannot do. I cannot change Ismaili Nasrallah, the murderous head of Hezbollah. Much as I would like him to realize how much more he hurts his own people, I cannot change his heart and mind. I cannot heal the sick. I have watched friends and family suffer from illness and watched it uncontrollably progress. I wish I could say a magic prayer and heal them, but I cannot.

I cannot force people to stop making destructive choices. I cannot in one breath solve the problem of poverty and hunger even in Santa Clara County. I am one limited finite person. All this and more I cannot do.

If I stop here, however, I am immoral and selfish. For all that I cannot do, there is much I can do. I may not be able to heal illness, but by visiting the sick I can alleviate the suffering that accompanies physical pain. Suffering is the existential awareness of pain, which means that a person can suffer without physical pain and be free from suffering despite immense physical pain. Visiting the sick cannot affect pain but it can be a balm for suffering. Feeding a hungry person cannot alleviate world hunger, but it can fill one empty stomach. I cannot change the choices that others make but I can change the choices that I make.

Rosh Hashanah calls our attention to what we can and cannot do. We pray to a Creator who decrees who will live and who will die. Even in our powerful age of science and medicine, life remains uncertain. People still die by fire and by water. People still live even though physicians predict their almost certain demise. The world remains tantalizingly out of our control.

The paradox of the human condition is our great power even in the face of this powerlessness. A story is told of a boy whose mother was terminally ill. His father invited the shamash of the congregation to stay with them over Rosh Hashanah so that he would have a warm place to sleep and good food to eat. During his stay, the boy gave the man his bed and his place at the table, saving out the tastiest morsels for their guest.

Later, the father commended the boy on his caring and compassion. The boy said, "I did it for mother. For the Machzor says that the evil decree can be lifted through prayer, repentance, and tzedakah." "Oh my son," said the father, "It is not your mother's decree that you can lift. It is that of the shamash."

Powerless to heal his mother, this boy is all powerful in the interior world of the shamash. Tzedakah averts the evil decree.

Prayer, tefillah, lifts the evil decree because it is through prayer that we discover and confront our own selves. A prayer of the heart heals and in that healing alleviates our own existential suffering. Pain is a fact. How we let it influence us is a choice. Aaron loses his two sons prior to Yom Kippur and makes the choice to become a lover and pursuer of peace. Then he spends the rest of his life blessing and praying for others, offering comfort to families, lifting the evil decree of so many.

Teshuvah, repentance, averts the evil decree. I cannot change the choices of others but I can change my own choices. I cannot make others turn away from the damage they inflict upon themselves and their loved ones, but I can myself turn towards Hashem. The impact on me and those around me of such a change is beyond measure.

There is so much we cannot do but there is so much we can. Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, the birthday of a world in which our choices matter. What we do counts, sometimes in big ways and sometimes in ways that seem small but are immense in an interior world of a loved one or even someone we have never met. The challenge of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is to do that which we can. This is why Hashem can call this world “very good” because goodness exists even in the midst of pain.

May we all be blessed with a year of peace, prosperity, and the blessing to bless others,

Rabbi David Booth

PRACTICES FOR YOM KIPPUR

SEPTEMBER 28, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Bible commands us to “afflict our souls” on Yom Kippur as part of a Day of Turning back towards God. Our tradition generally makes a place for physical pleasures because God created a good world that we are commanded to enjoy. Once a year we deny ourselves those pleasures and focus entirely on our spirituality.

The vague command to afflict our souls is open to abuse. Without guidance, people could go too far – or not far enough. Rabbinic Judaism generally looks at these general statements and tries to make them as specific as possible. God cares about what we do. That means our tradition always strives to specifically define Biblical commandments. Rabbinic tradition defines five specific afflictions:

First is fasting. We neither eat nor drink the entire day of Yom Kippur. We spend a lot of time eating; on this day it would take away from personal growth. Further, fasting is uncomfortable. It reminds us of our fragility and mortality. (There are certain exceptions to the fast. Any prescription medications that will lead to a medical risk should still be taken. Pregnant and nursing women should eat and drink small quantities throughout the day. Anyone who would become faint or otherwise put their health at risk should not fast. Torah is given to us that we may live by it, not die by it.)

Second and third is refraining from wearing jewelry and from wearing makeup or anointing. Aftershave would therefore be problematic. Ordinarily we spend time being concerned about our personal appearance and putting on a face for the day. On Yom Kippur that is too much like vanity and so we avoid it to teach ourselves humility.

Fourth is refraining from marital relations. This affliction removes a comfort and a source of physical pleasure for much the same reasons as fasting. Unlike fasting, there are no exemptions to this affliction.

Fifth is to refrain from wearing leather. Ordinarily we allow ourselves to benefit from animals. We eat them as the Torah specifically (if grudgingly) permits in the story of Noah, and we generally derive benefit from leather or other animal products. We usually think of ourselves as superior to the animals, but Yom Kippur is a day for humility. On this day we are no better than the animals. According to Isaiah, we may even be worse, for at least an animal knows its master, but we all too often forget God.

Finally, Isaiah tells us that our sins will be cleansed away and we will become as pure as the driven snow. From this quote it has become the custom to wear white garments on Yom Kippur. That is why I wear a kittel, the white High Holidays robe and a white kippah. It is a good day for a white oxford and for white dresses.

Yom Kippur intentionally puts us a little off balance. We remind ourselves of our mortality and force upon ourselves certain actions of humility. The prayer is that shaking ourselves up a little will help us genuinely change. Reminding ourselves of our fragility reminds us that we depend upon God. Reminding ourselves of humility opens up a chance to change.

May we all be touched and inspired by Yom Kippur this year, and may the afflictions of this holy day cause us to turn back towards God.

May we all be written for a good year,

Rabbi David Booth

SUKKOT: FINDING THE PLACES FOR JOY

OCTOBER 5, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Be joyful, says Hashem, as if that's so easy. In a tradition that values action over belief, this is one of the few emotional mitzvot in Judaism. The Shma commands us to love Hashem in specific ways. We have actions, like putting a mezuzah on our door or teaching Torah to our children, that allow us to express our love for God. The emotion is given a concrete form.

By contrast at Sukkot we are commanded to generally be in a state of Simchah, of happiness. There are ritual observances associated with the Holiday like building a Sukkah. Yet that sense of joy is its own distinct part of the way we celebrate the Festival. But what if I'm not feeling happy this Sukkot? Surely God would not ask the impossible of me. This unusual demanding of emotion points us towards the true meaning of happiness.

Happiness and joy can be expressed in many ways. Thomas Jefferson meant something different when he said that humanity has the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness than the child who says he is happy now that he gets to go play outside. Happiness can be the pleasure of a moment. It is the fun of riding a roller coaster or enjoying an ice cream sundae. The Hebrew word for this kind of pleasure is kef. Kef is great – but it's thin. A moment of kef is just a moment and once it's gone, it's gone.

By contrast, joy is simchah – the unbounded happiness that comes from a life well lived as a result of meaningful choices. It is closely related in Hebrew to osher, as in Ashrei. The Ashrei prayers recited three times each day begins with the phrase, "Happy are they who dwell in your house... happy are the people whose God is God." The Psalmist means something thicker, more abiding, than kef. We are happy to be in a Synagogue because it connects us to the meaning of our lives, because it gives direction, purpose and inspiration to who we are.

The entertainment industry excels at kef, at fun. Movies, amusement parks, Broadway shows will always be more fun than spiritual life and rituals. That kind of popular entertainment is even occasionally meaningful and deep. By the same token, spiritual living is also great fun. It's just that movies are for fun, and spiritual living is for meaning. Abiding lasting happiness, the strength of osher and simchah, comes from a sense of purpose and direction to one's life. This seems unlikely when walking out of the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Put another way, the entertainment business excels at entertainment. Spiritual living excels at meaning.

There is a special kind of happiness called simchah shel mitzvah. It is the joy that comes from the observance of commandments. It happens in community, stemming from the sense of connection engendered by a Holy Congregation reaching out before Hashem. Our Rabbis teach that God's presence is felt when ten come together and pray. We draw strength from one another in that moment and our joy that comes from meaning is enhanced by an affirming community striving towards holiness.

The building of a Sukkah focuses us on simchah shel mitzvah. We eat more meals together with our family during Sukkot. We entertain more. Our Sukkah becomes a centerpiece of community, reminding us of who we are and why we are. This is the origin of a true happiness, of the kind of osher that stays many months after the celebration is over. Even if I feel grumpy when the celebration begins, the ritual behavior engenders a sense of lasting joy rather than ephemeral happiness.

Put another way: It's Sukkot – Be Happy!

I wish you and your family a joyous Sukkot and a Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

Dont miss the chance to shake the Lulav and Etrog this year – 2nd Day Sukkot, 9:15am at Kol Emeth.
With Root Beer Floats for kiddush!

TIME FLIES

OCTOBER 12, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

An elderly friend once told me, “Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think” from the Guy Lombardo song. The flow of our lives is inexorable. I have been told by parents of college age or older children that young children grow up in the blink of an eye. In a similar vein, my father-in-law told my wife as he was about to walk her down the aisle to be married, “It never stops, Carol.”

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) calls our attention to the unstoppable flow of time. There is a time for happiness and a time for grief, a time for laughter and a time for tears. The world functions in cycles. Growth is followed by death, feelings and experiences repeat themselves in our lives and across the generations. The author of Kohelet notices that there is nothing new under the sun and despairs.

For Pagan culture, this cyclical quality was the nature of the Universe. As Thomas Cahill points out in *The Gift of the Jews*, the Pagan world lacks a concept of progress. People and cultures are destined to remain immutable and unchanging. Life moves through a spring of growth, to a summer of strength, to a fall of decline, and finally to a winter of death. Then the cycle repeats again.

The brilliance of Abraham, the inspiration of Hashem, is to look away from these cyclical experiences and see genuine growth. For Torah, the world has a beginning and a hopeful end. History has a cyclical element but also a meaning contained within linear time. My children may grow up in the blink of an eye, but my caring and love for them during that eyeblink has meaning because “from generation to generation we will tell of Your greatness.”

Sukkot as an agricultural festival calls our attention to the inexorable flow of time by focusing us on the turn of the seasons. Another year has gone by, a new year begins. In the ancient Near East, the New Year began in the Spring at a time of rebirth. The Torah reverses that flow, giving us the New Year in the melancholy of Autumn.

Kohelet comes to teach us that our lives are bound up in the cycle of seasons. We cannot escape the time bound finite cyclical nature of our lives. We celebrate in the fall because our existence is more than that cyclical experience in nature. Human intelligence and spirituality means that our choices have lasting significance. The people we are in the process of becoming matter to Hashem. For this reason, the New Year is in the Fall, before Sukkot, to remind us that hope exists outside of nature.

At Simchat Torah we rejoice in Torah and remind ourselves of renewal. We complete our reading of the Torah in the melancholy story of Moses' death but immediately renew ourselves in the story of Creation. Our lives come to have meaning when they are read through the lens of Torah. Hazak hazak – be strong and of good courage, for hope is found in despair, strength in weakness.

Let us this year dance and sing with Torah with eyes wide open. With eyes seeing that it is later than we think, that our days are fleeting and the world filled with cycles of birth but also of death. But eyes also open to wonder, to seeing fleeting glimpses of a purpose bound up in God and Torah that transcend the cyclical finite limits of the natural world.

Enjoy yourself – it's later than you think!

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameach!

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will off next week to recover from celebrating.

BAILEY'S IRISH CREAM

OCTOBER 26, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

During the Hakafot, the dancing around the Torahs at Simchat Torah, a full bar emerged in the social hall. There were a number of extremely high quality adult beverages available, including some fine scotch and vodka. One of the drinks brought out was Bailey's Original Irish Cream. I had always been under the impression that Bailey's was the rare exception in alcoholic beverages that was unkosher. As a result, I asked that it be removed.

After Simchat Torah, in a much more sober state of mind, several congregants asked that I research the matter a bit more. I suspect the motivation was entirely out of the interesting nature of the question and nothing to do with the delicious quality of the drink in question. Before I can answer the question, however, I need to make some preliminary comments on the kashrut of alcoholic beverages in general.

Distilled liquors have always been permitted without supervision. There is no enzymatic process in their distillation. Scotch, whiskey, vodka, and so forth are much more limited in their ingredients to malts and water. Some have raised questions about scotch being finished in a port barrel, as that brings the scotch into contact with wine precisely for the purpose of flavoring it, but few authorities even in the orthodox world have forbidden such drinks. For this reason, most alcoholic drinks, including beer, are permitted.

As a notable exception, wine does require Rabbinic supervision. According to Rabbi Elliot Dorff's Rabbinic response on this question, the kashrut of wines is questionable for two reasons. First, the Talmud in Avodah Zarah forbids non-Jewish wine because it is regularly used for idolatrous purposes. The Talmud further forbids wine that has even been touched by non-Jews unless it is mevushal, or boiled. It is assumed that non-Jews wouldn't use boiled wine, which is generally less good, for idolatry. Rabbi Dorff rejects this concern as irrelevant in our modern context. For this reason, I am comfortable drinking non-mevushal Kosher wines without any concerns of who has touched the bottle.

Second, the wine process is extremely secretive and involves the uses of chemicals and enzymes whose origins may be either dairy or meat. As a result, Rabbi Dorff suggests that American made wines without kosher supervision are probably fine but should be considered dairy while European wines of high quality should be avoided as they may have cows blood in them as a fining agent. Rabbi Dorff recommends drinking exclusively kosher wines because of this secretive nature of the wine industry.

There is a third category of drink into which Bailey's falls. Bailey's is a mixture of Irish whiskey, cream, and "other fine Irish flavorings." Invented in 1974, this drink involves the use of certain enzymes to bind the cream to the rest of the drink. Bailey's does not reveal to the public the exact ingredients. Like any packaged product, Bailey's would require a heksher, a kosher mark.

As it happens, the Bailey's bottle has no heksher on it. One congregant told me she thought it was under the supervision of the London Kosher Board. In my own research, I discovered that Star K, a U.S. based kosher board, lists Bailey's as "not recommended." That is a new kosher category of which I was previously unaware. Star K should be clear what their issue is.

I sent an email to the London Vaad, and they confirmed that Bailey's Original Irish Cream is indeed under supervision. It is the custom in England to list products that are kosher instead of marking each individual product. Since it is under supervision, we can assume that all the ingredients used are kosher dairy. I also discovered that Bailey's has a shelf life once opened of 48 months if kept in a cool dry place. Put another way, next year at Simchat Torah it will be my pleasure to drink a l'chaim of Bailey's.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HALLOWEEN

NOVEMBER 2, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My kids don't go trick or treating on Halloween. For the first time, they are upset with me about it. We live in a neighborhood now where there are a lot of kids on the street. As a result, for the first time my children have been invited to go with other kids. They would love to go. How fun is it to dress up in costume and have people give you an excessive amount of candy?

We don't do Halloween for several reasons. First and least significant to my family is a question of its origins. Halloween began as a pagan festival that was somewhat incorporated into Christianity around the time of Pope Gregory. It was originally a night when we were closest to the spirit world. Christianity turned it into All Hallows Eve, the last night on which evil has power in the world. This night is then followed by the sanctification of All Saints Day.

I avoid Pagan rituals. Having said that, modern Halloween as it is celebrated in America is far enough removed from its Pagan origins that it has become something else. Today it celebrates nothing theological. Further, no other religious tradition uses its symbolism and so it does not lead us toward another tradition's beliefs and stories. I could imagine the modern rise of Pagan and Wiccan traditions making this a concern, but today Halloween is an entirely secularized holiday.

My second concern is the message of Halloween. Halloween celebrates evil and encourages kids to dress up and scare others. It is Fright Night, a time to evoke the nasty and destructive side of our personalities. Trick or treat means give me some candy or I will mess up your house. This holiday encourages tricks from the relatively benign like teepeeing or egging a house to the truly violent. It is a bad night to be a police officer in many parts of the U.S.

Purim provides a useful contrast. I have heard people call Purim the Jewish Halloween but there are some important differences. Purim celebrates a victory of good over evil. There is a redemptive story at its core. Further, Purim encourages people to dress up either as characters from the Purim story or as funny characters. It is about humor and laughter, rather than fear and terror. Finally, we get candy and food on Purim but as "gifts to friends and portions to the poor." Purim encourages us to remember our friends and to share our blessings with those in need.

The real reason I don't bother with Halloween? Two weeks ago I finished taking down my Sukkah and I

am done with holidays for right now. There is a reason the month of Heshvan, following the Fall Festivals, is the only Jewish month without any special days. All my spiritual celebratory energy has been poured into these wonderful Jewish celebrations.

For this reason, Carol and I have also declared a Valentine's Day truce. I have no theological or other problem with this holiday. I want my romantic expressions to my wife to focus around Jewish celebrations. I am centered on the Jewish calendar to the point that the American secular calendar is crowded out.

Abraham is given the most difficult commandment in the Bible. He is told, "Go forth from your land, the place of your birth, the land of your father." It is a commandment to be different. I celebrated Halloween as a kid. It would be fun to go pick out a big pumpkin, carve it, and let my kids go out and get a ton of candy. But I have gone forth. I have chosen to immerse myself in the traditions of God and Torah. When you go out, says Hashem, then you become a blessing. The choice to be different, to be immersed in traditions of holiness and meaning, is a choice to strive to become a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Next Week: What about Thanksgiving?

LET US GIVE THANKS

NOVEMBER 9, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Thanksgiving is my favorite American holiday. It is the one day on the American calendar that unites people of all races, religions and creeds. The biggest travel day of the year, it brings people in the United States together in an inspiring and all encompassing way. We join together to eat, to celebrate, and to count our blessings.

Its theme of giving thanks to Hashem unites all of us in this country to take stock of our blessings. Noticing the Holy One's goodness in our lives calls forth action from us. The Zohar teaches that moments of overflowing abundance demand that we share that abundance with others. Thanksgiving is a good time to donate to Second Harvest, our local food pantry. We eat our bountiful dinners then in the knowledge that we have also fed others.

My family, along with many others, begins our Thanksgiving feast by going around the table and saying those things for which we are thankful. Family and health always lead the list. The blessing of being together for a happy occasion similarly moves us to give thanks.

Thanksgiving begins by blessing the bread – by reminding ourselves that “people do not live by bread alone, but depend upon Hashem's speech.” I propose this year the following prayer to be read immediately prior to reciting hamotzi, the blessing over the bread, at Thanksgiving this year:

O Lord our God, and God of our Ancestors:

We thank you for the blessings of peace, prosperity, and health that abound in this great country. To be together today is a great blessing. We acknowledge those loved ones no longer with us and thank you for the blessings in their lives, the values learned and the special moments shared.

The Psalmist asks, “Who are we? What are we? What is the meaning of our lives?” This year we have learned how important it is to value each day, how fragile life can be. We ask for your help and protection over our armed forces in Iraq and elsewhere in the world. No longer in control of their own destinies, we turn to You to shelter them in Your protecting embrace.

We ask also for Your continued protection over the State of Israel. A beacon for freedom in the Middle

East, Israel stands strong but besieged. Grant her leaders the wisdom to face the future and find the uncertain path to peace. Bring an end to terror, violence and bloodshed so that again all that will be heard is “the voice of bride and bridegroom, the voice of young people rejoicing in song.”

We thank you for blessing of our lives, for the value of our days. We thank you for the strength and wealth of this great country. We thank you for the peaceful home You have granted us here, a calm in a stormy world.

We thank you for our souls and for the lives daily in Your care. Each day is a miracle from You – today we notice the blessing of that miracle and thank You as You deserve every day.

May we soon and speedily see peace throughout the world, a day in which nation will no longer fight against nation, a day in which war will fade away as a bad memory. Let the day soon and speedily come when we beat our swords into plows, our guns into spades to work the Earth. On that day peace will come across all the lands, and the world will come to know You.

Praised are You, God, Our God and Ruler of all, who brings forth bread from the Earth.
Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, Hamotzi Lehem min HaAretz.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving,

Rabbi David Booth

TITLE INSURANCE

NOVEMBER 16, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a shocking amount of paperwork around the purchase of a home. Buyers have to sign a contract of sale, provide proof of insurance, and guarantee their first born child to the mortgage broker. Or at least that is how it felt as I went through it. Especially in a market like that of the Bay Area, it feels as though all power rests with the seller.

Among the items that I needed to pay for was Title Insurance. Title Insurance guarantees that the seller has a clear, unobstructed right to sell the property. It is the hinge around which real estate sales turn because it allows people to buy property without concern that someone else will show up later and claim ownership of the property. Lack of clear title is one reason why third world nations continually fail to develop vibrant economies.

Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpeleh to bury his wife Sarah is all about establishing clear title to the land of Israel (Gen 23). And for the people of the land, the Hittites, it is a seller's market. They hold all the cards because Abraham isn't a Hittite and therefore lacks the clear right to buy land at all. Such issues, sadly, existed here as well until very recently.

When I purchased my home in Palo Alto, it had some old covenants left over from the late forties. Among items like set back rules and other restrictions on future construction were some limitations on selling the property. My home originally had a covenant preventing its sale to Asians or Blacks. It specifically permits such minorities to live here only as servants. Those covenants were eliminated at a dear price during the Civil Rights era.

At first, the Hittites offer Abraham a gift. They are aware of his holy quality, of his closeness to Hashem, and they want to ingratiate themselves with this great man. At the same time, they are unwilling to give Abraham the right to own land in Canaan. Abraham keeps insisting, and ends up negotiating with Ephron the Hittite, who owns the Cave of Machpeleh.

Ephron says, "What is a land worth 400 shekels between you and me?" 400 shekels is a tremendous amount of money. In today's terms, it is in the millions of dollars. Ephron is saying, "Here is a ridiculous amount for this land that I know you would never pay. So now you know that I won't really sell it to you."

Abraham wants the clear title, and is prepared to pay a dear price to eliminate the covenant that keeps him from buying land. So he pays out the 400 shekels and establishes the right for his descendants to buy land in Israel. Abraham establishes title peacefully, though he could have waged war.

That's why Abraham says, "I am a citizen stranger (Ger Toshav) who dwells here." As Rashi puts it, "If you will accept me as a citizen, good, otherwise I will take the land from you as Hashem has promised me." Abraham has already defeated the might of Kings. The Hittites could not have stopped him from seizing the land of Israel. Yet he prefers to pay a dear price rather than have the title of the land be clouded in war and bloodshed.

We are a people of peace. Israel and Jews everywhere pay a dear price for our beloved land of Israel every day. We could seize all the land that Hashem has promised us. The military might exists. Yet we choose to remain a people primarily of peace. Let us continue to be students of Aaron, to always love and pursue peace, and students of Abraham, to always search for peaceful ways to sustain our presence in the land of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE PATHOS OF ESAU

NOVEMBER 30, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's been a long bad history as a Jew. From Medieval persecution to the modern Arab-Israeli conflict, we have been under siege for nearly all of our history. As a result, we have sometimes demonized the Other. We have been walled in and threatened – so we have used Rabbinic midrash as our own battlefield to restore supremacy.

Medieval and classical traditions make Esau into the demonic Other in precisely this way. The twins born to Isaac and Rivka who are so different in their personalities see those differences amplified in Rabbinic sources. Jacob, father of Israel, comes to embody all the values that we want to see in ourselves. Esau, father of Rome and by extension Christianity, exemplifies all the negative values we see in our persecutor.

When the twins are born, says Torah, Jacob was a “dweller of tents” while Esau “went out into the fields.” Jacob, say Beresheet Rabbah, went to yeshiva. Tents becomes symbolic of houses of study. Jacob becomes the father of yeshiva scholars. Esau, by contrast, went out into the field “to practice idolatry.” The field, the world uncontained by the boundaries of Halakhah, becomes the world of idolatry and destruction.

There is great tension in their relationship. After Jacob steals the birthright from Esau, Esau loses his temper and threatens to kill Jacob. Jacob flees, and returns 21 years later. The reunion is peaceful and moving, as Jacob and Esau kiss one another. The midrash, however, returns us to this violent world of polar opposites. It reminds us that Esau symbolizes our dangerous enemy.

Esau “fell upon his (Jacob’s) neck and kissed him.” The word in Hebrew for kiss is neshekah. There are scribal dots over the word in the text of the Torah. Using that odd scribal notation as an exegetical point of departure, the Rabbis says that Esau fell upon Jacob violently. The word neshekah, kiss, becomes instead neshek, weaponry. These worlds of opposites meet only in violence.

The experience of medieval Jewish persecution explains isogetically some of why Esau becomes such a violent and scary other. Esau is the father of Rome, destroyer of the Temple. Rome then becomes the Church who dominates and persecutes during the Middle Ages. If Esau is our persecutor, and Hashem tells Rebecca that the “older shall serve the younger” we know that our persecutor will find himself at

our feet. This is a comforting notion in the midst of millennia of pogroms and violence.

Maybe it's time for another look at Esau. Esau is a tragic figure. His values, even for the Torah, are questionable. We are told he "despised the birthright." He is neither thoughtful nor intelligent. He acts with a certain brutish intensity. He is a hunter, uncontained and uncontainable. Yet he is also filled with pathos.

Isaac blesses Jacob only to discover that Esau remains to be blessed. Esau cries, and says, "bless me too, father." He is a man craving his father's approval. "There is nothing left," says Jacob. Esau says, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Are there no more words of love and blessing for me? Am I always to be supplanted by my younger, tricky brother? This is an Esau that one can pity, an Esau and Jacob that could even care for one another.

Esau, the uncontained and violent, is scary. The world is filled with persecutors and those who would destroy us. Our history – and daily experience – reminds us of that ever present danger. We must always be cautious to see if Esau comes to wipe out our camp. Yet by the same token we have to learn to tell the difference between a neshekah, a kiss, and a weapon, neshek. We need the confidence of self to have our hearts open to the cry of Esau, when it finally comes, and accept that Other in love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

AHAVAT ISRAEL

DECEMBER 7, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This Sunday I was fortunate enough to attend the AIPAC South Peninsula dinner along with over 1300 other supporters of Israel. It was impressive to see the vocal and passionate support that Israel receives in this community and to see the non-Jewish supporters of Israel in attendance also. There were two tables organized by people of Indian descent inspired by the growing strength of the ties between India and Israel.

One of the speakers was an AIPAC organizer from Louisiana State University. A Catholic southerner, this young man became an AIPAC campus representative because of his concern to preserve Israel. He spoke passionately about the right of Israel to exist and his own worries about the growing anti-Israel organizations on college campuses. He sees a need to counter those who would challenge Israel's right to exist. He sees the long term friendship between Israel and the United States as tremendously beneficial to both countries and in need of passionate support.

The keynote speaker, Michael Oren, gave a fascinating lecture on the deep historical connection between Israel and the United States. Oren pointed out that the United States has had a fascination with Israel since the time of the Puritans. The Puritans saw themselves as the New Israel, escaping from Pharaoh in the person of King James.

Later, the Revolutionary generation saw themselves as building a new Israel. Benjamin Franklin even suggested an image of Moses leading the people out of Egypt as the seal for the new United States. His suggested seal lost by only a few votes to the Eagle image that was accepted.

John Adams, the second President of the United States, spoke favorably of reestablishing the land of Israel as a Jewish state. Many Protestants during the 19th century were fascinated by the idea of restorationism, of returning the Jewish people to what was then called Palestine. These non-Jewish lovers of Zion even went so far as to establish farms in Israel for the purpose of teaching Jews how to thrive in an agricultural setting.

One such farm was established outside of Joffa in the late 19th century. Before its destruction at the hands of Arab bandits, no less than Mark Twain visited and spent some time at the farm and in the land of Israel. Twain remained philo-semitic his whole life, writing passionately against anti-Semitism and

being among the first to welcome Sholem Aleichem when he came to the United States.

This fascination with Israel persisted into the 20th century. As World War One was drawing to a close, Lord Balfour of England came to visit Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States. He was trying to garner support for what would become the Balfour declaration, an official declaration of the English government in favor of a Jewish state. Wilson's advisors told Balfour they were opposed because of oil interests. Wilson himself, however, the child of Protestant ministers steeped in restorationism, supported the declaration.

It is into this long historic pattern that current United States support for Israel fits. 70% of Americans are supportive of Israel and see Israel as an important ally of the United States. Love of Israel has been an American phenomenon since our founding. Just as the Jewish community shows its love of Israel in a variety of ways including support for AIPAC, so also the deep roots of support for Israel transcend political lobbying.

Pete LaHonda, a member of Congress from the South Peninsula and long time supporter of Israel, summed up how I view Israel advocacy. He talked about the perilous times in which Israel finds herself, and the strength of American friendship for Israel. Friends, he said, sometimes offer advice and even criticism, but their close connection and friendship remains.

We as a community may sometimes discuss and debate the right course of action for Israel. We may raise issues of the techniques of our advocacy groups including AIPAC. But we are united through 2000 years of Jewish history and 400 of American history by the idea of love of Zion, Ahavat Zion.

May we soon and speedily see peace in the Land of Israel and throughout the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HOMOSEXUALITY AND CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

DECEMBER 14, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last Shabbat, I spoke about the Conservative Movement's debate over homosexuality. Due to the gravity of the decision, and to the requests made for a synopsis of that discussion, I would like to summarize what I said this week for CyberTorah.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards received difficult or extremely controversial questions from local Rabbis. They can then rule on those issues and create options for Congregations. There is no doctrine of infallibility, nor is a congregation required or expected to follow their decisions. They create options for practice within the movement.

On this particular issue, they have created options and confusion. The CJLS has misunderstood the famous story of Solomon threatening to split the baby to determine the identity of the real mother. The CJLS actually split the baby in half, ruling in one voice that Homosexuality remains forbidden under Jewish law as it has been since the time of the Torah and that Homosexuality is permitted. This will require individual congregations to wrestle with this issue, presumably responding with a multiplicity of voices.

All the discussion on the CJLS centered around Halakhah and what is right. There was no bigotry in the conversation. Further, there was no great schism that resulted. Several of the Rabbis opposed to this change left the committee, but not the movement or the Seminary. They feel this decision steps out of the bounds of Halakhah and therefore they cannot be a part of a Law committee. Then they all had lunch together.

There were two teshuvot which maintain the ban against homosexual practice and one which significantly lessens it. Rabbi Dorff, Rector at the University of Judaism in LA, authored the decision in favor of allowing gay Rabbinical students and commitment ceremonies. He makes a two part argument.

First, the prohibitions about homosexuality include a Torah based prohibition and Rabbinic prohibitions. Neither the Torah nor the Rabbis forbid homosexuality because the idea of sexual categories that determine identity is relatively modern. Instead, the Torah forbids specific acts. The Torah itself, in Lev. 18 and 20, forbids men to lie with other men as they would with women. Rabbi

Dorff's Teshuvah maintains this prohibition.

Second, he uses the Talmudic principle of Human dignity to overcome the remaining prohibitions since they are Rabbinic in origin. I need to look more carefully at this term. My previous understanding is that Human dignity functions to overturn other categories only when there is a Torah based positive precept opposed to a negative one. This may be a novel use of the term.

As a result, Rabbi Dorff permits gay relationships. He continues to forbid anal intercourse. He also permits commitments ceremonies, though puts aside the question of what the nature of such a ceremony should be.

Rabbi Roth, by contrast, affirms the existing Torah and Rabbinic prohibitions against homosexual intimacy. He states that existing precedent on this matter is clear. There are Biblical verses understood through Jewish history in a consistent fashion until the modern era. Therefore, unlike other areas of Jewish law where there have been variant practices or alternative interpretations, no such leeway exists in this case.

To permit gay intimacy would be to start a new book outside the bounds of Halakhic practice. This makes me wonder what Rabbi Roth would say about Reform Jews. I suspect he would urge them to be fully accepting of gay marriage because they indeed are writing a book of Jewish practice outside the Halakhah.

The practical implications for the short term are that the University of Judaism will most likely begin admitting Gay Rabbinical students for next year's class. The Jewish Theological Seminary is now in discussion about their policies. I suspect nothing will change for this year's class, but beyond that I have no idea. Rabbis who officiate at commitment ceremonies now do so within the framework of the movement.

For us at Kol Emeth, we now have to wrestle with who we are and what we want to be as a Synagogue. This issue tugs at our heart, for at our core we are a progressive institution deeply committed to social action. By the same token, we are also a traditional Conservative Synagogue rooted in long standing Halakhic precedent. Rabbis Roth and Dorff speak directly to different parts of what it means to be Kol Emeth. That will make this a difficult process, but ultimately a good one.

I hope over the next few months we will learn together about Halakhah in general and this issue in

particular. There will be some decisions to make with practical implications. Some of these decisions will be determined by community leadership, others by Rabbinic leadership. Before we get to that point, I pray that people will find opportunities to speak to one another about their concerns in an open loving way. An exchange of ideas and learning can only strengthen us as a community.

May this be a time of learning, of growth, and of listening.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LIGHT A CANDLE

DECEMBER 21, 2006

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Hanukkah is relatively unique because its core is a military victory. The story of Hanukkah is a story of people who take up arms against their oppressors. They do so for religious and political freedom. The Maccabees wanted political independence from Greek Syria and they wanted the right to serve Hashem. Other celebrations, like Pesach or Purim, include a military aspect but the core of the story is elsewhere.

The Rabbis were troubled by this element of Hanukkah. In the Talmud, B. Shabbat 21-23 they ask, "What is Hanukkah? The Greeks entered the Temple and caused all the oil to become impure. When the Kings of the Hasmoneans defeated them they found only one vial of oil that had been preserved in the warmer for the Cohen Gadol and there was only enough there for one day. A miracle occurred that the light lasted for eight days." The Talmud says nothing of the struggle, the guerrilla war that raged over years. This becomes a celebration of rededication and consecration. For we are first and foremost a people of peace.

Yet we live in a time of violence. The story of Yom HaAtzmaut is a military one, our only other celebration whose core is a military victory. The ongoing story of Israel includes violence, bloodshed, and loss of life. We are daily forced away from a narrative of peace. We are daily reminded of the violence to which the Talmud alludes in only one line.

The full story of Hanukkah reminds us of the soldiers, of those who defend Israel and who daily are confronted with the difficult choices that our current reality inflicts upon them. These soldiers are not generals or politicians in charge of policy. They are often teenagers thrust into violence and conflict.

A number of these soldiers, including most recently Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser, and Eldad Regev, have been kidnapped. They remain missing, held by forces committed to the destruction of Israel who are using them as bargaining chips. Hanukkah should be a time of light, of celebration. These soldiers are having a Hanukkah spent in darkness and fear.

As Hanukkah draws to a close, as we fill our homes with the lights of the Menorah, I propose we recognize our current reality and our sincere desire to see a lasting meaningful peace. Towards that end, I suggest the following prayers for the seventh and eighth candles of Hanukkah.

The Seventh Candle – The Candle of Freedom

May the Holy One who blessed our Ancestors preserve and protect the missing soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces, including Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser, and Eldad Regev. May the light of these candles, and the hope and freedom they symbolize, illumine the dark places in which they find themselves today so that hope and faith can remain embedded in their hearts. May God rescue them speedily from captivity, returning them to their homes and their families in health and vigor. Let us all say: Amen.

The Eighth Candle – The Candle of Peace

May the Holy One who blessed our Ancestors soon and speedily grant peace to the Land of Israel and the entire world. Our faces alight, we pray for a day in which violence will cease and the nations of the world will no longer study the arts of war and all our stories will be stories of peace. The world is a narrow bridge and we cannot see the path towards peace. May these candles light the way for us, inspiring us with the words of Your prophets that “not by might but by spirit alone” does Your presence enter the world. Bless us soon and speedily with the day promised, “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation and neither shall they study war any more.”

May we all be blessed by a Happy and Peaceful Hanukkah,

Rabbi David Booth

DR. KING AND RABBI HESCHEL: A STORY OF EXODUS

JANUARY 18, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My daughter Maytal studied all about Dr. King and the civil rights struggle on a kindergarten level this past week. She came home with a lot of good information, but one key five year old mistake. We were walking home on Shabbat and she said, "It's a good thing we don't have dark skin because if this were ever to happen again, we would be okay."

Her comment reminded me of the famous statement by the Christian Minister Martin Niemoller after the Holocaust. He said, in part, "'First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist – so I said nothing... And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew – so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me.'" He shows the faulty five year old logic of those who stand aside when others are persecuted. Reverend Niemoller exposes the kindergarten mistake behind those who allow the rights of others to be slowly stripped away.

It would have been easy for the Jews to stand aside during the Civil Rights struggle. Some did stand aside – but others stood up when it counted. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great theologians of the Conservative Movement, taught of the moral mission of the prophets. Part of the Prophetic personality is the inability to turn away from evil. When Amos saw the wealthy people of his own day ignoring those in need, he pilloried conspicuous consumption by addressing, "You cows of Bashan..."

Heschel saw six million Jews killed. Martin Buber knew him, respected him, and arranged for him to come to the United States before the war. He never forgot the miracle of his salvation, and he was never silent in the face of injustice. Heschel taught that people exist in partnership with God in bringing salvation into the world. He believed that God needs humanity in order to bring about a world filled with goodness and peace.

As a result of his beliefs, Heschel marched with Dr. King in Selma. He said, "'For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.'" Heschel's march with Dr. King was the fulfillment of a mitzvah, was even a prophetic act.

Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel share a great deal in common in their philosophical writings. Rabbi Shai

Held, who taught at the conference I attended last week, pointed out some of these similarities in thought. Both Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel see in the Prophetic tradition a call against injustice that remains relevant today. The essential quality of the prophetic voice is rooted in a moral challenge. Miraculous events and revelatory moments are only the dramatic backdrop to this true moral essence. People are created in God's image, so that when our eyes are open to wonder we cannot help but "judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

As a result, it is the actions of righteous people in any generation who have the power to save the world. The Jewish community, and Rabbi Heschel in particular, helped transform the struggle by Blacks in the South for civil rights into a human, prophetic mission for freedom.

Last week saw a felicitous combination of events. Thursday marked the 100th anniversary of Rabbi Heschel's birth. Shabbat saw the reading of the first section of Exodus, with its famous words, "Let my people go!" And Monday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It was this inspired combination: Torah, Dr. King, and Rabbi Heschel who transformed America.

Their mission continues to inspire us, to challenge us. It instructs another generation of children, like my daughter Maytal to see in any persecution and bigotry against one group a danger to all of humanity. It demands that we hear in Torah the unbelievable power for good granted to us by God. When we join others of good will, armed only with the moral call of Torah to see God's stamp in every human being, we become an unbeatable force for freedom. That is the true message of Dr. King's day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE PHARAOH WITHIN

JANUARY 25, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Pharaoh is a frightening villain precisely because his motives are so understandable, his actions so human. Among Biblical characters, Haman can't hold a candle to Pharaoh. His motives are cartoonish. He decides to kill the Jews because Mordecai refuses to bow before him. His downfall similarly is farcical as Esther tricks him in the finest traditions of slapstick comedy history. Haman always strikes me as a silent movie bad guy, complete with waxed mustache and piano music.

Pharaoh, by contrast, is genuinely scary. He sets out to destroy the Jewish people in a systematic way. Most frightening of all, he starts with good motives. "Let us deal wisely with them, lest they join an enemy and rise up against us," he tells his doubting courtiers who presumably DO remember Joseph's help to Egypt. At least ostensibly, Pharaoh wants to guarantee his people's future. Pharaoh sets out to be a hero to Egypt.

Stubbornness undoes Pharaoh more than evil. He clings tenaciously to his course even as the real pain and anguish it causes become more and more evident. First he turns his eyes away from the suffering of the Jewish people. His midwives cannot. They fear God and allow the male babies to live despite Pharaoh's command to kill all the male babies at birth. Then, as the plagues begin to afflict devastation and destruction on Egypt, he turns his eyes away from the suffering of his own people.

God tells Moses that he will "harden Pharaoh's heart" repeatedly. Abarbanel, a medieval Biblical commentator, understands God to mean "that the fear will be taken from Pharaoh so that he can make a real choice." Awe at God's miracles will be removed from Pharaoh's heart: he will base his decisions on a calculus of rationality.

Maimonides by contrast notes that God begins to harden Pharaoh's heart only after the sixth plague. Pharaoh admits that Moses is right and repents. But he returns to his old patterns of fear and betrayal. So, says Maimonides, choice is now taken from Pharaoh. He has set himself a pattern that can no longer be broken.

Thus the harsh justice of the plagues narrative. First, Pharaoh turns his eyes from the suffering of the Jewish people. Then he turns his eyes from the suffering of his own people. Finally, he is forced to see the devastation his stubbornness and fear have wrought when his own son is killed by the Angel of

Death in the tenth plague. God pries open his eyes.

Modern neuroscience supports Maimonides. Acting in a particular way creates neural pathways. That's why it takes a while to learn to drive a car but then becomes second nature. The pathways are established and so the actions follow their course without much conscious thought. How we relate to others, the choices we make in our day to day lives, similarly create neural pathways that over time make change difficult. It is human nature for our hearts to become hardened.

Each of us has a Pharaoh within. A voice that says, "Do that which protect my interests" but fails to remember that another Voice also speaks. A voice based on fear and stubbornness, refusing to look beyond our own space. That Divine Voice, by contrast, says, "I place before you this day a choice of death and a choice of life. Choose life."

Let us turn away from selfishness, stubbornness, and fear, from the voices of Pharaoh within us, and towards the Divine Voice that is filled with caring and love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WORD OF HOPE

FEBRUARY 1, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Both American and Israeli politics find themselves in a malaise of late. More and more, we feel trapped in situations beyond our control. These confined, narrow places further incur heavy penalties on a regular basis. Exiting from them seems equally or more terrifying as we imagine the outcomes of leaving.

Israel sits at an uncomfortable moment. The violence over the summer felt inconclusive and unresolved. There is a sense that this moment of relative calm is only a pause, a time to ready ourselves for more death and destruction, rather than a true moment of peace. Further, few if any speak well of the current Israeli leadership – but few seem to offer any alternatives. Olmert is Prime Minister by default at the moment. Malaise.

The suicide bombings continue. For nine months some combination of strife among Hamas and Fatah on the one hand and Israeli security on the other prevented incidents within the green line. This week another suicide bombing occurred in Eilat and another Israeli died as a result. Fatah condemned the attack, Hamas (the ruling Palestinian faction) praised it. Even within the Palestinians there is malaise.

The Israelites lived in Egypt for four hundred years, the majority of that time as slaves. And then Moses came to free them. They rejoiced, they praised the faith they had barely kept. Our midrash teaches that the Israelites were saved for only two areas of merit. They knew their Hebrew names and they circumcised their children. Only in these ways had they preserved their love of Hashem. Moses came to free them – it would be all right.

And then Pharaoh told Moses: I will not let your people go. And the people turned on Moses. The taste of hope, an imagined better world, became like ash in their mouths. That hope became betrayed and even more distant. Thus we see a whole generation in the desert who pause only to say to Moses, “Why have you brought us here to die in the desert?” God’s fire is in front of them, and they can only complain.

The next forty years Moses led a redeemed people stuck in a malaise. A whole generation cursed to wander in the desert. Their unwillingness to believe in hope led to the curse of hope removed. Their children could imagine a wide open land; the parents could imagine only the desert. His was the hardest job of any Rabbi in Jewish history.

And yet, Hashem does create a world filled with hope. Even in the darkest time of slavery, Moses was born to bring redemption into the world. We can see now that the time in the desert, painful though it was, was only preparation for building a holy society in God's Promised Land. That the Holy One of Jacob exists means: there is hope. We may be trapped for a time, but words of redemption are waiting to be spoken.

It is moments like these when I delight in my chosen profession. I don't have to suggest the diplomatic or military methods by which our current problems will be overcome. I don't need the perfect plan for peace in the Middle East. I need instead to be a voice for hope. To say: The Holy One's hand is still in the world. That mighty hand and outstretched arm waits to redeem provided we are still listening for the moment when peace is possible.

The Israelites lost hope and because of this they spent forty years wandering in the desert. It would be easy for us to lose hope and either give up or become consumed by hatred and violence. Though the path seems murky and dark, God promises Isaiah: I will surely clear away the path, removing its crooked ways.

I pray soon and speedily for a day when Israel and the whole world shall dwell at peace. When neighbor shall not lift up sword against neighbor and when we will study the ways of war no more. Until that time, I pray that my leaders, both here and in Israel, continue to search for the path that will in time be illumined by God. May we find the way towards hope and redemption, soon and speedily. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom, truly, a Shabbat of peace,

Rabbi David Booth

THE MOSHE RABBENU COMPLEX

FEBRUARY 8, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Many of us, particularly people of talent and ability, need to be on their guard against the Moshe Rabbenu complex. The Moshe Rabbenu complex is the belief that everything depends on your own efforts. Without you, goes the thinking of those so afflicted, everything will fall apart. It is a few more hours, a little greater effort that will ensure the people's redemption. Or the company's profitability.

Moses was a man of great talents and abilities. His own actions were fantastic and necessary. The list of achievements has no parallel in history. He was a giant in the realm of politics, forcing mighty Egypt to her knees. He brought Torah to the people and started a legal process that would continue to influence the ordering of society until this very day. Spiritually as a Prophet, he stood before God, seeing Hashem face to face. There has never been and never will be another like him.

And yet – even Moses fell victim to his own complex. He too took on too much and for the wrong reasons. Abarbanel, a 15th century Spanish scholar, points out one of Moses' unique characteristics. Hashem, in looking for a shepherd for the Jewish people, wanted a person of patience, someone who would make time to appreciate the souls of others. For this reason, says Abarbanel, the burning bush was a test. Would Moses pause long enough to notice the miracle of the bush not being consumed? For only then would he be worthy of God's task.

So Jethro, who knows his own son-in-law, sees that something is wrong upon their reunion. Rabbi Charles Savenor, a colleague of mine who is now the Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School at JTS, highlights Jethro's concern. After nearly a year's separation, Jethro is bringing Moses' wife and family. Moses hears of Jethro's arrival and comes to greet his father-in-law with honor and respect. Our Rabbis even teach that Jethro, who acknowledges Hashem's supremacy, then converts to Judaism.

Yet nowhere, says Rabbi Savenor, does the Torah record Moses hugging his wife and sons. The man who pauses, who notices the struggles and pains of others, fails to see the longing in his sons' eyes, or the passion and love in his wife's. And so Jethro is on guard: something is wrong.

The next morning, Jethro learns what. Moses is judging every single case the people have. He is working from dawn until dusk. There is no time for anything else and so Moses, the man of freedom, is showing the early signs of kotzar ruach, shortness of spirit, inner spirit fatigue. Worst of all, Moses, by

overstating his own necessity, is making the people dependent upon him for all decisions. Even simple matters require his intercession. His over-agency begins to erode his soul and to damage the people.

Jethro comes up with a simple suggestion: create others trained in Torah who can work with you. Let them take the easier cases so that you are left with time and spiritual energy for the work you uniquely can do. Then the people will grow, they will begin to shed the slave mentality, and become worthy of building Israel. Then you will have time to hug my daughter and my grandchildren.

It's easy to fall victim to this complex and so to undo ourselves and the very work we treasure so much that we dedicate our lives to it. Only by seeing and valuing the gifts others offer can we succeed. This is a great strength of Kol Emeth. There is an effort on the part of the whole community to create spiritual community. The Rabbis play a key role in this process, but so does everyone else who makes this community the spiritually rich place that it is. There is so much more happening here than any one person could ever achieve. That is the strength of community energized together.

Even Moshe had to face his limits. And for Moshe, as for us, this process was healthy for the whole people. When we try to do everything ourselves, to hold onto control, we become more and more like Pharaoh and so limit ourselves greatly. By contrast, when we strive to empower others, to create energy in our communities of committed people working together in the service of God, we are limitless in our ability.

We need to fight against the Moshe Rabbenu complex and instead remember Moses' words: would it not be best if all the people were prophets? Can we not all help others bring forth the divine gifts implanted within?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE DESERT LAW

FEBRUARY 15, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Leaving – being in between – is central to the Jewish narrative. God may be the God of Israel, but we more often remember God as “Your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt.” This is a God who gives us a history of journeys, of exiles, and of diasporas. Our stories most frequently take place in the desert, in between the settled places.

Being out of place, we learn sympathy for the other. We are told: Do not wrong the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 22:25). We know what it is like to be a stranger. We know that it is easy to look at the stranger and see: not human, other. And in seeing that otherness, to take advantage. To forget.

So immediately after being told: do not wrong the stranger, we are warned: do not oppress the widow or stranger. There is a habit of hard heartedness that we saw grow in Pharaoh. Each oppressive step becomes easier as Pharaoh trains himself to be a stubborn, oppressive dictator.

It's easy to forget the widow and the orphan. Their problems are systemic and long term. They too are out of place, outside the settled places of family ties and connections. Further, they remind me of my own tenuous existence. I prefer to depend on horses and chariots, to imagine that the relationships and material possessions I have somehow keep me safe. The widow and the orphan remind me that we all live in the desert of contingent life.

Wandering in the unsettled places, we learn faith. They depend on chariots and horses, says the Psalmist, but we depend on God's word. You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger. (Ex 23:9). The warning is repeated by Torah because it also teaches us of Hashem's hand in our lives. I learn faith because I was a stranger. I know about wandering and so I know the truth of Deuteronomy: People do not live on bread alone, but by that which comes forth from Hashem's mouth.

Don't oppress the stranger, says Torah, and then tells us of the Sabbatical year, of the Shabbat, of the festivals. There is a limit to our material selves. At some point, once a week, once every seven years, that part of ourselves must be put aside. Our manna is collected – we return to the world in which our sustenance is provided directly by God. I cook before Shabbat and then enjoy only what I have. I am no longer able to change it, influence it, make it different.

It is in the pause that I remember – all of us are created in God's image. All of us live in a contingent world that hangs in the balance. Each moment of life is a gift from my Creator and so each moment creates a responsibility to share that manifold blessing with others. And so I am reminded: don't take a bribe, don't subvert the rights of the poor.

These mishpatim, these laws, are given us in the desert because the desert is that in between place where I learn sympathy for the other. That I today am blessed to have a family and community, a web of relationships who help me navigate the potential terror of each day, is a blessing from Hashem. It is a blessing that requires me to remember what it used to be like when I lived in the desert.

Hashem says through Jeremiah, "I will return their exiles and have mercy upon them." Yet we are commanded to be God's messengers. So it is our job to return the exiles and have mercy upon them. We remember what it is like to be alone, out of place, and so we help the poor, the widow, the orphan – all those storm tossed in search of home and harbor. We too were strangers – now we are redeemers.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

ESTHER IN AMERICA

FEBRUARY 28, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Once upon a time there was a young woman. She knew that she was a Jew. In her soul, she was completely Jewish. She had been named in a Synagogue and she had a Bat Mitzvah along with all her other religious school friends. When she went to college she even occasionally attended services. Now, as a young woman, Judaism remained an unspoken part of who she was, but rarely of what she did.

Her real name, by the way, was Hadassah but everyone called her Esther.

There didn't seem to be any reason to join a Synagogue. She knew she was Jewish, after all. No reason to support the Federation or give to Jewish causes. She had enough financial responsibilities in her life. She figured she would get married and have kids and then she could do all of those things. What was the rush? Judaism seemed to be ticking along fine without her.

One day, her Uncle Mordy came by to meet her for lunch. Her secretary said, "Your Uncle is at reception. And by the way, he has a kippah on." She went down to meet him. "Can't you take that off your head?" she asked. "It's embarrassing." Mordy just looked at her, and then said, "Where shall we go for lunch?" The kippah stayed on.

Shortly after her 25th birthday, Hadassah received a phone call from her Uncle. They were trying to get together a shiva minyan for a mutual friend who had lost a parent to cancer. She did not really have time that evening – but something made her decide to go anyway. When she got there, late, she saw that there were nine other people. "Oh thank you for coming," said her friend's widow. "You made the Minyan."

They began to pray and a funny thing happened. It had been a hard day. She had argued with someone at work just before she left. Her mother had called and left another in a series of annoying phone messages. She had exercised and then worked with barely a moment to think. The widow began to recite the prayers and Hadassah sat and thought and prayed.

Her Uncle Mordy then got up to speak. "I really miss Harvey. Every Shabbat he and I would sit together during the service, schmooze at the Kiddush. Like the old joke, Harvey went to be with God and I went to be with Harvey. Harvey taught me that being Jewish means living in a covenantal relationship with

God. It means the decisions we make in our day to day lives are informed by the Jewish values we learn from God's word to us. It means making time for Shabbat and for prayer, to give my soul rest. I intend to spend Shabbat missing Harvey while I learn how to pray to God."

She had never heard her Uncle talk this way. She decided that next Shabbat she would go with Mordy to shul. She would sit next to him, not to pray but to be with her Uncle. And maybe a little time to think wouldn't hurt so much either...

So Hadassah, that is Esther, went beyond helping her friend make minyan for shiva. She started going to Synagogue, at first to comfort her Uncle, but more and more to create a Shabbat for herself. She took to studying about Torah and Judaism as she searched for meaning in her own life. In short, she became not merely someone born Jewish but someone who chooses to be Jewish. And in this fashion, a whole Jewish generation was saved.

And thus was the feast of Purim proclaimed again: to celebrate those who choose to be Jewish. To celebrate those who despite the pressures to simply disappear into the great melting pot that is America remember God and remember the Torah of our ancestors. This year let us celebrate both Esther and Mordecai who saved the Jews from Haman, and each one of us who is daily engaged in saving the Jews from a far more pernicious enemy – our own apathy.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!

Rabbi David Booth

CyberTorah is a day earlier this week as a reminder that Thursday (tomorrow) is the observance of the Fast of Esther. Taanit Esther reminds us that Jews are all bound together, and especially at a time such as this, when Israel's security and well being hang in the balance, the fast seems particularly meaningful.

A GIVING SOUL

MARCH 8, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

According to the Mishnah in Pesachim, even those eating from the local soup kitchen are required to give Tzedakah. That is, people who are receiving public assistance are themselves required to contribute to others in need. They need to be given enough money so that they can feed themselves and their families and also contribute to the very Tzedakah funds from which they are being supported.

This Halakhah comes directly from the half shekel mentioned in Parashat Ki Tissa. Moses is commanded to take a census of the people. Once the numbers are determined, every person, regardless of wealth, is required to donate a half shekel for the service of Hashem. This donation is a cleansing of the soul, a value assigned to each person.

There is an egalitarian quality to this commandment. The Torah specifically says that “the poor may not lessen from this, nor may the wealthy increase.” It makes sense to warn the poor from giving less. They may assume that their lack of resources releases them from paying a full share.

Yet then why prohibit the wealthy from giving more? Ramban points out that the wealthy person is also violating Torah if he or she donates more because it would imply that my soul is worth more than your soul. In the eyes of the Holy One we are all equal.

Judaism has a discomfort in assigning a finite amount to the infinite value of human life. In the service of God, in the worship that takes place in a Synagogue, there are no distinctions of wealth or station. We all give our half shekel. We all stand before God as unique individuals in the image of the Most High.

The egalitarian implication also means that everyone has something to contribute. No one is left out of the tasks of holiness. Though the impoverished person may feel undervalued elsewhere, whether in the marketplace or the places of work, in shul that person is a full congregant, a true and valued participant.

Among those essential tasks of holiness in which all people participate is caring for our general community. Giving to Tzedakah is a human necessity. It is a commandment that teaches me to give, to care for others. Emotionally, a wealthy person may struggle with creating a budget that includes caring for others as much or more than a person of limited means. To be a holy person means to have a conception of self that includes caring for others.

It is for this reason that even someone receiving public assistance must give to Tzedakah. Even though they are paying themselves, they are fulfilling the commandment of giving. Even though the money goes out one pocket and into the other, they are developing the capacity to think beyond their own four handbreadths and to have concern for others. In the realm of Tzedakah and other charitable giving, then each person gives according to their capacity. The wealthy do indeed give more, but even the poor must give.

Tzedakah means righteousness. The half shekel teaches us that we are all of infinite value. The commandment for even the poor to give Tzedakah teaches that we all have something to give. It is our job as followers of Torah to share those blessings we have with others and so build a world of righteousness and justice.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

JOSHUA'S STORY

MARCH 15, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Daddy, I have a tummy ache.” That was how I knew something wasn't right with my son. Between the ages of 2 and 3, my son Joshua didn't grow. He started to have some difficulty walking and he was constantly fatigued and complaining of an upset stomach. My wife Carol was especially attentive, keeping track of his symptoms. When he went in for his 3 year old well visit, we knew something was systemically wrong.

Our Pediatrician examined him and noticed an enlarged liver and spleen. As a result, he referred us to a liver specialist who wanted to take a liver biopsy. We were reluctant. I wanted a better sense of what we might be looking for before we began taking pieces out of my son's body. After making an absurd suggestion of hepatic fibrosis (damage to the liver, almost exclusively seen in chronic alcoholics) we asked for a blood screen that would include a test for Gaucher's, a rare Jewish genetic disorder.

After the Doctor initially refused, we persisted and got the blood test for Gaucher's done on Joshua. He tested positive. Now we knew what was wrong. And further, now we knew how truly blessed we were. Because alone among Jewish genetic disorders, Gaucher's is treatable.

Gaucher's is a storage disorder that results from an inability to make an enzyme necessary for breaking down certain fatty cells. Untreated, those cells accumulate in the liver, spleen, and bone marrow. Over time, Gaucher's will cause bone damage, fatigue, and lack of stature. Today a treatment exists that infuses the enzyme directly into the body resulting in a normal life.

Joshua gets his treatment every other week at home in our family room. My wife does the treatment herself. Joshua can watch TV, practice Piano, or do his homework. It's a hassle I'd rather live without but it can be managed. There are times when it's hard to open my back closet and see an infusion pole, but I thank God that I am in the realm of hassle rather than tragedy.

This past Shabbat, Gary Frohlich, a genetic specialist who works for Genzyme, the company which makes my son's medicine, spoke at Kol Emeth about the development of genetic disorders in the Jewish community. 3.5 million of the 8 million Ashkenazi Jews are descended from just 4 women – which means that rare genetic mutations are reinforced and spread throughout a large population. In marriage spreads a recessive gene throughout the population. That is called Founders Effect.

As a result of Founders Effect, there are 11 genetic disorders that occur with great frequency in the Ashkenazi Jewish population. All of these conditions are recessive genes, meaning that both parents have to be carriers before a child will show symptoms. The incidence of a recessive Gaucher's gene is 1 in 15 in the Jewish population, and more like 1 in 400 in the general population. Tay Sachs has an occurrence of 1 in 25. Canavan's and the other diseases are rarer still.

I had relatives who resisted being screened as we tried to track down the origin of the disease. Perhaps they felt guilt, or a sense of failing. I know that Carol and I both felt somehow responsible for what was happening to Joshua. Yet DNA isn't Din, God's judgment. It took us a while to work through our own guilt and our anger at God for what was happening to us. Sometimes those feelings come back.

Yet God created a world that is good, even though evidently imperfect. Further, we are in partnership with God and so it is our job to use human ingenuity to heal the sick. We uncover the secrets of God's world and then can do God's work of healing. Knowledge of the world is one of the ways we come to know God. Use those tools granted to us by God. Get tested – and then know.

I pray that sharing this story will inspire others to get screened. I pray that it will spare the parents of a young child the doubt and uncertainty that we experienced as we struggled to find out what was wrong with my son. I also pray that Hashem continues to guide the hands of the Physicians and scientists as they administer old treatments and seek out new ones.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 22, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items are limited to fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. All of these items are produced without the use of Chametz. If an infinitesimal quantity of chametz should accidentally have fallen into these items, it is considered void prior to the start of the Holy Day. If they are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

After the house is thoroughly cleaned of chametz (and all of us ought to thoroughly clean our homes at least once a year anyway), the kitchen itself needs a koshering process. Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle,

washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent.

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER FOR FREEDOM

MARCH 29, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The historical events celebrated at Passover are used only as an example. There are other stories, some personal, some national, that would have illustrated the existence of hope just as well. Passover is a promise. Passover teaches: even when all seems lost and dark, God's existence means that there is still hope. Even the narrow confines of Egypt were only a prelude to the wide open land of Israel that flows with milk and honey.

Passover reminds us both of redemptions that have occurred and redemptions yet to occur. It focuses our attention on those who remain trapped and in their own dark places. That is why we added a fourth matzah of freedom for so many years to our Seders. We knew of the persecution and darkness experienced by Jews in the Soviet Union. And so we remembered them at our Seders. That act of memory was integral to the final release of Soviet Jewry.

This year I suggest adding again a fourth matzah of freedom. There are so many, Jews and non-Jews, who find themselves in dark places, held against their will, unfree. Most prominently are the three Israeli MIA's from last summer's violence, Gilad Shalit, Eldad Regev, and Ehud Goldwasser. Missing now for nearly a year, their Passover will be in chains as they await a personal redemption for which all Jews pray.

The people of Darfur too will see the season of Passover come and go in darkness and fear. Daily violence and genocide makes normal life impossible. Kol Emeth raised over \$3,000.00 to help educate children whose childhood and education are being lost in the shadows of war. It was impressive and but a drop in the bucket. Darfur awaits a national redemption, an Exodus into freedom that can become their own national story of hope that emerges from despair.

There are others too, people fettered, awaiting freedom. Let us this year add a fourth matzah, the matzah of hope, to our seders and recite over it the following prayer:

Adonai, Rock and Redeemer of Israel, we pray that this season of redemption will be a time of freedom for all those who sit in darkness. We were enslaved to Pharoah and You brought us forth with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Though our souls were embittered by the hard labor and the narrow confines of Egypt, our faith sustained us and brought us to the day when you redeemed us, 400 years to

the day from the birth of Isaac. Our laughter was of joy, of hope.

Today again we look at a world filled with freedom and hope, but also filled with darkness and shadow. We pray that Ehud Goldwasser, Gilad Shalit, and Eldad Regev will soon and speedily be free. Today they sit in a narrow place, awaiting Your mighty hand. May You grant them hope in darkness and soon and speedily bring them to light. May Passover be a time of personal redemption for them along with all others unjustly held.

We see also entire peoples persecuted, oppressed, enslaved by terror, violence and genocide. In particular may this year be a year of redemption for the people of Darfur. May the ongoing slaughter cease, may the narrow bands of hate be released into hope and possibility for the future. Grant peace to the people of Darfur, and hope to all those who are oppressed, to all those peoples held in narrow places that afflict the soul.

At this season of redemption, we marvel at Your power. You bring hope to the oppressed and freedom to the enslaved. We will strive to be Your messengers of hope and freedom into the world. May this time of redemption and hope inspire all of us to rededicate ourselves to bringing Your light into the whole world. Amen.

Carol, Joshua, Naomi, and Maytal join me in wishing each of you a happy and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TRAGEDY IN VIRGINIA

APRIL 19, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It was Yom HaShoah. That's what shocks me. On a day of mourning and loss, Cho Seung-Ho took up an assault rifle and began shooting at Virginia Tech. He killed 32 people and then committed suicide in the deadliest campus shooting in United States history. On Yom HaShoah, a day that reminds us of senseless violence and slaughter, of genocide, a senseless mass killing took place.

There is something tragic about the death of college students, doubly so when killed senselessly by a peer. College is a time of possibilities, the opening of doors. It is a time of exploration and a time to begin fulfilling the promise of youth. It should never be a time when the opening of doors reveals a gunman intent on murder and suicide.

I wonder what can be going on inside the head of a 19 year old to make him take up a gun and start shooting. I want it to make sense, because then I can protect my children. I'd like to think his parents weren't as loving as I am to my children. I'd like to think there was something organically wrong with him. Thus I can be assured my children would never do something like this and that others who might do such things can be found and removed from polite society. But I can't do this.

Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* points out our desire to insulate ourselves from our own mortality and biology. When we send our children to school, especially as they leave home, they leave the control we imagine we had over them. Even though that safety is illusory, it is comforting. This shooting at Virginia Tech shatters our complacency. Thus says the Psalmist: I imagined I sat in quiet and security.

In the face of such senselessness, the real question is how we choose to respond. Aaron's reaction to the loss of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, offers one kind of response to life's senseless quality. Nadav and Avihu bring "strange fire" before Hashem in the Mishkan, the movable Sanctuary the Israelites had in the desert. Hashem strikes the two boys down. In the face of the tragedy, Aaron is silent. He offers no words of explanation nor ever says "why." He knows there is no answer that can satisfy. The pain of his children's death will be a burden he carries the rest of his life.

Instead, it is what Aaron does after their deaths that matters. The loss of his sons transforms Aaron into a lover and pursuer of peace. He becomes a man who says to God: You have taken my children from me, caused me such pain. I will now dedicate my life to reconciling loved ones and friends to preserve people

from the pain you have caused me. He said to God: Never Again, at least in the four handbreadths of the Earth I can affect.

Liviu Librescu, a 76 year old Israeli Professor at the University, took this message to heart. He was a Holocaust survivor and it was Yom HaShaoh. He had lived through death and murder and been powerless. He was teaching his students as the shooter arrived. He threw himself in front of the door, and preserved the lives of these students at the cost of his own. Given the chance to save lives, to prevent senseless slaughter, he became a hero because of what he had survived. He said to God: Never again, at least in my classroom to my students.

There are acts of heroism big and small. There are ways of fighting the potential emptiness of our lives that are dramatic and that are mundane. This is a good week to tell your children how much you love them. This is a good time to play a game or chat on the phone with someone you love. This is a good week to go to Synagogue, and join a community of worshippers together proclaiming that this veil of tears can be made a good place through our efforts.

There will be innumerable articles trying to explain why this happened. Like Aaron, our search for explanation leaves us silent, unable to speak. The truth is, we will never really know why. The real question is: when I begin to act and speak, what will I do? How will I say Never Again?

May God comfort all those in mourning, especially the family of Liviu Librescu z"l, and May God heal speedily all those injured.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CELEBRATING ISRAEL

APRIL 27, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Wednesday is Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. On that day, we celebrate the miracle that is Israel. This year in particular we must celebrate the great blessing that is Israel precisely because of all the current struggle and strife. We will read the Haftorah of Rosh Khodesh this Shabbat and Isaiah's words have a lot to say about our rejoicing in Israel.

Isaiah describes a scene in which the righteous are surrounded by the wicked. They offer a sacrifice and then kill a man. These wicked people are hypocrites and liars. Israel today is surrounded by terrorists and afflicted with those who talk peace to the media but preach only war to their own people. Yet those who have faith in God stand firm.

The Prophet calls upon God to bring vengeance upon them but never contemplates that vengeance himself. People can defend themselves against aggression or against suicide bombers, but they can never act in vengeance. That is only for God because only God can rise above hatred and animosity to know when vengeance is justified. When the Israeli Defense Forces capture weapons cache after weapons cache, I see a people defending themselves. Bulldozing people's homes is more problematic. I pray they will be resolute in their action and also see the distinction between defending themselves and evening old scores.

Yet even in the midst of this ongoing crisis, we must rejoice in Israel and Jerusalem. Isaiah tells us to "Rejoice in Jerusalem and be jubilant those who love her." Israel is a flowering democracy with a thriving economy. In a few decades, Israel will be home to more than half the Jewish people. It has already emerged as the center of Judaism.

Without Israel, there would be no Judaism today. We would be the last dying vestige of a rapidly assimilating downtrodden people. Instead, both here and in Israel we are a thriving nation. When I lived in Jerusalem and walked from my home to school, I regularly heard Hebrew, Arabic, English, French, Russian and occasionally German. I would always buy a little pastry on my way in the morning from a Sabra, a native born Israeli. He and I spoke together in Hebrew because we were both Jews living in the capital of both Israel and the Jewish people. That was enough in common to establish a relationship.

This is the miracle of Israel.

Isaiah also prays for a peace in which his enemies will be vanquished and in which Jerusalem becomes a world capital. People will stream there to worship God and to acknowledge God's sovereignty. That is the real hope of peace. That Palestinians and Israelis will see that their best hope for wealth lies in peace. It lies in making Jerusalem a world financial and intellectual capital the rival of New York, Tokyo, or London.

As the Jordanians have learned better to irrigate their fields and grow their crops from Israelis, an Israel at peace with its neighbors could be the source of intellectual capital that could make the whole region flourish. A Palestinian state could share its human resources with Israel and gradually over time become the envy of first the Arabic world and then the whole world. Then people from all over will stream to Jerusalem and the Middle East for pilgrimages both economic and spiritual.

It requires the vision of prophet. It requires devotion to God and justice. Isaiah saw it; it can still be. Let us celebrate the Israel that is and pray for the Israel that can be.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Israeli Independence Day

Rabbi David Booth

KEEP YOUR HELMET ON!

MAY 10, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you know, I had a pretty good tumble on my bicycle a couple of weeks ago. I was biking to minyan Thursday morning and a cable got stuck in my front spoke. The bike immediately came to a stop and I didn't. I landed on the ground pretty hard. I was knocked out briefly (a minute? Less? I don't remember) and then went to the emergency room. After x-rays and other tests in the Emergency Room, the physician told me I had a separated shoulder. In other words, take two aspirin and call me in the morning. I learned a few things from this experience I want to share with you.

First and foremost, wear a bike helmet. I was just going over to work. I wasn't going that fast or far, and it was a lovely morning. It was quite tempting not to wear my helmet. The impact cracked the helmet in two places. Had I not been wearing it, I would have been much more seriously injured. There is a tremendous amount of energy in a moving bike. A helmet is always essential.

Second, I learned about the power of community. The Talmud teaches that we are protected on the way to perform mitzvot. So in a sense it was theologically disappointing to have this accident on the way to minyan. I also don't think it was a punishment for some sin – I think a cable just snapped because I didn't look over the bicycle closely enough.

Yet the response of community reminded me of the real power of faith. I was protected because I was part of a prayer community. I fell on Manuela, right on the way to Synagogue. Others were coming to minyan as well and stopped to help me. The first person who found me didn't even recognize me. He made the connection only after he called Carol. The type of person who goes to minyan is also the type of person who stops on the way to help someone. I fell on my way to do a mitzvah and that meant I was in a community of people doing mitzvot. I fell into the protecting embrace of holy community.

Third, I learned how hard it is to accept help from others. I am used to thinking of myself as a strong and capable person. I contribute at Synagogue and at home. I clean up my own messes and I make things better because of my presence. It has been hard at home to let go of my household tasks as I heal. Carol has been so supportive and loving, but I feel diminished.

Rabbi Graff similarly stepped up and covered some services and programs while I was out of commission that first weekend. She was gracious beyond words, but I found it hard to say yes. Countless members

of the community offered help as well. It was hard to be the one receiving the offers instead of making them.

I learned emotionally how much I rely upon the community of faith that surrounds me. I got a tiny taste of how hard a permanent disability is. Our sense of value comes strongly from what we do. I have had to remind myself that my value also comes from the people who care for me and from God.

Finally, I have been struck by the miracle of the healing process. My face was severely abraded; it looks nearly back to normal. My shoulders were largely immobile after I fell, and range of motion is returning. By contrast, I damaged the face of my watch. It remains just as scratched and damaged as the day of my fall. Put another way, it is only that which God makes that can heal.

I am thankful to be recovering and nearly back to normal function. I am thankful for the care and concern of so many. And I am inspired to see how much God's invisible hand enables that healing and caring to happen. Praised is God who offers goodness to the undeserving and who has protected me only with goodness. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A YEAR OF RELEASE

MAY 17, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There's something about buying a new house that leads to a spending spree. First, you want to fix everything the previous owners ignored. Once you get over ripping the walls and plumbing apart, you want to have the right furniture and appliances. Not to mention window coverings, rugs, and just the right metallic toned garbage cans. Someone who recently bought his first new house in decades commented that if he had remembered what a sinkhole a new house is he never would have moved.

Material possessions exert a powerful pull upon us. We allow ourselves to be judged by them (O, what a lovely new home you have!) and we allow those items to demand from us. We are commanded to stay away from idolatry. Idolatry is broader than worshipping a statue. Abarbanel says that idolatry is ascribing power to anything other than God. Our worship of money and pursuit of material objects can easily cross the line into idolatry.

When our material possessions begin to own us, the hold they exert over us is as harsh as the slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Thoreau's book Walden Pond is all about avoiding the entanglement that material possessions and relationships bring. He warns us about how easily our material possessions can come to possess us. (He also warns against emotional commitments, and here I strongly disagree with him. Where material possessions can enslave us if we are not careful, loving relationships create responsibilities that give our lives texture and meaning.)

It is for this reason that the Torah proposes a Sabbatical year, a year of release. We count six years, and on the seventh the land is given its rest. We are commanded to exist from the fruit of the land that year, to teach us that God's goodness enables us to survive even in the other years. It is also a year of release from debts, a year in which doors are opened for those under the crippling burden of repayment to others.

Today, few if any of us work the land. The laws of shmita apply only to Israel anyway. Yet the message and theology of a sabbatical year are even more important in our material age. As a result, I have two proposals for the next Jewish year, the Sabbatical year in Israel.

First, let it be a year in which we refrain from all but necessary purchases. There are so many things we want to buy: appliances, furniture, cars, computers and electronics. I want a year in which I live with

what I have. I want a year in which I focus on who I am more than what I want. Our values drive our purchases and this year of release is a way to refocus on what matters in our lives. Then we will own our belongings instead of our belongings owning us.

Second, let it be a year in which we help others find a release from debt and the crushing burden of poverty. The Hebrew Free Loan Society in San Francisco makes interest free loans to those in need. This type of giving enables those who could not get or repay traditional financing an opportunity to find release and freedom. It is a way of restoring dignity. This coming Sabbatical year ought to be one in which we support programs that help those in need attain release and find financial freedom.

Money is a tool, a means to an end. The stuff that we own is there to make our lives more comfortable. It cannot make us better, happier, or more free. Let us dedicate 5768, a Sabbatical year, to reminding ourselves that true freedom and meaning comes from service to God.

Sabbatical Salutations,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be celebrating Shavuot next week and will return the following week.

UP, UP AND AWAY

MAY 31, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As a kid, and even today, I was and am fascinated by superheroes. As a teenager I read X-Men comics, and I continue to enjoy watching various Superman shows and movies with my own kids. I went to all three Spider Man movies and loved every minute. Over time, I have realized that the super hero genre is Jewish through and through, coming into being because of a meeting of American power with Jewish identity.

The creators of the major superheroes were all Jews. Siegel and Shuster, the creators of Superman, were two Detroit Jewish boys living in the shadow of the impending Holocaust. They created Clark Kent, a character of great power with a secret identity whom others perceived as bumbling and ineffectual. His secret identity included a mysterious and powerful heritage that Superman discovered over the years, and even a Hebrew sounding name, Kal-El.

Clark Kent is the stereotypical Jew. He's bookish and wears glasses. A strong wind could push him over. And yet there is a hidden power that comes from his identity. He puts on his tallit or cape and rushes out to save the day. For a Jew living in the 1930s, this is great wish fulfillment. As Jews around the globe were threatened Siegel and Shuster imagined a great hero to fight the Nazis. Superman took up that challenge in the comics of the 1940s.

The creators of Batman, Green Lantern, Spiderman, X-Men were all Jews. This is more than just coincidence. This is a uniquely American-Jewish genre influenced by Jewish history and expressing Jewish ethics. Michael Chabon explores this to great effect in [Kavalier and Clay](#), a fictional account of two Jews who create a Superhero in the late 1930s. Chabon uses the mythic backdrop of the Golem of Prague, that mighty creation of the Maharal, imagined to come to the rescue of Jews at times of great trouble. It is as if they carry the Golem with them to America and, like lead becoming gold, this Jewish superhero becomes updated and Americanized.

Superheroes become a way to wrestle with feeling different and misunderstood. The X-Men are persecuted mutants with a great secret. They struggle for acceptance and recognition. Even though they are persecuted, they still are morally compelled to contribute and help others. Stan Lee created them in the 1960s when colleges still had a quota on the maximum number of Jews they would admit. These fictional heroes have flourished under the direction of Brian Singer, a Jew who is also gay and who

has used the image of persecuted minority to great effect.

The first superhero sets the stage for the whole genre. Samson, in last Shabbat's haftorah, is gifted with a special destiny. He will have great strength and be able to defeat the enemies of the Israelites. He also has a weakness that Delilah exposes when she cuts his hair and so takes away his strength. His special destiny requires great sacrifice, and he gives his own life to help others.

Stan Lee, the creator of Spider Man and the X-men, has done more than any Rabbi to teach morality and responsibility by using this literary style. Spider Man's Uncle tells him, "With great power comes great responsibility." This teaching echoes Mishnah Sanhedrin. The Mishnah teaches us, "Each morning a person should say, 'It is for my sake that the world was created.'" Put another way, we have great power. We challenge ourselves every morning to say that our choices are meaningful and important. The mishnah also teaches that "To save a single life is to save a whole world." Seemingly small acts have great meaning.

Torah teaches us: Don't stand on the blood of your neighbor. Help people when you see them in trouble. This ethic is profoundly Jewish and has become profoundly American. It is a teaching we as Jews have offered America. Put in more American vernacular, if you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem. To stand idly by is to participate in evil.

We may not have tights or capes with big "S"s on them. Yet we do have a special destiny and heritage that gives us great power. Our faith in God and our heritage of Torah has made us a great people who have been at the forefront of change in the Western world. We do have the ability to change the world for the better. Therefore, just like Samson, Spider Man, or Superman, we must.

Up, up, & away!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE ONLY THING TO FEAR IS FEAR ITSELF

JUNE 7, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

What frightens you? What places are you afraid to visit because of what you may find there? What steps in your life do you avoid because they may take you somewhere new and potentially terrifying? What risks do you avoid because the prospect of change is too overwhelming? Put another way, do you ever know the right course and turn away because of fear? It is this failing that dooms the Israelites to forty years in the desert.

According to the Midrash, Moses makes one mistake in his leadership of the Israelite people. Instead of telling them, “We are going to conquer the land,” he sends out spies to see “Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many (Num 13:18)?” By asking, Moses draws attention to the dangers of going into Israel. Perhaps the people there will be strong, or the land a bad place to live. Ramban defends Moshe, saying that he sent the spies out knowing they would return with reports of the land’s goodness and fruitfulness. But Moses, shining with the light of Hashem, forgot human nature.

The spies return, arguing against change. This land eats its inhabitants, they say. The people who dwell there are giants, and we were like grasshoppers in their eyes. Even though they return with a grape cluster that requires two people to carry, showing the fruitfulness of the land, they are afraid that this is a place that will overwhelm them. So the people choose to remain in the desert because they lack the moral center that will strengthen them in facing the necessary challenges of entering the Promised Land.

Franklin Roosevelt put it another way, “So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory.” In FDR’s day, the moral choice was clear. To stop the advance of the Nazis was a political but also moral necessity. Yet many argued to do nothing, even though nothing in the long term would have meant fighting a Nazi Europe. Many felt too small to overcome the threat of Nazism.

The problem is entirely one of perspective. The spies say, “We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so must have looked to them (Num 13:33).” The people were not grasshoppers, but their fears made them seem tiny and powerless. They forgot that for Hashem, “Is anything too wonderful?” There is a

tremendous strength in a moral center that can overcome otherwise terrifying odds. From the vantage of fear and uncertainty, they are like grasshoppers. From the vantage of faith, it is the people who are the giants. That is why Joshua and Caleb say, "Have no fear of the people of that country...the Lord is with us (Num 14:9)!"

Thirty nine years later, Joshua does something very different. This new generation has more courage and more faith. Instead of sending out spies, he sends out scouts because there is no doubt: they will go into that land. It is only a question now of how they will get there. They are committed to the value of building a holy society in Israel; the hesitations are in the past.

We often know what we should do more than we do it. We often know what the right course of action would be, but do otherwise out of fear. We then find ourselves wandering a desert of uncertainty, lacking a sense of who we are and what the purpose of our lives is. It is faith that overcomes fear, a moral sense that overcomes uncertainty.

There are certain moral and spiritual decisions we know are right. We, like the ancient Israelites, avoid taking them out of fear. Perhaps this summer is a good time to confront those fears and with God's help overcome them. Perhaps this summer is the time to take that step you have been avoiding. May God guide us and protect us each step of the way.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ISRAELI SUMMER

JUNE 14, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel once again stands at the precipice. Beset by problems external and internal, Israel is more in need of our support than ever before. As the summer comes upon us, it's worth reflecting on the situation in Israel today and how we can help.

Hezbollah, the Iranian backed terrorist group based in Lebanon, remains aggressive. As a result of the fighting last summer, an international force went to Lebanon. They are supposed to keep Hezbollah north of the Litani river. The Israeli military, in an official report to the Knesset, indicated that Hezbollah has now dug in past this barrier.

Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, has reason to look aggressive. He was a big winner last summer. He is struggling to consolidate his position within Lebanon. It's hard to know if he will attack. Some observers suggest his newfound status will prevent him from actually attacking because he has a lot to lose from an effective Israeli response.

Iran now has the capability to build an atomic weapon. Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, has said that the first steps in the destruction of Israel have already begun. He has called the Holocaust a myth. The notion of this kind of religious fanatic getting his hands on a weapon of mass destruction terrifies me.

In the West Bank and Gaza strip, Hamas and Fatah are in open civil war. Violence has escalated between the two factions in the last few days. Increased chaos is bad for Israel. Palestinian civil society is in free fall. The kind of institutions that might support peace fail to take root while thuggish politics rule.

This chaos means that Sderot, an Israeli town near the Gaza strip, has been taking heavy Qassam missile fire repeatedly from a variety of Palestinian factions. The town was partially evacuated and remains damaged and quiet. Israel then launched a counter attack, further plunging the area into chaos.

Internally, Israeli politics are in great turmoil. Labor is on the verge of collapse, and the Olmert government seems unlikely to last out the year. The coalition has stood this long only because no one, left or right, can see any alternative. In addition to the military failures of last summer, the government

is scandal ridden to a degree not seen previously in Israeli society. At a time when Israel's existence seems challenged, her politicians seem more interested in personal gain than true leadership. This weakness by the government limits the political ability to make peace because concessions require political capital currently lacking.

As always, when we review the situation today, the question is: what can we do? I have three suggestions for this summer.

1. In the immediate future, the Federation and Masorti movement will be launching a joint campaign to help the community in Sderot rebuild. Sderot has a large well established Masorti (Conservative) community that has been significantly damaged. One way to help Israel is to support this campaign.
2. Tom Lantos, among others, has introduced legislation in the Congress to impose far reaching sanctions against Iran. These sanctions are designed to make it costly for Iran to continue developing nuclear weaponry. Another way to support Israel is to call your representative and support this bill. Last summer, Congress debated similar legislation in response to Hezbollah's attack on Israel. At the time, Barbara Boxer told AIPAC that she was receiving ten calls against sanctions for everyone one in favor. We need to do better this summer.
3. Plan a trip. I am in the midst of planning a Kol Emeth trip for June of 2008 – mark your calendars! Plan a trip of your own soon and speedily. There is no better way to show our support than to go.

May all of our efforts ensure a strong secure Israel, and may we soon and speedily see peace between Israel and all her neighbors.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

This will be the final CyberTorah of the academic year. CyberTorah will resume in Elul (Mid August). Have a great summer!

A CURRICULUM FOR CHANGE

AUGUST 16, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Without thought or analysis, we pick up a variety of behaviors, habits, and even tics. Neurobiologists debate how much those behaviors are within our control and how much they are determined by our biology. All observers agree that there is a complex interrelationship between our ability to choose consciously and our subconscious or biologically determined behavior.

One outcome is that habits form by creating neurological pathways. The more I do something in a particular way, the harder it is to do that same behavior a different way. This is why I am a better driver now than when I was sixteen. So many of the habits I need to drive are now easy to access pathways. I no longer have to think – I am capable of simply doing.

When habits start to do us harm, they are difficult to undo. Tiger Woods, the greatest active golfer today noticed a problem with his swing a few years ago. He spent most of a season retraining himself to improve. It was his worst season ever because it took him a long time to move away from his well established habits before he could create new winning pathways for himself.

In our own behavior, some of these negative habits hurt others, while others hurt only ourselves. The Rabbis teach: good deeds lead to more good deeds, sins lead to more sins. Our neurological pathways are being set every day by the choices that we make. The more we strive to do good, the easier it becomes. Identity and personality are determined by the choices that we make.

The Hasidim teach: You will not be called to account for failing to live up to the example of Abraham, or Moses, or Sarah, or David, or Deborah. You will be called to task for failing to live up to yourself. Each day, in the choices that I make, I am determining the type of person that I am becoming.

Change is a long process. I get back from vacation, having enjoyed some quiet thoughtful time. In my reflections, I have certain personal and professional changes I want to make. So I said to Carol, “This is the new me. I won’t carry around as much stress. I am going to have more trust in God.” I wish it were that simple. It’s a year’s curriculum of change.

Upon starting a diet, a friend of mine complained, “You know that mystical notion of the perfect Shabbat? If only one community could observe a perfect Shabbat than the Messiah would come? I wish my diet could be like that. If I had one perfect day, then I should lose all the weight I want.” It takes a long time and hard work. And diets are only successful when they include a change in how we eat after the dieting is over. We need new pathways, new habits.

It’s Elul. The Shofar is sounded for the first time, leading us towards Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In its insistent sounds, it demands. What will you do differently this year to be more true to who you can be? In what ways will you share the blessings you have with others? How can you begin to heal and grow? It is warning us that change takes a long time. Bringing out the image of God that dwells within takes effort, thoughtfulness, and practice.

Yet it also promises: we can change. We can choose something about ourselves that hurts people, that damages who we are or who we can be. And we can change it. God’s existence means that we aren’t stuck in our biology. We can retrain our neural pathways.

What will you change about yourself this year?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

KOL YISRAEL ARAVIM ZE L'ZE – ALL JEWS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ONE ANOTHER

AUGUST 23, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In the 1950s, Jewish refugees from the Arab world poured into Israel. The Israeli government settled these people in developing communities around the country, including a settlement near the border with Egypt. This small community was about one mile from the Gaza strip (then under Egyptian control) in the south of Israel.

Several decades later, when the large wave of Russian olim came to Israel, many Russians were settled in this same community, leading to impressive growth and incorporation as the city of Sderot. As Sderot developed, a Masorti (Conservative) community developed as well.

As the second Intifada began, Sderot's location near the Gaza strip became a liability. Katyushot rockets and gunfire became a regular annoyance. Their accuracy was fortunately awful, but low level violence became a fact of life. In May of this year, the violence became worse, leading to significant property damage and a partial evacuation of the city.

Jews are responsible for one another. We don't forget when other Jews are in fear, or suffering. They are part of our family. This means we need to show the residents of Sderot that we remember them, that we care for them, that we pray for them to have the same feeling of peace and security we do here in the Bay Area in their own streets.

Israelis will find a way to keep Israel strong and secure as they always have. The greater risk to Israel is the growth of hatred and bigotry in the hearts of Israelis. This ongoing conflict and violence leads to a feeling of isolation and of fear. It is so easy for those feelings to turn into anger and then hatred. Living in the Diaspora on the peaceful streets of the Peninsula, we can send a message of caring and hope. We can send a message that we support and love Israel, and that we pray for a day of peace. That message of caring lessens the feeling of isolation, and helps grant people the strength and courage to trust in God and pray for peace.

A friend of mine who lives in Jerusalem suggested a charity called Connections Israel. They are organizing an effort to send Rosh Hashanah gift baskets with personalized notes to all 70,000 residents of Sderot. Rosh Hashanah is known as a Day of Remembrance. Connections Israel is organizing a two

part effort for the Jewish world to let families in Sderot know they are remembered.

The first part is financial. Each basket costs \$36. In the next couple of weeks, I invite you to send in a donation of any size to help Kol Emeth send as many baskets as possible. I would like us to send 250 baskets to the residents there as an act of caring.

Second, I invite people to write cards and letters that will go with the baskets. These cards and letters are notes of caring, and prayers for peace. The cards should wish them well for the New Year, and offer prayers of well being and prosperity. Children can design and decorate cards if they would like as well. Any gesture on our part will be appreciated and will show our concern and caring.

We pray for the people of Sderot and the State of Israel to be blessed with peace. We pray for a day when being close to Gaza and Egypt makes Sderot into a road of commerce instead of the current outlet for Palestinian frustration and militancy. We pray also for strength and fortitude in the pursuit of peace.

If you are interested in sending gift baskets to Israel, write Sderot in the memo section of the check and send donations to

Kol Emeth

4175 Maneula

Palo Alto, CA 94306

Send cards and letters to the same address, or drop them by the shul. I will be collecting cards, letters, and donations for the next two weeks, and then mailing them to Israel in time for Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

AUGUST 30, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Certain situations are obviously dangerous. Wars and plagues are evidently situations to avoid; poverty and oppression are curses. Yet some situations have hidden dangers. Affluence and security, both great blessings that we are fortunate to enjoy in the United States and especially in the Bay Area, have hidden risks. The blessings can quickly become curses if we are not careful.

God says to the Israelites: When you come into this Promised Land, be careful to remember who you are. As you celebrate abundance, bring a basket of first fruits to the Temple. With those fruits in hand, recall the time when Abraham “was a wandering Aramean.” Recall that you enjoy the blessings of abundance and comfort, because Hashem brought you out of the Land of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

It is when we sit in safety that we are at risk of forgetting the values and faith that brought blessing. Moments of danger and crisis bring communities together. In such dangerous moments we need one another to survive. Further, those frightening scenarios inspire faith because we realize that our lives are outside our control. So we turn to God, looking for comfort at difficult moments.

By contrast, in comfort and security, we no longer struggle to survive each day. We feel ourselves to be self-sufficient. Our immediate need for community is less because we have the means and ability to provide for ourselves and our family. Comfort can create materialism as we begin to judge our selves and our status by what we own rather than who we are. Then our blessings become curses and our wealth turns to ash in our mouths as we lose a sense of who we are.

I am reading [The Price of Privilege](#) by Madeline Levine. This book chronicles the rising incidence of depression, food disorders, drug use, and self-mutilation among teens. According to Levine, over 22% of teens living in affluence (meaning family income greater than \$75K/ year) suffer from depression. These children are protected and cared for, but nothing is asked in return. They are bored and boring because they lack the sense of self to discover their own passions. They are motivated by grades rather than learning. One key statistic she cites: over 50% of college students now state that their primary reason for going to college is to make more money, a startling focus on materialism from previous generations that were more interested in learning and building lasting relationships.

Do not make of the Torah a spade to dig with, says Pirkei Avot. Learning loved for its own sake transforms our soul. Learning acquired to make money is only as valuable as your next paycheck. A person's learning can never be taken away; money and material items are as ephemeral as the grass. When students see learning as only one more spade with which to dig, they never develop the internal passion for Shakespeare or Physics or Judaic studies.

Affluence and security in and of themselves are wonderful blessings. It is marvelous to enjoy the wealth with which we are blessed. But that wealth becomes a curse when we are defined by it. That affluence becomes a strait jacket when we cannot see past it. Ki Tavo – when you come into that promised land remember who you are. It is the most dangerous moment for faith today in safe and successful America because we may forget who we are and allow ourselves to become only what we own.

As we hear the Shofar blasts signaling Rosh Hashanah, let us be reminded that our lives do have meaning beyond what we acquire. We remember being in Exile, whether in the Desert 3000 years ago or the poverty and oppression from which we escaped 50-100 years ago. We are indeed fortunate and blessed, capable of using the blessings we have been granted to make the world a better place for our presence in it. This act of memory, this challenge for the future, enables us to enjoy as blessings our security and comfort.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

LESS TELEVISION, MORE SOULFUL LIVING

SEPTEMBER 6, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every Friday as Shabbat gets close, I do something radical. It is an act horrifying to young children and their parents alike. I go to the power switch that controls my cable access and I switch it off. For the next twenty five hours, my house is a television and internet free zone. Even my phone is turned off during that time. (I do keep my cell phone on in the event of Synagogue emergencies, though I leave it at home sitting on my dresser. I am greatly appreciative of how respectful the community is of my Shabbat time, calling me only in the event of a family emergency that cannot wait until after Shabbat.)

There is something marvelous and freeing about living in a media free zone once a week. It is amazing some of the things that happen instead. For one thing, we nearly always entertain on Friday night and always have a Shabbat meal together. There are no distractions of telephone ringing or children begging for computer time. The only distractions are good food and singing. We break bread together. We talk. We meet new people.

Saturday similarly frees us in all kinds of ways. Shabbat mornings are the most marvelous experience in my house. My kids generally get up around 7ish. I give them breakfast while Carol sleeps in. By 7:30 the kids are involved in some kind of pretend play back in their rooms. They play quietly together until its time to get ready for Synagogue. There is no lure to watch TV or play on the computer. Instead, they engage in unstructured play. My children are developing a genuine closeness. They draw support from one another and they like being together. If the television were more readily available, it would drain away some of that energy.

One of the customary Shabbat songs says that sleep on Shabbat is to be praised. I take this seriously and take a nap in the afternoon. Again, because there is no television or telephone calling me elsewhere, I study or read. I take a walk with the kids. They go out and play with one another or with friends. Each moment is enjoyed and activities are chosen thoughtfully. Instead of zoning out in front of the television as hours drift by without notice, I fall back on my own internal resources to create an enjoyable day.

I do watch television during the week. I certainly use the internet and the telephone. Shabbat, though, makes me reflective on how I let those technologies determine the type of person I am. I watch my kids sitting in front of the television and I see how seductive a medium it is. They are incredibly focused when watching TV. If someone speaks or asks a question the response is "Be quiet – I am trying to hear

the show!” Turning the television off once a week has made me thoughtful about limiting my own television habits the rest of the time.

I notice something similar with cell phones. A couple is having a romantic dinner together and the phone rings. It’s amazing to me how many people answer the call and then talk for a while. I see teenagers during breaks in programs texting their friends who are far away instead of building relationships with those right around them. People often make friends with those who live near them or share similar interests because they talk to them at school pick up or during a work break or outside their garage. Cell phones let us avoid those kinds of contacts and so we never develop the social contacts in our neighborhoods, schools, and places of work that used to occur in an organic way.

Shabbat is the time when I meet my neighbors – and learn that they are worth knowing the rest of the week.

Our modern technological age lets us be anywhere we want to be. We can talk to loved ones and friends thousands of miles away and we can transport ourselves to imaginative worlds filled with drama and adventure. Shabbat teaches me that technology never substitutes for human caring. Immediate community is as important as ever.

This Shabbat try turning off all the media technology that takes you somewhere else. Focus instead on the blessings you have at home. I suspect you will be amazed at what you find.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE FAST OF GEDALIAH AND RABIN

SEPTEMBER 11, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's been twelve years since the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The assassination by a Jew of the Prime Minister of Israel remains a horrible tragedy over a decade later. Unless it becomes a part of our ritual behavior we run the risk of forgetting this terrible moment in Jewish history.

The day after Rosh Hashanah, this year Sunday the 16th, is known as the Fast of Gedaliah. It is one of a series of minor fasts that commemorate tragedies connected with the Babylonian Exile. Unlike the other fasts which commemorate events leading up to the destruction of the Temple, this incident took place several years after the destruction of the First Temple.

According to the Bible in both II Kings 22 and Jeremiah 39-41, the Babylonians named Gedaliah, a Jewish man, as governor over Israel after the Temple's destruction. "And as for the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, over them he made Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, ruler. (II Kings 22:22)" Gedaliah told the people to "not be afraid." As long as they maintained a nominal allegiance to Babylon, they would remain free and under Jewish rule. Little of their day to day lives would change.

Among the men of importance at the time, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah refused to accept Gedaliah's rule. He probably accused Gedaliah of collaborating with the enemy. Ishmael almost certainly felt that Israel must remain free of Babylonian control. Gedaliah's leadership, in his eyes, served only to legitimate domination by a foreign power.

Ishmael misjudged the political reality of the time. Gedaliah was the only thing standing between Israel and the Babylonians. The Babylonians were willing to permit limited Home Rule. Any further revolt would result in the complete destruction of Israel.

"But it came to pass in the seventh month, that Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, of royal seed, came, and ten men with him, and struck Gedaliah, and he died, and the men of Judah and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah (II Kings 21:25)." According to the Rabbis, Ishmael was motivated only by his own lust for power. That is why the Bible mentions Ishmael was of royal blood. He thought he, rather than Gedaliah should have been the Governor. Whatever his reasons, Ishmael's actions were an unmitigated disaster. It ended any hope of political independence for the next hundred

years.

The fast of Gedaliah was instituted both to remember Gedaliah and to prevent similar tragedies. Jews remember history. Hopefully, we avoid repeating our mistakes. Gedaliah's tragic end teaches us the dangers of Jew killing Jew. Such tragedies serve only to weaken us, never to strengthen us.

In 1995, another Jew executed a political leader for virtually identical reasons. Yigal Amir believed that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was a traitor, in collaboration with Arafat against the best interests of the Jewish people. Prior to Rabin's assassination, Israel's Secret Service barely worried about the Prime Minister's security from other Jews. The memory of Gedaliah was too faint and it happened again.

Political differences are the life blood of democracy. A particular policy may create opposition, but political assassination weakens the fabric of democracy. We should always be passionate in our disagreements over peace – but we should also see in those disagreements a genuine love for Israel and for the Jewish people. Rabin's death was a tragedy because political disagreement became spilled blood. The passion to save Jewish lives took a Jewish life.

This year, I encourage all of us to observe Gedaliah's Fast in memory of both Gedaliah and Rabin. It is a sunrise to sunset fast, meaning the fast begins at 6:35am and ends at 7:41pm. Rabin's assassination was a grave tragedy that deserves being attached to ritual memory. God willing, by commemorating Rabin's loss in this liturgical fashion, the memory of his assassination will prevent another such tragedy for at least the next 2500 years.

Wishing You an Easy Fast & a Shana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

ONE MORE DAY

SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

If you had one day to live, what would you do? Most of us pretend that we would indulge some life long desire, or engage in some favorite activity. Yet to do so implies that our lives mean nothing beyond our immediate experience. With only one day left to live, would I spend it sky diving or getting drunk?

Yom Kippur by contrast issues a challenge to us. If you had only one day left to live, spend it repairing broken relationships and reaching out to God. Take the time to meditate on your values and feel the genuine regret of mistakes. It is a day to put ourselves right with God because there may not be another day.

Yom Kippur creates an atmosphere of mortality. Its restrictions and practices remind us of the limited time we are granted on Earth as an inspiration to use that time more fully. Even our clothes reflect the somber mood of Yom Kippur. It is customary to wear white garments on Yom Kippur. Isaiah says that God's forgiveness means our sins will become "white like the driven snow." The white clothing moves us away from the vanity of our dress and towards our desire to be cleansed.

Some, myself included, go so far as to wear a kittel, a white robe, at Yom Kippur. I wore a kittel at my wedding; and I will wear it again in the grave. It is as if I am having a dress rehearsal for my own funeral.

Where Judaism generally encourages us to enjoy the physical, on Yom Kippur we turn away from the needs of our body and focus only on the needs of the spirit. It is as if we are reflecting back on our lives, liberated from the physical side of ourselves. "And this shall be a statute forever to you; that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger who sojourns among you;" Lev. 16:29. These afflictions commanded by the Bible direct us away from the material and back towards God. There are five specific afflictions of Yom Kippur.

1. We are commanded to fast. Food, particularly for Jews, brings us together as a joyful community. The Kol Emeth Shabbat Kiddush is marvelous in its ability to create community around a shared meal. Passover seders have the same quality. These meals build community and give us the Oneg, the joy, of Shabbat. We remove that comfort on Yom Kippur. It helps us focus on our own need to change. Fasting means to refrain from eating and drinking.

2. We afflict ourselves by not wearing leather. Originally a commandment to refrain from wearing shoes, our Rabbis gradually permitted shoes not made of leather. It removes another source of physical comfort because leather shoes are generally more comfortable. By refraining from wearing leather on Yom Kippur, we also avoid benefiting from the death of another creature. Generally, human needs take precedence over animal needs for Judaism. On Yom Kippur, when we plead with God out of humility, we deny ourselves this precedence. For this reason, I generally wear canvas shoes on Yom Kippur.
3. Anointing is also forbidden on Yom Kippur. This restricts the use of make-up, perfume, or after shave. Such beauty aids, while generally permissible, are tied to our vanity. Proverbs teaches us, “beauty is vanity;” at Yom Kippur we set aside our vanity for one day.
4. Jewelry is not worn on Yom Kippur for the same reasons that we do not anoint. For this reason, I remove my wedding band before Kol Nidre.
5. Physical intimacy between a husband and wife is forbidden on Yom Kippur. Such intimacy is the greatest source of comfort and pleasure humans can have. Our Rabbis praise it enthusiastically. On Yom Kippur, however, it is a focus away from the somber, solemn themes of the day.

All of these symbolic practices exist to inspire us to change. Once a year and only once a year we turn away from the material and turn towards God. We remind ourselves of how limited our lives are to inspire change in us immediately. This day helps us put the rest of our days into perspective. Then the balance of our lives is restored.

May we all be sealed in the book of life for goodness, blessings, health, and prosperity.

Shabbat Shalom & an easy Fast,

Rabbi David Booth

COME TO SUKKOT!

SEPTEMBER 26, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I found myself amazed as the Sanctuary continued to fill for Neilah. We started the afternoon service with a decent sized crowd taking many of the seats in the front of the Beth Am Sanctuary. From the moment we began reading the Torah, the room just kept filling up. People were streaming in by the dozens, by the hundreds, to join together as a community. We were pulled together by the power of community. By the end, every seat was filled. We literally stood together as a community in the presence of God, seeking to set ourselves right with the Holy One. It was marvelous beyond words.

The next day I woke up, feeling tired but inspired and motivated. My family and I spent the morning relaxing together and watching a movie. In the afternoon, we had some friends over and decorated our Sukkah. It was a nice counterpoint to the solemnity and intensity of Yom Kippur. It was good to be outside, for one thing. Yom Kippur is very Synagogue focused – I was happy to have a spiritual outlet in my backyard.

It was fun, too. The kids enjoyed putting up the decorations, including some painted pine cones and some blue and white lights. It's my job to put up the lights because I am the tallest. Who knew I would have to untangle lights as a nice Jewish boy? We finished and enjoyed the sunset, having dinner out in our soon to be a Sukkah.

Sukkot makes a wonderful bookend to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The serious quality of Yom Kippur gives way to the joy of Sukkot. The solemnity and intricacy of prayer gives way to movement and rejoicing in God's creation. Sukkot rituals make us active and take us outdoors. Whether dwelling in the Sukkah itself or shaking the Lulav (palm) during services, Sukkot is all about being with God now that we have restored our relationship on Yom Kippur.

All day Yom Kippur I find myself being challenged by the prayerbook to become better, to turn back towards the holy image of God planted within me. It's a hard day. Sukkot by contrast, is all about enjoying that sense of spiritual connection and feeling it well out of community and the natural world. This is why God commands us to have another festival only four days after Yom Kippur.

Every year, the room fills up for Yom Kippur. Maybe this is the year to let the room fill up for Sukkot as well. I want to celebrate with the same community that shared a day of change and growth together. I

want the chance of Sukkot to make new connections between people that helps deepen sacred community.

We all took time off work and school for Rosh Hashanah. I want to invite people to consider taking time off for Sukkot as well. The first day of Sukkot falls on Thursday the 27th with services beginning at 9:15 at Kol Emeth. We will shake the lulav and etrog for the first time this year with plenty of extras for those who don't have. Everyone, adults and children, will have an opportunity to shake and dance with a lulav. Then we will make Kiddush out in the Kol Emeth Sukkah – enjoying a special time together as community.

After Neilah, everyone rushes home to break fast, as well they should. Let's rush back now on Thursday to reconnect with our community and to enjoy the opportunity to dwell joyously in God's presence.

Happy Sukkot!

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah next week in celebration of Sukkot.

NORMAL LIVING

OCTOBER 11, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's good to get back to a normal routine. I love the intensity of the Jewish fall Holy Days, with their call to holy living and celebratory time, but I also enjoy the rhythm of my day to day life. The elevated living of Tishrei, the month of festivals, creates a consciousness within us of what a holy life can really be. Now it's time to bring that new awareness in our day to day rhythms.

Noah was a righteous man in his generations. The Midrash are quick to notice this limit on Noah's righteousness. Only in his generations, they ask? How would Noah have compared to Abraham? Some say his was the harder job, to rise above a wicked community, while others say he managed to look righteous only in his generation. Next to Abraham, Noah would never have been noticed.

Noah's main failing – or more aptly, his failure to rise to true greatness – is his own self-involvement. God tells him of the plan to flood the whole Earth. Noah builds the Ark, but never argues with God about this violent plan of destruction. By contrast, Abraham, upon hearing of the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, argues with God first.

C.S. Lewis, in his book [The Problem of Pain](#), makes a similar point when talking about human failings. All of us, he says, have lived in communities where certain bad or immoral behaviors were normal for that community. And so we felt that such behaviors are of no real concern, for everyone is doing it. Then, when we find ourselves in another more moral context, we realize how clear it was that we should have behaved otherwise.

Perhaps, says Lewis, human society as a whole is like this. And the Prophets and people of renown, who rise to a high moral level, are merely the indicators to us of what a truly moral and healthy community of humans could and should be. They are the real standard.

Noah rises above his surroundings, something hard for any of us. He is a thoughtful, moral individual in a world filled with depravity. He is righteous for his surroundings. Abraham, by contrast, rises to the level of heaven, perhaps our true aspiration. He is the example of what could be.

We spend Tishrei celebrating, reminding ourselves of values and joy that help us rise to the level of heaven. Yom Kippur is all about choosing who I want to be, and making the choice to be a servant of God

striving to fill the Earth with goodness. Sukkot then teaches us of the joy that comes from life lived with meaning. To use C.S. Lewis' terms, it shows us the possibility of a community, of an awareness, that shows us what we can really be. People rise to the level of expectation. Tishrei shows us the marvel of how high that level can be.

I am pleased to get back into a routine. I want to carry with me that Tishrei consciousness. I see what is possible when surrounded by holy community and people joyously celebrating. Now is the time to become that person, living in my day to day world, joyously striving towards the level of heaven.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that in my continuing desire to learn about our community, I will be davening this Shabbat morning at Emek Berakhah.

HALAKHAH AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

OCTOBER 18, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last winter, the Conservative Movement did something that appeared contradictory. The Law Committee ruled that same sex relationships were permitted behavior within the bounds of Jewish Law and ruled that same sex relationships were prohibited under Jewish law. Both Rabbinic responsa passed with a majority of 13 votes for, 12 against. (One Rabbi voted in favor of both).

I feel it is time to begin studying this issue in depth. Disagreements of this nature can destroy communities when they become about personal aggrandizement and power. That is what the Rabbis call a disagreement not for the sake of heaven. By contrast, disagreements like this founded on respect and learning can enrich a community and make us better servants of God regardless of a particular process outcome.

As a result, Rabbi Graff and I are offering at Kol Emeth a class called Halakhah and Human Sexuality beginning tonight (Thursday) at 8pm. This 8 week class has two distinct purposes. First, the class will study the Halakhic process as understood in the Conservative movement. That will then allow us to read and understand the two key teshuvot that contradict one another. By seeing the process in its context, and seeing how Conservative Halakhic process works, we will understand how we found ourselves in this strange and seemingly contradictory place.

The second goal is to serve as the first step in determining some key issues here at Kol Emeth. Kol Emeth already counts same sex couples as family units, and already provides a spiritual home for many such couples as a welcoming environment. The issues for discussion are blessing a couple on the Bimah before a same sex union and renting our facility for use for same sex ceremonies. Related, we are trying to find ways of honoring the pluralistic nature of Kol Emeth (many of us have different practices and customs even in how we approach a service) while still maintaining a sense of being one community. Maybe we can find some opportunities, as we do in other matters, for living in a pluralistic fashion at Kol Emeth much as the movement as a whole is doing.

Over the course of the sessions, I will send out weekly summaries. Depending on the topic, they may will be in addition to or in place of CyberTorah. Rabbi Graff will write some of those summaries. I will headline them Halakhah and Human Sexuality so you will immediately know the content. For those present, it will be a good refresher of what happened. For others, it will provide the basis for a common

language of discourse and an overview of some of the key issues involved. I also hope the nature of email will encourage people to respond directly to me about questions and personal concerns as the class unfolds. Comments of people beyond Kol Emeth are also greatly appreciated, to help give perspective as this process unfolds.

Learning is the basis of Judaism; Torah survives amid engagement and mutual respect. If we learn together first, if we listen and organize our thoughts before speaking, the final process can be a healthy one of learning and growth for Kol Emeth that becomes a model for other communities of how we can address this topic in a healthy way.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT DOES MITZVAH MEAN?

OCTOBER 25, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the next few weeks, as I am teaching my class on Halakhah and Human sexuality, I will sometimes send out special editions of CyberTorah that will review the class. This week, I felt the class topic was sufficiently basic to Jewish living that I wanted to send it out as CyberTorah. The question we explored was the meaning of Mitzvah.

Mitzvah comes from the Hebrew root Tzviu, which has two related meanings. One is command. From this perspective, Mitzvah means commandment. It is law. Isaiah Leibowitz, the great Orthodox political thinker, understands Mitzvah this way. He says that Mitzvah has nothing to do with human fulfillment or moral needs of the day. It is all about fulfilling God's commandment. We set aside our particular concerns and the morality of the day in the interest of heeding the Divine Will.

The Hebrew root of Mitzvah also means togetherness, bound together. So it may mean: communal norm, the sense of a community coming together around a certain practice. Heschel understands Mitzvah this way. For Heschel, one of the great Conservative theologians of the last generation, Mitzvah is the act which brings God and humanity together. There is an inherent holiness in a true mitzvah and God is as much obligated by the ethical thrust of mitzvah as is humanity.

Heschel's theology opens up a question considered by earlier Hasidic teachers and by the Talmud which Leibowitz precludes. What do we do when a specific mitzvah appears to differ with our understanding of God's will? Are there situations when specific commandments can be obviated either to preserve the whole system or to serve God more truly?

Maimonides does consider this possibility and ultimately rejects it. In his introduction to the Mishneh Torah, he notes that some people will be ill suited to the observance of a life of mitzvah. However, the necessity of communal norms means that such people are condemned to a miserable life.

Two 19th century Hasidic Rebbes suggest a different answer. Rabbi Tzadek HaCohen (1832-1900), in the Takkanat Hashavin, comments on the story of Yael to explain the Talmudic notion of "sinning for the sake of heaven." Sisera, a wicked non-Jewish general, comes to Yael's tent and begs for sanctuary from her. She invites him in, and then, according to the Midrash, seduces him. Sisera falls asleep, and Yael kills him. Rabbi Tzadek says the following:

From love one can come into the same state as Yael, to commit a sin for the sake of heaven Yael, from her great love and desire to save Israel, and to totally destroy this enemy from the world, looked not upon the sin and the impurity she would take as the Talmud teaches, "This was terrible for her." She thought, even if I receive punishment for this and am destroyed from the world, at least I will take this enemy of Israel with me.

In other words, a purity of heart can induce a faithful spirit to violate a specific mitzvah to serve a higher purpose of holiness, such as saving the people of Israel.

Mei HaShiloach (1804-1854), Rabbi Yosef Leiner, takes this notion one step further and gives us a path by which we might see a specific forbidden act as being God's will:

There are ten steps to inappropriate behavior. First, a person dresses up and intentionally does something wrong because his impulse overpowers him. Yet there are nine steps that follow, and ...until he arrives at the tenth step. That step is to be so removed from his urges, guarding himself from sin with all his strength until he can resist no longer, at this point when his urge overpowers him it is surely the will of God.

Mei HaShiloach seems to be saying that a person who truly wrestles with conscience, struggling to put aside what seems to be an inappropriate desire, may ultimately act on that desire. This isn't an Halakhic text- he isn't telling us how or when to make such antinomian decisions – but again he opens up the possibility that there can be a difference between God's will and a specific mitzvah. That gap may require us to privilege a subjective sense of God's will.

I see two ways of viewing Mitzvah. The first is positivistic. In this view, articulated by Rabbi Roth and others, there are right and wrong answers. Jewish law is a mathematical process with a range of possibilities but clear limits. Mitzvah and God's will are identical for the positivist. The positivist neither approves nor disapproves of a particular ruling. It is simply what is allowed within the system. A divergence of practice reflects a range of possible right answers.

Second is this Hasidic viewpoint in which God's will and Mitzvah may diverge, at which point God's will takes precedence. Mitzvah is a human effort to understand God's will through communal norms and so subject to divergence away from God's will. Courageous Jewish law that takes this seriously will be open to change, attempting always to keep God's will and the demands of Mitzvah living as close together as possible.

The posek, the person deciding Jewish law for a community, wrestles with a sense of mitzvah and of God's will. Certain sources become relevant and others less significant based on an internal struggle informed by Jewish learning to articulate God's will for a community. For this stance to be legitimate, the posek moves beyond personal preference into a complex realm where individual experience and text meet.

I am curious to know your reactions. How does this match up with your own personal decisions, and with what you expect from a community? I look forward to a fruitful conversation on the nature of Mitzvah.

Rabbi David Booth

TIME FOR PRAYER

NOVEMBER 1, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are a people of stories. Logic and reason are a deep part of who we are, but our dearest practices arise out of narrative. We tell stories in order to learn who we are.

The rhythm of daily prayer is embedded in the Biblical narrative. Each service comes from a particular narrative context of one of our ancestors. The story of the prayer becomes an inspiration and guide to spiritual experience. It instructs us in the splendor and multiplicity of connection to God.

Prayer begins with Abraham. He is the originator of Shaharit, the morning service. After Abraham argued with God to spare Sodom and Gemorrah, he went to sleep comforted that God was indeed righteous. God promised to save the cities if even ten righteous people could be located. That community of the righteous could not be found, and the cities were destroyed.

Torah teaches us that Abraham got up early that next morning and looked over the destruction. Midrash Rabbah says that Abraham got up early to pray. Overlooking destruction, the smoke rising from the cities of the plain, Abraham praised God for the sunrise. He opened up his heart and expressed all the sadness and regret over the destruction of those cities. He also accepted, though I doubt praised, God's justice. The morning is a time to be thoughtful, wrestling with deep questions even as we praise God's creation.

It is Isaac who gives Minchah, the afternoon service, to the Jewish people. One afternoon he is out in the fields, meditating. His heart is open to joy and contemplation. He also remembers his mother, Sarah, continuing to mourn her loss. He is focused, in place, receptive.

It is in such a state of mind that he lifts up his eyes and sees love and comfort. He sees Rebecca coming to be his wife. The moment when their eyes meet is powerful, so much so that Rebecca falls to the ground. They support one another, and fall in love. "Isaac took Rebecca to be his wife. So Isaac was comforted for the loss of mother and loved her." The afternoon is a time of receptivity, of relationship, of growing together.

Maariv, the evening service, is founded on vulnerability. It is at night when we go to sleep, and return to our own internal landscapes, that we remember how alone we are in this world. I have friends,

companions, those I love. Yet ultimately – I am alone.

So Jacob first prays while alone. He has left his home, his family. For the first time in his life, there is no one there to hold his hand, to tell him what to do next. So he lays his head on a rock that he is using for a pillow and prays. In his loneliness, he reaches out to God, and God responds. He awakens to say, “God was in this place, and I did not know it.” At Maariv we confront our own mortality and reach out to find God even in the empty places.

Each time we pray, we pray to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. We repeat God’s name three times as if to say: there is so much for us to learn from each of our ancestors. Their lives instruct us, and teach us different times but also different ways of reaching out to God. This then invites us to see prayer as an opportunity to tell our own stories, to express the deepest yearnings of our own hearts. When we so express ourselves, we offer a prayer worthy of God’s attention.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE ACTS OF OUR PARENTS

NOVEMBER 8, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

One of the most disturbing incidents in the Bible occurs in Genesis 26. As a result of a famine in Israel, Isaac and his household go to the land of Gerar. Upon arriving there, Isaac lies to the King and claims that his wife Rebecca is actually his sister. According to Rashi, he lies because he is afraid that there is no “fear of heaven” or piety in Gerar. Isaac worries that someone will kill him and take Rebecca if they think she is his wife.

This story, disturbing on its own terms, becomes even more upsetting when we remember Abraham behaving identically a generation previously. In Genesis 12, as they travel to Egypt because of famine, Abraham says to Sarah, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you and think, ‘she is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister that it may go well with me because of you.” Under identical pressure, father and son both are willing to lie and even prostitute their wives to stay alive.

The Rabbis ask: why do we learn all the details of Abraham’s journeys? Because the acts of our ancestors are a sign to the children. That is, the acts of our ancestors and parents foreshadow our own behavior. Generally, we view this as positive. Abraham’s journeys and actions foreshadow our own spiritual potential and act as a guide to us on our own journeys. Yet as this story illustrates, sometimes that parental example leads us in a destructive path.

Children study their parents to learn how to be human. Before we even become conscious we are learning from the example, from the model of our parent’s behavior. This influences us in our choice of friends and partners, how we treat others, and even how we view ourselves.

When I meet with couples before they get married, I ask them to talk about the example of their parents. I want to know how they expressed affection to one another and what disagreements looked like in their home growing up. I also ask how their parents showed affection to them and what disapproval looked like. People’s observations of their own upbringing tend to be insightful. There may be elements of their upbringing they found harmful, and other elements that they genuinely appreciated.

I then ask them to describe how they express affection and disapproval to one another. It’s interesting how often those dynamics, even those that the person consciously disliked in his or her parents, are

replicated in the current relationship. We learn how to be human from our parents and their example. The acts of our ancestors become a sign to us as their children. It's hard for us to act differently from our parents even when we would prefer to act otherwise.

Torah offers us hope precisely by telling us this duplicate story, allowing us to learn from the example of Abraham and Isaac. In both stories, once the ruse is discovered, Pharoah and Avimelekh, the kings in each story, seek only friendship. Torah shows us the longer view – that they could have behaved otherwise. Isaac is afraid piety is lacking in Gerar when it is only really lacking in him.

And we see Abraham and Isaac transcending their learned model at other points in their lives. Abraham goes forth, leaving the house of his father. He is able break free of the limits of the past and chart forth new spiritual territories. Similarly, where Abraham in his fear of famine leaves Israel, Isaac remains. Rashi tells us that Isaac's greatest merit is that he never left the land of Israel. He retained faith in God's blessing even in the midst of famine.

The learned example of our youth is deeply impressed on our souls. Yet Torah teaches us that we can choose who we are and who we will become. Trust in God enables us to choose the positive in our learned patterning and to reject the negative. It is a life long project, but God's redemptive power means that hope exists.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 15, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I really enjoy Thanksgiving. Unlike Christmas or even Halloween, Thanksgiving is a purely American holiday. It is a chance, along with our entire nation, to celebrate the many blessings God has granted us. The U.S remains a beacon of freedom throughout the world. Our blessings of prosperity and happiness are a shining light to the whole world.

Thanksgiving is both patriotic and religious. I believe God blesses us when we strive to do God's will by adding to the holiness in the world. The United States, warts and all, has contributed more to freedom and prosperity than any other nation. Further, this country is a unique experiment. We are the only place in the world where so many races religion and creeds peacefully coexist to create a greater whole. That dynamic strength is the greatest hope for peace in the world that exists today.

Further, we live in a time and place of comfort. Our tables will be full this year and that in itself is a great blessing. It's easy to allow the greater problems in the world to overshadow how fortunate we are. We need to work on those larger concerns, but also to recognize and notice our own blessings.

As we celebrate our blessings this year, we ought to explicitly thank God for both the food granted us and the blessings bestowed upon the United States. First, I invite everyone to minyan as a great way to start the day. We will meet at 8am Thursday morning and conclude with a light breakfast. Second, I encourage people to begin their Thanksgiving meal by blessing the bread and to conclude the meal with Birkat HaMazon.

Birkhat HaMazon, the Grace After Meals, touches upon four themes with a blessing for each theme. First, we praise God for providing for the needs not only of humanity but of all creation. We say "Barukh atah Adonai, Hazan et Ha-Kol, praised are You God for providing sustenance to all."

Second, we praise God for providing us, His people, with Torah and commandments. That is, we praise God for reminding us of the importance of injecting holiness into our everyday lives. We conclude this section by praising God for giving us the Land of Israel by saying, "Barukh Atah Adonai, al Ha-aratz v'al Hamazon," praised are You God for the Land and for the Food (which we have just eaten).

Third, we praise God for allowing us to witness the reconstruction of Jerusalem with the hope that the

peace and security of Israel will be seen in our lifetime. Barukh Atah Adonai, praised are You God, Bonei Birkhamov Yerushalyim amen. Who in mercy rebuilds Jerusalem.

Fourth, we acknowledge a fundamental difference between our God and other notions of a Creator. Our God is good and does good – God acts in partnership with us. God strives to help us transcend ourselves. This blessing is incomplete because we are still in a process of finding meaning and holiness in our lives as we strive for human perfection. We begin the blessing Barukh Atah Adonai, praised are you God, Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, Our God who is the King of all the Creation, who hativ, who mativ who yativ lanu, who has caused, does cause and will cause goodness in the world.

Finally, we sing Oseh Shalom – praising God who has given order and peace into the world. With the threat of terror felt so strongly in Israel and throughout the world, we sincerely hope for a real peace.

This Thanksgiving we will be blessed with sustenance. Let us take a few moments to praise God who has granted us that wealth and also, in partnership, has taught us a way of holiness to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us. This Thanksgiving, let us give thanks to the One who Spoke, and Created All.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving

Rabbi David Booth

OBADIAH

NOVEMBER 29, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Certain Biblical teachings resonate with me. When I hear Torah saying, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” I am inspired. When Torah says, “Be Holy for I am Holy,” I am challenged. As Torah delineates the rules for Shabbat or Kashrut, I am motivated to observe. By contrast, I find myself struggling to make meaning of other texts.

The Haftorah we read this past Shabbat is one such text. Obadiah the Prophets says, among other things, “Thus said my Lord God concerning Edom, ‘I will make you least among nations, you shall be most despised (Ob. 1:2).’” The reading continues in a violent and bloodthirsty fashion, including, “Your warriors shall lose heart, O Teman, and not a man on Esau’s mount shall survive the slaughter.”

I find a text like this troubling because I believe in a God of love who cares for all of Creation. The Ashrei tells us that God, “Opens Your hand and provides for all living things.” Surely such a God cares about Edomites and Israelites. How can this God be calling for such violent destruction?

One answer comes from the famous Midrash about the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. Midrash Tanhuma tells the following story. As the Israelites were leaving Egypt, crossing over the split Sea, they sang to God. On high, the angels also rejoiced. God then castigated the angels, saying to them, “These also are my children.”

God castigates the angels, but not the Israelites. After centuries of slavery, God allows the Israelites to celebrate their freedom even though that freedom included loss of human life. God has compassion on humanity, and understands that we rejoice in our own successes, in our own moments of joy, in our own victories, even when those victories come at someone else’s cost.

So perhaps Obadiah, seeing the rise of Edom, and its violence towards Israel, truly wishes for destruction. He cannot rise above his own anger at the historical situation in which he finds himself, and so his own experience informs the prophetic language. As Heschel teaches us, the Prophet stands as a filter between God and humanity. The language of the Prophets is divinely inspired but expressed through a human lens. Obadiah’s filter includes language that seems more hateful than fateful, more violent than predictive. In this case, the Prophet’s moment colors God’s word.

Another answer comes from the placement of this Haftorah a few weeks prior to Hanukkah. Obadiah's prophecy comes true in the time of the Maccabees. They are successful in conquering Edom and dominating it. Many sources even suggest they went so far as to force conversions of the Edomites to Judaism. By the time the Romans conquer Israel, Edom has become a largely Jewish place.

The most famous Edomite Jew is Herod, who held Israel on behalf of the Romans. A violent dictatorial King who killed his own family out of paranoia, Herod is a cautionary tale against forced conversion. He became a Jewish King only because of the forced conversions of the Edomites. It is his actions that in part enable Roman domination and ultimately lead to the destruction of the Temple which he built. When the legitimate anger of a moment becomes real violence, the results are often catastrophic and indeed were for the Jewish people.

My favorite verse in Obadiah reads, "On that day when you stood aloof, and foreigners carried off his (Israel's) goods." To turn away when another suffers, to have the ability to save a life and do nothing, is to inevitably suffer that same indifference from others. Edom's end is an outcome of their own indifference – and their example warns us into the future. In this verse I hear the sound of the living God.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WAITING FOR THE PUNCH LINE

DECEMBER 6, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I kept waiting for the punch line. The Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and President Bush all meet for a peace conference. They invite other Arab leaders to join them, including Syria. They talk back and forth, they all agree that peace would be really nice, and then they promise to talk again sometime in the future.

The timing of this meeting brings out the cynic in me. Olmert and Bush both find themselves with approval ratings at historic lows with little prospect of recovery in the short term. Abbas is watching the Palestinian Authority disintegrate into two separate sections, one Hamas led in Gaza, and the other Fatah led in the West Bank. Should there ever be a real Middle East peace deal, all three leaders have now positioned themselves to receive some of the credit. None of them have the political strength at home to do anything of significance. That's what makes the conference seem like the set up for a joke on late night television.

Yet peace will never happen unless we try. Meyer Scher, one of the founders of Kol Emeth, died a couple of weeks ago. As his family eulogized him, one comment in particular struck me. Meyer was a lawyer and consummate negotiator. He believed in always keeping the other guy talking. As long as we are talking, something good may yet come from it. Put another way, it is not given to us to finish the work, but neither may we desist from trying.

Zechariah tells us every year at Hanukkah that success comes "not by might, not by power, but by God's spirit alone." God is speaking to the people as they struggle to rebuild the state of Israel, surrounded by enemies. Military strength keeps the effort alive, but success comes from faith. For the real goal is the rebuilding of the structures of God, such that they will be called, "beautiful, beautiful."

We find ourselves in a similar moment. Military power isn't the key to victory. In Zechariah's time we lacked military power, today we possess it. The Israeli Defense Forces are the regional super power. Yet we don't know how or where to apply that power. Military power keeps Israel secure, but cannot bring peace.

The terrorists among the Palestinians want to win this conflict by might. They will fail, again and again. They will take lives senselessly and in so doing hurt their own cause more than they damage Israel. We

see the Palestinians reaping this whirlwind as Palestinian civil society is in free fall collapse. Not by power, not by might, but by God's spirit alone.

So I set aside the cynic in me and focus myself on what I believe. I believe that Israel is strong and secure and will remain so into the future. Israel will continue to protect its people and do everything it can to maintain security. I also believe that to pursue peace, even in the face of seeming hopelessness, is a praiseworthy act. We must keep talking, keep waiting, keep hoping for peace, for a day when Jew and Palestinian will sit under their orange tree together as they reap the first fruits of a new era.

We pray for the day when the wishes, prayers, and efforts of people of good will see this process emerge from comedy into reality. As we celebrate Hanukkah this year, the festival of light at the time of greatest darkness, let us pray for peace in the Middle East, a peace that can emerge precisely at this time of least hope.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Hanukkah

Rabbi David Booth

A NOVEL IN FORM

DECEMBER 13, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a unique quality to the Joseph story. Most other Biblical accounts are vignettes of different people's lives showing their response of faith to particular challenges. The Joseph story by contrast has a consistent theme and narrative that carries through the whole cycle, making it a key precursor to the modern novel.

That consistent theme allows us as readers to see a process of spiritual growth across an entire life. We first see Joseph as a 17 year old, filled with the brash arrogance of youth. He is then pushed into the pit by his own brothers and sold into slavery. O how the mighty have fallen! Brought down to Egypt, he is purchased by Potiphar, a man of esteem and power in Pharaoh's court.

Joseph rises again, to run Potiphar's household in Egypt. Again we see his arrogance, now as a man in his 20s. He preens in front of the mirror, noticing how attractive he is in the first flush of manhood. Mrs. Potiphar notices as well and tries to seduce him. Now we see Joseph the righteous emerging from the crucible of youth and despair as he rejects her advance. The theme repeats – Joseph is thrown into the pit again, this time Egyptian prison.

When he emerges the third time, it is as a man humbled, a man who has attained spiritual maturity. When Pharaoh asks Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph tells Pharaoh that interpretive power comes only from God. He has kept faith for two years in prison and has learned that God is in the pit and in the heights. Pharaoh sees Joseph's maturity, his strength of self and confidence of faith. As a result, he appoints him Viceroy. Having watched his growth as readers, we see that Joseph is eminently qualified for the job.

He is also ready to be the spiritual leader of his family. When the brothers arrive it is Joseph who provides for them and Joseph's sons who are blessed by Jacob. The Bible tells us the story of man who rises to material and spiritual greatness as an example of the value of spiritual maturity. It is as much a story of Joseph as a story of who we can be.

Spiritual maturity means something unique for each person. It is a notion that I am still struggling to understand, though I do have some preliminary thoughts. Spiritual maturity includes a strong sense of faith coupled with an understanding that life narratives include ups as well as downs. Like the author of

Mishnah Berkahot, who tells us to bless the good just as we bless the bad, the spiritually mature person sees that both the ups and the downs come from God.

I believe the spiritually mature person also possesses self knowledge. Such a person no longer craves power but instead is passionate in the pursuit of good. Choices become value driven and informed by faith and practice. For me, the quest for spiritual maturity has included observance because Jewish practice has given me a path that guides me towards a more full understanding of my self, my responsibilities to others, and my faith.

This year I have opened a new chapter in my Rabbinate by inviting people to spend an hour with me assessing their spiritual health. This idea was suggest to me by Rabbi Adam Kligfield. There is only so far a person can grow spiritually without outside input. Joseph is the interpreter of dreams – he suggests the need for someone to listen to our stories and help us to see the narrative contained within. We all need someone to hear our stories, to listen to our experiences and fears, and help us towards the next step.

I want to again invite you to make an appointment with me for an annual Spiritual. We will talk about what you find meaningful, what values you are passionate about, and what might be missing in your life. In some cases, the session has been to listen and get to know one another better. In other cases, we have together looked for a “prescription” – a suggested next step in spiritual practice.

You can either call the office to make an appointment or call or email me directly. I look forward to this chance to get to know your stories better. As we share our stories, and together look for their meaning, we can be inspired by the example of Joseph that we too can grow and mature.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ISRAEL STILL LIVES!

DECEMBER 20, 2007

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sunday I had the privilege of attending my second AIPAC dinner. It is a great event in support of Israel, with over 1200 attendees, 300 of whom had never attended the dinner before. Every Synagogue, school, and organization was represented. It is marvelous to see how much our love of Israel can bring us together as a community.

The speaker was Rabbi Daniel Gordis, a senior fellow at the Shalem Institute in Jerusalem. The Shalem Institute is a scholarly center dedicated to the study of traditional Jewish sources for the purpose of motivating, inspiring, and guiding the state of Israel today. He is a noted scholar and writer in the Conservative movement. He shared a number of stories, two of which touched me.

He first told a story of Israel's past. A couple of years ago, he was in the little shul he attends on a festival. The shul had been founded in 1946 and many of the same people continued to be its regular attendees, including one older gentleman named Ziggy. It was right before Yizkor. Yizkor is recited by those who have lost a parent, child, spouse, or sibling. Some have the custom of leaving during Yizkor if they themselves have no reason to recite it. However, Rabbi Gordis' father had always told him to stay in the Synagogue for Yizkor because so many had perished in the Holocaust.

Yet here, following the communal custom, Rabbi Gordis began to walk out during Yizkor since he himself had no reason to say Yizkor. As he proceeded to walk out with many other members, Ziggy grabbed his arm. He said, "Are you going out?" Rabbi Gordis froze, thinking, "Dad?" Ziggy then pointed outside and said, "When the state was first founded, there was no one to go outside because we all had lost family in the Holocaust. Then there was a war, and more people stayed. And another war, and another war. Now, in spite of everything, there are people to go outside. This state is a miracle."

It's a miracle to live in 2007 in the state of Israel and realize that people are just as likely to have their son or daughter or father or mother or sister or brother alive as anywhere else in the world. It's a miracle, said Rabbi Gordis, when you think back to 1946. In 1946, we were finished. Europe was destroyed, the American Jewish community nothing compared to what it is today. Britain was blockading the Holy Land. We were finished. And today – Israel is a miracle.

The second story he told was of Israel today and the nature of the miracle. The Holocaust, sadly, is only

one story of genocide. Darfur is the next chapter in man's inhumanity to man. Recently, two people from Darfur walked from Sudan, through Egypt, and snuck into Israel at 2am through a tunnel being guarded by IDF soldiers.

They took the two men into custody, which meant they gave them warm blankets and fed them soup. In the morning, the commanding officer contacted other authorities, and the two Darfuris were put in jail briefly before being released and coming to work in a Moshav (a rural community) outside of Jerusalem.

Feeling a little bad about how this had been handled, Rabbi Gordis asked them how the jail had been. The man replied, "Yes, very good." Rabbi Gordis, unsure if the man had understood his question, said, "How was the jail? Where they locked you up?" "Yes- very good. They fed us and the guards were very kind to us." I am astounded to live in a world where an Israeli jail becomes a haven and place of hope.

Ziggy and the Darfuris illustrate what Israel is. Israel is a miracle. It's a miracle that we as a people are alive and thriving. This vibrant Jewish world in which we live exists directly because of the State of Israel. At the same time, Israel is a haven, a beacon of hope to Jews and Non-Jews. Darfuris are making their way to Israel, seeking to escape genocide, because they know the story of Exodus. They turn to Israel, hoping to find their own story of hope and redemption.

We must all continue to find ways of supporting Israel. We must go there, we must support those causes we find essential to preserving and sustaining this place of hope, this miracle of our own day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

If you would like to receive CyberTorah, please click on the "subscribe" link on this page. Also, please note that I will be away on vacation beginning on Tuesday and returning to the office on the 2nd. However, in that time, I will be here for Shabbat, both Friday night and Saturday morning. Have a Happy New Year!

A GOOD NEW YEAR

JANUARY 3, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When my son was first born, Carol and I had an argument (which I won) about good versus happy. Carol maintained that the primary goal of us as parents was to help our children be happy. I maintained, by contrast, that our primary goal is to help our children be good. It's a subtle difference, but meaningful. I would rather my children put aside a moment of happiness in the service of helping a person in need. I would hope that my children would first dedicate themselves to making their communities better places and allow happiness to be an outcome.

Put another way, if happiness is a goal, I worry that it becomes self serving. My own private pursuit of happiness leaves me self absorbed and always looking over my shoulder for how I could be happier. Therefore, I perversely end up unhappy. By contrast, when I am dedicated to bringing goodness into the world, happiness becomes an outcome. This is why the Mishnah teaches, "Who is rich? Someone happy with their portion."

Victor Frankl, the father of Logotherapy and a holocaust survivor, points out that the one effective way of helping people deal with their neuroses is to find a meaningful purpose in their lives. That is, when they are worried about their fulfillment they may find themselves victim to neurotic behaviors and depression. Often dedicating themselves to a higher pursuit of good helps eliminate those troubling symptoms and behaviors.

A few days ago, we were wishing one another a Happy New Year. But a few months ago, we wishing one another a Shana Tova, a Good New Year. So I will say, I certainly hope you have a year of happiness. I too want to be happy and content with my lot in life. More significantly, though, I wish you a year of goodness, filled with the opportunity both to share goodness with others and to experience goodness yourself.

For then we are partners with God, who does good and is good.

A good year to all & Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE MONTH OF SHVAT

JANUARY 10, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I wake up and it's dark. This time of year I feel surrounded by darkness morning and evening. As I walk outside to leave for the day it remains overcast and dark even as it becomes 7am, 8am. Later in the day, I find myself sitting in my living room, hoping for sunlight stream in through my window. It is the last of Tevet, the day before the month of Shvat begins. It's 4pm, and already the sun is thinking about setting, already I need to turn on the lights. God creates light and dark. This is the time of year for dark. It is a dark that can be felt and experienced.

Winter is a time for quiet thoughts, deep in the sap of my soul. The trees take their time. They sit in silence, gathering strength, getting ready for new growth, getting ready to blossom. They reach out to God in the prayerful posture of their branches, and are given new energy from the heavens in the form of rain and sunlight.

The buds are just beginning to grow. The sap in the trees, slowed, now begins to flow creating the merest hint of new life even in the tree outside my bedroom window. A branch had fallen in the storm. For a few days, I saw just the merest hint of darkness in that ring of what had been the life of the tree. Suddenly, I see sap welling forth, thick and coagulated, life blood of the tree.

All of a sudden, the tree smells alive. I watch as I look out my window on Shabbat morning the new life emerging from within this sleeping tree. It now has green buds pregnant with blossoms ready to emerge into the sunlight. And I feel that winter might lose its hold on the earth, that light may yet return to awaken the world anew for Spring.

A walk to shul in the rain and cold. Tree branches blown down by the ferocity of the storm, leaves and debris everywhere I walk. I wear my boots for only the second time since I have returned to Palo Alto. And as I walk I see this little tree, no higher than my shoulder. It has no leaves. Like everything else around it, there is no sign of life in this tree. And yet, as I get closer, I see three blossoms, white tinged with the merest hint of pink. And in my hat and coat and boots I smile.

Later that morning I will say, How marvelous are your works, God, everything You have made is created in wisdom. It comes from the Psalm for the New Month, and it is the first few words of Shaharit, the morning prayer. We look around, seeing the cycles of death and rebirth, sleeping and wakening, and see

the wisdom of God's universe. When we are open to wonder, as Heschel demands of us, the passage of seasons testifies to God's majesty and wisdom.

It is the time of dark. We are just getting ready to think of emerging from our quiet thoughts into the world of holy action. I too need a time of dark, of gathering my strength as I look to see where my new blossoms will grow. I need the quiet reflective time to sit amid the trees, in their quiet, feeling the sap beginning to flow. Hearing the rain fall upon my roof. And in those moments I imagine my own spiritual energy, my own creativity and caring, being renewed and deepened.

May this new month of Shvat be a time of rebirth for us. May the rain falling on the Earth give strength to the natural world as life prepares, slowly, quietly, deep in the sap, to burst forth. May it also be a time where we, like the trees, feel our strength slowly growing, reading ourselves for new possibilities, for new blossoming in our spirits. Let us reach out to heaven for light and hope and find ourselves renewed..

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Shvat,

Rabbi David Booth

SHABBAT SHIRAH

JANUARY 17, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Music is what first drew me into Judaism. My first Friday night in college, much to my parent's surprise, I went to Friday night services and then began attending regularly. This was the first choice I made as a Jewish adult to be involved in a spiritual community. I enjoyed going to the services and praying and hearing some words of Torah. What really hooked me, though, were the dinners afterward.

For one thing, the food tended to be much better than what I was getting the rest of the week from food services. For another, the people who stayed for dinner were a marvelous group of people who became my community in college. This was a chance to check in with my friends. Most importantly, though, we would sing for quite a while after dinner.

We used the old UJA benchers that included traditional Shabbat songs as well as Jewish / Israeli folk songs. We would usually start with the traditional Shabbat songs, called zmirot and then work our way up to the folk and Israeli music. These zmirot date from the early middle ages and are written in a poetic style. Dror Yikra, one such song, is all about Shabbat rest as a promise of future freedom. Another song, Tzur Mishelo, channels our satisfaction in the Shabbat meal into thanksgiving to God.

In singing these traditional songs, I learned about joy transforming into gratitude. I learned of the hope for a better world, free from suffering and pain. I even learned a little Jewish humor. One song begins with the bounteous quality of the Shabbat meal, saying that we eat fatted duck and fish on Shabbat. Some of the vegetarians in the group rephrased it to say that we eat eggplant and other vegetables!

Other songs showed me how Jewish practice has evolved over the years. For example, one Shabbat song says that we should "light candles with a blessing." This reflects a disagreement at the time the song was composed. Everyone agreed we should light Shabbat candles, but some did so without saying a blessing. The song reflects the view of those Rabbis and communities who said a blessing over the candles.

After we had spent some time singing these traditional songs, we would begin singing other Jewish and Zionist songs. These included songs of Israel, like Jerusalem of Gold or Hafinjan. Those songs inspired my own love of and attachment to Israel.

We also sang Jewish folk songs like Mayim or Lo Yisa Goy. We would bang the table and sing and laugh and talk. There was always a divide between the people who wanted to bang the table and carry on and those who wanted to sing the beautiful songs. It was community expressed in song.

Singing is a direct line to our souls. When Carol and I got married, we sang and danced for hours, much of that time singing Jewish songs of joy like Yasis Aliyich, a prayer that God may find the same joy in us as a groom finds in his bride. We also sang Od Yishama. Od Yishama is prayer to hear no more the sounds of violence and death, but instead only “the voice of bridegroom and bride, the voices of young people in song.” And as we sang, we danced, and circled and shouted with joy.

This Shabbat is Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song. It commemorates the Israelites singing out in pure joy to Hashem as they crossed over the Sea of Reeds to freedom. It is a time for us to experience the richness of Jewish music as we sing out in joy. Song liberates the heart and gives voice to the soul. Let us sing to the Lord!

Shabbat Shirah Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

FIRST WORDS

JANUARY 24, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In my own journey of faith, and in having the marvelous opportunity to talk to others about their faith experiences, I am coming to realize that for our community the first words of God's revelation are the most challenging. This revelation, so often called the Ten Commandments, encapsulates God's message to the Jewish people and the world. It is more than commandments – it is 10 theological assertions about how the world works in a way that demands a spiritual and moral response. That is why Jews refer to it as the Ten Sayings.

That first saying asserts a great deal. God says, "I am the Lord Your God who brought you out of Egypt from the house of slavery." It asserts a God who exists and a God who cares. This God speaks to us as a people. In other words, this God cares about who we are and what we do.

Rashi realizes how profound and demanding this first verse of the Ten Sayings is. He points out that the Israelites have already experienced God in a variety of aspects. They saw God defending them at the Sea of Reeds in the image of a powerful warlike figure. Then they saw God as an elder seated in a throne of sapphire at Mount Sinai.

God says: I am God. This teaches the people that their many and varied perceptions of God are all still the One Who Spoke and Created. Our ability as finite creatures to experience the infinite is limited. This is why the Amidah, the silent prayer, begins with the words, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob." Just as each of these spiritual giants had a unique and valid experience of God, so also our unique experiences of God have validity. All of it is God.

My own experience of God is so varied that I find this freeing. Sometimes I experience a God who cares about me, who is involved in my life. I feel supported, uplifted, directly touched. Other times, I feel a sense of God's distance, the sense that "an iron curtain separates us from our Creator." And at still other moments, I experience the terror of the Universe, and especially the terror of my own bounded existence. Rashi is telling me that all those paradoxical experiences are of God.

Ibn Ezra understands this statement of identity, I am God, to have the force of a command. This statement asserts that God existed before everything else. It also means that we must serve and worship this God. God's existence calls forth a response from us. Ibn Ezra demands that we seek out

this God.

Sometimes, my experience of God is varied enough for me to wonder whether God even exists. Perhaps it is a useful coping mechanism to give me the illusion of order in a Universe that sometimes seems to be still “tohu v’vohu,” filled with chaos. At those moments, Ibn Ezra’s words demand more effort from me. I am allowed to doubt, but forbidden to give up. We are a people who struggle with God – we are a people who struggle even with belief in God. But we continue to struggle.

I used to think that faith came naturally to people. You had a moment of revelation and everything would make sense. My failure to have such a moment led me to question my own belief, and to doubt myself and God. Now I have learned to continually remind myself that faith is an effort. As Cynthia Ozick refers to Jewish faith as “unnatural,” she means that true faith develops in us only when we choose to struggle with God.

Heschel tells us that God is waiting for us, craving our love and prayer. God is in search of Humanity. God is in search of me and so I too am in search of God.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LISTENING TO GOD'S VOICE

JANUARY 31, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Is the primary concern of Torah human rights or obedience to God? This fundamental debate is first articulated in a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Akiva says that the “*clal gadol batorah*,” the great underlying principle of Torah, is “love your neighbor as yourself.” Rabbi Akiva asserts that justice and equity are the heart of Torah. The dignity of humanity and our need to treat others with love and respect lies at the center of how we act as Jews.

Thomas Jefferson articulated a similar notion in the Declaration of Independence. With a firm eye on Biblical tradition, he wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Hearing God means knowing of inalienable rights and an obligation to sustain freedom.

By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael says the great underlying principle of Torah is “listen to God’s voice.” Obedience to God is the central notion of Judaism. Listening and obeying the words of God’s revelation ought to be at the center of how we as Jews act.

It is the brilliance of Torah that these two disparate notions are brought together. Judaism holds these points, one of human rights, the other of duty toward God, in tension. For Torah is about both of them. The primary concern of Torah is human rights AND obedience to God. These are the poles of faith that make the concept of Ethical Monotheism, one God who is good, sensible.

The code of law revealed in the desert brings together these two poles, creating a seamless whole between ritual and moral law. We are told, “Do not oppress the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex 22:20).” Our experience of having been oppressed and then redeemed creates a moral obligation. Our experience trains us to see the inherent dignity of the other. It is the embodiment of “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then Torah teaches us, “You shall not mistreat the widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will head their outcry (Ex 20:21-22).” We are commanded to treat others with justice and equity. Listening to God’s voice includes loving our neighbor, or even the stranger in our midst.

The Temple and Jerusalem are destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE because of a failure to heed God's voice on a matter of human equity. Jeremiah tells us that the people freed their slaves in a Jubilee year as Torah commands. However, "Afterward, they turned about and brought back the men and women they had set free and forced them into slavery again." This insensitivity to the rights of others leads God to say, "You would not obey Me and proclaim a release. I proclaim your release – to the sword, to pestilence, to famine (Jer. 34:17)." It is a failure to hear God's voice on a matter of justice that leads to destruction.

Torah asserts that obedience to God and moral behavior walk hand in hand. Ritual behaviors create sensitivity and sustain moral sense. It is the moral commandments that ensure equity and make our rest on Shabbat or Holy Days a true joy. Listening to God's voice creates a driving compulsion to fashion a just society. For it is God's words to us that creates the longing for a world in which everyone heeds God voice to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL EDITION: RULING ON HOMOSEXUALITY

FEBRUARY 6, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rosh Hodesh Adar Aleph

Dear Congregants,

I hope this letter finds you well.

As you are aware, Kol Emeth has spent the first part of this Jewish year in a process of study and listening towards resolving our practice towards same sex life cycle celebrations. That process has led to a resolution in two parts. First is my Teshuvah on the question of same sex couples receiving an aliyah and blessing in celebration of a life cycle event. Second is the result of the board vote on sponsoring of kiddushim for same sex life cycle events and for renting the facility. Those decisions and the full text of the Teshuvah are attached to this email along with a letter of support from Rabbi Graff. I have also put the full text of the teshuvah at the bottom of this email for those who cannot open attachments. The other items will follow in a letter you should towards the beginning of next week.

One question that has come up several times is worth clarifying. All other policies affecting aliyot and Kiddush sponsorships will apply. The only issue being affected is that of same sex couples.

This has been a long and challenging process. It has been painful for some on both sides of this issue. It has been painful for me to see people who are dear members of our community feel a sense of hurt regardless of their position on the issue at hand. I care a great deal about the people in this community and I want Kol Emeth to be a place of peace, of spirituality, of connection to God.

My prayer is to now engage in a time of healing. It is time to remember why we love Kol Emeth. It is time to focus again on the strength of our community, whether it is the good deeds of the Hesed Committee or the stimulating quality of Adult Education. Kol Emeth is a broad community institution – but it is also a community of caring.

It is time to reconnect, to again listen to one another's stories, to remember why we care about the special people who make Kol Emeth their spiritual home.

I look forward to many opportunities to learn and grow together.

Sincerely,

Rabbi David Booth

Notes on a Teshuvah on Homosexuality

Question: Is it permissible for a gay or lesbian couple to be called to the bimah for an aliyah and blessing on the Shabbat preceding a commitment ceremony or other life cycle event?

Answer: Since a blessing expresses the feeling of a community that the people being blessed should have health and friendship and years of happiness, Kol Emeth will continue to allow such blessings.

Current Context

In 1991, for the first time, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) debated the question of admitting gay and lesbian students to Rabbinical school. At that time, the committee affirmed the traditional prohibition against same sex intimacy based on a Teshuvah written by Rabbi Joel Roth. Rabbi Roth forbade same sex intimacy and called upon people who were gay or lesbian to be celibate.

About three years later, Rabbi Stuart Kelman in Berkeley raised the issue again for his community. He wrote a Teshuvah in which he addressed two concerns. First was our question, as to whether or not gay couples could receive a blessing around a celebration of their relationship. He ruled in part,

Saying a blessing or asking for God's blessings seems perfectly acceptable in the case of all individuals without regard to sexual orientation... It seems to me quite appropriate for any Rabbi to ask for the blessings of God on two individuals who are joining together in a loyal, permanent, monogamous, committed, Jewish relationship.

He further addressed a related question about how one would sanctify the relationship. He said,

I propose the creation of a new category of relationships to be called Brit Rayot a covenant of love. The generally used word for the union of gays and lesbians, "commitment" is inadequate to convey the complexity of this new brit. Same-sex unions are not something new. What is "new"

is that the union to be sanctified stands in a new class of covenantal relationships – a class that is not forbidden by the Torah and that is different from the relationship called “marriage.”
(Community and Diversity, p.12)

However, this ruling remained sui generis (unique) at the time.

That changed in December of 2006. At that time, the CJLS accepted a Teshuvah by Rabbi Eliot Dorff by a majority vote accepting homosexual relationships, with certain restrictions, as Halakhically legitimate. Within several months, both American Rabbinical Seminaries for the Conservative Movement voted to accept Gay and Lesbian Rabbinical students.

In that same meeting, the CJLS also approved Rabbi Joel Roth’s Teshuvah maintaining the Halakhic ban on same sex intimacy also by majority vote. As a result, this remains an issue for individual congregations to decide. Yet it is clear that the Movement as a whole is far more permissive and accepting of homosexuality in a formal way than was the case a year ago. That affects us at Kol Emeth for two reasons.

First, as a Conservative Synagogue, there is now a valid Halakhic option to be accepting of gay relationships. As a committed Conservative community, it is now incumbent upon us to address the issue and see if the pain felt by many loving couples can now be overcome in a manner consistent with Kol Emeth’s strong commitment to traditional Jewish practice.

Second choosing NOT to accept gays makes a larger statement against homosexuality than was the case a year ago. Kol Emeth has always been a welcoming community, a place of spirituality for all who enter its doors. The new context means that forbidding such blessings, even on the best of Halakhic rationales, could create a perception in the wider community of bigotry.

While Halakhah must stand the test of time, encouraging hatred or bigotry is surely a forbidden matter. We are told in Exodus, “Do not oppress the stranger for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt,” and further warned that God will hear the cry of the oppressed widow or orphan. Rabbi Lewis Warshauer makes the point that it is critical for Jewish communities, separate from matters of Halakhah, to refrain from contributing to the disturbing history of how homosexuals have been treated.

Minhag HaMakom

Minhag, or custom, is a powerful force in Halakhah. There are several discussions in the literature around issues of mourning that local minhag takes precedence over Halakhah. The Rashbah (13th Century Spain) was asked by a community Rabbi what to do about several minhagim that violated Shabbat practice. He responded that out of respect for the community those minhagim should be left undisturbed. Significant areas of modern practice originated as local minhag, local custom, including the blessings recited over the Megillah at Purim, the practice of blessing candles on Friday night, and nearly everything associated with burial practice.

What establishes a minhag is complicated. Most authorities rule that anything done three times in a row becomes a minhag, a custom that becomes regular practice. Another definition I might suggest is a practice viewed as an integral part of the self-definition of a community. This is how we do things here. So a prefatory question to be answered prior to wrestling with the larger Halakhic issues is: what is Minhag HaMakom, what is the accepted practice, at Kol Emeth on the question of gay and lesbian couples receiving a blessing at the bimah preceding their being joined together?

Kol Emeth has always been a progressive congregation and a welcoming community. There has been one such blessing at Kol Emeth a year ago. In addition, the same couple was also blessed on the bimah the previous year in celebration of their engagement. Those blessings were preceded by a blessing over another lesbian couple celebrating a significant anniversary. There has also been study on the issue, but no formal Rabbinic ruling or Board vote affirming such blessings as Synagogue practice.

Further, I asked the Board in a non-binding vote to indicate whether they thought KE practice had established a minhag in this area. On that question (as distinct from what we should do), about half of the board voted yes and half no. Therefore, it seems to me that this specific issue is in a grey area of minhag. There is precedent, but perhaps not yet definitive precedent.

The issue of minhag at this point complicates matters. First, there is a lack of definitive precedent on which we could rely as an Halakhic matter. Second, we have as a community blessed such couples. As a result, to forbid such blessings moving forward would make a larger statement against homosexuality than had it never been allowed in the first place.

What is an aufruf anyway?

The second definitional question to consider is the nature of an aufruf. Ashkenazi couples have the custom of being blessed on the Shabbat immediately preceding their wedding. The standard form of the

blessing dates from the late middle ages. One version is:

May God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah bless this groom _____, and this bride, _____, who are soon to enter the Huppah. May they be privileged to fashion a Jewish home harboring love and harmony, peace, and companionship. May they be blessed with children reared in health and well-being, devoted to Torah and to good deeds. And let us say: Amen.

It wishes for the couple happiness and companionship over the years together. It also offers the hope of a home filled with happiness and children. Sephardic communities, by contrast, have the custom of being called for a blessing the Shabbat following the wedding and use a different free form liturgy for that blessing.

The blessing is an expression by the community of its well wishes for the couple. It is a free form prayer that can be changed to fit the specific situation at the discretion of the officiant. Unlike a traditional berakhah, shem and malkhut, God's name, are not mentioned. The Mi Sheberakh expresses the prayer and hope of the person reciting it, along with those saying Amen.

As a result, even if one were to say that homosexuality is forbidden under Jewish law, one might be able to say that a prayer of this nature would still be permitted. As will be discussed later, Torah under a traditional understanding does not forbid homosexuality. It forbids specific homosexual acts. Since the blessing makes no mention of such acts, a person could in good conscience recite amen even if they accepted the traditional understanding of homosexuality. They are expressing a wish that the couple standing before them has a strong bond and connection. They are wishing for that friendship to continue into the future. There is no discussion of what the couple is doing in their own bedroom.

Having said all that, a person accepting the traditional understanding could object because of the symbolic nature of the act. The blessing appears to approve of the relationship in its entirety. This is a perception of the prayer rather than anything said in the prayer itself.

Homosexuality

There are currently two accepted positions within the movement. The first, best articulated by Rabbi Joel Roth, forbids all same sex erotic contact. Roth makes the case that the Torah forbids anal intercourse between men and that Rabbinic tradition understands that prohibition to include any same

sex intimate contact. For Roth, we have no choice but to maintain these prohibitions because Torah is clear and clearly understood by Rabbinic tradition. Roth is careful to distinguish between the forbidden nature of specific acts and someone's nature. Someone who is homosexual is indeed created in God's image. Their nature causes pain for which we ought to have sympathy because they have no Halakhically legitimate manner in which to express those desires through intimate contact.

Rabbi Dorff, by contrast, creates certain ways in which homosexual intimacy can be sanctioned. Dorff acknowledges and sustains the Biblical prohibition against anal sex. He argues, however, that other intimate contact is forbidden by Rabbinic rather than Biblical tradition. As a result, the category of *kivod habriot*, respecting human dignity, allows us to overturn the Rabbinic prohibitions. This category of *kivod habriot* has been used historically to overturn a variety of prohibitions, including most famously the Ramah officiating at a wedding on Shabbat to avoid embarrassing a family.

To forbid someone the kind of loving fulfilling relationships towards which they are inclined by nature of their Creation is too painful. Dorff extends the category of *kivod habriot* to also overturn the Rabbinic elements of homosexual intimacy so that forbidden homosexual contact is limited to one action. He further entirely permits lesbian physical intimacy because Torah is silent on this topic.

The reach of this teshuvah doesn't require us to decide between the two. Further, Kol Emeth consistently maintains pluralistic attitudes on a variety of subjects. Some of our prayer leaders include all the mentions of the sacrificial system, where other equally respected members of the community omit the same. Some of us stand for Kaddish, others sit. We can observe a difference of opinion within the movement and limit ourselves to the questions being asked. Both exist as valid options within the movement. Individuals can accept either of these teshuvot.

In part, I believe this to be a matter of personal conscience. As a Jew struggling to understand what God asks of me in the world, I find my own moral landscape complicated enough. I do not presume to either understand or judge the feelings and desires of another person. Levinas teach us how difficult it is to understand another person. The most alien landscape is the human soul of another person.

Our community needs to agree on the practice on the bimah. On the other issues, I see no need for some sort of normative declaration. I have confidence for and respect of the people of Kol Emeth. These are topics that we can study and evaluate together and as individuals. Many discussions of Halakhic practice, especially pertaining to rules not currently in force, end with the phrase "taku," meaning, we can't decide between these two possibilities. With humility in the face of teachings from

two of my esteemed teachers, coming to radically different conclusions, I similarly say, “taku.”

Purpose of Kol Emeth

Kol Emeth has a reason that it exists. That reason sometimes includes setting limits on behavior but is far broader. In an era of isolation and loneliness, Kol Emeth offers sacred community. In a culture far more interested in the majesty of humanity than the meaning of our lives, Kol Emeth challenges us to seek out the purpose of our existence. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in *The Lonely Man of Faith*, points out modernity’s nearly exclusive focus on our ability to build, to do, to create. Rarely do we consider that responsibility goes hand in hand with power. We are created to guard and tend to search for faith and so guide the work of our hands.

Intimate relations have never been more under attack. There are so many difficulties in building and maintaining sacred relationships. Hollywood shows us romance. We never see the real work that follows to develop and sustain loving relationships that are vital and valuable. Kol Emeth exists to help people discover their own sense of sacred self that craves relationship. And then, having reached out for community and intimacy, to provide scaffolding and support to maintain and nourish relationships.

This issue highlights those values. We are struggling because our strong commitment to the value of each person created in God’s image working to bring God’s presence in the world is so strong. We are struggling because we see regularly the strength that love and family bring into people’s lives. This teshuvah is an affirmation of the tremendous value of loving, monogamous relationships. It is an affirmation of the critical importance of bringing a sense of God’s holiness into the choices we make in our most intimate behavior.

By the same token, Kol Emeth exists to provide an affirming place for spiritual growth. That means of necessity we must be loving and caring of all people. We owe it to everyone in our community, regardless of sexual orientation, to help people feel supported and comforted as together we seek God’s presence. God is found in those loving, caring interactions. Anyone who enters our Sanctuary should feel welcomed and accepted, encouraged on their own spiritual paths.

Let us be disciples of Aaron – pursuers of peace, and among those who draw people close to Torah.

DISAGREEMENTS FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

FEBRUARY 14, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Standing on the bimah at Kol Emeth is a great privilege. What I see always amazes me. I can look out and see people from Persia, from Russia, from Israel. Even a Rabbi born in Oakland – I was born at the Oakland naval hospital. There are people who passionately believe in a God involved in their day to day lives, and others unsure of God's existence. With our young and old together, we make up a community.

When God commands Moses to build the Mishkan, Moses is commanded to use a multiplicity of materials. He uses crimson and purple cloths, gold, silver, precious oils and precious gems. God then explains the purpose of all these different materials: to build a Sanctuary so that God may dwell in our midst.

Just as Moses needed many different kinds of materials to make a fitting dwelling place for God, so also the multiplicity in our community, the pluralism that surrounds us every Shabbat, makes this a community in which God can dwell. We strive to be a traditional community welcoming to all. As we have wrestled with the question of homosexuality in our community, our desire to be inclusive has come up against our passion to be traditional.

In confronting this challenge, we can turn to our Rabbis for their wisdom on the value and dangers of disagreement. Jewish wisdom tells us that there are two types of disagreements. The first is a disagreement not for the sake of heaven. Such arguments, like the rebellion of Korach and his followers, are all about personal power and aggrandizement. They use divisive issues in order to build power. We call them wedge issues today.

By contrast, there are also disagreements for the sake of Heaven. These are disagreements about how we build a just and holy society and the direction of our lives. The arguments of Hillel and Shammai are the classic example of this type of disagreement. They differed on fundamental matters – how to say Kiddush, marriage ritual, conversion practices – but did so because they were struggling to better understand how to build a holy society. As a result, they continued to eat in one another's homes and to marry into one another's families. They could still fit under one tent, in one Sanctuary.

As we have gone through this process of change, I have heard people talking to me about homosexuality, and I have been moved by their passion and their love. I have heard people talking about Torah and

traditional Judaism. Does this change damage our commitment to Halakhah? How can we continue to promote fidelity, monogamy, and the family ethic of Torah if we change our understanding of family? Judaism has said something for so long and I fear that if I take this away, we as community will be unable to protect core values that inform and influence us. I hear in their voices love of Torah. Love of the Jewish family that has become the altar on which Judaism has been sanctified and preserved.

I have also heard people saying: The dignity of people is a Torah issue. If we are created in God's image, then we have to see the holiness in one another regardless of sexual orientation. Halakhah grows and lives as we learn more about the human condition. Our Sanctuary is a room to share joys and sorrows, a room in which our stories are heard. How then can we stand in the way of someone receiving a blessing upon finding a loved one to share their life, and still call this a holy Sanctuary? I hear in their voices love for humanity and care for the other. A desire to feel cared for and accepted, offered the opportunity of God's blessing.

To me, this is a disagreement for the sake of Heaven. That means: I am hearing God's voice in all these emails, phone calls, and conversations. Our Rabbis instruct us to judge one another favorably. It's time for all of us to hear the holiness in what the other is saying. We don't have to agree. Judaism has never stressed consensus. It is time to remember that people are speaking out of love for Kol Emeth, love for Torah, and passion for human dignity.

When Moses ascended on high to make the Mishkan, says Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, God showed him fire woven together to form the Mishkan. Moses asked: How can I make such a thing with only the materials I am given here on Earth? How can I contain your infinite and contradictory quality in a construct of this world? God responds: you will build for me, and I will constrict myself to dwell with you below.

We are confronted by contradictory values. These and these are the words of the living God. Yet we must use the materials we have here on Earth, constrict that which is infinite into our own space. As painful as that is, God then promises to live within those choices, because it is in such choices that we weave the tapestry that brings God's presence to Earth.

We have chosen a practice. That means we have constricted the infinite, chosen from infinite values. In so doing, we have engraved those words of fire into our hearts and hands, into our community. We have chosen to see in this room a multiplicity. To honor Torah in a way that is committed to Jewish law. To also become a place in which all our members can celebrate their joyous moments with the community. To say that this bimah is open to all, regardless of sexual orientation.

I have never been more honored to be part of such a rich, diverse and holy community.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

DAILY PRAYER

FEBRUARY 21, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Minyan isn't just for Kaddish anymore. A Rabbinic colleague of mine, whose Synagogue also has regular daily prayers, made a comment about weekly services during a Shabbat sermon. Afterwards, a young man came up to him and said, "Oh, I didn't realize those services were for everyone. I thought they were only if you were saying Kaddish." This relatively involved and somewhat knowledgeable congregant thought regular services were only for the purpose of mourners and comforting the mourners.

Kol Emeth is committed to regular daily prayer for a variety of reasons. One reason is to provide a minyan for those in their year of mourning. As a holy community, we want to support those people saying Kaddish. As individuals, we want to honor our loved ones by reciting Kaddish during the year of mourning as regularly as possible. This individual and communal responsibility is only one piece of why we need a daily minyan.

We primarily need a daily minyan, however, to join together in praise of God. The Rabbis teach that when ten people gather together and share words of Torah, God's presence can be felt in their midst. Community helps develop a sense of God's presence. Individual spirituality develops most strongly when reinforced by spiritual community. Praying with others nurtures a growing personal spirituality.

This is why certain prayers require a minyan. Barukhu, the call to worship, is a communal prayer. We assume the power to bless by blessing the source of all blessing. It is through shared community that we grow to encompass this ability to bring blessing into the world. An individual needs a sense of community to become one who blesses others.

I read an article recently about some research into well being and happiness. People who regularly engage in a gratitude ritual are generally psychologically healthier. Such ritual include giving thanks for the good things in life, for noticing the blessing in the world around us. The ritual of prayer gives us this regular gratitude practice so essential to wellbeing. It's no surprise that weekly attendance at Synagogue increases longevity.

It is hard to find time for minyan. Work, family and other obligations quickly get in the way. KE needs you, however, and each of us needs some time for what a congregant called "no frills spirituality." This is how we remind ourselves of the value of our lives and when we build a sense of meaning to our days.

That which is worthwhile demands our effort.

Commit to what you can. We often struggle to get a minyan and your help will make a big difference. If mornings are too hard because of work, come for the evenings. If a weekday is too hard because of work and family, come Sunday morning. If every member of KE picked just one minyan service per week, the minyan would be overflowing every single day. As or more importantly, each one of us individually would be overflowing and filling our lives with the rudiments of holiness.

Minyan meets Sunday-Thursday at 7:45pm, Sundays at 9am, and Thursdays at 6:45. Shabbes services are at 6pm Friday night and 9:15 Saturday morning.

Please note that I will be in Monterey this weekend for the United Synagogue Regional Retreat. Have a good Shabbes!

Rabbi David Booth

UNITED SYNAGOGUE IN MONTEREY

FEBRUARY 28, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last Shabbat I had the good fortune of attending the first Northern California United Synagogue regional Shabbaton. 50 of us from 16 Conservative Synagogues in the Bay Area joined together for a Shabbat in Monterey. While there, I learned and was reminded of a few key elements of Jewish living that I wanted to share with you.

We can strengthen one another. Monterey has a tiny Conservative Synagogue of 15 members. They are entirely lay led and meet in a small space rented from a local Church. They have a strong sense of community and are dedicated to Jewish tradition. This Shabbat reminded them that they are part of something larger. It gave them an opportunity to hear from 5 different Rabbis, from lay people involved daily in building the Conservative movement, and simply to celebrate Shabbat with a rich community. This conference was rejuvenating for the Monterey Synagogue.

It's good to hear different Rabbinic voices. 5 Rabbis attended this conference. We all had opportunities to teach, to tell stories, and to sing. That variety is something we rarely experience because we stay in our own communities. I enjoyed hearing Rabbi Steve Vale from Vacaville tell Rabbinic stories. They were inspirational for people and reminded me how much I love stories and storytelling. Rabbi Art Gould taught a whole carefully researched session on the phrase "ki Tissa." I learned a lot and saw another way of approaching text. The five of us sat on a panel to share our thoughts on spirituality. Hearing different voices and perspectives was a high point for everyone.

Strong community creates ruach, spiritual energy, that draws everyone in. The weekend started out in a lovely fashion as Rabbi Berkenwald from San Jose led Kabbalat Shabbat. As he was chanting one of the Psalms, the Kol Emeth section looked at one another and we decided to get up and dance as we were singing. Suddenly, over half of the people in the room were dancing, singing, and rejoicing in Shabbat. At dinner that night, and lunch the next day, we sang Shabbat songs together. With that many knowledgeable people, the room was filled with song and joy. People who knew the songs sang enthusiastically; those less familiar with the melodies and words either hummed along and helped bang the table. Fifty people together rejoicing on Shabbat with no where else to go, nothing else to do except celebrate. (We have such a singing group every Shabbat after morning services. It's a great group that is incredibly welcoming to newcomers. No knowledge is required – after a couple of sessions you won't be able to help yourself from singing together.)

Our region is serious about Jewish tradition. Northern California stands out as a region filled with Synagogues committed to traditional liturgy, in love with Shabbat observance, serious about Kashrut. People at the conference wanted to pray, wanted to learn, and wanted to have the feel of a traditionally observed Shabbat.

Finally, our movement can strengthen us and we can help strengthen the movement. It is a credit to Conservative Jews that we are committed to the value of Klal Israel – the community of Israel. This commitment has often come at the expense of supporting our own Synagogues and movement. We love and support Judaism and therefore spread that support broadly. Our movement stands for tradition and for bringing people close to Torah in a modern idiom. We are dozens of Synagogues, some strong, some struggling, all offering people a way of being deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and living in the modern world. That deserves support. Put another way, it's okay for us to trumpet our own vital voice in the Jewish world.

I feel renewed and energized by my time away and connected in a new way to other area Conservative Synagogues. I am glad to bring these lessons home with me.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi David Booth

GOD WHO MAKES PEACE FOR ISRAEL

MARCH 6, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Prime Minister of Israel strikes me as among the worst jobs in the world right now. Ehud Olmert's popularity ratings are as low as they are in part because it's a job with many deep lasting problems and few if any good solutions. Any move that actually changes the status quo in any direction is deeply unpopular with a large segment of Israeli society because the country is so divided over what to do. And worst of all, the Palestinian leadership appears willing to completely destroy their own society as long as they take Israel with them.

Olmert faces many problems. Among them, the almost daily violence directed at the city of Sderot. Sderot is a border town of Israel next to the Gaza Strip. It is inside the green line, meaning inside the pre-1967 borders of Israel. Despite that integral status, terrorists attack the city almost daily. The residents of Sderot feel somewhat forgotten, but those committed to violence are helping the rest of Israel remember them.

Last week, for the first time, missiles were fired at Ashkelon in a sustained way. Ashkelon is 36 miles south of Tel Aviv, so this attack demonstrates a new capacity and level of threat from those terrorists sitting inside the Gaza Strip. Among the missiles were three Iranian Grad missiles that have significant range. Suddenly Israelis are reminded that the ability to hit Sderot with impunity means that all of Israel is potentially at risk.

So what is a Prime Minister to do? Olmert chose to send in IDF forces to destroy the material used, to kill those attacking Israel, and to clear a larger buffer between Gaza and Israel proper. It was good for his popularity ratings, but hardly a long term solution. Qassam rockets continue to fall in Sderot, Israel threatens more incursions. To me, it looks like a stalemate, with both Israelis and Palestinians slowly bleeding to death.

The extremists in Gaza and the West Bank have every reason to continue their violence. They want to destroy Israel. Allowing Peace talks to happen smoothly derails their agenda. Should Palestinians ever realize the marvelous nation they could build provided they make a lasting peace with Israel, those extremists would find themselves marginalized, ignored, and arrested. May such a day come soon and speedily.

By contrast, as long as the IDF keeps trying to take out well hidden terrorists, with the resultant damage to property and loss of innocent lives, their hands are strengthened. The extremists look like saviors, the only ones willing to strike out against the enemy. Never mind that they have no reasons for striking schools in Sderot or beaches and factories in Ashkelon. That no objective exists to be fulfilled. At least they are striking these soldiers who come violently into their homes and villages.

I am a lover of peace and of Israel. I am a person who believes in the power of prayer. Though I have no good policy suggestions, I do have prayer. Jewish prayer has always connected us to the land of Israel. Heartfelt prayer has the power to inspire and change. It identifies our aspirations and so creates hope amid despair. Peace is possible only when people hope.

May it be Your will, O Lord our God, that soon and speedily we will see peace in the Land of Israel. Let it be a peace in which residents of Sderot and Ashkelon can go to school or work secure and safe. Similarly, may it be Your will to incline the hearts of the Palestinian people and the Arab world generally to see the benefits of peace. May they discover the courage to make the hard choices and real sacrifices needed to build their own free society that benefits from a close peaceful partnership with Israel. May the leaders of Israel be granted the wisdom to act to both keep Israel safe and secure and at the same time to always leave room for the possibility of peace. So may it be Your will.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PRAY AS IF YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT

MARCH 13, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I spent last Shabbat with sixteen 8th and 9th graders from Kol Emeth in Los Angeles. The entire trip was memorable, inspiring, and fun. We visited the Museum of Tolerance, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Skirball Museum, and Universal Studios. It was great to see how the students reacted to each stop. The highlight was our Friday night experience at Beit Teshuvah.

Beit Teshuvah is the only residential facility in the United States (and probably anywhere outside of Israel) for recovering drug and alcohol addicts. Rabbi Graff helped make a connection with Beit Teshuvah because she worked there over two summers while she was in Rabbinical School. Rabbi Marc Borowitz, the director of the program, went out of his way to make our whole group feel welcome at this place of healing and recovery.

When we arrived, our guide gave us a brief talk and orientation. He was a good looking young man in his late twenties, dressed nicely. He told us about his family life in affluent LA and then later great financial success in Hollywood. Through all that time he was a heroin addict. He got good grades in school to please his parents. He got a job that he thought would give him financial success and therefore make him happy. Nowhere along the way, however, did he get in touch with what he wanted, what would make him feel good about his life.

Drugs covered over that deep unhappiness and the feeling that he needed to be perfect. Drugs helped him ignore the emptiness he felt inside, the feeling he was fooling everyone. The only time he felt fulfilled in his life was during the summers, when they had interns. He really enjoyed the feeling of mentoring young people learning the business. Finally, he crashed and entered rehab four years ago.

We then had two other guides who gave us a tour. As we were walking around Beit Teshuvah with them, we learned that both guides were residents of the house and in recovery themselves. It was eye opening for all of us. They were so similar to our group. They were struggling with the demands affluent society puts on us to have no flaws, to be perfect and had “self medicated” to cope.

Friday night services are unique. Part music from the Friday night liturgy and part 12 step meeting, it was an affirming, ecstatic experience that brought hope and faith to everyone in that room. People there prayed and participated as if their lives depended on it. Because prayer is a life line of meaning that helps

this room “hold on” to sobriety when the going gets tough. Prayer is a beacon of hope on the days when all else seems dismal and drugs or alcohol are the easy ticket out.

The welcoming quality of Beit Teshuvah was amazing. We have been talking all year about creating a more open community that makes all of us feel affirmed and cared for. Here is a community practicing that Torah. Newcomers are welcomed by the whole community with a blessing. People literally surrounded us, to share their stories and learn ours. Our group was invited up to lead Shalom Aleichem. Beit Teshuvah as a community is passionate about helping people heal and recover. That is a passion they wanted to share with us.

Beit Teshuvah’s Jewish practice is inspiring but rarely traditional. At the end of dinner, our group began to bench and sing together. People began to drift over towards our group, to sing or hum along, or just stand near these young people thanking God for dinner. It taught me and the rest of our group that the traditional words have a real influence and reach, especially when people are in process of healing.

I personally found the message of the community encouraging and challenging. I too fight against the desire to be perfect, to be all things to all people. Yet only God is perfect. I am a flawed person. Also, I have bad days that bring out my own problematic behaviors. I too need to remember faith on those days and just “hold on.”

Here at Kol Emeth, we pray and learn together with great regularity. We pray for many reasons, varying from deep spiritual commitments to a strong connection to community. Beit Teshuvah reminded me to bring my own problems and fears, my own sense of inadequacy and imperfection, with me when I pray. Because my life too depends on it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LAY OUR BURDENS DOWN

MARCH 27, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As we encounter the sacrificial system over the next couple of months in our Torah reading cycle, we feel as though we are encountering primitive religious expression. We cannot imagine scattering blood as anything other than outdated and outmoded. The notion of slaughtering an animal as a vehicle to finding God seems barbaric. As a result, we find these sections dull because they appear to describe a foreign outdated mentality.

We take refuge in Maimonides, the one Rabbinic Sage who questions the value of the sacrificial system. According to Maimonides, God establishes the sacrificial system after the sin of the Golden Calf. Once God realizes that the people lack the maturity to have a direct unmediated experience of God, God gives the people the sacrifices. Here is a religious expression familiar from Egypt. Here is a step that can lead from primitive religion to philosophical religion.

All these modern sophisticated responses show our own bias as we read the text, and our own inability to see the Divine wisdom contained within these rituals. Jacob Milgrom writes marvelously about these rituals in his commentary to Leviticus in the Anchor Bible series. He alerts us to several key elements of the sacrificial system.

First, Torah repeatedly puts these expectations on each person, using the Hebrew word Adam. Adam, Milgrom demonstrates, means both man and woman as opposed to the more gender specific word, ish. Therefore, Torah is placing religious responsibility on every household and every person. The experience of God is indeed direct and unmediated.

Second, the sacrifices themselves respond to the lived experience of people. I bring a sacrifice as an answer, as a response, to my own experience. Sometimes that means a sin offering when I perceive myself to have failed. Other times I might bring an offering of thanksgiving because of something good that has happened.

Most frequently, I bring a shlamim offering. Shlamim comes from the word Shalom and means complete. Yet as Milgrom notes, the shlamim offering is anything but complete. Only a small portion is offered while the rest is eaten by the householder. In other words, the meal itself becomes sanctified. It is the person's experience of having a family meal that creates the sense of completeness referred to by the offering.

All these rituals offer us a behavior in response to our own experiences, fears, hopes and dreams. The observers of these laws had a way to lay down their burdens, to work through the complex tangle of emotions that result from failures and successes, fears and hopes. Torah calls for a response to the challenging moment of transition and celebration in our lives.

Living three thousand years after these laws were given, I'm still subject to the vagaries of life. As a result, I sometimes carry around anger longer than I want. I sometimes worry over unresolved issues. Even joyous moments create their own stress for me as I struggle to understand their significance. I too need ritual to lay these burdens down and then to rest in the presence of God.

Even though we no longer offer sacrifices, Torah continues to offer me rituals through which I can lay down my burdens and baggage. As one example, Shabbat is a time to lay down my burdens. I do nothing financial over Shabbat, so all my worries about bills and investments, paying for my children's education, etc, etc, are put aside.

When I eat dinner Friday night, I use two challot and salt to remind me of the Shlamim offering. God becomes a part of my meal as I allow myself the room to get in touch with myself as a spiritual being. Is it any wonder Friday is always my best night's sleep? Prayer is a time to lay aside my anger and frustration that I find so tiring. It provides me a time to lay down the anger, lay down the depression, and reach out to God.

While we no longer sacrifice animals, we still carry around the same emotional and spiritual burdens that our ancestors experienced. We too need rituals to stand before God in those moments. So that we can indeed lay those burdens down and experience the true joy of living a redeemed existence.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CLEANING OUR SOULS

APRIL 3, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've got a Passover cleaning schedule on my wall calendar. It's pretty scary. Next week we are getting the living areas clean and scrubbed. We move the furniture and clean up all the dust and assorted items we find back there. Every year some favorite toy resurfaces, and the world's supply of pens is rediscovered.

Then we start in on the kitchen. Carol will move the refrigerator and scrub out the drawers. I will move all our Passover stuff from the garage into its appropriate places in the kitchen after it in turn is scrubbed and cleaned from the accumulated dust of the last year.

All in all, a demanding project that I always enjoy looking back upon. My house is gleaming and clean and I too feel cleansed. The ritual itself has a cleansing process. And that is what is supposed to happen. Because fulfilling God's commandments through our external actions is supposed to create an internal spiritual change.

We are standing halfway between last Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur. It's a good time for spiritual examination, to look inside and see how well we have fulfilled what we promised ourselves and God last Yom Kippur. To see the dust and muck that has been accumulating in the dark places within our souls, underneath the cushions and behind the refrigerator. To engage in a process of spiritual cleaning.

The Hasidim liken chametz, the forbidden foods of Pesach derived from flour and water, to the evil urge. Just as we cleanse our homes of bread and pasta and cereal, so also we engage in a process of self-examination and change. We want to get all of the chametz out of our homes even though it's an impossible task. That's why we finally declare any leftover chametz "null and void" before Passover begins.

So also we try to live one week without the evil urge. For one week we make an additional effort to live in a holy way. This includes ritual behavior, as we join together as one Jewish people in celebrating Passover. It also includes our moral behavior. It's a good week to entirely avoid lashon harah, or gossip. It's a good week to intend that every word to our loved ones be supportive and encouraging. It's a good week to remember others who are in need.

We declare the remaining chametz that we cannot find null and void and go on with our celebration of

Passover. So also we try as much as we can to live up to the holy best of who we can be during Passover and declare that which we cannot (yet) change as “null and void.” Living in this way for one week challenges us the rest of the year. It suggests: we can indeed change. It says: God’s redemptive power means that I too can be redeemed and brought close.

Just as we set aside time for cleaning our homes, so also we need to make time for spiritual self-examination and cleansing. It’s easy to put this process off. That’s why we have these special Shabbatot leading up to Pesach. It is a wake up call. Now is the time to begin thinking, to begin looking inside and getting ready for the redemptive possibilities of Pesach. We can change and grow, we can indeed move closer to God, but only when we take the time for self-examination.

I need a lot of help to get my house clean. It’s too big of a project to do by myself. If I need help to clean my house, all the more so I need help to clean my soul. I have a long standing study partner with whom I plan to spend some time thinking through the chametz in my soul, and listening as well to some of his concerns and issues. In this way I will spend some time cleansing my own soul.

As many of you know, I have invited congregants this year to make an appointment with me or Rabbi Graff for an annual Spiritual. I have had many people take me up on this offer and the meetings have been wonderful. It’s been meaningful to me to listen to people’s concerns and questions about faith and liturgy, about the direction of their lives, their fears and dreams. As you engage in your own process of spiritual cleansing, please feel invited to come in. I would find it deeply meaningful to be helpful in your own process of spiritual growth and change.

I wish everyone strength as we ready our homes and our souls for Pesach!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LET ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY COME AND EAT

APRIL 10, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Passover Seder begins with a challenge. We lift the Matzah and say, “This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat...” For this opening paragraph, Matzah is the bread of poverty and oppression. It is the bread the poor eat because they cannot afford “rich” or leavened bread. Just as we are about to fill our tables with an incredible feast, we remind ourselves of poverty.

In my family, we strive to live up to the challenge of inviting all who are hungry to come and eat in two ways. Those two modes reflect a duality that pervades the entire Seder experience. At the Seder we ask: why is this night different than all other nights? And we answer in two ways. One is physical. We were brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. The second answer is spiritual. God brought us forth to Monotheism and service of God. Or as Jonathan Sacks puts it in his marvelous Hagaddah commentary, we are free from slavery and free to serve God.

We maintain this duality when we fulfill “let all who are hungry come and eat.” There is a long tradition at Pesach of giving “maot chitin,” literally flour money. Maot chitin is money given to the poor to enable everyone to have Matzah at Pesach. It is literally money for the flour that will then be used to make the matzahs.

Passover is about ending physical oppression. Hunger is a harsh taskmaster that narrows the soul. Just as the Jews found themselves spiritually constrained – kotzar ruach – because of Egyptian persecution, so also those who are hungry today find themselves constrained in their ability to imagine a better life. This is why my preparations of Seder include a donation to Second Harvest. I want to emulate God and help someone out of the grinding oppression of poverty.

As the economy slows, Second Harvest is more needed than ever. Food requests are up 15% this year. Further, they sent a lot of food and resources down to the fires in San Diego and are only now beginning to recover. Finally, most of their donations come in December. Our donations at this time make a big difference.

Pesach is also about ending spiritual oppression. We say, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” Yet there is more to hunger than an empty belly. Many of us are spiritually hungry. We are craving

community and spiritual connections. In our isolated anomistic age we search for connections that touch our essence as a person, connections that speak to our soul.

Every year I invite a few people to my Seder who either have never been to a traditional Seder before or who are in need of a place. Every year I feel I gain more than I give because of how much our guests enrich everyone's experience as new connections and friendships grow. After all, I too am hungry for connection and community.

Passover is a marvelous time of year to remind ourselves of what matters in our lives. God brought us out of Egypt and oppression to Sinai. That means hope exists and that our lives have meaning. Our Passover celebration requires that we share with others the hopeful experience of redemption in which we rejoice at this time of year.

Let all who are hungry come and eat. As we eat and celebrate, let us make sure that others have full bellies as well. As we rejoice in community, let us open our homes and hearts so that all who are hungry for Seder come and eat.

I am accepting Maot Chittin donations to my discretionary fund. These funds will then be forwarded to Second Harvest. You can also donate directly to them as well.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

APRIL 15, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. I thought I would send out CyberTorah a few days early this week to help answer any questions that may arise as we prepare our homes. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then selling it. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items are limited to fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. All of these items are produced without the use of Chametz. If an infinitesimal quantity of chametz should accidentally have fallen into these items, it is considered void prior to the start of the Holy Day. If they are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run

through a second cycle to kosher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent.

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

EATING LEGUMES AT PESACH

APRIL 24, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a big difference between Pesach and Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, we deny ourselves physical pleasures with the intention of afflicting our souls. Through this affliction we hope to inspire spiritual growth. By contrast, Pesach involves eating in a distinct way so that we notice the blessings of our freedom. By eating no chametz we remind ourselves of the miracles of Pesach and the blessings of physical and spiritual freedom.

Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews treat this prohibition very differently. Ashkenazi Jews have become maximalists. Anything that is chametz or could be confused with chametz is forbidden, while Sephardic authorities have tended to be minimalists. If it's chametz, don't eat it at Pesach. By contrast, if it's corn or rice or legumes, you should only eat and enjoy. I'd like to show how the distinction arose historically and share with you my own current practice.

The classic definition of chametz comes from a 2nd century source, the Mekhilta d'Rebbe Ishmael in Piska 8. It says:

“Seven days eat Matzah.” Do I derive from this all items? The Torah teaches: “Do not eat hametz.” Rather, forbidden items are only those which can make matzah or chametz. What are these? The five types of grain: wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye. Rice, millet, sprouts, legumes, and sesame seeds that do not rise but rather spoil are fine.

Any of these products, when mixed with liquid, can produce hametz if allowed to sit without being cooked for more than 18 minutes. However, this source specifically permits rice and legumes. Further, there are records in Talmudic times of people eating rice and legumes during Passover, suggesting that this was a practical definition as well. (B. Pesachim 114b)

During the Middle Ages, the vast majority of authorities permitted legumes and rice. Maimonides, Nachmanides, the Meiri, and others, never even mention another possibility. However, in the 13th century, Rabbenu Peretz in Europe first introduces the custom of refraining from eating legumes corn and rice and identifies it as an old custom “dating back to the time of our Sages.” Since he was the leading figure in the French Rabbinic world, his custom became widespread throughout Europe. Sephardic authorities never accepted the custom.

The Ashkenazi or Eastern European Rabbis apparently accepted and followed this custom for two reasons. First, they did not know many of the earlier sources like those cited above that clearly permit legumes and rice. Thus, they did not realize that earlier authorities specifically permitted that which they were forbidding. Second, they almost never ate such products. As a result, they had a legitimate concern that people would confuse that which was permitted – lentils and rice – with what was forbidden – other types of grains – since they never otherwise ate them.

As this practice spread throughout Germany, France and then Eastern Europe, Spanish and African authorities were startled by this practice. Rabbenu Yerukham reacted quite strongly in the 14th century. He said in part, that he couldn't understand why "they make it so hard on themselves" and referred to the practice as "silly custom."

In our own era, Rabbi David Golinkin, President of Makhon Schechter in Jerusalem, permits the eating of legumes and rice at Pesach. He says in part,

It is permissible to ignore this custom. It stands against the descriptions of Passover in the Talmud and Mishnah. It is against both the law and practice of all the Rabbis of the Talmud and Mishnah with one exception, as well as all the Gaonim and the vast majority of scholars in all places...Further, there are many good reasons to stop observing this custom: It detracts from the joy of the holiday by vastly increasing the number of forbidden foods. It causes a vast increase in prices and this results in great loss. Further, it leads to a general lack of respect for commandments since this one has no good reason.

According to Golinkin, since there are good Halakhic reasons to eat legumes, corn, and rice, it is indeed permissible to do so.

There is at least one significant reason to maintain this custom. There is a principle in Judaism of "minhah avoteinu b'yadenu." It means: the custom of our parents is in our hands. Refraining from eating legumes and rice at Pesach has been well established Eastern European practice for hundreds of years. There is good reason to continue that practice out of respect for our ancestors and to maintain a continuity of tradition.

For myself, I do eat legumes, rice, and corn at Pesach. I make sure to buy only unprocessed food in this category and to buy it before Pesach. I find Rabbi Golinkin's arguments compelling and want to maintain a more clear distinction between a certain forbidden food, namely chametz, and everything else. I am

open to this change also because it doesn't make my home unkosher for others. Those who don't eat such foods and Pesach can simply eat around them. No division is thus created in Israel.

I hope that you are having a spiritually meaningful Pesach. I also pray that these sources enrich all of our understanding of the meaning of these practices so that they indeed inspire growth and spiritual change in all of us.

Shabbat Shalom & Moadim L'simchah,

Rabbi David Booth

STUMBLING BLOCKS

MAY 1, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Reality Television appeals to both axes of human nature. On the one hand, people watch reality TV to see a hero born. That's part of the appeal of American Idol (what a name!), where the next pop star is waiting to be found as we watch and vote. On the other hand, we also like to see people stumble and fall. Dancing with the Stars is as much about people humiliating themselves on national television as it is about watching people dance beautifully. There is something deeply appealing about watching people hurt themselves and fail.

For this reason, Torah reminds us "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear God, for I am the Lord (Lev 19:14)." It's appealing to insult the deaf, because a deaf person can't hear you. The Talmud in Shevuot 36a explains that coarse language diminishes us as a person. To insult someone who can't even hear is only to give our evil inclination power over us. This is why Maimonides goes ever further. He says that the Torah warns us against insulting the deaf because, when our words get no reaction, we will escalate to physical violence. As we tease and belittle without response, we look for a way to get a response.

In the same fashion, there is something in human nature ready to laugh at the blind person falling over a clearly visible obstacle. We set up this obstacle knowing how superior we are, for we can see the stumbling block. And then to our great humor the blind person stumbles and falls, never knowing how or why.

Slapstick humor and pratfalls point out how ingrained is the human urge to see someone else fall. I took Maytal to see Shrek 3 a few months ago. She hated it and had to go out because all the slapstick humor in the movie made her upset. In the purity of her youth, she only saw people falling and hurting themselves. She didn't get why it was funny. As much as I enjoy slapstick humor, it's possible that Maytal is on to something.

The Talmud in Pesachim understands these prohibitions in a wide manner. Placing a stumbling block before the blind includes tempting someone to do wrong. Many reality TV shows are about putting people into tempting situations and then seeing how they behave. Survivor, for example, twists teamwork into viciousness by creating incentives for people to gang up on one another and then to finally betray their friends to win it all. These shows get great ratings because we love to watch others

fall into temptation.

We cannot fix network Television. We can, however, be more thoughtful about our own actions towards others. I like to tease my wife. I can string together a false explanation about something, play her along for a while, and then laugh at her. I used to do this with some regularity. It was appealing on a lot of levels. It was fun to fool her. To watch her mentally trip and fall. And I suspect, if I am honest, some of the appeal was watching her then get angry at me afterward.

At a certain point, Carol told me that I was hurting her feelings. In examining my own behavior, I saw that she was right and stopped. I am similarly aware of resisting the temptation to tease my kids because I want to affirm them, to help them grow. I fight against the part of myself that wants to watch them stumble and fall.

I see this in marital and pre-marital counseling a great deal. Many couples have a dynamic where one spouse picks on the other. It's funny, after all. But when I give the "picked on" spouse a chance to talk, it turns out they are more hurt than their partner realizes. It's good to laugh together and affirm one another.

We are supposed to be Holy, for God is holy. If we indulge the part of ourselves that wants to insult the deaf and see the blind stumble, we quickly find ourselves damaging our most important relationships. If we are people who tease and trip, we forget to be the people who offer a supporting hand or an affirming comment. Let us strive to be those who affirm with our words and lift up the one who stumbles.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

YOM HAZIKARON

MAY 6, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The great blessing of Israel is to be in control of our own destiny. Herzl dreamed of a day when we could be a “normal” people. He meant a nation that existed in the political and economic world, rather than a people condemned to dwell on the outskirts of Europe. We have lived to see that dream realized, but it has been realized at a cost.

Loss of life is terrible, the loss of a young person doubly so. The Mishnah teaches that when a single person dies, it is as if a whole world dies, for they and all their future descendants perish in that moment. Israeli military service begins immediately upon High School graduation. Most soldiers in the IDF are young people giving away three years of their life before they figure out education, career, and family. For a young person to lose their life before it truly begins is a tragedy beyond measure.

In this country, defending Jewish existence means affiliating with a Synagogue or donating to Federation. Israelis are called upon in a much more visceral way to defend the land of Israel. Further, everyone knows or is related to someone who has lost their life in the IDF. Unlike the United States, where Memorial Day is as much about picnics as remembering those who have given their lives in the service of this country, Yom Hazikaron is a true day of remembrance.

There is a point during the day in Israel when the sirens sound and everything stops. In that moment everyone in Israel remembers. Some remember a child lost. Others, a friend or sibling. It is a communal moment that allows Israelis to draw strength from one another as they remember the lives cut short. The worlds that could have been but are no more, lost to us in this veil of tears.

I believe Yom Hazikaron inspires many Israelis to yearn all the more for peace. Yes, we want a strong and secure Israel. But that security and strength can come in the presence of a flourishing Arab world, provided that those who foster violence and hate are overcome. It is hard to see that world, or how we get to it but Yom Hazikaron makes us crave it all the more. Israelis mourning the loss of their loved ones want to be the last people crying for such reasons anywhere in the world. To me, the message of Yom Hazikaron is: we stand ready to defend ourselves, to preserve this land, and we wait every day for peace.

I suggest the following prayer to be recited at some point tomorrow to remember the dedication and sacrifice of Israeli soldiers.

God filled with mercy, may you remember and hold safe the souls of those who have given their lives in defense of the Land of Israel. May the memory of their loss and sacrifice inspire us also to protect and defend the Land of Israel in ways that echo their bravery. May their memory also inspire us to pursue peace. For we yearn for the day when “violence will no longer be heard in the courts of Jerusalem, but only the sounds of young people in song.” We cannot imagine such a world on this of all days, but we turn to You in hope and prayer for it is You who make peace in the heavens. We pray that those who stand in the way of peace, those who foster violence and bloodshed, shall have their hands weakened and their heads confused. May You hold these young people in Your sheltering embrace, and may their memory be for a blessing. Amen.

Please note that there are two ways of commemorating Yom Hazikaron publicly this year in our area. At 7pm tomorrow (Wednesday) at Gunn in Spangenberg is a Yom Hazikaron service. In addition, our evening minyan tonight will also include a special Yom Hazikaron prayer.

God’s comfort to all those who have lost loved ones in the service of Israel,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT HAVE THEY DONE?

MAY 14, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Studying with converts is among the most rewarding elements of my job. People come to me looking for a spiritual direction in their lives. They are seeking meaning and open to Judaism. They come with a fresh quality that inspires. As they begin to think of the role of God and Jewish observance in their lives, I find myself inspired and renewed in my own faith and spiritual commitments.

Early in the process, I have to tell potential converts of the downside to converting with a Conservative Rabbi. I tell them that I believe in my process and believe them to be 100% Jewish at the end of it. However, there are those in the Orthodox Jewish world who will not accept a Conservative conversion. If the convert is a woman, that also means there are some who will not accept future children as Jewish. Since my wife converted to Judaism under Conservative auspices, this is a personal issue for me as well.

I find the Orthodox attitude painful and contrary to the Rabbinic understanding of the conversion ritual. The Talmud in Yevamot identifies an ideal process for becoming Jewish as well as a minimum set of requirements. The ideal process includes learning about the commandments, circumcision for men, and then being immersed in a mikveh or ritual bath supervised by three Rabbis. Maimonides expands upon this in the 12th century, requiring a more involved educational process than the Talmud suggests.

Several passages immediately following in Yevamot establish a minimum requirement. A person must be circumcised if male and immersed in a mikveh with two Jewish witnesses to be Jewish. The Talmud errs on the side of inclusion. Someone who has lived as a Jew for years ought to be accepted as such even if their conversion process failed to meet the ideal educational and Rabbinic standards. They even go so far as to accept a woman who didn't formally convert but who has been regularly going to the mikveh for years. The Talmud understands the painful damaging quality of uprooting someone's Jewish identity and hesitates to do so even when the conversion process is far less than ideal.

I meet with my students for a year and expect them to grow in their ritual observance and faith. I believe in my process. Yet I can imagine Orthodox authorities putting my process in the category of a less than ideal conversion. I find it hard to understand why they reject them as Jews. All my converts who are male are circumcised. All my converts go to the mikveh supervised by me and two others. This at least meets with the minimum requirement.

It was with great sadness that I read of Israel's Supreme Rabbinic court ruling this month invalidating a conversion performed fifteen years ago. A woman had converted through a Religious Zionist Rabbinic Court. Religious Zionists are modern Orthodox. The Supreme Rabbinic Court, an ultra-Orthodox dominated body, invalidated this woman's conversion as well as the process itself.

By retroactively invalidating a conversion, the Rabbinic courts are creating insecurity for every convert. If anything doesn't match the ideal framework, a convert could find his or her Judaism suddenly open to question. If they are willing to invalidate an Orthodox conversion after fifteen years, children raised as and accepted as Jews may suddenly find themselves declared no longer Jewish. They will then no longer be able to be married in Israel, nor to be buried in a Jewish cemetery in Israel.

This is terrible for the Jewish people. Since the days of Abraham and Sarah, who converted others to Judaism before they left for Canaan, we have been a people open to the sincere seeking to dwell in God's presence. Further, individual Rabbis and communities have possessed the power to make new Jews for hundreds of years. These recent rulings by the Rabbinic court represent an effort to make conversion much more difficult and exclusive.

Before, it was about denying legitimacy to Conservative Judaism and Conservative Rabbis. I found that painful. Now the Court is denying legitimacy to Conversion, and that is damaging to the stability of the Jewish people. May everyone recall the example of Ruth, convert and ancestor of King David, who became Jewish in a spontaneous act of faith and enriched the Jewish people immensely as a result.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

POSTVILLE

MAY 29, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Aaron Rubashkin is a kosher butcher in Brooklyn. A number of years ago, he sent his sons to Postville Iowa of all places to start a kosher meat processing facility. Postville was a dying Iowa town home to a shuttered meat processing facility. Rubashkin was invited in with open arms in the hopes that this new venture would save the town.

A culture clash quickly developed between the townspeople and the Hasidic Jews who ran and staffed the plant. As recounted in some NPR segments and a book titled Postville, the Hasidim continued to act and live just as they had in Brooklyn. They rebuffed the outreach of the ministerial association, for example, and generally refused to socially interact with the townspeople. As Postville recounts, there may also have been a shooting cover up involving some Hasidic employees.

To this point, Rubashkin meats had generated some bad press but no question about the quality of its meats. Further, it appeared at worst to be a case of a group of Jews protecting their own and refusing to blend into middle America. Hardly something to condone, but also an insufficient reason to boycott their products.

Then came the PETA scandal in 2007. PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, got one of their people hired by the plant in Postville. That person filmed horrible conditions at the plant that raised significant questions about the kashrut of the slaughter. Kosher slaughter requires the animal to be killed by a quick cut to the throat. Cows at Rubashkin were filmed walking around after their tracheas had been cut and chickens were filmed being crushed by conveyor belts.

The O-U, the most respected kosher supervising authority in the world, has been supervising Rubashkin. After an investigation, they claimed the problems had been fixed. The Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative Rabbis, also investigated the kashrut of the plant and found it technically kosher. Neither group made any comment at the time on the work conditions of the plant. PETA claims they have continued to find kashrut violations since those inspections took place.

This past month, Rubashkin Postville was raided by Immigration officials. Over 75% of the plant's workers, according to the INS documents, have suspect or forged Social Security numbers. 368 people were arrested. There were also reports of food safety violations. According to the United Food and

Commercial Workers Union, USDA documents “cite numerous food safety violations committed by Agriprocessors that may have increased the risk of food-borne illnesses to consumers.” As if that weren’t bad enough, company officials apparently tolerated a methamphetamine lab in the plant.

At this point, I am honestly not sure what is happening at the plant. There are significant questions about whether the meat and chicken are kosher at all. They remain under O-U supervision which I normally accept without question. In this instance, however, I am unsure of the quality of that supervision.

Either way, significant moral issues of their employment practices exist. They are hiring undocumented workers and taking advantage of them. There are significant safety concerns about both the food and the people employed at the plant. In the face of such questions, I can no longer ethically consume meat under the Rubashkin label.

Trader Joe’s has begun carrying Empire products again after a four year hiatus. I encourage you to thank them for having made this change so that they will realize this is an important issue to the local Jewish community. I similarly intend to encourage Mollie Stone’s and Lucky to look for other vendors.

I care about the ethical background of my food. I keep kosher because I want my food to comply with Torah ethics so that eating is an act of observance. Torah ethics are much broader than the technical requirements of Kashrut. I can’t tell if Rubashkin products are still technically kosher. They are certainly ethically questionable and I am no longer going to eat them nor permit them at Kol Emeth until I am confident the products are kosher and produced in an ethical fashion.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE RETURN OF SHAVUOT

JUNE 5, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

For many years, Shavuot was the forgotten holiday of the Jewish calendar. Lacking any home rituals as compelling as the Passover Seder or the building of a Sukkah, Shavuot tended to languish in the American Jewish psyche. In recent years, and for a while now at Kol Emeth, Shavuot has been making a significant comeback. And nothing could be better.

Shavuot celebrates Matan Torah, the receiving of Torah. By the time of the Middle Ages, it had become the custom to celebrate Torah by studying Torah. People would get together on the evening of Shavuot and study through Biblical and Rabbinical literature. The traditional “tikkun leyl Shavuot,” the learning for Shavuot, starts with the Bible, progresses through Midrash and Talmud, and goes through Mystical and Halakhic literature. It tries to give a taste of all the different eras of Jewish learning.

As the sun began to rise, they celebrated the morning service. The first day Shavuot Torah reading is the Exodus account of receiving the Torah. The community spends the night getting ready to receive Torah by studying. Then, as we encounter the majesty of the Torah reading, it is as if we are receiving Torah ourselves. We have immersed ourselves in learning, and now we allow those words to become a part of who we are as people.

As Shavuot has made a comeback, many communities now have large all night study sessions. Kol Emeth will begin at 8pm Sunday night and study all night until a sunrise service at 5am. (Please feel welcome to any part- there are people who stay for a couple of hours and leave, and there are others who arrive just for the sunrise service.) Lots of people come out to learn and a vibrant core group stays throughout the night. Exhausting to the body, but invigorating to the spirit.

I believe Shavuot directly addresses some of the major concerns of Judaism today. First, it is totally Jewish. Hanukkah, partly because of an accident of the calendar, and partly because of secularizing pressures on the Jewish community, has picked up elements of being the Jewish Christmas. Purim too is sometimes thought of as a Jewish Halloween. Shavuot, with its ritual of study, has no easy American analogue. Quite the reverse! Shavuot opposes the anti-intellectualism that pervades our culture. It also challenges the autonomy of the individual by understanding learning and faith to have a significant communal dimension.

Second, Shavuot lacks a family element. It is focused on adult learning and spirituality. Maimonides teaches that communities need to invest in Adult Education first and then in the education of children. He says this because investing in the education of adults creates parents able to teach their children and ready to grow Jewishly themselves. American Judaism has forgotten this truth.

The infantilization of American Judaism means that everything rotates around the religious school and the bar or bat mitzvah. Teaching our children is an essential commandment; a bar or bat mitzvah is a wonderful affirmation of Judaism. If we forget our own spiritual growth and make no time for our own learning, we are sending a message that Judaism is something for kids. Shavuot reminds us to learn and grow as adults.

Finally, Shavuot is about directly confronting our tradition. It is about learning and reminding ourselves of the spiritual riches to be found through Jewish practice. This is why our Tikkun Leyl at Kol Emeth includes the study of Bible and Talmud, but also of Yiddish and art. We are celebrating the panoply of Jewish learning and being energized spiritually by the quality and richness of that tradition.

The return of Shavuot reflects the growing maturity of the Jewish community. The growing numbers of people who study reflect a growing core of Jews passionate about Jewish learning and open to spiritual growth. Where the re-emergence of Sukkot argues for the continued strength of the Jewish family, the return of Shavuot reflects a growing passion by adult Jews for learning and for Torah.

Find a place to celebrate Shavuot this year and take the time to learn and to grow, to be influenced by the words of our traditions of learning and then to hear of Torah.

Hag Shavuot Samech & Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that I am leaving for Israel on June 15th for a Synagogue trip. I will also be studying at the Hartman Rabbinic Institute for two weeks in Jerusalem as well as spending some vacation time with my family in Israel. I am returning July 24th. I hope to send a couple of trip and study updates while I am there, but CyberTorah will otherwise be on hiatus until Elul. Have a wonderful summer!

KOL EMETH IN ISRAEL

JUNE 18, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every time I go to Israel I remember how wonderful this country is. Somehow in the comfort and security of Palo Alto, the urgent life of Israel that I am so richly enjoying fades just a little bit. Upon returning to this place it all comes back and I feel again the life that flows through this land.

We are only 3 days into the trip and we have already had marvelous experiences and unique moments to share. About half of the people on the trip are here for the first time. It's a privilege to see people fall in love with Israel as they see the land of our ancestors for the first time. There are 18 children on this trip who are getting so much out of what they see and experience. Dana Meyerson, for example, an entering Hausner sixth grader, is thrilled to be in Israel for the first time. She is using her Hebrew and answering many of the tour guide's questions.

A few trip highlights. Tuesday we saw a Roman aqueduct dug out 2000 years ago through lime stone. It was designed to bring water to the port city of Caesaria. We got to walk through the underground water flow (getting pretty wet into the bargain). We could see where the oil lamps had been placed and marks from the hand tools used to build this 23 kilometer long water system.

Tuesday was also our day at Kehillat Hod v'Hadar, a Conservative Synagogue in Kfar Saba outside of Tel Aviv. They were so excited to meet us! I feel strongly that a trip like this needs to include the ancient sites alongside the modern dilemmas of Jewish living. We travelled as a Conservative group and we need to learn from and show our support to the Conservative movement here.

We made a connection because Martha Amram, our next Kol Emeth President, is friends with a couple of the community members. From this friendship we are hoping to build a long term relationship with the wonderful people we met there. The community organized a project for the kids (they decorated canvas reusable grocery bags) while they spent some time explaining what it is like to be a Conservative or Masorti Jew in Israel.

One person, a sabra or native born Israeli, described being a Conservative Jew as being a persecuted minority. He has three daughters. For the second daughter's bat mitzvah, he rented a catering hall for an egalitarian service and party. After that party, the Kosher supervising authorities heard that women had read from the Torah. They told the owner that if he allowed such an event to happen again he would lose

his kosher certification. He also told us of the Conservative community in Petach Tikvah being shut out of spaces ranging from schools to Shomer HaTzair facilities because they wanted men and women to pray together. For this reason he joined Hod v'Hadar. We got a whole new appreciation for the uphill struggle our movement faces in Israel with official state sponsorship of only one branch of Judaism.

This Synagogue has many amazing members, among them Shuly Natan. Shuly Natan sang Jerusalem of Gold for the first time right before the 6 day war. It was then played again and again when Jerusalem was reunited. Shuly came to join us and performed for us at Hod v'Hadar! The 36 of us sat with another 10 or so Israelis from the shul and got a private concert from one of the greatest of Israeli singers. I am still glowing from the chance to sing Jerusalem of Gold with Shuly Natan. It was so wonderful and welcoming of Hod v'Hadar to give us such a special evening. It is a relationship we very much want to maintain.

Today we were in Tsfat, the mystic city. We learned about the Ari, the composer of Lecha Dodi, and some of the mystical symbolism of that song. Among other things, the refrain of Lekha Dodi has 7 words – symbolizing the 7 days of creation and has 26 letters, equaling one of the names of God. Then we went rafting on the Jordan and got splashed and soaked. But even here we learned of the urgency of life in Israel. We happened to be on the water at the same time as a group from Tzahal having a fun outing. These children playing in the water and splashing each other will soon be putting their lives on the line for Israel.

There have also been quiet moments. This morning a number of us davened right on the beach at the Kinneret facing south – towards Jerusalem. I had the honor of teaching Jeff Rosen how to wrap Tefillin as we sang and davened together. I also had time to go for a quick swim in the water on a cool, clear morning.

The trip is really starting off beautifully. Special thanks to Rabbi Graff for making it all possible. I look forward to sending you some more highlights towards the end!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

This special edition of CyberTorah is dedicated to Sema Bayla, our honorary trip participant. I hope we get to go to Israel soon! Please note that I am responding to email only intermittently when I have access.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BEAUTY

JUNE 25, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The second half of the Israel trip was filled with wonderful stops. So much so that I am going to focus on just a few of the places we saw and opportunities we had to learn. There is so much beauty, so many wonderful people and places, that the lost struggles and failures seem particular poignant.

We drove up to the Golan and saw how small the region is. There is an old overlook and bunker up in the Golan that is a mere 26 miles from Damascus and 70 miles from Tel Aviv. There a couple of ways to think of this. One is from the security perspective. Israel is always living in a precarious place when its enemies are just 100 miles from its major cities. One tank brigade was all that kept Israel alive in the Yom Kippur war. If Israel loses one war it will cease to exist.

Another way to see this is the tragedy of war. Think of a world in which our trip could include a day outing for Hummus and Pita in Damascus. Where a trip to Israel can include a trip to Beirut with no more effort than a stop in Greece. This ongoing struggle leaves Israel an island when it ought to be an oasis bringing life to this whole region. (By the way, there is a little coffee shop on this overlook called "Coffee Anan" from the Hebrew for Coffee in the clouds. Kofi Annan, former UN secretary General, once visited on a trip to Israel and apparently has the t-shirt to prove it).

Later that day we went swimming at the pools in Sachne. These wonderful grottos and swimming areas in Beit Shean are beautiful. Susan Galel said that having so many children on our trip was great because it gave all of us an excuse to stop at some of these fun place that few of us, myself included, had ever seen or visited before. Part of visiting Israel is enjoying the rich natural beauty.

Shabbat in Israel is always wonderful. We saw at Hod v'Hadar Synagogue and again at the wall "kifya hadatit," the oppressive quality of religious fundamentalism on Israeli society. On Shabbat we saw the warmth and music of Orthodoxy. We davened at Kol Rina, a Carlebach Synagogue in Nachlaot. Nachlaot is the second Jerusalem neighborhood established outside the wall. As the Torah is brought out, people sing and dance. There were two upcoming weddings celebrated, with candy throwing and exuberant singing. It was jubilant.

It was also welcoming. People helped us find seats or showed us where the prayer books were. One person who happened to have an Artsroll prayer book with English gave his book to Marc Bader so that

it would be easier for Marc to follow along. My friend Joshua Weisberg had arranged home hospitality. That gave everyone an opportunity to meet an Israeli family and get a sense of what it was like to live there. Shabbat was a chance to see the passion and fervor of this kind of Judaism. The warmth and singing of Kol Rina can only inspire us as we return to Kol Emeth.

Later in the day, Joshua Weisberg came to teach us Talmud as the sun began to set. Joshua teaches at Nishmat, a women's yeshiva in Jerusalem. Our room had a large space to gather with a panoramic view of Jerusalem. What an unbelievable setting to learn and sing and later join together for Havdalah. Deborah Winston was particularly struck by the beauty of the golden moon rising over Jerusalem.

Joshua brought two sources from the Talmud that demand we notice the needs of those around us. There is a story of a Hasid to whom Elijah the prophet would regularly appear. However, once he builds a gatehouse to his courtyard, Elijah stops talking with him. Why? Because the gatehouse is inside the courtyard, insulating him from the cries of those who are hungry or needy. Joshua taught us that it's not enough to live in our gated insulated communities and write checks to help the needy. We have to be open to directly hearing their cries.

Joshua's talk opened our eyes to one element of that view of Jerusalem. It's easy to see the contrast of the wealth of West, Jewish, Jerusalem, and the poverty of East, Arab, Jerusalem from the fourteenth floor. I am not sure of how to help, even, but we must be open to hearing their cries too.

Joshua's learning session was a great lead in for one of our activities on Sunday – visiting Hazon Isaiah, a social services agency and soup kitchen. Hazon Isaiah feeds people, offers vocational training, and provides dental care for those in need. We had a chance to learn about this special place and prepare and serve a meal to those in need. Cheryl Bader noticed a lovely part of this visit. She said that it was amazing to see our children take charge of serving and making sure everyone got a meal. We filled the commandment of feeding the hungry and made giving back a part of our trip.

That night we heard from Yafet Alemi, the only Ethiopian Conservative Rabbi. We heard about how difficult it has been for Israel to make a place for Ethiopian culture. His charitable foundation strives to help Ethiopians as a family unit. Previous efforts have aimed at educational initiatives or development projects. Yet family is the basis of healthy culture, so he strives to help Ethiopian families. Rest assured that you will hear more about what he is doing and how we can help!

There is more to share about our time at Machon Schechter, when we heard Rabbi Golinkin tell us about

the Tali schools, a Jewish studies curriculum for secular schools now in place at 10% of Israeli secular schools. Or our visit to the Israel museum and the Shrine of the Book (and the modern section with the bald guy with a chicken on his head). Or our visit to Masada and the Dead Sea. But let me share just one more incident.

On our way back from the Dead Sea, we saw a fire ahead. Earlier in the day, 5 Jordanians had crossed the border near a nature preserve with a unique ecosystem called Ein Feshka. As Israeli security forces were cornering them, one person threw a grenade. This set the whole preserve on fire. Fire fighters were containing the blaze, but the ecological damage was enormous. And totally senseless. As our wonderful trip came to an end, we saw this fiery reminder of how precarious living in Israel can be.

I am finishing this trip exhilarated and exhausted. Israel is where our people live and the problems in Israeli culture can only be addressed by people of faith and good will seeing it as our responsibility to address them. The Conservative Movement in Israel must succeed because Israeli culture needs another spiritual choice than the either / or that currently exists. Hazon Isaiah is feeding and training new immigrants, the elderly, young children, and helping to lift up the bottom of Israeli society. 60% of their budget comes from American Jews. This is a beautiful land filled with almost limitless potential. Though I choose to live in America, I want to be a part of solving those problems.

May we be blessed with an Israel at peace, an Israel blessed with continued prosperity, and an Israel that we love!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE SURREAL LIFE

JULY 2, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was on my home this afternoon from the Hartman Institute. I had an amazing day of learning, studying first with a noted Biblical scholar from Hebrew University, and then from one of my favorite teachers of Torah, Avivah Zornberg. Further, I had been studying in this wonderful and hopeful mix of Reform, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, and Conservative colleagues. So I was feeling hopeful and at peace.

Street signs in Jerusalem reflect the mixed nature of this city by being in Hebrew, English, and Arabic. As I got close to my apartment in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem, I saw that someone had spray painted over the Arabic writing on some of the street signs as if to erase the Arab presence.

Earlier in the week, I had seen a different view from my cousin. She is about to start her military service. She is very proud of her decision to serve her country. At the same time, she wanted to share with my children that she worked with a number of Arabs and had several Arab friends. She has the courage to defend her country and the courage to see that we are all created in God's image.

Then, as I came into the apartment, my wife gestured for me to come into the bedroom and talk quietly to her for a moment. I started worrying that something is wrong with one my kids. Carol tells me, "There was an incident with an Arab driver in a bulldozer on Jaffa street by the bus terminal. I haven't told the kids, but they let me know at camp." What a strange reversal of the prophecies of peace – the plowshare was turned into a sword.

I always find it surreal when I read of these incidents at home. My own life continues on its normal pattern while people thousands of miles away have had their lives overturned and a little piece of their security in day to day life stolen. Being in Jerusalem a couple of miles away from the incident amplified that surreal quality a thousand fold.

A close friend and colleague participating in this two week learning program with me still came over for dinner with his daughter. We still went to the kosher take out place around the block to get some dinner (with this guy who keeps giving us free food – try this, it's really good). Nothing changes, except for the people who have lost loved ones or been injured in this terrible incident. Nothing changes, except that one little bit of security that my day will proceed as planned has been stolen from me.

It resonates with what I learned earlier in the day with Aviva Zornberg. We were studying about Jacob and the birth of Joseph. Joseph is introduced by the Torah telling us Jacob is now settled. And yet, as the plot unfolds, we see Jacob's life torn apart by the apparent loss of Joseph at the hands of his brothers. Rashi tells us that Jacob wanted to be settled. He was looking for a sense of shalva, of release from anxiety about the future.

Rashi tells us that such release is impossible in this world. The plot of our lives is a lot thicker, a lot more inexplicable, than we might like. The Ishbitzer (19th Century Hasidic Commentator) teaches that Jacob was a perfect shepherd. He never lost a sheep. He now realizes, after losing Joseph, that he has sinned against the wolves. That is, it is exactly that inexplicable point, that place of terror and the unknown, that is also the source of hope. Jacob realizes that by trying to control everything, by trying to find shalva, he is shutting out change that can mean terror and loss but also change that can signify hope.

When Israelis yearn for shalva, for contentment that tries to pretend the Arab world doesn't exist, they are sinning against the wolves. They are spraying graffiti over Arabic writing as if they could then erase the Arab presence. I get it, especially after a day like this. That attitude, however, will never lead to security and makes it harder to achieve a real peace, a peace of completeness, shalom, rather than of empty contentment, shalva.

I don't know what that real peace would look like or how to get there. As a visitor to this wonderful place, I don't have thechutzpah to impose my solutions, either. The problems are real. The terrorist threat is ongoing and dangerous. And as the silliness earlier with the graffiti illustrates, dangerous in subtle ways as it damages the soul of Israel.

Tonight, writing this, I feel like my cousin has it right. She is ready to defend but also ready to befriend. I see so little hope in the attitudes of those who use terror to further their own narrow ends. I don't know or understand that world well enough to do anything other than pray for a change of heart. Yet I see a world of hope even amid chaos in the honest courage to turn away from shalva, the peace of ostriches, and towards shalom, the peace of heroes, by my cousin the almost soldier.

May God offer comfort to those in mourning after today's senseless loss of life, and offer healing to those wounded to no purpose.

Shabbat Shalom from the turbulent City of Peace,

Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL EDITION: AGRIPROCESSORS

AUGUST 7, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At the beginning of the summer, disturbing allegations about worker abuse, sexual harassment, and dangerous conditions came to light against Agriprocessors or Rubashkin Meats in Postville, Iowa. One of the major providers of Kosher meat in this country, Agriprocessors was the subject of the largest raid on undocumented workers ever. As a result of that raid, a number of state and federal investigations into safety and labor violations were initiated. Since those events several things have happened.

1. A group from the Rabbinical Assembly including Rabbi Eilberg went to Postville. They spoke with numerous former and current employees as well as their families. The testimony they heard was disturbing and problematic. They heard about sexual harassment, safety violations, and regularly dangerous conditions. They also heard of unfair labor practices, including charging employees for their safety gear.
2. OSHA has filed numerous charges against Rubashkin. In addition, they are now being charged for a number of child labor violations as well.
3. Rubashkin has promised to hire a new person to clean up their operation and to get rid of these illegal and dangerous practices. There has also been pressure on them from the Union of Orthodox Rabbis to fire Sholom Rubashkin as CEO and hire someone new. Neither of these steps have yet taken place, though both may occur at any moment.
4. A progressive Orthodox group first called for a boycott and then lifted that boycott a couple of weeks ago. They felt that Rubashkin Meats' promises indicated good will on the part of the company and a true desire to fix the situation. Given the natural reluctance of Jews to boycott fellow Jews, they felt better to show caution and trust that Agriprocessors will indeed implement these changes.
5. A group of Rabbinical Council (an Orthodox Group) Rabbis went to Postville at Agriprocessors' expense. They expressed their satisfaction that the plant appeared both kosher and much safer than they had expected. They met with a few current employees at the Plant but did not meet with worker representatives outside the plant or with those making the safety complaints. That same day (yesterday) an op-ed appeared in the New York Times from another Orthodox Rabbi expressing his continued concern about the facility and the appropriateness of boycotting even Jewish business when their business practices are unethical.

As a result, at this point, I continue to have concerns about Rubashkin meats. I agree with those who express concern about boycotting Jewish businesses without significant proof. Having said that, there is

now an ongoing concern that for me raises questions about the ethical status of Rubashkin meats. I don't know what is happening there, but at the very least there is a significant cause for concern, and at worst they have been truly abhorrent in their practices. For the moment, I intend to continue to refrain from Rubashkin products, continue to encourage local markets to look for other suppliers, and continue to follow this story actively. As Rubashkin begins to make good on their word to effect these safety changes, I will change my buying habits. But at this point I both want to keep the pressure on them and for my own ethical concerns I prefer to eat meat from a different source.

I will keep you posted if and when more information becomes available.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HAPPY BIRTHDAY GILAD

AUGUST 28, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was planning to resume CyberTorah next week for Elul. Give myself part of the summer to think and study, to recover some creativity. But then I saw something that broke across my consciousness and required a more immediate comment. Today, August 28th, is Gilad Shalit's 23rd birthday. It made me think of what a birthday is like in my own life. I celebrated my wife's birthday over the summer. We were together with family, we had cake and ice cream. I gave her some nice earrings. It was lovely. Gilad Shalit is having a very different experience today.

Gilad Shalit was captured by Palestinian terrorists in Gaza 3 years ago. In that time, there was a failed rescue attempt and numerous so far unsuccessful diplomatic efforts to secure his release. Since he is a French citizen as well, the French government has been somewhat involved, and the Papal Nuncio even unsuccessfully tried to negotiate for his release. But today, on his birthday, he is still being held hostage somewhere in Gaza.

Over the summer, there was a lot of progress on a prisoner exchange that would have gotten Gilad home in time to celebrate his birthday with his family. Yet as often happens with these kinds of negotiations, just at the moment when things looked truly hopefully, the discussion unravelled. Hamas had a list of over 400 people they wanted released from Israel prison, while Israel had only approved 70 names. In addition, Hamas wanted a cessation of Israeli military activity in Gaza as a precondition. With the continued launching of rockets into Sderot and even Ashkelon, the Israelis were unwilling to cease their own military actions. By the middle of August, it appeared that diplomatic discussions had stalled, though there is still some headway being made by the UN.

Gilad is almost certainly still alive. A letter was delivered to his family in June so he seems to be alive and reasonably healthy. But held in captivity now for three birthdays.

Birthdays aren't that big of a deal. In comparison to a bar or bat mitzvah, I think of them as a little thin on meaning and significance. I don't remember that many of my birthday parties in great detail, and recently all I want on my birthday is a cake, a card, and a little present. But they do mark time, reminding us of how precious each day can be. The Psalmist tells us that human life is 70 or 80 years if we are granted strength. Even if we make it to the Biblical 120 mark, and no one on Earth is that old today, it's still short. I want to make my days worthwhile, doing the activities that give me meaning.

For Gilad Shalit to have lost now two years of his youth in captivity seem so sad to me. Those were years of identity formation and learning for me, when I figured out the type of person I was going to be. Gilad has spent them twiddling his thumbs, held against his will.

It's easy for us to get overwhelmed by the large issues that come every day for Israelis and Palestinians as they struggle to find a way to peace. It's easy to see all the big problems and be overwhelmed by the near impossibility of overcoming them. Sometimes, though, it's worthwhile to focus on one person, one young man who has lost over two years because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I hope today you will pause for a moment to think of Gilad Shalit, and pray for his speedy release and current well being. May there soon and speedily be peace in the land of Israel!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Booth

CONNECTIONS ISRAEL

SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

One of the highlights of my trip to Israel was a meeting with Adi Friedman who heads up a group called Connections Israel. Connections Israel does exactly what the name implies – it is a charity committed to making connections between people, giving all of us who care about Jewish and Israeli life a chance to extend a caring and helping hand. I was so impressed by my time with him that I have agreed to be on their board.

Connections Israel strives to help those bearing heavy costs on behalf of Israel. One program links religious school students with an Israeli Defense Forces unit. Israelis bear this incredible burden of donating three years of their lives to the state of Israel. In America, most Jews go on to college or a year of travel after they graduate from High School. Israelis dedicate three years to defend the state of Israel.

This matching program allows American religious school students a chance to send food, Purim baskets, Hanukkah gelt, blankets, and other useful or thoughtful gifts to a specific unit. The members of that unit may also correspond with the religious school students. It's a way of transcending politics and making a human connection.

It's a wonderful connection. American students begin to appreciate the bravery and sacrifice of these Israeli young people, and these Israeli teenagers get a clear message that the Jewish world cares about them. They know there are people out there thinking and worrying about them. I am hoping to involve our religious school in this program.

Connections Israel has also been one of the leaders in helping the residents of Sderot over the last two years. Sderot, a development town on the border of Gaza, has been regularly receiving gun and missile fire from Gaza for over two years now. Sderot was never a wealthy place to begin with, and the violence has only made things worse.

Originally settled by Persian and Kurdish Jews, Sderot has become home to Ethiopians as well. The average income in Sderot is around 5000 NIS / year or under \$2000. Of the 10,000 residents, almost 4000 are either unemployed or receive some kind of government income assistance. These are not wealthy people.

Further, in many cases, they were settled there by the government. They didn't choose to live in Sderot – they were put there. Sderot was first settled in 1951 and is within the original 1967 borders. These are poor Israelis in need of our thoughtfulness and support.

Last year KE participated in a gift baskets program through Connections Israel. We donated nearly \$5000 and over 120 personalized cards. We contributed more than any other North American community. I would like to do even better this year, to send the clear unequivocal message to the people of Sderot that they are remembered and cared for by the Jewish world.

Connections Israel wants to send a gift basket and personalized card to every household in Sderot. The purpose is simply to wish people a Shana Tova – a good year filled with peace. It is our chance to let people in this development town regularly surrounded by gunfire and rocket fire know that we care, that we remember, that we want peace for them and the world.

I would like to invite people to participate in this gift baskets program again this year in two ways. The first is through financial support. A donation of \$36 buys one gift basket. I will be accepting donations through my discretionary fund. Please indicate Sderot on the check.

Second, and just as meaningful, is to make a personalized card wishing a family in Sderot a good and peaceful New Year. Please make the card as personal as possible – the whole point is to let families in Sderot know that we care about them personally. Tell them where you are from and who is in your family. Let them know, as I will, how much we wish to see an Israel safe and at peace. Cards can be dropped off at the shul office and will be mailed to Israel Sept 20th.

Kol Emeth has always been a community that loves Israel. I am delighted to partner with Connections Israel and find new ways of building personal connections, person to person. I am excited by the opportunity to let people in Sderot know that people in California care about them.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A BLUE FRINGE

SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“You shall make tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself. (Dt. 22:12)”

Each morning I get up and wrap myself in my tallit. I take hold of the Tallit and say the blessing, Praised Are You, God, who makes us holy and commands us to wrap ourselves in the Tallit. I then wrap the Tallit all the way around my head, so I that I am covered, enclosed, by the feel and smell of my Tallit. Since I used my Tallit in Israel, and in particular at the Western Wall and on Masada, that smell includes a bit of Israel.

I inhale, breathing in that smell of wool and me and Israel, imagining that I am taking in the breath of blessing. I then open my tallit, and breathe out, into the open cool air of morning. As I breathe out, I imagine my stress, my frustrations, my negative behaviors, all being exhaled like black dots, cleansed from within me by the warmth of my Tallit.

The Tallit is intended to remind us of who we are. In the book of Numbers God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to make tzitzit, fringes, on the corners of their garments. Then we are told, “Look at it and remember all the commandments of God and observe them so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded... (Num 15:39-40)” The Tallit roots me in my obligations of love. I look upon it and am reminded that I am clothed in holiness, that I can live my life as a person created in God’s image.

The Tzitzit have a particular appearance designed to spark our memory and attract our eyes. Following Ezekiel’s comment that God “took me by the tzitzit of my head” we learn that the fringes should resemble a lock of hair. There are a total of 39 ties, which equals the numeric value of “God is One.” Further, there are 13 knots, which when added to the numeric value of the word Tzitzit equals 613, the total number of the commandments. In the detail literally tied into the Tallit we are reminded of our faith, our commitments, our selves.

We are also commanded to have one thread that is tekhelet, a special shade of sky blue. The tekhelet thread is made from a particular snail called the Hilazon found in the Near East. It has always been an expensive dye. The Romans in particular treasured its color and hunted the snail to near extinction. Some believe the practice of wearing tekhelet disappeared because the dye was simply no longer

available, while others assert that the expense led the Rabbinic leadership of the time to forbid tekhelet lest it become a status symbol. Either way, the source of the dye was lost.

In recent years, Israeli scientists have rediscovered the Hilazon. It has been identified as a mollusk called the Murex trunculus. Most scholars, including many Orthodox authorities, accept the Murex dye as kosher Tekhelet. Suddenly we have an opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah unavailable to us since the late Roman era! Further, while the expense is significant (\$20-100 for one tallit's worth of blue dye thread versus about \$10 for the plain white threads) it is affordable, especially when considering what people are paying for a tallit for bar or bat mitzvah celebrations.

My tallit now has a thread of blue, a tekhelet fringe on it. I started wearing it about 4 years ago and I find it spiritually significant. The color creates a contrast on my tzitzit that draws the eye. It is colorful, a restoration of joy to the plain white. It reminds us that we are all created in God's image, that we are all royalty. But as it is one simple thread, it also reminds me of humility.

There are two good reasons to refrain from wearing tekhelet today. First, since only some people are wearing tekhelet, it might be taken as a boastful sign. In other words, look at how holy I am since I am observing this mitzvah correctly. Second, we have been wearing only white tzitzit for so long that it has taken on the force of custom.

I have chosen to wear tekhelet anyway because I feel so good about having the opportunity to observe this lost mitzvah. I hope for the wearing of tekhelet to become widespread in Palo Alto as it is becoming in many other communities. Though still far from the norm, it is widespread enough that a person can wear it in humility.

As we move closer to Rosh Hashanah, a time of renewal, perhaps consider adding a blue thread. That small act can be a first step towards reminding ourselves each day of who we are and what we can be.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SPIRITUAL STEPS FOR ELUL

SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Busyness is often a cover to avoid thinking about our life's direction. We can run around, doing all the time, and so stay away from asking the hard questions about who we are and what we can be. I notice this in myself as the High Holidays approach and I am making a conscious effort to find some time for the spiritual investment that makes the Days of Awe real.

It's Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashanah. Every morning the shofar is sounded, reminding us that the New Year is approaching. And every day is filled with busyness. Getting the school year started. Making sure my gutters are cleaned before the rains. I find myself giving people advice about how to get ready for the High Holidays, but not finding the time myself. So now it is time to speak but also to listen.

Some suggestions for getting ready for the High Holidays:

1. I am a list maker. There is something about having it in writing, being forced to commit in pen, that creates a greater impact for me. That is why this year I am suggesting that we make a list of three Teshuvah issues for this High Holidays season. To identify and put into writing three issues, failings, things about myself that I wish were different. Then I can begin to think about changing. In addition, I believe that healing is an essential element of change. The High Holidays are not only about our failings, they are also about that which is broken within us. Healing is an integral part of the High Holidays experience. So I want to make a list of three areas in my life that need healing. I want to identify areas within myself that God's compassionate aspect of mercy can strengthen. These two lists will become my prayer focus over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
2. Find someone with whom to share your own soul issues. Speech is a key part of the process of change. When we can share of ourselves, when we can hear from another their guidance to our issues, fears, and hopes, then we can create a real possibility for spiritual growth and healthy change. As always, Rabbi Graff and I remain delighted to find time with you for your "Annual Spiritual."
3. This is the time of year when I make my Tzedakah commitments. As I am asking God to show mercy to me, to care for me, I feel a necessity to offer my own mercy and care to others. For this reason, I intend to donate money to buy Rosh Hashanah baskets for people in Sderot and I invite you to do so as well. Please send in donations this week so they have the resources in time to distribute baskets for the New Year. In addition, I will donate 3% of my grocery budget to Second Harvest as well as participate in the food drive at the High Holidays this year. We make the world better by cultivating our

own aspect of righteousness. Then we have a chance to merit God's mercy.

4. Our clothes at the High Holidays, especially at Yom Kippur, are a means by which our external rituals inspire internal change. By making sure we have the right clothes, we remind ourselves to focus on our inner state as well. It is the custom at Yom Kippur to wear all white, following the promise of Isaiah that God will clean away our sins like the driven snow. Now is a good time to make sure that we have something white to wear.

In particular, many wear a Kittel, a plain white robe, so that issues of vanity that often surround our choice of clothes are put aside on this one day of change. I have seen many more people at KE wearing Kittels over the last two years. You can purchase a Kittel at Bob & Bob.

These are some suggestions of mine for Elul. If you have some practices or suggestions of your own I would love to hear them.

Saturday night at 10:30pm at Kol Emeth is Selichot, the service that officially marks the beginning of the High Holidays season. The time has come to set aside our busyness and to make time in our lives to focus on our values, on our faith, on our spiritual selves. I look forward to this time of growth and thoughtfulness with all of you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HEALING FOR ROSH HASHANAH

SEPTEMBER 25, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In spending time over the last few weeks immersed in the texts, themes, and practices of the High Holidays, I am realizing how central healing is to the experience of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Perhaps I am noticing this more as I have seen so much illness and loss over the last few weeks.

We talk a lot about Teshuvah, about repentance, at the High Holidays. It is a time to return, to change our behaviors so that we are reoriented towards God and goodness. Yet I notice in myself that change requires healing as a first step. My own failings and problematic behaviors are driven by insecurity and anxiety. For me to change, I first have to address those underlying fears and find the resources to heal.

Judaism is filled with resources of healing, including stories, prayers, and theology. The traditional prayer for healing that we recite on Shabbat says,

May God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah bless this sick person. May the Holy One Blessed Be God fill this person with mercy, to bring recovery, strength, and renewed life. May God send speedily a complete recovery from Heaven among all those ill in Israel, a healing of soul and of body, now and speedily, and let us say: Amen

To heal, we first recall our generational connection. We are not alone but rather connected in a marvelous chain of people of caring. Further, we ask for God's mercy, that quality rooted in the mother's womb, to fully embrace the person who is ill. From that embracing quality of mercy, healing is possible. Finally, we ask for a healing of both soul and body. We recognize the integral way in which the soul aids in the healing process. A recovery from sickness must include spiritual health as well as bodily health.

Healing also requires a willingness to be healed. Sometimes we become attached to our pain as an integral part of who we are. There is a story told in B. Berakhot 5b in which Rabbi Hiyya falls ill. Rabbi Yochanan goes to visit him and asks, Is your suffering dear to you? To which he replies: neither they nor their reward. Rabbi Yochanan extends his hand, and lifts up Rabbi Hiyya.

We have pain and hurt places that become dear to us. I know in myself the perfectionism and intensity that sometimes works so well for me also creates stress and hurt in my life. Yet there is a part of me that

is afraid to give that up, to step away from that behavior. It is a pain in my life that becomes dear to me. Only when I am ready to let the rewards of that suffering pass away can I be healed.

Further, we need the loving hand of a friend or healer to get up from our broken places. Texts and prayers are integral to the healing process. I treasure the opportunities to say a prayer with someone who is ill and watch the remarkable effect that moment can have. The human contact as we hold hands in prayer is essential.

This year as we get close to the High Holidays, I intend to look at some of the pain and hurt in my own life. If I want to change, if I want to let the words and possibility of change at Rosh Hashanah work within me, I first need to heal.

At this time of renewal, may God grant us all healing and release from the burdens we carry in our bodies, our hearts, and our souls. Return to us O God, and we shall return to You. Renew our days as of old.

Shabbat Shalom and L'shana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

WE ARE ALL IN GOD'S HANDS

OCTOBER 7, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The economic environment is helping me get into the right mood of Yom Kippur. At Yom Kippur, we are supposed to remember that the blessings in our lives come from God. We are supposed to realize that the good things that happen to us are gifts that we do not fully deserve. As I watch my retirement assets dwindle by the day, I need to remind myself that my security and my future come not from my 403b (the Rabbi equivalent of a 401k) but rather from God.

In B. Sotah, the Rabbis teach that the “katnei emunah,” the people of little faith, are those who “have a full pot of food today and worry about what they will have tomorrow.” I am astounded and intimidated by this definition. To accept the blessings I have now and be thankful for them is one thing. Yet this is asking for a higher level, of trusting in God for my basic needs in the future.

In affluent America, it's easy to become katnei emunah. We expect a certain level of comfort and standard of living. We expect to become wealthier than our parents and for our children to similarly outdo us. Again, katnei emunah are those who have a full pot of food today and worry what they will have tomorrow. I, who have plenty of calories at my ready disposal, am worried about my stock portfolio. Maybe it's time to take a moment and breathe.

The world is a dangerous uncertain place. We ask this time of year, who shall live and who shall die. The truth is as we look around at members of our community, at our families, at our friends, that many faces we see today will not be present next year. Some because of illness, some because of violence. Only God knows who will live to enjoy this year. And that basic existential angst is present every moment of our lives.

It's just that in our affluent surroundings we insulate ourselves from its reality. We are only in trouble in the hospital. We are safe as long as we have enough money. Our homes are warm when they should be warm and cool when they should be. Our food arrives conveniently, easily, and in many cases shrink wrapped.

At Yom Kippur we wear white as if to say: our vanity, the value we put in our appearance means nothing. We also fast, as if to say: we survive not on bread, but on that which comes from God's mouth. In other words, we remind ourselves of how contingent our lives really are. It is not our food, our clothing, our

stock portfolio that protect us.

What then protects us? Untanetokef gives us one kind of answer. Tefillah – a willingness to struggle with faith and open up our hearts to a God in whom we sometimes believe and sometimes doubt. Tshuvah – a realization that our own actions matter. That we are capable of being different and better and therefore must strive to change. And finally, Tzedakah – an energetic desire to help those most at risk, those most vulnerable to the insecurity of life, have help and protection. I admit, though, I struggle towards faith and finding my own way of answering these frightening questions.

I pray that we are all blessed with a year of health and happiness, and yes, even prosperity. But that regardless of the quantity of blessings we find this year, we value each one and do our part to bring blessings into the lives of others.

Gemar Hatimah Tovah – May we all be sealed for Life.

Rabbi David Booth

As we ask for God's love and mercy on us, it is time to show love and mercy towards others. Remember to bring a bag or two of groceries with you to Kol Nidre so that in this way we can help those in need in what is shaping up to be a year filled with economic challenges. And PLEASE note – Yizkor is at 11am Thursday morning.

ELECTION DAY

OCTOBER 30, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every Presidential election feels important, but this one more so than many in recent memory. The financial crisis raises the stakes in what was already a decisive moment in American politics. With the collapse of Tzipi Livni's efforts to form a government in Israel combined with continued Iranian hostility, this election has tremendous implications for Israel as well. Local issues are similarly of great significance, including two propositions that would amend the California constitution.

In such an environment I have a few thoughts and a prayer.

1. Get out and vote. I suspect that most recipients of CyberTorah do vote and that is really good. The best way to overcome concerns about special interests and voter fraud is to get out and vote. The higher the voter turnout, the harder it is to manipulate the outcome. This is especially true in a places like California that aren't swing states. Local issues matter and turnout means we the people are the ones in control of our democratic processes.
2. I believe in the resiliency of American politics. I have heard from those on the right and the left the catastrophic result from either candidate winning. I will make the following bold predictions. Four years from now, there will be another Presidential election. The United States will remain one of the great democracies of the world, with a crucial and significant economy. And this is true regardless of what happens Tuesday.
3. Israel matters. It's important that leaders of both parties understand how important our love of Israel is to us when we vote in American elections. This is both because of our own love of Israel and because of the great friendship that exists between the U.S. and Israel. Israel is a great friend in a complex region. Israeli and American strength are linked. Democrats and Republicans need to know how important an issue Israel is for us.

Each Shabbat we offer a prayer for the well being of our nation. Here is a prayer to recite on Election Day:

O God and God of our ancestors, bless this country with wisdom, insight, and caring. As we go out to vote, guide us to choose candidates who can lead us with wisdom and understanding. Help us also to choose policies for the good of all those who live here. "For all the people are prophets" – we are doing something special and even sacred in the act of voting.

May those chosen today as leaders and representatives be directed and guided towards just and righteous policies. May they find the courage and strength to set aside polling data and political handlers to enact policies for the good of this Nation and the World. Let this election be fair, open, and transparent as an example to the world of the resiliency and strength of democracy.

At this portentous moment, may our leaders and representatives chosen today find the wisdom and insight to lead us towards a new prosperity informed by humility. As they face the challenges of this world, may they be guided towards policies and choices that lead us towards a real peace, in which all the people of this world realize that we are each created in the image of God. Help them lead us toward the fulfillment of Your prophetic promise: "Nations shall not lift up swords against nation, nor study the ways of war anymore." So may it be Your will. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

NOVEMBER 5, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Among the most difficult issues with which Israelis wrestle is the role of Judaism in the state. Ben Gurion created a state sponsored Rabbinate composed of centrist Orthodox Jews to represent Judaism and control Jewish life. Initially rejected by the Ultra-Orthodox communities, their own demographic realities have made Ultra-Orthodoxy more and more the dominant form of Judaism in Israel. The Zionist Orthodox parties have largely collapsed, and the Ultra-Orthodox are in the process of taking control of the Rabbinate as well.

The dilemma here is especially poignant because there is so much that is wonderful about Ultra-Orthodox society. The quality and spiritual intensity of learning in the Ultra-Orthodox yeshivot is extremely high. There are many examples of truly righteous people whose formation of self is rooted in Mussar or Hasidic texts. The Nationalist Zionist Orthodox hold the Ultra-Orthodox community in high regard and have allowed themselves to be politically marginalized by them because they see these Rabbis and teachers as true examples of committed Jewish living.

Yet giving such an extremist separatist group political power is a recipe for disaster for Israeli society generally and even for the spiritual health of the Ultra-Orthodox community. After the scars of the Holocaust, this community sees themselves as the surviving remnant of Judaism. They must do everything they can to preserve their strict adherence to Halakhic norms. Any outside influences that may secularize them are bad. Left to form their own communities, such ideals may create something of great spiritual value. Empowered over other elements of Israeli society, it is an unfolding disaster.

One such issue centers around conversion. In May, a Rabbinate court presided over by an ultra-Orthodox judge had a couple come into his office for an uncontested divorce. Something he saw in the women's attire made him suspicious. Upon discovering that she was a convert, he ruled that her conversion was invalid because she appeared to be no longer living an Orthodox Jewish life. This ruling created a chain of events including a list of conversions from years past to be investigated to see if they were still living an observant lifestyle as defined by an Ultra-Orthodox Judge. It has also called into question the viability of any ongoing conversion outreach to the 500,000 non-Jewish Russian immigrants.

If those Russian immigrants are pushed away by Israeli society, it will create a permanent barrier

between the Russian community and other Israelis. Given the size of the Russian community, this would be a disaster for Israel. Where I see demographic concerns and a need to reach out, the Ultra-Orthodox are more concerned with having a tightly controlled conversion process that only admits more committed Ultra-Orthodox Jews. They should have every right to create exclusive communities. But we cannot give them the power to make all of Judaism so exclusive.

Israel officially only gives the Orthodox voice in religious matters. Conservative and Reform Rabbis cannot perform marriages, divorces, or conversions in Israel. As that Rabbinat has become more and more ultra-Orthodox, those powers are gradually being taken away from the centrist Orthodox Rabbis as well. That power has been corrosive for the Ultra-Orthodox community as well. There has been a rising acceptance of violence as a political tool. Graft and payoffs abound around issues of conversion and kashrut as well. Israel is at a precarious moment of identity.

The woman at the center of the Conversion debate has gone to the Center for Women in Jewish Law, an advocacy organization sponsored by the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. They are helping her pursue this case to the Supreme Court, which will hopefully send the case back to the Rabbinic courts for revision.

Rabbi Golinkin, President of the Schechter Institute, has been involved for several years now in advocacy on behalf of women's issues and conversion issues in this case and many others. He will be at Kol Emeth next Shabbat as our Scholar in Residence. As one of the leaders of the Conservative Movement in Israel, Rabbi Golinkin has been at the forefront of political advocacy on behalf of agunot, Russian immigrants, and many other groups disenfranchised by the Orthodox monopoly of religion. He will share with us both the political concerns and the textual interpretative arguments that lie at their core. It will be a special and sacred chance to learn together on matters critical to the long term health of the state of Israel. I look forward to seeing you!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SATISFIED IN ALL THINGS

NOVEMBER 20, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In Tampopo, Juzo Itami's fascinating film from the 1980s that explores human sensuality, the penultimate scene is a wish fulfillment fantasy. Tampopo, the protagonist of the movie, has been learning how to run the perfect noodle shop. Her male tutors have put her through an agonizing (and incredibly funny) ordeal of training and learning until finally all the elements of her ramen soup are perfect. Sitting in her restaurant, eating her soup, Tampopo waits for the ultimate test of success: will they drink the soup to the last drop?

Each of these friends and teachers in turn lifts his soup bowl and drains the last drop. Tampopo is jumping up and down in excitement and joy. As they get up from their soup and begin to leave the restaurant, they tell her, "You've won, Tampopo. You've won!" You've won – as if there is a moment in life where we say: now I have succeeded. I am now victorious. All my challenges and worries have disappeared.

"Abraham was advanced in years and God had blessed Abraham in everything." Ibn Ezra says, "He was given length of days, wealth, and children. These are all the desires of a person." That is, the Torah is telling us that Abraham has won. He has arrived at the pinnacle of success and can now look back and see that he has been blessed with everything.

Except those moments of success can be anxiety provoking. Sometimes when we get exactly what we want it serves to create only new fears and concerns. Sometimes when I have a great success my first feeling is concern. How will I rise to that same level again? I know that I ought to feel good and count my blessings. Instead, I worry.

Rashi notices this aspect of human nature when he says, "The word 'everything (b'kol)' equals numerically the word 'son (ben)'" Therefore, after he has a son he realizes the need to get him married." Having everything engenders a new concern for Abraham, a fear for the future. I am blessed with everything. How can I make sure that feeling of blessing can live on into a new generation?

We are living in such a moment of anxiety. The gyrations of the stock market engender concern about the everything that we have. With 5-10% swings daily, I wonder if the "kol" I have will disappear. I realize it is going to take more time and money to achieve a stable retirement than I thought three months ago.

Similarly, the wealth many of us planned to pass on to future generations feels more ephemeral or has already disappeared. Having everything, we now feel anxiety over its real or potential loss.

Further, the previous chapter related the death and burial of Sarah. The loss of Sarah reminds Abraham in a different way about the ephemeral quality of what we have in this world. Our lives are never guaranteed. So there is worry too of losing those whom I love, of losing my own life.

Yet Abraham is blessed with everything. As the Ishbitzer points out, the inclusion of the word blessed points us towards a different kind of having. The blessing of Abraham is to have a source of healing and blessing, a teaching about faith and meaning in life, that can sustain the world. Jewish mysticism uses this notion to imagine that the word “kol” points towards God’s presence. This is where God fulfills the promise that Abraham will “be a blessing.” “It is the foundation of all,” the means by which God’s presence, God’s Shekhinah, becomes an integral part of the world.

Tampopo wins. She gets everything she wants and in this kind of movie land wish fulfillment we never have to think about the next scene, the challenge that still awaits. The movie ends and her role is finished. Abraham by contrast is blessed. There are still worries and anxieties, still concerns about what the future will bring. But the word blessing and the faith it implies means there is also hope.

This is an uncertain world, filled with fears and concerns. The race goes not to the swift because life isn’t something to be won. Rather, it is the ongoing struggle even amidst fear and trembling to seek after hope and blessing. I know how to be anxious. I am trying to learn how to dwell in the blessing.

May the person of Abraham, the source of blessing for Israel, grant all of us a sense of wholeness, of healing, and of hope.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING MEMORIES

NOVEMBER 26, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My grandparents on my mother's side, may their memories be for a blessing, both passed away over the last few years. I spent Thanksgiving with them on several occasions. I have two memories in particular that I would like to share with you as part of my own spiritual preparation for Thanksgiving.

When I was around 12 or 13, my grandparents invited us to San Diego for Thanksgiving. I remember little of the meal, though I am sure it was nice enough. My strongest memory is of a walk along the beach with my Papa. My Papa was an intelligent intellectual man. It was wonderful as a young teenager to have him engage and talk to me as if I were an adult.

Thanksgiving brings people together. It is marvelous to see Americans across ethnic and cultural lines all celebrating Thanksgiving. Jews and Christians, Asians, African Americans, nearly all that makes up the multiplicity of American life, find this one day a shared holiday. We all make a point of spending time with people who matter to us. This holiday reminds us to appreciate our key relationships and to care for those special people in our lives. Remembering my grandfather reminds me to treasure such moments all the more because our time on this Earth is so limited.

Thanksgiving also reminds us to give thanks. Thanksgiving asks us to pause, to take note of the blessings in our lives. As Rabbi Graff pointed out last year at Rosh Hashanah, there is a lot of scientific research demonstrating that the posture of thanksgiving encourages psychological health. When we count our blessings, we become more blessed.

That is the purpose of the Siddur. It asks us to offer thanksgiving because we are training ourselves to be healthy people who focus on our blessings even as we address our challenges. We say of God, "Praised are you God to whom it is good to give praise." The Siddur does not say, "who deserves praise."

There is a place in prayer for questioning God, for being angry with God. Sometimes we may feel that God does not deserve praise. Yet prayer also compels us to focus on the act of giving thanks itself. That posture of hodayah, of thanksgiving, gives us the emotional resources to respond to difficulties and challenges.

This is what happened to my family the Thanksgiving before my Papa died. That year, my parents and my

sister and I went to their home in Omaha to have Thanksgiving with my Nana and to visit my Papa in the nursing home. Even though the day was overshadowed by my Papa's failing health, this too is a cherished memory because we found comfort in breaking bread together.

When I find myself beset with problems and stresses and fear, I try to remind myself of this moment and of the comfort we found in being together and in giving thanks. It is good to give thanks and remind myself to be thankful. The problems and stresses don't go away, but I do feel more able to meet them.

My grandparents influenced me in many ways. Though they have both passed away, they are still a part of me. This Thanksgiving I will take note of their absence, but also of their continued presence as I recall those things in my life for which I am thankful.

Here is a prayer I plan to say before breaking bread, before the Hamotzi:

Modim anachnu lach: we offer thanksgiving to you, the God of our ancestors, the God of my grandparents. You, God, connect us across generations. Hold safe the souls of our loved ones in Your bond of eternal life. We thank you for the blessings of their lives, for their continued impact upon us. We thank you also for friends and family who care for us, who offer us their love and support. It is their inspiration that propels us through our actions and choices to build families and communities and friendships dedicated to bringing holiness in the world. May the sustenance on this table remind us of how fortunate we are, for "You open Your hand and provide sustenance to all." Blessed are You God, who brings forth bread from the Earth.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Thanksgiving!

Rabbi David Booth

TRAGEDY IN MUMBAI

DECEMBER 3, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Our Hearts are Shattered...”

I arrived at minyan Thursday morning Thanksgiving day. The morning service, with its theme of thankfulness and appreciation to God for the miracles with us each day, seemed such an appropriate way to begin my celebration of Thanksgiving. I had left without reading the news that morning. At the end of the service, one of the participants asked if I could say something about the hostage situation “happening right now” at the Chabad house in Mumbai.

With a sense of immediacy, he told all of us the outline of what was happening. Terrorists had seized the Chabad house in Mumbai and were holding the Rabbi, his wife, and as would become clear later, 7 other hostages. At that point, it wasn't clear whether they were alive or dead. It would be late Friday before we knew they had all been murdered.

This ongoing horror colored my experience of Thanksgiving dramatically this year. The enormity of the tragedy is horrifying. As I write this, the official death toll stands at 174 innocent people. They were tourists and natives, men and women, adults and children. And they were killed and tortured because they were tourists, because they were Indians, because they were Jews. In memory of the murder of Rabbi & Rivka Holtzberg and all the others so tragically and senselessly killed last week, I intend to do three things.

First, I will remember that murderous, violent Anti-Semitism still exists in the world. This attack was awful from beginning to end. The targeting of Chabad is asymmetrical with the rest of what happened. Luxury hotels were the main target. Chabad was selected because it was a Jewish target catering to Israelis on vacation. Further, Indian news sources are reporting that the Chabad house victims were brutally tortured. If true, this further reinforces the Anti-Semitic quality of these attacks.

Jews were tortured and murdered. The terrorists never offered to negotiate nor did they make particular political demands. The plan was to murder. I remain a lover of peace and pursuer of peace. This story reminds me again that my love of peace must include a realistic knowledge of the continuing virulence of Anti-Semitism.

Second is to remember the blessings of family and community in my own life. The Hertzbergs had a two year old son name Moshe. The cook in the Chabad house, Sandra Samuel, claimed the two year old was her son. The terrorist allowed her to leave. Moshe's grandparents flew to India to get their grandson last weekend. There are 172 other such stories of grieving parents and children and grandparents.

Such tragedy makes me appreciate the blessing of my own family all the more. As I kept reading more tragic details of this unfolding drama, I appreciated all the more having my family with me. I hugged my children a little more than I usually do, I felt especially blessed to have my parents at my Thanksgiving table. In the memory of those families broken last weekend, I intend to appreciate all the more the blessing of family and of community.

Finally, the Hertzbergs themselves were Jewish idealists. Chabad shlichim go out with great idealism and energy. I imagine them leaving Brooklyn anticipating an incredible adventure. Their goals included inspiring secular Israeli tourists and other Jews about the beauty of Judaism and Mitzvah living. The dangers they expected probably included adapting to a new culture and finding enough resources to establish the Chabad house. They became innocent martyrs to God's holy name.

Rather than vengeance, I pray that their memory inspires me and others to take on more mitzvot. They wanted to inspire people towards mitzvah living. They literally gave their lives for that purpose. The Zohar teaches that the dead are clothed in the commandments observed in their name. I would like to provide them with beautiful and plentiful garments as we take the meaning of their life as an inspiration to spiritual living.

It is a great wonder and strength of Judaism that if Jews anywhere are at risk or lost, Jews everywhere feel their loss. At least 174 people died last week and many more were injured. We as a community focus most acutely on the Israelis and Jews lost, but we must remember all those hurt and killed. May God offer healing to all those harmed and comfort to those in mourning. Finally, may all those lost be bound up to God in God's eternal embrace. Amen.

Please join me and others from the Jewish community tonight at Kehillah High School, 3900 Fabian Way in Palo Alto, at 7:30pm to mourn this terrible loss in the Jewish community.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

HANUKKAH

DECEMBER 10, 2008

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The early Renaissance artist Raphael has a wonderful rendition of the key scene of the Hanukkah story. The picture dates from 1512 and is at the Vatican. In the scene, Heliodorus, Antiochus' servant, is lying on the floor in his armor after attempting to raid the Temple treasury. He is surrounded by several strong young men and a horse rearing at him. A large crowd (including Pope Julius who commissioned the work) stands and watches, pointing as the scene unfolds. The High Priest is at the altar praying.

The picture is active, with lots of motion and at least three different scenes within the scene. There are the onlookers, looking and pointing. One person has even climbed on top a pillar to get a better view. The onlookers are the most static of the figures, watching with interest but otherwise stationary. As Raphael moves away from the onlookers, two are talking to themselves, perhaps reacting to the implications of what is occurring rather than the event itself.

The second part of the picture is the curiously motionless image of the High Priest in prayer. He is concerned with God and matters spiritual and pointedly isn't looking at the scene unfolding next to him. Instead, he is facing up and towards the menorah, perhaps to connect the picture explicitly to Hanukkah. I couldn't tell whether the Menorah is 6 pointed, following the Biblical description of the Temple menorah, or 8, following our practice at Hanukkah. Raphael may have intentionally obscured this part of the image to create the ambiguity.

Finally, Heliodorus himself lies on the floor. He is being attacked by a knight that has appeared out of nowhere, presumably symbolizing an angel from God. This equestrian figure is then surrounded by several other unmounted attackers, presumably the Hasmoneans and those who followed them. A jar spilling gold on to the floor has been knocked from his hands. He is in the far corner of the picture, implying that all the others, whether watching, praying, or attacking, are unified in their desire to expel Heliodorus from the Temple. You can view the picture on [wikipedia](#).

According to the book of Macabees, Heliodorus was sent by Antiochus into the Temple to raid the treasury. It was this act of desecration that triggered the Macabbean revolt against Greco-Syrian rule. Though Raphael painted the scene based on the book of Macabees with liberal doses of his own era, there is every reason to believe this incident really took place. A stele was found recently mentioning the appointment of Heliodorus to "take charge" of the Temples. This scene brings us into the world of

history and politics.

Hanukkah is different than any other Jewish holiday. Its themes are martial, its interest the right to be Jewish. Unlike Sukkot or Passover and their deeply resonant eternal themes of spirituality and human freedom, Hanukkah is all about Jewish political freedom. It is a curiously modern holiday, wrestling with assimilation on the one hand and political power on the other.

What I love about Hanukkah, and about Raphael's painting, is the balance point between prayer and human action. Raphael's painting is all about motion and action. But some of that motion is prayer and some of it martial. Both are important to the progress of the picture. Sometimes our real world concerns for Israel or for us as Jews require a response in the world of geo-politics, but sometimes also there is a need for prayer. It is when those two elements of human action are balanced, says Raphael's rendition of the Hanukkah story, that we can change the dark circumstances around us.

There is a time for action and a time for prayer. As Hanukkah draws near and darkness surrounds us, let us neither be paralyzed into inaction nor turn away from reflective prayer. For when we pray in order to act, we can bring light back into a dark world.

Shabbat Shalom and a Happy Early Hanukkah,

Rabbi David Booth

CRISIS IN GAZA

JANUARY 8, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Several years ago, I heard a fascinating talk about terrorism and its efficacy. Conventional military might has proved useless against Israel and the West more generally. The overwhelming military advantage possessed by the United States, Europe, and Israel means that no state, however committed to the destruction of Israel or the West generally, will attack in a traditional fashion. From the Six Day War to the lightning march of the United States to Bagdad in 2002, Western armies have destroyed conventional forces.

Human ingenuity is a remarkable force, however. This defeat on the conventional field of battle led to a new strategy, namely terrorism unconnected to official state institutions. Terrorism is a remarkably effective technique for two key reasons. First, it has the ability to strike deep into the territory of those the terrorists oppose. Thus, suicide bombers at the Dolphinarium in Tel Aviv or rockets fired on Tuesday from mobile launchers into the Tel Aviv Suburbs. Where conventional arms could never create the terror and insecurity of such attacks, terrorism's unconventional nature makes such damage possible.

Second, the means by which terror functions frontally assaults the liberal values of the West. We believe in freedom of religion. Even though the terrorists are largely extremist Muslims, we cannot profile all Muslims lest we lose this key value. Certain segments of Wahhabi Islam are violent and do spread ideologies of hatred. Yet if we allow the terrorists to get us to treat all of Islam as the enemy we only increase the number of our enemies and lose any notion of religious freedom.

Further, terrorists hide themselves in civilian areas. We cannot tell who the enemy is. Some are supporters, as committed to the destruction of Israel as the leaders of Hamas. Others are innocent bystanders. And worst of all, some are Palestinian victims being used as human shields. That means fighting back becomes morally problematic. Israelis cannot allow missiles to be fired with impunity at their homes. They also cannot indiscriminately kill Palestinians and retain any sense of the value of human life.

Terrorism is incredibly effective because it subverts basic moral values that sustain our culture. Successfully fighting against terrorists requires a strong military response. It also requires a new type of war that reflects moral nuance. If Israel just rolls the bulldozers over Gaza we create more enemies than we destroy. If Israel does nothing, the security and integrity of the state will quickly erode away.

I am frightened by this incursion into Gaza. After the debacle of 2006 in Southern Lebanon, the survival of Israel hangs in the balance. Israel must act when cities like Sderot and then Ashkelon and now the outskirts of Tel Aviv are being bombed regularly. Hamas must be stopped. And yet, facing this unconventional enemy, victory is really hard to measure. Victory includes stopping Hamas, taking away their offensive capability. How can this be done when terrorists hide in hospitals, mosques, and schools? I am afraid that this will be the first of many such actions, incurring a greater and greater real and moral cost to Israelis.

Victory also includes creating a viable civil society in Gaza that will at least tolerate Israel. Because, as the failure of the recent cease fire proves, peace is more than the absence of violence. Peace is the presence of something good and sustainable. Gazans chose Hamas in a free election for many complicated reasons. Some of those include Hamas' ability to offer basic human services to the people of Gaza. Is there a way for Israel to ensure those human services happen outside of the terrorist infrastructure? I am afraid here too, because I can't imagine how such a civil society can be reconstructed from the ashes of Gaza.

At a time like this, I remind myself of God's redemptive power. God brought us forth from the darkness of Egypt, a hopelessness of 400 years, into the light of Israel and Torah. So I pray once again that God's redemptive power will show Israel's leaders a path towards peace.

May it be God's will to protect the soldiers who defend the land of Israel. May their hands be guided with precision and mercy. May loss of life for both Israelis and Palestinians be kept to a minimum. And may God guide the hearts of all those involved in this frightening fight towards a real and sustainable peace. A peace with a strong secure Israel and a flourishing peaceful Palestinian entity.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

This Shabbat I will explore this issue further by looking at a key text that provides a useful moral calculus when confronting terror. This learning will take place after the Torah service, no earlier than 11:15

FINDING HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

JANUARY 15, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am surrounded by darkness at this time of year. When I get up in the morning, the sun has as yet to even rise. When I return home each evening, it is already dark once again and has been for hours. The dark and the cold make this time of year emotionally challenging. All the worse, then, that events around us have similarly been filled with darkness.

Between the ongoing conflict in Israel and the disastrous economy, it's been a pretty awful start to 2009. It's easy in such an environment to give up on hope and give in to depression. That is why the story of Moses comes along at exactly this moment of darkness.

The Israelites have been slaves to Pharaoh for generations. The oppression keeps getting worse. Pharaoh has decreed that all Israelite baby boys shall be cast into the Nile. Finally, Amram, the man who could be Moses' father, separates from his wife. He gives in to despair, choosing not to bring a child into this world where a wicked king threatens the death of innocent children.

According to the Midrash, his own daughter Miriam then comes to him. You are worse than Pharaoh, she tells him, because Pharaoh is killing only the sons and you would kill the daughters also. Pharaoh is the man of gezirot, a Hebrew word meaning decrees. The word can also mean cutting. So decrees are those legal acts that cut up the world into categories and appropriate behavior.

Miriam challenges her father, as if to say, "Do not allow the gezirot, the cutting decrees, of Pharaoh to remove all hope from the world. For those cuts can cut away hope and light." And Amram returns to his wife who then gives birth to a son, Moses.

And when that son is born, the Torah tells us he was "very good." The language reminds us of the story of creation and inspires a beautiful Midrash. His mother noticed he was "very good." Well, don't all mothers think their children are very good? Rather, he glowed with a light reminiscent of the creation story.

Even in the darkness of slavery and oppression, the birth of Moses was the return of hope. It is the firm assertion that even in the darkest of times and places, there is light. Yet that light comes into the world only because people of good will and faith are willing to act. Amram's rediscovery of hope is the necessary precursor to the birth of Moses.

The days will begin to lengthen as a sign to us that the darkness of the moment can be lifted. Giving in to despair gives away our own agency in helping to lift the darkness. It is through hope that we can imagine a better world filled with peace and prosperity and begin to take the small steps of creating that world. Amram does a small thing – he returns to his wife, he rediscovers a willingness to imagine a better future. That small act changes the whole world.

Moses was unique. Never again will there be a prophet like him, says the Torah. Yet Amram's example is more attainable. Let us allow the voice of Torah, like the voice of Miriam to Amram, to remind us that there is still light and hope in the world. For it is that sustaining faith that carries us through to the light.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

RENEW OUR DAYS AS OF OLD

JANUARY 22, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A prayer for this time of new beginnings in the United States, and for a fragile hope for peace in Israel:

Renew us, God at this time of renewal.

Cause the rain to fall and the wind to blow,

Washing away darkness and despair, missed opportunities

Mistakes and failures.

Bringing instead new growth, green shoots and flowering blossoms

That promise possibility, change, hope.

Let the seeds and life that waits now for water

Be blessed to come forth, heralding in its growth a return back to You.

May the new leadership of this country be blessed

At this time of darkness and fear

With wisdom and compassion.

May they lead this Country

Into a new era of understanding, renewal, and prosperity.

May this historic moment inspire all of us to judge others

Not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character

And see our political culture renewed

So that the sound bites and talking heads

Are replaced by true debate over who we are

And what we can be.

As you bring the rains and wind, we see also a fragile opportunity for peace.

May this cease fire, with all its problems and fragility,

Become an opportunity seized by two cultures with both hands

To create peace in the world.

To build rather than to destroy.

To see our faith in You as Jew or Muslim or Christian
A requirement to create something from nothing.
To find from the few dying bushes and plants
That once symbolized a chance for peace
Renewal, growth, new life
And so a chance for peace.

We turn to You in hope,
Because only through hope can we imagine
A world filled with peace and prosperity once again.
So we turn in prayer to You, for whom “nothing is too marvelous”
We turn in hope,
Ready to change, to grow, to be renewed as of old.

Renew our days as of old.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that I am leaving for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality this Sunday and will be out of the office all week, returning just before Shabbat on Friday. As a result, there will be no CyberTorah next week. I look forward to being in touch upon my return.

SHABBAT OF SONG

FEBRUARY 5, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Music is the language of the soul. Music also possesses an honest quality that day to day speech lacks. For the eloquent, the temptation to use words to convince can be overwhelming. When that happens, language becomes a tool for control rather than a means of communication and sharing. Similarly, all of us lie, even to ourselves. There are certain truths too frightening to share with others, and sometimes too overwhelming to be given voice at all.

Speech can have great integrity. The teachings and laws of Moses are an example of speech from a deep place of meaning and love. They are revelation because they emanate from the most honest place within Moses. That honest place touches God and led to speech that rings out across generations because of its integrity. This is the real secret of prophecy.

Song, however, is a more accessible medium of integrity. There is an ability to express our deepest yearnings, joys, fears, in song in a way that would be too frightening to actually speak. Lyrics can speak to us across time and space. Certain tunes, also, can remind us of times and places long gone.

Several years ago I led a Passover Seder at a nursing home. Most of the participants were quite elderly, and several had lost the ability to speak at all. When I started to sing familiar tunes like the Four Questions or Dayenu the participants suddenly were engaged and singing. People who hadn't meaningfully interacted with anyone in months suddenly were paying attention and a part of the music. .

This is why, as the Israelites were crossing the Sea of Reeds, they burst into song. There is a pure expression of joy from men, women, and children as they cross through the open waters to freedom. "Who is like you God... in Your love You lead the people You redeemed." And then Miriam and all the women took up their timbrels and danced and sang. They found in that moment the honest expression of their overwhelming joy, free from theology, analysis, logic. Simply a pure expression of that moment's faith.

When I hear Mi Chamocha, who is like you, I remember Friday night services when I was a boy at Peninsula Sinai in Foster City. Those words, spoken thousands of years ago, still resonate and connect me to my sacred past and to my immediate past. That is the holy power of song.

Niggunim, wordless melodies from the Hasidic tradition, are the purest expression of the emotional and spiritual power of song. A Niggun expresses a feeling and therefore engenders a spiritual state. It is a pure expression of feeling because there are no words at all. And so it can be the honest expression of who I am in this moment in a way that words are always an explanation, an analysis, a picture of who I was just before I said those words. Song is in the moment where words always describe the past.

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song, because we read the Song of the Sea Shabbat morning. When we sing, especially together in community, we can connect to a deep inner place that the music allows us to express. Logic, thoughtfulness, organized thought, gives way to pure feeling. We need such moments of expressiveness to remind ourselves who we are. As we will say on Friday night, Come let us sing!

Shabbat Shirah Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

GOD'S PRESENCE FILLS THE EARTH

FEBRUARY 12, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Two weeks ago, candle lighting on Friday was at about 5:15. Since Kabbalat Shabbat starts at 6pm, I could either drive over immediately after candle lighting but before sunset, or I could wait 5 minutes and walk over. I made a good decision, in part because I was not quite ready to go. I decided to walk.

As I walked through the Gunn parking lot on my way to Kol Emeth, I could see the Santa Cruz Mountains in the distance with the sun setting over them. The colors in the sky were vivid, with changes of hue all across the dome of the sky. The eastern horizon was brightly lit from the reflected light to the West. I stopped short to notice this overwhelming beauty, to take a breath, and allow myself to be filled with gratitude for such a world.

This is how I understand the Prophet Isaiah's vision of God when he hears the angels saying, "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! The whole world is filled with God's glory." The angels look upon God and are filled up with a sense of God's presence. That spontaneously moves them to be filled to overflowing with a sense of holiness. Then they call out to one another and allow this uniquely individual experience to become a communal moment.

As Isaiah witnesses this marvelous exchange, he too is filled up with a sense of gratitude, of joy, of love of God. Then, when God calls out, "Who can I send?" Isaiah is ready to say, "I am ready; send me." Just as the far horizon is filled with sunlight as the sun sets, so also we are filled with a refracted sense of God's glory. God's glory fills the Earth; we have moments of being filled and whole as well.

That is why Isaiah's vision is associated with the Ten Sayings. They are two sides of the same coin of revelation. Isaiah's vision is the experience of the individual being filled up, healed, and inspired by God's overwhelming presence in the world. The Ten Sayings are the voice of that inspiration.

Hearing God's voice, we are motivated toward moral behavior in our actions. This moment of revelation turns the Jewish people towards honoring our parents and remembering to allow for Shabbat in our lives. Shabbat allows the space for quiet reflective time in which we remember and reawaken the feeling of God consciousness in our daily lives. Similarly, this sense of wholeness, of gratitude in the sheer wonder of creation and the gift of life, turns us away from choices that dishonor our supernal feeling, actions like theft, murder or adultery. All are acts of betrayal that negate the value and godliness of

others. When I am filled with the sense of wonder Isaiah describes, I am ready to heed the call towards tikkun olam, repair of the world.

That Friday evening, for just one in breath and one out breath, I was filled with this kind of God consciousness. It's a hard moment to share with others because it was uniquely me in that place and moment. But the angels turn to one another and share their sense of awe in God's holiness. So I turn to you as well, saying, God is holy and God's glory fills the Earth. I knew that at the Gunn parking lot Friday as the sun was setting.

Isaiah tells us that when we listen, when we allow ourselves to hear these moments of joy and wonder as experiences that awaken God consciousness in our lives, then our hearts will understand. Further, this type of comprehension transcends the intellectual. It is a heart felt quality that causes us to turn towards healing. And that feeling strengthens us to say, hineni, I am ready. Ready to open myself up to the dual call for tikkun nafshi, healing of the soul, and tikkun olam, healing of this marvelous world so in need of repair.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PARADE OF PYGMIES

FEBRUARY 19, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last week, a key election took place in Israel. As is often the case, the future of Israel hangs in the balance. Yet the results reflect deep systemic problems in Israel's political culture. They also demonstrate distrust and lack of excitement on the part of the general populace. The result is an inconclusive election with many fragmented parties.

10 years ago Labor and Likud usually received 40 or so seats. That meant it was relatively straightforward to form a coalition with the help of a few smaller parties and that the main party in the coalition possessed an ability to implement its own policies. This election no party exceeded 30 seats. Forming a government necessitates many small parties. Each one has to be offered cabinet seats or some promise on their atomized agenda.

Further, the king maker in this election is a demagogue in the style of Joseph McCarthy. Avigdor Lieberman has captured the imagination of the Israeli population by demanding loyalty oaths from Israeli Arabs. He garnered 15 seats, making him an essential part of any coalition. Except for a national unity government, that is.

Israeli politics finds itself paralyzed for several reasons. First, the threshold to get a seat in the Knesset is 2%. That creates an incentive for relatively small interest groups to establish their own parties rather than joining a larger coalition. As long as they can get 2% of the vote, they get seated in the Knesset. A threshold of 5% would be much healthier for Israeli society. However, this solution would make it almost impossible for the Arab-Israeli parties to be seated.

Another key reason for the paralysis in Israeli politics comes from the system itself. Representatives are selected by each party and then seated based on how well the party does in the election. As a result, nearly all the representatives in the Knesset are from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Smaller areas receive little to no representation.

Winner-take-all elections by locality would be a huge improvement for Israel. It would shrink the number of parties by creating a pressure in each locality to form a winning coalition. Further, it would allow for a diverse representation in the Knesset that would include residents of places like Sderot and Eilat and Arab-Israeli areas alongside representatives from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

A third issue in Israeli politics is the corrupt and unrepresentative quality of the Knesset. Over the last few years, some new party has captured the public eye and garnered significant seats in each election. Then, as they become part of the establishment, that party fades into obscurity, replaced by the next new thing. Thus the Pensioners party last election, and the demagogic Israel Beityanu party led by Lieberman this election.

That ability of a new party to become essential to coalition politics reflects Israeli disgust with the existing parties. It does not seem to matter if Kadima or Likud is in power. Further, as virulently as they campaign against one another, they somehow seem able to join together in a coalition after the election. So it's easy to say: let me make my voice heard in a different way.

The rise of Avigdor Lieberman highlights the long term dangers of a system of ongoing corruption and paralysis. When all the choices for Prime Minister are pygmies, why not vote for a giant, even if he is a demagogue? When politics are paralyzed, the attraction of radical solutions rises. If we are making no progress towards peace, well, then let's try something different. In such an environment, democracy itself is at risk.

Jewish history shows our greatest concerns are always internal. Israel is strong enough to stop the combined might of the Arab world. Terrorism remains an ongoing threat, but a unified Israel is capable of securing its people. Further, as elusive as peace may seem, Israelis remain surprisingly, amazingly, open to its pursuit.

The real problems are internal. A government of pygmies demoralizes Israelis ready to pay a real cost for peace. A government of tiny parties of corrupt leadership inspires further atomization. Democracy requires a greater level of faith from the people, and deserved trust on the part of the leadership. Israel will thrive, but only as a democracy committed to human rights.

May the parade of pygmies somehow give way to a new and healthy political culture capable of addressing the concerns of Israeli society.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CYBERTORAH FEEDBACK

FEBRUARY 20, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

To all,

I received many comments to my most recent CyberTorah about the Israeli elections. I really appreciate all the comments. One thread that emerged from a number of people was concern about my word choice, and in particular a feeling that I was being overly disparaging of Israeli leaders. In retrospect, I can absolutely see why people feel that way.

So allow me to apologize and clarify.

1. It's a terrible job to be an Israeli politician right now. The choices are worse to impossible. Further, living in the shadow of the founding generation makes even people of real quality appear small. Though I am concerned about the inability of either Likud, Kadima, or Labor to build a centrist party, and though I see that coming in part from the quality of leadership, these are people responsible for and who do feel the weight of keeping the Jewish people safe. I apologize for being insulting and too general in my language.

2. There is a problem of political corruption in Israel. There is also a problem of the Knesset representing the people rather than elite interests. Having said that, context matters. It is still a functioning democracy. Though there are serious problems, the Israeli government has a system that allows for change and for voices to be heard through the political system. I should have been more clear to say that corruption is real there, and denudes trust. By the same token, Israel is a real democracy struggling to find the right system to represent an extremely diverse society. It is a vast overstatement to say that the Knesset doesn't represent Israelis. It would be more accurate to say that the Knesset doesn't sufficiently represent small localities.

3. I really love Israel and look forward to travelling there again hopefully this December with a Kol Emeth group. Part of loving Israel is learning and thinking and even criticizing. However, this ought to be done in a respectful and caring way. I apologize for language that lacked this quality.

May we soon be blessed with an Israel at peace with her neighbors, and an Israel that has the desire and the time to wrestle with the real ill and challenges that this wonderful and thriving democracy faces in

its struggle to be a true homeland for the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HEAR O ISRAEL

FEBRUARY 26, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There are volumes of books and lectures on effective communication. Since Aristotle people have thought about convincing speech and how to sound compelling to an audience. By the same token, interview skills tend to focus on how we present ourselves, making sure we are ready to have the interviewer see us as employable. From politicians to academics to job seekers, we think a lot more about speaking than about listening.

Yet listening, really paying attention to someone and being focused on what they are saying, is a rare skill. To listen means to set aside myself for a moment and be present in what you are saying. It means to listen without preconception, without judgment, to be open and to hear.

Often when we listen, we are thinking of how we will respond. For debate and other forms of persuasive speech, this makes a lot of sense. However, when we are listening in order to speak, we don't really hear what the other person is saying. Further, often when we listen, we are forming conclusions before the person is done talking. When we do this, we lose the ability to hear the nuances and emotion being expressed because our own mind is already made up.

Torah is all about communication, about opening ourselves up to hearing God. Torah asks us to listen – Hear O Israel – but also gives us techniques and methods for listening. God has Moses set up the Tent of Meeting to create a space that invites this kind of receptivity. That Tent is a place for listening and speaking, for silence as well as prayer. This one location then teaches us how to listen in every location, for “God’s glory fills the Universe.”

Moses is transformed in the Tent of Meeting by learning the lesson of receptivity and silence. His face glows with an unearthly light that frightens the Israelites. Through prayer and quiet, he has discovered openness, honesty, self-awareness. He is so fully present that the rest of us, half asleep, hiding from our failings and insecurities, need him to cover his face again. Only then can we bear to look in our own faces after seeing what we could be.

The Golden Calf, by contrast, is all about speech as acquisition. The people demand that Aaron build it. It brings out a frenzy and demands of all that they join in the dance. The frenzy compels, making the people feel as if they are something larger. Yet it fails to cut to the core, to reveal the honest essence of

each participant. Were the dancers to listen for even a moment, to peel away the layers of fear and insecurity that the Calf hide, individuality would re-emerge. So it cannot stop, it cannot listen – it can only sing, dance, and speak.

The Tent of Meeting and the Golden Calf are remarkably similar to one another. Both speak to our inner selves. Both call a reaction from our wounded places. Both invite a moment of transcendence. The only difference is the invitation to listen and to be fully present. The Golden Calf is speech to cover insecurity, a transcendence of self that lowers us. By contrast, the Tent of Meeting listens to who we are, including our insecurities and fears, and enables a transcendence that connects to real holiness.

Listening in order to hear, listening in the way the Tent of Meeting invites, is hard because it means setting our self aside as we listen to the person in front of us. It requires me to set aside my opinions, my judgments, my desire to convince. It necessitates taking a focusing breath to be present. I can't be thinking about my email or my to-do list or what I had for breakfast. I have to be present and thinking only of you as you speak.

Easy as it is to say, this kind of listening is demanding and different from how we usually listen. The Golden Calf mode is all over CNN, MSNBC, and FOX. It's the mode we see in blogs and on line discussions. Its pervasive quality deludes us into thinking it's the only way.

But the enterprise of building the Tent of Meeting is an invitation to a different more present mode that allows us to listen. I invite all of us to use these next few weeks as we read of the Tent's construction to refocus how we listen. I want to allow it to be a time for me to learn again, to construct within myself anew, the capacity to listen, to be fully present, to hear the voice of another. If we do that, we will discover the holiness contained within that sacred Tent of Meeting.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah next week. I will be in New York City Tuesday to Friday for interviews and meetings with educators.

THE RETURN OF DREYFUS

MARCH 12, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In the last few years, college campuses have seen a rise in anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic activities that I find disturbing. Israel Apartheid week, held last week on college campuses around the world, does little to advance discussion and thoughtfulness around Israel and Israeli policies. I would like to see college students considering how Israel treats its Arab minority. Yet reducing a complex situation to “Apartheid” only sensationalizes. To me, such language only promotes hatred and anger.

By the same token, Akiva Tor, consul general for Israel, went to San Jose State a few weeks ago. His talk was so disrupted by students that he ended up being escorted off campus amid concerns for his personal safety. Akiva Tor is an official representative of the state of Israel. One might disagree with him; one might protest him and the government which he represents. But physically threatening his health and safety only expresses hatred.

Similarly, when Daniel Pearl’s father, Judah, appeared at UCLA two weeks ago, he received a number of death threats. Daniel Pearl was the Wall Street Journal reporter beheaded in Pakistan because he was Jewish a few years ago. His father has become a speaker in support of Israel and the fight against terror. People may disagree with the conclusions he draws from his own personal experience. People may choose to protest his appearance. But I can’t accept making death threats against the father of someone killed violently because he was Jewish.

In recent weeks this trend has directly harmed a member of Kol Emeth, John Moghtader. John is a student at UC Berkeley who was elected to the Student Senate. He has also been involved in Israel advocacy. In November of last year, a group of students put up a Palestinian flag at a concert organized by the UC Berkeley Jewish community. A group of students went over to ask them to take the flag down.

After the incident, three of the students who had put up the flag accused one of the other Jewish students of physically assaulting them. The charges were subsequently dropped and John was never accused of anything. Later, a woman involved in the incident claimed that John had attacked her, though she never filed any formal charges.

That led to a student effort to have John recalled from the Student Senate. After extremely low turnout and some voting irregularities, John was recalled from the Senate. No other Senator has ever been

recalled from the Berkeley Senate. I can imagine, in the loud political culture of Berkeley students disagreeing with John's outspoken positions on behalf of Israel. But baseless accusations make it look like he was removed from the Senate purely for being Jewish and being outspoken on behalf of Israel.

I feel really badly for John and his father, Hessam. College is supposed to be a time of debate, argument, and political activism. This kind of baseless hatred is just awful for him. John feels strong at the moment, and wants people to know what happened. A number of our congregants have been offering assistance to John as he goes through this terrible ordeal, and I hope he is aware of his own courage as these events have unfolded.

I hope for a lively discussion of Israel. Yet I find it disturbing when some use concerns about Israeli actions as a cloak for their own agendas to delegitimize Israel as a state. And I find it even more upsetting when people are silenced amid death threats for speaking strongly because that feels like bigotry and hatred. And I find it especially disturbing to realize that college campuses are the focus of such activity.

May there soon and speedily be a day in which we can all learn from one another, in which we are open to genuinely hearing the voice of the other. For in such a day, hatred, anti-Semitism, and bigotry will wither away in the sound of true openness. And then peace will dawn on the morrow. May it be soon and speedily,

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 18, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items are limited to fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. All of these items are produced without the use of Chametz. If an infinitesimal quantity of chametz should accidentally have fallen into these items, it is considered void prior to the start of the Holy Day. If they are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover.

In addition, following the ruling Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use

chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent.

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah next week. I plan to be busy getting ready for my son's bar mitzvah!

THE PROPHET ELIJAH

APRIL 2, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Lo, I will send the Prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with their children and children with their parents so that when I come I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction” (Malachi 3:23-24).

I never used to believe in or pray for the Messiah or the Messianic era. I felt that such promises were “the opiate of the masses.” The Messianic idea appeared to be no more than a way of dealing with historic catastrophe and loss. This view suggests that this world in which I live might be filled with the Temple’s destruction and exile, but there is another world waiting to be born in which all such evils will be corrected. Such a notion struck me as comforting but untrue.

The Talmud teaches that Shabbat is a taste of the world to come. My life experience has gradually shown me what this really means. During the week, I am pulled this way and that by the loving obligations I have chosen in my life. Finding my own centered self requires prayer and moments of reflection in the midst of my day. But it’s hard to find the time, and it’s harder still to be focused and fully present.

By contrast, Shabbat is an invitation to live in a more complete way. To pray without thinking of the time. To enjoy lunch and study without feeling regret in my choice. To have the sacred space to remember who I am and so be restored for the rest of the week. It focuses me here and now. I can’t travel, I can’t make phone calls or use my computer. So my only choice is to be here and to reinvest in my own soul. Shabbat is a taste of more complete living, of an experience of wholeness hard to attain the rest of the week.

This past Shabbat for me was such an experience of wholeness, a taste of the world to come. My son, Joshua, celebrated his bar mitzvah in the presence of a marvelous community. If you will forgive the proud father, it was incredible to sit and daven as my son led me in prayer, read from Torah, and shared words of learning. But what was more incredible was the taste of the next world – a hint of wholeness and healing.

I have lived in a number of places over the course of my life and have a similarly mobile family. In the last three years, I have made a home here at Kol Emeth and in Palo Alto. There were people who welcomed me from day one and have been integral to KE for years. There were others whom I have met more recently, some studying with me now for conversion, others new to our community, who came and were

part of this Shabbat. So to look out and see a living breathing dynamic community of caring moved me beyond words.

For we are constructed in part through the people we love. So to look out and see people from the community, along side friends from High School, colleagues, and family from near and far, gave me a sense of many disparate parts of myself being united. There was a taste of completeness that usually lacks as I struggle to find the balance between community, family, and friends. A taste of the world to come.

The celebration showed a strength of community as well. I am so grateful to all the people who baked, who helped serve the food, and who helped me cook the kugels. It was a celebration for the community that happened with the help of the community. Several long time members noticed, telling me that the kiddushes always used to be like that. What an amazing thing.

I still have my doubts about the Messiah. Yet these hints of completeness and healing remind me of the possibility of something different. Perhaps redemption means the kind of congruence between soul and self that I glimpsed last weekend. A meeting place in which our inner self becomes fully actualized with our external reality. I can with intention and faith pray for that kind of redemption.

Though the joy fades as the world's voice makes itself heard again, I want to carry that taste of the next world with me into Shabbat HaGadol and then Passover. The feeling fades even as the memories remain from that wonderful and great day. Yet now, as I engage in the journey towards redemption, I feel like I have the merest taste of what the promised land really is.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will take a Passover rest, and return in a couple of weeks.

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

APRIL 23, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was struck during Pesach by how much we talk about our stories and our experience. We as a Jewish people experienced oppression and poverty and we rejoice in having found freedom. So we tell of the plagues and we sing dayenu and remind ourselves of our stories.

The Haggadah loves our stories of oppression and redemption. We go right from the four questions, when we expect to hear of the Exodus from Egypt, and start hearing about Lavan's oppression of Jacob. Louis Ginzberg argued that this odd passage is really code and that the Rabbis are telling of their own experience under Roman persecution.

Later in the Seder the door is opened and in traditional Haggadot we ask God to "pour out Your wrath." This passage, written immediately following the Crusades, puts yet another moment of Jewish darkness into the narrative of the Haggadah. As an aside, every year I invite one guest to tell us how to treat this somewhat disturbing passage. So some years we have read it as is with explanation about context. Other years we have omitted it and focused only on hope. And in still other years we have read other texts, including the medieval revision titled "Pour out Your love."

In all these places, we tell our own stories of darkness embedded in the hopeful quality of the Seder. Just as God once brought us through the darkness of midnight to the dawn of redemption, so also in each of our stories of darkness there is the possibility of light. And for this we pray.

Yet the Seder, for all its hopefulness, is inwardly focused. Only on the margins do we recall the stories of others, or see ways in which the narrative expands. Many of us have the custom of removing a drop of wine for each plague to recall the suffering of the Egyptians. Many of us recall hunger and poverty more generally when reading of the bread of affliction. But overall, the Haggadah focuses us on the particular rather than the universal.

There is a strength to this inward focus. The Seder focuses on Israel to remind me that Israel ought to hold a special place in my heart. Suffering and darkness are found elsewhere, but I take as my special responsibility the challenges facing Israel. That inward focus also reminds me that my own problems and challenges matter and that the light of a new dawn waits for me too. Trivial as my issues may feel at particular moments, they matter and are part of this narrative.

Yet the Seder, by telling these stories, by reminding us that there is a new dawn yet to come, invites us to see anew the sufferings and difficulties of others. It is from the particular that we learn the universal. We tell our own story of oppression and loss of freedom and that inspires in us a concern for those oppressed or suffering from poverty around the world. We have the courage to tell even of our own anger and so remember how oppression and destruction can lead to anger and away from peace. And the dawn promised by the Seder provides a new light that gives us the strength to see the sufferings of others and to strive to help.

I intend to use the occasion of this Passover now past to bring the other narratives that hover in the margins of the Haggadah more front and center in my own life. I want to do more especially at this time of economic hardship to feed those still eating of the bread of poverty. I want to do more to bring an end to oppression, terror, and violence throughout the world. And I want to look at my own closed off places, the places where I bring darkness into the lives of others, and find a new light of renewal for me that engenders greater compassion in me.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Hametz

Rabbi David Booth

YOM HAZIKARON & HAATZMAUT

APRIL 28, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In Israel, Memorial Day and Independence Day occur back to back. It's a startling choice that juxtaposes the prices of freedom with its joys. Israelis are reminding themselves of the necessary intrinsic cost of something and its perceived worth.

Israel exists because of an act of will. Theodore Herzl took a nascent national effort and galvanized it into a viable group. He recorded the details of his dream in a book called Altneuland, a Utopian vision of a Jewish state written in 1902. That book is the reason the JNF forest is Pine trees. Herzl, in imagining a reclaimed Israel, described vast groves of Pine trees. So even though Pine trees aren't the best choice for the climate, the Jewish National Fund planted them to fulfill Herzl's vision.

And that obstinate quality is what brought Israel into existence. European Jews generations removed from agriculture moved to Israel to start Kibbutzim. 95% of that first generation of pioneers returned home because of how brutal the conditions were in Israel. And then came the refugees. They came from destroyed Europe, they came from Arab lands, and together they built an amazing country.

Ben Gurion, the founding Prime Minister, would put these refugees wherever he thought Israel ought to have a city. So people from Yemen ended up in Sderot. People from Russia might be sent to the North. We remember their losses and sacrifices as well, for they too built Israel.

Lizie Doron in her book There Once Was a Family Here captures this experience of this post-Holocaust generation. Her mother, who lost a finger, says, "With these nine fingers we built a state!" It is an ironic assertion of meaning by the post-settler generation. They too paid a price, they too built a State.

The one piece of Herzl's vision that remains tragically unfilled is the promise of peace. Herzl imagined a Middle East where Jews led the Arab world into a renaissance of growth and prosperity. That admittedly colonialist vision has ended much more tragically.

And so Israelis continue to pay a regular price for their country. Israelis give up three years of their youth to defend their country. These teenagers aren't politicians making the big choices that may or may not foster an environment of peace. These young people are "the silver platter on which the State was born."

So today let's remember their sacrifice and their prayer. Their sacrifice: having given their lives in the service of our people. Their prayer: that we fulfill the promise of peace envisioned by Herzl so that such sacrifices become a distant memory.

I want to invite everyone to find one minute over the course of today to remember the fallen of Israel. To pause for a moment and to breathe the fresh clean air breathed by soldiers and others who have built this place we love so much. And as we each pause and exhale, to imagine Israel at peace, an Israel that fulfills our vision and imagination of the possible. If we are obstinate enough to plant Pine trees in the Middle East, surely we can be equally obstinate in our pursuit of this peace.

Because if we will it, it is no dream.

And then, tonight, let's celebrate. We remind ourselves first of the price paid daily, of the continuing challenges and difficulties in fulfilling our own vision of what Israel can and should be. Yet Israel is a haven, a home, a place in which the beating heart of the Jewish people dwells. So tonight we sing, we rejoice, and we yearn towards that beautiful, inspiring, challenging, Old-New Home.

May God remember the souls of those who have lost their lives for Israel, & May Israel be blessed with peace, safety, and goodness

Rabbi David Booth

THE AIPAC POLICY CONFERENCE

MAY 7, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I just got back from an exhilarating three day conference in Washington D.C. sponsored by AIPAC, the American Israeli Political Action committee. I wanted to share with you some initial thoughts and reflections of what was a unique and remarkable experience. There is a holiness to being with 6500 others who all love Israel and have made the time to come learn about and advocate for a continued closeness between the United States and Israel.

The policy conference invites dozens of scholars and elected officials to speak. I heard broad bipartisan support for the land of Israel from both Republicans like Eric Cantor and Democrats like Barbara Boxer. Senator John Kerry spoke passionately about the need for peace and for security. He related being in Gaza and calling upon the Palestinians to discard violence. He said to Palestinians in Gaza that, had missiles been raining down on Boston for 8 years, the United States would have been required to act to stop those missiles. He said it's time for both sides to show real progress, and the first and necessary step is for an end to terrorism and violence. Alongside that step, he called upon Israel to cease building new settlements as a way to similarly build trust that will enable a viable peace process to begin.

We heard from Benjamin Netanyahu via satellite. He surprised everyone at the conference by indicating a strong desire to begin a new conversation with the Palestinians with no prior conditions. He assured us that his meeting with Obama in a few weeks will be about inviting the United States to help resume progress towards a peace that guarantees Israeli security and gives the Palestinians a chance to build a real state.

I was surprised by the political and religious diversity among the attendees. There were those passionately in favor of the security barrier, and others as passionate about the need for renewed freedom of movement for Palestinians. Some were focused on the need for Israel to ensure security while others were focused on finding ways of achieving peace soon and speedily. Some saw the Arab people as yearning for peace while others expressed great pessimism of our ability to find a true peace partner. I experienced the conference as being more about maintaining strong US support for Israel than for any particular view of Israel.

There were two items of consensus at the conference. First is the necessity of peace predicated on a two state solution. Rabbi Daniel Gordis pointed out the necessity of such a solution because this is the

only way to create a viable democratic Jewish state. Rabbi Gordis further commented that peace could be achieved in a matter of weeks should the Palestinian people commit themselves to state building. Nearly every speaker from John Kerry to John Kyl, from President Shimon Peres to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke of finding a way to build a Palestinian state.

Second was the need to stop Iran from developing a Nuclear weapon. The Conference was lobbying for legislation that would give President Obama the option of imposing sanctions on the import of refined petroleum products to Iran as part of his policy of engagement. Many of the speakers commented on the destabilizing impact an Iranian bomb would have on the entire Middle East, potentially triggering a nuclear arms race. Some saw an interesting opportunity: Iran's desire to build a bomb has engendered among Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf States real concerns about increasing Iranian hegemony. This offers the first opening in years to get Arab support for policies that weaken Iranian funding for terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

I heard inspiring talks and passionate discussion. I heard compelling cases, and ideas with which I strongly disagree. But what I heard loudly and clearly is a love for Israel among Jews and Christians. I heard a desire to sustain a special close relationship between Israel and the United States. And finally I heard many times: Am Yisrael Chai, Israel and the Jewish people live.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HEAL ME AND I SHALL BE HEALED

MAY 21, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Heschel reminds us in *The Prophets*, prophetic language calls forth the subjective experience of the Prophet. Its astounding language defies analysis that is only critical and demands a personal response from us. One such example occurs in the Haftorah of Jeremiah last week.

After talking grandly of God as the hope of Israel, Jeremiah calls forth the intensely personal when he says, "Heal me, God, and I shall be healed. Save me, and I shall be saved. For You are my praise." The verse has a 3 part structure of healing-salvation-prayer. Salvation stands at the center in between healing and praise. It is the bridge that transforms a moment of healing into a moment of praise. Perhaps this structure intentionally reminds us that, like any bridge, we can go in either direction. So praise, gratitude, can itself be a moment of healing that leads me to Yishua, a personal redemption from my narrow places that returns me to hope.

Now here is exactly where we have to notice Heschel's concern. It is both easy and truthful to say: medicine is important for healing too. Or: prayer alone is insufficient. Jeremiah, however, is calling upon us to notice the subjective miraculous quality of healing regardless of the means by which we receive that healing.

The Radak reminds us that a prayer for healing goes beyond physical pains and suffering. He tells us that the Prophet is also praying for healing from insults and belittling words, the wounded places within as well as without. That for which we need healing goes beyond that for which we go to see the doctor.

What are your wounded places? Where do you experience physical pain and where do you experience emotional pain? Perhaps it stems from chronic illness, or a fear of recurring stresses. Perhaps it is the injury from decades of painful relationships when those who ought to be loved ones instead harmed us. Heal us, God, and we shall be healed.

Having brought to mind our pain, our wounded places, it's easy to lose hope. Jeremiah's words are more challenging than that. They assert that I can be healed. The Zohar comments on this verse and says, "All the healing in the world is in the hands of the Holy One Blessed is God. Sometimes it comes by means of a messenger, and sometimes it comes without a messenger, and sometimes it comes directly from God's hands."

The Zohar is reminding us that are different ways we experience the miracle of healing. Sometimes it comes through others, whether medical professionals of the comfort of friends and loved ones. Sometimes it comes from our own internal resources, both emotional and physical. And finally, sometimes healing is experienced as miraculous, beyond what we thought possible.

When are times you have experienced healing? Occasions perhaps when medical professionals offered of themselves to heal you? Or occasions when friends and loved ones by their presence offered comfort and strength? Or healing that came from within? Or even – healing that amazed and went beyond what we thought possible?

Having reminded ourselves of that from which we need healing and also reminding ourselves of the possibility of healing, perhaps we can find the courage to take the third step, to ask. To stand before God in our brokenness, in our wounded places, and to ask for healing. To uncover the faith to believe in the possibility of healing even when hope seems lost. To discover Jeremiah's experience: heal me Adonai, and I shall be healed. Save me, and I shall be saved. For my praise is of You.

Not every injury can be healed. Wounds, chronic illness, and pain remain in this world, this veil of tears in which we live. Nevertheless, Jeremiah challenges us to find the faith and hope to bring to mind our pain and say: Heal me, God, and I shall be healed. Save me, and I shall be saved. For of You is my praise.

May we all find healing in our broken places.

Rabbi David Booth

COUNT FIFTY DAYS

MAY 28, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The orange blossoms are giving way to fruit. The spring time blossoming all around is ebbing and giving way to lush green growth as summer slowly, languidly, emerges. It comes with a promise of new growth and rest, the slower pace that warmth and longer days engender for us.

There is an ease of life in the summer. The harvest is beginning to come in, alleviating the anxiety of Pesach. In the early spring, we cast out our seeds not knowing what will come back. Sometimes we over plant, wastefully, because we worry what the harvest will bring in. But now, having counted the barley sheaves each day, we see the beginnings of promise, the hopefulness of first harvest and so we breathe and realize how burdensome was our anxiety.

If Pesach is the celebration of freedom, it also carries with it the anxiety of the Spring. Again and again we hear in Torah: why have you brought us here to die? The Israelites are freed from slavery, and all they can do is complain about how good it was in Egypt. Pesach is the worry of what will be now that I am free. It is the frightening knowledge that I do not know what comes next.

Shavuot, by contrast, settles us, places us in a framework of meaning. It celebrates the receiving of Torah: the first harvest of purpose. That is why Torah study is the main way in which Shavuot is celebrated. We reconnect ourselves with divine sources of meaning. We discover anew the healing that comes in knowing why we are here that is re-membered as we recall our purposes.

Put another way, I don't know what comes next, but I do have a guide in the process of discovering myself. I am reminded that the world has meaning, that there is purpose to me and to my life regardless of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Soloveitchik teaches that our whole lives are this process of searching for our meaning, for the purposes for which we are granted life. According to Soloveitchik, Moses had it easier than any of the rest of us because God told him what his purpose was. We spend our lives striving to discover our purposes. Torah is the guide, the instruction, that helps focus that search. Shavuot roots us, reminds us, of the need for the search.

Torah, though, is only the beginning, the first fruits. My oranges have yet to flourish, the berries in the back yard are still just buds. There is miraculous growth still to happen as the everyday flourishing of life continues. That growth happens within nurtured by Torah in partnership with that which dwells within

me. If I stop only to read the words, they are as nothing. It is only when they are enmeshed within, a part of the greater self that I am ever becoming, that the words sound their fullest, unique meaning.

I wish all of us a happy Shavuot and a summer of spiritual healing and growth!

Hag Samech,

Rabbi David Booth

Join us tonight for Shavuot as we study beginning at 8pm until 5am, followed by a marvelous sunrise service. We will also have a special Shal Shudes to mark the end of Shavuot on Saturday 7:30pm including a study session led by Rabbi Lewis.

CyberTorah will go on hiatus until Elul (Mid August). Enjoy the summer!

LIFTING UP OUR EYES

AUGUST 20, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The summer affords me an opportunity for a slower more contemplative pace than I experience the rest of the year. By the end of vacation, I find myself ready to reengage in an energetic fashion. At the same time, I want to carry forward with me some of the thoughts and realizations that the quieter time of vacation allows.

Rav Kook makes a comment about prayer that has proved resonant with me all summer. He says that a blessing, a berakha, is a promise to oneself of possibility. A blessing becomes a kind of lens of imagination through which we can see a possible vision of ourselves. It allows us to see a world of hope previously closed to us.

When Isaac first meets Rebecca, the Torah tells us that he was “meditating in the fields. And then he lifted up his eyes...” and saw Rebecca. The Talmud tells us that Isaac was praying the afternoon service, the Minchah service. That moment of prayer, of quiet and stillness, allowed him to lift his eyes and see this new blessing entering his life. Prayer lets us lift up our eyes and see in a new way that invites possibility.

This comment opened up for me one of the blessings of the weekday service. We say, “Return us our Father to Your Torah. Draw us, our King, close to your service. Return us in a complete repentance (teshuvah) before you. Praised are you, God, who desires repentance.” Rav Kook’s comment about a prayer being a promise changed the way I see these words.

I feel I should say a quick word about setting. My realization, my moment of saying this prayer with intense meaning, occurred in a fantastic location. I spent part of my vacation up at Tahoe. One of my outings was to Emerald Bay and the hike to Vikingsholm. I had just finished the hike and was standing on a rocky outlook with Emerald Bay displayed before me. I could see Fanette Island, the only Island in Lake Tahoe and the whole rest of the bay. It is one of the most beautiful spots anywhere.

There were lots of people around me having lunch and playing, but I was sitting a little bit off on a bench by myself. It was mid day, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of Creation, and so I started Minchah, the afternoon service. As I began to pray, I quickly got to this blessing of change and the quality of stillness I was experiencing allowed me to lift up my eyes and see it in a new way.

If a prayer is a promise, then this blessing means that I can change. I don't have to be stuck in behaviors that hurt me and those around me. I can move beyond the fears and anxieties that keep me from finding joy and fulfillment in my actions. I can find the necessary courage because this blessing promises me that I can. I can lift up my eyes and see the blessing in front of me.

This moment of prayer gave me a wash of relief. That moment is one I want to carry with me even as other demands, responsibility, and busyness once again surround me. Today is Rosh Hodesh Elul, the beginning of the month that precedes the High Holidays. That moment in Tahoe has left me feeling hopeful, oriented towards the possibility that we can change, that this year we can be healed in all of our broken places. May it be a season of hope and change and healing for all of us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

FREE GILAD SHALIT

AUGUST 27, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In June of 2006, an Israeli soldier named Gilad Shalit was kidnapped by Palestinians near the border with Gaza. They came through a tunnel near the Kerem Shalom border crossing surprising the Israeli detachment there and successfully capturing Gilad Shalit. Since that time, he has been heard from only twice. Once, in a video released by his captors, and a second time through a letter to his mother. Israeli intelligence believes that he is still alive, though they have no idea what his condition might be.

Shalit began his service in the IDF after High School graduation. Israeli law requires three years of military service, meaning that young Israelis sacrifice three years of their life between college and High School to serve their country and the Jewish people. These young men and women don't set policy. They don't make decisions about security barriers or prisoner exchanges or border crossings and their politics vary exactly in proportion to Israeli public opinion generally.

Since Shalit's capture, there have been numerous efforts to free him, including a prisoner exchange in January of this year in which 1000 Palestinians were scheduled to be released in exchange for Shalit's freedom. That deal fell apart as has each subsequent attempt.

Shalit is turning 23 this Shabbat. When I was 23, I celebrated my first wedding anniversary in Jerusalem. I was in my third year of Rabbinic school, with a life of hope and possibility stretching out in front of me. My life was just starting out, as I began the process of preparing for my career, for the beginnings of a family. Shalit has lost these last three years of possibility and promise. They are gone forever as he sits in a prison in conditions impossible to guess.

The Torah and Rabbinic literature are filled with practices and rules for freeing captives. In an era where Jews were routinely kidnapped, it was considered a great community mitzvah to free a captive. When one Jew is unjustly held, it creates an obligation for Jews everywhere. Here in the United States, where few of us send our children to serve in the IDF, it's easy to forget about Shalit.

But we are Jews. And what we are best at is memory. So it's time for us to commit to remembering Gilad Shalit and praying and advocating for his release. So that he can go to college, or travel to Turkey, or start a business. So that he can meet a girl or go out hiking. So that he can resume his life in freedom, amid the remarkable opportunity of the land of Israel. When one of is held unjustly, all of us have a responsibility

to care.

I pray for peace in Israel and throughout the Middle East every day. What a joy it would be to start the Jewish year with Gilad Shalit being freed by his Palestinian captors. What a statement they could make to the world were they to free him. It would be a sign that they are serious about peace, ready to seriously engage a discussion about creating a Palestinian state that sits strong and at peace with Israel. We as a people have never given up hope even in our darkest moments. Now is the time for hope, for prayer, in the desire to soon see our prayers fulfilled by Gilad Shalit's freedom.

May the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, preserve and protect Gilad Shalit. May he be held safe from harm, and healed from any injuries. May his family find strength and courage in the midst of this long and frightening captivity and may Gilad feel God's presence with him in this dark place of Exile. And may God's mercy incline the hearts of his captors to free Gilad Shalit and to allow him to celebrate the new Jewish year with his family, with his friends, and looking forward to a hope filled future.

We join together with Jews throughout the world in wishing Gilad Shalit a happy birthday filled with hope and the promise of freedom.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE KITCHEN TABLE

SEPTEMBER 3, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you may know, a new Kosher meat restaurant called [The Kitchen Table](#) has opened recently over on Castro Street in Mountain View. It's an exciting development for kosher diners. This area finally has a place for a good quality meal and dining experience. [Izzy's](#) has for years been a marvelous blessing for this community, but The Kitchen Table is in a totally different part of the market. Over the summer, I have eaten at the restaurant several times. So I thought I would try my hand at a review.

Walking up to The Kitchen Table is fun because it's part of such a great scene on Castro. I have been greeted consistently with warmth even on days where they are clearly swamped with customers. Outside on a nice day is really fun. It's lovely to people watch and be part of the Castro scene. Inside is nicely appointed, though I find the electronic picture viewer showing nostalgic scenes a little out of place.

The wait staff is quick, efficient, and polite. They know and like the food so they can talk knowledgeably about different dishes or combinations. They pace the meals well. At lunch, it's easy to get in and out in under an hour, while dinner moves at a more relaxed, fine dining, kind of pace.

The food is really good. For lunch, I especially like their hand cured pastrami. While it's just a tad too salty, the flavor is remarkable. I lived in New York City and its suburbs for nearly eight years – this is among the best pastrami I have ever had. I also really like the BBQ Chipotle chicken sandwich.

The starters are a lot of fun. Relatively inexpensive, they are all interesting combinations of California Cuisine and traditional Jewish foods. Among my favorites have been the Salmon Crostini and the Yam Fries. My wife really loves the Red Mole Turkey. The soup specials have also been interesting combinations of flavors that work really well together. We keep thinking we should make a meal just from the appetizers, but keep finding ourselves seduced by the rest of the menu.

Dinner offers more entrees, including an excellent Duck entree with a tamale and a salsa verde. The glazed salmon was also delicious, showcasing chef Chaim David's ability to combine tastes and ingredients in a new way. I often wonder how it will work. Once I start eating I see how each flavor draws attention to or enhances the next.

This brings me to a suggestion. The Kitchen Table combines traditional Jewish foods with California cuisine in a novel and tasty manner. However, I would suggest leaving a few items on the menu in their more traditional mode for less adventurous eaters. My daughter ordered her favorite, matzo ball soup, but ended up leaving the soup untouched because of the interesting spice choices. The soup was delicious and well thought out but a surprise for a 10 year old expecting the usual flavors. I really liked it, by the way. I would say the same about the hamburger. A friend ordered the hamburger and didn't like it because of the unusual flavoring. So I would suggest that a few of "traditional" items, like the burger and the matzo ball soup, be included on the menu for those in the group who want more traditional flavoring.

The desserts, amazingly for a meat restaurant, are a highlight of the meal. The banana cream tart is out of this world. If I didn't know they were under Rabbinic supervision, I would be very skeptical. Similarly, the seven layer walnut fudge cake is delicious, and the accompanying orange fluff great fun. I also have enjoyed the caramel pecan torte, though I suggest having it with Vanilla rather than Black Cherry custard. The Black Cherry custard was great, but it overpowered the flavor of the torte to my palate.

I am thrilled to have The Kitchen Table in my proverbial backyard. The prices are reasonable when compared to non Kosher offerings of a similar quality. For lunch I have been spending between \$10-15. Dinners are more, averaging around \$40/person after appetizers, main course, and dessert. If you haven't been, I highly recommend finding an occasion!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'd like to share an historical moment that Rabbi Graff related this past Shabbat. On June 24, 1922, the foreign minister of Weimar Germany, Walter Rathenau, was assassinated by a group of nationalist extremists. Two of the three assassins committed suicide when they were later cornered by police. The third, Ernst Techow, was captured and arrested.

After this horrendous murder, Rathenau's mother wrote Techow's mother the following letter. "Say to your son in the name and the spirit of him who he has murdered, I forgive, even as God may forgive, if before an earthly judge he make a full and frank confession of his guilt and before a heavenly one repent. May these words give peace to your soul." These amazing words, combined with Techow's testimony that he had wanted to back out of the incident before being threatened himself, led the court to convict him for 14 years. He ultimately served five.

Techow then joined the Foreign Legion and eventually became a French citizen. That letter from Rathenau's mother became one of his most treasured possessions. It led him to study Rathenau's writings, and to learn Hebrew and study Judaism. He fought against the Nazis until France capitulated in 1940.

As occupied France began to participate in the slaughter of Jews, Techow helped save over 700 hundred Jewish lives. He helped those Jews leave France and escape to Spain. Rathenau's mother was able, in incredible pain, to offer words of forgiveness. Those words ultimately saved 700 lives and transformed Techow.

This story show our own power to change and our own power to forgive. If even an anti-semitic nationalist can become a Jewish scholar dedicated to the preservation of Jewish lives, imagine what we could do. If a mother's words can speak directly to the heart of her son's assassin, imagine what our own words of forgiveness can do in the lives of others.

The High Holidays are about forgiveness as well as change. It is through forgiveness that we allow others the room and the courage to change. They know even before they engage in the hard work of change that they will be accepted. Rathenau's mother didn't let Techow entirely off the hook – he had to admit guilt and truly change as a precondition for forgiveness. But Techow knew now in his heart that he

could change and that even Frau Rathenau would accept him.

I think about Frau Rathenau's example as well. It would have been understandable, normal even, to let herself be consumed by hurt and loss. This is what Cynthia Ozick means when she calls Judaism "unnatural." Had she taken the more normal, natural course, I imagine the rest of her life being defined and limited by her sorrow. Instead, she found an amazing capacity to forgive that I suspect allowed her to find her own healing.

As we prepare ourselves for the High Holidays this year, I want to invite all of us to focus on forgiveness. We implore God to forgive. Let's imitate that for which we pray. Imagine a world in which we give others the room to change, knowing that they will be accepted. How many more would change, would open themselves up to the power of inner transformation? Imagine a world in which we lay down our burdens of hurt, of being wronged, and instead focus on hope and possibility. How much more light would we feel, finding healing where before there had only been hurt?

Selichot this year, which will begin at 10:30pm this Saturday evening, will focus on forgiveness rituals. We will study about the power of forgiveness and then share some forgiveness rituals to lighten our own hearts and make us ready to forgive. At midnight, with our own hearts enriched by the possibility of forgiveness, we will turn towards God and ask for our own forgiveness.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

SEPTEMBER 17, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This summer, I had the fortune to study with Rabbi Ebn Leader while I was at a retreat for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Rabbi Leader led a session in which he helped me articulate what constitutes a spiritual practice. I want to share these insights with you as Rosh Hashanah draws near in the hopes of inspiring all of us to engage in some practices that may allow a true transformation of self to occur.

Spiritual practices require three key ingredients. They must be regular, meaning they happen at a set time in a predictable way. They must be intentional, meaning I set out to engage in a certain behavior or practice. And finally, they must have a goal / desired outcome. So walking outside on a beautiful morning and being struck by the wonder of God's creation isn't a spiritual practice. It may be a spiritual moment as God reminds me to pay attention, but it lacks the intentionality and regularity to have continued impact.

By contrast, I have started to pause in my morning prayers each day to recount that for which I am grateful. I do it each morning, I am intentional about doing it, and I have a goal of inclining myself towards gratitude. This makes it a spiritual practice that is gradually having an impact on how I experience the world.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days that can meet this definition, but for many of us they fail to do so because we fail to engage our own intentionality about what the Holidays will mean for us. If we simply show up, the services may (or may not) touch us or transform us. If instead we are thoughtful and intentional, there is a much greater opportunity for these Holy Days to impact who we are as people.

As we ready ourselves for the holidays, I would like to share a few practices of my own with you.

Each year, I spend some time reflecting on my own issues and failings, seeing in this season a call for Heshbon HaNefesh, an accounting of my soul. As I identify some issues that I want to change in myself, I bring those issues with me into the service. That means when I recite Avinu Malkeynu, our Father our King, I say some of my own verses that are from my heart to my Creator. During the confessional, I confess my own personal failings alongside the alphabetical listing of our communal issues.

I also look for a person with whom I can share my own issues and I invite them to listen and respond.

Speech is a key part of the process of change. When we can share of ourselves, when we can hear from another their guidance to our issues, fears, and hopes, then we can create a real possibility for spiritual growth and healthy change. As always, Rabbi Graff and I remain delighted to find time with you for your “Annual Spiritual.”

Finally, I make some Tzedakah commitments. Kol Emeth will once again be putting out grocery bags at Rosh Hashanah to bring back for Kol Nidre. This is a spiritual practice designed to awaken compassion for the needs of others in me. Isaac prayed and only then was he able to lift his eyes and see because prayer leads to awareness and compassion. Bringing a grocery bag with me to Kol Nidre is a way of reminding myself to focus my prayer as a means of acquiring compassion.

These are some of my spiritual practices to orient myself towards Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. If you have some practices or suggestions of your own I would love to hear them. May we all be blessed with a year of peace, happiness, and prosperity.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ACTIONS THAT CHANGE US

SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I shall make you white as the driven snow....Isaiah

There is a dichotomy built into the fabric of Yom Kippur. On the one hand, we are “maleh avon,” filled with sin, while on the other we are capable of teshuvah, of responding to our failings in ways that reorient who we are towards a path of goodness. What we say and what we wear encapsulate that divide.

Yom Kippur asks a central question: who am I? And challenges me through the mirror of Torah and the Prayer Book with how I might answer that question. As a result, I have to confront the reality of my failings AND see new ways of answering that question in the future. Teshuvah, repentance, is better translated as answer. The process of change at the High Holidays is an answer to the question “who am I?”

We make the verse in Isaiah literal by wearing white at Yom Kippur. I wear a white kittel, a plain robe, that I wore at my wedding, that I wear each year for Seder, and that will be my funeral robe as well. Those layered associations add meaning to my experience at Yom Kippur. There is a thick quality to my experience because it connects to other key moments in my life as I seek to answer the question posed by Yom Kippur.

Our white garments are meant to be an inspiration for what is possible. If my outside can become washed clean, turned pure white, perhaps an internal transformation is possible as well. I know that when I put my biking gear on it orients me in a particular way – so also with my white robes for Yom Kippur. The Sanctuary built in the desert had gold inside and out. As we try to build a Sanctuary in our souls, that white garment becomes a challenge to purify me on the inside as well.

By contrast, our words highlight our failings. We confess our sins multiple times throughout the holiday with two acrostic lists. Going from A-Z is a way of saying that we have sinned in every way that can be imagined. We say that our lives, our might, our intelligence, is without meaning. This focus on our failings is necessary if we are to change our answer, if we are to reorient ourselves towards lives committed to meaning and mitzvot.

Maimonides says that a teshuvah process, a process of reorienting ourselves towards living lives that matter, requires first a confessional. I must articulate my failings, I must be willing to name them, if I am to have any hope of changing. Yet as I name each one, as I am honest in looking at myself, I can become overwhelmed, drowning in my own iniquity and therefore unwilling to change.

It is at that moment, as I truly look at myself, that I see the white garments and remember the verse, I shall make you white like the driven snow. There is hope because I am not alone. I am surrounded by community and in the presence of God. I assert on the outside that I can be different, that I can answer the question of my life in new, more value filled ways, and am inspired to find those qualities within as well.

This year, in addition to wearing white, I also want immediately through my actions to suggest that I am already changing, already orienting myself towards helping others and growing spiritually. I will arrive in my white clothing with a bag of groceries to help feed those in need. Last year, we at Kol Emeth collected well over a ton of food, making an amazing statement of the true meaning of Yom Kippur. This year, the problem of hunger in our area is even worse. Second Harvest reports needing to feed many more clients over the last twelve months at the same time that they are seeing a decline in donations. How much more meaningful does our fast become if it coincides with putting food into the mouths of those in need?

I encourage us this year to wear white so that our clothing is an inspiration as we begin the challenging work of Yom Kippur. I hope that everyone will bring a bag of groceries with them before Kol Nidre so that our actions immediately speak louder than our words. Yes, we are filled with failings, but we also are right now, today, helping those around us in need.

May all of us be inscribed for a goodness, for internal growth, and for health.

Rabbi David Booth

STEPS FOR TESHUVAH

OCTOBER 1, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Let the wicked abandon his way, and the person of iniquity his thoughts and return to God. God will have mercy upon him for God is great in forgiveness...”

At Musaf on Yom Kippur I offered a five step plan for change based on Maimonides. As we look from Yom Kippur toward Sukkot, I'd like to review those five steps in a written form. I hope that they will be helpful to you as you complete your own Yom Kippur process.

Maimonides, in his laws of repentance, identifies a five step process through which we are able to change. It is based upon the above verse and imagines a means by which people can both put aside behavior that misses the mark and reorient themselves towards God and goodness. It suggests that we can change, that we decide by our actions each day who we are going to be. We are never stuck, determined, but always able to make choices.

Step 1: Realize that you have done wrong. This seems obvious, but we cannot abandon our way until we see that we are on the wrong path. Yom Kippur, with its quality of stillness and attention, is one way to open our eyes and realize our error. Perhaps I have been speaking ill of people and didn't even realize that I was inadvertently spreading rumors and diminishing myself. So first I have to realize what I am doing and that it is wrong.

Step 2: Regret. Guilt is not a Jewish emotion. Guilt implies that I feel bad, but I am not going to do anything about it. Regret, by contrast, is a productive emotion. I realize that my language is hurting people, I feel bad about that, and I want to change.

Step 3: Confession. In order to change our bad direction, we have to admit out loud what we have done wrong. There is no need for another person to hear it. Rather, the act of verbalizing is a means by which I admit truly that it was wrong and that I regret it. I have now begun to act upon my regret, to bring into the real world my desire to return to God.

Step 4: Create a plan. There are a variety of cues and social settings that may inspire my problematic behavior. Maimonides here was generations ahead of his time. Modern research emphasizes the importance of visualization, of imagination, for change. I have to plan how I will react the next time I am

tempted to speak ill of another, how I will respond when someone invites that reaction from me. Without a firm plan, it's much less likely that I will follow my new path when I am confronted by my old temptations.

Step 5: Change. I must realize that Teshuvah means I have the power to determine what I do next. I am filled with temptations and thoughts that lead me after the "lusting of my eyes." But I am separate from my temptations and I can choose to be other. With my new plan in hand, I now have to become different, a person who now, given those same social cues and temptations, will no longer set out on the old path.

We spent Yom Kippur in prayer and contemplation, wrestling with ourselves. I hope this process suggested by Maimonides allows us to carry our resolutions and new found connections into the rest of the year. I look forward to seeing you this weekend as we begin celebrating Sukkot!

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that due to Sukkot there will be no CyberTorah next week.

CLAL YISRAEL

OCTOBER 15, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“All Jews are responsible for one another...” says the Talmud. Yet we live in an era where that sense of communal obligation, of communal caring, becomes ever more attenuated. As the divides among us increase, that sense of being one community, one family, becomes a lesser and lesser social force.

When I lived in New Jersey, we were in close proximity to the Syrian Jewish community. The Rabbis in those congregations called me Mr. Booth rather than Rabbi Booth because I was a Conservative Rabbi. A local Ashkenazi Orthodox colleague refused to sit on a board of Rabbis with Conservative or Reform colleagues.

I once officiated at a wedding in a Conservative Synagogue with some Orthodox family in attendance. Towards the evening, a group of people asked if there was going to be Maariv, the evening service. I thought this was a good idea, so I took them with me into the Sanctuary. I then realized that they were going into the stairwell to pray because they refused to go into a Sanctuary in a Conservative Synagogue.

In a similar fashion, I was recently talking with a prominent Reform Rabbi about Reform conversion. I told him that I always appreciated it when Reform Rabbis took their conversion candidates to a mikveh, because then it made it easy for me to accept their conversions without question. He was surprised – and then sheepish, because he had never thought through the communal implications of converting someone to Judaism, especially in our more permeable communities.

The contrast here in Palo Alto could not be more stark. Tuesday I sat on the Kol Emeth bimah for a very sad occasion that spoke volumes about Palo Alto. Mary Imberman, one of the pillars of the South Peninsula community for decades, passed away over the weekend. Sitting on the bimah at Kol Emeth were all of our Rabbis (including Rabbi Eilberg who had flown in for the funeral) alongside Rabbis Feldman and Levin. They made a huge statement of community by sitting there. Their presence on the bimah said that we are one people who care for one another even in the midst of significant differences around how our Judaism ought to be expressed.

The Feast of Jewish Learning which takes place every January is a similar statement of what can be when we see ourselves as one community. Over 600 people from a variety of styles of Judaism come

together for one night to learn Torah. It is because the Rabbis of Beth Am, and Kol Emeth, and Etz Chayim, and Emek Berakha, and Chabad, and the JSN come together that so many arrive to have an incredible moment of Torah.

Around the country we see fewer and fewer people caring about their Judaism or about the land of Israel. There have been many articles recently about why. I want to add another reason. We spend so much time fighting amongst ourselves, refusing to study or pray together, that we alienate our entire community. If what it means to be Jewish is to squabble, then why bother?

Israeli politics similarly have become so toxic that it's easier to just stay quiet. Anything I say results in someone feeling betrayed and hurt, so why say anything? Yet that chilling silence descending upon the American Jewish community quickly turns into apathy.

Avishai Margalit, a fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, writes compellingly about caring as the basis for ethical behavior. It is only when we are willing to care for one another that we develop a sense of the ethical – a sense that I have a special responsibility to you because of our shared bond. Rabbi Avi Weiss, an Orthodox Rabbi in Riverdale, NY, embodies this ethic of caring. He greets every Jew he meets with a hug because he is so filled with a love of the Jewish people.

Mary Imberman was one person who helped this community grow by offering that ethic of caring to the South Peninsula. We have grown and thrived in part because we have a sense of ourselves as one community. I pray that the notion of Clal Yisrael, a unity that transcends our differences and passionate concerns, can more and more infuse our community and from here the whole world. Because that ethic of caring is the best way I know to restore our love of Judaism and Israel.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi David Booth

ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

OCTOBER 22, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year we raised over 3000 pounds of food for hungry members of our community. This charitable aspect of our High Holidays deeply enriched my own experience of the holidays. Heschel talks about how “our feet were saying prayers” when he marched with Martin Luther King. Similarly, our prayers became actions this year as we fed those in need.

The problem of hunger is a world wide problem. And it is invariably the least powerful, the most out of place, who are afflicted by hunger. I'd like to focus on two ways in which the Ethiopian Jewish community both in Israel and in Ethiopia suffers from hunger and needs our help as they struggle with entering Israeli society and being on the margins in Ethiopian society.

In Israel, the Ethiopian Jewish community faces a nutrition problem. Since many Ethiopian Jews live beneath the poverty line, they often arrive in school hungry. Children are less able to focus and so less able to get the benefit of possibility that education can offer them in the future.

The Limudiah program of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) offers hot lunches to Ethiopian students in places throughout Israel, including Ramla, Lod, and Rehovot. This program directly helps over 1000 Jewish Ethiopian children. These Jews want to enter the mainstream of Israeli society. Education is their ticket to opportunity. Hot lunches are one key way of helping them learn and open doors.

Several thousand Jews remain in Ethiopia. Particularly in Gondar province, there are approximately 8000 Jews in terrible conditions. NACOEJ had ongoing efforts to provide food and medical supplies to this remote region. While the Israeli Ethiopians experience a nutrition problem, here in Gondar there is a starvation problem.

There simply isn't enough food, water, and medical supplies. The Ethiopian government seems unconcerned or unable to provide the needed assistance. The Talmud reminds us that all Jews are responsible for one another. That means we have a responsibility in our own communities to find ways of being together and supporting one another. It also means a special responsibility to help a Jew in trouble anywhere.

This year we made a difference in our own immediate community by offering food to thousands of Jews and Non-Jews in need of nutrition. I would like to invite us to support the Ethiopian Jewish community as well. Then our connection to Kol Emeth and the spiritual nourishment it offers can challenge us to offer real nourishment to people thousands of miles away. Our desire to pray can reconnect us with compassion, and so inspire us to change the world through our actions.

You can find out more, including how to donate, at [NACOEJ.org](https://www.nacoej.org).

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A NEW MAHZOR

NOVEMBER 5, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I find the High Holidays at Kol Emeth filled with beauty and spiritual uplift in a variety of ways. This year there were several moments that especially touched me. There was something particularly moving for me as we recited Shekhyanu together on the evening of Rosh Hashanah as the holiday began. Hearing those words again thanking God for sustaining us and helping us reach another year together touched me, perhaps because of how challenging the year had been.

There was a special quality of joy this year as well. I joined the families to sing Happy Birthday to the World. It was great to see the simple joy children can have in some cake. For me, one of the most moving musical moments was Avinu Malkeynu, our Father our King, recited towards the end of Yom Kippur. Usually, I stay facing an open ark to remain aware of the holiness symbolized therein. This year I felt the greater sense of kedushah, of a true sense of God's presence, in the whole community joining together in heartfelt prayer. So I turned around and experienced the real meaning of the Biblical verse, "God is praised in a great multitude."

Right before Yom Kippur I received a sample of the Rabbinical Assembly's new *Mahzor Lev Shalem*. They sent me their Kol Nidre service and I was impressed with the thoughtfulness and spiritual depth in this new prayerbook. This book has been years in the making by the Conservative Movement.

Our current Mahzor has served KE well for many decades. Yet each year more and more people comment to me on the problems they have with what has become a somewhat dated prayerbook. Originally published in 1938, the Silverman Mahzor is now significantly out of date. The English translation has several problems. First, it sometimes translates only partially. I prefer our prayer books to wrestle with that which is difficult, rather than simply leave it untranslated. Second, the English is written in archaic form filled with King James English that resonated with people in 1938 but which seems antiquated now. Third, as a product of its time, there is no gender inclusive language. Finally, it lacks extra readings or traditions that we might choose to use during the service.

As a result, I am suggesting that we take a close look at the new Rabbinical Assembly Mahzor coming out for next year. A group of us will be comparing this edition to two other Mahzorim on the market. One is called Mahzor Hadash, and the other is the Artscroll Mahzor.

In the new Mahzor, the English is much more usable, being an updated translation more in line with what we see in our current prayerbooks. Further, the Mahzor includes an option to mention the Matriarchs before each Amidah. Most wonderfully, however, this Mahzor includes optional readings and prayers from the Sephardic tradition as well.

The Mahzor has notes and explanations throughout that include topics for further thought as well as details of the choreography of prayer. You can see from the Kol Nidre sample available electronically that the format follows a traditional Jewish book with prayer text in the middle and commentary surrounding it. This leaves room for modern and traditional readings and explanation. In addition, this Mahzor is the official prayer book for our movement and includes the full traditional liturgy.

I encourage you to take a close look at each of these three books. It is a big decision to switch the books we use for the Holidays and I very much want your thoughts and input. As a result, there will be copies of all three books available at Kol Emeth for people to look through. Further, you can go to rabbinicalassembly.org. That site includes sample materials for the entirety of Kol Nidre and selections from Rosh Hashanah. There will be a survey for people to offer their feedback in the next couple of weeks, and I invite direct response to me as well.

Next year I look forward to another Holiday season filled with meaning and tradition and perhaps even a new Mahzor from which to recite Shecheyanu and Avinu Malkeynu!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TALKING ABOUT ISRAEL

NOVEMBER 12, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Talking about Israel in our community presents many challenges. Our passionate love for the Jewish people, our Jewishly based passion for justice and righteousness, means that we have strongly held and divergent beliefs about Israel in our community. Yet Israel remains near and dear to our hearts. So we have to find a way together to make Israel a continued communal focus and priority.

I want to begin a meta-discussion about how best to make Israel a true and ongoing Synagogue priority in a way that unifies rather than divides us as a Synagogue community. I have a couple of immediate thoughts and suggestions, but am open to other ideas of how we can best proceed in a healthy, healing way.

First and most importantly is simply derekh erez, polite behavior. Our Rabbis teach: speak pleasantly to all people and always maintain a pleasant countenance. They lived through a time of deep divides within the Jewish community and understood that our communal survival depends on maintaining a sense of being Jewish together.

A few months ago I suggested a process of listening that I want to reiterate. First, listen respectfully to what others have to say. Second, if it awakens a strong negative reaction in yourself, think why that might be. Is it something they are saying or something in you? Third, if you still strongly disagree, remind yourself that this other person is a human being created in God's image. Further, their involvement at KE suggests they too love Israel. Fourth, if after all these steps you still feel no understanding or respect for the other person, remind yourself that the person in front of you is created in the divine image and deserves respect for that alone. Then respond, from a place of passion, commitment, and kavod, respect. Because without respect, the walls of the community collapse.

Second is to find ways to put Israel again at the center of our immediate community. Towards this end, I suggest focusing for the moment on key issues in Israel around which we can both make a difference and that can draw our community together. The ongoing failure of peace initiatives sucks the air out of efforts and funds towards key issues in Israel that make a difference in real people's lives.

The Ethiopian community continues to struggle to find a place in Israel. The area outside the Tel Aviv – Jerusalem – Haifa corridor continues to stagnate economically and educationally. Religious pluralism

remains a distant dream. Gilad Shalit continues to be held with little hope of release. All of these concerns deserve and should receive our care and attention. I would like these kinds of issues within Israeli society to become the focus of our educational and fund raising efforts.

Further, we need to find ways of connecting our community positively to Israel. Yes, there are deep and serious problems in the Middle East. But we want the American Jewish community to continue to feel that Israel is home. We want Israel to be all around our building, and regularly in people's minds in a positive way. We want our young people to leave our educational program with a great passion to visit Israel, to help build Israel, and to address the many issues facing that wonderful land.

Next week I want to suggest two immediate ways we can create greater passion for and awareness of Israel around our facility. If you have thoughts or suggestions both on how to talk about Israel in a way that can strengthen our community and how to engender a greater commitment to Israel, I would greatly welcome your thoughts and ideas.

May we soon and speedily see peace in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CONNECTIONS WITH ISRAEL

NOVEMBER 19, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As I mentioned last week, I want to find ways in our community to connect us to the people of Israel. In particular, I want people at Kol Emeth to learn about the human dimension of being in that land. I have a few suggestions on ways of creating those connections.

First, I want Israel always to be present in our thoughts and in our facility. Should I forget you, O Jerusalem, says the Prophet, let my tongue stick in my mouth. So as one step we are in the process of naming each Synagogue room for a different city in Israel. I see this as a way people who have travelled or lived in Israel can share their own personal experiences with others in the community who either have not been to Israel or who aren't as familiar with a particular place or region.

Later this month I will send out the list of cities chosen. If you have pictures of that city, please send them to the Synagogue so that we can post them. Similarly, if you have stories of your own connected to that place, I would be honored to have you share them with the community. We will place the pictures and stories at the door to the room so that people can learn more in a personal way about these particular places.

In addition, each religious school classroom will as a class pick a particular charitable cause connected to that city. They will be looking at groups like Hazon Yeshaya, that feeds hungry people, offers free dental care to those in need, and helps with job training to get people financially on their feet. Or like Connections Israel, a smaller charity that has been offering the impoverished people of Sderot gift baskets, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, and other immediately human connections. I hope that the whole community will then embrace those causes and together we can see them as ongoing opportunities for our community to help those in need in the land of our ancestors.

Second, as many of you know, I am leading a trip to Israel next month. I would like you to feel invited along, to participate virtually, with us as we visit Israel. If you would like to email or mail me a prayer, I will take it with me and place it in the Western Wall when we are there Dec 12th. (If you have something you prefer to be totally private, please bring it to me in a sealed envelope.)

In addition, while there we will be visiting Shaarei Tzedek Hospital. As part of that visit we will be making a donation to Matan B'seter, a wonderful Jerusalem based charity that among other projects

helps extremely poor families receive new or gently used clothing for their children. It's a way of allowing those families to preserve some dignity because the parents get to choose the clothing and then give it to their own children.

If you want to make us your Shaliach Mitzvah, your designated agent to perform a mitzvah, I invite you to make a donation to my discretionary fund marked for Matan B'seter. I will then make that donation to them on our visit in Israel.

Finally, I will be inviting people on the trip to share some reflections with the community about our travels. We will update you regularly on our learning, our adventures, and about the people we meet.

Our young people are more and more disconnected from Israel. We as a community find it harder and harder to talk about Israel. It's time for us at Kol Emeth to remind ourselves – and the rest of the Jewish world – that our love for and connection to Israel strengthens us as a people. That love awakens compassion in us, and increases our passion and desire to soon and speedily see a day when Israel is at peace, and when that whole region flourishes.

May we live to see such miracles!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 25, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Thanksgiving strikes me as a marvelous American holiday that shows the wisdom a multi-ethnic and religiously open society can offer the world. When George Washington first declared a celebration for Thanksgiving, he invoked God's blessings on this country. He invoked these blessings in a nuanced fashion, thanking God for our peace and prosperity, but also calling upon us to recognize our failings and the need to continually improve ourselves. He focused on national virtues rather than individual practices or beliefs and then established a ritual vessel to contain those values.

I have been reading a wonderful book by Avishai Margalit, a scholar at Hebrew University, called The Ethics of Memory. In it, he creates a distinction between two otherwise synonymous words, ethics and morality. He defines ethics as the actions and behaviors pertaining to a group with whom a person has thick connections, like family or a community with a shared narrative. Morality, by contrast, define those actions and behaviors called forth to others by the simple fact that they are human beings. Ethics then is a much richer, fuller set of actions based primarily on caring, while morality is of necessity a thinner set of behaviors based on human dignity.

The first amendment, and Washington's declaration of Thanksgiving, both focus us on this distinction by creating a public sphere aware of morality and even faith which leaves ample room for the individual ethic and practice of each community. So some may choose to celebrate Thanksgiving with deep heartfelt prayers to Jesus or God or Buddha. Others may only share in the national quality of the celebration, so that something relatively thin like watching the Detroit Lions lose yet again becomes the main personal ritual. Either way, this one day pulls us all together across this marvelous and diverse nation.

Each year at Thanksgiving I celebrate Thanksgiving through the lens of my own Jewish ethic. I begin with Hamotzi – to bless the bread and to thank God for the gift of sustenance. That intentional beginning helps me orient myself towards an awareness of blessing to which I easily become blinded without ritual and care. I end my meal with Birkhat HaMazon, the grace after meals, to similarly bless God for the food in front of me, as well as the blessings of living in this country. These blessings reaffirm my ethical connection to Israel and the Jewish people in the wider vessel of an American celebration.

This year, I wish all of us a meaning filled celebration of Thanksgiving that includes a connection to a

broader sense of citizenship in this country. I pray that this connection follows the model suggested by George Washington and creates an awareness of the blessings of our own prosperity. That awareness in turn engenders a responsibility to share those blessings with others by helping those in need as we strive to do more in the cause of human dignity. I also pray it creates stronger family and communal connections as well, binding us anew to those people, communities, and stories that fill our lives with meaning.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Thanksgiving,

Rabbi David Booth

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

DECEMBER 3, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I woke up at 4:15am this morning to wrestle with myself. My intention had been to sleep until 6:15 or so, but I woke up early and found myself tossing and turning. All my worries, anxieties, imperfections, seem much more overwhelming in the dark and quiet, in that still time before the sun rises. I say to myself: I will put these worries aside, breathe in and breathe out, and fall back asleep. But sleep doesn't come – and the worries and fears fly through my mind one after the other and then around again.

My wounded places, that I can cover over with action and busyness during the day, make themselves felt in the still unsought that I discover at this early hour. I am awake, but in an anxiety riddled half dream. What do all my efforts really mean? How stable and secure are my relationships, really? And that deep fear underneath as I watch my own life fly by, day after day, wonderful, a gift, but somehow not enough.

In the light I say: praised are you God, who accepts change. Praised are you God, who allows us the possible of being other than we are in this moment, who allows us to overcome our failings and imperfections. Who grants the sublime power of will that allows us to change and then find healing. But in the dark, in the failure to sleep, such hopes seem fleeting, vanity of vanities.

“That same night, he arose...and Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn (Gen 32:25).” Jacob has returned home, back to Esau, back to all the anxieties, worries, and family drama left behind. And that day he is a frenzy of busyness, of planning and activity. Send this group first, and then the other group. But at night, alone, there is nowhere left to hide.

Gustave Doré's painting of Jacob wrestling with the angel captures that feeling of struggle. Unlike many such representations, the painting is dark, with just the merest glimmer of false dawn from behind the clouds. Jacob stands high above the camp as he wrestles with the angel, being pushed close to the edge of a cliff. Further, the cliff is covered with snake like cactus that appear to be reaching out towards him. His muscles are straining with effort and his face is downcast, while the angel appears serene and calm.

At 4:15, I feel alone. Far removed from the camp of my friends, family, those who care for me. I am beset all around by struggles, wrestling with angels on the one hand and cactus and cliffs on the other. And waiting for the break of dawn. For Jacob, when the sunlight comes, he realizes that he cannot prevail over the angel – but neither can the angel defeat him. He is marked and wounded, but also blessed.

6:30 came around and I got up. I had slept a little more between the tossing and turning and worrying. I went running as the sun was rising and came back home for breakfast and for prayer. I realize that I am marked and wounded, like Jacob always wrestling. But the rising of the sun, the beginning of the day, saying the words, Thank You, God for the miracles of my life, reminds me that I am also blessed.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Doré (courtesy Wikipedia)

SPECIAL EDITION: ISRAEL & JORDAN

DECEMBER 9, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's been so amazing to have an opportunity to be in Israel again and especially a chance to travel with people for whom this is a first trip, or for whom the last time they were in Israel was many years ago. It's wonderful to see the thoughtfulness and excitement as people begin to learn about and make sense of this wonderful, challenging, living place.

We started our trip by looking at the Megillat HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Scroll. That document declares that Israel shall be a Jewish state called Israel and a homeland for the Jewish people. Right away, there is a conflict between being a special Jewish state, a place ready to airlift Jews out of dangerous situations anywhere in the world, and a nation among nations. Our first two days of travel showed us some of the blessings and challenges that promise has created.

After arriving in Tel Aviv on Monday, and seeing the wealth and energy of that great city, we made our way down to Sderot to see a very different side to Israel. Sderot is part of the promise to be a homeland for the Jewish people. It was established when Ben Gurion sent Jewish immigrants from Arab countries to this somewhat desolate spot on the border of Gaza on the one side and the desert on the other. It has always faced economic challenges – it is today the poorest city in Israel – but 2006-2008 was a whole new kind of struggle as over 3,000 rockets and missiles rained down on this city of 25,000 inhabitants.

We first saw some of the evidence both of poverty – the contrast with Tel Aviv was stark – and of violence. We saw concrete reinforced bus stops and playground equipment, stark day to day reminders of a city used to Kassam missiles. The most transformative part of our day, however, was a chance to visit Sderot's Middle School – High School. While there, we had a chance to meet with some 8th and 11th graders who are participants in a youth leadership program. This leadership program is helping them realize that education is the key to economic opportunity. In recent years the graduation rate in the local high school has dramatically increased as a result of this program and other efforts from the incredibly committed teachers and administration.

We met one young man who wants to attend the Technion, Haifa's outstanding science and technology university, and another young woman who wants to become a lawyer and then a member of the Knesset! One student, after being asked to describe the differences between them and young people in Tel Aviv or elsewhere, responded that they feel a strong connection to their own community and a need

to help build and sustain their town. That sense of responsibility impressed me and suggests that these young people really will emerge as leaders.

They shared with us some of their reactions during the height of the bombings. It has clearly marked them in significant ways and made them mature beyond their years. They wanted to be able to wear high heels to school and not have their friends feel betrayed because they couldn't get to shelter in those vital 10 seconds from the warning signal to when the missile hit. And they wanted peace. This more than anything else made them seem wise beyond their years. I heard no anger, no desire for vengeance. I just heard a sincere yearning for an Israel that frees them to pursue their dreams and to live a quiet life at peace with their neighbors.

The next day we went to Petra and Aqaba in Jordan. And I heard some encouraging signs. Eilat sends hundreds of tourists every day into Jordan to visit Petra, the ancient Nabatean city literally carved out of sandstone. It is breathtaking and well worth the effort to get there.

Our Jordanian tour guide spoke repeatedly of the importance of peace. Peace has meant opportunity and growth for Jordan. There are now 46 hotels around Petra when there were barely two 15 years ago. Aqaba has built a new hotel area designed to compete with Eilat for tourists. And most encouragingly, there is serious talk of building a new joint airport. People would arrive at Eilat / Aqaba in a joint sovereignty zone and then enter the appropriate country. Peace between Israel and Jordan means jobs, revenue, and opportunity for the Jordanian people. Jordan / Israeli relations have become an example of the opportunities of peace. I so much pray that it is this example that spreads, because it shows a path towards peace for Israel and frankly enrichment and advancement for the Arab world.

I will share more with you next week. Tomorrow we head to Masada and then Hanukkah and Shabbat in Jerusalem!

Shabbat Shalom and a Brilliant Hanukkah,

Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL EDITION: SHABBAT IN JERUSALEM

DECEMBER 12, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the last couple of days, as we visited first Matzada and then Jerusalem, we have been directly experiencing Jewish history and Jewish life today. One account that keeps coming up is the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

According to the Talmud, a man had a friend named Kamtza and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. By accident, his servant invited Bar Kamtza to a party with all the notable Rabbis and others of the day. The man told Bar Kamtza to leave. Bar Kamtza asked to stay, offering to pay for the cost of feeding him, rather than be embarrassed. The man refused, even when Bar Kamtza offered to pay half the cost of the party. The Rabbis there did nothing on his behalf. As a result, Bar Kamtza left humiliated and angry.

Bar Kamtza then went to the Roman authorities and claimed the Jews were in rebellion. This led directly to the destruction of the Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem. The way the Talmud tells the story, everyone involved failed to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The Rabbis fail to demonstrate leadership. The host allows his personal animosity towards Bar Kamtza to escalate out of control. And then Bar Kamtza betrays everyone. It is hatred among Jews that destroys the Temple.

Thursday and Friday we stood first in Matzada and then at the Western Wall, seeing the results of this failure of leadership and hatred between fellow Jews. Matzada, originally a Maccabean stronghold and then Herod's winter palace, became the last stand of the Jewish zealots against the Romans. We know very little of what happened there. Josephus' famous account of a last stand and mass suicide is problematic.

First, he writes of two other battles that end the same way. Each story involves an heroic last stand as the Romans breach the last defenses. Then, unaccountably, the Romans wait while the Jews vote and decide to commit mass suicide. As the Romans then enter the scene of devastation, they discover two women who tell the whole story. Second, though there was clearly a battle and siege, there is no archeological evidence for the mass suicide. While each of these battles may have ended the same way, it seems more likely that Josephus took a few liberties with the facts.

For many years, this story of a last stand while surrounded by enemies was extremely resonant for Israelis. Golda Meir saw the whole country as a kind of Matzada during the Yom Kippur war. But the site

has become much less significant to Israelis in recent decades. The army no longer uses Matzada to swear in soldiers. Israelis still visit, but tell the story in a more varied way.

Because the real hero of the Talmudic story is Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who escapes the destruction of Jerusalem and convinces the Romans to give him Yavneh. Without him, and his daring leadership, there would be no Judaism we could recognize today, and therefore no state of Israel. The Talmud teaches: Iron is forbidden in the building of the Temple. For iron shortens the days of humanity, while the Sanctuary exists to lengthen our days. Yochanan sustained a religion of action and of peace, of traditions designed to live in this world and to foster peace among people in it.

We went into the Western Wall tunnels and saw the huge stones brought down from the Temple. We could even see ancient blackening from the fires as the city burned. And yet, amazingly, we went down to the wall. We prayed together as a group and even put in the prayers of our religious school students and others in our community. We are here – and it is a miracle. We are here writing a new story. A story that includes threats of violence and terror. But also strength, wealth, and friends. Put another way, the real existential threats to Israel's continued existence come from within.

Over Shabbat, we spent time in Nahaloat, the second neighborhood founded outside the walls of Jerusalem. People opened their homes to us for Friday night dinner based on friendship I have made with people here. Saturday, we had Shabbat lunch with Daniel Cohen, a KE member who now lives in Jerusalem. There was something healing, amazing, about singing, celebrating, and sharing Shabbat. It was the other side of the story. While hatred between us leads to destruction, friendship and connections are healing. Singing together on Shabbat, being so welcomed by old and new friends, forges deep bonds that build and create.

May we see peace soon and speedily.

Happy Hanukkah

Rabbi David Booth

ISRAEL – FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

DECEMBER 14, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At Passover, the Seder goes from sorrow to joy. The journey of redemption means we start in darkness and are then brought out into the light. Our trip has gone from sorrow to joy, from darkness to light, in our journeys yesterday. And as redemptive journeys do, that leads us to healing.

We began our day at the new Yad Vashem. Dr. Rachel Korazim helped introduce the museum to us. She shared with us the changing way Israelis view the Holocaust. Her mother arrived in the state in 1946 from a concentration camp. She arrived at a Kibbutz and ended up working in the kitchen. Another woman in the kitchen, who had arrived 25 years earlier, asked her, “Was it really as bad as we heard?” And her mother told how a Nazi had come into their courtyard, fired his gun into the air, and rounded up her neighborhood.

“Why didn’t you fight back?” This question illustrated the bias of Israelis in the 1940s and 1950s to blame the survivors. The heroes were the partisans and the fighters in the Ghetto – the others were sheep led to the slaughter. That attitude began to change with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in the early 1960s.

Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor in his trial, said, “I may be alone but there are 6 million others who stand with me saying, ‘I accuse.’” As dozens of survivors came forward with their testimony, people began to realize that the Nazis, not the survivors, were to blame. The experience at the Munich Olympics, where Israeli athletes were murdered by terrorists, further broke that prejudice.

At Yad VaShem we saw many examples of heroism. There was the heroism of Leo Baeck who smuggled paper and writing materials into the camps to invest in Jewish life. Or of the person who shared a piece of bread with a child even though she was starving. Or a mother who shielded her baby with her own body. This is the heroism of small acts and is now celebrated at Yad VaShem.

As we left Yad Vashem we emerged into the light of a Jerusalem afternoon. Though Israel cannot explain the Holocaust or make up for the depth of the tragedy, it does provide a response. We, who live after, have chosen to build a country. We could have chosen despair or vengeance, but instead chose to build.

From there we went to Har Herzl, the military cemetery of Jerusalem and saw the price Israel pays for

its freedom. While there, we studied some Talmud and asked ourselves whether violence is an integral part of human nature. The Talmud teaches that we are not allowed to carry weapons of war on Shabbat because there will be no such weapons in the world to come. That is, we can imagine a world of peace even without a dramatic transformation of human nature. And the Talmud suggests Torah study as the means by which we change our violent and competitive selves into people who encourage, support, and heal.

Our last stop of the day was Shaare Tzedek Hospital where we saw an amazing cardiac unit, a fantastic trauma center, and the busiest obstetrics unit in Israel. And I learned something about the meaning of Israel today. The hospital offers dialysis to all the pediatric patients from the West Bank for free even though they have no medical arrangement or treaties with the Palestinian Authority. As a result, 90% of their pediatric dialysis patients are Palestinians.

So we went from the sorrow of the Holocaust to the light of peace and discovered real healing. What a marvelous place this is!

Composed in the city of Modiin, where the Maccabees lived.

Happy Hanukkah,

Rabbi David Booth

PANIM EL PANIM

DECEMBER 22, 2009

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you know, I just got back from Israel last week. It was a wonderful trip, where we had an opportunity to learn, to see many modern and ancient sites and to learn a great deal about the land of Israel. But the most meaningful aspects of the trip for all of us were the opportunities to meet and learn from people living in the land.

In Sderot, we met with High School students in a leadership program. It was amazing to hear from them about their reactions to missile fire and violence. But it was more impressive to see them caring about their own community as they search for ways to help this economically depressed and forgotten place. They were so excited to practice their English and to meet and talk to people from the United States.

Shabbat was also a chance to meet with individuals. We attended a Carlebach shul in Nahaloat, one of the oldest Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the Old City. After shul, we split up and went to people's homes. That chance to be in smaller groups and experience Jerusalem hospitality was similarly a great chance to hear about people's lives and choices. To learn first hand what it feels like to live in Jerusalem. As an aside, that ethic of hospitality is a wonderful strength that I really hope we here in Palo Alto can find a way to acquire. The ease of finding people interested in hosting us was amazing.

One of the best such encounters happened at Shabbat services between my daughter Naomi and an Israeli 11 year old girl in the Synagogue playground. They had a great time playing together and managed to find a way to communicate between Naomi's broken Hebrew and the other girl's broken English. After Shabbat, they exchanged email addresses and hope to remain in touch. This kind of friendship is the real reason for a trip to Israel. Now there is a person to person connection of friendship bridging the 10,000 miles in between us.

Those kind of person to person encounters between American Jews and Israelis happen with ease in Israel. But they also happen here. The Women's Alliance, in partnership with Federation, is arranging a week long visit to the Bay Area of 10 Israeli women across a spectrum of Israeli society. There will be a variety of events across the Bay Area and a retreat in Half Moon Bay on the 29th-30th of January. Lucy Milgram is the South Peninsula chair for this week long event, and Ellen Bob is the co-chair of the retreat itself.

This is a great opportunity to move beyond politics and towards human connections. When I open myself up to listening and hearing of another person's experience, I discover an opportunity to encounter true holiness. When our Rabbis teach that two who sit and share Torah experience God's divine presence, I believe this is exactly what they mean.

This delegation of Israeli women gives our whole community a chance to hear first person accounts, to discover the individuality and subjective experience of women confronting a host of issues in Israeli society. It would be normal for the next couple of generations to lead to a greater and greater divide between Israel and American Jewish society. We need to be intentional about building upon existing connections and creating new ones. Panim el Panim in January is one way to create those connections and maintain our strong sense of attachment to the land of our ancestors and the place today of our people.

An early Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

If you would like to sign up for the Panim retreat, you can do so at their [website](#). Please note there is an early bird special that expires this week.

Also, please note that CyberTorah will be on hiatus for the next two weeks. I am taking some vacation time and then attending a conference.

HAITI & MITZVAH DAY

JANUARY 14, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I imagine you have been tied to the media images and pictures coming out of Haiti. The Earthquake struck one of the poorest nations on Earth with devastating results. I have seen estimates of between 100,000 to 500,000 dead. Relief efforts are having a hard time even getting into Port-au-Prince because of the sheer quantity of rubble. The city seems to have simply collapsed.

God says to Moses, "I have heard the cry of the Israelites and remembered My covenant." This is one of the most important verses of Torah. It reminds us of a moral order to the Universe, because God hears the cry of pain and suffering. Further, it teaches us about a God who does care, even when that caring seems distant. The Midrash further instructs us to emulate God. God is long suffering and patient, and so should we be. Further, God hears the cries of those in need. And so should we. Finally, says the Midrash, when we deafen our ears, when we fail to respond to tragedies like this, then God in turn emulates US and deafens God's ears. God can only be with us in loss and tragedy, says the Midrash, when we are present for others in loss and tragedy.

Each week the Torah has a message for us as individuals and as a community. This week, the message I glean for our community is to hear the cries in Haiti as a call to action. To see the press reports and mourn but also to do. I urge you to go to the [American Jewish World Service website](#) to see updates of the relief efforts, and to donate to them.

This coming Monday is also Martin Luther King Jr. day, a day of service in our specific community as well as around the country. Kol Emeth is a partner with Mitzvah Day this year, and are now organizing 2 projects as part of the larger Jewish community effort. We are making soup for the Veterans Hospital as we did last year, and as a new project going to a Soup Kitchen to feed the hungry.

I am so moved to see care for the less fortunate in our own community become a more integral part of Kol Emeth. This December, dozens of us went to the Ecumenical Hunger program to help distribute food to the needy. Some of us ended up helping some children do arts and crafts projects to help them celebrate their own holiday. It was a great example of hearing the cry in our own community and acting. Doing more this Mitzvah Day continues emphasizing this key part of who we are as a community.

This weekend, let us strive to imitate the Holy One by hearing the cries of those in need, both in Haiti

and at home. May the example of Martin Luther King Jr. inspire us to open our ears and uncover our eyes in the face of tragedy and suffering. With ears and eyes open, may we then extend our hearts and our hands and remember the covenant we have with all our brothers and sisters everywhere.

Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SEEING MYSELF IN EXODUS

JANUARY 21, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Whenever I am particularly struck by a biblical character, I know the Bible is inviting me to look inside myself, to realize how I can find myself in this character. As we begin the story of Exodus, that insight is particularly frightening because I find the person of Pharaoh riveting. What rivets me about Pharaoh is the way in which his own anxieties set in motion events that bring about his worst fears.

As Radak points out, his first speech of fear, “We must be clever lest the Israelites join our enemies and rise up against us,” becomes prophetic. The Israelites indeed rise up from the land and strip Egypt because of Pharaoh’s persecution. I see this in myself sometimes, that my own fears can give birth to that which I dread.

Pharaoh is strong, powerful, a man of gezerot, of human decrees. And yet, for all that power, for all that sense of human ability, Pharaoh is self defined by his fears. He chooses again and again, six times in fact, to turn away from hope and towards the darkness. Six times God sends plagues and six times Pharaoh chooses to harden his own heart. And out of that fearful place, out of ego trying to totally control others, comes persecution and then devastation. First, the Jews experience suffering and destruction on a literally epic scale. Then, as it must, that fear, that anxiety, rebounds, bringing back an even worse catastrophe onto Egypt itself.

But there is also Moses, a source of light and hope. The Zohar identifies Moses with daat, or consciousness, awareness, perhaps even mindfulness. So there is a response, an antidote, in me as well. There is Pharaoh, but there is also Moses. Moses also experiences fear, especially of his own leadership. Yet by contrast with Pharaoh, Moses’ quality of daat, of awareness and focus, returns him to hope and possibility.

I am returning from a week long Jewish spirituality retreat down at Brandeis Bardin in LA. Rabbi Shefa Gold was one of the prayer leaders at this retreat. She taught that the Bible invites us to regularly see ourselves in the text. Further, when we see ourselves in the text, we need to find both the practices and blessings that allow us to meet the challenges posed by Torah to us this week.

As I begin to read Exodus again, I discover a challenge. A challenge to turn away from Pharaoh and the qualities of fear and ego that he embodies for me. And to turn towards Moses, who embodies the

quality of daat, of mindfulness, from which I can discover hope and possibility.

So my blessing for myself and for all of us is: May the God of our ancestors remind us of hope in our darkest moments. May we realize that our experience of fear is the true concern, and that daat, an awareness of self, can allow us to see that our fears are only feelings, only an illusion of the ego. In that moment of daat, of God consciousness, allow us then to act in integrity, in hope, and in love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LOVE AND HATE

JANUARY 28, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Warning: This CyberTorah includes explicit and offensive language. It addresses the ridiculous charges of Fred Phelps and uses his own words from his website, godhatesfags.com to show the range of this man's hatred and bigotry.

Hatred breeds more hatred. This is the real lesson of anti-semitism, of racism, of any form of bigotry. History is filled with hatred directed at Jews, at Blacks, at Gays and Lesbians. As I much as I wish such beliefs were in the dustbin of history, I am sad to report that they are alive and well and coming to the Bay Area.

Fred Phelps is the pastor of an independent Baptist church in Topeka, Kansas. He is notorious for his hate filled speech and activities, primarily targeting the gay community and the Jewish community. His Church's slogan is, "God hates fags." Yet he has a broad range of targets that include Catholics and the Military. He protested outside Catholic Churches with signs reading, "Priests Rape Boys." Similarly, he has brought signs reading "God loves dead soldiers" to military funerals.

Phelps has preached that "Homosexuals and Jews dominated Nazi Germany just as they now dominate this doomed U.S.A." (from the [ADL website](#)) While not quite a Holocaust denier, Phelps regularly says the Jews deserved what they got and raises questions about what really happened.

And he is coming to the Bay Area this week, focusing on Jewish organizations and local High Schools for his hateful picketing. Thursday he will be visiting a variety of Jewish communal institutions, including the Contemporary Jewish Museum. They plan to protest the Holocaust memorial at the Museum. "We will stand at your goofy lying memorial and remind you of what is to come..." He then plans to protest outside the ADL offices because "You liars are leading bros to hell," and from there on to the JCC. He will also visit Twitter, Lowell High School, and the Thursday production of *Fiddler*.

Friday he plans to be in Palo Alto, first at Gunn High School and then at Stanford Hillel. He plans to protest the "Antichrist Obama" and "Kevin Jennings who is determined to sodomize all of your children he and Obama can get their filthy blood hands on." Gunn has decided to discourage a counter protest. As a result, I encourage people to either donate to the ADL who have done tremendous research in following Phelps' activities, or directly to Stanford Hillel.

Hatred breeds more hatred. Yet love has its own strength and power as well. The broad swath of Phelps' bigotry so clearly reminds all of us that hate ultimately targets everyone. I will finish with the words of another pastor, Martin Niemoller, about the inaction of German intellectuals as the Nazis rose to power. His words remain honest, challenging, and a clarion call.

*First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out.*

This time, let us all stand together.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT IS PRAYER?

FEBRUARY 4, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We need to think about prayer in a different way. If prayer is only about Jewish community, there are far more engaging ways to have communal experience. If prayer is only about building strong families, then our prayer experiences are utilitarian and risk becoming infantilized. It's time to raise the question of how we think of prayer, of our state of mind as we enter a place or a time of prayer.

Our own encounters with prayer ought to call something deep from within us. Yet if we arrive at Synagogue expecting to meet God, we are often disappointed. By contrast, my most powerful prayer experiences in Synagogue were preceded by intense preparation for that prayer moment. I came upon God in full consciousness.

Heschel is at his most inspiring when he writes about prayer and prayer experiences. He says that prayer is a meeting place between humanity and holiness, between the Divine and our own limited selves. Prayer in Hebrew is appropriately called *l'hitpallel*, a reflex verb meaning to judge oneself. Prayer is a reflexive act, an act in which I allow my whole self to be present.

If I come to shul expecting to be bored, I will be. If I come to shul looking for ways of expressing gratitude and appreciation, I will find them. Prayer more than any other human activity requires that reflexive quality, requires that I bring myself to the experience for the experience to have meaning.

For many years I have accepted the obligation of ritual. Initially for me that obligation was somewhat rote. I felt a pressure to recite certain words and to be present with community on certain occasions. However, I also skated along those words, and experienced prayer as one more responsibility to be gotten through.

In the last few years, prayer has become a real necessity for me. Prayer is the place in the morning where I orient myself to the day, where I set my intention for who I am. When I wrap my tefillin at weekday prayers, I have an intention with each wrap. They vary, from "I intend to be more intentional about my eating" to "Let this draw me to a renewed sense of purpose and God." The ritual practice connects me with something deep and essential. It also opens a doorway to God.

Liturgy provides a marvelous vessel from within which to construct an experience that invites that

reflective and open quality from the participants. The liturgy offers a curriculum that must be filled by community, by music, and by silence. How we fill that vessel is a key question for us as a community and for us as individuals.

Kol Rinah, our exuberant monthly Friday Night service, is one such experiment. Within the traditional vessel of Kabbalat Shabbat, we sing, we put our arms around each other, we dance. Sometimes we even sit quietly for a moment. Kol Rinah meets the first Friday of each month. I would love you to experience Kol Rinah this Friday to begin thinking for yourself about prayer and music and tradition and God.

Our daily minyan this year is another place where we have rediscovered the power of faith to build community. In part because of all the losses experienced last year, there is now a much larger group of regulars sharing in the mourning of their loved ones. It has led to a vitality in the daily minyan, a presence for one another, that has greatly enriched my own experience.

I invite you to think about prayer and what it means for you. A dynamic enriching prayer experience is possible only with a dynamic spiritually engaged community. If prayer is a necessity, how will we meet that human need?

Next Week: The Shabbat Morning Task Force

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE SHABBAT MORNING TASKFORCE

FEBRUARY 11, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Having identified prayer as a human need, there are real implications for how prayer experiences occur. If we want prayer to have a dynamism and life to it, an ability to speak to us, then we need a spiritual attentiveness that influences prayer itself. Many of us see prayer as an isolated activity; I believe it must be integrated fully into our lives.

Traditional liturgy offers a vessel for prayer which must be filled with content. As a result, our community must make choices about pacing, melodies, and teaching. Dynamism — a live quality that leaves room for change and experimentation — feels essential to me. My own dynamism, my own experience of the fluidity of my life and the world around me, necessitates a response from my prayer life that continues to speak to me even as I experience change.

Saturday morning is one of Kol Emeth's central prayer experiences. In partnership with Joni Block, a member of our Synagogue's executive board, I have set up a think tank of 7 members. Our task is threefold as we strive to fill the vessel of Shabbat morning with greater meaning and intentionality.

Our first goal is to identify key values of the Kol Emeth Shabbat morning service. Second is to gather information from Kol Emeth members about their experiences of Shabbat morning. Related is to gather information about other communities and how they are realizing their communal values in prayer. Third is to make some specific recommendations that will shift our Shabbat morning experience.

Such changes may include pacing, music, styles of learning, even the physical set up of the room. The suggested changes will come from the values we identify and the learning we do about the community so that they help the traditional vessel of our service continue to be filled with a content that challenges and inspires.

Our first tangible suggestion embodies several values. Beginning on Feb 20th, the Synagogue will be slightly reconfigured. The Torah reading table will be placed on the floor with seats arranged in a U shape around it. The other chairs and tables on the bimah will be placed elsewhere in the facility. We will solicit feedback on this change over the next three months and then decide whether it should be a permanent shift.

The change is intended to express three values. First, by bringing the prayer leader into the midst of the community, we identify that prayer and singing are centered in the congregation. We all have equal access to God. A prayer leader's responsibility is to keep the congregation together in prayer and perhaps inspire greater focus through music and pacing. Yet we all together can reach out to the Holy One directly.

Second, by having the bimah on the floor, Torah becomes accessible to all. This is Jews with Disabilities month, which creates a lovely opportunity. There are members of our community in wheelchairs or who have other difficulties with stairs. While we do have a ramp, it's awkward and hard to set up. This change will allow people easily, without hassle, to accept an aliyah even if they cannot manage stairs.

Finally, we are trying this as an experiment. Vibrant communities try new things. Healthy communities are able to discuss change and experiment within a certain framework. I want Kol Emeth to continue to be a place where we can try out new things, new melodies, new ways of teaching within the overall framework of Shabbat morning.

As our process continues, we will be talking about teaching, melodies and pacing, and the welcoming open quality of our community. We encourage you to send feedback to me, to Joni, or to ShabbatAMTF@kolemeth.org and tell us your reactions, thoughts, fears, and hopes.

Come, let us join together, fully present, to bless the Holy One.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE SPIRITUALITY OF WELCOME

FEBRUARY 18, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Build Me a Sanctuary that I may dwell in your midst... (Ex 25:8).” When God envisions the Sanctuary (Mishkan in Hebrew) that Moses and the people will build, God wants an intimate structure that draws the people close to one another and to God in two ways. First, the Mishkan’s physical presence gives us a focus for God-consciousness, for our awareness of the holy in our lives. While God’s presence fills the whole world, our ability to perceive that presence is filtered through our senses. As a result, having a tangible structure in our midst gives our eyes and ears and touch something to grasp, something to focus on and so regularly remind us of God’s intimate presence.

Second, the rituals of sacrifice themselves draw us to an intimate awareness of God. In Hebrew, the sacrifices are referred to as “korbanot.” This comes from the root *krv* which means to draw close. Sacrificial practices would be better translated as drawing closer rituals.

Synagogues are often called “Mishkan Maat,” a small version of this desert Sanctuary. As a result, the intimate intention of the Mishkan should be reflected in the way we envision and construct Synagogues for our own communities today. We were fortunate to have Dr. Ron Wolfson with us this past Shabbat as our scholar in residence. He pointed out that Synagogues thrive not on programs but on relationships. People go to an event because they are invited, because they have someone to sit with or someone they want to see. Pirkei Avot teaches: When friends sit together, God’s presence dwells in their midst. We find God in the community.

In the last few years, we have drawn closer to a more open model of a Synagogue. When I first arrived at Kol Emeth, I often heard from newcomers that they were politely ignored. Some may recall a man in town on business for four months who came to every minyan and Shabbat service reciting Kaddish for his son. During those months he was greeted by me and two other people.

Today, I hear something very different. Newcomers now comment on the warmth of their reception. They tell me of being greeted by numerous people at the Kiddush, of how warm and welcoming the greeters were, of how caring the staff has been. This is happening because we as a community are making it our sacred mission. Many of us are spending ten minutes of our Kiddush time greeting people, stepping outside of our usual groups. For people to draw close WE have to draw them close.

There is more we can and must do. Dr. Wolfson reminded me of the simple holiness of inviting someone to sit next to me. If we see a newcomer, or someone we would like to know better, or someone sitting alone, why not ask them to sit with us? More boldly, why not invite a newcomer, or someone we are just getting to know, or someone we have known for years but never known well, to dinner on Shabbat or another occasion? Imagine the sense of community and of holiness this would create.

Dr. Wolfson led a discussion Shabbat afternoon. People shared a number of key concerns. Parents of young children talked about the difficulties in feeling welcome with their children in the Sanctuary. Are there ways our Synagogue can create space for young children to feel embraced by the community in ways that stimulates and inspires our prayers?

We also heard from those still growing in their Jewish knowledge and practice. Kol Emeth uses a lot of Hebrew. Even a word like daven, from the Yiddish for praying, can be a technical term unfamiliar to some. How can this knowledgeable, practicing, serious community, translate its practices in a way that invites the newcomer while retaining that serious quality? How can we reach out to those on the margins seeking a way in?

“Build Me a Sanctuary...” That present tense commandment never ends. We no longer have the Mishkan itself. Instead, we have our community as a focus for holiness, as a place in which we find God. Let us continually strive to build a Sanctuary in which God can truly dwell.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WITH OUR YOUNG AND OLD WE SHALL GO....

FEBRUARY 25, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Flourishing Synagogue life requires an intergenerational community of respect, or kavod. A healthy community needs to find the ways in which people at different stages of life can support one another. This is why Moses tells Pharaoh that he will leave Egypt only with both young and old, with the whole community together.

In our society, the trend is in the reverse direction. We tend to atomize narrower and narrower demographics with their own preferences and living arrangements. While it may sell more products, something human is being lost. The trend is to have less and less patience for the needs of other groups as my own particular needs are met by this product, show, or housing arrangements.

This past Shabbat, we addressed both young and old. First, the Bimah has now been moved to the floor of the Synagogue with the seats arranged in a U shape as an experiment over the next three months. This greater accessibility of the bimah means that people for whom stairs are a challenge can now easily and regularly receive aliyot. Several people who had not been called to the Torah in years received an aliyah. It has changed the way the Sanctuary feels, opening it up and making the wide space of the community the center.

Second, we talked about the welcome for children at Kol Emeth. I have heard from many young parents that their children have been shushed or disciplined by others. Even worse, parents have reported being asked to leave the room. Decorum matters in a Synagogue, but part of decorum is the quality of welcome people receive.

I want to encourage all of us to take to heart the teaching of our Rabbis that the voices of young children inspire greater focus or kavannah. As a result, the next time we hear children making noise in the Synagogue we can welcome it as an inspiration and a sign of Jewish life and continuity. Further, the Baal Shem Tov reminds us that interruptions in our prayer are warnings that we need to refocus. An interruption occurs because we need to refocus, to dig a little deeper inside, to be ready for prayer.

I want to invite all of us to change the way we respond to the presence of children. I want us first and foremost to trust the parents of these children. Our young parents are serious about their Judaism and about their praying and about their parenting. We need to respect that commitment and allow the

parents to parent.

Then, if we are inclined to shush a child, we ought to smile instead. I want the associations young children have of us to be of warmth and openness. If we are frustrated by a child's behavior and inclined to discipline that child, we should remember the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov. Perhaps our reaction is reminding us of our own issues. So this interruption becomes instead a reminder and an inspiration.

And in that moment when we want to ask someone to leave the Sanctuary, perhaps we can refocus and instead invite that child or family to come sit with us. Intergenerational connections are enriching and marvelous. Imagine if 50 and 60 and 70 year olds were regularly connecting with 3 and 4 and 5 year olds. That would be a truly healthy image of what a community committed to God, prayer, and continuity should look like.

Moses insisted on leaving Egypt with young and old alike. How can we do any less?

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Purim

Rabbi David Booth

IMAGINATION AND HOPE

MARCH 4, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The frivolity and play of Purim leads us directly to Passover. Purim is all about rediscovering our imagination. In the darkness of winter, our capacity for hope is weakened. Pharaoh continues to afflict us, making us feel pressured to work harder to secure financial security or professional success. Purim reconnects us to imagination and therefore to hope.

There are four commandments associated with Purim and one practice. We are commanded to hear the entirety of the Megillat Esther, the story of Esther. This story reminds us that darkness turns to light, that hope can be found even in darkness. And it reminds us that humor and celebration is one way to free ourselves of Pharaoh.

We are commanded to give gifts of food to our friends. In this mitzvah we see a wonderful opposite to the practices around Halloween. Instead of demanding treats from others, we give treats. This practice of Mishloakh Manot, of gifts to one another, reasserts communal connections. It is a way of tangibly building connections within our community.

We are commanded to celebrate with a meal and drink. Drink can be a destructive force in people's lives; it can also function as a social lubricant. Purim celebrations are about laughter and joy. Drink becomes a vehicle of discovering anew our capacity to lay aside our burdens and to laugh together. The practice of dressing up in costume functions similarly by letting our imagination run free. We can pretend to be someone else and in so doing discover something new within us.

Finally, we are commanded to give food to those in need. If we are going to rediscover hope, we need to help others. God gives to Abraham the power to bless others. Purim invites us to rediscover our own capacity to be a blessing in the lives of others. When we have that realization, we have taken the first step towards freedom. A redeemed life means knowing that our actions matter and that we can make a difference for blessing in the world around us.

As we move towards Pesach, as our imagination rekindles our hope, our own ability to help others becomes paramount. When we can assist others in discovering freedom from hunger, we remind ourselves of the wide open land that lies in front of us. For this reason, I call your attention to the American Jewish World Service's Global Hunger Shabbat occurring March 19-20th.

Alongside dozens of other communities, we are reminding ourselves that we can make a difference in the world around us. Hunger and poverty remain crushing oppressive forces in much of the world. Donating to AJWS is one way to reconnect with our own ability to be a blessing. It's a way to remember that we can be part of the process of bringing light into darkness, of restoring hope amid despair.

I hope that we are all still enjoying the glow of joy and laughter from Purim. I pray that this rediscovery of imagination reminds us of our ability and responsibility to be a blessing in the world around us. If that happens, we really are one step closer to the redemption promised by Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that I will be away this weekend in Los Angeles with our 8th and 9th grade students. As a result, Cybertorah will take a one week hiatus.

NESS

MARCH 11, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Teach these words to your children ... (Deuteronomy).” God lives in history; so do the Jewish people. Our tradition, its wisdom for living and practice, are meant to continue throughout history. Times and situations change, but the underlying divinely inspired wisdom of the Bible and the Rabbinic tradition continue to guide us and direct us.

Conservative Judaism in particular reminds us of the deep connection between eternal wisdom about the human condition and the changing dynamic nature of our lives. As Conservative Jews, we believe in Klal Yisrael (the whole of the Jewish people) and Ahavat Yisrael (love of the Jewish people). That means we believe in a respect for others and for creating a wide open Jewish space in our Synagogue. It is this place of religious pluralism and respect from which we discover a promised land flowing with milk and honey.

It is a core part of our mission to pass these values of Jewish learning, wrestling with faith, creating room for the other, on to another generation. In the last year and a half, Kol Emeth has been wrestling with ways of fulfilling that holy educational mission to more completely embody our values as a Synagogue.

Through the Bureau of Jewish Education we have received a 3 year grant to help us better understand how to fulfill this sacred responsibility as a community. Now mid way through that process called NESS, we are beginning to see some real results on the school and the community. Among the success stories of NESS so far:

A whole new group of leaders has emerged to help guide us through this process. Parents and community members have been giving so generously of their time to examine curriculum, community, issues of outreach, and our core values. Even if NESS produced nothing else, this would have been sufficient.

NESS is also teaching us new ways of running meetings and projects. NESS gives to us a management consultant who regularly looks at new ways of becoming an evaluative thoughtful community capable of envisioning and then implementing change. This too would have been sufficient were it the whole of NESS.

Hanukkah and Purim in their new intergenerational celebrations were also a direct result of the NESS process. NESS isn't just about the religious school because the religious school can succeed only when it is strongly connected to the rest of the community. So NESS helped create an evening for adults at Purim. We have also put out a coffee cart on Thursdays to build community. This too – dayenu.

Finally, the leaders involved in NESS have created a mission and vision statement for the school. This statement is very much a product of Kol Emeth. It is caring and detailed and includes Jewish text at its core. Since this document will point us towards the future in ways that involve the whole community, Michael Kahan (Co-Chair of NESS), Rabbi Matzkin and I will present it to the community this coming Shabbat at around 11:30am as part of our morning service. It will then be emailed to the congregation.

I hope you can join us this Shabbat as we worship together and take this opportunity to learn, inspire, and be inspired.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 18, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. In addition, items with no chametz can be purchased prior to Pesach. (Please note that sour cream should have a kosher for passover label as it sometimes has gluten.) That would include tuna fish that is only tuna and water, tomato paste or crushed tomatoes that are only tomatoes and water, jams that are only fruit, and so forth. If an infinitesimal quantity of chametz should accidentally have fallen into these items, it is considered void prior to the start of the Holy Day. If they are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, pasta sauce, and ketchup with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label.

In addition, following the ruling Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please

keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes. For those who eat legumes, they may similarly purchase items before Pesach that include corn products, like potato chips or pure ice cream (do not purchase ice creams with candy, cookies, or other additives as they may include chametz.)

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at rabbinicalassembly.org. They have posted a .pdf there called Passover Guide.

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

OUR NEW SEATING ARRANGEMENT

MARCH 25, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are one month now into a three month experiment with the seating in the Main Sanctuary. Changing seating and set up can create a great deal of initial discomfort and concern and I value the community's willingness to go through this period of adjustment. Rabbi Akiva commands us not to make our prayers "fixed" or rote, meaning we ought to stir things up in our prayer lives and experiences from time to time to discover a greater spiritual connection. I want to pause and reflect on some of my own reactions and the feedback I have received to this point.

I have heard three main concerns about the new setup, These concerns were amplified when the back of the Sanctuary was open for additional seating. First is a concern about sound. Our sound system has for years been problematic. Last Shabbat we tried a new microphone with a wider range. However, the volume was set too low until mid way through the service. This week it will be set louder and all of the Rabbinic comments will be made into the microphone. Please let me know if you are able to hear, both compared to the way the system worked in the past and in absolute terms.

Second is the accessibility of seating. Some are finding the new aisles more narrow. I am going to remove a few seats (about 10-12) in order to widen the aisles and leave people more space to get to their seats. Let me know if that helps address this concern. Related, some really like the side facing seating and some find those seats less comfortable. In particular, during the Torah reading some found these seats difficult to access because a person had to push by the Gabbaim or Torah readers. I will remove a few seats to broaden the area around the Torah readers table. I encourage those who like or are unconcerned with these side seats to sit in them so that they fill up early leaving others alternate choices.

Third is the issue of visibility. Particularly during the Torah reading, a number of people can no longer see the Torah reader or the person receiving an aliyah. This was similar to my experience in praying at Shir Chadash or the old Yedidiah in Israel. It's the hardest issue to address because it requires some carpentry work to overcome.

Should this become our permanent setup, we will consider building some kind of platform for the Torah reading table. For this Shabbat, we will pull out the step for the Torah reader to stand on to at least modestly address this concern about sight lines.

I have also heard some consistent positives. First and foremost, those in wheelchairs and walkers are now able to receive aliyot. The old ramp could be used, but required effort to set up and was somewhat narrow for a wheelchair. As a result, it was in practice seldom used. This new set up creates easy accessibility for all.

Second, there is an intimacy now in the community. We are much closer to one another without having lost significant seating. We can see one another because some of the seats now face towards the side, which we can choose to make a key part of our spiritual experience. The Ari HaKadosh used to ask his students to make eye contact with one another as they began their prayers. It's one thing to love your neighbor in the abstract; it's another to engender real feelings of caring for the actual person in front of you. Our new set up places us in community and broadens our prayer experience to include the people around us.

Third, the leaders are now immediately in the community. There is no distance, no raised quality, of the person leading. We together are singing and praying. I hope that this will inspire more singing, more harmonizing, more of a sense of a community in prayer together. Related, the Torah tells us that God dwells in the midst of the people. Our new format invites us to feel a sense of God here in our midst.

Change itself is always hard. I am so honored to be part of a community willing to engage ways of enhancing our thoughtful intentional spiritual community. I have heard from many people, and I want to continue to invite input in the remaining two months of our experiment. Please feel free to email me directly, and / or to email ShabbatAMTF@kolemeth.org.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Pesach – I hope that we all find ways of liberating ourselves from that which enslaves us as we rejoice in the words of the Seder and the practices of Pesach.

Rabbi David Booth

FOUR PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

APRIL 15, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This past Shabbat, we were privileged to have Arnie Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, home for a brief visit. He spoke in an inspiring and passionate way about the Seminary and the Conservative movement. In particular, Arnie suggested that our ideas as a movement remain strong but our organization is weak and fractured.

Following up on his remarks, I want to focus on some of the great ideas that hold our movement together. I would like to put forward four key values that I believe are central. Further, as Arnie suggested, I see these values as attractive and necessary for American Judaism today. They are:

Gesher Tzar Meod

Our tradition teaches that the entire world is a narrow bridge. This teaching applies to building Jewish identity. People are uncomfortable walking into a Synagogue for the first time. Jews disconnected from their Judaism are even more afraid because they worry that they will be judged. The only way for us to reach people at a variety of levels of commitment is to be open and accepting to all regardless of their current observance. We want people to feel comfortable attending a class or feeding the homeless even if they never come to services. We give an aliyah to someone regardless of their Shabbat practice because we believe they are far more likely to become interested in Shabbat if we fully welcome them. Our Synagogue needs to be a bridge between different points of Jewish commitment.

Clal Yisrael

The entire people of Israel. The Conservative movement, alone in contemporary Judaism, treats the whole people of Israel as a factor in decisions and activities. This means we are supportive as individuals of a wide variety of Jewish causes. It means as a movement we strive for good relations with other strands of Judaism.

Talmud Torah Im Derekh Eretz

Conservative Judaism values learning that is integrated into our lives. This means we take seriously traditional text and the wisdom contained therein alongside the contributions Western study and living have offered Jewish and general study. By the same token, we see Jewish learning as a means to inform our day to day lives. Science and religion are in dialogue. Observance becomes a way of structuring lives

that continue to be deeply integrated into the Modern world.

Shvil HaZahav

The Golden Mean. As Conservative Jews, we need to be passionate moderates. This affects us in terms of Jewish Law and in terms of our organizational role. Jewish law is supposed to be a sustainable tradition. As one example, it has become more and more difficult to buy kosher meat that is not Glatt. Glatt is a higher optional standard that significantly increases the cost of meat. Some take it upon themselves as a special and praiseworthy stricture. Now it is virtually impossible to buy anything but Hebrew National, a non-Glatt kosher product, had Orthodox supervision for years and years. When their supervising Rabbi died, no one else in the Orthodox world would supervise a non-Glatt facility. Now the facility is under Conservative supervision. Conservative Rabbis decided that affordable kosher hot dogs were worth supervising even though the meat was not glatt. There are numerous such examples. Sitting in the center, we have helped hold together the Jewish people. Without us, I wonder if Reform and Orthodoxy would view themselves as two separate peoples.

Our ultimate goal as Jews is to fulfill God's commandment to "Be Holy for I God am Holy." These four principles are heartfelt ideals that continue to guide us in our service of God. There may be others that touch you as well – I would love to hear from you. I pray that we be granted the opportunity, through passionate adherence to our values, to positively impact the entire Jewish world to greater tolerance, unity, learning, and love of tradition.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MUSIC ON SHABBAT

APRIL 22, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last Thursday, I attended a concert / spiritual event with Beit Ayin, a Philadelphia based group that does chanting and story telling at Kol Emeth. The group had a variety of instruments to accompany several chants taken from Jewish liturgy that we then repeated many times. It was relaxing and uplifting and showed a way in which instrumental music can enhance a spiritual experience.

By contrast, Friday night was Kol Rinah, our new Friday night Carlebach service. The service is incredibly musical but it draws on voices rather than instruments. It is the enthusiasm of the participants that engenders the feeling of joy and rest. We breathe at the beginning to let go of the pressures of the week and then join our voices together to rediscover joy. Shabbat V'yinafash – we rest and breathe and are renewed.

Jewish law forbids the use of musical instruments on Shabbat while Jewish practice strongly encourages music – the music of our voices and selves. There are two Halakhic (Jewish legal) concerns and one spiritual concern with the use of instrumental music. The first is out of mourning for the Temple. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the Jewish community refrained from using instruments as a sign of sadness and loss. While instrumental music gradually returned to people's lives outside of prayer experiences, Synagogues continued to avoid instrumental music.

With a strong and wonderful Israel in our lives, this issue of mourning no longer applies. I attend concerts and listen to my ipod. Further, if musical instruments can enhance or add to a spiritual experience, then all the better. There is consensus on this in the Jewish community. As one example, many Orthodox Jews attend and perform at the Klezmer festival in Sefad every year.

The second concern does apply today. On Shabbat, one is forbidden from making something usable as a tool or vessel or instrument (this is called tikkun kli). Shabbat is all about being in the world as it is, leaving aside our striving and doing. As a result, we are not supposed to engage in any activities that build or create. I would not hang a picture on Shabbat or finish a building project. Since string and wind instruments require tuning and building (attaching different pieces together to make the instrument), they cannot be used on Shabbat.

I also have a personal aesthetic/spiritual concern. Spiritual activities are a broad range of practices and

behaviors that include but are not limited to prayer. Prayer is a particular kind of spiritual experience where the focus is on the individual and the community. My own experience with instrumental music is positive and wonderful, but outwardly focused on the performance rather than inwardly or communally focused. I would be uncomfortable with a weekday evening service, for example, with musical instruments because it would detract from the hard inner work that is prayer.

At Kol Emeth, this plays out in several ways. First, we regularly bring in musical groups, including those like Beit Ayin that are spiritual as well as cultural on non-Shabbat times. Second, we work hard to make Shabbat musical by joining our voices together as a community. Third, we use musical instruments in our weekday educational program when that enriches the experience.

We are planning to use a guitar for the first part of Making Room for Shabbat in May in a way that honors all the above concerns. The program starts at 6pm, well before Shabbat officially begins. We plan to use the guitar to get the kids singing and rejoicing for the first part of the experience. Then, following the Mishnah Berurah who says Shabbat begins either at sunset or on reciting the Psalm for Shabbat, we will put away the guitar prior to Barkhu even though the sun will still have another hour or more before setting. Maariv, the evening service itself, will then be recited with the music of our voices.

Music is a key part of our spiritual lives. I wanted to share with you some of the ways in which our voices and musical instruments can enhance or detract from our spiritual lives. At the same time, I want to encourage everyone to find ways that singing, music, and prayer can help us actualize that restorative breathing that the Torah calls “Shabbat v’Yinafash.”

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

YOU SHALL BE HOLY

APRIL 29, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

You shall be holy, for I God am holy. So says the Torah. Rashi comments: the rest of the body of Torah depends upon this section. That is, the ritual and moral practices of Torah depend upon one another. Separating the law and the practice does damage to both for together they create a system of meaning that allows us to fill our empty places.

Rashi goes on to say that in all places where Torah describes forbidden sexual practices holiness is found as well. For example, when Leviticus forbids the Cohen from marrying a zonah (a woman who has committed adultery or incest), the next verse commands the Cohen to sanctify the offerings, "For I God am holy (Lev 21:7-8)." On the one hand, Rashi is reminding us that that path to holiness begins by limiting our desires. Only when I make value driven choices about who I sleep with, how I spend my money, or what I eat, can I find meaning in my life.

On the other hand, Rashi is warning us that we need more than just turning away from bad behavior. There has to be a substitution towards meaning or the hole inside remains empty. Therapists make the same recommendation to their clients. Changing unhealthy habits requires replacing them with healthy ones.

This passage brings to mind the various current scandals of powerful men indulging their own sexuality in inappropriate ways. Tiger Woods, about whom far too much has already been written, has a God sized hole that he is trying to fill with the rush of excitement that comes from beautiful women desiring him and acting on that desire. He has insecurities and fears, just like everyone else, but hasn't found healthy ways of addressing them.

When he golfs, he often swears at himself about himself. After a poor drive or put, he will sometimes say, "You **** Tiger." From the outside, this looks like a man whose self-worth comes from his success on the golf course and in the bedroom. And failures on the golf course resound inside again and again in painful ways. The adulation he receives for his incredible talent will never fill this God sized hole in his soul. The only way to do that is to turn towards meaning. He ought to share his own fears and insecurities with his wife or friends. In striving to be perfect, he has fallen into a pit.

The recent scandals in the Catholic Church are even worse. They actively profane faith because of the

bad behavior of certain Priests. These Priests have their own desires and insecurities and somehow managed to justify to themselves terrible behavior. Compounding the abuse to children by Priests is the hierarchy's ongoing willingness to cover up the bad behavior and move the offending Priests to other places. All the parties involved know the behavior to avoid; a great opportunity for holiness is destroyed by this failure.

If we are honest, it's not just Tiger or the Catholic Church. We all have our God sized holes that arise out of insecurities, fears, and failings. The wounds that we have received in life leave their mark inside and create wounded places. Our natural tendency is to ignore these places, pretend that they don't exist. When we do that, these holes feed our bad inclinations and result in terrible self-destructive behavior. Torah is suggesting a different path. It is precisely in this so human place of emptiness, of potential bad behavior, where a great opportunity to discover meaning in our lives exists.

When I admit my own failings, my own imperfections, I reorient myself towards healthy behavior. I am filling that God sized hole with God. And when that succeeds, I reconnect myself with meaning, with the possibility of being Holy for God is holy.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

SPRING AND RENEWAL

MAY 6, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a pleasant scent on the air as I walk out of my home these days. The leaves have returned to the fields, the flowers are fully in bloom. Even early in the morning, the sunlight makes known its warm intentions for the rest of the day. Suddenly, after months of cold and of rain, the outdoor beckons once again.

It's easy to imagine in the first flush of rediscovered warmth that a boundless abundance of days stands in front of me, too numerous ever to be counted. Tomorrow will be soon enough to heed the call, to find the moments in which to appreciate that which God has made. Tomorrow will be soon enough to greet my neighbors and friends in the newly welcoming spaces near my mailbox and on my street.

Each day we count the Omer, reminding ourselves of days gone by when a sheaf of barley was brought each day to the Temple as we drew closer to Shavuot and Torah. We remind ourselves of the past even as we live in the present. Each day, each counting, is a challenge. This day, filled with warmth and promise, stretches in front of me. With what will I fill it?

Though we imagine an infinite abundance of days, the Omer focuses, reminds, and challenges us with the very quality of finitude that we would just as soon ignore in the flush of spring growth and the passing of the rains. Yet this is the time of year for gentleness in our efforts, for a reminder not only of great things, but of simple acts and simple disciplines.

The rain gives way to dew, to the life sustaining moisture ever present without which we cannot live. Rain comes some years in abundance and other years barely at all, and we live. However, says the Talmud, let the dew stop for even one day and life would cease. It is the simple acts, the persistent daily efforts, the choices of meaning we make each and every day, in which we discover the blessing in our lives.

We ready ourselves for Torah not in a rush of action and activity, not in a growth of commandments and practices, but rather in one simple act. To notice each day and to be fully present in it. To live each day knowing that today matters because soon there will be no more days to count. Teach me, God, to number my days that I may acquire a heart of wisdom.

Teach me God, the simple wisdom of just listening. Of being still and hearing the call of the bird, the hum of the refrigerator, the noise of a child. And in that stillness, that quiet listening place, ready myself to hear. To hear in a new way so that the words Shma Yisrael, Hear o Israel, can penetrate through to my deepest inward parts.

For at the end of that counting, as the warmth and blessing of spring gives way to the heat and dryness of summer, Torah bursts upon us. The wellsprings filled in the winter with rain, and now deepened and enriched by the quiet and stillness of the omer, are ready to be drawn upon anew as a source of blessing.

Those waters of blessing are the source of strength for the hero and the sage, but also for each of us. This is the time, in the quiet and simplicity of just counting, to rediscover their depths and their renewing power. And then, in a few short days, to let that source of strength and blessing come gushing forth in the receiving of God's Torah.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

GETTING READY

MAY 13, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

One of the most interesting parts of a hockey game occurs before the puck ever hits the ice. As the game is getting set to begin, each goalie comes out on the ice and goes to his respective goal. Invariably, the goalie scuffs up the ice and spends some time getting his area ready for play. Presumably, the goalies believe the scuffed ice slows down the puck sufficiently to make it easier to defend the goal. I suspect that marginal difference is far less significant than the ritual itself. If you started the game without allowing the goalie to get himself ready, I suspect even the very best of goalies would play poorly. Preparation is the key.

We spend a lot of our lives getting ready – but getting ready for what? We go to college or work to gather professional skills. Then we earn that money to buy a house, or send children to college, or save for retirement. We are always getting ready, preparing, for the next step but never arriving there. Our Rabbis teach that this world is merely a gateway to the next. If so, our whole lives are merely preparation for that which will follow.

Yet we are also told of grandparents who plant trees for the next generation. Such actions teach us that our choices matter. The investments we make in this world, in our families, in our friends, in charitable and spiritual endeavors, have an impact beyond the self. So we are preparing, readying ourselves, for something here and now that matters.

Nahman of Bratslav offers a surprising ritual to prepare ourselves for each day. He suggests finding a place of isolation for a certain amount of time each morning, and giving voice to our sadness, fears, and depression. We cry out verbally in our own language (not in Hebrew unless that is our native tongue) and share with God all our pain. In this way, says Rebbe Nahman, we can live the rest of the day in joy.

For Nahman of Bratslav, then, we are preparing ourselves always to live in joy in the service of our Creator. The Psalmist teaches: Let us come before God in joy and song. Life is about discovering our own joy and song that brings us before God Who Spoke and Created the World and Whom I doubt every day. It is joy balanced by responsibility, song accompanied by service.

Next Tuesday and Wednesday mark the beginning of Shavuot, the holiday celebrating Torah. We prepare ourselves for hearing Torah by engaging in a night of study on Tuesday the 18th beginning at

8pm. We learn and share together with community so that as the sun rises early Wednesday morning we are prepared to hear revelation as the giving of the Ten Commandments is recited.

So what are you preparing for? What do you need to hear this year as God speaks to us? That goalie needs to get himself ready for play. Surely our lives are as important as a Stanley Cup playoff. Shavuot suggests spending some time preparing not just for Torah but for our lives, by learning, by praying, by being present in community.

And then, as we hear Torah, to be open to rediscovering, to hearing anew, who we are. Torah is a mirror of our holy selves. Shavuot is a chance to hear again or for the first time who we can and ought to be.

So get ready. Life is happening and it matters.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CRISIS IN GAZA

JUNE 2, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I usually try to stay away from divisive issues in Israeli politics. My goal as a Rabbi and a lover of Israel is to facilitate connections to the people and land of Israel. In recent years, our intense focus on Israeli-Palestinian issues has been divisive and distracting and has limited our ability to notice other key issues central to Israel. These include religious pluralism, growing economic disparities, and the thriving of Israeli culture.

However, the incident on the quasi Turkish boat outside Gaza requires some thought and comment. It is likely to cause ongoing damage to the state of Israel and shows a new tactic capable of inflicting meaningful harm on Israel's international standing. In addition, it highlights the double bind in which Israelis find themselves. On the one hand, they need to secure their borders and keep the country safe. On the other hand, they have a moral obligation to treat all people, Jew or Arab, in a humanitarian fashion.

Following the election of Hamas, both Egypt and Israel have been blockading Gaza to prevent weapons traffic into the territory. Egypt's involvement in the blockade demonstrates that there is a significant geopolitical concern in allowing the unfettered movement of goods into Gaza. In its effort to stop the flow of weapons, the blockade also keeps out other goods. As a result, economic opportunity is essentially non-existent in Gaza, creating a humanitarian crisis.

Israel is sending food, medicine, water, and even electricity into the Gaza Strip. However, the constant smuggling of weapons leads Israel to tighten its grip to prevent weapons from arriving and then being used against places like Sderot. Having said that, I want Israel to be concerned for Arabs living the Gaza strip. I want my beloved Israel to go beyond the requirements of international law and I rejoice when Israel does so.

A group of activists decided on a new ploy. They would load a ship up with goods, attempt to break the blockade, and hope for an international incident. In this they were successful. As far as I can understand from the press reports, it appears the Israelis boarded the vessel with insufficient preparation. Instead of going in prepared with riot gear, the IDF soldiers were armed only with light pistols and paint ball rifles. They expected to quickly seize control of the boat and turn it back.

However, the activists on the ship apparently then grabbed some of the firearms from the Israeli soldiers and, along with other light weaponry they had brought with them, began to fight back. The Israeli soldiers then opened fire, resulting in the death of at least 9 people on the boat. Without the proper gear, the situation spiraled out of control.

Now we see the tragic results. Nine people are dead. The activists succeeded in creating an international incident that is resulting in Egypt lifting its blockade, in Turkey moving a giant step away from its military alliance with Israel, and in calls from Europe and the UN to “punish” Israel for this tragic incident. The residents of Gaza continue to suffer, and Israel becomes more and more isolated as a result of trying to isolate Gaza. The costs are high for everyone involved.

I want to offer a prayer during this difficult time: May it be Your will, Adonai, that Israelis and Palestinians will discover a new path towards peace. We say Listen O Israel. May Israelis and Palestinians hear one another, and rediscover compassion. We say You are the One who makes peace. Please, at this time of seemingly endless, insoluble ongoing violence and loss, make Peace, a peace that leads to a strong secure Israel at peace with her neighbors who themselves thrive and show a path towards freedom and democracy in a region with all too little of either. So may it be Your will. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

KASHRUT POLICY REVIEW

JUNE 10, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Kashrut is about fidelity and about community. By choosing to keep Kosher, I am engaging in faith every time I take a bite of something. It is a choice of commitment, a willingness to have values influence the way my desires express themselves. God places a tree in the Garden from which Adam cannot eat. Everything else is permitted; only the tree of knowledge forbidden. God forbids one thing because holy living can be achieved only through limiting desire. Meaningful living requires us to make choices. Kashrut is one way we choose to orient ourselves towards meaning and faith.

At the same time, Kashrut invites me into a community. The limits imposed by Kosher eating affects where we can eat and what we can eat, creating a bond and connection with others who follow such practices. It is also a carrier of identity. We are connected to others living now who keep Kosher, but also to a past and a future of people living within the bounds inspired by these food practices.

Kol Emeth strongly supports Kashrut practice in a way that embodies both of these values. I want to take a few moments to review our Kashrut policies so that people are familiar with them and to show how they connect to the value of fidelity and community.

At Kol Emeth, we maintain a strictly Kosher kitchen under my supervision. In practice, Pepe our Facilities Supervisor ends up enforcing much of what we do because he is on site, under my direction. Vegetables, fruit, and other unprocessed items can be brought into the kitchen. All processed or prepared food brought into the KE kitchen must be under Rabbinic supervision. We do accept any kosher mark.

Rabbi Lewis, seeing community as one key part of Kashrut, created a baking exception to our kashrut policy. In the interests of inviting people to help make kiddushes for one another, KE permits people to bake in their homes under very specific guidelines, posted on our website at kolemeth.org/how-to.

The guidelines require that foods baked in the home use only kosher ingredients. Further, they are to be cooked in new or kosher utensils. Finally, ovens need to be self-cleaned and therefore kashered before use. There is a sweetness (please forgive the pun) to this policy- it allows people to directly participate in a slightly burdensome but manageable way in Synagogue celebrations.

Over the last two summers, our Friday night services have been prayers followed by potlucks in someone's back yard. Those potlucks have operated under an extension of the baking policy. The potlucks are dairy only, and we ask people to adhere to the same details of the baking policy. It can be a community endeavor that takes Kashrut seriously and trusts members of our community to follow guidelines. People are also welcome to bring kosher packaged items like Entenmen's cakes.

Kashrut is a key Jewish practice that continues to directly sustain us. I hope this review educates how the policies operate at the same time that it inspires us to appreciate the underlying values.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

OPTIONS FOR HOLINESS

JULY 1, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you know, we have changed our Main Sanctuary set up after a three month experiment. We moved the Torah reading table into the congregation on the floor and have had people both lead services and read Torah from that location. This closer more immediate place has affected the singing in a positive way, has created a sense of the immediacy of Torah, and has allowed those unable to manage the stairs a means of receiving an aliyah.

There are certain drawbacks to the new setup, most significantly difficulties in seeing the Torah readers and those receiving aliyot especially when the back of the Sanctuary is opened. Further, there are also some decorum challenges, including where to seat those receiving an honor and having a clearly marked location that is the bimah. As a result, we are looking at two potential changes to the Sanctuary to address these concerns.

First, we have a sketch of a platform and ramp that will raise the table 8-9 inches (about 1/2 the height of the current bimah) while still being handicapped accessible. As a result of the requirements to make the ramp handicapped accessible, it will be 15 long and 5 feet wide. This gives us enough space to have a wheelchair turn around at the Torah table after receiving an aliyah, and is long enough to have a manageable slope for someone in a wheelchair or walker.

Second, as a result of the length of the new platform and the current unused space on the bimah itself, we are also exploring moving the bimah back several feet to where the trees are currently located. Were we to do this, it would allow us to keep the Torah reading table in its current location while still leaving enough room for a person in a wheelchair to get up and down the ramp. In addition, we would be able to add some additional seating including a designated area for those receiving honors with the extra space that would become available.

So at this point, before we begin on the work, I want to solicit your thoughts and input. As I see it, we have three choices.

1. Leave things as they are with no ramp. The line of sight issues remain and so this option seems troubling to me.
2. Just get the ramp and platform. The table will be 4 feet closer to the congregation to make room for

the ramp. Leave the bimah as is or do some other design / usage of that space to add a greater sacred quality to that space.

3. Get the ramp / platform and move the bimah back. The Torah reading table can remain in its current location and leave sufficient room for someone in a wheelchair. We can add some additional seating and change some unused space into used space while giving the bimah itself a greater sense of the sacred.

I would like to see this process completed several weeks before Rosh Hashanah, so I am now requesting input so that we can move forward on one of those options in the next few weeks.

I am so appreciative of the thoughtful and holy way the community has engaged this issue. Especially for those who have had their seats moved, it has caused a real loss. Yet people have expressed their ideas in constructive and caring ways and I so appreciate that. Let us continue to explore ways both physical and spiritual to ever more fully have Kol Emeth embody the value of being a true Kehillah Kedoshah, a holy congregation.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE ROTEM BILL

JULY 21, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I just finished a conference on Jewish Spiritual practice and spent a wonderful Shabbat with some close friends in New York City. I am now looking towards some time in Tahoe with my family but feel a matter of timely significance requires me share some concerns I have with you about a piece of legislation now moving forward in the Israeli Knesset.

Who controls conversion in Israel has become an extremely controversial issue in recent years from two perspectives. First is as an issue of religious pluralism. Israel's state sponsored Rabbinate has always been controlled by Orthodoxy. As a result, the Conservative and Reform movements have struggled for acceptance on a variety of fronts over the years. In particular, they have wanted their converts to be accepted by the State as Jews. This acceptance would allow them to be married and buried as Jews.

Second, and in some ways of greater significance, is the acceptance of the Russian aliyah to Israel. Israel has amazingly absorbed well over a million refugees from the former Soviet Union. Among those refugees welcomed and given a chance to build new lives in the land of our ancestors were many whose mothers were not Jewish or who had been married to Jews but never converted. There are as many as 400,000 people in this category.

As the wave of Russians arrived, there was a great interest in converting to Judaism and being fully accepted by the society. The Masorti movement through the Schechter Institute has been particularly energetic in reaching out this to community and educating them about Judaism.

These ambiguously Jewish people, people that the Soviet Union often labeled as Jews, have found it difficult to convert to Judaism and join their destiny to that of the Jewish people. The religious establishment funded by the State of Israel expects converts to agree to live an Orthodox life before being converted. Further, one of the more notably accepting Orthodox courts found one of its conversion decisions overturned about two years ago by a zealous ultra-Orthodox Rabbi who is part of this state established structure. This decision created fear for thousands who had converted, worried that their conversions could be overturned retroactively, a notion unprecedented anywhere in Jewish Rabbinic literature.

As a result, David Rotem, a member of the Israel is our Home party put forward legislation that would

have given power to local cities to officiate at conversions. His intent remains murky, but appeared focused on making it easier for Russians to convert. After the bill was proposed, however, the religious parties inserted an amendment that gives oversight to the state Rabbinate.

Should this bill pass, it would remove the current limited role the Conservative and Reform movements have in conversion in Israel. It would allow scrutiny of every conversion, including those from Orthodox Rabbis, by an increasingly ultra-Orthodox Rabbinate. It would likely make the acceptance of these 400,000 people from the former USSR impossible. Haaretz is reporting that the Bill will not be voted on this session, but Rotem remains adamant that he will bring it forward should he have the votes. The Prime Minister has expressed his opposition to the bill – I encourage you to send him a letter telling you approve and are happy to see him take a stand. Click on this link:

<http://www.masorti.org/email/form-letter.html>

or send him a letter on your own.

May this summer be filled with a greater openness to one another so that the notion of Clal Yisrael, Jews who together care for one another and respect one another across movements, comes to grow and fill our whole people.

All the best,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will resume regularly in Elul. I am currently on vacation, returning to the office August 10th.

FINDING GOD AT FOOTHILL PARK

AUGUST 13, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Carol and I decided to have a family outing Wednesday for sunset at the overlook in Foothill Park. Foothill Park, up in Palo Alto Hills, has an incredible overlook of the Bay. On a clear day, you can see San Francisco, Oakland, Mountain View, the East Bay. It's a gorgeous spot.

We had a picnic by the lake in the last remnants of daylight and then made our way up to the overlook. The fog was rolling down the hills above us and creating a glow from one edge of the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. It was a graphic reminder of the words of the morning service – How beautiful are your works, God, they are all made with wisdom.

We saw day giving way to night, darkness and light and color mixed throughout the horizon. The pinks and blue giving way to black in the East as color still remains in the West gives a vivid sense of the blessing of each day. The Talmud sees that moment of color as the end of sunset and the beginning of dark. It inspires me towards the leap of faith to see God's hand in each moment, in the gift of each day.

Then comes our place in creation as the lights slowly begin to appear in the valley. First the twinkling of cars on distant roads, and then buildings and streets. We have filled the beauty of the world with our own homes, streets, places of work. The contrast between the quiet dark of the hills and the light and life of the valley felt like the fulfillment of God's blessing of Adam. Fill the Earth and hold it as a blessing.

Carol had brought along hot chocolate. As it got colder and darker, we sat for a bit and drank our hot chocolate together. All the elements of spiritual experience were present. A sense of beauty and awe. An openness to an experience. A desire to see God's hand in the world. And a sense of loving people with whom to share that experience.

It is experiences like these that make the words of our prayer book live for me, making a connection between my own experience of awe and wonder and the poetic expression of that beauty captured in the words of the siddur. And so I want to invite others to join me next Tuesday at Foothill park to watch the sunset and to join together in prayer. Usually, our afternoon and evening services happen in the Small Sanctuary at 7:45 disconnected from natural cycles. With the sun setting at 8pm, it easy for our prayer life to connect with the rhythm and beauty of the natural world.

Please join me next Tuesday the 17th (the 7th of Elul) for a spiritual and community experience. I will invite those who would like to join my family by Boronda Lake (just follow the signs after entering the park) for a picnic at 6:30pm. Please bring your own dairy meal. At 7:45, we will go up to the overlook for a shofar blast in this month leading to Rosh Hashanah (feel invited to bring a shofar), singing, and then the afternoon and evening services. I will bring a number of prayerbooks- if you have your own daily prayerbook please do bring it with you.

Foothill Park is located on Page Mill about 3 miles up from 280. They do not staff the entrance booth on weeknights, so it should be easy to enter and then join us either by the lake or the overlook.

May this be a Shabbat of joy and healing for all of us!

Rabbi David Booth

START UP NATION

AUGUST 19, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's so nice to be back home. Shabbat was a wonderful chance to reconnect, first here for Barkhu at the Booths on a beautiful Friday night, and then with a simchah over Shabbat. I feel very fortunate to be a part of this community!

While I was away this summer I read a marvelous book called Start Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle by Dan Senor and Saul Singer. Inspired by trying to understand Israel's economic growth, particularly in the area of technology, this carefully researched book explains some of the factors that led to Israel become one of the world's leading economies.

Senor and Singer found a few key factors. First is the role of the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces. With the exception of the Ultra-Orthodox, all Israelis serve in the military. While there, they develop a strong sense of national cohesion. Further, the IDF encourages innovation. Young commanders in the field are given a high degree of autonomy which breeds confidence, creativity, and multi-disciplinary problem solving. In addition, the IDF encourages its soldiers to speak up to higher authority regularly when bad ideas are suggested. All of these connections, skills, and innovative thinking turn into incredible assets as these young people leave the military and begin their careers.

Next is a strong sense of commitment to Israel. Entrepreneurs in Israel in many cases see themselves as representing the whole country. As a result, they make an effort to promote Israeli methods and business even at the expense of their own interests. One example was during the first Gulf War. Intel Israel had taken the lead in developing the 386 chip and was just about to begin serious production as the Gulf War started. This was a key moment for Intel. If they were unable to get the chips in the quantity they needed, IBM would likely find a competitor for the next generation of chips.

Hussein was firing SCUD missiles on the outskirts of the Tel Aviv. At the time, there was significant concern that the missiles might be tipped with chemical or biological weapons. As a result, Israeli authorities were encouraging families to build safe rooms, were giving out gas masks, and asking people to stay home for safety. Perlmutter, the head of Intel Israel, realized this crisis was broader than his own personal interests..

If they shut down, he felt, no one would ever do significant business in Israel again. If they stayed open, if

they found a way to meet Intel's expectations, by contrast, this story would get told again and again as a reminder that Israeli business keeps going no matter what. Perlmutter asked for people to voluntarily come to work that day. Expecting maybe 50% of the work force to show up, he was thrilled when over 70% came to work. Further, families organized classes and day care so people could stay at their tasks even though the schools were closed. This was a passion to show that Israel was a great place for business.

Lastly is a unique effort by Israeli government to promote Israeli venture capital. Israel created a five year effort to seed venture capital in Israel. The law had a sunset provision, so that once the venture capital industry began to flourish, the government program disappeared. That allowed Israeli entrepreneurs to have access to both the funding and the expertise that venture capital brings to an industry without creating a permanent bureaucracy that could have easily stifled further innovation.

Start Up Nation tells an encouraging story about one element of the Israeli miracle. It is filled with personal stories, anecdotes, and hard statistics. Living in Silicon Valley, I knew how strong and central Israel's tech industry had become. It was fascinating to see some of what led to that economic success and get a sense of how uniquely Israeli – and Jewish – that growth has been. And it made me realize I should invest in some Israeli tech companies...

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE GIFT OF SHABBAT

AUGUST 26, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Shabbat is the greatest gift of the Jewish people to the world. It is through the idea of Shabbat that a balance between the need to create, to do, to fill the Earth, finds a place in the need also to be, to experience the Creation as it is. Each generation discovers in Shabbat its own meaning, its own answers. And so it is happening now.

In the days of the shtetl and Jewish poverty, Shabbat was an escape from Exile. The German / Jewish poet Heinrich Heine imagines the Jew in his era as a prince transformed into a dog as a result of Exile.

*But on every Friday evening,
On a sudden, in the twilight,
The enchantment weakens, ceases,
And the dog once more is human.*

Heine's biography is fascinating and disturbing, making this poem all the more evocative. While he did convert to Christianity, it appears he did so to further his acceptance by the German world. I prefer to believe he remained Jewish in his heart.

Shabbat has the power to take the downtrodden and lift them up. It becomes a day of recovering a humanity lost amid persecution, poverty, and Exile. It may have been a day for Heine to reconnect with his lost Judaism as well.

In our own era, this image retains its strength, but in a new direction. Poverty and persecution have given way to the challenge of connecting with our humanity amid the frenetic motion of the modern world. While in these days of recession we worry more than we used to about financial considerations, we rarely worry about hunger. Yet our ability to discover human connection, to find a rest that is healing, has become an even greater need in our own virtual era.

More and more, real communities are giving way to virtual ones. Virtual communities have their place. It is wonderful to find a community interested in my own idiosyncratic cultural and intellectual pleasures. It is sustaining to have learning or spiritual communities unbounded by physical location.

Yet there is a danger. The social capital that creates connections between people suffers as we spend

more time inside our own homes, our own individual electronic connections, and less and less time connecting with real human beings. Skype is a great way to stay in touch with my Israeli family; it can never be used to form a minyan.

In response, there is a growing trend urging people to unplug at least one day a week. People are setting aside one day dedicated to real rather than virtual communities. That day is lived at a more whole, connected pace than that which technological connections engender. This day of unplugging gives perspective that can then inform with wisdom the ways in which we reconnect.

I see something similar in the slow food movement. Here is a movement inviting people to spend time preparing and eating their food. Microwaved dinner eaten quickly has its place, but a lovingly prepared meal with friends is its own necessity.

So this week lets unplug ourselves Friday night at sundown. Lets turn off our wireless networks and cable modems for one day of rest. Lets power down our cell phones and turn off our televisions. Lets spend some extra time preparing and eating our food. I suspect we will recover some of our lost humanity and reconnect with something essential inside. And then, when we turn everything back on again Saturday night after dark, perhaps we can carry some of that wisdom and humanity with us into the week.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LISTENING IS A MITZVAH

SEPTEMBER 2, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Shma Yisrael, Listen, Israel, is a commandment. As a culture, we tend towards the verbal and the wordy. Much ink has been spilled in the Talmud through to the modern era on speaking. We have rules about polite speech, restrictions around gossip or abusive speech, practices of attributing speech to others. Yet there is far less on listening.

When I lived in Virginia, I served as part of an interfaith group planning a Freedom Seder with the local Jewish community and Hampton College, an historically black College. At the planning meetings, I began to notice a real problem of listening. The Jewish participants, who were adults with professional training, tended to dominate the talking in these meetings, overpowering the younger students. When we should have held back, we spoke. When we should have waited, we became uncomfortable and felt the need to fill the silence with words.

The students and faculty from the college had meaningful contributions. A student suggested to us one of the best ideas of the program, which was to share different musical traditions and see some connections between jazz and klezmer. Had we kept talking, we never would have given him the space to share this transformative idea.

God says: Shma Yisrael. Listen, Israel. Pay attention. Listen in order to hear. So often we listen in order to respond or rebut or make our own point. We listen, but only until we are again speaking. Torah suggests a different mode. We listen only and solely to hear what the other person has to say. We intentionally and thoughtfully create room for that other person through our silence.

I notice in myself a discomfort with silence. Further, in my own family, we talk at a pretty rapid clip. So I am too quick in a pause to respond, to speak. I have been making an effort recently to retrain myself, to accept the silence in those pauses and to wait. I am discovering that people have a lot more to share, have a lot of beautiful reactions that come only after that moment of pause.

We turn to God as “Shma Koleynu” Who listens to our voice. One of God’s best attributes is that God hears prayer. That means God has the patience to listen to all of our thoughts and prayers as we struggle to articulate them. I have recently been praying for God to help me rediscover my own sense of joy and courage. It has taken me years to finally say this prayer. Yet God is listening. God is waiting, ready, for me

to finally say what has taken me so long to learn.

If we imitate God, or if we project on to God how we ought to behave, then surely listening, an attentiveness to the other filled with patience and comfort, is a key quality worthy of our intention. When people listen to me, when people take the time to see and hear me in compassion, I find it healing and restorative. I want to offer that same compassionate listening to others.

May we learn to listen to one another and to the words of the Mazhor this High Holidays. May our acts of listening be counted as praise, and may the healing quality that compassionate listening engenders be felt everywhere in our community.

So may it be God's will.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

OPENING OUR EYES TO NEED

SEPTEMBER 8, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Seeing requires filtering. Our eyes learn to make sense of all the shapes and colors around us in part by focusing on one area of vision and ignoring another. Often, filtering enters the social arena as well. Whole categories of people become invisible, unnoticed, seemingly not present at all. God is asking more of us.

Second Harvest of San Mateo and Santa Clara county this year served over 250,000 people each month. That represents a 10% increase over 2009, which was in turn a 10% increase over 2008. Hunger is getting significantly worse in our immediate area, even in these incredibly affluent counties in which we live.

Yet those in need are often invisible. We filter them out of our perceptions, we forget that there are children who go to bed hungry here, at home, in the South Bay. As we develop that hard calloused places in our hearts, it becomes easier and easier to fail to even see those in need around us as the scales form over our eyes. 250,000 customers translates into many people without enough to eat.

This past Shabbat we read about God's perceptive powers. God calls forth the leaders of the tribes and elder. God also summons the children, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water. God sees the wholeness of the people. No one is invisible, we are all seen and noticed. As we attempt to imitate God, we try to cultivate this quality of expansive sight. It is a key moral sense that helps open our hearts and direct our generosity.

I have been reading the 1930s and 1940s food writer MFK Fisher. She wrote a book during World War II called *How to Cook a Wolf*. In it, she describes real hunger as a daily experience for many Americans. She suggests recipes and ingredients that will stretch meager budgets and put enough calories on the table to feed everyone.

We are facing real and severe economic challenges, yet they pale in comparison. For most of us, the struggles are to fund our 401ks, to send our children to college, to maintain an affluent lifestyle. We must see that for others, 10% more each year, there are people struggling just to feed themselves and their families. We have an obligation to help.

As in previous years, you will find a grocery bag waiting for you when you come to Rosh Hashanah services this year. Fill it up with food and bring it with you to Kol Nidre. Last year we raised 4 tons of food. This year we have to do 10% better because the problem is 10% worse. Last year as a congregation we raised well in excess of \$115,000 for Mazon, Second Harvest, and other agencies dedicated to alleviating hunger in our area and in the world. This year we have to raise 10% more, because the problem is 10% worse.

I look forward to seeing you in shul!

May we all be blessed with a year of goodness, prosperity, and peace.

Lshana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

SH'MA SALONS

SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Judaism has a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual depth we seldom appreciate. Those three realms have always reinforced one another. For some, one of these can provide an entry into Judaism that then serve as a gateway into the rest of what Judaism has to offer. For others, each element informs and strengthens the others.

My own journey to Judaism followed this pattern. Growing up, I was involved but disinterested. I quit religious school post Bar mitzvah and attended Synagogue only when my Dad dragged me with him under protest. High Holidays were an exercise in tedium for me. I vividly remember counting how many pages were left to know how much longer I would be sitting there.

When I went to college, I chose to take a Jewish studies class. That class showed me an intellectual depth to Judaism of which I had been previously unaware. The excitement that class generated made me interested in looking again at my own Jewish identity. I started going to Synagogue on Friday nights and slowly but surely got more and more involved.

The Jewish organizational world has separated those three realms into three institutions – JCCs, Jewish Studies at Universities, and Synagogues. That separation allows for more specialization, but also tears an integral and mutually reinforcing structure asunder. Its crucial that we find ways of restoring that connection to return Judaism to its essential wholeness.

One effort towards restoring that connection will be our Shma Salons. Shma is a monthly journal edited here in Menlo Park. A national journal, Shma selects key topics in Jewish living and invites a broad spectrum of Rabbis, scholars, and Jewish leaders to comment in a conversational format. Topics have included what it means to support Israel, issues of marriage in Judaism, and the current significance of prayer.

Salon members will receive a subscription to Shma and then meet monthly throughout the academic year in someone's home with a group of no more than 15 people. The groups will be led by Ellen Bob, Nanette Freedland, Lee Shulman, Alan Bennett, and Janis Popp. Facilitated either by me or one of the leaders, the evening will be a chance to add our own voices to the conversation in Shma. Given the dynamic and varied topics, participants will have their own sense of Judaism's rich intellectual, spiritual,

and communal life enhanced and broadened.

In addition, I am hopeful that groups will develop their own sense of havurah, of communal connection. When we have attempted to form havurot in the past, they have often failed for lack of structure. These Shma Salons will provide a more structured way to let us meet new people and establish new friendships. Studying with others has been one key way I have made lasting friendships. It would be great to see that develop in these groups.

We are in the process of forming the groups now. If you would like to participate and did not sign up at the Holidays, please let me know via email. You will hear from one of the group leaders in Mid October to let you know when and where the first meeting will take place.

I wish everyone an easy fast, and a Yom Kippur that is transformative and healing.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

HOSPITALITY IN OUR DAYS

SEPTEMBER 22, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Hospitality is a lost virtue. Few of us have dinner together with our families any more, let alone with guests in the house. The pressures of modern living combined with the convenience of restaurants has made entertaining largely a thing of the past. This loss can potentially undermine our society at its core.

Why were Sodom and Gemorrah destroyed? According to the Rabbinic teachings from the Talmud, their failure to welcome strangers was their chief sin. Without hospitality as a foundation, that wicked society gradually saw its other values erode as well. Guests who should have been welcomed were instead attacked, robbed, or even mutilated. Sodom and Gemorrah merited destruction because of this reversal of values.

Abraham, by contrast, merited being chosen by God to bring Judaism into the world because he was so hospitable to strangers. In the heat of the day Abraham is sitting in his tent. According to the Rabbis, he is convalescing after his circumcision. Despite the heat and his own physical discomfort, Abraham rushes to invite in and provide for his guests. He has many servants but chooses to entertain his guests himself.

Rashi, a medieval French Biblical commentator, goes even further, asserting that Abraham later opened up a guest house. All strangers were welcomed and offered food and a place to sleep. Out of this experience of Abraham's goodness, many chose to become Jewish. His hospitality led others to new virtues including Ethical Monotheism, the belief in one God who ordains a moral order.

When even a few of us take hospitality seriously, it has a snowball effect. I have a specific action I want you to consider as I mentioned over Yom Kippur. I would like to have a massive evening of hospitality on Oct 29th this year. Think how amazing it would be if 200 households agreed to open up their homes. Every single member of Kol Emeth could share a Shabbat dinner with another member. We could welcome others in our community looking for Jewish and social connections. It has the potential to dramatically influence the nature of our community.

Some of us will open our homes to strangers and those requesting a place for Shabbat, others will invite friends and people they already know from the Synagogue, home, work, or community. Some of us will heat up frozen pizza, while other will make more elaborate dinners. We will all share in an evening of

Shabbat in community.

In this fashion we can encourage a new sense of community and spirituality. Maybe in this way we can combat the isolation and loneliness of modern living. We are all the children of Abraham. It is time for us to emulate his chief virtue of hospitality.

If you are interested in hosting and did not sign during the High Holidays, please let me know and you will be added to the list. You can also call the office to sign up. When you volunteer, let us know if you have space for additional guests from the Synagogue. There are no requirements for your kitchen – we are simply asking people to open their homes as they are. I hope you can participate as we try to dramatically change the nature of our community to embody the values of Abraham our Ancestor.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

MAY I BE HAPPY

SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I find joy a difficult emotion. I like being happy, but I have a hard time admitting that feeling joy is something I want. I attended a retreat led by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality in which we were taught a free translation of the Cohenic blessing. We were to repeat, May I be safe, May I be happy, May I be at peace. Oddly, as I repeated this threefold blessing to myself, I found myself skipping, “May I be happy.”

Yet we are told by the Psalmist “to serve God in joy, to come before God in song.” Spiritual service goes hand in hand with joy. The Hasidic tradition urges us to be joyful regularly because joy unlocks spiritual pathways that allow us to serve God with a greater fervor and intensity. So I am trying to convince myself that joy can be a goal that means something as a part of my spiritual practices.

Joy is different than frivolity. Frivolity means lightness, silliness, perhaps even kalot rosh, the unfocused unaware state against which the Rabbis warn. Yet even frivolity has its place in the Jewish tradition. Purim is all about silliness and a world turned upside down.

Aldous Huxley wrote a wonderful book called *The Devils of Loudon* in which he explores the religious personality around a fascinating pre-revolutionary witch trial in France. He points out that humans crave transcendence. We desire to go beyond ourselves in moments of great ecstasy. Those moments exist on a pole that points towards holiness in one direction and towards emptiness and profanation in the other. One pole might be using drugs to escape and hide. The pole of holiness might be represented when I am at Neilah by the quality of the music and the communal experience.

This suggest that the joy our tradition points us towards is a joy that elevates, that brings us closer to God. Intention makes all the difference in the world. The same moment of laughter can be a way of unlocking my own cramped up places or a means of hiding, of running away from unpleasant truths.

For this reason, we dance with the Torah. We create a joyous pathway that includes many “normal” activities, among them dancing, drinking, and singing, but that is focused through Torah. It may include the frivolous, but it is also rooted in a structure of values and meaning.

I have been trying to say, “May I be happy.” It is still hard for me, even though I want to be happy.

Somehow, it feels like a selfish or unworthy goal. It is time for me to remember that joy is a means by which I can uncover spiritual energy and strength. It can lift me up, and enable and ennoble the many ways in which I worship God.

May we all be happy – and experience lasting joy – as we dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah Thursday at 7pm and then Friday morning beginning at 9:15

Happy Sukkot & Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LEAVING THE HOLIDAYS BEHIND

OCTOBER 7, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a certain relief as the Holy Days come to an end. Lots of people have said, “Are you enjoying your first full week without a holiday in it?” “Isn’t it less pressured now that the holidays are over?” Or even, “Happy Chol – a joyous non-Holiday time.” And yet, as I hear these comments, and feel some relief myself, I also have a sense of loss that the holidays are over.

Our Rabbis teach that Shabbat and Holy Days give us a taste of the world to come, of paradise. I experienced an element of that this year. The Holy Days were filled with joy and a focus on community, on family, on faith. Where normally my attention is split between a variety of programs, during Tishrei I am much more able to focus myself here, in this place, on the prayer, meal, or person in front of me.

I don’t travel or use electronics on the Holidays. This means I am where I am. There is no where else to be because I can’t get anywhere else. I come to shul and stay here, not needing to allocate time for what comes next. I go home with guests for a meal together and similarly that’s where I am. My computer and network are off for three day stretches. The virtual world disappears and more room exists for the real world.

And most meaningfully to me, there is a sense over the holy days of the whole community. I get to see nearly every person in the community for at least a moment. We all have chances to renew and establish connections with so many more people than we can during the rest of the year. There is a focus on Jewish life, and our own sense of celebration at being together as we start a new year filled with possibilities.

So I invite all of us into bringing some of that focus and feeling of joy into the rest of the Jewish year. How can we be more present with what we are doing, more fully here and not thinking of where else we need to be even when there is a next appointment or need? How can we stay focused on real communities of real people even when our electronics are turned on again? And lastly, how can that sense of joy and belonging, that sense of needing one another, be carried with us into the rest of the year?

I pray that we are granted a year filled with goodness and celebrations and a wisdom that comes from Tishrei to carry us with meaning and renewed purpose through another year.

Lshana Tova for one last time!!

Rabbi David Booth

SEEING NON-JEWS

OCTOBER 14, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is no place in Jewish narrative for my mother in law. My wife is a convert to Judaism. Traditional sources imagine her leaving behind her non-Jewish family entirely, severing those ties, as part of the process of becoming Jewish. While this may have had a logic in the Middle Ages, today I strongly urge my conversion students to actively maintain their connection to their relatives so that their relatives see the conversion as religious, not as a rejection.

My own connection to my mother-in-law is strong. I find Lynne to be supportive and loving. At the same time, her own involvement in her church means that we often talk about religion. She has been a helpful advisor to me on many occasions and often listens to my sermons as I am writing them.

Yet Rabbinic Judaism has a hard time imaging such a positive and open relationship. For the Rabbis, living in an era of persecution and exclusion, non-Jews are almost always portrayed in a violent or negative light. One example is the person of Nimrod, a post diluvian non-Jewish king.

According to Genesis 10, Nimrod was a “mighty hunter before God.” Rashi summarized the Medieval view on Nimrod. Nimrod, says Rashi, hunted peoples opinions with his mouth, meaning he was a powerful demagogue. His name, Nimrod, comes from the three letter hebrew root MRD, meaning to rebel. “Before God” means that he incited the people of his day to rebel AGAINST God.

By contrast, Ibn Ezra, coming from the Golden Age of Spain with its more healthy connections to the non-Jewish world, understands the plain meaning of the Torah differently. He says that we can’t learn about people’s character from the names their parents give them. That Nimrod has the root MRD, rebel, in it is meaningless.

Further, the Bible has a plain meaning. Nimrod learned about establishing the mastery of humanity over the animals. His was a key step in civilization that then led to the building of cities. When the Torah says “Before God” it is positive. It means that Nimrod built altars to God and made sacrifices of the animals he caught. Nimrod is a key player in civilization and even had a quality of piety.

When we see Nimrod in this light, he illuminates more fully our own experience of the non-Jewish world. There are threats from anti-Semitism and from terrorism. Israel does indeed have many enemies.

However, our daily experience is one of integration rather than isolation. Our flourishing both in America and in Israel stem from our integration into Western civilization.

Israel is flourishing today because of international trade. Israel's economy is lifted up by an information economy heavily integrated into the multinational corporate world. Similarly, most of us have many non-Jewish friends from whom we learn, from whom we receive support, who genuinely care for us. The isolation of Noah has given way to an integrated culture in which Nimrod, or Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) are symbols of integration, of that which is gained when people of strong moral character together engage in affirming life and building civilization.

The story of Noah warns of the evils that can come from the outside world and the destructive impulse we all have. Yet the world that comes into being after the flood suggests the tremendous possibilities when all of creation joins together in praising God.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi David Booth

AN EXPERIMENT IN RADICAL HOSPITALITY

NOVEMBER 4, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Judaism first came into the world because Abraham discovered the courage to open his tent and to invite others in. Abraham is the man of faith, the singular individual of incredible courage who goes out but also invites in. Abraham's courage is found in his willingness to leave everything he knew behind and to hear God's call to service. It is equally found in his openness and in the courage to welcome guests into his home.

It is frightening and overwhelming to entertain. Especially when we invite people we do not know so well, or who are strangers, we enter into a risk. We have no idea what these people will be like. Will they judge my house or apartment, finding it too small or not nicely decorated or too messy? Will they dislike the food I cook for them? About what will we talk? In opening our homes we allow ourselves to become vulnerable and that opens us up to being hurt.

Yet God tells Abraham to go out, to allow himself vulnerability, because it is only through openness, through risk, that he can find God. Abraham takes the risk, hard as it is, and enriches his own faith. He becomes the man of faith because he is willing to share his faith, his self, and his home, with others. Thousands of years later, we read this story and forget the courage it took even from Abraham.

This past Friday, 100 households found the courage of Abraham to open their homes to guests. I estimate somewhere between 200-300 people shared a Friday night dinner together as a result. I heard back from many of these hosts and guests. I heard of people who had known one another casually for years but never shared a meal. I heard of young adults looking for a way in who found welcome and care. I heard of singles who just wanted to share a meal discovering a great quality of welcome. The guests were so appreciative of the warmth and welcome they received.

Several hosts shared with me their own trepidation at opening their homes and inviting in strangers. Some worried that their houses wouldn't seem nice enough, or that they lived too far away, or that their home was too chaotic to have guests. I am so moved by people's willingness to overcome those real concerns and participate in this countercultural practice of opening our homes for a religious reason.

Many of our participants invited their own guests, often making the effort to have someone new into their home. We also had the offer of 50 open chairs to match guests from the Synagogue. The matching, by the way, was the most challenging part of the whole event.

We see the thriving of Chabad all around us because they open their homes. We see the flourishing of Orthodoxy because they welcome guests. We have taken a key first step towards making hospitality a JEWISH value. In opening our homes, we are saying that we care enough to share ourselves as we are with one another. Abraham's courage meant that he would be brought to the land that God would show him. We also are orienting ourselves towards a spiritual promised land, a discovery of God over our own tables, as we similarly embrace as a community the value of welcoming guests.

We will announce shortly two more dates this academic year. If you were not a host or a guest this time around and would like to be, please let me know and I will add you to the list. You can be a host or a guest. You can invite your own guests, or we can match you. You can serve a fancy five course meal or frozen pizza. You can live in a wonderful spacious home or a small apartment. The only request? Invite at least one other person into your home to share Friday night dinner. And then discover a whole new land filled with spiritual possibility.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SEEING ISRAEL, BEING SEEN BY ISRAEL

NOVEMBER 11, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This past Shabbat we were fortunate to have Dr. Rachel Korazim as our scholar in residence. Rachel is in love with modern Israeli literature and poetry. Her teaching introduced the community to the beauty of those writings, and explored the new ways in which Israelis are understanding their own connection to the Bible, to one another, and to the rest of the world.

Before she came to Kol Emeth, she taught at the Palo Alto JCC to the Israeli community. She invited the participants to join KE for her sessions here. Rachel told me that many of the Israelis were horrified at the idea of Israeli literature being taught in English. They were upset partly because the Hebrew language itself is so integral to the literature and poetry. Teaching in English loses many echoes that resonate in the beauty of the Hebrew.

They were also uncomfortable because this literature represents an internal dialogue within the Israeli soul. It is deeply personal. Sharing it in English, as it were, shares it with outsiders. Though we are all Jews together, the Israeli identity and cultural context has a sacred quality as well that creates discomfort when non-Israelis, non-Hebrew speakers, study these books and poems.

By the same token, I was struck by my own discomfort with some passages and selections. We read a selection from A.B. Yehoshua written in the late 1970s. The selection is a first person narrator who is an Arab working in Haifa. It is deeply uncomfortable to read, highlighting the displaced quality of being an Arab worker in modern Israel.

My own discomfort arises from my context. Here in America, we regularly see criticism of Israel. There is a drumbeat of nastiness labeling Israel everything from an apartheid State to a racist regime. In loving and wanting to protect Israel, I find myself uncomfortable with a passage like this that raises the issues of racism in Israeli society lest those who would delegitimize Israel find more ammunition for their deceit.

The passage reminded me of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Written in 1953, this first person narrative of an African American brought the invisible unseen Black man into the American literary consciousness for the first time. It was shocking at the time and retains its ability to shock. It is a key part of an internal American conversation about race. It was one literary element that helped create the Civil Rights

movement of the 1960s.

These poems and novels in Israel similarly make up a national conversation that zigs and zag and looks critically at Israel because this is how open democracies thrive. There is a real need to defend Israel today in the United States and throughout the world. Part of that defense is showing the world that Israel is one of the few democracies in the world, and the only one in the Middle East, with a vibrant literary openness ready to explore deep fissures within the society.

Israel's strength is shown by a vibrant debate taking place within the Israeli soul that makes room for shocking dissent. As we look on, we may be moved to agree, to disagree, to think, to donate towards related causes, to throw the book down in disgust. Only an open society, dedicated to freedom of speech and open political discourse, can allow such a conversation. And that is a great blessing of modern Israel.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE STATE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

NOVEMBER 18, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This past Shabbat, we were fortunate to have Rabbi Steven Wernick, CEO of United Synagogue, as our guest. He shared with us his sense of the Conservative movement and what the possibilities and challenges are for the future. I would like to share a few thoughts with you inspired by his weekend both about the movement as a whole and Kol Emeth in particular.

We are in a time of radical change. Two thousand years ago, the Temple was destroyed. The Rabbis took the Biblical Judaism of their day and found ways of transforming Judaism into something that could be carried with the Jewish people into Exile. The Biblical emphasis on the holiness of place gave way to the holiness of time, the altar in Jerusalem was replaced by the Shabbat table. Centralized communities with Priestly leadership based on descent from Aaron gave way to decentralized communities with Rabbinic leadership based on acquired Torah learning.

Our prayers became focused on our most fervent heartfelt wish. We prayed for a restored Israel and Jerusalem. We prayed for a time when we would be politically free and allowed to practice Judaism unmolested by those around us. We were powerless, and asked for God's protection. A miracle occurred: all our prayers were granted. Now, in this new millennium, what do we do? For what are we praying today?

This moment, a moment in which religious institutions in general are under assault, in which faith is more and more counter cultural, and in which Jews are so fully accepted into American culture, is a moment in which Judaism again stands at the brink. The need for our institutions to change, to respond to these new circumstances, is as great as it was 2000 years ago. Torah is about our lives – who we are as human beings and how and why we make our way in the world. Jewish teaching and practices are the embodiment of that Torah. When our lives and circumstances are transformed, the form, the embodiment of that Torah, must change as well.

Conservative Judaism is incredibly significant in a moment like this. We choose to live in the place of tension, to embrace democracy, pluralism, open inquiry, and doubt. We choose also to continually look towards Torah and traditional practices as a means by which our lives can make sense, by which we can discover the wisdom and moral teachings to live good lives. That place of tension is incredibly difficult. A community dedicated to exploring the creativity that comes from such a location is necessary.

Further, many issues essential to Synagogue transformation require a bigger stage, a larger scale, than one shul can provide. One of our congregants suggested to Rabbi Wernick that USCJ provide cloud based computing services for Synagogues. While it would have only a marginal effect on KE, small Synagogues would suddenly have access to data management and publicity services that now are totally beyond their reach. Rabbi Wernick is readying USCJ to invest in creating excellent curricula for k-12 and adult education through partnerships with the Jewish Theological Seminary and other institutions. These kinds of projects can only be done with national support – they are way beyond the ability of any particular congregation.

By contrast, some issues of transformation are about us in particular. In talking to people over Shabbat, I realized the hardest part of change is going to be what we stop doing. As we move towards being more purpose rather than program driven, we will have to stop doing certain programs that people like but are extraneous to our mission or dwindled in relevance. As we move towards being more focused on people, our staff and time priorities are going to have to shift. If one of our key priorities, for example, is building havurot that build communities of caring, what do we stop doing in order to have the time to build and support those spiritually and personally rich affinity groups? If we want to be a haven for young families looking to connect with Jewish meaning, where do we create space in our Sanctuary for babies?

Every trend continues until it changes. And trends change because people learn. Our community is filled with people of incredible thoughtfulness, intelligence, and spiritual concern. Ours is a community that wants to thrive, to be vibrant and meaningful, a place in which we can be comforted around loss, where we can share moments of joy, and where we can share learning and experiences that allow us to make our way through the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” We have a choice this day, as to whether the movement in general and our community in particular, will become irrelevant and wither away, or whether it will thrive, discover renewed possibilities and meaning. I believe that we will choose life.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A BLESSING FOR THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 23, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Thanksgiving is my favorite American holiday. Its message of thanking God for the blessings in our lives transcends religious and ethnic background. It links all of us as we acknowledge the blessings of liberty and prosperity that have characterized the United States. Thanksgiving is a uniquely American holiday. First established by George Washington and then affirmed later by Congress, Thanksgiving is a day to thank God “for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us,” as George Washington put it. From turkey to football, Thanksgiving is redolent of the United States.

As Jews, we owe the United States a special debt of gratitude. When Europe restricted the rights of Jews to own property or enter professions, the United States from its inception provided a safe haven and an open society. Never in United States history has the Government sponsored hatred of Jews. Few if any other Western countries can make such a boast.

This year at Thanksgiving dinner, I plan to read the following prayer prior to reciting hamotzi, the blessing over the bread:

O Lord our God, and God of our Ancestors:

We thank you for the blessings of peace, prosperity, and health that abound in this great country. To be together today is a great blessing. We acknowledge those loved ones no longer with us and thank you for the blessings of their lives, the values learned and the special moments shared.

The Psalmist asks, “Who are we? What are we? What is the meaning of our lives?” This year we have learned how important it is to value each day, how fragile life can be. We ask for your help and protection over our armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the world. Help their dedication to freedom, democracy, and security become real.

We thank you for the blessings of our lives, for the value of our days. We thank you for the strength and wealth of this great country. We thank you for the peaceful home You have granted us here, calm in a stormy world. We thank you for our souls and for the lives daily in Your care. Each day is a miracle from You – today we notice the blessing of that miracle and thank You as You deserve every day.

We ask also for Your continued protection over the State of Israel. A beacon for freedom in the Middle East, Israel stands strong but besieged. Grant her leaders the wisdom to face the future and find the uncertain path to peace. Bring an end to terror, violence and bloodshed so that again all that will be heard in Jerusalem is “the voice of bride and bridegroom, the voice of young people rejoicing in song.”

May we soon and speedily see peace throughout the world, a day in which nation will no longer fight against nation, a day in which war will fade away as a bad memory. Let the day soon and speedily come when we beat our swords into plows, our guns into spades to work the Earth. On that day peace will come across all the lands, and the world will come to know You.

Praised are You, God, Our God and Ruler of all, who brings forth bread from the Earth.
Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, Hamotzi Lehem min HaAretz.

I wish you a Thanksgiving filled with joy and celebration, with food, and suffused with sense of gratitude for the many blessings in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving!!

Rabbi David Booth

GIVING THANKS

DECEMBER 2, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year, I prepared for Thanksgiving by going to the Ecumenical Hunger Program in East Palo Alto. EHP is a supplemental food program that distributes groceries to its clients up to twice a month. Kol Emeth has partnered with EHP over the last two years to help distribute food to needy people as an initiative of our Tikkun Olam's efforts to address hunger in our own community.

I saw a lot of things there I don't often see or experience just 4 miles away in my affluent bubble. There was a woman who arrived with 4 small children all wearing matching white t-shirts in 40 degree weather. Did these children have jackets but just didn't wear them? Or were they entirely lacking such basic necessities as warm clothing? Several of the clients did not want to open their car trunks, preferring to put the groceries into the back seat of their car. I wondered if some of them were living out of their cars, or if they just had a lot of clutter in their trunk.

Several clients walked up because they had no cars. I realized part of the reason they wanted us to help the clients out with the rolling carts was to keep them from taking the carts. Those who walked up had no choice but to load their handbags with groceries. One person walked off carrying a frozen turkey in his gloveless hands.

My daughter Naomi found the experience of real value. It helped her appreciate the simple blessing of having enough food on her table. She kept asking about why there were so many children with their parents. It surprised her to realize that those families had no other alternatives than to bring their children with them.

We then shared Thanksgiving dinner the next day. We ate Turkey and stuffing, home made bread, three kinds of pie. There was an abundance of food and we appreciated that blessing of abundance on a deeper level. At the conclusion of our Thanksgiving dinner, we recited Birkhat HaMazon, the Grace After Meals. Praised are You, God, who provides for all. And with whom we partnered this year in making sure that those who were hungry had enough to eat this Thanksgiving.

Hanukkah, which started last night, is also a festival of Thanksgiving. I invite all of us to more fully appreciate the blessings that we have in our lives, in particular the particular blessings of sustenance. We eat, we are satisfied, and then that experience of being satisfied requires blessings. Only when we

bless, only when we notice the goodness, do we realize how marvelous our blessings are. My own deepening appreciation has then inspired me to want to do more to solve the problem of hunger in our community.

I urge you to take two steps, one inward facing, one outward facing, this Hanukkah. Each night of Hanukkah, after eating latkes, or donuts, or whatever else you enjoy for this festival, set aside a few moments of blessing. For many of us, the traditional Grace After Meals is a good way to fulfill this commandment. For others, perhaps a moment of quiet, or singing, is the right way to notice and appreciate the goodness of food and blessing in our lives. Any of these rituals will give us a greater sense of appreciation and well being. They are genuinely healing practices.

Second, set aside one night's worth of gifts and donate the money saved to Second Harvest. As we pause to bless, we realize the blessing of having full stomachs. That realization impels us to help others who go to bed hungry, who are unable to feed their children.

Praised Are You, God, whose goodness fills the Earth.

A Happy Hanukkah and a Shabbat Shalom to all

Rabbi David Booth

HANUKKAH

DECEMBER 9, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I really like the simplicity of Hanukkah. Its one simple mitzvah: light a candle each night to celebrate. That first night, there isn't much to see. Just one candle. By the end, however, eight candles are burning and the cumulative effect is beautiful and inspiring. In our home, we light one menorah for each family member, so last night our dining room was filled with the light of 45 candles.

The simplicity of Hanukkah reminds us that simple acts matter. We prefer the dramatic, life changing actions. Yet when you look at most truly meaningful moments of change they were comprised of many small actions over a period of time that produced cumulative effects.

Hanukkah reminds us that one moment of warmth and caring to another person matters. It's just one candle, one light. Yet when others offer the same warmth, when a community becomes centered around acts of caring and compassion, that one act becomes a series of caring gestures, producing real light into the darkness of mourning, loneliness, or depression.

The Menorah inspires us to realize that pausing each morning to thank God for the good things in our life can have a life changing effect. Imagine pausing each morning upon getting up for 2 minutes. Breathe for just a moment, to be centered and truly focused on what you are about to do. The Rabbis call this centered state Kavannah. Out of that place of Kavannah, think of two to three aspects of your life for which you are grateful. And then say: Thank you God, for these things.

It's one candle, one light. But day after day, that moment of prayer can become a shining beacon amidst the challenges of our lives. My life is hard, I do have challenges. And: there is a lot I really appreciate and am grateful for. One simple daily act that produces ever more light into the darkness that sometimes surrounds our souls.

Hanukkah ends in just a few hours; this year I hope it helps us reconnect with the value of simple acts of caring and gratitude. Our Rabbis teach that the human soul is God's candle. Let's get busy kindling some lights.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SHABBAT ON FIRE

DECEMBER 16, 2010

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Serve God in Joy” says the 100th Psalm. “Sing a new song” says the Psalmist repeatedly. It is through joy and music that our hearts can open, that we can find a way into prayer that matters, prayer that reaches beyond the self. Joy can open our hearts, music can speak to our souls.

The Mishnah teaches: Pray from a place of koved rosh, of intention or mindfulness. Like any other worthwhile human activity, prayer requires effort. To stay in shape, I exercise regularly. If I want to get stronger or faster, it requires more intensive training. Similarly, my friends deserve my care and attention. Only if I put effort into the friendship does it deepen and grow.

Prayer can become stagnant. Rabbi Akiva warns: do not make your prayer rote. There needs to be something new and different each time we engage in a prayer experience. The liturgy provides a frame and a structure. Singing, silence, moments of learning, provide the life changing connection that arises from within that structure.

Shabbat on Fire this Shabbat at Kol Emeth is an effort to experiment, to have something new and joyful, in our prayer experience. We will sing several songs and chants together, punctuated by times of silence in which people can either turn towards the liturgy or meditation. I hope you can come at the beginning to get the full flavor of the joy and spiritual intensity of this part of the service. To encourage early arrival, I will have M&Ms out at the beginning!

The Torah service will be focused on a dramatic communal engagement with the full reading. Based on Amichai Lau-Levi’s means of exploring Torah, our StoraHtelling troupe will present a dramatic and entertaining take on the Torah reading as it is happening. There will be chances for the congregation to participate as well! It is a fun experience that will give a visual and dramatic take on the reading. Our troupe includes the Rabbis, Lee Shulman, Michael Radwin, Ben Lehman, and Nathan Dinitz. This element will begin around 10:15am and the M&Ms will most likely be consumed!!

Finally, we will conclude with Musaf led in an Hasidic mode. We will finish with some niggunim, wordless chants, so that our experience ends energetically and joyfully. I am hopeful that we will end between 12 and 12:15.

Shabbat on Fire is an experimental Shabbat, a chance to live up to Rabbi Akiva's command to keep our prayer experience fluid and living. God takes pleasure in us when play is an element of our spiritual experience. Come early and with an open mind and heart.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

COPTIC MASSACRE

JANUARY 6, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Coptic Church is one of the oldest Christian institutions in the world, dating from 190 CE. Their power and influence grew in Egypt until the Arab/Muslim invasion of 641. At that time, as was the case throughout Muslim lands, non-Muslims were required to pay in person a special tax called the Jizya. Churches had to be lower than Mosques. Some periods, like that of the Mamluks around the time of the Crusades, included forced conversion and violent oppression of this Christian minority.

In Egypt during the 19th and early 20th century, Copts participated in and benefitted from Egyptian nationalism. They became a wealthy minority, owning as much as 50% of Egyptian businesses and industry. That ended when Nasser came to power in 1952. Coptic wealth largely disappeared as Nasser nationalized many industries.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and more radical Islam has made the position of the Copts ever more precarious even under secular political authorities. Hate crimes against Copts are spreading and being tolerated by the police. One such attack occurred in 2001 in El Kosheh, resulting in the deaths of 20 Christians and one Muslim. Another such attack occurred against Christian churches in 2006.

In May of this year *The Wall Street Journal* reported “waves of mob assaults” by Muslims against the Coptic community with police help typically arriving only after the violence was over. This hatred and bigotry has culminated in a New Year’s massacre that left 21 Copts killed and dozens more injured after an attack on an Egyptian Church.

It’s not only the Coptic Church that faces persecution and violence in Muslim countries. There were two other violent attacks against Churches this Christmas, one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan. The Palestinian Christian community similarly is shrinking and facing persecution and challenges.

Lebanon, the only remaining Arab nation with a sizable Christian minority, does have leaders confronting the problem. The Lebanese Islamic-Christian dialogue committee has called upon Arab nations to stop blaming the “Israeli enemy” and look at their own internal responsibility for this violence. Hizbullah’s Sheikh Naim Qassem, in control of a sizable voice in the Lebanese parliament, said by contrast that the attacks were part of a “Zionist-American conspiracy” designed to divide Arab unity. When every problem comes from the “Zionist Enemy” no problem needs to be solved.

Jews have tasted persecution. My own family left Russia to avoid conscription into the Czar's army. My great grandfather fled the country dressed as a woman, making his way through Europe and finally to America. Our own experience of insecurity, of living at the whim of autocrats and always subject to hatred, ought to attune our compassion for the Christian minorities living in Arab lands.

When the Jews faced such persecution, the world stood idly by. We as Jews have stood up for those living through persecution in places like Darfur and Kosovo. We know that when the light of world opinion shines on a problem, haters and murderers scurry away like cockroaches. So let's keep attention focused on the persecution and murder of Christians in the Arab world in the hopes of preventing more violence and inspiring nations with Islamic majorities to grapple with tolerance and openness.

Last year, January 7th, Coptic Christmas, was a day of violence for Coptics in Egypt. Let's pray that this year January 7th is a day of peace.

May It Indeed Be a Shabbat of Peace,

Rabbi David Booth

A WEEK IN REVIEW

JANUARY 13, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This week, I want to share a few short thoughts in place of a longer piece.

First, the loss of Debbie Friedman last week is both tragic and leaves a big hole. Debbie Friedman changed the face of Jewish prayer in America. Her music drew on folk and popular modes to create something accessible, singable, and deeply moving. Her loss will be deeply felt far beyond the Reform movement. May her memory – and the music she leaves us as a sacred gift – be for a continued blessing.

Second, amid the shock of the shooting in Arizona, I want to highlight Gabrielle Giffords Jewish identity. Giffords, the target of this deranged attack, often identified herself as a Jewish woman. Her Jewish identity is of increasing importance to her as she talks about it more and as she practices more. My prayers for her full recovery, alongside prayers of healing and consolation for those murdered and wounded in this terrible attack.

Third, in our own home community, Second Harvest plays a key role in feeding those in need. Second Harvest serves over 250,000 clients a year. Without their efforts, many people would go to bed hungry. Many children would lack sufficient nutrition. Last year, need was up by 5%, and donations down by 10%, leaving a significant gap. I want to encourage you to tithe to Second Harvest by donating 3% of your grocery budget so far this year. Were we all to do that, the thousands of dollars generated would make a substantial impact.

Fourth, Radical Hospitality is back! I am pleased to announce we will share another evening of Friday night meals across our community. Last time, nearly 100 people opened up their homes. In fact, we had more offers of meals than guests! So – please go to the [Kol Emeth website](#) and on the front page is a link to sign up. Consider being a host or a guest – the main point is to share a Friday night dinner with someone!

If you sign up as a guest, your host will be in touch with you around the beginning of February with your Shabbat dinner invitation. If you sign up as a host, you have two options. Either invite your own guests with whom you would like to share a Friday night or indicate that you have open spaces for us to match. If you invite your own guests, do let us know how many people you have at your table so we can get an accurate sense of participation. If we are matching guests, our matching committee will be in touch two

weeks before the event to give you the name and contact information of your guests. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me at rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org

Finally, last week I wrote about the challenges facing Christians living in Muslim countries. I am encouraged to read that thousands of Muslims showed up to protect Coptic Christians as they celebrated Mass on January 7th. What was a day of violence last year became an encouraging day of peace this year. May God strengthen the hand of the peacemakers!

I wish everyone a wonderful and peaceful Shabbat!

Rabbi David Booth

STUXNET

JANUARY 20, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

So you have to hand it to the Israelis. Iran stands on the brink of having a nuclear weapon. World opinion remains divided on everything from sanctions to military action. Further, unlike Iraq's nuclear program in the 1980s, a surgical strike will be difficult if not impossible. Iraq's nuclear program was in a specific above ground area. Iran's, by contrast, is in deep bunkers closer to civilian locations.

The United States kept giving mixed signals to Israel. Sometimes they were clear and unequivocal that military action would not be tolerated, other times the US was decidedly unclear. It seems evident that some in the US government had been hoping for a unilateral Israeli strike that would stop Iran's nuclear program without implicating the US in a military maneuver.

Wikileaks' treasure trove of now revealed secret correspondence from the Middle East similarly shows conflicted views on the part of Arab leaders. The King of Saudi Arabia called on the United States to "cut off the head of the snake" while Bahrain's King similarly said, "the danger of allowing the program to continue is greater than the danger of stopping it." Yet publicly, Arab leaders were far more circumspect.

As a result, Israel had great diplomatic risks from a military strike. Israel's economy has grown and thrived in the last two decades because of international trade. Sanctions against Israel could potentially be devastating. And from a purely strategic point of view, a military option appeared to require ground troops, a far more difficult endeavor than an air strike.

In Dimona, home of Israel's own sort of secret nuclear program, experts from Israel and the United States developed a computer virus called Stuxnet. They installed computer equipment and centrifuges identical to those being used by Iran and then developed a virus to destroy the equipment. They were successful in getting that virus into Iran in 2009. As a result of that success, Iran's ability to build a nuclear weapon has been severely impaired. Israel now estimates it will take another four years for Iran to acquire a bomb.

The Iranian threat remains real. However, Israel has demonstrated its ability to respond to these kinds of threats in creative and effective ways. Israel has also demonstrated a desire to minimize innocent losses. While perhaps unrealistic for future actions, I love that this virus dealt a blow to their nuclear program with no loss of life whatsoever. I truly respect the creativity to demonstrate to the world that

even in a difficult diplomatic and military situation, Israel continues to have effective resources.

And lastly, I love that this appears to be a collaborative effort between the US and Israel. Both countries share significant interests and concerns. Administrations may differ on how to handle issues like the Settlements and negotiations while remaining strong allies when the chips are down.

So may it continue!

Rabbi David Booth

LISTEN

JANUARY 27, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Taking the time to listen, to be attentive to those around us, has the God given power to transform our relationship and our own selves. Notice the contrast in Exodus between Jethro on the one hand and Pharaoh on the other. The verbs most frequently used in connection with Pharaoh is to speak. He talks incessantly. Not once in the Torah does he listen. As a result, his heart is hardened.

Jethro, by contrast, listens. He hears of everything that has happened to Moses. He sits as Moses tells him all that has occurred. Only then does he begin to speak. And his words are words of blessings. Praised is God who has done all these amazing things.

Jethro then observes Moses. He watches what he does and see the burdens Moses places upon himself. He offers advice only after watching and being attentive. Moses is able to accept his father-in-law's advice because it is given after listening, watching, and noticing.

The verb listen appears for the first time in connection with Moses after Jethro listens to him. Up until now, he has mirrored the behavior of Pharaoh speaking and of needing to be in control. Now, the compassion and attentiveness of Jethro enables Moses to listen as well as he mirrors Jethro's behavior in turn. Only now are Moses and the people ready to hear the 10 Sayings (10 Commandments) from God.

In our own lives, we take too little time to listen. Often, our moments of listening are really moments in which we are waiting to speak. How often have I begun speaking before the other person is even finished? How often have I assumed that I knew what the other person was going to say?

Listening is itself a commandment. The Torah says, Hear O Israel. The choice to listen is the choice to care. I care for you and therefore I suppress my own ego needs and give you the gift of my full attention.

I suggest the following. Before any interactions, whether at work or with family or friends, enter with intention. Take a breath. Formulate an intention. One such intention might be: "I intend to listen, to be attentive and caring of the person in front of me. Only after I have understood will I begin to speak."

At the moment you are ready to speak, take another breath. Give the person in front of you another

moment of attention to see if they are ready themselves to listen. In recent years I have started to allow a longer pause before I speak. I am amazed at the confidences, fears, and joys that people have shared with me because of that extra moment of attentiveness and listening.

Pharaoh is around all the time, speaking, talking, posting on blogs and yelling at us on Cable Television. But Jethro is around as well, quieter, perhaps, but remaining a force of compassion and healing. If we can learn from the example of Jethro, we will surely bring healing and love into our current relationships, and teach others a new way that can heal the world itself.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

FINDING WHOLENESS

FEBRUARY 3, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Speech is fraught with many problems. All too often, our words are spoken hastily or in anger. We forget to listen, as I talked about last week, and so our words come staccato, wounding, harsh. Furthermore, even when we listen, speech has a potential for dishonesty that is inherent. The moment we begin to speak, we begin to lie. Is it any surprise that the first human speech in the Bible is a lie?

Spiritual practices are beset by many of the same stumbling blocks. Kierkegaard, the famous Christian scholar, notices how the necessity of writing Scriptures and prayers immediately fossilizes and makes dishonest a particular experience. Moses tries to capture in the broken vessel of human speech his awesome and all encompassing experience of the divine. As we make efforts towards understanding his words and their import in our lives, we of necessity allow our own ego and self interest to cloud the pure experience Moses seeks to convey. For this reason, we all too often see religious institutions that are corrupt or self serving, and experience spiritual practices and prayers that leave us untouched.

As the Mishkan, the movable Sanctuary in the Desert is being built, another possibility is being constructed as well. According to the Zohar, one of the key books of Jewish mysticism, the Mishkan built itself. The construction of certain items for the Mishkan are spoken of in passive verbs, leading the Zohar to suggest that the materials themselves instructed the craftsmen in their building. Further, the sound of metal cutting devices was never heard. Later, when the Temple was built, the Rabbis teach us a creature called the Shamir cut through the stones so that no metal devices were used in building the Temple. A quality of unusual silence was inherent in the construction of both the Temple and the Mishkan.

That silence allowed the Miskhan to be built on compassion rather than judgment. Judgment requires distinctions. In Hebrew, the word for decree is “gzar,” which also means cutting. So judgment comes into the world through cutting. That cutting has no place in the Mishkan. All the items build themselves in a more gentle fashion, and even the stones that must be cut are split through the silences of this mystical creature. The Mishkan and then the Temple are different than normal human constructions. The Zohar is looking for a way out, a way to speak and pray that is nourished from above, that has honesty and healing.

Only once the Temple is built, says the Zohar, does speech begin. Speech emanates not from that which

is base in our lives, our own egos and self serving agenda, but speech that first comes from holy silence has the potential to be nourished only by the supernal. The Zohar has an almost naive faith in our ability to discover a whole way of speaking. Jacob, the complete man (gever shalem) becomes symbolic of this possibility.

To speak in this way of integrity requires much hard inner work. It demands that we find our own inner place of holiness, to find in quiet that core of soul that God plants within us. For me, this search is one of the key reasons I engage in prayer and spiritual practice. There are moments when I think I have found that place, when my words suddenly come forth in ways that are healing for others, that are based on compassion, and then my own ego wakes up again and my words return to their more base expressions. The Mishkan is built, and then lost. The Temple built, and then destroyed. We fail, but there is always hope that next time the Temple will stand forever.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

INCREASING JOY

FEBRUARY 10, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When Adar begins, joy increases....

I tend to undervalue the importance of joy. Part of this is intellectual. John Locke stated that God endows humanity with the right to life, liberty and property. Thomas Jefferson altered that formula in the Declaration of Independence to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That phrase “pursuit of happiness” has been creating problems ever since. Happiness by itself, joy disconnected from purpose, becomes only a fruitless search that leaves the pursuer more and more exhausted.

My reaction is also personal and emotional. I have a hard time letting myself be happy. As soon as I feel good, I start to worry about what is coming next. Or that my good mood now is a precursor to depression later. Or that I do not deserve this moment of happiness. And so I resist joy and do little to cultivate joyous moments. Yet our Rabbis teach: When Adar begins, joy increases. As this Jewish month that roughly corresponds to February begins, there ought to be an increasing feeling of joy. Which is to say, joy has a value. As the month renews itself, we see an opportunity for our own renewal. The natural world hints at a human possibility.

This month that process of renewal, of reconnecting with our most essential healthy selves, comes out of joy. Often, in looking for ways to connect with our healthy core, we become like Pharaoh. Pharaoh grips his fist ever tighter to exercise control. And yet, he finds himself gripping sand that gradually slips out of his grasp. We also, in effecting change in ourselves, grasp tightly. I failed before. Now I will succeed. I will clench my will and finally overcome my flaw. But we are grasping at sand and our efforts at change fail and slip away.

Adar suggests a different path. Adar suggests reconnecting with joy. I was happy and filled with contentment Friday as I walked to shul amidst a gorgeous sunset. That good feeling can be an impetus to create other moments of joy and meaning. There are times I have failed to say the right thing, to be properly attentive to the people around me. Yet there are also times when I was healing and comforting and a good friend in all the ways I want to be. Those moments are joyous ones and when I hold on to them, they can inspire me.

We are to serve God in joy because joy motivates and inspires. Joy connected with meaning leads us on

a path towards hope and redemption. It is the pursuit of happiness that sets us out on the road towards hope and meaning and God. I invite you this month to focus on moments of joy in your own life. Savor such moments and see in them an opportunity to bring forth the sacredness of your soul.

Adar is here, let us discover joy!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TUNISIA, EGYPT, AND IRAN

FEBRUARY 17, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The word “shalom” in Hebrew points to a key element in establishing peace. Shalom is usually translated as peace. However, it could also be translated as balance, meaning a place of harmony, or equilibrium. This rich meaning alerts us to the challenges of creating social order and establishing peace. Revolutions fail when they are only about turning away from a dictator or other oppressive ruler. They succeed when there are also elements towards which the people are turning, elements that can create a consensus for the future.

The largely non-violent human revolution now sweeping the Middle East contains both hopeful and frightening elements. As the Arab world rejects its current leadership, there is little sense of what comes next. The Tunisians wanted Ben Ali gone. Now he is gone – so now what? Similarly, the Egyptians wanted Mubarak gone. Now he is at least out of power – but now what?

Waiting in the wings are some scary figures. The Muslim Brotherhood is the most organized political opposition in Egypt today. The Brotherhood includes humanitarian elements, but is ultimately a party of radical Islam whose leadership sees current events as a “Zio-American conspiracy.” Should these revolutions create an opening for another Iran in the Middle East, that will be bad for the United States, expensive and difficult for Israel, and tragic for the Egyptian people.

Yet there are also hopeful signs. Egyptians, Iranians, and Tunisians all are clamoring for freedom. They are clamoring for governments that are fair, transparent and open. They want to grow their own trees and eat the fruit thereof. That Iranians also are protesting and striving for a new government shows a real hopefulness. What a blessing if Iran became more interested in helping its people than in oppressing them. How amazing for the prospects of Middle Eastern peace if Iran took the money currently invested in terror and instead invested it in the Iranian people. If the people of these countries can turn their unfocused hopes into a consensus that leads towards a new order, then a real Shalom may emerge that includes nascent democracy for the Middle East.

For us, there is little we can do other than pray and hope. So a prayer:

May it be the will of the God of all the Earth, that the forces released for freedom will be strengthened, encouraged, and kept safe. May they find the wisdom to lead their nations into a new era of peace and

freedom, in which prosperity, learning, and opportunity will fill the Middle East. May those dark forces that see in this movement an opportunity, an opening, find themselves frustrated at every turn. May we soon see a day in which peace, harmony, and balance, come to fill the Middle East and all the places in which humanity dwells. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

CULTURE OF INTERRUPTION

MARCH 3, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Bezalel was 16 when Moses appointed him to build the Mishkan, the movable Tabernacle in the Desert. Though already known for his skills as a craftsman, the size and scope of this project was a frightening challenge. Unsure of how to proceed with such a significant and meaningful project, he began by sitting with the assembled materials so lovingly donated by the Jewish people. He knew his intention, and as he sat, the materials themselves began to instruct him in their use. The Zohar relates that this partnership between craftsman and materials allowed the Mishkan to be a place spacious enough for God to dwell.

Our culture often lacks this Mishkan mentality. Call waiting led the way in our current culture of interruption. Call waiting means that I am waiting for the next call even as I am talking to you, because the next call may be more important. And how ego gratifying when you drop another call to talk to me!! Cell phones create a similar culture, because we are always on call, always ready to turn away from our current interactions for the important call.

Shelly Turkle, in her new book Alone Together, tells of a 16 year old girl coming out of school after lacrosse practice. She has her heavy backpack, her athletic gear, and lacrosse stick. As she trudges over to the car, her mother does not even look up until her daughter opens the door. She grunts a quick hello, and returns to checking her email and texts on the cell phone. As Turkle points out, though we blame teens for overusing their cell phones, in many cases teens themselves are urging their parents to turn off their cell phones at dinner, to be fully present for them. They want the spacious quality at dinner, in the home, that the Mishkan mentality offers.

Some places still demand our attention. In Synagogue, for example, people turn off their phones or at least are embarrassed when they ring. Movie theaters have attempted in ways serious and humorous to get people to shut off their cell phones. My own experience is that they are fighting a holding action at best. Yet our human interactions with friends, children, and relatives, are just as sacred as a service in the Shul, just as worthy of our undivided attention.

I have two concrete suggestions to regain our attentiveness. There is a growing movement to unplug at least one day a week. I urge you to turn off your cell phone over Shabbat. Voice mail assures you that calls will be saved for you. In this way, you can have one day off call, present in the here and now, wanting

only to be with the people around you. In the same vein, I suggest deactivating your call waiting. Phone providers will be surprised at this request but have the technology to honor it. It's another way of saying: I am here, off call, not waiting for something else but present to you. I believe that if we can do this, we will learn from the Mishkan mentality how to appropriately use these wondrous technologies in ways that make room for community, friendships, family, and for God to dwell in our midst.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A NEW STORY OF ESTHER

MARCH 10, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In the days of American democracy lived a young woman named Esther. Esther was in her late twenties and very politically involved. She cared about the world around her. She spent time with her family, when she could, and worked hard in the fashion industry every day.

Esther had grown up Jewish. She even had a Hebrew name – Hadassah – though she seldom used it. In truth, the only time it came up was when she was called to the Torah. And she hadn't been in a Synagogue in a long time. The last time was her cousin's bat mitzvah a year ago and they hadn't given her an aliyah. So it had been a long time since anyone called her Hadassah. She missed having a Synagogue, but never seemed to get around to going to shul or looking for a Spiritual home.

In those days, no Haman arose to destroy the Jewish people. There was the occasional bit of anti-Semitism from celebrities. (What was Charlie Sheen trying to say there???) But she herself had never directly experienced any act of anti-Semitism. She thought sometimes about Israel, but she realized she couldn't remember when Israeli independence day occurred anyway.

One day she was on Facebook and saw an update in her Uncle Mordy's status. Mordy was a traditional guy, still attending Synagogue almost every week. But he was pretty with it, and had gotten onto Facebook before a lot of people his age. His status update read: It's Purim – Be Happy. The post had a link to a website. Esther clicked on the link and found a site filled with Jewish jokes. She laughed until she cried, and cried until she almost couldn't breathe.

That night she had a dream. Mordy was there, but dressed like Mordecai from the Purim Story. And he stood there waiting in an empty Synagogue. Just outside the Shul, there was a noose hanging and a plaque underneath it reading, "Where's Haman when you need him?" She woke up sweating and confused.

Later that same day, while designing a new shoe, she got a text message from a friend of hers. "Come with me to Purim?" It said. She almost texted back, "No, too busy." And she laughed because it reminded her of a joke about a person who refused to help make a minyan. She started to text "No thanks," again and saw in her mind that image of an empty noose with a sign saying "Where's Haman?" So instead she texted back, "Ok. What costume are you wearing?" And she went. With another friend. And she kept

going.

And so in a quiet modest way, without a great enemy or any particular drama, Judaism was renewed. In that era, we didn't need Haman because we remembered on our own that God needs each and every one of us. We remembered that our Synagogues only survive when people make the time to care about Judaism, about God, and about one another.

Happy Purim!!

Rabbi David Booth

If you are interested in receiving CyberTorah, just click on the blog and add your email.

THE GIVING OF GIFTS

MARCH 17, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Gestures of caring mean something because they are a tangible way of showing another person that you are thinking of them. Receiving a gift can make a recipient realize that others in the community are holding them in mind. I notice this with our amazing Hesed committee. The Hesed committee brings food to those going through medical challenges. Invariably, when someone receives a dinner, the sense is of being lifted up and carried by the community during a difficult time. Purim reminds us that we don't have to wait until someone is facing a challenge to show caring.

One of the central mitzvot (commandments) of Purim is to send gifts of food to one another. By giving at least two people two portions, we are commanded to make an intentional effort to show others how much we care for them, that we are willing to share of our time and our sustenance with them. It is a tangible means of building a caring community even when people are well and healthy.

For some years, the Kol Emeth custom around this mitzvah has been to bring the mishloach manot bags to Kol Emeth and to distribute them during services. While the intention is one of caring and convenience, the effect has been to leave some feeling excluded. When I see this person walking away with 5 little bags, and no one gave me one, it leaves me with a sense that I don't really belong. This year every single KE member has received at least one bag as a result of efforts led by Elaine Sigal and Rich Freedland. I still find meaning in making my own bags, and encourage others to do so. However, I will distribute them personally. (As an aside, I intend to give mishloach manot to the KE staff and then to a number of homes on my street of both Jews and non-Jews.)

A second key mitzvah of Purim is matonot l'evyonim, gifts to those in need. Purim is a time of abundance, overflowing with hamentaschen and chocolates. Such a moment ought to incline us to remember those who lack such bounty. We have so far raised over \$10,000 for Second Harvest, and over \$120,000 for Mazon – the Jewish Response to Hunger. As impressive as those numbers are, the problem of hunger in the United States and abroad is only deepening. I encourage you to go to either shfb.org, the Second Harvest site, or to Mazon.org.

May we all be blessed with a joyous and wonderful Purim filled with gestures of caring and compassion.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Purim

THE DRAMA OF BIBLE

MARCH 24, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The reading of Torah is intended as a dramatic act. The Torah is brought forth from the Ark amidst great pomp and circumstance. We honor Torah as she comes out, we sing and rejoice that God's word will soon be heard in our community. The reader becomes God's voice, speaking to the community through the filter of human experience. The Midrash teaches that the prophets hear God in their own voice – we hear God each week through the voice of our friend, our community member, who is reading Torah.

Torah reading is called "kriah" in Hebrew with the sense of declaiming, of being read out loud to be heard. The Mitzvah, the commandment, is in hearing the reading. We lose this sense of mystery today because we have printed books. We follow along in the text and lose the essential element of the Torah being read by someone. We hear God in our own voice, but also in the voice of others. Hearing the Torah reminds me that I too have a Godly voice dwelling within, waiting to be heard.

I fear that this mystery, this deep quality of experiencing God through a text read by a human, gets lost all too easily in Synagogue. Our books help on the one hand because they give us direct access to the text and, more importantly, an English translation. However, the book itself too easily becomes our focus and we lose sight of the rest of the experience. Routine can also be a problem. I engage in the same act again and again and lose the purpose of the ritual. Worst of all, I come in unready, unfocused, without my ears attuned. As a result, I hear only my own inner echoes for nothing of the divine can penetrate my sealed heart.

Peter Pitzele has developed a new method of approaching the Torah to make its dramatic and personal quality more vivid called Biblio-Psychodrama. In this method, people are invited to be the characters in the story and then to speak from their own voice and experience. People might be asked to stand up and form a tableau of one scene. Then individuals might explain why they have chosen to stand in a particular location, or why they are close to another character in the story.

People are also asked to actually give voice to the characters. So in this week's reading, telling the story of Nadav and Avihu, a person might be invited to speak in Nadav's voice, in Aaron's voice, in Tziporah's voice. The Midrash teaches that God delights when we play before God. Psycho-Drama creates a fertile field in which we can play before God so as to draw close as we live in the Torah story itself.

This Shabbat is our second Shabbat on Fire. We will prepare ourselves through learning and meditation and prayer beginning at 9:15 (please come early – this will be a very different prefatory service) and then hear the Torah. After the Torah reading, we will experiment with Biblio Psycho-Drama in an effort to bring the Torah alive. I am hopeful that our experiment will enrich our reading this Shabbat and also be something we carry forward to help us see the personal drama unfolding before us every Shabbat.

I look forward to seeing you!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 31, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, pasta sauce, and ketchup, and sour cream (which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label.

In addition, I am now permitting some packaged items with no chametz to be purchased prior to Pesach provided that the item has a kosher mark on it. That would include tuna fish that is only tuna and water, tomato paste or crushed tomatoes that are only tomatoes and water, jams that are fruit, and so forth. I am being more lenient for two reasons: the principle of batel b'shishim, that an item unintentionally added which is less than 1/60th of the total volume becomes meaningless, and the significant expense of kosher for Passover product. Thus, if an infinitesimal quantity of chametz should accidentally have fallen into these items, it is considered void prior to the start of the Holy Day. Though many of us have the practice of buying only kosher l'pesach packaged items, this is to prevent accidentally purchasing

something to which chametz was intentionally added. Given the current high cost of such items, and our own greater sophistication around food and additives, I see every reason to be careful in checking labels and therefore more lenient. Showing extra care and purchasing only kosher l'pesach marked items is a praiseworthy practice. If any packaged/processed items are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover. Batel shishim no longer applies once the holiday starts.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes. For those who eat legumes, they may similarly purchase items before Pesach that include corn products, like potato chips or pure ice cream (do not purchase ice creams with candy, cookies, or other additives as they may include chametz.)

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at rabbinicalassembly.org. They have posted a .pdf of Passover information there called [Pesah Guide](#).

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher

Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

LESSONS FROM GOLDSTONE

APRIL 7, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Richard Goldstone, a noted jurist from South Africa, and a Jew, made a terrible error in judgment and has now admitted his mistake. Goldstone was invited by the United Nations to investigate alleged war crimes committed by the IDF during the Israeli action against Gaza in 2008. Invoking Jewish traditions of honesty in judgment and self-criticism, Goldstone agreed to investigate these allegations.

His study was done without Israeli participation, because Israel asserted sovereignty and its own right and duty to investigate. Goldstone in 2009 concluded that the Israelis may have been guilty of war crimes and called on both Hamas and Israel to investigate their actions. This report has since been used to bolster claims that Israeli military actions violated international law and that the Israelis engaged in systematic brutality.

Before Shabbat last week, Goldstone largely recanted. Saying, "If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone report would have been a different document." Israeli investigations have shown, according to Goldstone, that there were occasional violations of established behavior by individual Israeli soldiers. However, "civilians were not intentionally targeted." Further, Goldstone expresses frustration at the pace of Israeli investigations but is confident that "the appropriate process is underway." Finally, the issues appear to be error and negligence, rather than intentional misconduct.

I derive several lessons from this. First, Dictatorships and Terrorist organizations put their own interests ahead of those of their people. From such a perspective, their people are really an expression of the leader and so are expendable. See the actions of Qadaffi or Assad or the Iranian leadership over the last few months. Related, international law and issues of integrity are inapplicable. A massacre in Jenin can be made up of whole cloth if it suits their purposes; allegations of war crimes in Gaza similarly. As a result, information from such sources are meaningless. That is, the information may or may not be true and an independent observer cannot determine the truth of the claim from such a source.

Second, democracies like Israel and the United States are imperfect with leaders of varying qualities and soldiers of varying qualities. That means such societies are vulnerable to two kinds of errors. The first is on the field of battle itself. Young people given the power of life and death will inevitably and occasionally do terrible things. Such behaviors appear to be the very unusual exception and as a matter of policy such democracies endeavor to create rules, procedures, and consequences to minimize such

behavior. Second are errors of judgment by political leaders. Political leaders will make policy decisions when a nation is under threat or under perceived threat. Those decisions, in functioning democracies, will be divisive within the nation itself as people disagree both on the nature of the threat and the best way of responding.

Third, democracies, including Israel, have transparency and integrity in their societies, albeit imperfect. As a result, the public generally WILL learn of inappropriate behavior and even allegedly inappropriate behavior. Further, there will be loud voices with significant public support calling for investigations and improved integrity from the military. See Israel's own ongoing investigations of its soldiers, or the recent trial in the United States against soldiers accused of criminal behavior in Afghanistan.

Goldstone erred in accepting testimony about which he should have been suspicious and of failing to understand the uses to which his report would be placed. On the one hand, being Jewish carries with it a strong ethic of self-criticism. On the other, self-criticism within Israel and by Jews, whether true or untrue, will be used by the enemies of Israel. This is one of the powerful elements of terrorism. It subverts democracies at their deepest level, making even self-criticism and dissent potentially aiding and abetting the enemy. We cannot give up on self-criticism, transparency, and dissent but we must do so with an awareness that our words offered constructively may be misused in a destructive manner.

The Torah tells us to love and pursue peace. By the same token, we are also given rules "When you go out to war," not "if" you go out to war. Goldstone says that "it goes without saying" that Hamas' actions were intentional in targeting civilians. Further, those violent actions are ongoing. In the face of real challenges that sometimes necessitate military response, I want Israel (and the United States) to have policies that always offer the possibility of peace on the one hand, while securing life and liberty for its people on the other. May Nissan be a month that brings about a redemption of peace, where Jew and Arab together are able to sit each under his date tree eating the fruit thereof.

Shabbat Shalom and a Happy and Kosher Pesach

Rabbi David Booth

CyberTorah will be on a three week hiatus. I am taking a few days off next week to prepare for Pesach, followed by Pesach. CyberTorah will resume in May.

FOUR LESSONS FOR THE ARAB STREET

APRIL 18, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

These days, when you look at a map of the Middle East, you see something that drives home the message of Pesach. Everywhere people are rebelling against authoritarian regimes, demanding freedom, except for one little sliver of land. Everywhere is poverty, lack of opportunity, youth and sometimes even educated youth, with nowhere to go, nothing to do, except for one little sliver of land. In that situation of poverty, of lost opportunity, something has boiled over throughout the Muslim / Arab world.

The Arab world is one rife with missed opportunity. A region awash in oil revenues that have enriched a tiny elite while having almost no impact on the Arab people. A region that in the Middle Ages was a center of learning and openness, in sharp contrast to Europe of the same era, is now a backwater, with the lowest literacy rate in the world, including Africa. A region that was once the crossroads from Europe to Africa, in which Greek philosophy was carried through people like the Muslim sage Alfarabi to Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas, now has become almost totally isolated intellectually. And it keeps getting worse, year after year.

In looking at this map, the contrast between Israel's experience and that of the surrounding nations, the words of the Haggadah jump off the page.

Avadim Hayinu. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought us from there with a strong hand and a mighty arm. Had the Holy One Blessed Be God failed to bring our ancestors from there, we, our children, and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And even if we were all people of great wisdom and discernment, it would still be an obligation to speak of the Exodus from Egypt. For the more one tells the more praise one receives.

I remember reading this passage as a teenager and finding it absurd. We would still be slaves to Pharaoh??? Pharaoh doesn't even exist anymore. The Egypt of today lacks cultural continuity with the Egypt of so many years ago. As often happens with Jewish liturgy, this year these ancient words suddenly mean something again. So the question is, what about the Passover story, about Torah and faith, has led us in such a different direction?

I think it can all be found the Seder itself.

The Seder starts with questions. The Bible imagines as the core of the Seder ritual children asking their parents and then being told the meaning of these events. Our Seder starts with the 4 questions, as the youngest person in the room is expected to ask about the Seder.

Our young people are trained to notice, to pay attention. They are trained to ask questions and to receive meaningful answers.

Hope exists. We were slaves and now we are free. Things can change – and for the better – in a moment. For four hundred years we were slaves in Egypt. The work was bitter and hard. Our midrashim teach: they kept hope alive for 399 of those years. They despaired only at the very end. Moses went to Pharaoh and said: let my people go that they may serve me. And Pharaoh said: no. The elders told Moses that he had made them smell bad to Pharaoh – and they turned away. And still: God brought them out with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm. Hope exists even in the darkest moments.

Hope and faith in Judaism include God in partnership with humanity. God waited for Moses to free the Jewish people. That means human agency is part of what brings divine providence into the world.

Next is memory. The Haggadah is an odd document, in that it mentions the exodus from Egypt, but manages to mention nearly every story of Jewish oppression in some way. It is a highlights tour down memory lane. Seth Watkins makes the point that the Haggadah really is the headlines and it's our job to tell the story, to see the text as director's notes. We remember who we are, where we have been. That we have a shared story of how we came to be free people.

Finally is argument. In the Seder itself, in this core story of who we are, there is argument. The Rabbis argue where we should start the Seder. Does it start with we were slaves, *avadim hayinu*, or in the beginning we were idolators? And we manage to include both answers to the 4 questions. Rabbi Eliezer argued with his colleagues for years about saying the third paragraph of the *sh'ma* at night until he finally won the argument. Persistence – and a willingness by his colleagues to tolerate him all those years until he finally proved that he was right. It's easy to imagine a culture that erases him, drives him away because he keeps arguing. Or smooths over the dispute later. Instead, it's front and center, one among many arguments we see in the Seder itself.

As I look at the simmering and open violence in the Arab world this year, I am worried, which seems very Jewish, and also hopeful, which also seems very Jewish, that maybe this year, this time, it really will flower into peace and freedom. So I want to suggest that there are four elements that must emerge in

the Arab world that will signal to us that a deep and meaningful change is taking place.

Questioning. Questioning has driven these street protests. Why is there no opportunity for young people, even or especially with college educations? The Arab people can look at Israel and see such a sharp contrast with their own corrupt authoritarian regimes. And so they are asking: why can't we have the wealth and comforts we see just over the Jordan?

Hope. These street protests can take these cultures only so far. What happens in the dark days, when they smell bad to one another and failure seems inevitable? Can they find hope when the Egyptian military refuses to sell off its state industries and so its grasp on power seems intractable? What happens when leaders in the Muslim brotherhood endeavor to impose Sharia law? Can the hope of these few weeks remain inspiring?

Memory: can the people remember what has been, their own power to stop oppression by refusing to play, by refusing as a whole people to accept it? Can they remember that together they are a force for freedom?

And finally: **debate.** Can these authoritarian societies that have intentionally radicalized elements of Islam find room in their cultures for a place in which people can disagree, yell, argue, challenge and to see those debates as a strength, as the deepest strength, of a free society?

This year, as we celebrate freedom and hope, let's pray for the Arab world. So that in some imagined future, Arabs sit down at their table and say: we were once slaves to oppression, and tyranny, and a perversion of our sacred faiths. But now we are free! And if God had not brought us out of that dark place, we would still be poorer than Africa, forbidden to post on twitter, and lacking in opportunity for our children.

We are a people of hope. If you will it, it is no dream.

Hag Pesach Sameach!!!

SHARED-SHABBAT

APRIL 28, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Passover Seder begins with a challenge. We lift the Matzah and say, “This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat...” For this opening paragraph, Matzah is the bread of poverty and oppression. It is the bread the poor eat because they cannot afford “rich” or leavened bread. Just as we are about to fill our tables with an incredible feast, we remind ourselves of poverty and the desire to share a meal.

Passover is about ending physical oppression. Hunger is a harsh taskmaster that narrows the soul. Just as the Jews found themselves spiritually constrained – kotzar ruach – because of Egyptian persecution, so also those who are hungry today find themselves constrained in their ability to imagine a better life. This is why my preparations for Seder included a donation to Second Harvest. As the economy slows, Second Harvest is more needed than ever. Food requests are up 10% again this year, following two consecutive years of double digit increases. Kol Emeth has risen to the challenge, increasing what we have given to those in need over the last two years by over 50%. More is still needed. Our donations at this time make a big difference.

Passover is also about building community around our tables and in our homes. Over the last Jewish year, we have been working to acquire a greater measure of hospitality in our community. At Passover, I saw so many people open their homes to members of our community, to Jews looking for a place to have Seder, to non-Jews looking for a chance to learn about Judaism. Hundreds of us shared a meal together and deepened our connections with one another and with God.

Let us take that lesson of hospitality forward to the last of our 3 Shared Shabbats this year, our experiment in radical hospitality, on May 13th. Last time, we had hundreds of people sharing a meal together in over seventy households. We had exactly the same number of hosts and guests, partly because we had a few hosts courageously step forward at the last minute. This time, we are partnering with United Synagogue and with Stanford Hillel to invite college students to a Shabbat table. We read so much about how distant young people feel from the Jewish community. So let’s do something real and invite those young people into our homes.

Go to www.shared-shabbat.org to sign up as either a host or a guest. We need guests and hosts, people who want to open themselves to the opportunity to break bread together, to expand their connections.

According to the congregational survey, 30% of Kol Emeth members have participated so far this year. I want to bring that number to over 50%. As always, you may participate in one of three ways. You may invite your own guests, friends, and people in need of an invite. If you choose this path, do register so we can better track how many people are participating. Second, you may sign up at shared-shabbat.org and offer spaces for our matching committee to offer you guests including Stanford students. Finally, you can go to shared-shabbat.org and sign up as guest. I took it as a real blessing that guests came forward this last event and created opportunities for hosts to fulfill the mitzvah of welcoming people. Our host committee of Rachel Urman, Ora David, and Dalia Sirkin will then match hosts and guests by May 9th. Passover this year was a great example of the power of hospitality, the way in which opening our homes can create a space for God in our lives. Let us carry that blessing forward to May 13th for Shared Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HOSTING A SHIVA

MAY 5, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Judaism does death well. Mostly, anyway. Our tradition offers us practices in touch with deep wisdom about the human condition. When observed in an intentional way, these practices are comforting and offer healing structure at a difficult time. However, people often feel overwhelmed by Shiva practices. There is a lot we as a community can do to make it easier for people to use the tools our tradition offers us.

Shiva, the seven days of intense mourning following the loss of a close loved one, creates an intense ritual precisely during the time that recent studies indicate is the most intense period of mourning. Shiva is observed for our key loving relationships – parents, siblings, children, and spouse. During that time, our tradition advises us to remain in our homes, to refrain from music and TV, to cover our mirrors, to sit on low stools. In other words, we are asked to step outside of life, to put aside joy and comfort, for this intense period of time.

During those seven days, instead of the mourner receiving guests, we go to the mourner's home as the hosts. It reverses the normal etiquette of hosting. The guests provide the food. Guests usually enter on their own and leave on their own, with no expectation that the mourner will greet them. Usually, it is the host's responsibility to entertain the guest. During shiva it is exactly the reverse. It is the guest's responsibility to comfort the mourner.

Similarly, guests in a house of mourning wait for the mourner to speak and follow the mourner's mood. Like Job's friends, we sit first with no expectations. We simply want to be there, offering our warmth and comfort. Should our friend choose to speak, we listen, attentively, setting aside judgment and our own agency. If the mourner chooses to speak of sadness and loss, we listen. If the mourner wants to discuss the latest Shark scores, we listen. Only then do we respond. Our response ideally affirms or echoes what the mourner said. We set aside our own desire to make them feel better, to somehow be a light of healing, and place our effort instead to simply being present, attentive and caring.

Too often in our community people resist sitting Shiva because of the burdens of hosting, and the pressure they feel to be a host. As a result, people either feel drained by Shiva or simply don't do it. When this happens, we lose something very precious and healing. As a community, I want us to return our behavior back towards this healing practice that focuses us on the needs of the mourner, in which

we allow a mourner to experience fully their loss surrounded by a supportive and listening community. Shiva requires a community. That means we as visitors to a Shiva must be attentive to how we listen and behave so that mourners feel lifted up, relieved of the burdens of hosting, experience a warm present community there to listen and offer comfort.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT I CARRY WITH ME

MAY 12, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Travel to Israel in Hebrew is an aliyah, an ascension. The Zohar, one of the key books of Jewish mysticism, takes this felicitous phrasing and sees the journey of Avraham in his day and the Israelites in theirs as a physical journey which leads to a spiritual ascension. Each stop of Avraham's travels through Israel corresponds to a particular level of spiritual growth, culminating with his arrival in Beit El, the Gates to God. The Zohar suggests that the physical mitzvah of traveling in the land of Israel can carry with it a spiritual process of intense growth.

On June 12th, I am leading a group of 33 Kol Emeth people, families, children, and parents, to Israel for a 9 day tour. It is our intention to travel representing Kol Emeth. We will visit Hod v'Hadar, a conservative Synagogue in Kfar Saba, recently vandalized by Israelis offended by religious pluralism. We will visit a center for abused teens and engage in a mitzvah project. We will be welcomed into people's homes for Shabbat lunch and on other occasions. This trip is more than sights and archeology – it is people, a chance to get to know and walk with those living in the land of our ancestors and renewing it every day.

On the trip, as we endeavor to lift ourselves up, we hope to carry the congregation with us as well. Towards that end, I invite you to participate in our trip in one of two ways. First, we will be visiting the Western Wall erev Shabbat to tour the Jewish Quarter and see the remnants of the Second Temple. The sight has great archeological significance and also great spiritual significance. It is a location in which Jews over two millennia have opened their hearts, have prayed in tears, and left behind the deepest expressions of their heart. We will offer our own prayers in that place, but we would also be honored to carry prayers from you as well. If you would like, feel free to either send me via email or in a sealed envelope which will remain closed to the Synagogue, a prayer of your own. Perhaps it will be a healing prayer for someone you love. Or a wish for better economic opportunities. Or a prayer for reconciliation among family members. Or a prayer for peace in Israel. We will carry your prayers with us to Israel and then place them in the Wall alongside hundreds of other prayers.

Second, part of our trip includes a stop at a shelter for at risk teens in Jerusalem that teaches skills and self reliance. While there, we will get a chance to meet some of these teenagers and share a mitzvah project with them to help the shelter better do its work. I would also like to give them a donation while we are there. If you would like to be part of that free will offering, send a donation to my discretionary fund clearly marked for Beit Suzzanne.

Carrying your offerings and prayers alongside our own wishes will elevate our experience significantly. You will transform us into Mitzvah Messengers, and so invoke on our behalf a measure of divine protection. I am quite excited about my time in Israel and the chance to carry Kol Emeth with me in meaningful ways.

I leave for Sabbatical beginning on Monday and return to Kol Emeth August 18th. May you have a wonderful summer of rest, restoration, and joy.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS AT 30,000 FEET

JUNE 2, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'm flying back from my grandmother's funeral. There is a strange unreality to the whole experience, exaggerated by being in a plane floating above the clouds at 11 at night. I arrived in Des Moines late last night, close to midnight. I will return a bit after midnight this – or tomorrow – morning. In between, the end of my Baubie's life was marked.

My Baubie had suffered from Alzheimer's for over a decade. I went over to the house where she lived and where my aunt cared for her about a month or two ago. We brought chinese food. My grandmother read aloud the text on a few t-shirts. Otherwise she neither spoke nor recognized me or my children. She had dinner with us, but didn't otherwise interact.

More recently, just a little over two weeks ago, I saw her at my aunt's store at the JCC. My aunt runs Miriam's Well, the Judaica store at the J. I walked in. My Baubie didn't react or recognize me. Then my aunt said, "It's David, it's your grandson." She didn't react to David, but the word grandson brought a great smile from her and a moment when she knew me. It was a gift from God, because the next day she suffered a stroke. Two weeks later, Shabbat to Shabbat, she died.

Alzheimer's is an awful disease that takes a person slowly and gradually away from those that person loves even while they are still alive. I remember my Baubie knowing me, being a vital intelligent person. My children only remember her as a person unable to speak more than a few words, with only the most remote sense of who they are. I remember my Baubie making the world's best brownies. And I remember her being banned from the kitchen because she had hurt herself.

Losing my grandmother in that gradual vivid way challenges my faith directly. If there is a soul, what happens in a disease like this? Where does my Baubie go when there is this body that can barely speak? What is the real essence of who we are when my Baubie can stand up and then in the next instant have no idea of where she was heading?

Related is the sense of my own mortality. With my Baubie's passing, I have no more grandparents. My own place in l'dor v'dor, in the chain of generations, has inexorably moved up a link. And that is frightening. I looked at my Baubie's casket and I helped bury her today. I saw so much stripped away from her over the last 10 years. And now she is returned to the Earth. I believe in the soul, and in God's

care for us, a care that extends beyond this life, and pray that she is now in God's comforting embrace.

At 30,000 feet these feelings are exaggerated by the sense of unreality, the surreal quality of going to Des Moines, perhaps for the last time in my life, and then returning home. My life rushes forward and though I try to cherish each moment, each moment goes and is gone.

I thank you God for the gift of my Baubie's life. I praise You for letting me see how much she loves and how gentle she was as everything was stripped away from her, leaving only pure concentrated Baubie living only in each moment for she could remember no other. And I praise you for the gift of my own life, for each moment. And I, at 30,000 feet, ask for Your strength in letting that be enough.

Shabbat Shalom –

Rabbi Booth

NARRATIVES OF THE OTHER

JUNE 16, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The story in Israel always looks different to me than how I feel about things outside of Israel. I am currently traveling through Israel with 32 other Kol Emeth members, including 17 children ages 4 to 15. On Day 4 of our trip, it has already been an amazing opportunity to travel, to learn, and to meet Israelis.

One of our fun outings included a geo-political element that was very hopeful. We went to the Jordan River, boating down a mile or so segment. We had a big splash fight and enjoyed ourselves immensely. Boating with us was a large group of Tel Aviv Jews and a large group of Muslims from the North. Later, we saw people from both groups zip lining off a large pier into the river and having a great time. In the same way, we stopped in Rananah at a park and saw Israeli Jews and Muslims simply enjoying a day together at the park. This picture of normal life is rarely seen in America. It was a moment that seemed wonderful symbolic in its promise of Jews and Muslims peacefully floating down the Jordan together, the voices of young people raised in play.

At the park in Rananah, we studied the Megilat HaAtzmaut, Israel's declaration of Independence. If you have never read it, I strongly urge you to do so. The words are both inspirational and aspirational. It proclaims Israel as a Jewish state. I wonder what Ben Gurion and his mostly secular compatriots meant. For them, there was a notion of Biblical Jewish history that resumes today with a modern state. Biblical stories present almost entirely negative views of the non-Israelite. What then is the place of the non-Jew in Modern Israel? Both Arabs and Israelis have moved well beyond the point of imagining one functioning state. Yet what of the immigrant worker from the Philippines and elsewhere? Or of the Druze? How can they be visible in ways that honor their amazing commitments to the modern state? The declaration also talks about religious freedom. Does this include a space for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism? We visited our sister Synagogue in Hod v'Hadar for a lovely dinner and evening together. They had to clean up some graffiti apparently left by Orthodox Jews virulently opposed to non-Orthodox streams. They talked about a lot of the successes they are having, and the zeal they have, to show secular Jews there are other meaningful ways of being Jewish. This Megillah deserves its place among our sacred texts. I think it will really inspire you both of what Israel aspires towards and what Israel is already.

Israel is an amazing flourishing democracy that is a real land of opportunity for many. We went to the De Karina Boutique chocolate factory and learned the story of its founder, an Argentine Jew who came to Israel around the financial collapse in Argentina. She arrived in Israel, became part of a Kibbutz, and started this great Chocolate factory. At Hod v'Hadar we met many people involved in Israel's tech industry. The community has a lot similarities to Kol Emeth. This is an imperfect land, but one filled with great beauty and promise.

One last anecdote. We arrived up in the Golan, looking over the Hula valley, exactly at sunset yesterday. The colors and the view were amazing. We paused for a moment to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings and praised God's creation. We then sang of the deepest hope of the Jewish people: May God who creates peace in the heavens bring peace to us and to all Israel.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

AN ISRAELI WELCOME

JUNE 21, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There are certain elements of Israeli society from which we in the United States have a great deal to learn. In particular are the strong sense of hospitality and the commitment to community service. As we have been traveling together in Israel with 33 KE members ranging in age from 4 to 60, I have been noticing the deeply rooted quality of both of these attributes.

People in Israel are quick to open their homes and embrace visitors, family, and friends. At our stop in Kfar Saba at Kehilat Hod v'Hadar, our sister Masorti congregation outside of Tel Aviv, dozens of congregants came just for a chance to get to know our group and deepen the connections between our two Synagogues. As some of the members there realized that some of us were lingering in Israel after our trip, they extended invitations for meals and outings in a warm and surprising way. Similarly, we spent Shabbat with a centrist Orthodox community in the beautiful Jerusalem neighborhood of Nahlaot. It was easy to find six families interested in entertaining a group of American Jews, each in their own home.

We experienced a warmth and welcome in very modest homes. Our hosts lived in apartments filled with 3 to 6 children and perhaps 1500 square feet of living space at the most. Their homes were pleasant and often quite beautiful and historic. They were certainly clean, though in some cases cluttered. I got the sense that Israelis live the way they live and would rather have a big table than a big house. Rather than entertain perfectly and rarely, they entertain warmly and frequently. It doesn't have to be just right. Abraham ran around getting everything ready for his guests. Better to open our homes as we live than to close our doors in perfection.

We also have seen a strong commitment to community and service. We toured a wonderful charitable institution known as Beit Suzanne. Beit Suzanne is a half way house for troubled teens. The two founders take in 12-15 teens at a time to train them in making glass and jewelry of great beauty. They then sell this jewelry in malls and at street fairs. We saw one teen, most likely a graffiti tagger from that way he cleaned glass to prep it for the art work, showing real pride in productive rather than destructive work. If Beit Suzanne can succeed in getting these teens ready for their army service, doors of opportunity open up for the students. Since all Israelis are required to serve, the connections made in the military become key for determining which opportunities will exist for these teens as adults.

And lastly, we saw a large group of Israeli teens on their first outing as a new military unit. When Israelis are drafted into the military, they begin their basic training with outings around Israel to learn what they are defending and to bond as unit. Where our teens at 17 and 18 are worrying about which college they will attend and are looking towards four years of adventures, learning, and personal development, Israeli teens are entering the service of their country. Some serve in the military, others in National Service which includes work in orphanages, national parks, and some guard duties.

I have been amazed by sunsets in the Golan, the beauty of the Dead Sea region. I have learned texts in new ways as I sit in the locations they describe. But most of all, I have been reminded of and learned in new ways directly from the people of Israel about hospitality and service, about building a society that includes room, even if a little cluttered, for others.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

THIS (JEWISH) (ISRAELI) (AMERICAN) MOMENT

JULY 8, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My cousin, Benny, cuts hair at a salon in Jerusalem. I went over there close to closing time yesterday to see him and go to the gym and then Mahane Yehudah (the open air food market in Jerusalem) together. He was just finishing with his last customer. When she learned that I was a Rabbi from the United States, she was very interested in talking to me. She said, "Assimilation is getting worse in the United States, especially because people don't like Israel so much any more." I assured her that American Jews do still love Israel, but I think both her interest in American Judaism and her perceived sense of our disinterest highlights a worrisome trend for the continued connection between Israel and the United States Jewish community.

Micah Goodman, a prominent speaker and teacher in Israel who recently wrote an Israeli best seller on Maimonides (the key Medieval Jewish philosopher and legal scholar), taught about this growing divide at the Hartman Rabbinic program this past week. He pointed out that Secular Zionism as an experiment intended to create a Jewish identity entirely divorced from religion. A new Israeli would be unrestrained by all the burdens of the past, including Jewish Law and manners. This new direct human would then build a new kind of secular Jewish society that would take its place in the family of nations.

This conception of Jewish identity had amazing power and indeed succeeded in building an amazing state. One outcome is that some Israelis feel disconnected from Judaism or even assert that they are Israeli, not Jewish. In recent years, however, that Secular Zionist identity has proven insufficient. As a result, Israelis are reclaiming a sense of themselves as Jews. Israeli rock stars are performing cover songs of Jewish liturgical music because it has become so popular. Breslow, a Hasidic movement that encourages music and joy, is influencing secular culture in all sorts of interesting ways. And Micah Goodman wrote a book on Maimonides that became a best seller. All of this suggests that Jewish identity in Israel is deepening. Israelis are searching for music, wisdom, and joy in their tradition and beginning the process of making the tradition their own.

In the United States, by contrast, Micah Goodman sees the reverse occurring. American Jews remain interested in Judaism, Jewish practice, and Jewish learning. However, the connection to Jewish peoplehood is weakening. As Arnie Eisen and Steve Cohen write about in [The Jew Within](#), American Jews mirror the wider culture in seeing religion as a personal quest. I look for that which provides me with meaning and don't necessarily feel a connection to other Jews. The younger you are, the less likely

you are to affiliate or to view Israel as a key part of your Jewish identity.

Israelis today at places like the Schechter Institute, which is the intellectual center of the Conservative movement in Israel, are working hard to give Israelis a sense of Jewish identity. Their successes in an intentional effort to have Israelis see themselves as Jewish in a deep and meaningful way are bearing tremendous fruit in Israeli society. Alongside many key partners, the Hartman Institute and the Schechter Institute are beginning to change the trends in Israel in ways that may preserve Israel as a Jewish state.

It's time for a similar effort in the United States to deepen Jewish identity in ways that are countercultural. We need to help Jews learn about deep Jewish values, and show the incredible strength of Jewish community and people. If Judaism becomes a branch of American Protestantism, it will no longer be meaningfully Jewish. Jewish law contains within it incredible moral resonance rooted in a sense of community. Jewish spiritual practice similarly is rich, deep, and takes place in community. And Jewish people today are interested in connecting to other Jews, in learning about Jewish law and practice, and experiencing rich spiritual moments together.

Put another way, it's time for an intentional effort on our part so that the customers at my cousin's hair salon feel themselves engaged in a loving dynamic that includes open conversation and criticism with American Jews. I feel Kol Emeth can play a leadership role in this because of how knowledgeable and deeply connected to Israel we are. May we find the wisdom, inspiration, and strength to build such a rich and varied sense of American Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth, writing from Jerusalem of Gold

BEING IN THE STORY

AUGUST 18, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The stories we tell about ourselves matter. This week, Moses will retell the history of the Jewish people in a remarkable way. Rather than glorify all the amazing things that happened to the Jewish people, rather than tell them how great they are, Moses emphasizes instead the moral responsibility that accompanies being in the land. Having just returned from my travels Tuesday, I'd like to share with you one aspect of my own story of being in Israel, particularly in light of the awful events occurring in Eilat.

For two months, I lived in the land of Israel. Israel possesses an intensity of Jewish experience like no other place. In Israel, Judaism becomes about the national as well as the personal. How someone understands Jewish ethical teachings directly influences the way in which that Israeli will react to the political issues of the moment. There remains a sacredness in the way taxi drivers and firefighters and people working in high tech go about their business. They are daily figuring out what it means to build a Jewish state. Here in America, our concept of Jewish identity is smaller because the lack of national drama is so much more intense.

American Jews cannot be bystanders in this era. We have to work harder to be in the story, but it can be done. We can and must feel deeply the tragedy of attacks like that which occurred yesterday in Eilat. It's scary because 7 people were murdered, the worst attack in years. It's terrifying to Israelis because a new front in terror has been opened up. Will post-Mubarak Egypt keep the peace? Or will it passively support Hamas and other efforts to destabilize Israel? And it's sad, because people were hurt and killed senselessly. These were Israelis going home from a few days at the beach. As an American, especially having so immediately returned from Israel, I feel guilty as well because here it's bright and sunny and life continues the same as it always does.

At the same time, we cannot let our connection to Israel only be about the violent moments that grab international headlines. That equally profanes the lives lost by turning them into a caricature of a living vibrant country. While in Israel, I witnessed the largest Israeli street protests in history. And I saw barely a mention of it in the Western press. I mourn those who lost their lives yesterday. I pray their families can somehow find comfort after such a terrible loss. And I recommit myself to reading about Israel, staying connected to Israel, and searching regularly for ways to stay a part of that ongoing drama, filled with joy and loss, with moments of greatness or great tragedy, but also day to day life. Now is the time to read the Israeli news, at sites like ynetnews.com, the English mirror site of one the major Israeli

news agencies. It's equally important to read these sites next week as well, and to read past the headlines into the cultural articles about music and movies and day to day life. This is also a good moment to plan a trip to Israel. Our visits are a way to helping Israelis know they are not alone and to help them continue to find the strength to pursue peace. Finally, we must pray for comfort and strength to those in mourning.

I just got back from Israel. I want to stay a part of the story.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TENTS AND RIOTS

AUGUST 25, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When I tell people about spending the summer in Israel, I have been asked by many if I was concerned about being in the Middle East during the uncertainty of the Arab Spring. As a result, I wanted to share two different kinds of experiences I had with uncertainty and safety as a traveller thousands of miles from home.

Israel over the last month of my time there erupted in the most extensive street protests of Jewish Israelis in the nation's history. Young people, initially led by students, took to the streets to protest. These protests lacked a list of demands, or a clear sense of what specific steps they expected of the government. Instead, they reflected a sense by over 300,000 Israelis that the country is heading in a bad direction, that life has become too expensive to imagine a real future living in Israel.

The street protests include a harkening back to Israel's socialist roots. For the last 20 years, Israel has become a much more economically free society. This has triggered a massive technology boom and increase in wealth. At first, I thought these protests were nostalgia for the past and wishful thinking for a new socialist country in which everyone has an apartment on Rothschild Blvd in Tel Aviv. The massive and broad based support for these protests suggests a much broader social consensus that Israel is at a key moment in its history, a moment that requires great leaders and great policy.

Amid this ongoing and massive social uprising, I never once felt in danger. As far as I know, there was no violence whatsoever associated with hundreds of people living in tents for now 5 weeks straight and 4 massive Saturday night protests. This is a mature and free country at a moment of transition in which free assembly is giving voice to a popular discontent.

By contrast, our second night in London saw the worst street riots and violence in that nation's history. Ostensibly triggered by the killing of an armed London man at the hands of the police, these riots were an excuse to loot and destroy. Businesses were destroyed, homes were burned. We happened to be near a major staging area for the riot police. Each night we saw hundreds of riot police gearing up and heading out as they worked to restore order in London and the rest of the country.

While the riots were in local neighborhood far off the tourist itinerary, I had two nights of feeling some anxiety while checking the news, which left me worried for our safety. I would then check with the

conciierge, who allayed my fears. This was followed by two mornings of checking our itinerary with the hotel conciierge, which inevitably made me feel secure. That reminded me how much the media sensationalizes violence and destruction. I was less than a mile away from the various images, but was perfectly secure.

No where is perfectly safe. Israel has challenges both internal and external. The media images show only one side of what living there feels like, exaggerating the sense of personal risk. Our journeys this summer emphasized that it is as safe to travel to Israel as anywhere else. I know many of us go regularly, but for those who have never been, or who are concerned by the proliferation of violent media images, Israel remains one of the safest places for travel in the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE SERIOUSNESS OF PRAYER

SEPTEMBER 1, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Prayer is a serious endeavor. We are often deceived into thinking that prayer is a far less intense activity because it draws on so much that is familiar to us from other venues. Communal prayer contains elements of entertainment, of musical concerts, of social gathering. It includes all of these elements but is at its core other.

Prayer is an encounter of the individual with God. All the trappings of prayer, the music, the sense of community, the words of Torah, are there to help attune our souls to that basic primal encounter. There is a necessity to that encounter, a requirement that we reach out for basic connection beyond ourselves. The Midrash tells us that everyone heard God at Sinai in their own way. We continue to have a unique encounter whenever we allow ourselves to experience an honest moment of prayer.

God, then is the recipient of prayer. God is that before whom I stand, before whom I share and show the truth of myself. God is also that Other beyond description who reflects back the possibility of what I may be. As a result, true prayer is a terrifying endeavor because I stand before that which I cannot explain, understand, or be certain of. I stand exposed, even to that which I hide from myself.

Torat Adam, a 16th century mussar text, instructs us that the rituals and rules of Jewish prayer serve the purpose of exciting our souls. They help our minds and bodies to get out of the way and to allow our souls to speak. The liturgy functions as a method of awakening the soul, of exciting something deep and essential within us that all too often is hidden amidst our busyness and movement. Yet it is that sacred core which contains our truest, holiest selves. That sacred core is best discovered and strengthened in prayer.

This year I intend to engage in a conversation about how prayer can function in such intense and serious ways. How can we build a praying community that shares in the seriousness of the endeavor? A minyan can become a source of distraction when people are chatting and engaged anywhere but on the prayer experience. By contrast, it can enable prayer when it strengthens me in my fears, and lifts me up when I might fall. Music and liturgy can become rote, or they can become the means by which I excite my soul to speak out in all her beauty.

Prayer is a serious endeavor. True prayer is possible only with effort, contemplation, and love. And true

Jewish prayer is only possible together, in community. I invite all of us into a conversation this year that will help deepen our experiences of prayer and give all of us the strength to engage in something essential and necessary. Come let us sing before God a new song, the song of our souls.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE INVITATION OF ELUL

SEPTEMBER 8, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Elul is an invitation, a chance to pause in the rush of our lives and take stock of our direction. This sacred opportunity passes us by all too rapidly. Amid the noise of our lives, the responsibilities and the tasks that daily take up our time, we forget to take control of our time. We rush from one thing to the other as we worship at the idol of busyness. We risk lifting our heads to discover that our whole life has rushed by and we failed to notice.

The invitation of Elul, the opportunity presented by this month leading up to the High Holidays, is to interact with the way we use time differently. There is the list of tasks and responsibilities, many of them lovingly chosen, with which we fill up our day. This month we are invited to make time, to find time, to examine those tasks, the direction towards which we are rushing amid all the motion of our lives. It is an invitation to sit, to treasure some quiet, from within which we can examine the course of our lives.

That examination is terrifying because we may decide that we desperately need a course correction. We find that we are rushing in ways that may be only a little off the mark, but may be far off the mark. In Hebrew, the word for sin is Chate. It is originally an archery term meaning to miss the target. In Elul we examine our chatim, our sins, as we take the time to see how far off we may be heading. In the short term, it is easier to stay the course, to accept our failings and continue to rush blindly on.

In the long term, however, this is the path of death. Those who sin are as if they are dead in their own life time, says the Talmud. In other words, when we fail to take the time to examine our lives, to see what our course really is, then we are rushing towards an already determined end that steers us away from meaning. That rushing becomes enervating, exhausting beyond words, as we find ourselves further and further away from a life that means something.

In Elul, if we so choose, we can find the time to correct the course, to reorient towards a rediscovery of meaning. If we choose, if we make the effort to use our time in this different more reflective mode, we can discover new sources of strength, new energy, new commitment as we re-embrace our responsibilities, obligations, and behaviors. Then, when we hear the call of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we will be ready for God's hand to lift us up on this new path, and so discover ourselves experiencing a healing we never even realized we needed on Yom Kippur.

May we be blessed with an Elul filled with time for thought and introspection. May we discover the courage to honestly look at our faults, and so begin the process of changing our direction back towards God and meaning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

DOORS WIDE OPEN

SEPTEMBER 15, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When I was in college, our Friday night service used a siddur called Likrat Shabbat. I remember a reading in the book that said in part:

*May the door to this synagogue be wide enough to receive
All who are in need of love, all who are lonely for friendship.
May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough
To shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.
May we make this synagogue, for all who enter,
The doorway to an enriched and more meaningful life.*

The image of doors wide enough to admit those lonely for friendship, those looking for meaning in their lives, which at the same time are too narrow to admit pettiness and pride, echoes with the language we will read this Shabbat.

Moses tells the people, “When you enter the land... you shall enjoy together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst.” Hasidic commentators teach that the word blessing means to increase. As a result, when we experience blessing, those blessings are meant to be shared in an openhearted way. Even the stranger and the Levite, people with whom we have no family or social connection, are invited to partake.

When we enter the land. When we arrive in a Synagogue, we are entering a sacred space. As we encounter that space, we are offered choices. We may fall victim to pettiness, pride, enmity. We may say: I have been working all week, and now I am entitled to rest and enjoy my blessings. Or worse: I know the true meaning of this place. I am the one to define what it means to be here, and I am the one to say who belongs. Such choices feed our evil inclination and damages the sacred community at its root.

There is another choice, the choice of blessing, a choice that increases, that reaches out to the stranger and the Levite, that makes room for the other and in that spaciousness encounters a new quality of blessing and abundance. We are commanded to share the bounty with the stranger and the Levite. We offer an invitation to newcomers, to people finding their way in the community. It may be an invitation to learn, an invitation to friendship, an invitation to a Friday night meal. We extend the invitation as our

own blessing. The response, positive or negative, is accepted lovingly.

When I was in college, I remember being embraced warmly by a community to which I arrived knowing no one. I was welcomed as often as I attended and without question about my practices or behaviors. As my practice changed from relatively secular to fairly observant, amazingly, the community continued to embrace me. Each Friday night we started services with that reading above. And each Friday it meant something to me because it made a value statement of what a sacred community can be. It created a space for me and many others to explore our Judaism in an open way.

As we turn towards the High Holidays our doors are literally opened wide as rooms are expanded and opened up to make room for the thousands of Jews who are drawn back for these special days. Let us all make the inner effort to open our hearts as well, to create spaces wide enough to receive everyone in friendship. This process will enable us to more fully receive the healing blessings of the holidays as our own hearts learn to be open and compassionate.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SHARED SUKKOT

SEPTEMBER 22, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Our full Hebrew name is Kehillah Kedoshah Kol Emeth, the holy community of Kol Emeth. This immediately defines a mission for us, a mission of building a place imbued by an awareness of the sacred, at the same time that this feeling of sacredness is deeply rooted in connections between people. A sacred community is one that leaves room for all its members. It is a place that has self confidence in its mission and as a result allows its members to explore and grow in their own ways and at their own pace.

Sacred Community carries a great risk, the risk of judgment and smugness. As soon as someone decides they know the path towards God or the right way to be a Jew, they are already off that path. Our challenge, to live up to the ideal of being a sacred community, is to find the courage and the conviction to carry an openness, an expansiveness, as we encounter others on their own paths and journeys. At the same time, it must come with an invitation to grow and to learn, to discover the ways in which Torah speaks to each person.

Sukkot is one place in which our practices embody this ideal. The Sukkah has a wide open quality about it. It must be open to elements, so that we can see the stars and have the experience of being outside. Further, Sukkot have certain norms around which they are built and then have all varieties of shades, colors, and even shapes. I have been in dozens of Sukkot and each one embodied the personality of the builder.

This year, Kol Emeth is going to experiment using Sukkot to foster sacred community, to be the first step in a new way of building social capital in our community. We are looking now for Sukkah hosts in the goal of having every congregant invited into a Sukkah not too far from their home for an ice cream social on Sunday, October 16. The idea is to create a sacred context – the Sukkah – and to use its welcoming quality to create a space that is wide open to the entire community.

A sacred community inspires a two-way relationship – with giving and receiving being of equal weight and importance. To achieve our goal, we are looking for about 60 hosts across the community willing to share their sukkah with 9 or 10 other singles, couples and/or families on Sunday, October 16th. Naturally, we also need guests willing to visit a neighbor's Sukkah, and bring their favorite kosher dessert. Much like we do with the Hospitality Initiative, Monica Kuniyoshi will chair the effort to match hosts and guests. If you want to be a host or a guest, go to <https://sites.google.com/site/sukkahsocial/> or

contact Monica directly at community@kolemeth.org. Look out for additional communications about this special event, with a form you can complete to be a host or guest.

To add to the experience, I will ask that every Sukkah gathering on that day include one moment of blessing as we notice the sacredness of being together in community. Each host will be supplied with the blessings for sitting in the Sukkah, as well as the Shehekyanu blessing, the blessing thanking God for reaching this moment. And otherwise it will be an afternoon to get to know other KE members living in your area with open hearts.

Kol Emeth is a special and sacred place. As we celebrate the Holy Days this year, let us each find ways to give room and open heartedness to others. I suspect, can we but effect this change in ourselves, we will receive our own blessings back a hundred fold.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE FAST OF GEDALIAH AND RABIN

SEPTEMBER 28, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Lshana Tova!!

Rosh Hashanah is a time of hope and of joy. It is a time of joy because we remind ourselves of the possibility of renewal, an ability to be transformed and healed. Yet amid our joy, our hopes for a joyous new year, we also recall loss and tragedy.

The day after Rosh Hashanah, this year Sunday the 2nd of October, is known as the Fast of Gedaliah. It is one of a series of minor fasts that commemorate tragedies connected with the Babylonian Exile. According to the Bible in both II Kings 22 and Jeremiah 39-41, the Babylonians named Gedaliah, a Jewish man, as governor over Israel after the Temple's destruction. "And as for the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, over them he made Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, ruler. (II Kings 22:22)" Gedaliah told the people to "not be afraid." As long as they maintained a nominal allegiance to Babylon, they would remain free and under Jewish rule. Little of their day to day lives would change.

Among the men of importance at the time, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah refused to accept Gedaliah's rule. He probably accused Gedaliah of collaborating with the enemy. Ishmael almost certainly felt that Israel must remain free of Babylonian control. Gedaliah's leadership, in his eyes, served only to legitimate domination by a foreign power.

Ishmael misjudged the political reality of the time. Gedaliah was the only thing standing between Israel and the Babylonians. The Babylonians were willing to permit limited Home Rule. Any further revolt would result in the complete destruction of Israel.

The fast of Gedaliah was instituted both to remember Gedaliah and to prevent similar tragedies. Jews remember history. Hopefully, we avoid repeating our mistakes. Gedaliah's tragic end teaches us the dangers of Jew killing Jew. Such tragedies serve only to weaken us, never to strengthen us.

In 1995, another Jew executed a political leader for virtually identical reasons. Yigal Amir believed that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was a traitor, in collaboration with Arafat against the best interests of the Jewish people. Prior to Rabin's assassination, Israel's Secret Service barely worried about the Prime

Minister's security from other Jews. The memory of Gedaliah was too faint and it happened again.

Political differences are the life blood of democracy. A particular policy may create opposition, but political assassination weakens the fabric of democracy. We should always be passionate in our disagreements over peace – but we should also see in those disagreements a genuine love for Israel and for the Jewish people. Rabin's death was a tragedy because political disagreement became spilled blood. The passion to save Jewish lives took a Jewish life.

This year, I encourage all of us to observe Gedaliah's Fast in memory of both Gedaliah and Rabin. It is a sunrise to sunset fast, meaning the fast begins at 6:45am and ends at 7:30pm. Rabin's assassination was a grave tragedy that deserves being attached to ritual memory. Much like the glass shattered at a wedding, this fast warns us that in our imperfect world we must always keep the brokenness of our world in mind. For if we strive for peace, realizing what happens when we turn towards hatred, then we can truly merit a happy New Year.

I wish you a Shana Tova, a joyous New Year filled with good things, with prosperity and hope, and tempered by an awareness of tragedy and loss so that we all work to create a world filled with peace.

Lshana Tova!!

Rabbi David Booth

YOM KIPPUR PRACTICES

OCTOBER 4, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Ten Days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur create a false sense of security. In fact, there are only 6 days. 2 are Rosh Hashanah itself, 1 is Shabbat, and 1 is Yom Kippur. The sacred opportunity to repair relationships, to seek healing and change in my own life, has an immediacy when we realize the time is short. I want to suggest three practices to help us orient ourselves towards the cleansing and healing possibility of Yom Kippur.

1. Tzedakah, Charity. The problem of hunger in our community continues to worsen. The continuing economic turmoil means that Second Harvest has seen their need increase by nearly 10% each year for the last three years. Last year, we raised over a ton of food and over \$7000 dollars to play our part in alleviating this need in Santa Clara and San Mateo county. This year, we need to do even more because the need is greater. I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you before Kol Nidre, and to go to shfb.org/ and donate. Please indicate that you are part of the Kol Emeth food drive. Other worthy charities with this same goal include Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger and Jewish Family and Children's Services.
2. Tefilah, Prayer. There is a practice of wearing white for Yom Kippur services as a symbolic practice to strengthen our intention to experience God's cleansing power. It helps us turn away from ego, by making our garments similar one to another. It reminds us of Isaiah's promise that on this day God has the power to cleanse us as white as the driven snow. Perhaps by wearing white we can invite that cleansing power into our lives.
3. Teshuvah, Repentance. These ten days, short though they are, are a unique chance to affirm and heal broken relationships. I suggest finding time to call, email, message, or even speak to in person, friends, family, acquaintances with whom we may have had issues over the year. There is something deeply cleansing in saying: will you forgive me for that which I have done intentionally or unintentionally? It's a way of asking for healing, for a new start, without needing to assign blame or even to list out all that has happened. I am every year caught with too little time for this practice, and every year am amazed by its healing power to set aside that which gets in the way.

May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have a transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

CELEBRATE SUKKOT

OCTOBER 11, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The warm glow of Avinu Malkeynu at the end of Neilah reminds us of our connections as a community. One new member of our community came up to me at Havdalah in tears talking about how powerful it was to be with so many people all singing together, all hoping together, all looking for healing together. It was time to end the fast, and people kept singing because we all knew that this was something special, something to grasp and hold and treasure. To quote Rabbi Graff, the best thing ever.

That special feeling, that sense of being connected to one another and to something beyond ourselves, all too easily fades. Our routines reassert themselves and we go on as we were before, nurtured by that experience but forgetting to make time to care for those spiritual fires. I want to remind all of us of how Sukkot can be the next step in a process of carrying that feeling of joy, that sense of single tasking, into the year as a whole.

Sukkot follows Yom Kippur so that God can linger with us. Sukkot creates an opportunity to bring that feeling of joy and connection another week into the year. Our Sukkot are enclosed shelters that are also wide open to the world. When we build them, and then eat in them with family and friends, we are opening ourselves to another more intimate experience that matches and enhances our Yom Kippur moment.

One the teens suggested we fast on Yom Kippur to remind ourselves of those who experience real hunger. The Sukkah also, as an open temporary structure, reminds us of those without housing and in need. It both awakens our compassion, hopefully inspiring charitable giving, and our gratitude, as we appreciate the true blessings of what we have.

Sukkot is rooted in nature, in growing things and being outside. Where Yom Kippur is filled with liturgy and intensity, Sukkot is filled with deep appreciation and joy. I invite everyone to find a way of celebrating Sukkot this year.

Perhaps you will come to services Thursday or Friday morning this year at 9:15. Thursday we will shake the lulav and etrog for the first time and parade around Kol Emeth with them. The Bible commands us to gather together. I encourage you to find the time from work or school to privilege spiritual living as well. And for those with vacation time, all the more so!

You could build a Sukkah. They can be done quickly and easily (see the Halakhah corner). Once built, you can invite friends to eat with you and use your Sukkah to expand and deepen your friendships and feeling of community. You could use your Sukkah to host our Shared Sukkot event Sunday the 16th, or sign up to be in someone else's Sukkah that same day. ([go to Sukkah Social website](#))

Lastly, you can focus on joy during this week of celebration. What activities / friends / places bring out happiness for you? It is a commandment to rejoice on Sukkot. I invite you to make time for these activities that help awaken happiness in you.

I felt so lifted up by the community this year during Yom Kippur in general, and at Neilah in particular. I hope you in turn can feel lifted up this year by our celebration of Sukkot as we join together to rejoice before God.

Sukkot Sameach!!

Rabbi David Booth

TIME FLIES

OCTOBER 18, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sukkot is the season of joy, but it possesses a bittersweet quality as well. We read Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), which calls our attention to the unstoppable flow of time. We join together for Yizkor towards the end of the Holy Day and allow grief and loss to be a part of our experience. We rejoice, we sing and dance, and we also take note of the flow of our lives and the sadness that sometimes is our lived experience.

I find the freeing of Gilad Shalit to fit this joyous yet bittersweet quality. I rejoice for his freedom. This young man, thank God still a young man, whose life was put on hold since he was captured in 2006. He appears well and healthy, even though his Hamas captors refused to allow the Red Cross or others to visit or monitor his well being. He is now at home with his parents. To see a captive redeemed is a cause for the whole nation to celebrate.

And yet, the cost was high. Our traditions warn us of allowing the price of captives to become exorbitant lest we encourage kidnapping. The agreement that brings Gilad Shalit home was expensive. Murderers and terrorists are among the nearly 500 already freed and the promised total of 1029. It is a high price that is hard to measure at this point. Will it strengthen Hamas and those who support continued violence and terror against Israel at the expense of more moderate voices interested in building a Palestinian state?

The Shofar, we are told, has the sound of Sisera's mother crying for her son. Sisera was an enemy of Israel who sought to conquer our people and land. And yet we remember the heartfelt cry of his mother as she mourned his loss. Human loss, the separation of families, is a human pain that transcends nationality and religion. Is there any chance instead of this agreement being seen as a blessing, as parents are returned to children and families reunited? Can this be a moment of transformation, of real hope and joy?

I rejoice at Gilad Shalit's freedom, but I feel, given the questions and worries of its price, that the joy ought to remain a private celebration. I think his family should rejoice and party and be happy in the simple blessing of being together. I think we in the rest of the Jewish world are better off to be happy for his family, but otherwise restraining our joy as we are aware of the cost of that joy.

We draw close to Simchat Torah, a time of conclusions and beginnings, as the Torah is finished and then

read anew. We dance and we sing as we rejoice in the blessings of life and of the gift that is Torah. I rejoice in the thought of Shalit celebrating with his family, with a new beginning in front of him, a chance to return back to Israel and to freedom. May God grant him strength and courage as he begins the process of starting anew, of reading again in his life, In the Beginning.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameach!

David Booth

THE WIDTH OF OUR DOORS

OCTOBER 27, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The role of non-Jews in Synagogues has again become a complex issue. I say again, because in the days of Isaiah there was apparently much debate about the status of non-Jews in the Temple. Isaiah imagines a world in which God's name is one. In such a world, according to Isaiah, there will be non-Jews involved even in the Temple services. For Isaiah, anyone prepared to serve God will be invited into that service.

There are Egyptian Synagogues from the 1st Century that in part fulfill this vision. In one, archeologists found two pillars inscribed with the names of donors (some things never change). One pillar was labeled Children of Israel, referring to the Jewish members, the other Pious Ones, apparently referring to non-Jews who financially supported the Synagogue. Though we know little more than this, it suggests a non-Jewish community that actively supported Jewish life in classical Egypt.

Our era, like that of Egypt, is one of openness and integration. As a result, Jews are often friends and business associates of non-Jews. Over 80% of Jews have a non-Jew at least as closely related to them as a cousin. Further, non-Jews are often interested in learning about and exploring Judaism. I officiate at a number of conversions each year, and interact with many other non-Jews interested in learning more about Judaism.

Isaiah's message of welcome establishes a high bar to which we ought to aspire. That is, we ought to welcome non-Jews to the fullest extent that Halakhah, Jewish law, permits. We want intermarried spouses to feel welcomed in our Synagogues and honored for their supportiveness. We want converts to feel that their families have a role in Bar and Bat mitzvahs celebrations. Finally, we want those exploring Judaism to feel they have a welcoming context within which to explore their own spiritual paths.

Kol Emeth has been historically welcoming to non-Jews in many ways. Kol Emeth was one of the first Conservative Synagogues to welcome non-Jewish parents to be present at the Bimah for baby namings. Kol Emeth was also an early leader in creating roles for non-Jews at family simchas like Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Continuing in that tradition, Kol Emeth is making two changes with the goal of sending a message of welcome.

First, we are engaging in an effort to get the names of non-Jewish spouses. For a number of years, the

Jewish partner in an intermarriage has usually filled out the membership application. In many cases, we never then got the non-Jewish partner's name. We would like to change that, so that our mailings are sent to both partners and so that phone and other contacts are easy with both spouses.

Second, after Halakhic and community research, I am broadening the role of non-Jews in the Synagogue service. In the past, we have limited the involvement of non-Jews to a few English readings. Now, we will allow non-Jews to open and close the Ark. Jewish law is nearly silent about opening the Ark. It is communally perceived of as an honor, but has no associated obligation, unlike having an aliyah. Further, many congregations locally and nationally, including a number of Orthodox communities, see this honor as a good way to include non-Jews, particularly at life cycle celebrations like bar and bat mitzvahs. I have written a Teshuvah on the subject which will be posted shortly on the KE website. (A summary is to the side at Halakhah Corner)

My life long love affair with Judaism means that I want to share with others the meaning and purpose I have discovered through study and practice. It is critical that non-Jews connected with our Synagogue feel embraced and welcomed in ways that honor our sacred Jewish commitments. If you have other ways in which we can continue to offer a message of welcome to intermarried families, to the extended families of converts, and to non-Jews exploring their own spiritual paths, please let me know.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TESHUVAH ON NON-JEWS OPENING THE TORAH

OCTOBER 27, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Teshuvah on Non-Jews Opening the Torah

Rabbi David Booth

Question: Is it permissible for non-Jews to open the ark during a family simchah? Is it permissible for someone studying for conversion to open the ark during a regular Shabbat?

Summary: Yes. Opening and closing the ark is not in the category of obligation or *hiyyuv*. No one has a religious obligation to open the ark – it is simply a necessary part of the choreography of the service. Therefore it would be permissible to permit non-Jews to open the ark. Further, it would be desirable to move in this direction because of the ever expanding number of non-Jewish families of congregational members. These families desire a place in the life cycle events of their loved ones and the Congregation ought to provide the maximum participation possible within the limits of Halakhah.

Full Response: A synagogue ark symbolizes the ark of the Covenant which contained the original Ten Commandments. Like the original ark, a synagogue ark carries in it Torah scrolls, albeit ones written by human and not divine hand. Symbolically the opening of the ark dramatically reenacts the moment of receiving the Torah at Sinai.

The ark of the Covenant, unlike a synagogue ark, could be handled only by the High Priest and then only in a war situation or on Yom Kippur. II Samuel relates a story of David trying to bring the ark up to Jerusalem. One of those carrying the ark slips and that Jewish person is struck down by God. Immediately afterwards, the Book of Samuel, Chapter Six, relates the following:

10. So David would not move the ark of the Lord to him into the city of David; but David carried it aside into the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.
11. And the ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-Edom, and all his household.
12. And it was told King David, saying, The Lord has blessed the house of Obed-Edom, and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the

house of Obed-Edom to the city of David with gladness.

Obed-Edom is a Gittite, not an Israelite. He is not Jewish. According to B. Sanhedrin, he and his children cared for the ark and kept the area around it clear. They were rewarded for their service. According to Seder Olam, a rabbinic chronology, that ark resided with Obed-Edom for several years. Even the original ark containing the Ten Commandments was equally accessible to non-Jews and Jews. That original ark was treated far more carefully than a present day synagogue ark because of the Holy Tablets it contained.

In addition, since the opening of the ark today symbolizes the revelation at Sinai, note that non-Jews, the “mixed multitude” of Exodus, were present at that revelation. According to the Talmud, all the souls that would become Jewish, meaning converts who had not yet converted, were present that day as well. The revelation at Sinai was aimed primarily at the Jewish people – it was not aimed exclusively at the Jewish people.

In addition, God asks the Jewish people to become a “Light among the Nations.” That is, by our example and commitment to Torah we are to demonstrate the tremendous value of a Torah based life. Again, that revelation is aimed primarily at Jews but its scope and focus includes the non-Jewish world as well.

Isaiah reiterates this theme in his description of the Messianic era. He says in Chapter 66:

19. And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those who escape to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal, and Javan, to far off islands, that have not heard my fame, nor have they seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations.

20. And they shall bring all your brothers for an offering to the Lord from all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon fleet camels, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, as the people of Israel bring an offering in a clean utensil to the house of the Lord.

21. And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

In other words, God will reach out to the non-Jewish nations. Not only will Torah come to include them, non-Jews will have a formal liturgical role within the new Temple itself – God will take Levites and Priests from among them. The inner parts of the Temple itself will become accessible to non-Jews.

Medieval Attitudes Towards Non-Jews

The Mishnah in Avodah Zarah forbids business relationships between Jews and non-Jews on days close to idolatrous Holy Days so as to prevent contributing to an offering (AZ 1:1). The Talmud, written three to four hundred years later, greatly expands permissible dealings between Jews and non-Jews and permits such business relationships solely because they are now living in a majority non-Jewish environment. Similarly, wine, cheese, and bread of non-Jews is forbidden by the Talmud and the Mishnah in Avodah Zarah to limit interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Practice today limits only wine. The Conservative movement limits wine today only due to supervision issues (Teshuvah by Rabbi Elliott Dorff, 1985). The concern of idolatry and of social interactions has been entirely dropped from the Conservative movement and almost entirely from all but the most Orthodox.

Know Before Whom You Stand...

In the Middle Ages, the Ramah (17th Century France – the main Halakhic authority for Ashkenazi Jews) ruled that the Gentiles of his time were not like the Gentiles described by the Talmud. According to the Ramah, his Gentiles were no longer considered idolaters, but monotheists (knowers of the one true God.) Put another way, non-Jews are considered aware of “Know before whom you stand.” They know of God – they simply have additional beliefs that would be heretical for a Jew. Rashbah, a Spanish authority in the 14th century refers to these beliefs as violating the commandment of “Do not add.” Thus, according to rabbinic authorities from the 12th century to the modern era, Christians and Muslims can be considered Monotheists. They are still not Jews but they are considered to know God and to be respectful of God. As a result, interactions with non-Jews become entirely permissible.

Medieval Requirements for Opening the Ark

There are none. None of the standard legal texts refer to opening that ark. They refer to being called to the Torah and to leading a service. In both cases such involvement requires being a Jew because those involve an obligation. All Jews have an obligation to say the Amidah; therefore a non-Jew cannot release us from that obligation. Reading Torah falls into the same category. By contrast, there is no obligation to open the ark – it is simply part of the choreography. Children or women would have been permitted to do so in medieval times (although women might have been required to remain behind a divider in some communities.) There is simply no basis from the Halakhic literature for forbidding a non-Jew to open the ark.

Further, the ark, despite its significant symbolic role in our service, is considered a third grade of holiness. The Torah is considered a first grade of holiness in that it may only be treated as a sacred

object. When a Torah must be disposed of, it must be buried. By contrast, the garments in which a Torah is clothed are considered “Tashmish d’Kedushah, servants of Holiness,” a second grade of holiness. They must still be treated with a great deal of respect. They can only be used for their purpose and must be constructed with that purpose in mind.

An ark, by contrast, is one grade lower. In an emergency situation, money or other items can be placed within it. (B. Megillah, Beginning of Chapter 3 and Yaveah Omer – Part 8, O.H. 19)

In the Shulkhan Arukh’s discussion of the choreography for the Torah services, Karo says only the following: “The Torah must be lifted and shown to the people for it is an obligation to see the writing (OH 134).” As a result, a non-Jew could never have Hagbah, the honor of lifting the Torah, because it is a mitzvah to see the writing. However, there is simply no reference to opening and closing the ark.

Modern Responses to the Issue

The last fifty years have broadened enormously the interactions between Jews and non-Jews. There are far more converts to Judaism than in previous generations and far more intermarriages. The long-term viability of Judaism hinges on our continued ability to attract and make welcome Jews across a spectrum of observance. Furthermore, as anti-Semitism has subsided, similarly has bigotry by Jews against non-Jews. It is no longer socially acceptable to refer to non-Jews derogatorily as “Goyim.”

As a result of these changes, many communities now have families with close non-Jewish relatives. Many are grandparents of bar and bat mitzvah candidates; others are parents of babies to be named or bar and bat mitzvahed. Some families have requested their loved ones be allowed to open the ark as well. In some cases they have requested this because they are looking for a more integral honor for their loved ones while in other cases they have seen it done elsewhere and wonder if we can do such here.

Various communities have responded differently. Many communities in both the Orthodox and Conservative world continue to forbid non-Jews from opening the ark. There are a number of concerns: To what extent does it dilute the specifically Jewish character of the service? Are there concerns about non-Jews having contact, either directly or indirectly, with the Torah?

Many communities have decided that they are uncomfortable with such contact. The Torah is our central artifact and of great significance. We treat it with respect at all times. It is housed in a special

place and dressed in beautiful and valuable garments and silver. Any interaction with the Torah is therefore of enormous symbolic value. Reading the Torah is the highest level of such interactions and implies an acceptance of Torah. Therefore, it cannot be offered to a non-Jew. Other such interactions are within the area of aesthetics. Many have decided that because of the aesthetic discomfort and the high symbolic value of anything connected with the Torah, non-Jews will not be permitted to open the ark.

According to the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards non-Jews may be asked to take any role for which there is no *hiyyuv* or obligation. A *hiyyuv* means some ritual act that releases others in the community from said obligation. For example, all Jews are obligated to recite the Amidah. Therefore, the person leading the Amidah must be Jewish so as to release others from the obligation. Similarly, the person reading or being called to the Torah must be Jewish because it is an obligation to hear the Torah read. Only a Jew can release another Jew from an obligation. The CJLS does not require us to take this position but has sufficient latitude to include it.

There is also some variation on this point within Orthodoxy. The Tzitz Eliezer, past President and current member of the Jerusalem Rabbinic court, permits non-Jews to open the ark and even encourages it because it may lead them to convert turn toward You.”

If Isaiah can imagine a day of non-Jewish Priests in the Temple, surely we can imagine a today in which non-Jews are permitted to open the ark. If God allowed the mixed multitude of non-Jews to experience the revelation at Sinai, then surely we can allow non-Jews today to participate in our dramatic reenactment of that ritual as the ark is opened.

Given the nature of our community today and the Biblical and Halakhic precedent, it is permissible to have non-Jews open the ark. In the case of family *simchas*, it is actually desirable to formally offer this honor to beloved non-Jewish family.

Rabbi David Booth

ABRAHAM IN OUR DAY

NOVEMBER 3, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A man was living in Mountain View. He worked in Silicon Valley doing something technical and software related that no one else really understood, though it had great upside potential. He attended Synagogue from time to time, spent time with his wife and kids when he could, and otherwise worked and played hard. His home was modest by local standards, and he and his family were so busy with work, sports, and everything else that they almost never entertained. And so his life went.

One evening, as he was biking home from work, he stopped at a traffic light. Next to him, camped out at the corner, was a woman passing out flyers. Normally, he wouldn't take such handouts, but there was something about the piercing eyes of this woman that caused him to pick up the paper. He got home that night and read it.

“National study shows dinners together as a family even once a week dramatically lower the risk of drug and alcohol abuse by teenagers, increase academic scores, and improve social connections and health. It's time to go forth and leave behind all the habits and behaviors that mean we never sit down to eat together and build a place in time where it can happen. Go forth!!”

Being a scientifically minded person, he checked the assertions in the flyer and discovered that they were all true. A dinner that includes a formal beginning and end, without media access, has immense and measurable impact. He showed the paper to his cousin, Lot. Lot was dismissive. “Who has time for dinner?” he asked. “Can you imagine how long and how much effort it would take to do this?”

Sarah, his wife, said, “Are you going to cook or am I?” Once he agreed to help, they decided to give it a try. Since they were Jewish, they decided to pick Friday night to start. They began their meal with Kiddush, and they finished with a short version of the grace after meals that Sarah half remembered from Synagogue. The first Friday, their two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, were at each others throats the whole meal. But in two weeks, everything changed. Isaac and Ishmael talked, but more importantly, they listened. The meal lasted for almost two hours. No one wanted it to end.

The next week, Abraham decided it was time to share this experience with others. He invited Lot's family. Lot's wife whispered to Abraham, tears in her eyes, “We haven't spent this much time sitting together in years. Thank you.” And so it became a custom, that Abraham and Sarah often entertained

guests on Fridays. They even started having dinner together on Sundays, and then on Wednesdays as well.

Some Fridays Abraham and Sarah really go all out. It as if Abraham has prepared a whole cow! Other times, they have been getting Chinese take out. A couple of months ago they stopped worrying too much about how the house looked. That encouraged Lot's family to start entertaining.

They now have made many close friends. Isaac and Ishmael, previously at each other's throats, are now supporting one another. At least most of the time. Their grades have improved, and home feels, well, sacred.

This story doesn't have to be just a parable. It's not too late to participate in Shared-Shabbat. You can sign up on line, or simply invite guests that you know to join you. Or, at least, share Shabbat with your own family. Everything counts, and any way of doing it is an invitation to be different, to go forth and be countercultural, in a way that will transform our homes and lives for the better.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

STANFORD LOSES!

NOVEMBER 17, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The news each day ranges from frightening to depressing. Occupy Wall Street protesters are cleared at 2am with no press coverage. Iran is close to having a bomb. Israel is contemplating action against Iran but unwilling to reveal those plans to the United States. The Supreme Court is to review Obamacare. Stanford lost to Oregon.

These are just a few of the headlines as I scan the news. Each one in different ways reflects key events going on that matter to me but about which I have little control. And there are so many different stories of different types that it's difficult to prioritize. My limited agency means that I can't care and be involved in all of these stories.

I suspect that this is part of the appeal of sports. Of the news items above, the one I spent the most time talking and thinking about was the Stanford Oregon football game last Saturday evening. It's a relief to care about something in the papers that has less existential impact. It gives me an immediate and largely non-stressful (though in this case disappointing) connection to the rest of the world.

This constant bombardment of information can overwhelm us and strip away our sense of agency until all we do is hide in trivia and media culture, staying away from anything that matters. Such an outcome is disastrous. It leads to outcomes like less than 10% of eligible Palo Alto voters choosing to even bother last Tuesday.

We can do something about this by choosing once a week to unplug, to spend a real Shabbat that focuses us on remembering that we are indeed people of value, created in God's image, children of Abraham and Sarah. Shabbat narrows our universe to the people and community immediately around us. By limiting travel and access to media, we focus on our own surroundings. This focus is inherently healing because it reminds us of our own agency, our own ability to affect those in our immediate community, and because it lets us rediscover our ability to focus and to care.

Each Friday as we light our candles, and later as we begin Kabbalat Shabbat (prayers to welcome Shabbat), I find myself exhaling a great deal as I let go of all the various pressures of the week. On Shabbat, we receive an extra soul, an extra breath, that allows us to reconnect with ourselves, with our values, beliefs, and community.

On Yom Kippur, I urged all of us to single task and to use Jewish practices as a vehicle for rediscovering how to focus and therefore to be healed of our powerlessness and communal attention deficit disorder. This week, I am inviting specific action. Let's create a media free Shabbat, a Shabbat with no internet or news or cell phones drawing our attention somewhere else. Let's instead create a Shabbat focused here that allows us to recover our inner self so that Saturday night as the stars come out we are ready to reengage the world in a way that is empowered and healing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

BLESSING ONE ANOTHER

DECEMBER 1, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Several years ago, I went on an interfaith retreat. While there, I made a few meaningful connections with people who at some point in the weekend took my hand and blessed me. I admit to being somewhat surprised. On the one hand, it felt a little corny, a little naive even. On the other, it was really, really nice.

We are in the midst of reading all about blessing and being blessed. Esau cries out in a heartfelt way: where is my blessing? The Rabbis are quick to criticize Esau. Some challenge his desire for a blessing from Isaac at all. After all, he sold the birthright and ought to expect to lose the blessing as well. Others challenge his spiritual maturity, wondering how he can imagine that the source of blessing will dry up? Yet, this past Shabbat, I suggested instead that we allow ourselves to empathize with Esau.

His cry is honest and heartfelt. He wants his father to touch his forehead or hold his hand and notice and call forth from within his own heart the wellsprings of blessing that enable creativity, healing, and joy. There is great power in blessing another person. The Talmud teaches that the imprisoned person cannot free him or herself. So also, when we are stuck, wounded, damaged, the touch and blessing of another is needed in order to free us.

In such moments, we too cry out: where is my blessing? As Jews, we have internalized the critiques of Esau and so tend to stay silent. We may wish one another well, say mazel tov, talk of the joy of sharing a moment, but rarely do we look at another, take their hands, and intentionally offer words of healing.

The Bible and Talmud are filled with examples of people blessing one another. One of my favorite stories is of Rav, the first century Tanna. A man comes before him and Rav offers him a rich and meaningful blessing of joy and prosperity. The man then leaves, and Rav is angry. Why? Because the man ought to have replied: and so also for you. That is, the person being blessed, now freed, ought to bless in turn. Perhaps this is the true secret of the call to worship: Let us bless the Source of blessing.

My wife Carol, having converted to Judaism, has brought this practice to me. In modern days, it is Christians who are quicker to offer blessings without embarrassment. Having shared this last Shabbat, I was then touched and overwhelmed by the blessings I then received from so many. I was blessed with happiness, with joy in my family, with prosperity, with the ability to carry a moment of joy forever in my heart, and on and wonderfully on.

Bruce Feldstein, the head of Jewish chaplaincy at Stanford, has taught me to bless the sick by asking them of their fears and worries and then echoing them back in words of healing and blessing. Such moments are often tearful, releasing something locked within that only the healing words of another can free.

I invite all of us to explore the power of blessing one another. It feels awkward the first time, but is a practice that can bring healing and a new capacity for joy to those around us. My own blessing to all of us is to have the strength to bless others and in turn to be blessed, so that we may uncover our own deep wellsprings of creativity, healing, and joy.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

AIPAC DINNER

DECEMBER 8, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was fortunate enough to attend the annual South Bay AIPAC dinner this past Sunday and had a few insights that I want to share with you. There is something moving and inspiring about the event itself. God is blessed by a great crowd, says the Psalmist. The feeling of being surrounded by a group in love with Israel, looking for ways to support Israel, is special and sacred.

One insight: The partnership between Israel and the United States benefits both countries and the entire world by pursuing peace and innovation that helps so many worldwide. It is an amazing relationship and story too seldom noticed amid the more attention grabbing headline topics. We met an Israeli medic turned entrepreneur who has designed an amazing field bandage that has saved countless limbs and lives. While serving in the IDF, he saw the antiquated medical supplies and saw an opportunity to contribute. The bandage is now in use by dozens of countries around the world.

A second insight: Many of the challenges facing Israel are identical to those facing the United States. The threat of an Iranian nuclear device, the disastrous election results in Egypt, the instability in Syria, all affect Israel today and the United States tomorrow. While there are issues on which US and Israeli interests may differ, the big questions and the key foreign policy challenges have enormous overlap.

A third insight: AIPAC exists to strengthen and foster this necessary relationship. That means a few things. AIPAC works to empower people in love with Israel as political activists in places as local as UC Berkeley or on a national scale with members of Congress. AIPAC fosters relationships with leaders in the United States to help them see how critical the relationship between Israel and the United States really is. AIPAC's leaders work with Republicans and Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives.

A related insight: Since AIPAC exists to foster this key relationship, internal challenges and political issues within Israel are better addressed by other groups. There are issues of religious pluralism, freedom of speech, and economic injustice that we as American Jews should and must care about. AIPAC simply isn't the right place for those kinds of concerns. It has a laser focus on one key goal: keeping Israel at the top of the foreign policy agenda of the United States as a critical ally. That seems important to me. I am glad I was able to attend and in this small way show my own support for the uniquely close and critical ties between these two nations that are so close to my heart.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE SACRED VESSEL OF MINYAN

DECEMBER 15, 2011

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a beauty in Kol Emeth holding a daily minyan. There are many who never attend the minyan who have told me that they feel good being part of a community that holds this sacred space. The daily Minyan is a no frills chance to pause, to draw a breath, and to support community. In our busy lives that rush from one responsibility to the next, daily prayer is a chance to set an intention, to orient our lives in ways that are based on values. Minyan is a chance to remind ourselves of what matters, to fill our inner selves up in ways that are healing and that inspire.

Minyan is also a chance to be present for others. Many in our community attend minyan to say Kaddish for a loved one. Kaddish is a sacred opportunity to linger in our memories, to call to mind those no longer with us. That moment of memory, when supported by community, helps the pain of loss heal. A group of 10 others enables the mourner to rediscover joy even amid loss, to find again blessing in their memories of their loved one. The shared solitude that a minyan offers the mourner is a treasured gift that heals.

I have the sense that there are many people ready to support our minyan, especially if they know that we need additional people on a particular evening. As a result, we are introducing a new system to help make sure we always have a minyan. First, our website now has a link to a signup list. We are inviting people who plan to be at minyan to go to kolemeth.org, click on the minyan signup, and let us know they plan to attend.

Second, we are going to compile a list of people willing to be emailed if we are short on a particular morning or evening. If you agree to be on this list, you are obligated to nothing other than receiving an email from time to time. That email will link you to the signup page. The signups will operate in real time, so once you get the email, you can see if anyone else has signed up. If you are busy or unavailable, you can simply delete the email. If you go to the signup sheet and see we have a minyan, great. If you see we are still short and you have time, you can then sign up, knowing you will help make the minyan.

Third, we are forming a steering group who will check the signups and send out the emails. They may also make a few last minute phone calls if we are having a really hard time. I am hopeful, if we can get enough people willing to receive the emails, that we can easily make minyan all the time with just a few emails a month.

You can help in two ways. If you know you will be at minyan, please take a moment to sign up. The more information the steering group has, the easier it will be for them to insure we always have a minyan. Having said that, always feel welcome! If we have extra people it's terrific...Second, you can "opt in" and let me or Jeff jeff@kolemeth.org know you are willing to be emailed when we are short of a minyan. I would like to get at least 72 individuals signed up. If that group were willing to help even once a month each, we would have a minyan every single time.

I invite you to come and check out our minyan. It is a place of community, of quiet, and of healing. Your presence means more than you can know to those there. Minyan meets Sunday – Thursday at 7:45pm, Sundays at 9:15am, and Thursdays at 6:45am.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note I am taking some vacation next week. CyberTorah will resume with the secular New Year.

PLEASE STOP SPITTING ON SCHOOL GIRLS

JANUARY 4, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God created humanity in God's image, male and female God created them. As is typical, the Torah gives us a value – equality- and then leaves it to humanity to figure out the mitzvah clothing, the actions in the world, that will come to be associated with this value. Israeli society today is undergoing a real disagreement being expressed in both appropriate and inappropriate ways of how best to understand that Biblical clarion call to see in both men and women God's image.

The Haredi or Ultra Orthodox community chooses to see the mitzvah clothing of this value in a separation of the sexes. For that community, sexuality is such a powerful and pernicious force that men and women are kept apart in public, liturgical, and educational settings. The degree of separation is one indicator of where one stands in the Orthodox world. The Modern Orthodox tend to maintain separation only in liturgical settings where the most Orthodox insist upon such separation in every sphere of life.

By contrast, the Conservative movement understands the mitzvah clothing to mandate ways of creating space in which men and women can pray, learn, and be together. Women sang to the men at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds – so also women ought to have a voice in the Synagogue today. The Rabbis looked out for the rights of women through institutions like the Ketubah, the required payment to women upon divorce, and we today ought to as a community find ways of respecting the rights of women. Secular Israelis, like Westerners everywhere, similarly believe in the equality of women and their presence in society. Indeed, the public status of women in Israeli society is a sharp contrast to the legal atmosphere around the rights of women elsewhere in the Middle East.

Over the last few weeks, this disagreement has emerged into a public debate in Israel as a result of two incidents. The first was on a bus. In Israel, there are a number of public buses that travel within Haredi neighborhoods and require men and women to sit separately with women in the back. So far, this has been unfortunately supported by the Israeli courts. A different bus, not on such a route but travelling from and to a largely Haredi neighborhood, erupted into chaos when a group of Haredi Jews demanded a woman move to the back of the bus. She refused, and the bus ultimately had to stop, and the police got involved. Ultimately she stayed and the Haredi Jews got off and waited for another bus.

The second issue surrounds an Orthodox school in which boys and girls are allowed to play together on

the playground. There have been protests since the beginning of the school year by Haredi Jews against this school. During one such protest, Haredi extremists spat on a young girl heading to school. That led to counter protests across a wide swatch of Israelis, including other non-Haredi Orthodox Jews. There have been a number of other incidents, including a group of soldiers who walked out of a military ceremony because a woman was singing.

I want to be clear. Those responsible for the incident on the bus and at the school have been roundly condemned by Israeli society, including those within the Haredi community. These two incidents were the acts of people on the fringe of society. Netanyahu has publicly condemned the acts, and the police are taking action.

Yet the fearful and difficult question it raises is what will be the ongoing role of the Haredi in Israeli society? How can the needs of a Western democracy coexist with a large and growing community with very different ideas of what the public sphere should look like? Is there a way for the Haredi community to imagine itself leaving room for others unlike them?

We are all created in God's image. That means we all have a responsibility to listen and to make room for one another. The tendency I have seen in the papers and elsewhere is simply condemnation of all Orthodox. Yet the baseless hatred and nastiness goes both ways. Israeli Channel 10 News reported that a 10 year old Haredi girl was on a bus to school. She also was spat upon and yelled at. She exited the bus and hid behind some garbage cans to get away from her secular assailant. Less violent, but still offensive, an 18 year old Yeshiva student ordered a burger and was called to get his burger by the name "Dos," a derogative slang term for Orthodox Jews. Such responses are repugnant and show that mistreatment, bigotry, and nastiness are all too common.

I see protests in Israel asserting the continued value of women's equality and I am glad. I see the government and the police and the military refusing to give the public sphere to the Haredi notions of the role of women and I am glad. I also see a real fissure in Israeli society and wonder: from where can the healing come? Perhaps the silver lining here is that the non-Haredi Orthodox, and even the Haredi, are seeing what happens when you give the fringe power. I pray that these events show the Haredi community the need to reaffirm mitzvot that respect the Godliness in every Jew in ways that will allow Israel to have room for a wide and diverse community. I pray also that those standing up for the rights of women continue to do so and see in their call for equality a responsibility to treat the other, even Haredi Jews, with lovingkindness.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

GROANING IN SPEECH

JANUARY 12, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Soloveitchik teaches that slavery means we have no ability to speak. In the darkness of Egypt, in slavery and oppression, our words cannot matter. Our actions result in nothing volitional. Redemption, by contrast, means acquiring anew the ability to speak. The Exodus was nothing less than the Israelites learning how to speak and act in a way that mattered.

Egypt still exists in our own hearts and souls. Even in the freedom that surrounds us, we can find ourselves enslaved, trapped, unable to speak in ways that people can hear. We can find ourselves in situations where our actions no longer matter and nothing that we do can make a difference.

Are there moments in which you speak, and yet are not heard? Are there times where the words themselves cannot even be spoken? Or times where you do something, act in ways that ought to have impact, ought to change something, and it is as if you did nothing?

We have enormous capacity to tolerate such moments. Amazingly, it takes years before we cry out of the darkness, out of the silence and depression. But all at once we groan from the weight of our burdens, our servitude, our silence. The groaning of the Israelites is their first act of speech. It matters, because God listens. Once they stop tolerating, and cry out, God hears and begins to act.

When we find the courage to cry out, to admit that we are groaning under a weight we cannot lift on our own, we create from the groaning itself something uniquely hopeful. The groan, strange as it may seem, can be an invitation to God. I wonder if the Israelites believed in God. I wonder if they waited for redemption from beyond themselves. Either way, they give up on their own capacity and turn outwards. That turn outwards is enough to trigger the journey of faith.

This is the season of Exodus, the season where we read of the progress of faith, of being brought out into speech. I invite all of us in this time of darkness giving way to light, to acknowledge the places where we are silenced, where our speech or deeds fail to signify. For it is that place, that place of humility, where our voices can begin to speak, even in groans, and invite God in.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SHARED SHABBAT

JANUARY 19, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is no substitute for person to person connections. There is no substitute for another person offering the gift of their undivided attention and care. Such moments are sustaining, healing, enriching. They are the basis of community because they offer purpose and meaning both to the recipient and to the giver. When I care for someone else, I am saying they matter. They are created in the image of God and merit love, attention, and caring. That I can see God's presence in another means God may be inside of me as well.

For this reason, I want hospitality to become a deeply rooted virtue at Kol Emeth and throughout the Conservative movement. Inviting someone into your home is a chance to say to someone else that you care for them. It is a way of reaching out to people who may be elderly in our community and could benefit from the warmth of Shabbat with others. It is a way of inviting people looking for personal or spiritual connections to share a meal with other Jews who care. It is a way to simply meet someone new or deepen an existing friendship.

By the same token, being a guest is offering others an opportunity to do a mitzvah. Mitzvah means commandment, but it also means connection, from the Aramaic word Tzvata. Mitzvot are a means of building connections between this world and Heaven. The Mitzvah of hospitality is a chance to create connections here on Earth that may even be transcendent. The guest facilitates that connection by making the mitzvah possible.

If Judaism is going to thrive, if the Conservative movement is going to be meaningful in the future, hospitality is going to be a key ingredient. Conservative Judaism stands for learning, for practice, for openness. We bring together essential values about the status of women. We bring Torah in an open way that lets people find their place in it. It's time for us to be evangelical about our brand of Judaism. Breaking bread together is a key way to invite others into a richness that deepens because it is shared.

Our next Shared Shabbat is February 10th. I encourage you to sign up now as either a host or a guest. People have made friendships over these Shared Shabbats, people have cared for one another at difficult moments, people have shared their loneliness and been healed. You can participate in one of two ways.

First, you can simply invite people to your home that you think would enjoy sharing a meal with you. I can offer you potential guests if you are looking to do some outreach. Second, you can go to shared-shabbat.org and sign up as a host or a guest. We always needs guests, so please feel welcome to sign up as a guest or a host. You will then be informed by our matching committee of your guests by Feb 5th.

I invite you to participate in what has been a terrific step towards embodying the value of hospitality in our community.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

TIM TEBOW

JANUARY 26, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Tim Tebow is not a great quarterback, though he may be a great man. His passing style is unorthodox to say the least, and a number of sports writers think he would do a lot better as a tight end than a quarterback. This season was a dream come true for him, and a story that captivated the whole country in ways that highlighted our unreasoned discomfort with piety and faith.

Part of what makes the story so telegenic is Tebow's poor form. Here is someone who has no right playing quarterback but who is winning close games in an incredibly exciting fashion. The other captivating quality is the Christian faith he wears on his sleeve. After every great play, Tebow bows and offers thanks to God. "Tebowing" has become a phenomenon. Some are emulating him. Most are making fun of him.

According to the Wall Street Journal, Tebow has said publicly that God doesn't care who wins football games. He has explained his bows as appreciation rather than supplication. He does not expect God to back the Broncos, but he does express appreciation for his God given talents when he does something great. It is more demonstrative than we find in the Jewish tradition, but similar to the Mishnah that commands us to bless God over the good and the bad. When something good happens in our lives, Judaism encourages us to name God's presence in the moment by reciting a blessing.

Tebow has used his fame to draw attention to an incredible array of charitable endeavors. Interviewed after an astounding comeback midway through the season, Tebow focused only on an ill child he had visited in the hospital. He has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for charity and spent his own time visiting the needy and the sick. This is a good man.

The discomfort with Tebow comes from at least two sources. One is an American discomfort with public expressions of piety. We are always waiting for the hypocrisy while also feeling challenged by his religion. Second is a worry about the political power of evangelical Christianity. Especially as Jews, we worry about the challenges to the first amendment.

Both of these concerns are our own discomfort and have little to do with Tebow. They show more than anything else our own discomfort with piety. While I can't imagine such a public display of piety in my own spiritual life, I do want a safe space in which to talk about faith. I want to be able to explore my own

spirituality, and that of members of our community, without it being threatening to those of us wrestling with faith or unsure of our own piety.

Tebow will start for Denver again next year and who knows what type of season he will have. It could be great, or it could be a great disappointment. Either way, Tebow is making me think about my own piety and trying to let go of my own negative reaction to others publicly sharing their faith.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

KOL RINAH TOGETHER

FEBRUARY 2, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Jerusalem is an amazing place to spend Friday night. The city quiets down Friday evening as traffic dwindles to almost nothing. Even secular Jews often make the space for a Friday night dinner. Synagogues throughout the city are filled. Many who will sleep in Saturday morning go to shul Friday night. I tend to go to the shuls that use Shlomo Carlebach's music. I love the energy as people sing, dance, even jump up and down in joy. Friday night is experienced as a release, a chance to let go of worry and stress and turn towards community.

Walking home, I see windows lit up illustrating a variety of different Friday night meals. Some are families together; others are large tables with multiple guests. And in German Colony, there are also many tables with friends together sharing a potluck meal. People want to be with their friends and family on Friday night.

It's hard to capture that energy in the United States. Friday night services have dwindled in recent decades and Shabbat morning has grown. Many of us get home at the end of the week too tired to imagine going out, let alone hosting others. Yet even as tired as we are from the week, there is still a desire to sing, to be together, to transition out of the week and into a different mode that is restorative and joyous.

This Friday, we are trying an experiment with our Kol Rinah service. Kol Rinah was inspired by the exuberance of Friday night services in Jerusalem. Kol Rinah has a different flavor than our other prayer experiences. The music is beautiful and inviting; there is a sense of joy and energy in the room. I came into Kol Rinah two months ago exhausted and anxious. The chance to pray, to be together, to sing and to breathe meant that I left feeling light and joyous.

We are adding a potluck dinner to the experience this Friday. I know how tired I am and my family is as the week ends. The idea of going to services and then coming home for dinner seems daunting. By contrast, the chance to make one dish, show up and share this experience with others, seems like a relief.

I invite you to join us this week at Kol Rinah. Bring an item that follows our kashrut policies and share a meal with others as we welcome the Shabbat in joy. We can't all live in Jerusalem, but perhaps we can find a way to carry a hint of that quality of Shabbat into our lives here in the United States.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

PIETY AND REVELATION

FEBRUARY 9, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We rarely talk about piety in a Conservative setting. Yet as Conservative Jews who believe in the authoritative voice of our tradition and in the insights of our reason, we have an important contribution to make in the annals of faith. We are one of the few locations in religion that can at least theoretically take both doubt and faith seriously.

Judaism values action over belief. Our tradition is more worried about our doing the right thing than believing the right thing. This emphasis on normative behavior creates a freedom in the realm of belief. The Talmud in Taanit, for example, debates the reasons we pray for rain. According to one voice, we pray for the miraculous quality of rain. It is a surprise, a change in the natural order brought about by God. Prayer, in this perspective, is all about asking for God's direct intervention in the world around us.

By contrast, others urge us to frame prayer around the experience of dew. Dew is omnipresent. It forms every day as a fixed point in the natural world. Prayer is the awakening of our eyes as we challenge ourselves to see the wonder present in the ordinary. This vision of prayer asks nothing and praises everything.

Such fundamentally different views on prayer are acceptable for a religion that values action over belief. We use action to create a community together and belief becomes a conversation framed around how we understand our moral and sacred actions. For some, Friday night services are a moment of welcoming Shabbat, of entering a place of holiness that connects us to God. For others, it is a community experience of beautiful singing. There are as many experiences of Friday night as there are people celebrating it. As long as we share Shabbat as a community, our own experience of it can vary greatly.

I went to one of the Shma Salons, our monthly groups dedicated to study and discussion. We talked about this question of piety and how piety can be shared and expressed in our context. People shared their own experiences of God. For some, that meant atheism, for others a strong ongoing sense of God's presence. It was a sharing of experience, rather than an orthodoxy of what must be believed. I feel such conversations are essential. They are a first step of making room for our own experiences of faith in ways that are supportive rather than judgmental, healing rather than argumentative.

This week, we will read of revelation, of God speaking to the Israelites and giving us the 10

Commandments. I invite you to post on the blog for Cybertorah your own experiences of revelation in your life. Are there moments where you feel / felt God speaking to you? How do you feel the sense of God in the Torah? If faith isn't part of your experience, what does connect you to these words and to Jewish community?

I believe we can create a conversation that lets real questions of meaning take place. The work is hard and beyond our ability to finish. Nevertheless, we must make the attempt.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

BECOME MORE GENEROUS—IN JUST SIX DAYS!

BY RICK DINITZ

FEBRUARY 16, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Note: I am for the first time having a special guest CyberTorah written by Rick Dinitz. Rick has been involved with Mussar, the Jewish practice of moral and personal development, for a number of years. He has brought my attention to Generosity Week, an intentional week spent working on our capacity to be generous people. It is specific, doable, and challenging. Here are Rick's thoughts:

Become More Generous—in Just Six Days!

Rick Dinitz

The Basics

The goal of Generosity Week is to develop and strengthen the trait of generosity (in Hebrew, *nedivut*). How? Give a small gift 18 times during the 6 days of the week. Rambam notes that repetition is key—just as when weight-lifting to strengthen muscles.

The Mussar Institute has declared February 19–24, 2012 as Generosity Week. Kol Emeth is one of many participating communities, world-wide. Develop your heart as a generosity muscle. Learn more at generosityweek.org.

What Could “More Generous” Mean?

When we think about Jewish giving, we usually think of *tzedakah*. Generosity surely applies to *tzedakah* organizations and pan-handlers—but this trait also goes beyond our obligations in this mitzvah, and beyond our perception of the recipient's need. Generosity is active when giving to family members, friends, co-workers, strangers in the checkout line. During Generosity Week, Tina and I plan to give to individuals (person-to-person), selected on the spur of the moment, to foster awareness of our shared humanity. Of course, one could also give to *tzedakah* organizations—focusing on that aspect of giving.

Generosity has many practical aspects, and choosing to focus on just one or two can yield strong results.

For example:

- Giving more cheerfully, or less grudgingly
- Giving more frequently
- Showing more respect for the recipient
- Creating personal connection with the recipient, or creating more empathy
- Eliminating the hesitation that inhibits giving
- Responding to solicitation calls with less annoyance, more friendly tone of voice, more respect for the volunteers and professionals raising funds for causes that matter to them
- Giving more gratefully—thanking God for each opportunity to give

We can also think more deeply about our personal goals, asking questions like these:

- In what ways do I want to be more generous?
- What else could *more generous* mean for me?
- When do I notice myself feeling less generous than I'd prefer?
- What holds me back?
- Who are my role models for generosity? Can I emulate one of their behaviors?

Extra Credit

The simple practice of giving 18 gifts in 6 days works to increase generosity. However, you can amplify the effect using two tools—*kavanot* and journaling.

The Hebrew word *kavanah* means focus or intention. In our context, a *kavanah* is a short key-phrase that embodies your specific intention regarding generosity. Deliberately bring your *kavanah* to mind each time you give one of your 18 gifts, and at other times during the week. Remembering our goals in the moment of giving binds the intention to the action, and cements them together in the habit we are developing. Notice how each of these example *kavanot* focuses on a different aspect of generosity:

- Every time I give, I open my heart.
- *V'ahavta l're'acha kamocho* – Love your neighbor, a person like yourself.
- I'm grateful for all the gifts God has given me.

Keeping a journal of your Generosity Week experience promotes opportunities to celebrate successes,

capture insights, reveal hidden roadblocks, pinpoint sources of anxiety, and discover new directions. It's a great way to get more generosity bang for your gift buck.

Summary

We hope you'll be inspired to participate in Generosity Week. Look for the Generosity week posters around Kol Emeth. Pick up Generosity Week gift cards in the social hall. For additional helpful hints, see generosityweek.org.

In the words of the Chafetz Chayim, "When you open your hand to others, you cultivate generosity in your heart." Don't keep goodness in your pocket—experience how giving to others can open your heart.

HALAKHIC PROCESS

FEBRUARY 23, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A mitzvah is the action clothing we give to a Torah value. Torah is filled with values given by God. Do not oppress the stranger. Make the Shabbat holy. Stay away from dishonesty. It is the Rabbinic system that takes those values and finds real action that brings the values into the world around us. Oppressing the stranger includes behavior that humiliates a convert. Therefore, the mitzvah is: do not remind a convert of their practices prior to conversion. Accept them as they are now. "Make the Shabbat holy" means light candles and say Kiddush to make yourself aware of Shabbat at its start.

Arriving at those values is a living process. Conditions change, we invent new things, discover new scientific truths. The values have eternal meaning, but the specific actions, the mitzvot needed to actualize those values, may change or require renewal over time. As one example, the Bible could not imagine the existence of electricity. Once we begin using electricity as such an essential tool of our daily lives, how we interact with that tool becomes a question for Shabbat practice.

If the Halakhic system of Jewish law fails to grapple with the role electricity plays in uncovering the value of Make the Shabbat holy, then the system atrophies and dies. By contrast, if we grapple with how the terms and values apply to the new situation, then we have a living, breathing system capable of guiding us in navigating the moral, ethical, and spiritual dilemmas of the modern world.

I was selected for the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement last spring. This group addresses questions of Jewish law and practice for the Conservative movement. Among the issues currently being considered is a new Teshuvah (Jewish legal decision) on the role of electricity on Shabbat, the question of eating Pizza out in a non-Kosher restaurant, and the status of deaf people in reading Torah and leading services. These issues show the group's concern with basic areas of Jewish practice that include ritual and moral issues. Our understanding of deafness, and the capacity of deaf people, has undergone a radical transformation in the last hundred years. Jewish law ought to reflect our new insight into the full mental capacity of deaf people and create halakhic categories that honor the deaf.

As part of my teaching at Kol High, our Tuesday evening High School program, I have been looking at these issues and these teshuvot with the students. We have been studying in great detail the classical sources, the modern issues and concerns, and the process by which the teshuvot are written. They are

also helping me write a paper that I will submit to the Law Committee. The students like the sense that they are affecting the movement as a whole, and the result has been some terrific learning about Jewish law and how it works. I am planning a similar class aimed at adult learners next Fall.

Jewish law is the means by which we bring holiness into the world through our actions. Mitzvot are the action component, the way those moral and spiritual values are clothed in behavior that can change the world. Mitzvot are a key means by which we forge a connection with God, with community, with the deepest moral parts of ourselves, and bring those connections of holiness into our daily lives.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

BUILDING A SANCTUARY

MARCH 1, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God tells us: Build me a Sanctuary that I may dwell among you. Our Rabbis teach: The Sanctuary is built not by gold or wood, but by acts of caring. The Sanctuary is more than the physical item once carried by the Israelites. It is the community we choose either to disassemble or to assemble through our acts of caring.

Kol Rinah, our monthly Friday night service that features Carlebach music, singing, and even some dancing, was born out of the goal to build community. It is a service that invites us to let go of the pressure of the week, and then to be healed in joyous song. We have added a potluck dinner to this service to increase the opportunity to come to know one another and so invite in God's presence without requiring a fee or advance registration. Last month's service was joyous and the dinner was both tasty and rejuvenating. There was a relaxed atmosphere of warmth, talk, and sharing. I invite you again this Friday at 6pm.

Purim is also a night of community. This year we will present our third annual Shpiel – Jews and Aliens – along with our always joyous reading of the Megillah. Yet our actions can disassemble the mishkan as easily as assemble it. For many years, the practice developed of bringing mishloach manot, little bags of food, to be distributed at the Megillah reading itself. This lovely practice ended up damaging our community as some felt left out when they saw bags being given out and received none. As a result, I strongly encourage you to give Mishloach Manot to friends and community members privately. Please do not bring them with you to Kol Emeth services. Our goal with this mitzvah is to build a mishkan, to strengthen community. Let's make the extra effort to build community and bring the bags directly to people's homes.

Modern research more and more shows the health benefit of religious communities. Religious communities are predicated on face to face interactions. While virtual tools can strengthen us (this is CyberTorah, after all), they are designed to facilitate human interaction. Second, religious communities connect us to purpose. Kol Emeth is a place to explore faith in all the myriad ways we experience it, to share our hopes and fears, and to be inspired to action in the world. It is a spiritual base from which many of us draw strength towards a variety of actions to repair the world. That experience of faith and purpose is measurably healing.

I invite you to help build community, to help build the Sanctuary, this next week. Come for Kol Rinah to share a meal together. And then come to Purim to celebrate, to laugh, and to be healed.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

BE HAPPY- IT'S PURIM!!

MARCH 7, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Okay – a joke leading up to Purim.

So here's a favorite: A Russian is tired and thirsty. He says I must have Vodka. A Mexican is tired and thirsty- he says I must have Tequilla. A French person is tired and thirsty – he says I must have wine. A Jew is tired and thirsty – he says I must have diabetes.

It's better out loud.

At Purim, we make time to play and to laugh. To dress up in costume, to tell jokes of varying qualities, and just to stop taking ourselves quite so seriously. We step outside ourselves and so create the opportunity to put our lives back into perspective. The neurotic quality of being Jewish that the joke captures so well is best treated by laughter. And especially laughing at ourselves.

So have a happy Purim. Come to Purim dressed up as an alien or anything else from your imagination. Hear the reading and enjoy the shpiel – this year a comedic original by none other than Lee Katzman. There are other ways to find a laugh. You could go oldjewstellingjokes.com/ to hear some classic Jewish jokes. Or find an old Bill Cosby routine.

And laugh. And in laughter, I pray we all find healing that inspires us to reconnect with the hope promised by Passover.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!!

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 15, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then selling it. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for Passover label. This is a change from **last year** after consulting with Rabbi Paul Plotkin, the Kashrut Chair of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Food processing includes flour and other hametz derivatives in a variety of ways that do not require labeling but do render a food unkosher for Passover.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at rabbinicalassembly.org. They have posted a pdf there called [Passover Guide](#).

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL CYBERTORAH: TOULOUSE ATTACK

MARCH 20, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you may know, 4 Jews were gunned down and slaughtered in the town of Toulouse, France, yesterday. Apparently the third in a string of attacks aimed at French paratroopers and now Jews, this devastating incident leaves families and community reeling at a time when they should be preparing to celebrate. Weeks away from Pesach, families find themselves preparing for a funeral and for lives without their loved ones and teachers and friends. The matzah of liberation, with its promise of hope and freedom and peace seems especially remote.

I pray for all the families and members of that community, for the students at the Ozer Torah school, and for all the families who have lost loved ones in this shocking and violent incident. As we begin to clean our homes of hametz, let us remember and pray for those who have died yesterday. As we gather all the food for our Seders, let us pray that the families find comfort at what should be a time of joy. And as we gather at our full tables, let us pause in compassion for those with seats now shockingly empty as families throughout the world sit down for Seder.

May God offer comfort to the community of Toulouse, and speedily and soon fulfill the vision of peace promised by God's prophets. May the perpetrators soon and speedily be brought to justice. And may the voices of terror and loss no more be heard anywhere as all come to know and respect the image of God planted in each human life.

CLEANING HAMETZ

MARCH 29, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

External ritual, when engaged in an intentional way, has the possibility of effecting an internal change. Lasting change in our habits and behaviors, even when we really want it, is a difficult task. Torah offers us values towards which we aspire but also practices that help us better embody those values and act upon them.

We may own no hametz at Passover. Any product of wheat, barley, oats, rye, or spelt with water that has been allowed more than 18 minutes to rise must be removed from our homes. And so many of us engage in a process of spring cleaning designed to get rid of the crumbs and loaves that are easy to see and that are hard to reach. There is a target to our cleaning. We may also get rid of dirt, but the focus is on hametz.

Our Rabbis notice that hametz, in addition to being forbidden at Passover, is also forbidden as an offering in the Temple. As a result, the Chasidic teachers understand hametz to symbolize our evil inclination. The evil urge gets into our most basic motivations, anxieties, and beliefs. Then, having grasped onto our fears and ego, they are puffed up, allowed to rise, until they manifest in hurtful or immoral behavior. Passover can be just as much about removing our inner hametz, about puncturing our egos and letting the air out of our baseless anxieties, as it is about cleaning our homes.

As we go through the cleaning process, I suggest the following ritual of inner intentionality to accompany the cleaning process. Our cleaning usually begins with the bedrooms and other living spaces where there is only a small likelihood of hametz. So I start in the chambers of my heart where I feel most comfortable. Is there hametz here? Have I allowed myself to be led astray even in actions and behaviors that are usually okay?

Next, we do a bigger cleaning in our dining room and family room. Here we are certain to find hametz behind the furniture, underneath couch cushions, and so forth. Where is the evidence of my fears and anxieties venturing into the real world to hurt others and myself? I lift away my own dishonesty, my own desire to hide from myself, and confront the truth of my self.

And finally the big task: cleaning the kitchen. I have found evidence of my ego, my fear, my hurting. Now I have to let it go, to clean it out, to remove it from the depths of my soul. There is a choice here and I

choose to trust where I have been afraid, to create space for others in my life where I have been puffed up and insecure. With each piece of bread or cereal, I let go of something inside as well.

And finally, after all that work, I declare the rest of the chametz void. I have done what I can: now I have to trust in God that it has been enough. I have examined and thought and explored the frightening recesses of my soul. Now I invite God into the process to help me genuinely change and heal.

May we all have a kosher Passover that includes a renewed sense of trust in the world, of spaciousness and love towards others in our lives, and true healing in our own souls.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi David Booth

THE CJM WOMEN'S TORAH

APRIL 5, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Torah stands at the center. It is from Torah that we learn our values, history, and practice. The art of how a Torah is made is the practice of bringing God's voice into the world in a visible form. That is why we have never accepted printed or copied books as a Torah. God can come into the world only through the medium of a human. It is the intention of a person to write the Torah even more than the actual writing that matters.

Rav Kook, the early religious Zionist teacher, describes prophecy as coming from the interior of the prophet. That is, the prophetic message comes from God through the medium of the prophet. It is the inner experience and life of the prophet that gives form and content to the message of inspiration. A prophet is far more than a radio or receiver of some kind. There is an active participation in the way in which the message is framed.

Torah scribes similarly add of their own spiritual life and interiority to the Torah. While the words of each Torah across a myriad of practices and traditions are identical, the style of writing and the artistic quality are unique. Indeed, a photocopy overlay of one column can identify a Torah as accurately as a fingerprint can identify a person.

Women have often been at the margins of the Synagogue. A distance is maintained between Torah and women in many communities. It is one of the achievements of the Conservative movement to provide a basis within Jewish law and tradition to invite women back to the Amud, the table from which prayers are led and the Torah is read.

Last year, the Contemporary Jewish Museum went one step further by commissioning the public writing of a Torah by a female scribe, Julie Seltzer. This act took a central practice and let hundreds of people see it in action. And it invited women to the center.

There are a number of practices that make a Torah kosher or fit for use. They include incredible care and accuracy, special organic inks, and spiritual practices to ensure that the Torah is written in a focused and intentional manner. None of these practices are inherently masculine, but rarely in history do we hear of female scribes. The only recorded instances come from medieval Italy.

Julie is the second woman in our era to write an entire Torah. Using such a Torah is a way of saying: a woman's voice and scribal hand are needed today. Half of the Jewish world is then invited to uncover their own inner encounter with the sacred and to find ways of giving it voice. And that item joins a vast scribal tradition that includes Torahs saved from the Holocaust, Torahs written in Israel, and even Torahs written in early medieval China. Julie's work shows both the continuity of Jewish tradition, the centrality of Torah to our experience, and the unique ability of each generation and each person to experience that tradition anew in their own voice.

We are fortunate over the next month to be housing the CJM Torah. We will read from it and learn about it in a variety of contexts as we celebrate Torah, the scribal arts, and the role of women in our community. On Sunday, April 8th, at our second day Passover services, I will lead a special session to look at and learn about this Torah and about the scribal arts generally. We have the Torah until May 7th. I invite you to experience something old and new at the same time as our community learns about and reads from this beautiful new Torah.

Shabbat Shalom & a Happy and Kosher Pesach,

Rabbi David Booth

YOM HASHOAH

APRIL 19, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There are many things to which we bear witness today on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust memorial day. We bear witness that love is stronger than death. We choose to remember in love those who were slaughtered and perished, to remember them and hold their memories in our hearts. We bear witness that one generation can listen to another and hold their truths. The Holocaust happened over 75 years ago. Each year there are fewer and fewer survivors left. As we listen to their stories, as we carry their stories within us, we prove that our generation can carry these accounts forward to our children and grandchildren. And finally, we bear witness that even murder does not have to engender hatred. Our remembrance today is an act of love, an act of recollection and of warning to the future. Our memory of the slaughter transforms us into pursuers of peace.

Here is a thought from Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor. He wrote this to describe his own experience in the camps:

“A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.”

Today in our words, in our memories, in our silence, we bear witness to a truth to generations to come that this happened. We recall that 6 million of our people were murdered, slaughtered and burned. And we proclaim to those who would deny it: We have heard the stories with our own ears and we will speak of them with our own lips. And we will say to future generations: Never again, not to us, and not to anyone else.

I invite you to pause in whatever you are doing and to sit in silence for one minute in memory of those who perished and in hope for the future.

May the memories of all those who perished in the Shoah be for a blessing and may their souls be bound up with the Holy One.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A BLESSING FOR THE STATE OF ISRAEL

APRIL 26, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Today is Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. On this day of joy and celebration of both what is and what can be, I offer the following blessing:

Avinu Shbasmayim, our heavenly parent in heaven, addressed over the millennia as Rock of Israel. Bless the land of Israel, its people and inhabitants, and the promise that it holds in our collective imagination. We thank you for the blessing of living in the days of a renewed Israel. We bless You, and those with courage in the days of the founding of the state and today, for making real our hope of two thousand years to reenter the world of history, to become again a people with the power to determine our own way.

At this time of world economic turmoil, grant Israel continued economic growth and vitality, drawing on the assets that Torah and our love of learning have implanted within us. At the same time, strengthen the people and leaders of Israel to find ways in which opportunity can be found throughout the nation. I pray for an Israel that is a model of growth informed by values of justice, and a nation of Israel with great opportunity for all its citizens.

At this time of political instability in the Middle East, hold safe the people and land of Israel. Grant Israel the strength to keep its citizens safe combined with wisdom and compassion. May the leaders and people of Israel always emulate Aaron in being lovers and pursuers of peace, eyes wide open to the inherent dignity of every human being created in the image of God while holding their specific responsibility to protect and hold safe Israel.

And finally, on this day of celebration and joy, we acknowledge the blessing of a restored and renewed Israel. Yet we also ask for the continued strength to yearn for more. You have promised us the perfected Israel on high, an Israel that is the embodiment in the world of all our sacred teachings and values. Israel means literally to wrestle with God. Grant us the continued strength, as an act of love, to wrestle together with the citizens of Israel for both what is and what can be. Help us find the balance between joy of what is, and yearning for what might be.

May we live to see a day where Israel stands at peace with her neighbors and the vision of your prophets can be fulfilled: nation will no longer lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Happy Yom HaAtzmaut and Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

IRAN

MAY 3, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Certain moments in history demand activism.

We believe that Iran's impending nuclear capability is such a moment. The threat a nuclear Iran poses to Israel, the United States, and world stability is frightening and real. Our response will be a defining moment in Jewish history.

As a united clergy in the Peninsula, we urge you to contact your Congressional representatives regarding pending House legislation HR 568 and Senate legislation SR 380. These bills affirm that it is U.S. policy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability and to oppose any reliance on a policy seeking to contain a nuclear-capable Iran.

We believe that the threat of a nuclear Iran is so profoundly dangerous that we have banded together to inspire you and our entire community to stand united in activism as we urge Congress to pursue policies designed to address this urgent threat.

A nuclear-capable Iran could:

1. Threaten the very existence of Israel: In November 2011, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad boasted that "end will be near...Iran's capabilities are increasing." Iranian leaders have brazenly stated, over and over again, their clear intention to destroy Israel.
2. Easily provide the opportunity for terrorist organizations and rogue states to be armed with nuclear weapons: As the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and as a friend to the governments of Venezuela and other South and Central American countries, Iran could provide nuclear materials to entities on both Israel's and America's borders.
3. Shift the balance of power in the Middle East, threatening US troops: Were Iran to have nuclear weapons capability, US forces would have to account for an emboldened regional power that would increase support to terrorists and insurgents already targeting US troops. Countries desiring peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict would be thwarted by the threat of Iranian reprisals.

4. Stimulate a nuclear arms race in the Middle East: Other countries in the region have hinted they would either develop such a capability or obtain nuclear weapons overnight by purchasing them from Pakistan or North Korea in order to compete with Iran. Thus, an increasingly unstable Middle East would be home to a nuclear arms race. This escalation could prove catastrophic by any number of scenarios.

5. Cause the cost of oil to skyrocket: Iran would possess the leverage to coerce oil-exporting nations to raise prices to impact our economy.

We urge you to act now, beginning with contacting our representatives in the House and the Senate.

Please call Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein and ask them to co-sponsor SR 380.

Senator Boxer: 202-224-3553; Senator Feinstein: 202-224-3841

Please call on Representative Anna Eshoo or Representative Jackie Speier to co-sponsor HR 568.

Congresswoman Eshoo: 202-225-8104; Congresswoman Speier: 202-225-3531

May our activism bring with it a time when we can see the vision of the prophet Isaiah fulfilled, where nation shall not threaten nation and humankind will not again know war anymore.

Sincerely,

Rabbi David Booth
Congregation Kol Emeth

Rabbi Nat Ezray
Congregation Beth Jacob

Rabbi Corey Helfand
Peninsula Sinai

Rabbi Elisheva Salamo
Congregation Kedem

Rabbi Ari Cartun
Congregation Etz Chaim

Rabbi Dan Feder
Peninsula Temple Shalom

Rabbi Dennis Eisner
Peninsula Temple Beth El

DRAWING CLOSE

MAY 10, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Each Torah portion, no matter how random the material may appear at first blush, has a spiritual wholeness that links and unites each chapter and word. Emor, the Torah portion this week, wanders from theme to theme seemingly without connection. We start with the purity of the Cohanim and end with the holy day cycle. And yet, there is a thread, a wholeness. This whole portion is suggesting ways in which we can uncover what the Hasidim call God consciousness, meaning an awareness of the holy and of our sacred connection to others, through our engagement with the physical world.

Torah invites us to encounter holiness. We are invited to structure our lives so that encounters with meaning, with something beyond ourselves, are possible. The Cohanim are one pathway to transcendence. They are responsible for the offerings, called in Hebrew korbanot. Korban means to draw close. So they care for the drawing close rituals, the rituals that invite us to encounter holiness, the divine Other, in our daily lives. Prayer today is intended to function “in place” of the sacrifices – meaning that it is our own drawing close ritual. It is a practice that invites a different, deeper, awareness of the world around us.

Rav Kook writes that the act of eating, and I think by extension all material pursuits, has the potential of raising holy sparks. When we eat with intention, by saying food blessings, we elevate the animal appetite with something deeper in ourselves. Then the energy released by the food into our bodies creates a mirrored process in which we also release energy into our souls. Rav Kook suggests that an act of eating can be a drawing close ritual, a means by which we invite meaning and a sense of connection and purpose, into our lives.

Holy days uncover that connection through shared celebration. Studies show that face to face human interactions release serotonin, the happiness / well being chemical, into our system. Torah understands that shared moments can trigger physical and spiritual processes that give our lives meaning. In the same way that food potentially gives us both physical and spiritual energy, so also a shared moment can elevate that serotonin experience into a spiritual uplift.

These are my appointed seasons... These are the times, of Shabbat and Holiday, when we pause, breathe, and immerse ourselves in the kinds of experiences that invite a look beyond the self. Just as prayer invites the individual to reach beyond the self in the safety of community, so also holidays strengthen

our sense of security, of “dwelling in the presence of Shaddai (a name for God.)” It is from that feeling of trust that we can look outwards and inwards towards the holiness in our own lives.

The portion begins with an act of divine speech. It then goes on to offer us pathways toward attuning ourselves to that divine articulation and the ways in which we can allow ourselves to hear. I invite us, this Shabbat, to find time to listen through prayer, through shared experience, and through Torah.

PRAYER AND STUDY

MAY 17, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Prayer and study are almost entirely unlike one another in the way in which they impact their practitioner and that person's sense of the world. They share similar goals but uncover them in different ways. Both prayer and study intend no less than a transformation of the soul and a refining of the self. They are means by which we reach beyond ourselves and discover our connections to others. For some, they are also a key means by which we reach out to and potentially encounter the Holy One.

Study is the more accessible of the two disciplines. Torah is filled with narrative and with law and our study of these two topics can radically transform our deepest selves. Narrative has an openness that allows it to be more than the words on the page, or the often terse account of a story. Cain speaks to Abel but the Torah shows us only the tragic outcome of the exchange. The story asks us to imagine what they said to one another. Then, as we place ourselves into the story, that study invites reflection on how our words have impacted others. Narrative invites us to place our truest self into the story and to uncover our own hidden depths.

Law is more concrete. It is behaviors and norms that free us, that through their observance enable that self to be transformed in holy ways. Jewish law, for example, instructs us never to remind a repentant sinner of their former misdeeds. This simple norm creates space in society to allow people to change. All too often we lock people into their former behaviors. The study of Torah law instructs us to create room in our society and our hearts for people to grow.

Study is acquired in effort. The Talmud teaches: one should study as if one's life depends on the learning. We are instructed to engage in this practice through effort. We gain whatever we try. And the impact becomes a permanent part of the self. It may affect me in varying ways, but it is always a part of me.

Prayer, by contrast, is all about one moment. Prayer invites me to sanctify the world around me, to live in a timeless moment in which I can uncover wonder. The Talmud teaches: one who forgets to recite the Shma (to pray in the morning or evening) is as if that person has never prayed before. The impact of prayer is the moment that is transformed. Prayer helps the soul and the self speak in unison.

A novice may have a deeper experience of prayer than the greatest expert. It matters little the skills we bring to the experience. It is instead all about the presence of self we possess. The expert may forget to

pray or only skate around the edges of the experience, while the novice may open a window into the self and the divine. Mastery of prayer skills helps, but unlike study it is an inner discipline rather than a skill.

Some of us are drawn to one or the other of these practices more. Yet it is their balance together that illuminates the Jewish spiritual and moral path. I invite all of us, as we are counting the Omer and refining the self, to find ways of acquiring that measure which we resist, which is the harder for us, and so make ourselves ready to hear the words of revelation a week from Sunday morning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

REVELATION

MAY 24, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

One of the stories we love to tell ourselves occurs this Sunday morning. Sunday morning at 6am (and again around 10:30am...) we will read of God giving the Jewish people Torah. That moment of revelation continues to resound throughout the world and throughout history. It was a moment in which Moses encountered the Divine Other. He reached beyond his own self and encountered something Other. He chose to call that other God.

That moment of encounter, the realization that otherness exists, that there is a distinct boundary to the self, creates a necessity for a moral encounter. Once Moses realizes that he isn't the limit of creation, he realizes the need for behaviors and practices that create a space within which there is room for Divine Otherness. For Moses, or at least the way Moses describes that experience to us, there is both a vertical and horizontal quality to that revelation.

The horizontal revelation is the encounter with the divine image implanted in each human. It is a realization that others have infinite depths deeply implanted within them. That realization obligates me to create a moral system within which others are free of being colonized by me and my needs. Moses understands the risk that I will seek to assume that others are like me, or exist for me. Revelation requires that I instead create room within which others can uncover their own infinite self.

Vertically is the encounter for Moses with the Divine Other. He expresses that experience as hearing a voice that commands and is outside the self and beyond the human experience. Revelation for Moses includes an encounter with the infinite Other, the Self beyond self, whose name is I will be that which I will be. The four letter name that Moses encounters means "Is." Moses' encounter is an encounter with Being, Existence, with the Is of the universe.

Once Moses writes down his experience, there is a risk. The experience is authentic and challenging. Once codified in words, the words themselves become reified at the expense of the authentic moment of revelation. That means that the study of Torah itself can be a form of idolatry when we forget that the words are only the representation of something much greater that Moses needed to express. His words are meant to remind us of the possibility of that vertical and horizontal revelation but can never be a substitute for the actual experience.

Shavuot celebrates that moment by reenacting it. The reenactment is an invitation for our own moment of revelation, our own openness to encountering the Other in a true and honest way. If we allow ourselves that encounter, we can experience our own revelation, our own Torah, that challenges us in our behaviors and practices, reminding us in our deepest selves of the need for moral practice and spiritual discipline.

We study all night and then share revelation in community to create an attentiveness, an attunement, that normally in our more rested and settled selves is walled off. This year, whether in practices traditional or unconventional, I invite all of us to reach beyond ourselves, to allow ourselves a true encounter, and so uncover in our own hearts our hidden Torah.

Shabbat Shalom & Hag Samech

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be on hiatus until Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashanah. Enjoy summer!!

ANXIETY AND BLESSING

AUGUST 10, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rashi stumbles on a great problem in this week's parashah. Ekev, the section of Deuteronomy that we will be reading this Shabbat, is a retelling of the Exodus and all the events that occur in the desert. Towards the end of the reading, Moses begins to anticipate the people's entry into Israel. He says the following: "That land that you are about to enter as an inheritance is unlike Egypt. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden. The land you are about to possess soaks its water from the heavens." Dt. 11:10-11. This land, says Moses, always has God's eye upon it.

Moses alerts us to the conditionality of life in Israel. In Egypt, the water comes from the Nile with fair consistency. Yet in Israel, the rains come some years but not others. There is a greater sense of the contingency of life. We don't know what will happen and so each year we wait anxiously to see if our crops will grow and the work of our hands will be blessed.

Rashi is quick to point out that this comparison is meant to identify the superiority of Israel. He realizes that we might prefer the reliability of the Nile to the potentially greater but contingent blessing of the rain. It is harder work in Egypt; but we can count on it. Nevertheless, says Rashi, this means that Israel, that a world in which God's eye is on us, a place in which blessings are contingent, is superior.

I can sometimes be an anxious person. I worry about the fruits of my labors and the work of my hands. On one of the Olympic broadcasts I heard a great quote about training. The athlete said that when he was on the bottom, he felt good because he could only get better. But when he got to the top, he was scared because he could only get worse... This is the fear of Israel, of waiting for blessing even when that blessing leads to promised lands filled with growth and abundance.

Rashi is reminding us to find the inner comfort to live in that place of worry. He implies that God's eye upon Israel means that we are noticed, cared for, loved. Even though that eye may sometimes see our failings, it is still better to be seen and loved. Or put another way, to be seen in a whole way is ultimately holy.

As we begin to look towards another Jewish year and another academic year, many new ventures are beginning. I invite all of us to remember Rashi's promise that Israel is better, that the courage to live in the place of possibility and blessing is many times superior to the certainty of a world solely reliant on

what we know we can count on. When we remember that our strength and blessing comes from many sources, some beyond the self, then we can enter into promised lands of abundance that are wonderful to inhabit.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

DAF YOMI

AUGUST 16, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Seven and one half years ago I made a somewhat spontaneous decision to start studying one page of Talmud per day. I'm not totally sure what initially motivated me. Several people invited me to study with them, though I suspected (correctly) that they wouldn't be able to follow through. It was in the papers at that time, which gave it a certain glamor and excitement. And the idea of actually reading the entire Talmud in this more manageable daily practice felt potentially doable.

So I jumped in. And managed to finish a couple of weeks ago. Doing it every day required a lot of thoughtfulness and schlepping. I would read my page at the gym between sets. I would read my daf while shaving or flossing my teeth. Some people make it a fixed time each day – my schedule varies enough that my schedule over a week was pretty regular though it varied from day to day.

The page of Talmud became a companion and provided a structure each day. Sometimes it frustrated me. I had moments of wondering if I wouldn't be better off studying something in more depth, or something else entirely to broaden my Jewish learning. Yet I kept coming back. And then I would be surprised by a story or a law or a bit of history and remember why I was doing this. The goal was to appreciate the breadth of this critical formative book of Rabbinic Judaism and to allow myself to be influenced by it as a complete work.

The Rabbis teach that we should make a fixed time for study. Like anything else that matters, if we make it a regular priority we can do it. Even on the busiest days, Jewish learning happened. Let it be the length of your days – I can't say it was the length of my days. Some days it was a bare 15 minutes. But I can say it was pretty much every day.

I share this with you to invite you into finding a practice of regular study. Jewish learning is soul sustaining. Too often we encounter learning in predigested chunks for the "interesting" and "relevant" material. Instead I suggest finding a practice of regular daily learning that appreciates the wholeness of our sacred literature and invites us to engage them on their own terms as well by reading them and living with them in their entirety.

The daf yomi cycle has started again. That is one practice. There is also a mishnah a day cycle that takes five years to complete. Or a chapter of Prophets and Writings. Both of these have extensive supporting

materials available through [United Synagogue](#). You can also subscribe there for a daily email reviewing the Mishnah for that day. I am also working with some colleagues now to create an alternative daf yomi drawing from many sources and will share details with you as they emerge.

I have chosen not to read the daf yomi again. For the last two weeks, I have been reading 2 chapters of the Shulchan Aruch and 1 aliyah with Rashi each day. I am worried that I will have a hard time sticking to it because there is no outside structure to help me keep the pace and rigor, but so far so good. A handful of KE members have started daf yomi. Another person is studying Pirkei Avot this fall. A few people said they will begin the chapter of Bible a day. I invite you to join us in regular learning. Please do share your practice- I'd love to know and support those of us engaging in daily learning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PURSUE JUSTICE

AUGUST 23, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Winston Churchill famously quipped, “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others which have been tried.” As is typical of Churchill, the humor of the quote makes a serious point. For one thing, democracy is deeply flawed. There are systemic issues that come up everywhere it has been tried that entrench certain interests over others, that invite corruption, that create a distance between rulers and ruled. By the same token, every other system is even worse. This suggests a consistent ongoing need to work at it, both because it is imperfect, and because it is the best game in town.

Churchill’s own biography supported such a view. He lived through an era that nearly saw the collapse of democracy from within and without. He saw the inability of the United Kingdom and France to address the growing threat of the Nazis, and he saw how quickly and powerfully Hitler was able to amass power initially through the levers of democracy. Churchill knew the weaknesses of democracy and knew that democracy thrives only when there are people who believe in it.

The Torah says: Justice, justice, you shall pursue. The Hebrew word, *tirdof*, means to pursue or even to run after. That is, we are commanded by Torah to pursue justice knowing full well we will never attain it. Every generation will have to run after justice because justice is only possible when people of good will pursue it. The moment we stop pursuing it, the moment we are distracted by all the other facts and challenges of our life, is the same moment in which injustice returns.

As we enter a political season, it is easy to feel disempowered. Polls tell us who will win, and what everyone is thinking. The various media outlets are more than happy to tell us how to think as well. My own ability to influence the outcome in directions that affirm justice are limited at best. Nevertheless, says Torah, pursue justice. Giving up is tantamount to giving in.

Similarly, when we look at the world around us, and the many and varied injustices that exist, it is easy to give up. What can I possibly do? The answer is: pursue justice. I can strive in my own world and limited capacity to pursue justice. I can donate to feed those who go to bed hungry and in that fashion pursue justice. I can speak with integrity and fairness and so pursue justice. There are many things I CAN do, and since I can do them, it is a *mitzvah*, a commandment, to do them. I cannot attain justice for all: but I can pursue it in my actions and behaviors every day.

Individual action can become more as it catches on. Rav Kook understands individual action as having a messianic component. When I pursue justice, I bring the world incrementally closer to a larger transformation. It is each act of justice, each caring gesture that values the inherent goodness of another, that becomes the first hint of a change, a new direction for an imperfect world.

Ours is not to finish the task, yet neither may we desist from trying. Justice, justice, you SHALL pursue.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

GET SERIOUS

AUGUST 30, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We tend to get very serious at this time in the Jewish year. As we draw close to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we encourage ourselves to engage in Heshbon HaNefesh, a careful look at the soul and self. That look is designed to invite us to see where we have fallen off the track, where our soul and self have gotten out of alignment and ready ourselves for the promise of Yom Kippur to restore that balance.

I want to suggest a different, almost jujitsu, way of engaging in that process. Serious is good, but sometimes postponed. Like a diet or a dentist visit, Heshbon HaNefesh is all too easy to put off even though we know it's time. When we play, when we engage in flights of fancy, by contrast we tend to rush into the activity, to look forward to it. So maybe there is a way to use fantasy and imagination to unlock something transformative deep inside.

Jews for centuries have imagined and written wonderfully creative fabulous literature. From the Talmud itself, imagining that certain holy Rabbis had creative powers that rivaled that of God to Chagall's time in the Russian Theater, Jews have seen imagination as a way of unlocking something creative and powerful in the soul. The Bible forbids divination – because we should seek after truth from within the self, from within the world, from within the Torah. It encourages imagination because imagination is a God given capacity that enables transformation.

If we will it, it is no story. I would amend Hertzl: if we can imagine something, maybe we can bring into being. The Talmud imagines incredible human capacity to create. Science has made good on much of that promise. Had we never imagined people being able to fly, or creating life, or having incredible harvests, would we have ever had airplanes, biological sciences, or the agricultural revolution of the last few decades?

That which is possible in the external world can also happen in the soul. I can imagine who I might be with no thought to the possible. And then begin to challenge myself: what might be possible? Maybe I'm not as limited as I thought. I sometimes imagine winning the lottery. That flight of fancy occurs in part because I worry about my capacity to provide for my children and for my retirement. For me that flight of fancy often includes supporting certain charitable causes I love, or buying property in Jerusalem. I (probably) won't ever win the lottery. But imagining becomes an exercise in what I really care about. Surely this is a Heshbon HaNefesh?

So I invite you this week to flights of fancy. To engage in the purest of imagination with no regard to the possible. Perhaps write them down, or share them with a friend or partner. And then next week, after you have given yourself time to fantasize, to imagine, begin to look and see what those flights of fancy have to say about the self. That process, I believe, will help us soar into Yom Kippur ready to imagine being transformed and drawn back into alignment. If you can imagine it, if you can dream, it can be real.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

BUY A LULAV, TAKE HOLD OF JUDAISM

SEPTEMBER 6, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As we approach the High Holidays, it's worth reflecting that the greatest specifically Jewish sin is the degree to which we as a people have subcontracted out our Judaism and our spiritual living to Rabbis and Synagogues. This occurs in direct and indirect ways. Rabbis, especially in Conservative Synagogues, are expected to be observant. Even relatively non-practicing Jews have opinions on whether the Rabbi should drive on Shabbat or eat hot dairy out. At Yom Kippur, we read of two offerings. There was a goat that received all of our sins driven into the desert, and a goat offered on the altar to God. Rabbis risk becoming the goat to God. We are Jewish for you, and even carry something of you with us. But that Jewishness is carried by someone else and not by the individual Jew.

Synagogues have a similar problem. The Rabbis teach that the holiest location in Judaism after the destruction of the Temple is the Shabbat table. The home, filled with possibilities for relationship and blessing, ought to be the center. The Synagogue is designed to support the home. Too often now that relationship is reversed. Jewish homes have Jewish items, but all too rarely Jewish practice.

And so we find ourselves facing a Jewish crisis. Many feel disconnected or unsupported in their spiritual and Jewish quests. Further, the ability of the Synagogue to help people make sense of their lives, to find strength in moments of loss or in moments of joy, is weakened. Forgive us, for we have sinned. We have sinned by giving up our Judaism to institutions and professionals when it should be living in our hearts, bodies, and homes.

But confession is only the first step; we have to change our ways as well. A remedy exists just as Yom Kippur ends. Sukkot is a prime example of a holiday palmed off on the Synagogue. In particular, the Mishnah commands each Jew to own their own lulav. As a result, on first day of Sukkot we gift one another our lulavs so that everyone in the room can own a Lulav, even if they did not buy one themselves.

The lulav and etrog are some of the most primitive stuff in Judaism. There is a sensuality about them- a feel, a smell. After waving the lulav and etrog, our hands are filled with the lemony smell of the etrog. It is a practice, a mitzvah, that lingers, reminding us of how sweet and generative practice and observance can be in general. It involves our entire body, as we hold them together, shake them, feel, smell and touch them. In other words, the lulav invites us into a feeling of shlemut, wholeness, for which we spend much

of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur yearning.

Now is the right time to buy a lulav. Kol Emeth is selling them until Monday the 10th and you can [buy one here](#) or contact office@kolemeth.org to get a purchase form. This is a chance to take possession of Judaism, to find your own true and whole self through the prism of Jewish practice. I hope we can all take hold of our lulavim – and our Judaism – and join together to take them on the first day of Sukkot, October 1st.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

WRITING A EULOGY

SEPTEMBER 13, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I spend some amount of time writing and delivering eulogies. There is a sacredness to the process itself because it requires first listening to close family and friends and then uncovering the values, cares, and concerns that defined the person's life. A good eulogy challenges those of us who survive to find ways of keeping those values and cares alive. We receive a responsibility to dedicate ourselves to something as we remember the person who has passed away.

This exercise sometimes leaves me wondering about my own eulogy. What will be said of me? Do my values communicate as much as I want them to? Do I live up to my own aspirations? For I know there is a gap between who I am and who I can or might be. And I have a limited amount of time to fill that space, to have said of me something meaningful.

Reb Zusya, the famous Hasidic master, had his own similar worry. He said: When I approach the heavenly tribunal to be judged after my death, I am not afraid that they will ask me: why weren't you like Abraham? After all, I am not Abraham, so what can they expect. Nor am I afraid they will ask me why weren't you more like Moses? For again, I am not Moses and what can they expect? What frightens me is that they will ask: why weren't you more like Zusya, and then what can I say?

One of the central images of the Holy Days is of God with a book of life open in Heaven. During the Untanetokef, the liturgical poem in the midst of Musaf, God "opens the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page." In other words, God merely reads that which we have written. Every day we are writing our own record and determining through every choice and action, who we are and how we are known and seen.

With these two examples in mind, I suggest the following exercise as we ready ourselves for the High Holidays. Carve out some time to sit quietly to write and think. Begin ideally with 2-3 minutes of silence to allow the demands of the day to recede. Then begin to imagine what would be in your eulogy were it written today. Or: what are you writing in God's book of remembrance on high? Sit again for 2-3 minutes and begin to write what you would LIKE to be written. Be honest: it may include moral commitments alongside business or personal achievements. Where do we really invest ourselves and where would we like to be known? For some, this may include a lot about our interactions with others, or with family members. For others, it may also include business related goals in which we are deeply invested.

After sitting again for a moment, examine the differences between the two documents. That gap is one part of the Teshuvah process. The distance between the mark I see myself leaving and the one I want to leave is scary. Yet it is also hopeful. For it says that the seeds of Teshuvah, of repentance and change, are already known to me. The Holidays can be one way in which I unlock my own capacity for growth and transformation to write that which I want, to create an integrity between my imagined and real self. We can then spend the holidays finding in the prayers, in the strength of community, in our own experiences of faith, the strength to travel the road that leads to that place of authentic self.

Shabbat Shalom and L'Shana Tova-

Rabbi David Booth

HUNGER IN OUR AREA

SEPTEMBER 20, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

For many of us the last two years have been good. The Valley is thriving on many measures, and the economy is expanding, if only anemically. But it's not better for everyone. Persistent unemployment and underemployment mean that many are still struggling and suffering. It means that there is a continued and increasing need in our area as well as nationally.

The Bay Area is one of the great Super ZIPs of the United States. Super ZIPs are zip code addresses in which there is a great concentration of education and wealth. This new phenomenon highlights an increasing isolation and segregation in American society. It is now possible to grow up, go to school, attend college, and find a job without ever interacting meaningfully with someone from a different economic background. We can insulate ourselves from those in need, and never hear their voices.

In the Talmud, Bava Batra 7b, there is a curious story. A certain man lives in a house with a courtyard. Elijah the prophet visits him regularly. One year, the man decides to build a gate house at the entrance to his courtyard. Though the behavior is permitted by the Mishnah, Elijah stops visiting him. The Talmud teaches: though he was allowed to build the gate house, he could now no longer hear the cries of those in need. And if they were walled off, Elijah would not visit either. In other words, by keeping himself closed to the cries of those in need, this man also walled himself off from spiritual life.

We in our Super ZIPs risk walling ourselves off from those in need. We no longer need to hear their cries; we can avoid being confronted by hunger or poverty. Yet when we do so, we risk our deepest most sacred selves. Today in the United States there is 8.1 percent unemployment. And that number reflects only the tip of the iceberg because of how many people have dropped out of the labor market entirely. There are many, as many as 20% of the population, unemployed or underemployed.

Compounding that challenge, the drought in the Midwest this year is driving food prices up enormously. Those in need are more vulnerable than ever and will find it harder than ever to put food on their tables, to find enough to feed their children. Second Harvest in San Mateo and Santa Clara County serves over 241,000 clients on average per month, up nearly 50% since 2008. And that is in two of the most affluent counties in the United States. They estimate that over half the need in our area continues to go unmet.

At Rosh Hashanah, you were given a grocery bag and invited to bring it back, filled with food, at Kol

Nidre. Last year, such food donations made all the difference. Second Harvest saw a decline of 7% in cash income, and an offsetting 8% increase in food donations. They cannot meet the need in our community without these donations. Please bring a bag filled with groceries or make a donation to our food drive.

We ask God to judge us mercifully and favorably. Yet we can only ask for forgiveness and mercy if we ourselves embody these same qualities. It is time to share our blessings with those in need, and to make a real difference about ending hunger in our area.

Shabbat Shalom & L'Shana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

SEPTEMBER 27, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Peter Wexler, our Synagogue President, talked beautifully about some of the ways we are thriving this year and placed particular emphasis on some new initiatives now bearing fruit for families of younger children. I want to add to his words our focus on empty nesters and senior members as well. I believe in the words of Moses: we will go with our young and old. A community is complete only when it remembers all its members across age and stage in life.

Sh'ma Salons: Now entering their third year, Sh'ma Salons are a forum for adult learning and conversation. Each member receives the monthly journal Sh'ma to then join a group discussion. The four groups are led by Lee Shulman, Alan Bennett, Janis Popp, and Laurie Leventhal-Belfer. I attend each group every other month and am continually amazed both by the depth of the conversation and the developing friendships and community. As Sh'ma Salons gear up for this new year, I invite you to join a group. Send me or Alan Bennett an email and we will happily find a group for you.

ZAP: ZAP or Zippy Adult Programming is an effort to create a USY-like group for members in their 50s, 60s, and 70s. Their next event is a walking tour of San Francisco led by our very own Penny Katz. They are also planning a comedy night in December to follow up on last year's fun Dec 24th event. These events are a chance for people to have a new experience, to make new friends, and to enjoy the sense of shared community.

Lastly, Audra Vaisbort, our new Community Connections Manager, and I are exploring ways we can begin to enrich how we interact with seniors. The Retired Men's Club hosts a monthly lecture, and we want to add some additional classes or events for seniors. We are considering a Sunday afternoon workshop in artistic and creative endeavors as well as a series for caregivers looking for help and support. In addition, as Rabbi Graff mentioned, our Chesed committee is looking for ways to expand the friendly visitor program and create cross generational connections. I would love next year at the High Holidays to have a list of successes and new ways we are serving the elderly, and hope you can offer ideas and suggestions that will help us.

I feel truly blessed to be one of the Rabbis at Kol Emeth. We are blessed with a thriving community engaged in finding ways to reach and bring together generations, to learn from and support one another.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Sukkot,

Rabbi David Booth

MEDICAL CENTER IN THE ARAVA

OCTOBER 4, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The cycle of the Jewish holy days draws our eyes and hearts to the land of Israel. The Biblical account of these times of celebration is deeply rooted in the land and the harvest. Sukkot is a time of rejoicing in bounty and in harvest and in the whole notion of sovereignty, of having our own place. Pesach can be understood to represent God, Shavuot Torah, and Sukkot Israel. That means that the Sukkah itself becomes a metaphor for building the land.

A Sukkah is filled with a yearning for peace, for healing, and for connection. The readings at Sukkot remind us of historic moments, such as Solomon's consecration of the Temple, when we experienced a sense of shared mission and purpose. Unlike the four sons of Passover, Sukkot invites us to find unity through the four species, held together and enriching one another because of our differences. In this moment of having Israel, Sukkot reminds us of the need to connect ourselves in values driven ways to the land, and to find our own paths to strengthen Israel and to bring healing into that place we love so much.

As many of you know, there is a great housing shortage in Israel. There are many paths towards addressing this shortage, among them developing new areas and housing. The Arava is one of the areas ripe for such development particularly as new roads and public transportation bring this region closer and closer to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Currently, the population is a mixture of Jewish and Bedouin Israeli families. Medical services are hours away, requiring a drive to either Eilat or Beer Sheva. For this region to continue to develop, basic infrastructure, including medical services, are a necessity. As a result, Kol Emeth has reached out to JNF to participate in a Bay Area wide effort to help build a much needed medical center in the Arava.

I am excited about this project. It's a chance for us to help build the land of Israel, to come together in the fashion suggested by Sukkot around literal healing. Like all medical facilities in Israel, this center will serve all comers. It will bring emergency and preventive medical care into a tremendously underserved region. And in the long run it may be a key step in opening up a new area in Israel to provide much needed affordable housing.

There will be more information in the coming weeks of how you can participate. Kol Emeth, through its

Israel Action Committee, has agreed to help raise \$50,000 towards this project. We are already over 2/3rds of the way there. Carol and I plan to participate as well, because we want to help build the land of Israel and bring accessible high quality healing to all its inhabitants.

Happy Sukkot

Rabbi David Booth

PRAYER

OCTOBER 11, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rav Kook warns that the materiality of our lives can get in the way of the spiritual. When we focus on our own particular needs and wants, he says, we invite in the possibility of sin. That is, the more I focus on ME, the more I create opportunities for acting in ways that hurt those around me. At the same time, Rav Kook refuses to give up on the value of our particularity. This life, he says, is all about weaving a garment of many colors from our deeds, from all the mitzvot we fulfill.

Materiality is an essential ingredient of lasting value. To make a difference in the world, to affect those around us for good, requires an investment in caring, in the doings of this world. The spiritual journey is in part finding a balance between the materiality, the stuff of this world that so powerfully pulls us in, and a mindset of service that enables us to develop the highest within each of us.

In a concrete way: I have a love-hate relationship with email. On the one hand, it is this daily regular overwhelming task. It is a constant possibility of distraction and an invitation to all kinds of communication that lead me away from my values. On the other hand, it enables a connection with people impossible 20 years ago. Email is often the first step in learning of an issue with which someone is wrestling, or hearing of a joyous moment in someone's life. My challenge is to find the balance and preserve the sacred sparks in the mundane task of email, to remember when to send a short response and when to pause and write something richer.

Daily prayer is one of the key moments in which we give ourselves the spiritual space to maintain that balance in our lives. There is a reason Judaism asks us to pause morning and evening for prayer. It is a check in, a chance to reconnect ourselves to our own inner Kol Emeth, our own inner location of authenticity. Prayer is an act of connection and healing enabled through the prism of the liturgy.

Kol Emeth has held daily minyan as a sacred responsibility for many years. It reflects a deep value in the community of the regular daily need to pause and remind ourselves why we are here. Kaddish for mourners is a central element of minyan because it is a chance for the community to offer a centering, caring location within which to name and process loss and grief.

The minyan needs the community. The last few weeks have been a challenge, and we really need you to make the minyan possible. By the same token, I have found a real comfort, a quiet, a chance to breathe

and pray, to be a source of healing and strength in my own life. It is a location that gives me the focus and resources to find my truest self. Should you make the time to attend, I believe you will gain at least as much as you give.

Minyan meets Sunday – Thursday at 7:45pm, Sunday at 9:15am and Thursday at 6:45am.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE FLOOD

OCTOBER 17, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is in American literature and popular culture the fantasy of the new beginning and the reinvented person. Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, by the end, turns out to be the true focus of the story. While Hester is weighted down by the past in ways that hurt her, Pearl is the new beginning possible in this New World. *Moby Dick* has a similar cast as Ishmael ends the story freed of the burden of Ahab and his obsession with the whale washed ashore to start anew. Or the promise of renewal at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, when the daughter offers life to the starving man. In each case, the weight of the past is left behind to allow for a new beginning unburdened by that which was.

Yet such beginnings are not so easy. The story of Noah reminds us that the past retains its own weight and that we struggle to free ourselves from it at our own peril. Noah builds an Ark to escape the immorality and corruption of his generation. However, when he exits that Ark, a drama unfolds that carries into the New World the corruption of the old. Noah becomes heavily inebriated and then his son “reveals his nakedness.” In the morning, Noah realizes “what his son had done to him.” The Torah alerts us: even in the new beginning, the Old World is never far behind.

The Midrash expands upon this grip of the Old World. As Noah’s Ark begins to float, the Giant-Monster Og grabs hold of the side. He retains his grip for forty days and forty nights as the world is drowned all around him. And during those forty days and forty nights, Noah feeds him and cares for him. There is a paradox for Noah. If he feeds Og, he allows the Old World to retain its grip. If he starves him, that Old World already has him firmly in its grasp.

Don Draper, the central character of *Mad Men*, fits this mold. Don has left behind a terrible past and fled from a terrifying war. He has then remade himself into his fantasy of a great man and has in part become great as a result. There is a depth and thoughtfulness to this new creation. On the one hand, Don has everything he could ever want. He is rich, successful, has a beautiful wife and beautiful children.

Yet Jon Hamm’s acting makes clear again and again the essential hollowness of Don. He easily loses track of who he is and then falls out of alignment. He does not know how to share of himself, and so his intimate relationships are thin, and he walks through life alone and isolated. He has fallen out of the generational lists on which we linger so lovingly in this section of Torah, and so has fallen out of touch with his own self.

Let us then imagine new worlds, new beginnings inspired by hope. Let us imagine the possibility of remaking ourselves and uncovering our own inner greatness. When we can leave behind the burdens of our past, we can truly find our own creativity and healing in deep reservoirs. Yet let us also remember our past, from where we came, so that we can continue to know who we are and avoid the mistakes and hurt of the Old World. It is the weightiness of the past that keeps us from floating away. It can be an anchor that allows new growth, a root system that forms the basis of how we are nurtured even as we send out new branches, leaves, and flowers.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note there will be no *CyberTorah* next week. I will be away in New York for a Law Committee meeting and a United Synagogue training.

A PRAYER FOR THOSE RECOVERING FROM SANDY

OCTOBER 30, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

How marvelous are Your works, Adonai. It's Tuesday morning. Those words appear in my morning prayers just like they do every day. But today, today is different. It's different because I see images of New York City taxicabs flooded in three feet of water. It's different because I see images of homes destroyed, debris everywhere, and the aftermath of natural devastation throughout New Jersey.

I lived in Ocean Township, just two miles from the Jersey Shore for 5 years. I saw pictures of destruction that are hard to fathom, including a house that somehow just floated away and broke one of the beautiful drawbridges characteristic of that area. Dozens of people lined up at a gas station with plastic containers to buy gas to power their home generators. And yet I say: how marvelous are Your works, Adonai.

How great, how marvelous. Our Midrash teaches us that the world was not founded on the word tov, meaning good, but rather on the word blessing or brachah. While the world contains much that is good, it also contains much that is wrong, painful, necessary but carrying with it loss.

And so we praise not how good are God's works, but how marvelous, how great, from the Hebrew word gadlu. And indeed: the workings of the Earth, the possibility of life, is a marvel. It includes much that is painful but the sweet and the sour are necessary for life. There can be no genetics without genetic diseases. There can be no climate without massive storms.

And so, as I contemplate destruction, I am moved to prayer. In part because of my own powerlessness, in part to quiet and comfort my own fears that come from such destruction, and in part to genuinely express a wish that my own intention can influence that which is beyond me, whether through God, through the universe, or through the power of good will.

God, we are amazed by Creation and the power in Your world. We have seen the devastating quality of that power, the destructiveness inherent in the natural world. Now we turn to You to move to Your seat of mercy, to channel healing and strength and comfort into the world. May those hurt or injured uncover a capacity for healing as powerful as winds of the storm. May those who have lost property or find themselves without power uncover a power to rebuild as great as the power of the storm surge to

destroy. And may the force of the rain be as nothing to the strength and inner reserves granted to those now tasked with reassembling, rebuilding, and healing.

Lastly, we ask that the quiet of these first days remain. That all of us are moved to help one another, to support one another, and that our human efforts remain focused away from destruction and violence, and towards peace and rebuilding.

And let us all say: Amen.

Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER (BEFORE) AFTER THE ELECTIONS

NOVEMBER 8, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Writing is one means of time travel. I am sitting here, Tuesday morning, waiting for the election returns this evening. At this point, no one knows who will win. You, however, are receiving this Thursday morning, by which time, presumably, the election outcomes will be determined. So in this time altered state of perfect openness, I want to write the following prayer for our next President, whoever he may be.

Avinu Shebashamayim, God in Heaven. Bless and protect the United States. We live in a moment of great importance. We are surrounded by many challenges, and blessed with numerous opportunities and strengths. Ours is a tradition of hope that sees opportunity and possibility whenever people of good will join their voices and efforts together to bring blessing and goodness into the world.

May it be Your will to guide the next President of the United States. To help him see the threats near and abroad and to be guided in wisdom to respond with appropriate force and appropriate compassion. May God guide the President to know which of the many powers available to him should be used. May he be informed by compassion: "I rejoice not in the death of the wrongdoer, but in his turn away from evil. (Ez. 18)" And yet have the strength of will to act when necessary. "When wickedness perishes, there is joy. (Pr 11)"

May the President see in Israel a great friend. May the close ties between the US and Israel increase as we see more and more the shared interests of each nation and the way our mutual ties can lift both countries up and up. May the President encourage Israelis to pursue peace and help to hold them safe from rockets, terror, and bloodshed.

At home we see continued challenges, such that we bless God that anyone wants to accept the responsibilities of leading our great nation. May the President find a path that can bring prosperity to all. Though poverty may never cease, says Deuteronomy, we pray for a day in which all Americans have open to them a path to prosperity. May the President tear down that which blocks prosperity and freedom, and build up that which leads us to a life of blessing.

Finally, a word to the other party, whichever it may be. God, we bless you for a system in which opposition can be a source of strength. We see other places in the world and bless You for granting our

Founding Fathers the wisdom to build a country in which we can debate, argue and challenge within the framework of the democracy. May both parties advance their ideas and ideals with strength and vigor. And may the process of debate, argument, disagreement lead to outcomes better for the nation and its people.

In this moment of transition, a moment in which some are overcome with joy while others despondent in sorrow, may we all uncover a path that leads to a land flowing with possibility, democracy, and prosperity.

Amen.

MAY GOD GRANT PEACE TO ISRAEL

NOVEMBER 15, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel has begun military operation Pillar of Cloud. It began with a strike early Wednesday that killed the top Hamas commander and then disabled a number of longer range underground launch sites.

According to Ehud Barak, the Defense Minister, Hamas' capacity to launch missiles deep into Israel has been severely weakened.

This attack comes after weeks of low level missile fire from the Gaza strip into Sderot and other border areas. Hamas has threatened Israel for this attack and said they have "opened the gates of Hell." They have shot several dozen rockets into Israel, many of which were shot down by Iron Dome. As I write this, one has exploded in Beer Sheva. I received an email from the Conservative Rabbi in Beer Sheva who has closed the Synagogue for the moment because of concerns about rocket fire.

I was alerted to look at the news by a congregant who has a child serving in the IDF who they were expecting to see shortly. That child is now out of contact as a result of the violence in Israel. When I think of my own 16 year old, and how much I want to protect him that certainly brings the reality of what Israelis are facing home to me.

I am pained by violence and bloodshed. I wish that our swords could be beat into plowshares, and our fighter jets into passenger planes. But that isn't the world in which we live today. I see Hamas violating Israel's borders with rocket fire, Syrians trying to bring Israel into their civil war, and realize that Israel needs a strategy to secure security.

I was in Israel in 1993 when Arafat and Rabin shook hands. That process – and the hopefulness of that moment- feels entirely in shambles. I have a hard time imagining what a peace process looks like today, especially in Gaza. There have been some encouraging signs on the West Bank, but too few.

I don't know what will happen next, or whether the military operation will expand. In the face of worry, and concern, I then offer up the following prayer:

May God protect and hold safe the people of the land of Israel. May God protect them from missiles and rockets, and from being drawn into the conflicts that rage all around them. May the soldiers who defend the land of Israel be kept safe from harm so that they can return in time to their families and loved ones

whole and healthy.

May God also guide the political leaders of Israel with wisdom, to apply only the minimum amount of force necessary to keep Israel safe and secure. May Israelis and Palestinians be granted courage, strength, and insight to find a path that can lead towards a true and lasting peace, a peace in which all the peoples in that land can sit underneath an orange tree blossoming with a prosperity that comes from a shared sense of purpose. And let us say: Amen.

May Shabbat bring Peace and Rest to the World

Rabbi David Booth

THANK YOU

NOVEMBER 21, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At this time of Thanksgiving, I want to spend a moment offering thanks.

I am first and foremost grateful to God. I am grateful to God for the soul I have, for my strengths, and for so many other blessings in my life. Even when I doubt, even when I question, that possibility the reality of faith sustains me.

I am grateful to my Rabbinic partners for their gifts and friendship. Rabbi Graff is a true partner in leading this congregation. Her caring for those around her is an example to me, and her thoughtfulness about pastoral care a gift. Similarly, Rabbi Matzkin has blossomed as a creative, talented, and caring Jewish educator. I am grateful to the time, attention, and thoughtfulness she puts into caring for our Religious School and High School programs. Finally in this vein, I want to thank Rabbi Lewis. As Rabbi Emeritus, he is unfailingly supportive, helpful, and involved. I learn a lot from his example of spiritual living and passionate involvement in the community.

I want to thank Jeff Schwarz, our Mitzvah Director, for the care and love he shows his students and everyone with whom he interacts. Jeff's commitment and piety means he puts untold efforts into his students, into our daily minyan, and everything else he does. He is a true friend.

I would be unable to function without the energy I receive from our executive director, Yvonne Boxerman. Her tireless efforts in keeping the trains running make possible the level and success of all our various classes, programs, and events. She leads an office staff of Olga, Arianna, and Asya. They maintain the financial, communicative, and administrative side of the Synagogue and I am grateful for the whole hearted way in which they fulfill their essential functions.

I must in this context mention Pepe our facilities manager. Pepe is a gem; we are fortunate to have him on staff. Aisake, Susan, and all those who help with kiddushes, parking at the High Holidays, and maintaining the facility make up a great facilities team to whom I am so appreciative.

I feel blessed with the lay leadership here at Kol Emeth. Whether people like Peter Wexler, our current President, or Collin Cohen, leading our building effort, or Lucy Milgram, co-teaching with me currently, I am blessed to be surrounded by dedicated, caring volunteers. I feel a true sense of partnership in our

sacred identity of sustaining and enriching the Kol Emeth community with all the volunteers, board members, and committee chairs.

My family deserves appreciation as well. Carol, Joshua, Naomi, and Maytal are all so supportive of what I do. They understand when I need to be called away for something, they listen to me and help me think through the challenges that arise, and all are ready to give me a hug.

There are so many partner organizations in this area. I am grateful to live in a community where the Synagogues and agencies cooperate. We share with the day schools, JCC, Jewish Learning Works, Federation, and so many others a sense of mission to serve the Jewish community in this area. The thriving of Judaism here in the South Peninsula arises in no small part from our desire to work together.

The Talmud teaches the last mentioned in any list is most beloved. In that context, I feel so blessed and grateful to be a part of the Kol Emeth community. There is a an intensity of Jewish living here, an openness to learning and questions, a passion for Israel, that I treasure. I learn so much in so many different ways from people here, whether a new perspective on the death penalty from Larry Marshall or new approaches to visiting patients in the hospital from Bruce Feldstein. I am regularly challenged in ways that inspire growth and spiritual development, and cared for in ways that sustain me. I cannot thank you enough for both the honor of being one of the Rabbis here and for being a part of this tremendous community.

Shabbat Shalom and A Good Month of Kislev-

Rabbi David Booth

WHERE WE FEAR TO TREAD

NOVEMBER 29, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sometimes, there are messages we fear to send. Places in our emotional landscapes that we dare not visit, lest we be forced to confront that which is there. Vayishlach, the reading for this week, is all about Jacob's fear as he confronts and avoids the damaged relationships he has left in his wake.

Twenty years earlier Jacob conspired with his mother Rebecca to fool Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau. Isaac cries when he learns of the deception; Esau falls into a rage. Jacob flees to Padan Aram where his uncle Lavan lives. There he gathers family and fortune. For Isaac, Rebecca, and Esau twenty years have gone by. But for Jacob, as he returns, he is back emotionally at the same moment from which he fled.

He delays his reunion with Esau, sending out two camps before finally appearing before Esau. Esau falls upon him and hugs him. The Midrash wants Esau to be out for blood, biting at Jacob's neck. Yet the plain meaning of the text is that Esau has moved on. The rage of 20 years ago has been replaced by a craving to know his brother.

Even more troubling is Jacob's pledge to return to his father's house. As he departed the land, God appeared to him at Beit El amid a vision of a ladder. He then swore to return to his father's house. And yet, as he returns to Israel, he delays and delays. We learn of the death of Deborah, Rebecca's nurse. We hear of God telling Jacob to go home. And he persists in delaying.

Aviva Zornberg suggests he is afraid of coming home because he knows that his mother Rebecca has died and he does not want to confront the reality of that loss. There is that which he has left behind and which is too terrifying to confront. The tragedies that follow in his life – first the rape of Dinah, and the seeming murder of Joseph – stem from this repression. That which is hidden and ignored engenders yet more tragedy, more deception, and more delay.

We have places, relationships, conversations, that we fear. We are silent and then never experience the hug. We stay away and miss the last moments. We imagine ourselves to be whole even as these wounds and shadows grow ever more powerful in our inner lives. I invite us in this week of Jacob's delays and broken relationships to seek after courage. God tells Jacob again and again to return home, to return to those feared landscapes so that he can be healed. Perhaps we can hear that deep inner voice urging us

towards healing and reconciliation.

BARGAINING CHIPS

DECEMBER 6, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I wish everyone a joyous Hanukkah. May the lights of the candles each night offer all of us light, joy, hope, and faith.

On a deep level we imagine we have bargaining chips with God, the Universe, that which is beyond the self. In the moment of challenge, we say: this far I can manage, but no further. I will tolerate this, but only if you spare me that.

A woman suffering a recurrence of cancer cannot understand why she is going through this ordeal again. But at least I am the only one, she says. My family is safe. And a primitive basic part of her says: God, I can do this again but only if you keep my husband and children safe. A parent awaits a diagnosis on a child. The physicians are “ruling out” all kinds of terrible possibilities. Taysachs; no. Cancer; no. And with each diagnosis, the parent more and more says: as long as it’s not neurological, we can live with it. As long as it’s treatable, we can manage.

This is where Jacob is as he flees from Esau in last week’s parashah. Esau has threatened to kill him, and Jacob leaves behind everything he has ever known. He is alone, perhaps for the first time in his entire life. And in that moment of being alone, he has vision. God promises to be with him and to bring him back to again possess the land. And Jacob, upon awakening, thinks he has a card to play. He says: If You bring me back, then You will be my God. I can bear this suffering and exile, as long as I know that I will come back. That’s the deal, God.

The truth, however, is that we have no such card to play. We possess no bargaining chips that God or the Universe or the Eternal All accept. As Jacob returns 20 years later, he has learned. He realizes that he has nothing but faith. And so he says: I am smaller than all the love you have offered me up until now. Please continue to be with me and save me from Esau.

Jacob encounters Esau with 400 of his men. Through a combination of his own planning and foresight, alongside a newly mature faith, this potentially deadly encounter becomes instead a reunion of brothers. Jacob continues on his way, Esau on his.

Ours is an era of power and majesty. We are able to do and heal and build so much more than ever

before in human history that we forget our own limits. When the Universe thrusts those limitations back into our face, we want to bargain. Jacob possesses a deeper wisdom. There is already so much that I do not deserve, I am less than all the good that I possess, and even so: I ask You to be with me. And I am asking in humility, from out the depths, with no certainty that You will answer or that you even exist. But I ask anyway, in hope and in faith.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

DECEMBER 13, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every Jewish holy day connects to an historical event. The event itself, such as the victory of the Macabees at Hanukkah, is celebrated. At the same time, the event potentially symbolizes something deeper within the Jewish people or within each individual. I would like to look at the Hanukkah candles through the eyes of the Sfat Emet, a Hasidic Rabbi of the late nineteenth century and what he sees symbolized by their light.

The Hanukkah lights, according to the Sfat Emet, have an inherent capacity to illumine the inner essence of their viewer. They are lit beginning on the left. Left in mystical teachings symbolizes that which is distant from God. So the lights have a particular power to illumine inner truth for everyone, even those “entirely enslaved to the evil inclination.”

As my friend Joshua Weisberg points out, the Sfat Emet talks about Judah encountering Joseph in Egypt using similar language. Judah is in despair when Joseph confronts him and demands that he leave Benjamin in Egypt. In that moment, Judah realizes that he simply cannot do this. And so rather than plead for mercy, or try to invent a reason, Judah simply bares his heart and tells his entire truth. As a result of that act of truth telling, Joseph can no longer restrain himself and he reveals all to Judah.

We also have that capacity to find our inner kol emeth, our hidden places of essential truth. When we find that core, and give voice to it, we ascend to new levels of holiness and possibility. Such moments of self revelation are incredibly generative, creating possibilities both external, usually expressed through creativity, and inner, usually expressed in healing.

The candles of Hanukkah, which can only be seen and not used, are set aside as powerfully symbolic so that they have the special potentiality to illumine that inner authentic place. Then, just as the Macabees were able to uncover light amid darkness, to find hope in despair, so also we can find light and hope in our own inner selves.

As you light candles for the last few nights of Hanukkah, I invite you to view them with this potentiality in mind. I intend to pause with my candles and offer the following kavannah, focusing prayer:

Master of all, healer of all wounds, as I look into these lights, help their light reach my deepest places.

May they illumine the truth in my soul and so reconnect me to my deepest, most authentic self. In their light may I feel the possibility of Your salvation, a salvation that unlocks power and healing within me. So may it be Your will. Amen.

A Happy and Fulfilling Hanukkah!!

Rabbi David Booth

SANDY HOOK

DECEMBER 20, 2012

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Our hearts are breaking; our pillows drenched with tears
 As we see laid to rest those who should rise in play.
 Teachers who gave their lives for their students.
 How long, Lord, how long must we bear such pain?

I want to turn away on this beautiful sun drenched morning
 And forget.
 But their pictures haunt me, the hugs of their parents dropping them off at school
 Can not be darkened.

God, source of Life, fount of blessing, offer comfort and strength
 to those whose burden is sorrow. Your Shekhinah, divine presence, goes into Exile with us. And so this
 painful week of loss, she must attend funeral after funeral. And stand with those parents and siblings
 and friends mourning their lot and their loss.

You have granted to us great power; how marvelous is your Creation!
 Teach us the wisdom and the compassion to temper that power
 So that such loss, such death of young people who ought to be feasting and singing
 Will never be heard again.

God, true judge, we pray, no we beg you to open our eyes.
 Our eyes have turned away too long from the pain of others
 Our eyes have too long let people suffer in silence
 Only to experience their rage and violence

May the lives of these children and teachers, heroes, be a source of blessing as You are the source of
 blessing.
 And may that blessing include a new found compassion, a new willingness to truly see
 those around us who walk amid the darkness

May it be that our prayers, our thoughts, our hopes, and our tears

Can be felt as comfort, love, support, blessing to those who mourn
And may this loss transform us such that never again will tears like this need to be shed.

Amen.

STRIKING FROGS

JANUARY 17, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are now in the midst of reading the plagues narrative in the weekly Torah portion. The second plague of frogs has a grammatical oddity that inspires Rashi to make an insightful comment about how we respond to problems and challenges. Moses tells Pharaoh that the frogs will cover the land. But then, in Ex. 8:2 the verse reads:

Aaron stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt.

Every other reference to this plague has the plural – frogs – but in their appearance, it is a singular frog that arises. This leads Rashi to make the following comment based on the Midrash:

A single large frog arose from the Nile. Each time they struck it, it split into two.

The scene has a certain humor. This large frog comes out of the Nile. They try to kill it, and it makes two more frogs. Those other frogs do the same until quite shortly the land is overrun in part because of the efforts of the Egyptians to kill the one and then many frogs.

Like the Hydra in ancient Greek mythology, Rashi's comment points us towards an essential truth. We often want to solve our problems and fears by striking at them. While this works in some cases, in others it only amplifies the problem. Our strong even violent reaction multiplies the frogs and suddenly we are far worse off than before.

The Egyptians and Pharaoh in particular are consistently portrayed as being stuck in stubborn behavior as they endeavor to hold onto the Israelites. Their tragedy is that their stubborn desire to grasp everything leaves them in the end with nothing. Rashi is warning us here to develop multiple modes of addressing problems and conflict. Pharaoh's heart is hardened, meaning he cannot be influenced by others nor hear their cries. We can see that example and find our own compassion, hear the cries of others, and keep those frogs at bay.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE MYSTICAL TORAH

JANUARY 24, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At Kol Emeth, we have just completed the restoration of a 300 year old Torah. This Torah, according to Rabbi Moshe Druin, is one of the most beautiful Torahs of this type that he has seen. It is unique in many ways but in particular because the scribe who wrote it followed kabbalistic traditions now largely lost to us.

The Torah was written in the area of Prague. The mystical traditions of Spain, encapsulated in the Zohar and other sacred texts, made its way into Prague. The scribe who wrote this Torah received that tradition and wrote a Torah of great quality informed by those traditions. The community- and the mystical traditions – were destroyed during the Holocaust. This Torah is the community's sole survivor.

Our restoration effort is a blessing. Lorri Lewis initially noticed that this Torah had some issues inspiring us to bring out Rabbi Druin to beautifully restore the Torah so it can once again become a living part of our community. This Torah wants to be read, to be used for learning, so that she can continue to be a part of Jewish learning and Jewish tradition. The Nazis tried to bring our holy traditions to an end; Kol Emeth, by preserving and using this Torah, is a victory every time it is used. There is still time to be part of the restoration effort. We set ourselves the goal of \$18,000 both to restore the Torah and to support Kol Emeth religious education. We have raised over \$15,000 and are hoping to complete our efforts soon.

Among the unique qualities of this Torah are the length of each column, the quality of the handwriting, and the interesting letter decorations produced during the Spanish era through to certain communities in the Prague area. There are special pehs in which the peh is doubled inside. There are extended tets, lameds decorated with flags, letters made in larger sizes. While some of these decorations suggest obvious explanations, others are chosen for reasons now lost to us.

As one example, the tet in the word “vayet” meaning stretched, is itself stretched. Thus as Aaron stretches his hand out to bring on the plague of frogs, the scribe elongated the tet. I suspect he did so to emphasize the miracle. Aaron stretches forth his hand, and the letter similarly is stretched. It points towards redemption and hope. Many of the letter decorations and choices may indicate messianic or redemptive hopes. But such thoughts are only educated guesses in the absence of a clear tradition.

You can find around the building photos taken by Benjamin Cintz (himself the son of one of KE's founding members) that show some of these unique decorations. Each picture is accompanied by an English translation of the relevant verses including a highlight for what is unusual. There is then a question next to it. Why has the scribe made this decoration? What does it mean or signify? I am hoping people will use the opportunity to imagine what ideas or stories the scribe might have in mind. Then we can write our own book of midrashim, the midrash of Kol Emeth on our special Torah.

I look forward to hearing from you and creating together our own book of stories, of imagination, and of mystical traditions.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

THE ROAST SHOP

JANUARY 31, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Roast Shop

565 Bryant St in Palo Alto

There is a new Kosher restaurant in downtown Palo Alto: the Roast Shop. I've been there four times now and want to share my impressions of this tasty new option. After the Kitchen Table sadly closed last year, we were left only with Izzy's Bagels for kosher options. While I truly love Izzy's, every now and then I like a place I can potentially go for dinner and where I can order meat.

The Roast Shop is a casual deli right in downtown. They serve deli favorites like pastrami, corned beef, or fried chicken. They cure their own pastrami which I like quite a lot. It is very flavorful and not too salty. I've had the pastrami, the corned beef, and tried a bite of the fried chicken. All were good.

We are in California, so some of the sauces have a nice kick to them. The standard Pastrami sandwich is surprisingly horseradish hot. I loved it, but it was a bit much for my daughter. If you do not like spicy hot, be sure to request less of the spicy. The pickles were good, but not great.

I also like the California / Atkins touch. They had a parallel Salad and Sandwich menu, meaning you can get a Pastrami sandwich or a Pastrami salad. So for those avoiding bread, it's an easy place to find an alternative.

They have some higher end items as well, including lamb and rib eye. I haven't tried them – I keep wanting to try the Pastrami—but they look promising on the menu if you want something a bit more substantial.

There are a number of salad sides including baked beans and coleslaw. The baked beans and bits I thought was a lot of fun. The coleslaw and other sides are good but unsurprising.

Prices are extremely reasonable. \$11 for a sandwich or salad, \$2.50 for sides. It's easy to have a terrific lunch for less than \$15. The one downside is a lack of vegetarian options. They have one roasted vegetables sandwich. I brought my son the vegetarian and he waited to have dinner until we got back home.

The Roast Shop is a much needed and extremely tasty addition to downtown. I urge you to check it out and help keep Palo Alto Kosher!!

HEARING YITRO

FEBRUARY 7, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Jethro hears and so goes to Moses. What, ask the commentaries, did he hear? Some say he heard of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. This so impressed him with God's might that he journeyed to Moses and converted to Judaism. Others say he heard of the victory against Amalek. From this he realized the Israelite camp could defend itself and so he was willing to bring his grandchildren back to be with Moses.

Most intriguing is the Hasidic commentary. He heard: he went to go and see and notice Moses. And what he saw was disturbing. This man, so attentive and caring, barely noticed the arrival of his wife and children. This man who paused to notice the miracle of the burning bush and who saved the Israelite from the hands of an Egyptian, sat in judgment all day but heard very little.

As a result, Yitro says to Moses: pay attention to me. That was the whole of his advice: listen to me. Meaning, notice the people around you. Listen. See them. Pause to give your children a hug, your wife a kiss. Otherwise you are blind to the miracles around you every day.

And then we come to the end of the reading. We are instructed: do not reveal your nakedness on the steps to the altar. Says Rashi: they were never truly revealing themselves. Rather, there was a concern they might treat the stones disrespectfully. If we are commanded to respect stones, says Rashi, all the more so we need to treat people with respect.

We end where we begin. Torah and worship are received only in a state of attentiveness, of noticing and caring for the divine quality of those around us. Prayer exists to refine that part of ourselves that is filled with compassion, to develop and extend our capacity to listen and care.

So the giving of the Ten Commandments waits on Yitro telling Moses: listen. And the building of the Mishkan, the movable sanctuary in the Desert, concludes with a deep warning to care and respect other people.

This week, as we begin to imagine an altar being built in our midst, let us build something from our own inner capacity to listen, to be compassionate, and so to find God indeed dwelling in our midst.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

BUILD A SANCTUARY

FEBRUARY 14, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God commands us to build a Sanctuary within which God might dwell. The Israelites construct for God a physical location within which God's presence can be most intensely felt. The Torah tells us that God's voice will emanate from this structure. There are two angels Keruvim, that face one another. Their hands form a chair that is left empty. It is from that space that God's voice is heard. In other words, God's presence is felt but not seen.

Sight is our most used sense, but also one most subject to deception. Both in ancient – “watch for the lure of your eyes” – and in our own era – think of optical illusions or movies – eyesight most easily leads us astray. Visual images overpower both heart and mind. This is why media images are so powerful. They bypass our usual conception of self and lodge themselves deeply in places they may not belong.

For this reason, we do not see God. The second of the Ten Sayings warns us from making idols and other physical representations of God. The details of the desert Sanctuary further this spiritual conception by making God invisible.

Build a Sanctuary that I can dwell in your midst, says God. That commandment is spoken to the Israelites in their era. But I believe it addresses us as well. We are commanded to create inner and outer structures that make room for God in the world. It is a mitzvah to explore our spiritual lives to create room for one another (morality) and our Creator (spirituality.) Mishkan structures are a means by which that space is created in our moral and spiritual lives.

When someone makes a point of coming to Saturday morning services so that she can sit next to her friend who has just experienced a tragic loss, she is building a Mishkan. And she is then met by a surprise of her own. She had not been to Kol Emeth for a while. She come to support her friend, to create the space to honor and support another human. But in that space she encountered something else of the spirit as well.

When a three year old climbs the bimah steps to her Baubie, we have a chance to build a Mishkan. The child sees the special quality of that place and wants to join her Baubie there. We in the community accept it as an act of love, and so make space for her and for other small children. By accepting normal behavior of three year olds as prayer, we create room for three year olds and their parents. That is how

to build a Mishkan.

And when we stand silently, focused, ready to pray, we offer ourselves to those around us. We as a community facilitate the individual in his or her ability to reach out to God. Our supportive silence lifts up and so builds that Mishkan space.

May we all be inspired to find paths and ways to build a Mishkan and so invite God, experienced in so many different places and ways, to dwell in our midst.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

PURIM IS COMING! PURIM IS COMING!

FEBRUARY 21, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Hasidic Rabbis make a connection between Yom Kippur and Purim. First, in playful fashion, they note that Yom HaKiPURIM contains the word Purim. Second, they note a surprising similarity in theme. Yom Kippur is all about Teshuvah, about reorienting ourselves back to our most holy essential self. And Purim contains that same theme.

The Sfat Emet points out that Mordecai twice “returns before the King.” The word “returns” is the same as the Hebrew word for Teshuvah, repentance. As a result, the Sfat Emet teaches that Mordecai engaged in a complex process of teshuvah during the course of the Purim narrative.

Initially, Mordecai is struggling with a potential terror. The world seems in chaos. Haman gains power because of the capricious rule of Ahasverous and decides almost on a whim to kill all the Jews. The orderliness of the world collapses in the absence of the King. Haman can do as he will, seemingly without check. This is the moment when I hear a loved one has been diagnosed with a terrible illness or that I have lost my job. My world is turned upside down and I easily lose my balance.

In that moment, Mordecai turns towards God and faith. He may be angry, he may go through his own trial of faith. Yet he emerges from that ready to act, to assert that the world may be burning, but then the righteous person must fight the flames. And so he goes before Esther and convinces her to act and save the Jewish people. That is his first moment of Teshuvah. It is a Teshuvah that comes from a low place, a sense that all is lost and hopeless. It requires immense courage in that moment to believe, to assert that the world has meaning and that our actions matter.

Yet the phrase “he turned before the King” appears a second time. This time it is after Haman has been forced to lead Mordecai through the gates of the city proclaiming “Thus is done to one who honors the King.” This teshuvah, this act of return to essential self, comes in the moment of being raised up. Mordecai now is in a high place, raised up above others. And it is in this moment as well that he turns back, breathes, and reconnects.

These two moments of Teshuvah parallel Yom Kippur and Purim. That teshuvah from the low place, from the deep existential yearning of our life, is that of Yom Kippur. The second, coming from the high place of joy, is of Purim. “Rejoice always before God” says the Psalmist. Joy is another means by which we

connect ourselves to our deepest places, to true meaning, to that which some of us call God.

That act of Teshuvah, according to the Rabbis, makes this whole generation worthy for the return to Israel. Thus the Purim story becomes an essential ingredient of the Zionist story. It is for this reason that this Purim we are raising money for a medical center in the Arava from the project launched at Yom Kippur. Kol Emeth is partnering with a number of other Synagogues and the JNF to build a much needed medical center in central Israel. We have committed to raising \$50,000. We have only \$5,000 to go. This is more than Kol Emeth has ever been able to raise for an Israel project before and shows our community's commitment to building the land of Israel. I invite you to bring your generosity to Purim this year. Any donation is appreciated – I want us as an entire community to participate in the mitzvah of building the land of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!!

Rabbi David Booth

FROM LAUGHTER TO HOPE

FEBRUARY 28, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As we recover from our Purim revelry, perhaps we look at the world in a new way. Purim focuses us on laughter, frivolity, fun. It comes along just as the seasons are changing, as the days are suddenly lengthening. It is abrupt. A few short weeks ago all was barren. The nights were long, the mornings dark. Now the sun arises before I do. I can hear birds and squirrels making their morning clatter while still in bed.

It is in this moment of transition from dark to light that we challenge ourselves to go from sadness to joy. And the change comes whether we are ready or not. Purim commands us to joy, and laughter. We are not always ready, but then someone says just the right thing, tells one good joke, and we crack up. We allow all that is tightly held together to come undone. Cracking up means the tension is released. It also invites the possibility of real change. We can crack up and then put the pieces back in new places.

And just as these changes are happening inside and outside, we read of the building of the Tabernacle. This movable Sanctuary had incredibly detailed building instructions. There were equally details instructions for the rituals that would take place inside. There is a parallel between the inner and the outer. Light can give way to laughter and laughter to hope. I crack up and I feel better by letting those pieces get jumbled for a moment.

And then I begin getting ready for Passover. There is so much ritual. Passover, unlike Purim, is laden with commandments and preparation. It is probably the most work intensive of all Jewish holidays. Why? Because in this moment of renewal, of opportunity, of cracking up, we are most open to change that invites hope and that inspires healing. Yet to get there requires real effort and work. If we just crack up, if we just laugh, the potentiality of the frivolity is lost. If instead we use that joy, that possibility of laughter and light, to heal and restore hope, then we can really celebrate a moment of redemption.

So this week I invite you to take seriously the need for laughter in our lives. Listen to a Cosby routine, or watch Seinfeld or listen to a good joke. And then in that moment of laughing, offer appreciation for something for which you are grateful. Repeat every day this week, and you may find yourself with a new sense of joy and appreciation of every day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 7, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation that goes towards hunger relief but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label. Food processing includes flour and other hametz derivatives in a variety of ways that do not require labeling, but do render a food unkosher for Passover.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them empty through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/jewish-law/holidays/pesah>.

I hope this helps as you being your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SIMPLE ACT OF CARING

MARCH 14, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sometimes, it's the simple things. As part of our lay and staff effort to listen, to hear people's voices and stories, Audra Vaisbort, our Community Connections Manager, has been making time to listen to some of our more elderly members. Her purpose has been to learn where this group feel connected and for what they yearn. We learned some interesting things. This is a group that loves learning and cultural events. Many participate in book clubs, JCC events, and other opportunities to study.

This is also a group that by and large likes much of what KE is currently offering. Some are drawn to services and prayer experiences, others to learning events, and still others to cultural/ community programs. Many indicated their primary yearning was to be able to attend more of our current offerings.

What keeps them away? Many in this demographic find driving at night a challenge. Thus many pass on any event that ends after dark even though it seems interesting or spiritually nurturing. Some find it difficult to attend daytime events as well. Since the closest bus stop is at Gunn High School, about 1/3 of a mile from KE, public transportation isn't a good option for this group.

As a result, we are organizing a corp of people to offer rides to those in need. The system is already working. We have a few people receiving rides to and from daily minyan after the loss of loved ones to say Kaddish. We would like to expand, however, to offer rides to our events as a standard part of the service, class, or event.

Here is how it works. You agree to volunteer, submitting your address and some of the kinds of things you like to attend. We then develop a geographically wide base of volunteer drivers who like to attend a variety of Synagogue events. Separately, we begin reaching out to those who would like rides and work to arrange a match.

This simple mitzvah has potential to help people feel more connected to Kol Emeth and to one another. Too often in our culture we segregate across generational divides. This rides program is a way both to support those in need of rides, and also to make cross generational connections. It is a chance to hear stories and to help one another. Communities are built on these kinds of caring acts. Further, as with any mitzvah, it elevates the person performing the act. It brings the drivers closer to their passengers and closer to that which sustains all. It reminds the driver of his or her power to make a difference in the

world, that he or she is a person of true worth.

I invite you to join our corp of volunteer drivers. Please [contact me](#) or [Audra](#).

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

LET ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY COME AND EAT

MARCH 21, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At the beginning of the Seder we say, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” The Seder itself is telling us: make sure everyone has a place for Seder. And on this night, celebrate freedom and make sure everyone has enough to eat. Celebrating freedom means overcoming the barriers that separate us. It means constructing community in a broader fashion than what we usually imagine.

The Talmud teaches that Jerusalem was destroyed because of a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza. A host, curiously unnamed by the Talmud, meant to invite his friend Kamtza and instead invited his enemy Bar Kamtza. He then wants to throw Bar Kamtza out. Bar Kamtza begs to be allowed to stay, offering even to pay the full cost of the party and still the host refuses. Because of his embarrassment, his sense of being outcast, Bar Kamtza masterminds a chain of events leading to the Roman army destroying Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The narrowing of community is destructive and the broadening constructive. Bar Kamtza and this anonymous host can't even eat together in the same room. It casts the wicked child in a new light to me as well. That child is still at the table. Doesn't that mean something significant?

Martin Luther King Jr, in the “I Have a Dream” Speech, picks up on this theme of broadening community through sharing a meal. He says in part, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.” If those former enemies can share a meal, then they can see that they are in the same community of humanity.

It is burdensome to carry hatred and division. Bar Kamtza's never named host carries in him a great and exhausting anger. Bar Kamtza's anger then in turn becomes destructive far beyond even his imagination. We too carry hatred, animosity, petty dislikes. And they limit us, burden us, restrict us. They shrink our image of community, and make our tables smaller and our hearts constricted. Passover and King remind us: when we let those negative feelings go, when we broaden our tables and hearts, we experience a true freedom, a freedom from the hatred and divisiveness that can poison our hearts and exhaust our spirit. Then we say: Free at last, Thank God Almighty, free at last!

A prayer as we ready ourselves for Pesach:

None of us are bigot, nor racists. And yet: do we judge people on the content of their character or the color of their skin? Do we give people a chance and then another chance and then a third chance? Are we indeed pleasant to all people – offering a hand of welcome and care? We remain enslaved to indifference, to the tiny indignities and hurts that come from inaction. May we soon be free people, free to offer welcome, free to judge our fellow favorably, free and open to every broken heart.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Pesach-

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah over the next three weeks due to the holidays.

SHARED SHABBAT

APRIL 11, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a famous teaching from Pirkei Avot that whenever ten gather, God's presence is found there. In other words, when we form a minyan, a place of worship, we invite God to be with us. Yet the source goes on. When five people or even two people gather, God's presence can be found. This means that acts of building community, of learning together and of sharing meals together, are all ways that we invite something sacred, something of deep and lasting meaning, into our lives. They are all ways that we can begin to feel God's presence around us.

Our experience of God can begin from experience rather than theology. I may be unsure of what I think about God; but I may be sure of the meaning I experience in a shared meal or in an intimate moment of friendship. Pirkei Avot is inviting me to view that experience as holy, as a gateway through which we can come to know God.

This is also why the Rabbis teach that the Shabbat table is like the altar. The meal itself, with blessings and learning but also with human connection, is the gate through which God can enter the world. I have recently taken to inviting my Shabbat guests to share something for which they are grateful. The shared conversation this engenders is moving and meaningful. Something is felt in that moment. The Rabbis are inviting us to name that feeling, that something, as God.

I am passionate about hospitality because I have formed so many lasting connections and friendships over Challah and Kiddush and cookie pie. I watch how meals draw people into the community, how they create opportunities for Jewish learning, inspiration to find Jewish meaning. I feel that Shabbat hospitality is a key means by which Judaism thrives, grows, and is experienced as deeply meaningful. I feel Chabad and many Orthodox communities grow precisely because they share of themselves in this intimate and meaningful way. That challenges us to similarly open our homes and to share of ourselves.

I invite you to participate in our next Shared Shabbat on Friday May 3rd. Some will participate by inviting guests into their homes. Others are matched to those looking for a place. Signups are due by Monday the 15th. We are looking for both hosts and guests – as is often the case, we currently have more hosts than guests – and hoping for people to use their own energy and creativity to invite in people in their lives for whom such a meal could be healing and meaningful.

Perhaps it's a friend with whom a meal like this would energize a friendship. Perhaps it's someone you have met in the community for whom a Shabbat meal could help them feel connected and embraced. Perhaps it's someone at a point of transition in their life where a shared meal could be sustaining. There are as many reasons as there are hosts or guests.

I look forward to hearing about your experiences on what promises to be a rich and meaningful day across our community. May we be blessed to experience God's presence in our midst as we gather for this moment of Shared Shabbat.

For guest form visit tinyurl.com/SharedShabbatGuests2013

For host form visit tinyurl.com/SharedShabbatHosts2013

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

AFFLICTIONS VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

APRIL 18, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

For many years, the medical establishment implied that there were organic illnesses and psychosomatic illnesses. Organic was real disease, psychosomatic only neurotic. Recently, medical practitioners have realized the lines are more blurred than that. Placebos are about 30% effective even on cancers or other “organic” illness, implying that our minds and self are a key component of the healing process. The reverse then also applies. Some illnesses may have no organic cause, but are still real. They may be caused by visible agents – pain or loss – or causes that are harder to determine because medical science and psychology cannot yet comprehend them.

When we thought illness was either real or imagined, the afflictions described by the Torah were quite theologically troubling. The metzora condition matches no known symptoms. It’s not leprosy. It goes from person to clothing and buildings. It deadens part of the flesh and then that dead flesh returns to life. Rambam points out that this disease can only be explained as a punishment. It is an affliction caused by gossip or ego, says Rashi.

Illnesses come from many places. Some are viral, some bacterial, some result from inner pain or inner states too complex to yet comprehend. And sometimes we introduce risk factors. Smoking does not cause cancer, but it does increase the likelihood. Washing hands protects from a number of infections, but is no panacea. Similarly, gossip and ego, like smoking, introduce a spiritual vulnerability.

The physical manifestation is necessary because all too often I fail to see the signs of inner disease in myself. I imagine to myself that I have to speak ill of so and so because I need to let out those bad feelings or I need to prevent him from harming others. Similarly, I justify ego to myself all too easily. I deserve these perquisites. I have earned them and they are my right. And all the time I am lowering others to raise myself up and creating a vulnerability to infection at the soul level.

The healing solution? Isolation, really meditation. The afflicted person is sent outside the camp. As Steinsaltz points out, all the underlying spiritual causes of metzora are social. They come from comparing myself to others. The only way to find healing is to remove myself from that place of comparison and reestablish an inner equilibrium. Only then can I be declared pure. Meditative practices of quiet are a path towards healing, towards reestablishing an equilibrium that allows my spirit to be a source of health in me. What was once a risk factor now becomes a font of blessing.

This week I invite all of us to find time to sit alone. In those moments of quiet, to let go of painful burdensome behaviors. To remind ourselves of our true value and so paradoxically to let go of our ego needs. And to remind ourselves of the hidden healing purity of our soul.

The soul that You have given me, God, is pure. And as I say it, as I live it, I am healed.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

FINDING JOY

APRIL 25, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

All around me, life is returning. Flowers are blooming; leaves are unfolding on the trees. Amid the beauty of this season, and it is immense, I also find it literally hard to breathe. I suffer from seasonal allergies. The layer of pollen coating my car is a reminder of why I'm a bit short of breath, why I seem to have lost my sense of smell.

This year I have started taking an anti-allergy medication. I resisted doing it. It feels like an admission of fragility. It seems somehow a sign of age as well. I notice in myself the allergies getting worse each year. And I do not like the image of myself as needing a pill each morning.

My breathing finally got bad enough, my persistent cough persistent enough, that I had to set aside ego and take the darn pill. And it's a lot better, though far from perfect. Each morning, I can feel the pill start to take effect as my nostrils clear and my throat loses its tightness.

There are many situations where joy blossoms all around us, and for reasons internal and external we find it hard to notice. We can't or won't take that breath that will remind us of joy, of our deep connection to others and to the world around us. Ego gets in the way; it is the pollen of the psychological universe, blocking passages and creating discomfort and pain.

Our fragility also gets in the way. As the world blossoms anew, it can restore hope but it also invites despair. I see the blossoming all around me and wonder: how many more years will I be a part of this moment of life returning? And such worries constrict the throat, impede the cleansing and healing quality of breath.

Prayer for me is sometimes like my claritin pill. There are days when I resist it: I don't want to need it, I don't want to confront what it requires from me to pray in a way that counts. It's easier to float above, to let my throat tighten, than to be honest. Yet the time of prayer unclogs the spirit; it opens my mind and my consciousness in ways that reconnect me with my inner essence. That place of inner connection has a truth that transcends worry and doubt. It connects me to God, a presence beyond the self that offers healing and demands caring. Prayer reminds me to "Love my neighbor as myself." It reconnects me with purpose. In short, it lets me breathe.

The spring is beautiful. To take help and healing that is offered, to be given a pathway by science and medicine to breathe, is such a blessing. I accept it and rejoice in it. Thank you, Most High, that you have given me this day to appreciate and to experience. I will find ways to breathe and to rejoice so that I can find a deeper connection to myself and to what matters in the world.

Shabbat Shalom

THE ISRAELI MOMENT

MAY 2, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel needs more religious pluralism. Israelis have struggled with creating room for religious pluralism because they are so invested in building a Jewish home. In the United States, it's relatively easy to create a space for pluralism because we feel no ownership over other people's spaces. It's great to have such a wonderful Reform neighbor just up the road. We can collaborate and do all kinds of things together. By the same token, they allow certain foods in their kitchen that we at Kol Emeth wouldn't, we each do our prayers and practices differently, and so forth. And so some people choose to make Kol Emeth their home and others are pulled towards Beth Am.

In a similar vein, my expectations on guests in my home are much greater than on someone I meet in the street. In my house, I absolutely expect all male guests to wear a kippah when we recite a blessing. Outside, I expect people to choose to do what they value. I am neither offended nor upset by choices different than mine. So the first question of pluralism is: what do I own?

By the same token, there are some behaviors I will not tolerate anywhere. If I see someone shouting racial epithets at someone, I will not stand idly by even if I am in their space. Were I to see a parent abusing a child, I would get involved even if the abuse were happening in their home. The second question of pluralism is: what can I live with?

Israelis struggle deeply with both questions. If Israel is the home of the Jewish people, then maybe I own every inch of it. And what I might allow you to do in your house is intolerable in mine. This explains much of the struggle over the Wall plaza. It boils down to a question of who owns that space.

Second, the threshold of what can I live with is too low. When people throw rocks and chairs because someone else is reading from a Torah, their threshold of what can I live with is too low. When someone is arrested for disturbing the peace because they are wearing a Tallit, the threshold is too low.

The possible solutions to the Wall plaza center around these issues. Those open to the idea of three spaces, one for men, one for women, and one for egalitarian groups, as Sharansky has proposed, are saying: the Wall can belong to all of us, each with our own space. Those opposed, for different reasons, want that plaza to belong to all and therefore to create one Jewish standard.

A true commitment to pluralism is going to require an American Jewish sensibility. We know how to create space for one another even when we disagree about how those spaces are used. We understand that people are going to do things in their own spaces that may make others unhappy. But I don't own it and so I can live with it.

As Israelis struggle forward to invest the Jewish State with a pluralistic quality, I pray they are informed by the ability that Hillel and Shammai had in their era to learn together, to eat together, to be in one community and yet to have variant practices. May that space for vibrant egalitarian Judaism emerge whole, holy, and soon amid a profound respect for the other.

Shabbat Shalom

ATTUNING THE SOUL

MAY 10, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a voice we all strive to hear. It is those moments when we are lost, unsure, out of place, that we most need that voice and when we have the most difficulty in hearing. There are many distractions which make it hard to hear. Some are the distractions of noise and tumult around us. When we are busy, striving towards only the physical needs of our life, that voice is stilled. It becomes quiet and hard to sense.

Similarly, when we ignore the place in our lives of value and of faith, that voice is drowned out. Doubt does not drown out this voice, but disinterest does. Doubt means we question its authenticity and its origin. Yet that act of questioning is itself a quality of tentativeness that enables us to hear.

An unwillingness to listen to others makes this voice also hard to hear. Our receptivity is a shared capacity. To diminish it in one category of our lives is to diminish it in all. By contrast, when we make room for listening and for compassion, that receptivity increases and the voice is easier to hear.

The moment of revelation at Sinai was a moment when a whole community heard that voice. Moses and the people all together heard and that openness and receptivity transformed them and continues to transform us. It was a moment so unique that it transcends time and continues to ripple out into the universe that is our souls.

As the Talmud teaches, that moment of revelation is ongoing. There continues to be a voice that calls out every day. The Hasidim teach that this voice is the inner voice of conscience and of consciousness. It is found in the place of mystery where self emerges. When we listen to it, it reminds of who we are in our deepest self.

Soloveitchik teaches that Moses had it easier than the rest of us because God told him the task appointed to him. We spend our lives developing ways to hear the voice telling us the reason we are here. Shavout celebrates the moment of revelation, meaning it celebrates our ability to attune ourselves to that inner voice of authenticity that guides us and reminds us of purpose.

This year we will again gather to learn, to increase our receptivity to that inner voice through the refinement of Torah. Some of us will stay up all night, allowing our exhaustion to be a tool to strip away

our connection to the purely physical and to attune our self to something deeper. Then as the sun rises, we will pray and we will hear the story of that moment of revelation, and perhaps, perhaps, experience it in ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A THOUGHT BEFORE SHAVUOT

MAY 14, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Torah was given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai. Says the Talmud: God held the mountain over their heads and said: if you accept Torah, good; otherwise, let this place be your grave. The Talmud offers a different vision in another section, where the mountain is held as a Huppah or wedding canopy. In this vision, Torah is given in love rather than violence.

Immanuel Levinas combines the two teachings. The Torah had to be offered in duress, he says, because they needed to make a choice that precedes choice. They had to accept the Torah completely without a sense of competing options. This is the only possible choice. And yet at the same time such leaps of faith are ultimately acts of love. It is the choice preceding choice. This God has taken us out of Egypt, and we accept the relationship out of passion, out of fear, out of deeply felt commitment. In this teaching, the two visions of the mountain over their heads, one as violence one as huppah, come together.

This causes me to reflect on some of my own key commitments. I was blessed to meet my wife when I was 17 years old and we were married when I was 22. I understood very little of the commitment I was making. Today, I can understand the nature of what I chose. I know the contours of our relationship and what the commitment really means and meant. I pray there is a lot more to be discovered, but now I know what it means in a way that 21 years ago required a leap of faith.

Or the decision to come to Palo Alto. Similarly, it was a leap of faith. I knew on paper and from having met people that Kol Emeth seemed a special place. But ultimately I had to decide without knowing what the future would bring. Now I know what before I only imagined as I feel the blessing of being a Rabbi for this incredible place. These kinds of key decisions of love and commitment are ultimately leaps of faith. They are choices before choice, choices we have to make before we can really understand their meaning. Their meaning is uncovered only as we live out the choice.

Yet if we failed to make such choices, think how empty our lives would be. To be trapped, ready only to make fully informed choices, would be to live a calculated safe life, but one devoid of passion, of commitment, and of love. Sometimes we need to set aside calculation and do what is right.

May Shavuot inspire us with the qualities of courage and trust to enable us to make both the small and the large leaps of faith that fill our lives with meaning.

Shavuot Samech!!

NEW BUILDING

JUNE 6, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This is an exciting moment for Kol Emeth. It's a moment to imagine the courage of KE's founders who envisioned a thriving Jewish community in Palo Alto. It is a moment to thank those who built our Sanctuary in the mid 1980s as well. Silicon Valley was coming into being, and similarly required great imagination and courage.

We stand at a similar moment. Moses calls the assembled people together, both "those standing here this day and those not present this day." Rashi tells us this means that all generations were present in that moment, that the whole Jewish people affirmed the covenant. We too stand in the presence of those who came before us and enabled Kol Emeth to come into being, to grow, to thrive, to become the rich, warm, spiritual learning community that is so meaningful to all of us.

We currently are a community of 600+ families living in a facility designed for 250-300 families. There are not enough bathrooms or classrooms, let alone prayer or learning spaces. Tot Shabbat is bursting out of its room, and we are not sure where to house our youngest families. There are issues around accessibility to people in wheelchairs and walkers. And then all the challenges with the roof, the heating and cooling, sound issues, and so much more. That means we have to do something to keep our home in order. It means a significant capital campaign is necessary alongside a significant building effort. I feel we should seize the moment and engage in hiddur mitzvah – the beautification of commandments – and create a long term home for our community.

Rebuilding means to take who we are in terms of values and to build a place to house our sacred community for ourselves and for generations to come. To build a facility that serves our needs, that has intimacy to it, and uses wisely the space we do have. We now have the opportunity to do something special, something that embodies our values as a community in a way that inspires.

The Board unanimously urges us to vote in favor of moving forward as does the entire Rabbinic Staff at Kol Emeth. The vote is to say we have done enough preliminary work to empower the Board and the Building committees to move forward with design and fund raising. It includes at least three check-in points by the Board to verify that the relevant elements are ready for proceeding to the next stage and that we have sufficient funds to move forward without long term debt. There will be many opportunities for people to get involved as we solidify design and other issues within the community and with the City.

I've invested a lot of my own time and effort to get us to this point because I feel it's necessary for Kol Emeth. We are a shining example of what a Conservative Synagogue can be. This brave step is to choose to do more than renovate our current facility and instead to make for ourselves a long term home to educate our children, to pray together, and to bring glory to the service of God.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PS: I wanted to let everyone know that I leave Monday on a few trips, returning July 20th. I will first be in Italy for a wedding of some congregants, then the 2013 Kol Emeth Israel trip. After the Israel trip, I am going to Denver for a family reunion and some vacation time. I look forward to seeing you at the meeting, and then late July.

FALLING IN LOVE WITH ISRAEL

JUNE 20, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In introducing people to Israel for the first time, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to fall in love with Israel. Travel in Israel means a confrontation with the reality that is Israel often in the face of the imaginative notions and hopes that people have of this incredible place. People are surprised to see Hebrew graffiti and inappropriate "business" cards scattered outside our hotel parking lot.

More substantively, there are deep fissures and real challenges in Israeli society. Going to the Wall is complicated. On the one hand, it is this incredible focus of intense Jewish prayer over millennia. I am moved and transfixed by being there and touching a wall touched by generations of Jews in moments of deep despair and greatest joy. There is a focused invitation to healing and connection.

At the same time, the plaza has become an orthodox and even ultra orthodox place. Our group can pray together only inside the archeological garden and only by reservation. The men's section is far more spacious than the women's. Women of the Wall have made some progress in recent months but continue to be heckled by others and forbidden from reading Torah. So I feel torn at the Wall.

Similarly, there are great economic fissures in Israel. There is a great divide between rich and poor and between the big cities and the smaller towns. I am dazed and amazed to see the progress and economic strength of Israel and saddened to see more beggars and homeless on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. That the Jewish homeland has even one homeless person makes me sad. And then I am lifted up by a stop at the Jaffa Institute – a center committed to helping young people out of the cycle of poverty and into mainstream society.

We toured the City of David site today. It's an amazing archeological site in the middle of an Arab neighborhood. It's so easy literally to turn my back on the Arabs and focus only on the site. The site needs to be there and needs to be excavated, but the needs of the neighborhood have to be respected as well. It symbolizes for me the human challenge of how deeply intertwined Israelis and Palestinians are, layered together across years and place. I yearn for a Jewish state at peace and pray that recent efforts in that direction can bear fruit.

My mother in law once gave my wife the following advice. Choose your spouse, she said, more by your ability to live with his flaws. Put another way, real love means to know the real person – not some

idealized vision. Real love is to know the wholeness of another and love them for the totality of who they are.

Every time I come back here I fall in love again with this place. Not because it's perfect- because it's amazing. It's amazing to see the natural beauty of Israel from an overlook in the Judean hills introduced to me by a dear friend who made aliyah years ago. It's amazing to me to have the bus driver invite me for coffee on my way out of town. It's amazing to see a vibrant real place wrestling in the deepest ways towards achieving some of the highest ideals any nation has ever placed in front of itself.

On this trip, I pray that I can introduce my traveling companions to the reality that is Israel, strengths, weaknesses, blessings, and deep fissures. Because then they can really fall in love with Israel as it truly is.

Shabbat Shalom from The City of Peace, Jerusalem

A FEW ISRAELI ENCOUNTERS

JUNE 27, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

One of the of great things about traveling in Israel with a group is the chance to bring in speakers from a variety of perspectives. I want to share with you two of our experiences.

Issam. On Saturday afternoon, our group was enjoying Shabbat in Jerusalem. A Palestinian named Issam joined us for Shalshudes, the afternoon meal on Shabbat. He grew up in Gaza in a refugee camp. He continues to identify himself as a refugee from Ramle, a city inside the green line in the general Tel Aviv area. As a young man, all his experiences with Israelis were with soldiers telling him where to go and what to do. Most of his family and friends ended up in Israeli jail at some point, leaving him with a very negative sense of Israelis. Then, when we was in his very early twenties, he started working in an Israeli restaurant. He quickly learned Hebrew and then began working the tables. He started to see that Israelis were normal people.

His second key experience was in Eilat. He was working as a janitor in the Eilat bus station, and he noticed a teenage girl crying. He stopped to ask her what was wrong. At first she ignored him – after all he is a strange Palestinian man and she is all on her own. He persisted, and she told him her money had been stolen, and she didn't have enough money to buy a ticket home to Tel Aviv. He gave her the bus fare, which was two days salary for him, and she made her way home. Her family repaid the money a few days later and a great friendship was born.

Issam then started a number of “people to people” efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis together, giving them the opportunity to get to know each other as human beings, including a summer camp for youngsters. He described the first day when both the Israeli and Palestinian participants requested not to be roomed with each other. Within two days, you could no longer tell the two groups apart and great friendship bloomed. As a result of these and other efforts, Issam found his life at risk from the Hamas regime in Gaza and fled to Ramallah.

When we talked bigger picture with Issam, there remained a wide gap even with this person so committed to peace. He agreed that the Arab regimes have used Palestinian suffering for their own purposes, but still self identifies himself as a “double refugee” from both his family's former home in Israel and now from Gaza. He also thinks little of either Netanyahu or Abbas.

Issam struck me as the type of person we will need in order to make peace. He wants a state and he acknowledged the essential humanity of Israelis. There may be a gap in how we each view the world, but it is a gap that can be bridged by our shared humanity.

Reserve Col Gruber. Bentzi Gruber commands a base just outside Gaza. He talked about the IDF code of ethics and the 8 seconds commanders have to make key decisions of life and death. He documented for us ways in which Western media ignores and even covers over terrorist actions. He showed a video of a terrorist grabbing a child to protect himself from IDF soldiers, and a film of an injured terrorist on a stretcher. The terrorist's gun is quickly grabbed by someone else, and now he looks like an injured civilian. He showed UN vehicles actively blocking Israeli tanks and allowing dozens of terrorists to jump inside. He showed us a video of stopping a Hamas terrorist and the short window of time to make decisions and the reluctance of those under his command to use force.

And he talked about peace. He talked about how he wants to keep his mother and family safe, but that he has no desire to kill anyone. He weighs every decision to use force based on criteria of need, mission, and proportionality. He said that the terrorists are his enemy, but that the civilians, the families, the children, are not.

There have been many other encounters and learning, but these two raised both the possibilities of peace and the challenges of getting there. I maintain my hope and pray for peace realizing that it will take courage, creativity, and insight. I pray that the current steps towards negotiations bear true and lasting fruit.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE NEW ZIONISTS

JULY 4, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As I leave Israel, I am struck by the Zionist passion I experienced on this trip on a number of different fronts. I saw people in a variety of different realms of Israeli life seeking ways to change the country with real passion and zeal that their efforts could effect lasting change.

Mitch at the Jaffa Institute made aliyah and found his calling in serving underprivileged young people. These are students who are often malnourished with little to no support at home for their studies, locking them into a cycle of poverty. The Jaffa Institute creates a structured place to go with food, homework support, and the kind of extracurricular activities usually reserved for the wealthy. One student was sneaking bread from their hot lunch. Rather than yell at him, a social worker met the student to find out what was going on. It turned out his mother was home sick and his siblings had not eaten anything in two days. The social worker went to the home to get medical care. They often see people sneaking food which alerts them to a family struggling with hunger then allowing them to support those families. They succeed in getting over 80% of their students into the army, meaning into the mainstream of Israeli life. They believe they are transforming Israel by offering opportunity.

Celia and Eyal down in the Arava are building a new home for Israelis in the geographic heart of the country. We contributed \$50,000 to their new medical center to help attract young families to this developing area in partnership with JNF. Eyal is the mayor of the region. This quiet soft spoken man who had to be strong armed into our picture is no professional politician. He is a PhD in bioengineering and works as both a farmer and scientist. Celia is an artist who helped coordinate an artistic endeavor with KE religious school students and students from the Arava. They both drew beautiful pictures of the other's home. She believes Israelis need to feel a deeper connection to world Jewry than they do and so she is quite passionate about finding other such partnerships with us going forward. Eyal sees the Arava as a growing community that can help address Israel's housing problem. The Arava is also home to AICAT, an incredible initiative that brings farmers from Malaysia, Myanmar, and other impoverished Asian countries. In the Arava they are apprenticed to local farms and taught in school so they can be sent back empowered and able to help their villages. They also become incredible ambassadors for Israel, creating connections in a number of Muslim nations.

We also met Yoav Ende, the Rabbi and director of Hanaton, the only Conservative Kibbutz in existence. 5 years ago, Hanaton was nearly moribund. Only 5 families were left and the government was in the

process of repossessing the land. Ende and some of his friends decided this was their chance to achieve their vision of a community based on egalitarian values, on open communities that live together in a pluralistic way, and about intentional living. The kibbutz is now a hive of activity, educating young Israelis as well as visiting students from our movement in the US. They are building a model community that brings together secular and religious and strives to find ways of sharing public space. That means public shared areas in Hanaton are shomer shabbat, but individual members are free to act as they choose. It means there is one preschool, even though that school is more secular than the Hanaton founders want. It means they are searching for ways to view Arabs in the surrounding areas as part of their community and to find shared ventures.

There is something hopeful happening in Israel away from the press and the publicity. There are religious people and secular people, kibbutznikim and farmers, all uncovering a sense of deep purpose in building Israel. Israelis are seizing their own destiny, no longer waiting for politicians to figure it out. The stakes are too high to wait. Yedidya, our JNF guide, phrased it so powerfully when I asked him how he liked being at JNF. He said: I love it. I get to go to bed every night knowing I made Israel just that much better.

Amen.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

I will be on vacation until July 20th. I look forward to being in touch upon my return.

THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR

AUGUST 8, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This week we hear the Shofar and its sound is startling. How can the holidays be so close? I thought I had more time...And yet – it's time. It's time to look inside, to remind myself both of who I am and more terrifyingly who I can be.

Reb Zusya famously said of himself: I am not afraid when I die that they will ask me why I wasn't more like Abraham, or Moses, or David. I am terribly afraid they will ask me why I wasn't more like Zusya....

So the question of Elul is: how can we be more wholly ourselves? How can we find the hidden wholeness deep within that nurtures and inspires us? The Hasidim tell us that prayer is an act in which we incline our normal physical selves, so easily overwhelmed by the material world, to hear our souls speak. They found language to say: look inside. Find that whole holiness planted within. Because once we find that sacred place, we can learn how to be ourselves.

Judaism has lots of reminders of who we are. The Tallit is there so we aren't distracted by our eyes. It is there to remind us of who we are. It is a regular daily practice, a constant reminder of self. The strings are there to help me have my actions match my intentions.

Torah itself is viewed as a mirror. The stories and narratives and laws aren't about people like us, or with similar situations from which we can learn. Rather, the stories are deeply and authentically about us. We can see ourselves in the text. What Torah then reflects back is the possibility of who we can become. It has the unique ability as a mirror to show what's possible, not merely what is.

The Shofar is another way of reminding us of who we are. It is shocking, surprising, disorienting. It wakes us up with a jolt. That jolt can be a chance to remember: oh yes, this is who I am and this is who I can be. I need to make time to see myself in that reflection of Torah, and be drawn towards my own inner places of healing and creativity.

Elul has come. Let us use this gift of a month to find pathways back to our most sacred self. Then when Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur come around, we can find a true road towards healing, faith, and joy.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

FROM FAULT TO FOAM

AUGUST 15, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I just returned from an amazing day with Ray Pestrong and David Milgram. We took 45 KE members out to Bean Hollow and Pebble Beach to learn some geology and to appreciate the majesty of God's creation. David also taught us pointers on taking better pictures, the better to preserve the feelings and experiences of travel, especially travel that can touch the soul.

The trip was something that stemmed out of my own commitments as a Conservative Jew. The Psalmist teaches: How marvelous is Your creation; You have fashioned all in wisdom. Learning geology allows the marvel of creation to become more clear. Seeing how plate tectonics work in action, how the pressure of the ocean creates beautiful rocks at Pebble Beach or gorgeous stacks near the light house at Pelican Beach increases my appreciation of the marvel of the world. Understanding the wisdom of creation at the most basic levels becomes, for me at least, a path into faith.

If I expect the Bible to teach me history and geology, I have a problem. The world appears to have formed more like 4.5 billion years ago than 5773 years ago. By contrast, if I see the Bible as a path to sacred and moral living, the contradiction disappears. No where does the Bible tell us the age of the Earth, nor deny in any way other scientific discoveries. Some choose to interpret the Bible in these ways, but I as a Conservative Jew choose instead to see the Bible as what it itself purports to be: an instruction manual in how to be a holy person and together to be a holy people.

The Prophets also see in the natural world a metaphor that can instruct. For Amos, earthquakes are signs of God's frustration with our moral failings. For Isaiah, they are metaphors of God's power over the world and God's joy in the world. Jeremiah also sees in the natural world an argument for moral action and faith. Just as water flows in the rivers, just as snow covered peaks retain their snow, so God and the Jewish people are joined. And yet, says Jeremiah, we have forgotten. That is, the world itself symbolizes and invites us towards faith.

We concluded our day with an afternoon service that drew upon the beauty of our surroundings. We began our prayers together, and then each found a quiet spot of our own to pray. Some of us used the words of the Amidah as our guide, others listened to the stillness around them. Then we sang together of God who creates harmony in the world.

The trip was a chance for all of us to start getting ready for the Holidays. It was a chance to experience the beauty and marvel of the world on a new level. It was a chance to see in nature a metaphor and a goad towards moral action and faith. And most important of all, it was a chance to reflect, to slow ourselves down, and reconnect with the deep wellsprings in our hearts.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SHVATIM- THE NEIGHBORHOODS INITIATIVE

AUGUST 22, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Moses confronts Pharaoh: Let My People Go. And Pharaoh says: only the young may go. Moses responds, articulating the strongest statement of communal integrity: no, with our young and old we will go. We are one people and we will not leave anyone behind.

This year, Kol Emeth is endeavoring to nurture communities that restore a feeling of wholeness, an integrity and connection across generations. Along with a number of Synagogues across the country experimenting with ways of deepening members' connection and sense of belonging, Kol Emeth is starting the Shvatim Neighborhood Initiative.

Leslie Brody, our new Community Connections Coordinator, and I have formed 12 geographic neighborhoods of approximately 50 or so members within the Kol Emeth community. Each community has one or two coordinators. Those coordinators are tasked with two responsibilities. First is to organize three neighborhood events over the course of the year, with the first around Sukkot time. Each event will be open to all members of the region, and we hope everyone will attend! These events will include facilitation by our outstanding Shma Koleynu team to include opportunities for meaningful conversation, to really get to know our neighbors.

Second, the coordinators will assist Leslie in Hesed, caring, needs. Each neighborhood will become a center of caring for one another. I believe there are many of us who would be willing to deliver a meal to someone a 1/4 mile away, or offer a ride to Synagogue to someone just down the street. By rooting hesed in each community, I am hopeful we can greatly expand our ability to help one another.

In these two ways I believe neighborhood members will develop closeness to one another and a sense of mutual belonging and care. We know that a person can have only around 100 - 150 meaningful relationships from studies of Facebook and other social media. These neighborhoods have around that number of people, creating an approachable community. In addition, we know that someone who recognizes 2 or 3 other people at a large event will feel as though they belong. As the neighborhoods take root, people coming to larger KE events will find themselves surrounded by people they know, making it easier to enter the larger community as well.

Expect an invitation from your neighborhood coordinator in the next few weeks. And be open to a new

possibility of connection, of caring, and even of friendship.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

JEWISH LEARNING SALONS

AUGUST 29, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There are choices on what we do with our brains. We are constantly bombarded by a variety of unhealthy media and cultural images. Those media images encourage us to consume to great excess, and then to feel bad about how our bodies look as a result. Culturally we are surrounded by encouragements to feel bad, to talk about others, to rehearse old wounds and injuries.

When we hear the words of Torah to choose life, we attempt to let go of these clearly unhealthy patterns. Yet it is easier said than done. As we move away from the overly materialistic and worldly, we are left with a vacuum. In the absence of anything with which to fill that vacuum, we revert to the old behaviors even though we know they are damaging.

Learning together in a community is a key way we fill that vacuum. True learning involves the cognitive by inviting us into rich ideas. It also involves the emotional and spiritual as it invites us to consider ourselves and our lives differently. Such learning happens richly in hevruta, in companionship, because the insights of others allow something different to penetrate our hearts' depths.

This is the intent of our Jewish Learning Salons. These are monthly opportunities to engage in rich topical learning with a community. They meet in groups of 10-15 people in living rooms. They begin with some social time and then turn to facilitated learning. I attend each Salon twice a year. I will be selecting interesting topics that I encounter over the course of the month and then sharing articles and questions with each group. Towards the end of last year, for example, we discussed the question of "celebrity" Rabbis and the various rankings that Newsweek and the Forward newspaper print. Another month we explored the recent election of Ruth Calderon, the new member of Israel's Knesset. She gave an incredible speech teaching Talmud at the Knesset followed by some fascinating responses from the Jewish world.

This year, we plan to explore topics like Synagogue architecture, a blog post by an Orthodox resident of Beit Shemesh frustrated by her mikveh attendant and the ensuing outrage, and many other topics that will arise over the year. We are blessed to have currently three such groups, ably facilitated by Alan Bennett, Len Lehmann, Alice Stiebel, and Miriam Schulman. If you are interested in becoming a new participant, please let me know and we will add you to one of our groups.

I believe it's going to be an incredible year of learning, and learning in ways that cure what ails us, that gives us meaningful topics of conversation, and that invites us to fill our minds with that which can stimulate, inspire, and heal.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note there will be no CyberTorah next week due to Rosh Hashanah.

LSHANA TOVA

SEPTEMBER 3, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I feel so grateful to be a Rabbi here at Kol Emeth and to have the readers near and far for CyberTorah. I often get such insightful comments, and hear such lovely appreciation. Thank you!

I want to wish everyone a Good New Year. This year is ending with so many worries and places of anxiety. And yet, it has also been filled with blessings, with goodness, with new beginnings. There have been friendships made and renewed, new lives brought into the world, and others who have left us forever.

So now as we look forward, we gaze with hope on the year to come. There so many possibilities for each of us as individuals, for all of our communities, and for the world as a whole, to uncover pathways towards blessings.

May this New Year of 5774 for all of us be filled with joy, with prosperity, and most of all with peace.

Lshana Tova-

Rabbi David Booth

YOM KIPPUR IS COMING

SEPTEMBER 12, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Ten Days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur create a false sense of security. In fact, there are only 6 days. 2 are Rosh Hashanah itself, 1 is Shabbat, and 1 is Yom Kippur. The sacred opportunity to repair relationships, to seek healing and change in my own life, has an immediacy when we realize the time is short. I want to suggest three practices in these last few hours to help us orient ourselves towards the cleansing and healing possibility of Yom Kippur.

1. Tzedakah, Charity. The problem of hunger in our community continues to worsen. The continuing economic turmoil means that Second Harvest has seen their need increase by nearly 10% each year for the last three years. Last year, we raised over a ton of food and over \$7000 dollars to play our part in alleviating this need in Santa Clara and San Mateo county. This year, we need to do even more because the need is greater. I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you before Kol Nidre, and to go to <http://shfb.org/> and donate. Please indicate that you are part of the Kol Emeth food drive. Other worthy charities with this same goal include Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger and Jewish Family and Children's Services.
2. Tefilah, Prayer. There is a practice of wearing white for Yom Kippur services as a symbolic practice to strengthen our intention to experience God's cleansing power. It helps us turn away from ego, by making our garments similar one to another. It reminds us of Isaiah's promise that on this day God has the power to cleanse us as white as the driven snow. Perhaps by wearing white we can invite that cleansing power into our lives.
3. Teshuvah, Repentance. These ten days, short though they are, are a unique chance to affirm and heal broken relationships. I suggest finding time to call, email, message, or even speak to in person, friends, family, acquaintances with whom we may have had issues over the year. There is something deeply cleansing in saying: will you forgive me for that which I have done intentionally or unintentionally? It's a way of asking for healing, for a new start, without needing to assign blame or even to list out all that has happened. I am every year caught with too little time for this practice, and every year am amazed by its healing power to set aside that which gets in the way.

May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have a transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

SUKKOT

SEPTEMBER 17, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a reason Sukkot follows so soon upon Yom Kippur. It is on Yom Kippur that we sit with ourselves, trying to uncover what Parker Palmer calls our hidden wholeness and what the Hasids call our *nikudat nefesh*, our soul point. We fast and engage in a variety of ascetic practices in the hope that our physical lacks will remind us of our moral and spiritual lacks. Then that feeling of hunger, of need, can awaken in us a desire for more than food. It can awaken a desire for moral growth, for human connection, for spiritual sustenance.

Yet it is also a difficult day with difficult liturgy. We spend a tremendous amount of time in sitting (and a fair amount in standing) as we pray. We recite, we contemplate. Yom Kippur is hopeful in that it teaches we can change. And our realization that we can change is joyful. Yom Kippur isn't fun, however.

Sukkot is a sharp contrast. On Sukkot we go out – just like Abraham had to go out. We leave our settled places and comfortable homes. If the fast helps remind us of our deepest needs, the Sukkah reminds us of our dependency. We are exposed to the weather and the bugs. (There must be a reason God created mosquitoes, but it's beyond me...) We are less insulated from sound, even. We sit at Yom Kippur – we go out at Sukkot.

Going out carries with it the possibility of change. When Abraham hears God's commandment to go forth, he realizes that he has undergone a change inside. He is ready to listen, to be unsettled, and to uncover his own truest self. He goes out physically but also spiritually to uncharted lands that are hard to find but filled with promise.

It is also at Sukkot that we take the Lulav and Etrog, these most sensual and physical of Jewish ritual objects. By sharp contrast with the asceticism of Yom Kippur, we are overwhelmed by the sights and smells and feel of Sukkot. Having uncovered in ourselves a new way of engaging in our physical selves at Yom Kippur, we immediately enter Sukkot to practice that new and healthier mode.

We hold together the four species, the etrog, willow, palm, and myrtle, because now we are joyously connected to our hidden wholeness after the work of Yom Kippur. That sense of Jews streaming together means we can now imagine a Jewish unity that is healing, a Jewish connection that nurtures. Sukkot is fun – we sing and rejoice and experience the beauty of God's world. And it reminds us of how

fun can be a path towards more whole living.

I invite you this year to join us for Sukkot. The Jews streamed to be together for Yom Kippur, for hard work. Yet Sukkot is just as important. It is more than the reward for the hard work. It is the practice to help create a new more whole way of behaving and being. It is the engagement with our sensual physical selves in ways that elevate and lead towards holy living.

Happy Sukkot to all!!

Rabbi David Booth

SIMCHAT TORAH

SEPTEMBER 25, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This time of year has a flow to it. Each holiday offers us feelings, emotions, that then build towards a final climax as we begin the Torah anew. As the Sfat Emet teaches, the flow of the holiday can be experienced in our most familiar liturgy of the Shma.

Rosh Hashanah focuses us on community. It is the holiday of Clal Yisrael, a connection among Jews. We stream together to be in Synagogue and in one voice we say: Shma Yisrael.

Yom Kippur is the next step. We let go of ego as we fast, wear plain white garments, and spend a day in self denial and prayer. That is why we say Barukh Shem, God's glorious name is praised for ever, out loud. This day alone we set aside the physical and connect deeply towards the spiritual. In that letting go of self, we leave room to connect deeply to our inner life point and to God.

Then comes Sukkot. Now that we have reoriented ourselves in our physicality, made space by letting go of ego, we are ready for experiencing something else. There is room to feel love and to say: You shall love the Lord your God. We can experience inspiration, God's ruach hakodesh or holy spirit. It is a place of creativity and profound healing. And we also realize in that experience, in the openness of our Sukkot, that our newfound sense of joy, creativity, and purpose can feel the whole world. Paradoxically, on this most Jewishly unique holiday we are reconnected with all of humanity.

And from that place we uncover a tremendous fount of joy that can no longer be contained. And we reveal that joy on Simchat Torah as we dance with the Torahs, spinning in ecstatic circles possible only because of this journey. In our circling and dancing we reinforce with joy this journey from Shma (Hear) – to Barukh (Bless) – Ahavta (Love).

And then we start the Torah all over again. And say: God created the world; we can create the self. We have uncovered new aspects of who we are and can be and now we are open to a real new beginning.

May this Simchat Torah be a time of joy, of dancing, of song, and of renewal in joy.

Rabbi David Booth

BACK TO THE WEEK

OCTOBER 3, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Many of us are relieved to have a normal week. No holidays other than Shabbat on the horizon. Six full days to catch up, to work, to reconnect to the digital universe. This rush back into the normal routine undervalues the progression and spiritual work taking place leading up to the holidays.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about reconnecting to the Jewish community and about creating a space for sacred living in our innermost selves. We are drawn together as a community across the world. Everywhere Jews hear the sounds of the Shofar, sing of God's kingship, ask for forgiveness. There is a Jewish unity seldom experienced the rest of the year in which to luxuriate. Similarly, as we confess our failings, as we turn away from our shadow selves, we are creating a space deep inside. We turn away from the usual business of our lives and let ourselves fashion anew a soul vessel capable of containing purpose and holiness, inspiration and healing.

Sukkot then is the first step of filling that soul vessel with the joy of purpose, a joy of Torah and sacred connection. We busy ourselves in many sensual and joyous mitzvot, culminating in the ecstatic joy of Simchat Torah. We dance and sing because we have the gift of Torah that offers us a life sustaining path. And then we read about the creation story, a story that reminds us that we too can recreate ourselves. Genesis teaches that all the hard work of teshuvah, or reorienting ourselves, means we are capable of having our intentions and actions match. The apple that Adam ate made possible a breach between action and intention. Torah is the way to repair that breach.

So as we reenter the world of our normal routines, I invite us to value the spiritual work in which we have engaged these past few weeks. There is a process that has taken place and we can carry it with us into the New Year. That process can inform how we eat, the ways in which we busy our hands, the choices we make of how we fill up our hearts and minds. The space and opportunity has been made deep in our souls. That opportunity creates joy and opens up worlds of creativity. Let there be light!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

GO FORTH AND THE PEW RESEARCH SURVEY

OCTOBER 10, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Pew Research has just released a detailed and troubling survey about the American Jewish Community. You can find it at pewforum.org. There is excellent commentary around the web and so my own reaction is intentionally less about the numbers themselves than what I think constitutes a Jewish community WORTH preserving.

What worries many is the increasing secularization of Jews. As we have become more accepted into American society, and more educated, we are participants in two trends worrisome for the future of Judaism in the US. First, more and more people are leaving organized religion behind. Younger educated Americans are less likely to affiliate with a church or synagogue. Jews mirror this trend but more intensely because of our high educational achievements. Second, those with more education as a group tend to marry later and have fewer children. As a result, the non-Orthodox segment of the Jewish community may be slipping below replacement rate even before we consider those who assimilate or no longer identify as Jews.

There is a lot that is positive in this survey. It shows how important Jewish education is to continuity. It shows that Synagogue membership in a Conservative shul carries with it powerful connections to Judaism and Israel in both behavior and attitude. It measures in concrete ways the successes in the Conservative Jewish world.

Yet, ultimately, the numbers are beside the point. Either Judaism matters in our lives, in which case it's worth struggling against those trends, or it does not, in which case I have no reason to fight against the wider culture and its impulses. The Sfat Emet, a hasidic commentator from the latter half of the 19th century, finds in Abraham an example of devotion. Abraham sees the downfallen state of his world through the metaphor of a house on fire with no one to fix the damage. He takes it upon himself to represent the owner and to save the house.

For the Sfat Emet, this means Abraham's actions and teachings bring the possibility of blessing into the world. His actions inspire others and operate on a mystical plane to change the world for the better. Sfat Emet sees the circumcision as a symbolic act which indicates that we live in an imperfect world that requires our intentional actions to repair. Abraham's hospitality is similarly a vehicle for bringing God's hesed, a sense of love and mercy, into the world.

Judaism today is equally essential. Torah ethics, with their focus on each individual being created in God's image, remains a key lesson for the world today. What our tradition has to say about speech and deed remain deep and seldom heard lessons. Studying Talmud has enriched my life morally and spiritually.

Further, our spiritual practices continue to offer key lessons from the mundane to the supernal. Mundane: it's okay to turn off cell phones and media once a week. The supernal: spiritual living requires effort and work. Abraham's actions were necessary for his spiritual attainments. We too have to work and desire that kind of growth and transformation of self.

There are lots of barriers and ways in which Jewish living is countercultural. There is also an educational challenge because of the sophisticated nature of our practices and liturgy. How many of us realize that the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, for example, is constructed all around 3s and 9s? This is one tidbit that opens the Mahzor to see the great spiritual composition found in the book. Or to realize that saying the grace after meals every night would create a vessel in which my family talks and learns to care for one another almost every single night? These practices required effort to learn and acquire. Their continued observance refines, educates, transforms.

So yes, the numbers matter. They give us a snapshot of how we are in certain key areas. But the real story, and the real potentiality for a thriving American Jewish community, is our belief we have something important to learn and to say to the world. I've staked my claim that we do.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Im off to Baltimore today for the USCJ centennial conference. See you when I get back next week!

100 YEARS OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

OCTOBER 17, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have just returned from the centennial celebration of the Conservative movement. There was an energy, an excitement, that I haven't felt at something like this in a long time. At the end of Shabbat, 150 USYers led the most energetic Havdalah I have ever attended. Along with guitar, violin, and drum, Havdalah rocked. We all sang and danced and rejoiced. There was a similar energy at the centennial dinner when Neshama Carlebach sang. People got up and began circle dancing around the hall – something I can not imagine from even 5 years ago in our movement.

At the same time, there was a real thoughtfulness about the challenges of this moment. Arnie Eisen gave an amazing talk in which he pointed out the reality of our challenges but also the resources and opportunity in front of us. No one, he said, would have predicted Schechter's success in building the Conservative movement 100 years ago. Arnie, and later Rabbi Ed Feinstein, made the key point: we can thrive, but only if we have something to say to American Jews and the world. The flourishing of the vital Jewish center remains essential. We represent a principled pluralism, an open approach to living in the world with Torah as our guide.

Rabbis Harold Kushner and Ed Feinstein offered their own wisdom. On the one hand, Feinstein reminded me of the responsibility of Abraham – and of us, his descendants, to be a blessing to the world. That means we are partners with God because it is our job to fix this veil of tears, this broken world. We have to stand up for homelessness and hunger, for hurt and loss. Jews argue with God and with the world itself. This is a theologically radical posture that says the world as it is is unacceptable. Once I assert that truth, I have no choice but to engage in world creative action. Rabbi Feinstein challenged all of us to attend services with the following intention: May God strengthen me through this time of prayer to be a blessing to myself and others.

Kushner suggested that the two word summary of Conservative Judaism ought to be “sanctify yourselves in Your mitzvot.” Mitzvot are the means by which we learn who we can be. We learn we can choose what and when we eat, with whom and when we have sex. Such practices sanctify the self and prepare us for acting in ways that are blessings. Rabbi Shai Held offered one last thought that tied these two ideas together. He said the great theological divide is less about God and more about whether one views meaning as something we create or something with which we connect.

Our house is on fire. If we do nothing, that amazing endeavor of egalitarian Judaism deeply rooted in Jewish text and law will become a thing of the past to the great detriment of the world. But there is hope as we remind ourselves we still have something critical to say. There is sacredness in the world, and finding our place in sacred practice gives us the tools, wisdom and strength to be a blessing. What could be more important?

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

HOSPITALITY

OCTOBER 24, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are seeing a crisis in Judaism. Fewer and fewer people connect with Judaism as a religious or spiritual endeavor reducing it to the purely cultural. Jews do form a people – our cultural heritage is of great value – but without our spiritual and ethical heritage I doubt we can either survive in the melting pot that is America or that we deserve to do so.

To survive, we will need to act differently. Abraham developed Judaism around opening his tent. He invited the three strangers into his tent and uncovered from that act of hospitality great fertility and connection to God. Put another way, opening his tent drew others into Judaism but also strengthened Abraham's own self and faith.

Following Abraham's example, I believe the most critical thing we can do is engage in radical acts of hospitality. For several years now I have been urging all of us to open our homes to others and for Shabbat dinner in particular. The importance of this kind of hospitality is being mentioned more and more in the Jewish public sphere. Ron Wolfson in [Relational Judaism](#) notes that Shabbat dinners are a non-judgmental opening into Jewish living. Michael Steinhardt, a noted Jewish philanthropist, is beginning a broad initiative around Shabbat dinners with the sense that Shabbat dinners just might save the Jewish people.

So if you have been hosting people, congratulations. There is nothing more important that you could be doing. If you have not yet felt the ability or the courage to do so, I want to encourage you to look again. Abraham, the paradigm of acts of hospitality, opened his tent to three strangers. I guarantee that your living accommodations and food are superior to what Abraham had.

There are three elements to a successful Shabbat meal that leave great flexibility for the host. The first is the ritual. For many, the ritual is a menu of possibilities. The meal can begin with blessings over the wine and bread. It might include Shalom Aleichem or blessing the children. The end of the meal might be with song or with the grace after meals. There are materials on our website and coaching from many at Kol Emeth to learn any piece of this you want in your Friday night ritual.

The second element is the food. Shabbat dinner is Shabbat dinner whether it is fancy or simple, made at home or take out. The third element is the conversation. For some, they look at the Torah portion of the

week and share a thought or question. For others, the conversation might include a learning about something from Jewish culture. And for many, it's the sacred chance to get to know one another.

Synagogues, JCC's, all the structures of the Jewish community can be hard to enter. Opening one's home, by contrast, is a chance to model to others how Shabbat can make a difference in your life, and to show why Judaism matters to you in an open non-judgmental fashion. It can be inspiration to learn about Shabbat rituals and Torah learning to make your table a special and sacred place.

This is our chance to reclaim the most sacred location in Judaism – the Shabbat table- and to invite the American Jewish community to enter the 21st century in a thriving, pluralistic, and sacred manner.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like any help either in finding guests or in the specifics of the ritual.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

HOSPITALITY PART II

OCTOBER 31, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Last week I wrote about the essential quality of home hospitality to revitalize Judaism. The holiest location in the Jewish world is the Shabbat table. If we use our Shabbat tables, and invite others to share with us, we are connecting to a spiritually transformative technology.

Abraham was told by God to become a blessing to the world. The first act of making that into a mitzvah, of bringing this value of blessing into the world of action, was to invite those in need into his home. That mission based action was both about outreach, to show others the beauty of Jewish living, and about caring for those in need, by literally feeding the hungry.

Our mission as Jews continues to be about being a blessing to “all the families of the Earth.” This is why we are exploring having Kol Emeth host a men’s shelter in February or March. As many of you know, Palo Alto recently banned sleeping overnight in cars. Our area has a genuine homeless problem. The efforts regionally to address it are more and more relying on religious institutions like ours making themselves available to those in need.

The particular program that we are partnering with is open to people for 90 days. Guests are thoroughly screened to make sure they are drug and alcohol free and no risk to anyone. Half to 2/3rd are employed, the rest receive job training. Many of them “graduate” from this program to transitional housing and a job.

The shelter operates from 8pm – 7am each day. Residents store their belongings (most likely under the awning outside the Sanctuary) during the day. They clean up after themselves and can even be given that day’s set up before they go! They receive coupons to shower at local YMCA’s. It is an integral part of the program that they do their chores and take responsibility for the place in which they live.

We have a chance to emulate Abraham. We have a chance to be a blessing in the lives of people who are often underemployed, who have lost homes or who were living out of their cars. It is a chance to partner with skilled professionals and volunteers working hard to help these residents get back on their feet and find homes and jobs. What more sacred use could our building have?

As our opportunity to host this shelter gets closer, there will be calls for volunteers to feed and serve

dinner, to grocery shop, to make sure we have supplies for the residents to take breakfast and lunch with them. In addition, there will be educational and training sessions so we can better understand the people we will be hosting and a larger picture of our Jewish ethical obligations.

I hope you will help us in this sacred act of hospitality!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

DIGGING WELLS

NOVEMBER 7, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is an odd anecdote in Isaac's life. He is journeying through the land and needs to find water. He has records of wells his father Abraham dug, but Abimelech, a potentate in the area, initially contests his right to dig there. After some effort, Isaac is able to prove his right to these wells and he and Abimelech make a treaty. There are three such wells: Esek, Sitnah, and Rechovot.

The names of these wells contain a deep secret. Esek means fighting or contention, Sitnah means enmity and Rechovot means wideness. So each well symbolizes a different human capacity and a process of spiritual growth.

Rabbi Shefa Gold suggests that first we have to dig through our contentiousness. We argue sometimes out of ego or simply attachment to what is. First we dig through that resistance. Then we encounter our next challenge, enmity. There is so much that we allow to divide us from those around us. The second well is our challenge to dig through those divisions and hatred. And then we are ready to dig widely, to encounter a certain boundless quality.

The Sfat Emet similarly sees in these wells a process of spiritual growth that leads us to the broadness of Rechovot. For him, each well symbolizes one of the patriarchs. Esek or contention is Abraham's well overcome by Abraham's deepest quality, Hesed, meaning boundless love. Sitnah or enmity is Isaac's well, overcome by Isaac's quality of Yirah, or limitless awe. And finally comes Jacob, who combines both Hesed and Yirah into Torah that becomes wide open, Rechovot.

The story of the wells describes a process of spiritual growth. Certain inner qualities can be developed and strengthened to overcome other destructive aspects of self. The journeys of the Patriarchs becomes a spiritual practice more than a geography lesson.

So this week I invite the following exercise or meditation. Begin by sitting in stillness for a full 2 minutes. Then concentrate on that part of yourself that argues, that fights, that stirs up trouble. Allow yourself to dig through it, to breathe through it, and to imagine in love finding hidden blessings. Then concentrate on that which divides, places of hatred or enmity in the world or in yourself and similarly allow yourself to dig past through them with awe to find the blessings underneath. And finally, to breathe again and to reach out in wideness for joy, for creativity, for blessing.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

BEING IN GOD'S CAMP

NOVEMBER 14, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Jacob returns to the scene of the crime. Twenty years earlier he stole the blessing from Esau. Now he is back, and it is time to face the music. He knows tomorrow at dawn he will meet his brother. He is afraid, worried and anxious. He has a vision of God and realizes that he is in the Camp of God, Machnayim.

What does it mean to be in God's camp? For Jacob, it means uncovering in himself courage. It is the courage to speak honestly to Esau. For Jacob, so used to trickery and twisting his speech to get what he needs, it is a big realization. The realization is accompanied by modesty as Jacob understands that he is smaller than all the goodness God has offered him.

Leslie Brody, our Assistant Executive Director, posed this question at a recent staff meeting. What does it mean for us to be in God's camp? What would being in God's camp call from us as people or as a community?

For one thing, it invites us as a community and as individuals to talk about God and faith more and more honestly than we do. I sometimes resist teaching about God or about my own faith in the fear that it will turn people off. I want those who doubt God to feel they have a home here alongside those whose faith is more determined. Further, my own theology is a work in progress. So when I say the word "God" I feel like I mean a great deal. I don't want to deliver a long dissertation every time I say "God" and so sometimes it is easier to speak about uncovering gratitude than uncovering gratitude to God.

I feel there can be a way to talk about God in open, non judgmental terms. In God's camp I believe there is a desire to learn about people's experience of faith and of doubt. The desire for the God-encounter overcomes our need to put other people down, which generally stems from our own insecurity. God's camp is a place where humility transcends insecurity and where honesty trumps deception and subterfuge.

In addition, being in God's camp calls out inner behaviors that leave space for the hidden holiness and wholeness in those around us. Jacob learns to be honest, humble, and straightforward. Those qualities let him see how blessed by God he really is and clears the way for a loving reconciliation with Esau. If we choose to be in God's camp, we work to acquire similar strengths so that we also can appreciate our own blessings (from God). As we uncover that capacity for humility and honesty, we also uncover a capacity

to heal our relationships and to forge even stronger bonds with the people around us.

These are some of my answers of what it might mean to be in God's camp. What about you?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

JFK

NOVEMBER 21, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This Friday marks 50 years from the assassination of President John Kennedy. There are many aspects of that terrible day from which we as a country have as yet to recover. It reminded us of insecurity and vulnerability in ways we hadn't previously known to fear. In particular, it highlighted the power of an individual on the margins of society to cause great harm.

Oswald, on whom much ink has been spilled, was a strange person who may have had some undiagnosed mental illness. This is a man who wandered from place to place and group to group. He was a US Marine who shot himself and got into fights before pleading for a hardship discharge. Then he defected to the Soviet Union, hoping for a Communist utopia before leaving there as well to return to the United States.

I personally question any of the conspiracy theories that surround him. I think we want the assassination to represent certain geopolitical forces that make sense rather than grapple with the hard truth that it may have been the act of a lone and disturbed individual. If we admit that, then we have to realize there are still lots of lone and potentially violent people out there.

Those who live on the margins of society and on the margins of mental health have few places to go. The common resistance to treatment on their part amplifies the difficulties the few resources that do exist have in helping such people. As a Rabbi, such individuals sometimes reach out to me. I see the challenges in getting them housing, treatment, care. Such people often resist social workers and counselors in part because of untreated or poorly treated mental illness.

In recent years we have seen a number of violent incidents from people poorly or under treated for mental illness. The Newtown massacre was one case. The mother of the perpetrator was caught in a terrible situation, lacking the appropriate help for her son. His actions were a tragedy in part because his violent acts were based on delusion and underlying illness.

Synagogues and Churches are one entity where others are willing at least to listen to these marginal people. I spend some of my time caring for people with inadequate or no mental health care, or for people who ought to be taking their medication and do not. They are hard to help. Yet I believe the time I spend in person and on the phone with such people is a key part of their care.

I'm not sure what the long term solution is. But I do believe that willingness on the part of religious institutions to devote their time to listening needs to expand more broadly in our society. Social workers and professionals at wonderful places like Jewish Family and Children Services need more resources and time to help provide the ongoing care needed alongside greater training to learn how to offer help when mental illness leaves people still legally competent but nevertheless in great need of support.

JFK's murder was an awful act. Like so much that is senseless, there is no way to explain it or make meaning out of it. It can however inspire action to prevent violence occurring again. I feel one key lesson still to be learned is to find ways of better caring for those suffering from paranoia, from delusions, from other mental challenges, so that we can meet them with compassion and help find a place for them in healthy productive society.

May God grant that the peace of Shabbat extend through the world.

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVUKKAH

NOVEMBER 27, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year, Thanksgiving will be the 2nd night of Hanukkah. This has never happened before, and won't occur again for millennia if ever. It is because this year is a leap year on the Jewish calendar, bringing Hanukkah close to its earliest possible date. And since November 1st is on a Thursday, Thanksgiving is also the latest it can possibly be.

Thanksgiving and Hanukkah share a theme of appreciation. Both celebrations are dedicated to the notion of cultivating appreciation, of realizing that we need to pause with some regularity and make ourselves aware of the blessings in our life. George Washington, in his original declaration of Thanksgiving, praised God for our success in the Revolution and for the establishment of the new constitution. The language and themes are so similar to the traditional prayer for Hanukkah which thanks God for enabling us to prevail over the Seleucids and for enabling us to reestablish worship in the Temple.

At this moment, we are afflicted by doubts and worries both as Americans and as Jews. We wonder if we still have something special to say to the world. This combined holiday is coming at exactly the right moment to remind us that our message of blessing, of liberty, of service to others, remains deeply important. The darker the world, the more important the symbolism of the Hanukkah lights.

Many of us are exploring ways of combining these celebrations. Most of what I see is about menus. I too think it will be fun to serve latkes at my Thanksgiving meal. Yet I want to suggest that a true pause for gratitude, for reminding ourselves that both traditions urge us to have a meal of appreciation with people about whom we care, is a truly meaningful way to bring these holidays together. That experience of thanksgiving and blessing can then strengthen us to find ways of bringing out light and blessing to others so that we can be a blessing to the world.

So I urge you to recite the Grace after Meals this year after Thanksgiving. For some of us, we will do so in the traditional language. Others may choose to pause after their meal and fulfill the Biblical commandment to eat, be satisfied and then bless. We will bless the good things in our lives alongside the land, both of the United States and Israel. And see in those blessings an inspiration to be a light in the darkness, a beacon of hope.

Happy Hanukkah and Thanksgiving!!

Rabbi David Booth

PUSHING LIGHT AWAY FROM DARKNESS

DECEMBER 5, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Our family's practice is to light one Menorah for each member of our family. As a result, on the last night, we have five Hanukiyot filled with candles as we say the blessings and sing. The light from those candles fills my dining room with light and it also fills our hearts with a sense of joy and blessing. It is no accident we light our candles at the darkest time of the year. We are reminding ourselves that even in the deepest dark there is also the possibility of light.

The candles become symbolic for the Rabbis of our most essential Jewish selves. Each person is a candle for God. We become as it were God's menorah. The mitzvot are the means by which we kindle those inner lights. Just as a flame catches from something hidden that then comes into being, so also the soul can ignite passion, creativity, healing in our deepest selves. The menorah reminds us of who we are and who we can be.

This seems an essential lesson of Judaism. It is our job as Jews to bring the light that pushes away the darkness. That essential teaching is practiced in many different ways. For some it is through Tikkun Olam. When we agree to host a homeless shelter for a month, we are seeing the darkness and despair that can afflict those in need. We choose to be part of the light, providing warmth and welcome at a dark time. For others it is through Shabbat and celebrations. By opening our homes, by preparing our tables, we encourage friendship and sacred connection. Such shared celebrations engender feelings of well being and happiness, as darkness and sadness give way to the light.

For still others prayer is a way of uncovering in the soul our hidden light. The focused quiet of prayer pushes away inner darkness. It fosters joy and healing. People who pray regularly are healthier. A recent study shows that those who pray recover their ability to resist daily temptations. Prayer connects us with the soul and ignites our own hidden light. Torah study also is a means by which we uncover ways of being a light, of driving away the darkness. Whether in its practices and mitzvot or in the stories and narrative, Torah is an instruction book in being a sacred person.

When we embrace our responsibility to be a light to God and the world, we join ourselves to a community of hope and of healing. Judaism has a vital message to the world and to the self. The darkness of hunger, of depression, of loss and hurt, can be overcome. Each of us is a light in the dark, and together we are bright enough to truly change the world and ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah!

Rabbi David Booth

NELSON MANDELA, MAY HIS MEMORY BE FOR A BLESSING.

DECEMBER 12, 2013

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Nelson Mandela is one of the great heroes of our age both for who he was and even more importantly who he chose to become. In his youth, Mandela believed in violence and terror. Like Yassar Arafat, Mandela trained in the former Soviet Union. He had a number of friends and connections around the world that were anti American and anti Israel. It would be easy to write him off.

And yet. Mandela, after spending decades in prison, learned the value of peace and dialogue. He could have become embittered; instead he became an example of a pursuer of peace. He worked with De Klerk, one of the last leaders of apartheid South Africa, to bring about reconciliation. He had a vision of a South Africa that lived in racial harmony. He designed and implemented a process of healing that included bringing perpetrators of violence and hate to justice. That process also came to a clear end, leaving the history as history and allowing the country to begin moving forward.

Mandela's other great claim to fame? Almost uniquely among African leaders, Mandela stepped down after one turn as head of South Africa. He chose to model reconciliation and a peaceful transfer of power. That raises him to the level of figures like George Washington who proved through their actions that they loved their countries more than power. That is why South Africa's chief Rabbi eulogized him by recalling Mandela's "mighty power of forgiveness" and his ability to "to forgive and embrace his brothers and sisters who inflicted so much pain on him and millions of others."

What amazes me about Mandela was his capacity to grow. So many of us, living through his experiences, would have sought vengeance or responded in anger. Mandela chose instead to become an example of peace and leadership that transcends ideology. He helped end apartheid by the moral strength of his example rather than the violence of his youth. And he succeeded in creating a new South Africa with hope for both black and white citizens.

South Africa today, like much of the world, stands at a crossroads. Violence and crime are high and the racial divides seem more threatening than ever. There are many South Africans at Kol Emeth who left in part over concerns for a future for themselves and their children. The world too seems ever more divided along religious and racial lines. We need more people like Mandela, able to transcend backgrounds that can so easily inspire hate and instead turn towards peace. We need more people like

Mandela in whom religious ideals (Mandela self identified as a Methodist) inspire a sense of the essential dignity of every person without regard to creed or skin color.

May we learn from Mandela to seek power for good, and to use it for the benefit of all humanity. May we have the wisdom to lay down power and ego and make room for others. And finally, may God inspire us to be students of both Aaron the High Priest and Nelson Mandela: to pursue and seek peace and to honor all of God's creation.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

CONVERSATIONS

JANUARY 22, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We have just concluded an inspiring Shabbat with Rabbi Larry Hoffman of HUC and Synagogue 3000. Rabbi Hoffman's teachings inspired all of us to think about our prayer life in a much richer way. He pointed out that the prayers exist as a kind of alternative reality that inspires us to think of this world in a very different way. By noticing a God who is merciful and loving, we are inspired to become merciful and loving. By hearing the sounds of the Shofar at Rosh Hashanah, we too can experience the pain of new beginnings, but also the possibility of rebirth. Most of all, he brought a great love of the liturgy and a desire to show the ways in which it continues to speak to us today.

Most challenging was his notion of prayer as drama. Rabbi Hoffman pointed out that prayers are entirely unlike novels, which are a personal and almost private reading endeavor. By contrast, prayers bear a great deal in common with drama, in the sense that something shared is acted out. However, prayer is more personal. Where drama may leave us with lessons, we can hardly act like the characters in Macbeth. By contrast, the drama of the siddur is all about inspiring our actions, changing who we are. Every prayer experience ought to change something in us.

Rabbi Hoffman has for many years worked with Ron Wolfson at Synagogue 3000. We have chosen Wolfson's book *Relational Judaism* as our One Book, One Shul book this year. As a result, there is an opportunity over the next three weeks to address some of the ideas both Hoffman and Wolfson raise as we imagine what can be possible for Kol Emeth.

I'd like to begin thinking about this idea of drama and what it might mean for us in our setting. There are dramatic moments in our prayers, whether the singing as we bring out the Torah, or the quiet of the Amidah, or the humming as the Torah is returned. Our learning and conversations also have a dramatic quality, and often leave us with something that is changed or inspired. Yet I wonder: what would it mean to explore that dramatic quality each Shabbat? Are there ways within our great love of the siddur to reach something inside to be inspired and renewed more deeply? How can we invite a greater focus and intensity to the experience?

I invite you into this conversation because our Shabbat morning is so unique, special and valuable. It is a place of inspiration and renewal, that gives us an experience of quiet and community to recharge our hosed (loving-kindness) batteries so that we can be a blessing. Yet our ongoing efforts and intentionality

are necessary. Only as a communal value, only together, can this sacred space we love so deeply be sustained and renewed. I hope you can join me and Mike Krigel tonight (Wednesday) at Kol Emeth to begin this conversation.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

IMAGINE DAY

JANUARY 30, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As we begin reading of our ancestor's efforts to make a location in which God's presence could be uniquely felt, we too are exploring what it means to build a home for Kol Emeth. After a great deal of prefatory work we are now ready to fully enter the design process itself. Last year we surveyed the congregation, had various focus groups on particular topics, and engaged in a building related discussions in a number of different venues. From that a consensus around adjectives describing our community have emerged.

Among the descriptions are words like "humility." Many have described our community as open and warm, and without much in distinctions of status. Many are proud that no one can tell who the "machors," the wealthy and powerful, are in our community. Our congregation is centered on three pillars: learning, prayer, and community. Each have their place, and each strengthens the other. Finally, in many different ways people have described a sense of the community welling up from deep resources. That is, our singing comes from the congregation rather than a cantor; we are a singing congregation. By the same token, many of our programs and activities emerge from energetic lay leaders. We are much more than the sum of our parts.

What we need to do next is begin to give those adjectives and values some visual form. Rabbi Hoffman, our scholar in residence early this month, suggested gathering our community together for a day of identity and imagination. A number of us felt strongly that Shabbat, despite certain issues, was the ideal day for this. Shabbat is the moment that brings our community together. There are people across generations including children here for our Kol Shabbat program and tots for Tot Shabbat. Further, Shabbat is the vital beating heart of our community and the notion of our new building welling up from the sacredness of Shabbat feels significant.

Our plan for the days is to gather at 9:00am. Please do arrive early so we can make our minyan first thing. We will pray the normal service, though a bit faster, until 11:15am or so. (Please note this means I anticipate reading Torah before 10:00am) At 11:15am, Rabbi Graff and I will teach for a few minutes and give some instructions as we divide the entire community, young and old together, into facilitated groups of around 10 people. Each group will be assigned a place, whether in the Sanctuary, the Social Hall, the Courtyard, or elsewhere and engage in an imaginative exercise centered around metaphors of who we are. (Please bring appropriate clothing- the weather center predicts a high of 60) That exercise

will conclude at 12:20pm with kiddush and festive lunch. We will then reconvene at 1:15pm to unpack and share what we have learned, facilitated by David Waksberg. Our goal will be to share images, but also to unpack their meaning. We imagine this will clarify around a small number of key points that may give us a master image for how we view ourselves.

The only downside to doing this on Shabbat is the inability to write. To overcome this problem, we will be posting a Google doc to the website before Shabbat. Immediately after Shabbat, a “rememberer” from each group will post the metaphors and ideas heard. Then others can go on as well and fill in anything left out. In addition, we will tape the facilitated session led by David and post that as well. Our goal is to make this as sacred and open a process as possible.

The week that follows will include some targeted focus groups including but not limited to our teen madrichim. This will be to gather voices that might otherwise be missed on Shabbat. In addition, Stan Field, our architect, will teach at 1:15pm on February 15th so people can begin to get a sense of who he is and the way he approached architecture in general and sacred architecture in particular. Finally, the neighborhoods will begin to have their open facilitated “kitchen cabinet” sessions focused on the building process so far.

It is going to be an amazing time of living the Torah. God asks us “build Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in your midst.” That’s what we are striving to do.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

IDENTITY DAY

FEBRUARY 6, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A tree. A beehive. A coconut. These were some of the metaphors that came up in trying to articulate the soul of Kol Emeth, the essential self of the community we want to embody in our new building. With approximately 300 participants of all ages, a component of the whole that is KE was named.

The Torah tells us that God wanted the Jewish people to build “Me a Sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.” The odd lack of parallelism – build “Me” a Sanctuary and then God dwells not in its midst but in their midst – invites commentary. The Sfat Emet among others notices this language choice and says that God’s original intent prior to the sin of the Golden Calf was for each human heart to be a receptacle for God.

Our Torah and Haftarah readings this Shabbat suggested three metaphors for God’s location. One is in the Sanctuary built in the desert. The other is in the human soul. And the third, suggested by Isaiah, is the whole world. What appears to happen in the desert is that each person reacts in a whole hearted fashion to help make God immanent in the world. They gift from their heart of their own selves to build the Sanctuary. Each person finds a way to bring an aspect of God from their heart out into the world.

We saw something similar happen on Shabbat. People spoke and talked in a whole hearted way. We each talked of our own experiences at Kol Emeth and how we saw ourselves. That generated a few key themes. Eco systems kept arising that nurture their inhabitants and strengthen them to act in the world. Tree imagery appeared many times, and I realize that trees are found all over our current building. They are on the Ark doors and the stained glass. Plus the trees all around our building, including our beloved olive tree. Trees are a deeply Jewish image. Trees have a few meanings in Jewish literature. There is the sustaining tree of life in the Garden. That tree according to many is made known in our world through Torah – so Torah becomes a tree of life. For the Zohar, the twelve tribes form a world tree from which God’s energy flows into the world.

Canopies that cover and sustain came up as well. One person said Tallit, while others talked of tree canopies and other covers that nurture, comfort and protect. Finally, a sense of holding disparate elements that can then come back into contact arose repeatedly. We are a community that values its different parts and wants those parts to come into contact, much like a loving couple under the Huppah.

I realize that our intergenerational programming on Shabbat or in our new neighborhood initiative are actions or mitzvot associated with these values. Shared Shabbat (sign up now!!) is another way we want to create small spaces that foster deep sustaining relationships. Our Shelter program in March, or all the ways Jewish and world leaders emerge from Kol Emeth, further shows how our eco system gives us sacred energy to go out and change the world for good.

Over the next few months, our architect, Stan Field, will take what he has learned and begin to give form to those concepts. He will design a body to house our community's soul. The design committee, led by Jenn Miller, will represent the community to him. Tina Dinitz and another member of the committee are designated to spend time gathering input and listening to various ideas people may have. This should allow Stan the chance to create and to get a singular unambiguous message from us.

The day ended in a way that showed who we are. Rabbi Graff led us in singing "hashivenu." Beautiful harmonies emerged from the community. It ended and no one moved for a moment for the sheer beauty of it all. That is Kol Emeth.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

ROTATING SHELTER PROGRAM

FEBRUARY 13, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Talmud, in describing Synagogue ritual, tells us the origin of Kiddush. Originally, Kiddush was only recited in the home. However, as homeless people began to stay in the Synagogue as a shelter, there were those without wine, so we began to recite Kiddush in the Synagogue. Similarly, people are prohibited from eating and drinking in a Synagogue unless they are staying there. Both of these sources paint a picture supported by what we know of medieval Synagogues as well. The Synagogue used to have two purposes. The first was a communal gathering space for prayer and learning. The second was a homeless shelter for those in need.

This makes sense. Synagogues were often the largest spaces for gathering. They were also the location in which people learned of their responsibilities to those in need. Very organically they became a space for those in temporary need of housing. Jewish tradition is unambiguous in its command to care for those in need. Sodom and Gemorrah were destroyed, teaches the Talmud and the Zohar, because they did not care for the hungry and the homeless. Those who care for the poor earn a merciful gaze from God, and a place in the world to come.

In our own era of social stratification, it's rare to directly know a homeless person. And yet, the problem persists into our era of affluence. There are many people in this area who cannot afford any housing, even though they may be working. Palo Alto recently outlawed sleeping in cars, further driving this issue of our day to other places. It is a way of closing our eyes to a reality of high housing prices and persistent weak employment.

In March, Kol Emeth is proud to partner with the Rotating Shelter Program to do our part in addressing the problem of homelessness. We plan to use our own building to offer shelter to approximately 15 men, including dinner and groceries for breakfast and lunch. We will do so in a way that makes these men feel like they are welcomed guests in our home by serving them ourselves with food that we make for them. We will invite them to a Friday night service and dinner. In other words, we will recapture one of the original purposes of the Synagogue: a true home for this in need or in a time of transition.

This is a massive volunteer effort. We need over 80 volunteers to make this happen, and currently have about 40 people signed up. There are cooking parties to get ready, dinners to be serviced, and groceries to go out and purchase. Go to <http://tinyurl.com/rotatingshelter> for signups. We need you to make this

possible. Here is a chance to spend 2-3 hours moving beyond talk and concern into action. The Shelter program is outstanding, carefully screening its participants so that those actively looking for work or working get the support to make it through a difficult time. Most of the men go on to transitional housing and work. This program is a key stop gap measure to help carry people through and give them the support they need to get back on their own feet.

I hope you can make time to be a part of this effort. I am so moved that we as a community are taking this project on so wholeheartedly.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE PERFECTION OF SHABBAT

FEBRUARY 20, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God gives Torah twice. First, Moses is with God for 40 days and 40 nights. The Universe only took seven days. Torah is a far more difficult construction and took 40. So something marvelous is happening on Mt. Sinai between God and Moses. The quality of that experience is such that Moses then lingers and throws the people below into panic.

That panic leads them to the frenzy of the Golden Calf. Having been freed of slavery, and now being offered freedom from the body through Torah, through a set of practices that let us sanctify our bodily experiences and to grow beyond their limits, the people lose their courage and instead immerse themselves in the materialism of the Calf. This is why later Moses requires them to drink the ground up remnants of this idol. They wanted it in their flesh; let it then be ingested into their flesh!

And so then they get the second set of tablets. Moses goes back up the mountain for another 40 days. In other words, this second Torah is something other than a duplicate copy and it takes just as long to write. There are key differences between the two, in particular that the first is written by God's own hand, the second by Moses.

Sfat Emet suggests the first Torah was the intended Torah. It is the one that can dwell in each heart, that can inform and guide us in our innermost selves. Yet it is predicated on our physical and then spiritual freedom. This Torah can be heard only when we are free from the physicality of our own bodies. It is the second Torah, after the Golden Calf, that helps guide us even towards that physical freedom. Yet in order to do so, it must itself be more of this world, more of the physical, and so in places can only echo the real truth of the higher Torah.

Shabbat, says Sfat Emet, is the exception. Shabbat is the same in both tablets. It frees us immediately from the body, from the way our physical nature can be a trap, and invites us into something higher. It elevates the physical to let us uncover the latent spiritual potentiality contained within. That is, a simple act like eating becomes a sacred Shabbat meal in which friendships, story, and faith are invited. This is the Shabbat spice of midrashic legend that makes all food on Shabbat taste better. Singing becomes prayer; community becomes sacred.

By the same token, Shabbat also slows us down and gives us a chance to breathe. It is a chance to let go

of our construction of self and experience a different mode. It is a mode less connected to electronics and more connected to people. It is a slower more focused mode, challenging the frenzy of our daily lives.

When the Sages say Shabbat is a taste of the world to come, this is what they mean. It is all about finding our own hidden wholeness. That is why Shabbat is hard. Initially, we are so enslaved to our bodies that it can be hard to slow down in this way. It is less intensely stimulating and so our first reaction is boredom. Further, it is quiet and so some of the thoughts and fears the frenzy pushes away rise up. I want to suggest that if we can find the courage to push past these two feelings, Shabbat offers us something great, something truly marvelous.

It is in Shabbat the we can encounter a world, a self, and a God that is truly worth knowing.

Shabbat Shalom

David Booth

PRAYING FOR RAIN

FEBRUARY 27, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year, this drought, means extra fervency when we recite “ who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.” It has been dry in California- at present around 30% of normal. The ground crunches in ways that feel unnatural. Reservoirs are as low as I have seen them (and I lived here during the '77 drought). So we're a little desperate as the rainy season starts to wind down.

The prayer for rain is recited from Sukkot to Pesach, the rainy season of both Israel and the Bay Area. In the Sephardic rite, the remainder of the year has a different prayer, “ who causes the dew to fall.” That assertion gives the rain comment context. Dew is a natural phenomenon. It occurs in every climate and is necessary for life. It proves that the air even in the driest places possesses some moisture. Rain by contrast is a more contingent experience. Sometimes it rains and sometimes we have drought.

So there are two different theologies at work. In the theology of dew, I am attuning myself to God's presence in the world. The ability of life to thrive is a noticing of God in the world. God, like the dew, is always there. Yet I seldom notice either without conscious effort. Praying for dew seems odd: noticing its existence is an amazing movement of gratitude and awareness.

Rain by contrast offers a more contingent theology. Sometimes that which I request occurs, other times not. Unlike magic, in which I can compel outcomes, prayer is a noticing of my inner most desires. I want God's life sustaining energies felt, and in particular through the presence of rain. So I might mean by this prayer that God is the ultimate cause of rain, but I might also be asking for God to be its proximate cause right now.

The contrast between these two theologies is necessary. There is a way for me of experiencing God in the facts of my life. I need to attune myself to notice God because God is so present, so around me, that I have to fight against tuning God out. At the same time, I want to have the strength to ask God for help in my innermost desires. I don't know whether God will answer, or what the nature of that answer might be. But I choose to believe my asking has meaning.

Prayer is ultimately an act of hope and humility. We have to put aside our careful reasoning and imagine a world in which the rain is falling, in which healing is possible, in which our land can be restored in peace. We have to put aside our own despair and say: this might be possible, God. And then we are

challenged to work to bring such hopes and desires into the world.

May God indeed cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall for blessing!!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

AN OPEN LETTER TO GOD

MARCH 6, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Dear God,

You did something amazing in creating humanity. You created us all in the divine image and you granted us incredible uniqueness. As our Sages wrote, when a human king makes a coin they are all the same. When You make humanity, we are all cast in the image of God and each unique. That uniqueness carries with it a blessing and a risk. The risk is fear – fear of letting others develop their own uniqueness, a fear of being threatened by the otherness of the other. The blessing is to realize that we can find You only by allowing that incredible essential difference. Each one of us captures one aspect of You; the more I truly allow myself to know others, the more I come to learn yet other aspects of You.

Watching the violence unfold now in both Ukraine and Venezuela shows how that fear can lead to violence. I am sad to see leaders afraid of allowing others freedom. They use military forces, arrests, and intimidation to get what they want. I understand the fear. Too much freedom lets something loose they can no longer control. Yet that fear is so destructive.

At the same time, I watch the rest of the world unsure how to act. On the one hand, there is something noble in the desire to refrain from yet another armed conflict. And yet I wonder: Is there a way to act with integrity that inspires those who seek freedom, and puts limits on people like Maduro or Putin who seek chains for others? I don't want another war. But I also want to be a voice that urges a true pursuit of justice that gives each human being the freedom and room to uncover their own divine spark.

At this time of fear, of uncertainty, I pray that You make Your way into the hearts of Your creation. Grant leaders like Putin the courage to make their hearts more gentle, while granting wisdom to the West to enact policies and practices that challenge those who would enslave humanity. Guide us in wisdom to create a world in which we all gaze with wonder on the other and see as part of our own divine mission a responsibility to enable others to uncover their mission, their purpose, their unique teaching.

God who makes peace and order, please grant wholeness, or at least the hint of what that hidden wholeness could be, so that we can find the courage, the strength, and the faith, to truly pursue and love peace.

Shabbat Shalom my beloved Creator,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT A SYNAGOGUE SHOULD BE

MARCH 13, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the last 10 days, I have been filled with a feeling of blessing every time I walk into Kol Emeth. Our building is filled with people whole heartedly engaged in mitzvot of great meaning and significance. Collin Cohen articulated that there are three pillars on which Kol Emeth stands: prayer, Torah, and community. It is amazing to see all of those values being honored so intensely.

Saturday night, for example, Carol and I came to participate in offering dinner to our shelter guests. This month we are hosting a men's shelter, providing them a place to sleep and food to eat. Elizabeth Eastman, chair of the Tikkun Olam committee, has spent countless hours making this major charitable effort possible. We are fulfilling the ancient function of a Synagogue as a shelter for those in need. This is why the blessing for the congregation blesses those who provide both wine for kiddish and havdalah, as well as those who "provide bread for the wayfarer and charity for the poor."

While we were busy feeding our guests, the Social Hall was filled overflowing with items for our Mishloach Manot baskets. Over the last few years, under the leadership of Elaine Sigal and Kathy Reback, Kol Emeth has been sending gifts of food for Purim to every single KE member as well as our students in college. Everyone at Kol Emeth comes to the Synagogue for Yom Kippur; we as a Synagogue go to everyone for Purim.

The next morning, while Mishloach Manot distribution was continuing, there was a cooking party for dinners for the shelter. There was also our regular Sunday morning minyan that starts at 9:15am. Sunday minyan is a lovely and relatively short service. We spend 45 minutes or so in quiet prayer to start our week off right. Then the Talmud class meets at 10:15am, now having met over 40 years. So there is prayer, learning, care for the community, and concern for the wider world, all being honored in our building on one day.

This is what a Synagogue can and should be. It should be a convener of holiness, a place where we can join together around shared values to make a difference in ourselves and in the world. Abraham is commanded to be a blessing. That commandment requires real work. We must nurture ourselves through prayer, learning, and community to have the inner resources to share with others. We need the inspiration that community can provide, and opportunities a strong referential community invites to be a blessing.

Kol Emeth is an amazing place because we create room for leaders like Elizabeth Eastman or so so many others to inspire us, to direct our community, towards ways of touching the hearts of many. This month of Adar / March is intended as a month of joy and gathering. It is this month we are proving how inspiring and joyous it is when a Synagogue fulfills what God intends.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!

Rabbi David Booth

LEARNING HOW TO TALK

MARCH 20, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Esther enters our scene as something of a lightweight. She is beautiful, sexy, and desirable. We learn she is an exile, which offers her back story some weight and sadness, but otherwise see nothing of her that suggests depth. The King chooses her because of her sexual power (each virgin goes in the evening and comes out in the morning, and she is esteemed above all the rest).

Later, as Mordecai uncovers Haman's plot, he tries to get Esther's attention by parading up and down in front of the palace in sack cloths and ashes. Esther, apparently embarrassed, sends her servant down to the gate with other clothes for him to wear. Like a new immigrant, she is more worried about how she will appear than about Mordecai's concerns.

And then something changes in her. Mordecai gives an impassioned speech in which he calls her to task. He says that God will surely save the Jews, but if she isn't involved she will perish. And, he adds, perhaps this opportunity to secure the Persian Jewish community is the reason she became Queen.

Something in that speech resonates. Esther fasts for three days, approaches the King, and saves the Jews. The Talmud teaches that God's spirit descends on her in the third day of the fast. It uses the same language for the way the Judges like Deborah receive divine inspiration. She is even listed as one of seven female prophetesses. And yet that moment of divine inspiration is fleeting, and ultimately she needs to call on her own developing inner resources to have the courage and faith to face both the King and Haman.

It is in those three days of quiet and fasting that Esther learns the real meaning of speech. Prior, she seems more concerned with appearances. After, she learns about meaning and depth. I want to suggest that our own era is similarly too much concerned with appearances, celebrity, and words without thought or depth behind them. Esther suggests a different model.

If we follow the example of Esther, anyone, even an apparent lightweight, can discover words that can save and transform the world. To discover those words requires first a sense of true mission. Perhaps I can save the Jewish people, says Mordecai. Second, it requires time to reflect. Esther fasts for three days. And third, it requires the courage to risk a great deal, in particular to risk being embarrassed.

In our own era, there is way too much noise that distracts us from the kind of quiet contemplation that will inspire meaningful speech. There is a lot around us that has meaning, tasks that need people to undertake, missions from God waiting to be fulfilled, but we can only realize these tasks when we are ready to listen. And finally, there is still the fear of embarrassment to adopt a purpose and to say: This Matters.

May we find the strength, faith, and courage of Esther and so seize the opportunities we are offered to change our corner of the world.

Happy After Purim & Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

APRIL 2, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation that goes towards hunger relief but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label. Food processing includes flour and other hametz derivatives in a variety of ways that do not require labeling but do render a food unkosher of Passover.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at [Pesach Guide](#).

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY

APRIL 10, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At the beginning of the Seder we recite the following: “May all who are hungry come and eat. May all who are needy come and celebrate the Pesach.” These words are a profound challenge. It is easy to have a Seder that leaves this opening declaration empty if we make no effort to feed those who are hungry or to offer meaning to those seeking connection. This year, I want to suggest several ways to give those words meaning and so to encounter the true depth of Passover.

Some year for a chance to celebrate the Seder. Though not lacking food, they hunger for connection and community. Passover is a time to be with family and friends. It is in particular a time where nearly every Jew wants to find others with whom to celebrate. May all who are needy come and celebrate the Pesach. You can make these words real by inviting guests to your Seder. Seder is one of the most celebrated Jewish moments, surpassing in recent years even Yom Kippur. Hospitality is taken more seriously at Passover than any other holiday with clear measurable results. By opening your doors, you give someone a chance to celebrate Passover and to be reconnected with a sense of caring. The surprise is that when we offer caring to others, when we do acts of hesed (of love), we realize our own merit and experience a feeling of God’s hesed in ourselves.

Many in our own immediate area who experience literal hunger on a regular basis. Second Harvest feeds over 250,000 clients per month in our area. Even in this most affluent of enclaves, people are still short of their daily bread. To sit down at Seder invites an awareness of hunger everywhere. When our tables overflow with food, it reminds us of others whose tables are empty. The most basic Jewish command is to be a blessing to the world. You can feed those who are hungry through a donation to [Second Harvest](#) or to other organizations like Mazon or Jewish Family and Children’s Services. The surprise here is that when we are a blessing to others, we realize the blessings in our own lives. We realize that we too can receive God’s blessings in abundance.

Passover is our core narrative. It is more than an historical account. We are celebrating a possibility of redemption and freedom that we experienced once in the Exodus from Egypt, that many experience individually every year, and that we hope for again. This time of the year brings a particular potentiality for hope. The great Hasidic master, Rabbi Heschel of Apt, writes that Passover is the time when our own limited consciousness can be expanded. Our focus on self and ego, on our own day to day needs, can give way to a wider world view that expands to include care for others and an awareness beyond the self we

often name God. Passover's message of freedom, hope, and faith remains remarkably compelling and contemporary. By feeding those who are hungry, we remind ourselves that we are blessed. By making sure all have a place at the Seder, we remind ourselves that we are recipients of an even greater love.

May this Passover be filled with blessing, love, and hope.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

COUNTING THE OMER

MAY 1, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

From Passover through Shavuot we count each day, following the biblical practice to “bring a sheaf (omer) of grain” to the Priest. This practice invites a contemplative time, a practice of having to set aside time to work on acquiring certain behaviors or characteristics. For some, this means naming each week to a particular characteristic like love or strength. Another more personally determined practice is suggested by Sfat Emet.

The Sfat Emet teaches that since Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of good and evil, good and evil are now mixed in the world and in each person. That deep teaching reminds us that we have evil and good in everything we do and in every desire that awakens in us. Thus, even in what appears straightforward there is complexity, a mixture of good and evil.

For example, the love of my children seems entirely good. Yet it can lead sometimes to my being overly involved in their lives. Sometimes I have to remember their choices and behaviors are their own and do not reflect on me. Further, I realize sometimes that that which annoys me in them is often my own foibles and failings. So this entirely good thing – my love for my children – is mixed in with certain dangers.

Another example might be ego. Ego is often viewed as an evil, and indeed arrogance is a destructive and paradoxically constraining emotion. Left unchecked, ego can silence others and destroy sacred energy. Yet here too there is good. Ego also means I speak up when I need to, it means I want to build things and succeed.

In all such cases a key solution is regular effort to distinguish the good from the bad. Such distinction requires constant effort. This time of counting the omer can be such a time of effort. For me, right now, my parenting is one such area. All my children are teens as of last week; one of them is going to college next year. That means I have to look reflectively at my parenting and see how to be in contact with the good and to let go of ego needs and fears that orient me towards evil. I’m feeling another (perennial) issue of attention. How can I give family, friends, community members, the attention they each deserve? When is my own impatience getting in the way, and when am I making good “triage” decisions? When am I getting overly involved and when am I giving people great resources of time and support because it’s what they need?

I invite you over these few weeks to identify one or two of your own issues. Be extra aware of the issue or behavior right, trying to make yourself aware of both that which is good and holy and that which is evil and impure. Work on the level of motivations – what brings the good or the evil out in me? How can I separate the two, and then how can I strengthen that part of myself that brings out the good? A few minutes of such daily reflection over the next few weeks has the potential to invite a great change that can help you bring much more of the good you have into the world.

Sfat Emet warns us that this world is always filled with mixture of good and evil. That means the work can never be fully done, but it also means that effort can have real impact. I wish you a time of growth and even transformation!

Rabbi David Booth

EGALITARIAN JUDAISM

MAY 8, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

What we expect of others says a lot about how we view them. When a Jew becomes bar or bat mitzvah, we count them. They are included in the minyan, for example, which makes a statement that they matter. We let them lead services, which is another way to say that we want to hear their voices.

The expectations on women in Jewish law, their status in Halakhah, does say something about the value of women in the culture. I was in New York City last week for a meeting of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement. We discussed and passed a paper or [teshuvah](#) (follow link to paper) by Rabbi Pamela Barmash on declaring women fully obligated in the mitzvot.

Rabbi Barmash notes that women traditionally were considered exempt from time bound positive commandments, such as morning prayers or hearing the shofar. The reason for that exemption has changed over time. In the middle ages, Abdurham among others identified the concern of the woman having two masters- her husband and God. According to him, the woman should be available to her husband and not have to choose serving God or her husband. As this explanation became socially unacceptable, Hirsch in the 1800s was the first to say that women are on a higher spiritual plane than men, and therefore don't need these particular commandments. This now popular explanation was unmentioned prior to Hirsch. Finally, in the early 20th century, a number of scholars advanced the theory that this exemption was to permit women to care for infants and the elderly, whose needs might sometimes conflict with other positive time bound mitzvot.

Barmash then shows the incoherence of this category of time bound commandments. It includes some mitzvot, like hearing the shofar or saying the grace after meals, that are only sort of time bound. Hearing the shofar is an obligation of the entire day. Saying the grace after meals must be done within an hour or so of the meal, but again has some significant flexibility. By contrast, women are obligated in other commandments that seem equally or more time bound, such as lighting Shabbat candles (must be lit in a relatively narrow range no later than 18 minutes before sundown) or daily prayer (just as time bound as hearing the shofar).

I would add to her argument as well that the exemption of women from the Amidah, which is the central reason women don't count in a minyan or can lead a service in some settings, is directly contradictory to the Mishnah. The Mishnah says women are obligated in prayer, and uses the term tefilah that

everywhere else in the Mishnah means the Amidah. Only here and only Maimonides understands this to mean prayer more generally. This explanation became accepted, leading women to have a lesser prayer obligation, meaning they can neither be in the minyan nor lead a service.

As a result, the CJLS has declared that the laws of the Torah address the entirety of the Jewish people. Tefillin, tzitzit, prayer obligation, the fast of the first born, Shofar, Lulav, are all equally obligated on women now as on men. The only acceptance, born of compassion, is an exemption for those who grew up with a different understanding. Someone raised differently, who finds this too much of a change can continue to act as they did. We choose to honor their sincerity and commitment to a certain understanding of Jewish practice over time.

I am thrilled to be part of this moment of establishing a clear halakhic basis to the equality of women and men under Halakhah. It is long past time, and a terrific and holy statement. May this inspire all of us to new acts of commitment and holiness!!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

BITTUL

MAY 15, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Self negation is rarely considered a Jewish notion. It feels more Buddhist than Jewish. However, Hasidic spiritual practice includes a notion of “bittul,” of letting the self disappear. For example, Sfat Emet, whom I have been studying this year, identifies that letting go of the self is a key practice towards uncovering the divine within.

The Shmita or Sabbatical cycle described in last week’s Torah portion becomes a model of spiritual practice, showing both how to let go of the self and the rewards that result. The Torah says, “When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land is to cease, a Shabbat of rest to God.” That is, in the seventh year, we are to plant nothing and simply live off of what grows on its own and what we have stored.

The Torah realizes this is a terrifying notion and specifically warns us to do this practice anyway. If there are some who worry, or doubt, saying what will we eat, then we are commanded not to listen to them but go forward anyway. The Shmita year is an act of immense trust, letting go of our control, and accepting what we encounter. It feels terrifying because we are not sure we will have enough. And yet, the Torah promises that somehow it will be enough.

This suggests an inner spiritual practice. My boundaries of self and ego are about control. Moments when we are out of control feel frightening. We say that “lost it” or that we “cracked up.” Yet for all that fear, letting go, allowing the constructed boundaries of ego to ebb, is a healthy practice that lets us encounter the “land that I am giving you.”

This practice suggests that it is worth letting go of the self. There is a benefit in working on letting that voice or lens through which I experience the world fade for at least a brief time. By letting that voice fade, by trusting in that which will grow even though the “I” isn’t doing the planting, we allow ourselves the possibility of encountering something else.

That something else, sometimes called God, is hard to encounter with a rigid construction of self. It is only when the boundaries are let down, when I become something deeper in me, that I can experience the deep connection that I have in my own self and to the world around me. I am literally connected to the world – I breath, I constantly exchange atoms with all that is around me, and yet somehow I say: this is me, and that is not.

The shmita is an invitation to let go of that construction of self and to enter dvekut, a sense of union. That experience is the realization of my deep connection to all that is around me. For some, that is named God. For others, it is a deep connection with the Universe and all that is. That state of dvekut is healing and joyous. It is deeply nurturing and incredibly creative. It is the land given to us.

The shmita cycle also suggests that this state is possible only sometimes. It is desirable to let go of the self, to experience our deep connection and then to be restored to a new deeper sense of my own ego and self. That process of renewal allows me to plant, to transform the world, from a place of deep connection and attunement.

Next year marks a shmita year. I intend to work on conquering my own fears of letting go of self, and work towards a deep connection with values, with self, and with an experience I only know how to call God.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

HUNGER

MAY 22, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Another school year is coming to an end. That means school lunch programs are also coming to an end. There are many students, including thousands in our own area, who rely on these meals for critical calories each day. What that means is that summer time is the time of year when food banks and shelters have the greatest demand on their resources.

Isaiah warns us to take note of the poor. What use are our prayers and practices if we turn away from tzedakah? How can we expect God to listen to us if we ourselves are deaf to the cries of the needy around us? We, so quick to raise issues of the efficacy and power of prayer, are ourselves not as quick as we should be to incline our own capacity to hear and help. We want God to listen, but are we attentive?

We pay particular attention to the cries of others when we ourselves want to be heard. There is a practice of making charitable donations at both the High Holidays and Pesach. On both occasions, we want to be heard so we make a point of listening. By contrast, at this time of year, we perhaps are not as worried about being heard and so we more quickly ignore the cries of those who are hungry or in poverty. But this is the time of year when others are in particular need.

There are a number of ways in our community. I'm a fan of Second Harvest. Second Harvest collects food to supply to various pantries and programs for those in need. It's an efficient charity with over 95% of its fund going directly to programs and services. It gets a high four star rating from Charity Navigator. You can donate [here](#).

It is easy in our neighborhoods to never directly encounter someone in need. Yet that relative isolation can be no excuse for deafness. Let us be among those who plead the cause of the poor, who listen to the needs of those around us. Even a small contribution can make a huge difference.

The Bible asks us to set aside the corners of our fields for the needy. Few of us work in agriculture, yet this regular commandment to help the needy feels just as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. Most scholars think that the corners of our fields came to about 3% of the total harvest. This has resulted in the hunger program Mazon pointing out that if we all donated 3% of our grocery and food budgets we could solve the problem of hunger tomorrow.

So I invite you to join me and Carol in making a regular donation to something like Second Harvest, perhaps as a percentage of what you spend on groceries. We alone cannot solve hunger, but if we do our part it can make an immediate difference in the lives of real people in our area. This is the time of greatest need; I hope we can hear the call.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

THE MOVEMENT OF MILK AND CHOCOLATE

MAY 29, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel is the land of milk and honey. It is a vivid image of a land that is filled with a sweet abundance. At Shavuot, we have the custom of eating dairy, and often sweet dairy like cheesecake or blintzes. There are a number of reasons we eat dairy, including a notion that the Israelites weren't ready to eat Kosher animals right after they received Torah. But the most compelling reason to me is that dairy connects us to the life force. Milk is life for mammals, just as Torah is spiritual life for Jews.

So as Shavuot draws near, I want to play with these images a little bit and suggest that Conservative Judaism ought to use this imagery and focus on our own gifts to be the movement of milk and chocolate.

I want to retain milk. Milk reminds us of Israel and shared history. Agriculture and domesticated animals link us to land, to a sense of having a place in which we are settled. Milk is also life giving for infants and so reminds us of the need to be nurtured. People do not live on bread alone, but by God's word, says Moses in Deuteronomy. Milk similarly reminds us symbolically of our need for sustenance both physical and spiritual that comes from outside the self.

Chocolate, by contrast, has very different connotations. Unlike honey (most likely fruit nectar is a better translation), chocolate is itself not inherently sweet, but rather complex and strongly flavored. Furthermore, chocolate is a product of the New World. Its availability and complexity is very much a creation of the modern era. Few can eat it on its own. Rather, it becomes delicious with the addition of fats and sugars.

In a similar fashion, there is deep complexity to Conservative Judaism. We are a varied movement with many different flavors and practices, but with a shared connection around egalitarian Judaism rooted in Rabbinic learning. We also treasure what modernity has to offer, and through our teaching and practice look for ways of bringing the wisdom of traditional Judaism into the reality of modern life. We need the sweet and the fat to eat the chocolate. In the same way, we need the teachings of Torah and the Rabbis to sweeten and help make palatable the modern experience. It is in the combination that the delicious complexity is found.

For that reason, I am suggesting eating chocolate mousse at Shavuot this year. It brings together dairy, the delicious richness of tradition and Israel, with outstanding chocolate, the multiplicity of our

movement alongside its embrace of modernity. This recipe, based on Julia Child's, also adds a dash of liquor to give the dessert a unique personal flavor. It helps remind us of the need to make Judaism our own.

Conservative Judaism Mousse

1 cup cream

1/2 cup butter

3 eggs

8 oz ghirardelli or other high quality semi sweet kosher chocolate

1 tbsp Sabra chocolate liquor (or other liquor to your taste. Hazelnut is good...)

Melt butter and chocolate in a double boiler until smooth. Whip cream until stiff peaks form. Separate eggs. Whip whites until stiff peaks form. Add yolks to butter / chocolate mixture in the following fashion: remove one tbsp. of chocolate mixture and stir into eggs. Then, slowly drizzle eggs into rest of chocolate butter. Combine chocolate, whipped cream, and meringue in large bowl. Now either pour mixture into champagne flutes and refrigerate overnight or refrigerate in bowl overnight. Enjoy!

Shavuot is next week – please join us for our always amazing Tikkun Leil Shavuot, an all night study session. It begins on June 3rd at 8 P.M. with activities for all ages, services from a number of traditions, learning, and sharing until our sunrise service at 5am! And the always delicious 1:30 am blitz breakfast... Not be missed!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

NORMANDY KADDISH

JUNE 3, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I. I have two thoughts as we draw near to Shavuot today. Tonight marks our annual Tikkun Leil, our community gathering of learning to ready ourselves for revelation tomorrow morning. As the Sfatai Emet teaches, the real Torah is located in the heart of each person. The night of study is a path to open our hearts and be ready to hear that element of the divine which lives in each of us. The study session is really all about getting ready, about attuning ourselves so that we can get in touch with the deepest inner place that touches God.

This year I want to especially highlight our sunrise minyan. We pray together at 5am and it is one of the most special prayer experiences of the year. Even if you haven't been to the rest of the study session, come join us as we see the sun rise in the Courtyard, and read of the moment of Revelation. It is a sense of community and of openness that I treasure every year. Feel most welcome!!

II. This Friday marks 60 years since the D-Day invasion that marked the turning point of World War II. Over 10,000 people died on that day. Among those who fought and died were Jewish soldiers as well. Over 500,000 Jewish soldiers served during the war, and around 12,000 gave their lives in service to the United States.

Alan Weinshal was traveling in Normandy and visited the cemetery there in which many of those who perished on that violent awful day are buried. He said:

were there right after the High Holidays. I saw that some of the Magen David had coins and stones placed on top of them, but many others were bare. I know that this was the time of year that people often visit graves of family members. Seeing the empty gravestones triggered something in my mind that had me asking, "who is saying kaddish for these guys?"

This inspired Alan to organize hundreds of Synagogues to make a point of saying a special kaddish of remembrance for all those who died that day, with special attention to remembering the Jewish fallen.

There is no greater mitzvah than honoring those who have died. This was a cause to stop the crematoria of the Holocaust and to save Europe from a regime based on hatred and bigotry. Had they been allowed to complete their horrible designs, the slaughter would have been boundless.

Let us therefore this Thursday at Yizkor and again at services on Shabbat pause to remember those who gave their lives on D-Day and throughout the war. May God offer peace to those who perished, giving them abode among the righteous in Heaven, and grant continued to strength and comfort to those who still carry the burden of loss. Amen.

Rabbi David Booth

OUR HEARTS BREAK

JULY 9, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My heart is broken. It is broken because Jewish Israelis took it into their head to brutally slaughter a Palestinian Arab. It is broken because Jews, and even observant ones, could see anything Jewishly legitimate in such a heinous crime. Torah reminds us that every human being is created in the image of God. That means we do not slaughter and certainly do not burn someone alive. We turn to institutions of justice to maintain order and to protect our people. We are not vigilantes.

My heart is broken. It is broken because missiles at this hour are raining down on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis are huddled in bomb shelters. It is broken because there are people who think this kind of pointless destruction can somehow achieve their political ends. It is broken because there are Hamas terrorists who want Israel to react and even overreact so they can drum up more support for their cause.

In such a moment it is easy to despair. And yet, ours is always a tradition of hope. So in this moment, as the Psalmist asks, from where will my help come?

One place is from mothers who love their children. Golda Meir famously said that peace will come when Arabs love their children more than they hate us. Look at this this amazing story in the Forward: <http://forward.com/articles/201500/families-of-slain-israeli-and-palestinian-teens-tu/>. It is the story of the Fraenkel and Khdeir families drawing comfort from each other. They have each had a child murdered and instead of hating are making an intentional choice to be a model of reconciliation.

From where will help come? From God, says the Psalmist. Help will come from people recognizing God's image in one another. It will come from mothers sharing their grief and being examples of healing. Though it delays, I do believe it will come.

The Israeli military will act in the next few days. I pray that they act with discretion and towards the ending of violence. Israelis cannot live with the ongoing threat of missiles. I also pray that Israeli society will see the importance of more actively combating the price tag movement that teaches acts of vengeance. The murder of Muhammed Abu Khdeir show how easily such talk, graffiti, and minor vandalism can turn into something truly evil.

May we see peace soon and speedily in Israel and throughout the world. May this be the summer when mothers and fathers everywhere realize how much they love their own children and that there simply is no other option than peace.

Rabbi David Booth

HOPE AND WORRY

AUGUST 14, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I feel blessed to have enjoyed an amazing vacation with my family. We drove along the Oregon Coast. We played on sand dunes, ate squeaky cheese, and explored Crater Lake. I got to experience directly the calm and beauty of the Northwest of the United States. This made the contrast with news in the world all the more stark. It seems as though everywhere else, from Ukraine to Iraq to Gaza, the world is in flames.

There are several things that make me nervous, and several that give me hope.

I'm nervous about Putin's adventurism. Not only do his actions threaten hard won European stability, but they embolden others who might chose similarly to act. While a long way from Israel (and Putin is generally quite pro Israel, notwithstanding his other shortcomings), the ongoing fighting in Ukraine can potentially disrupt European order since World War II.

I'm nervous about ISIS and their assorted ideological brothers. ISIS, the nascent Islamic state in bits of Iraq and Syria, shares strong ties with a wider Arabic / Muslim movement. They are connected to Libya, where another such Islamic radical insurgency is ripping a country apart. They also share ideological and religious connections with their fellow Sunni Muslim radicals in Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. They slaughter Christians and Zoroastrians. They blow up historic shrines, Churches, and even Mosques. As this influence gains force in the Middle East, it destroys and brings immense violence to the region and the world.

Finally, I'm nervous about Hamas and its hold on the Gaza strip. Hamas was duly elected and appears to be popular in Gaza. This in spite of their corruption and destructive practices. Concrete intended to build homes and schools was turned instead to tunnels meant only to terrorize. Millions upon millions of relief dollars meant to make the lives of Palestinians better has been misspent on weapons, tunnels, and missiles. Hamas tactically can always be defeated by the IDF. But if they hold the hearts and minds of the population, the problem is much greater.

By contrast, there are several things that give me hope. I'm hopeful that a new coalition of Arabs wants to stop this spread of destructive and radical Sunni Islam. It includes secularists like the Jordanians alongside more religious but less radical groups like the Saudis. It appears that even Iran, Jordan, Saudi

Arabia, and Egypt, want to see Hamas removed from power. Further, all those countries are worried about ISIS and what it may imply for them. They are slowly realizing that Israel is a key actor in maintaining a civilized Middle East. I doubt any of these nations are discovering love for Israel or for Jews; yet they are beginning to see an alignment of interests.

I have hope because of the IDF. Strategically and tactically, they continue to show their ability to defend Israel. Tunnels have been destroyed, missiles blocked by Iron Dome. They continue to have the ability to move at will through Gaza. Further, the IDF has a strong code of conduct in its behavior. They warn people before they strike to limit civilian casualties. When something potentially questionable happens, they investigate and when needed punish those guilty of violating their code of conduct. The IDF is hardly perfect, and every death is a tragedy, but it is a military that institutionally puts sustained effort into incorporating moral behavior into their tactics.

Finally, I have hope because so many around the world, Jewish and non, see the need for Israel. The pro Israel rally in San Francisco was a rally for peace, not vengeance. Israelis talk of a return to peace, without rockets, even with the chance to go out to the beaches of Gaza again. When there is bigotry, we as a community work to stamp it out. This also gives me great hope.

We are in the time of consolation, the special words of comfort that lead us from a day of sadness, the 9th of Av, to a time of renewal, Rosh Hashanah. May true faith come to the world, where we see that God invites compassion, healing, and strength. May those who see in faith only a permission to kill or destroy be weakened. May those who pursue peace, a true and lasting peace, be ever strengthened over those who seek to destroy. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

BLESSING AND BEING BLESSED

AUGUST 21, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Kol Emeth is deeply committed to liturgy, observance, and the rich nurturing quality of Jewish learning. At the same time, we are an innovative and progressive community. The Mishnah reminds us that old wine in new vessels is far preferable to new wine even in an old vessel. I feel we work hard on keeping the sense of meaning, faith, and morality, the old quality wine, at the center of our community. At the same time we recognize a need to renew the vessels, to experiment with new ways of delivering and communicating that meaning.

Last Spring, I was at a very exciting meeting of the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards. We passed a Teshuvah (a Rabbinic response to an issue in Jewish law) written by Rabbi Pamela Barmash creating an intellectual and Halakhic basis for egalitarian Judaism. That Teshuvah highlighted for me how central the egalitarian nature of our community is. By saying that women are equally responsible for the mitzvot, the commandments, we are also saying that women are equally valued. Our community says that both men and women have a voice in ways both literal and figurative.

Dukhening, the practice of Cohenim blessing the people, is the only Synagogue ritual only for men. Along with Flaurie Imberman (chair of Religious Practices), Rabbi Lewis, and Rabbi Graff, alongside other members who chose to attend (the sessions were open to all) we studied this issues last June. Based on two earlier Teshuvot from the movement, we learned several things. First, the daughters of Cohenim share in aspects of the rights of Cohenim. For example, they can eat gifts designated for Cohenim and do not have to redeem their first born children. Second, the dukhening is a Talmudic ritual distinct from the Cohenic offerings in the Temple. In the absence of any Cohen, the service leader still recites the same phrase with a few small differences. The Teshuvah concludes that the daughters of Cohenim may go with the Cohenim to bless the people. (All the Teshuvah are available at rabbinicalassembly.org/jewish-law/committee-jewish-law-and-standards.)

As a result, this High Holidays we will be inviting the daughters of Cohanim to lead the Cohanic blessings, and for daughters of Leviim to be involved in washing the hands of the Cohenim as they prepare to bless the community. Rabbi Lewis, himself a Cohen, has kindly agreed to lead two sessions to help those new to the practice learn how to do it. The sessions will be Sept. 4th at 8pm and Sept 21st at 10am. Further, we will be expanding the opportunities to receive these blessings by also inviting the Cohenim to bless the community at Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. This is the general practice outside

of Israel.

I have always appreciated being blessed by the Cohenim. There is something mystical that touches me by someone being open to channeling blessings from God onto me and the rest of the community. The Cohanic blessings end with the word peace, shalom. They are one vehicle by which peace can be made manifest in the world. I believe inviting women to dukhen is another chance to expand our own experience of God's peace, and to help us find new ways in which we can bring peace into this world all too often enflamed in conflict.

There are very few communities in the Conservative movement who have the Cohenim bless the community. There are even fewer who do so in an egalitarian way. It speaks strongly of us as a community that we can preserve the ancient wine of being blessed and pour it into new vessels of openness and participation.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

(Please note that this article will also appear in the September Voice in the hopes that as many people as possible will know of this change before the High Holidays)

LISTEN UP, ISRAEL.

AUGUST 29, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When we think of Jewish values, a great deal that matters comes up. Tzedakah, Tikkun Olam, Guarding our Tongue, Jewish and Israeli connections, Learning. Yet there is one core Jewish value that is rarely noted or mentioned and is in many ways the most fundamental of them all. That value? Listening.

Jews are so used to speaking that we rarely notice how deep a value listening is. Shma Yisrael is our most beloved and core prayer. Listen, Israel. Pay attention. In order to keep the Mitzvot, we first have to hear them in a deep way. When Moses again and again reminds us to hear the Mitzvot, he means to allow ourselves the spaciousness to hear what they ask of us with all the depth of our self.

This is why Torah constantly renews itself. As we grow, we are able to notice new layers, new meanings, that previously had been closed to us. That growth, though, is only possible when we first pause and take the time to listen. Turn it over and over- everything is in it because in our willingness to listen we can find the deepest truth of our selves slowly being uncovered in the God infused mirror that is Torah.

Listening is a key value for faith, but also for our interactions with others. What greater gift is there than our attention? We often think it is so important to share of ourselves, our thoughts, our stories. Yet it is just as sacred, just as important, to listen to the stories and hopes of others.

A shiva home is one of the few places where we encounter both kinds of listening. A shiva service typically begins with prayer. There is a sacred quiet, a connection with Jews, an invitation to God, a gathering of strength together. Prayer includes a willingness to listen, to be taken in the direction of the prayer, of our thoughts, of our deep soul point. Then, we make space to listen to the stories of those grieving. We create a sacred vessel within which the healing quality of memory and story can take root.

Yet that kind of listening, the kind of listening that connects us to something deep within the self, and that creates a space for blessing, is needed throughout our lives. The Sfat Emet says that hearing is the vessel that allows blessing to be brought into the world. That blessing then can lead us to real peace, to Shalom. This process of listening may have the potential to change the world. It can certainly deepen and strengthen our own immediate community.

This year, I invite all of us as we enter Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, to work on listening.

Whether it means listening in the quiet of prayer, or creating space for others to share of themselves, it is a vessel in which we can find real blessing and real Shalom.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

SLAVERY IN THE BAY AREA

SEPTEMBER 4, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This next Jewish year marks a Sabbatical, a year of release. I have written previously about making this a year to reframe materialism by avoiding significant purchases all year so that our values can take precedence over our spending decisions. The Sabbatical year is a chance to free ourselves from being owned by our things, and reassert our values in what we choose to own.

Sabbatical is also about literal freedom. It was on this year that debts were released and slaves freed. I'm always upset when the Torah talks about slavery. This week we are given a number of humane ways to deal with slavery, but still. The Torah does condone its existence. Amazingly, as Rabbi Shai Held points out, the Torah encourages us to be a refuge for runaway slaves from other nations. That is, we are worried enough about the experience of slavery, aware enough from our own history of being runaway slaves, that we are required to create a safe haven even in the Biblical era.

It is easy to read this and appreciate the Torah's moral advance of the time, but see the material as only a relic from the past. Would that it were so. The truth is, slavery exists in our own era in horrific numbers. And would that it were only in underdeveloped nations. Yet, according to local law enforcement, there are 5000 people in the Bay Area today being held in slavery or quasi slavery. Most are sex workers, and some are held against their will in other service businesses.

Most of those sex workers are extremely underage – between 12-14. Nearly 1/3 of all runaways end up in sex work with no ability to escape. Their movements are restricted, their earnings turned over to others. We can find at risk teens in every zip code with Kol Emeth members. This is not a problem of the past, nor of other places. This is a human concern right here and right now.

As we enter this Sabbatical year, I want to make Kol Emeth a part of the movement to end slavery, to be a refuge as the Torah commands us to be. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the problem. But I suggest three steps everyone can take today.

Kol Emeth is partnering this year with Love Never Fails. Love Never Fails offers education to local at risk teens in area schools. By reaching out to the teens before they get trapped, Love Never Fails gives them tools and a sense of self worth to prevent their ever being enslaved in the first place. Be a part of this by donating through Kol Emeth to Love Never Fails.

Slavery like this exists because there is a demand for it. I believe in my heart that no one at Kol Emeth would ever knowingly participate in such behaviors. Yet it is people in our demographics, with the money to spend, who are the demand. Were American money to disappear from the sex trade, it would almost disappear. There would still be demand, but to a much smaller degree. We must be part of fighting against the demand by making such behavior socially unacceptable and shameful.

We can learn. By making ourselves aware of the signs, we can be part of a network of refuge. If we see a nail or hair salon that appears to be holding its workers, or do business with other service providers that seem problematic, we can help by alerting aid workers and law enforcement. In this way, we can be a people of refuge.

Elizabeth Eastman, our Tikkun Olam chair, will organize a number of educational and sponsorship events this year so that Kol Emeth can be a Synagogue of Refuge that helps promote freedom here at home and everywhere in the world.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

TWO BOOK REVIEWS

SEPTEMBER 11, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'm not much of a book reviewer, but two Kol Emeth members have just had two (very different) but wonderful books come out in the last few weeks. They each have something to offer for this time of year, as we get ready for the holidays, so I wanted to share a short review of each.

From Enemy To Friend by Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Rabbi Eilberg is someone who believes passionately in peace and reconciliation. She has made her life's work about different aspects of healing. She was an early innovator in creating spiritual care through hospice, and is a current leader in the area of interfaith dialogue. She is also learned and thoughtful, using Jewish text as a vehicle to frame her work. This book is in many ways the distillation and intellectual background to the deeply caring and emotional work that has been the core of her professional life.

The book has two components, one stronger in my own estimation than the other. The first, strongest, part is in the area of individual reconciliation. Using Jewish sources and her own wisdom, Amy shows paths by which a lot of healing might take place in our own interpersonal lives. This is a time of year when I assess my own relationships with friends, family, and community. Amy's book is a good guide for that process to find ways of healing broken relationships, sustaining strong ones, and generally enriching my own daily human interactions.

As she ventures into the larger areas of reconciliation between peoples and nations, there is a beacon of hope. Yet I must admit this area of her writing, while hopeful, left me somewhat less convinced. While these texts of reconciliation offer a lot on the interpersonal level, I worry that the geopolitical may require a different approach. Having said that, I'm glad for Amy's hopefulness and challenge.

The Mathematician's Shiva by Stuart Rojstaczer

This is a very different book. The Mathematician's Shiva is light fiction, written to entertain. It ably succeeds in that goal, showing surprising humor and warmth, especially given that this is his first novel. Stuart is a long time KE member and geology professor at Stanford. His own experiences in academia, with immigrant family, and with science have given him marvelous material for a funny and occasionally

moving journey through a crazy dysfunctional family.

The story focuses on a math prodigy, Rachel, who dies early in the book. Her son discovers a great deal about his mother and her world during the course of the shiva. Amid a rumor that she may have solved a key mathematical problem, mathematicians from around the world descend on the shiva and ransack the house. The book is occasionally laugh out loud funny, but also has a touching quality as Stuart explores the meaning of legacy. Anyone with colorful and crazy family (and that would be me, and I suspect most of us...) will enjoy and be touched by this first novel.

These two books on one level couldn't be more different. On another, if you were to read both over the Holidays, the two together offer more than either could alone. Amy's extremely thoughtful and often practical teachings about peace making combined with a meditation on family, life, and legacy, touch on many of the themes the Holidays ought to evoke from us.

Shabbat Shalom and Lshana Tova, and happy reading!

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

SHABBATON

SEPTEMBER 18, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This coming year is a Sabbatical year. This year presents an opportunity to align our values by refraining from major purchases the whole year. It is also a chance to educate ourselves on those who are held as slaves with little chance of ever experiencing a year of release, let alone freedom. Today I want to mention a third spiritual opportunity, to change the way we relate to the Earth itself.

The Sabbatical year is first and foremost an agricultural practice designed to facilitate good stewardship of the world. It commands an awareness of resources and care for that which God has granted us. The Psalmist says it best: The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. That means that we are the recipients of an incredible goodness from God that allows us to live and thrive in the world.

Usually, we take the blessings of food and sustenance as a given. Of course there is enough food on our table. Of course things will grow and flourish. This year has been a reminder that we cannot always assume those blessings. The drought has been intense and destructive. It has highlighted our failure to manage resources well on both the macro and micro scale. There are political and personal issues involved, but there is also a question of prayer.

A key element of prayer is the alignment of the self. For the Sfat Emet and many Hasidic masters, prayer is a means of connecting to the life point that comes directly from God. Prayer uncovers the hidden aspects of that life point and creates potentiality for healing and creativity. That for which we pray exposes something of the innermost self. Beginning at Shmini Atzeret, Jewish practice is to begin praying for rain as we yearn for renewal. Our climate, like that of Israel, is so contingent each year that we begin mentioning God as the ultimate cause of rain at the time when the rain can begin to fall.

The prayer, God who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall, is a statement of God's power rather than a request. In the Talmud, there are a series of stories in which a fast is declared to end a drought. In each story, the fast brings no results. The drought ends when someone leads the prayers and says, "God who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall." In each case, it is someone of humble background and piety whose simple words allow the rains to begin.

For me, I find myself divided. Part of me knows that the rain falls due to El Ninos, jet streams, and pressure fronts. Another part of me believes that praying about rain has impact. When I say "the winds

blow and the rain to fall” I am making a statement of faith that God is ultimately behind all that is, even if proximately the jet stream is more immediate and measurable. Yet I am also opening myself up to the possibility that our words and prayers DO create a flow of blessing into the world that might help cause the rain.

This year marks a Sabbatical year. In this year of heightened sensitivity to the Earth, in this year of drought, I want to begin naming our own hopes for blessing and rain at Rosh Hashanah rather than during Sukkot. We need the rain this year desperately. I want to name that communal concern in prayer this Rosh Hashanah. When we stand together, when we have the courage to pray even when we do not completely understand the meaning and impact of that prayer, we invite something life sustaining into the world.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

LSHANA TOVA

SEPTEMBER 24, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A Prayer for the Year Ahead:

God and God of our ancestors! May this New Year be one filled with goodness and blessing. We stand before you in awe and in fear. Awe, at the magnificence of all that is and our own small place it; and fear, in the continued disturbances, violence, and bloodshed we see throughout the world. We turn to you in prayer, hoping that our words can inspire changes in our own deepest selves and in the world around us.

God, may this year that reminds us of the Biblical Sabbatical be a year where we connect in deep ways to our own values. May we find the strength to let go of being judged for what we have and instead value ourselves on what we do. May we find time to let go of our busyness so that we can study, create, and heal.

We also ask for you to strengthen the hands of those who would bring peace to the world. This last year has been filled with those who want to murder, destroy, and invade. Yet we know there are many others, of every people and nationality, who want peace, who want prosperity, who want a good life for themselves and their children. Please weaken the hands of those who seek violence and destruction, and strengthen the hands of those who pursue peace.

May the year ahead be filled with prosperity, with goodness, and with blessing.

Amen.

A Personal Note:

I am so grateful for this community of readers. I appreciate all the comments I receive back, and also knowing that we are engaged together in a conversation of meaning. Especially to those from Kol Emeth, I am so honored to be one of your Rabbis. I find this community so inspiring on a personal, social, and Rabbinic level. I hope for many opportunities over the year to have meaningful engagement, whether around learning, worship, meals, or tea!! Thank you!! May you all have a year of goodness, blessing and peace!!

Rabbi David Booth

YOM KIPPUR IS COMING

OCTOBER 2, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Ten Days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur create a false sense of security. In fact, there are only 6 days. 2 are Rosh Hashanah itself, 1 is Shabbat, and 1 is Yom Kippur. The sacred opportunity to repair relationships, to seek healing and change in my own life, has an immediacy when we realize the time is short. I want to suggest three practices in these last few hours to help us orient ourselves towards the cleansing and healing possibility of Yom Kippur.

1. Tzedakah, Charity. The problem of hunger in our community continues to worsen. The continuing economic turmoil means that Second Harvest has seen their need increase by nearly 10% each year for the last four years. Last year, we raised over a ton of food and over \$7000 dollars to play our part in alleviating this need in Santa Clara and San Mateo county. This year, we need to do even more because the need is greater. I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you before Kol Nidre, and to go to <http://shfb.org/donate> and donate. Please indicate that you are part of the Kol Emeth food drive. Other worthy charities with this same goal include Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger and Jewish Family and Children's Services.

2. Tefilah, Prayer. There is a practice of wearing white for Yom Kippur services as a symbolic practice to strengthen our intention to experience God's cleansing power. It helps us turn away from ego, by making our garments similar one to another. It reminds us of Isaiah's promise that on this day God has the power to cleanse us as white as the driven snow. Perhaps by wearing white we can invite that cleansing power into our lives.

3. Teshuvah, Repentance. These ten days, short though they are, are unique chance to affirm and heal broken relationships. It's time to reach out to those whom we have hurt, to heal relationships that have been broken. There is something deeply cleansing in saying: will you forgive me for that which I have done intentionally or unintentionally? It's a way of asking for healing, for a new start, without needing to assign blame or even to list out all that has happened. I am every year caught with too little time for this practice, and every year am amazed by its healing power to set aside that which gets in the way. May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

SUKKOT

OCTOBER 8, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We don't talk enough about joy. I mean something deeper than mere happiness that might be triggered by an external event, or the sense of fun at a celebration or party. Joy by contrast is the feeling of a life being lived in blessing. It is the sense that what I am doing matters and that I uncover true contentment and deep satisfaction from who I am. The Rabbis refer to this feeling as *simchah shel mitzvah*. Deep abiding joy that comes from observance.

Yom Kippur is the balance check in our lives. Life sometimes has a quality of a tight rope walk. Do we have our balance? Do we have the safety netting we need so that if we fall, there are loved ones ready to help us find our way again? The liturgy invites us to find that balance anew, and to build the kinds of community and family bonds that can allow us to stand. The end of Yom Kippur, the strength of *avinu malkeynu*, also allows us to encounter something else, something sacred and Godly, that can cleanse and restore us even more than we thought possible.

And then immediately we enter a feeling of joy. I took that cleansing breath of Yom Kippur (and gave myself the time and the reflective space in which to do it) and the feeling is one of happiness, containment, meaning. Sukkot has to follow right on the heels of Yom Kippur, four days later, because we need an outlet for that joy, a practice to express our appreciation at the gift of life and the sense that our lives have meaning.

I once visited a patient who had recovered from a life threatening condition. I saw him the day after learning that he would live, that the surgery had worked. He was positively vibrating with gratitude. He didn't know what to do with all that feeling, all that joy and newly discovered hope. As I listened to him, I learned a great deal about truly intense appreciation, and how much that joyousness needs an outlet. He said, "Why did I have to get cancer to be this grateful for my life and who I am?"

The joy of Sukkot, to me, aims to be as intense an experience as that patient felt. It invites us to remember how joyous it is to be alive even without something life threatening. All too often we notice something only when it is taken away. Sukkot is a practice that can help us towards gratitude without losing something. By lasting over many days, it invites a new kind of appreciation that becomes a daily practice rather than an exceptional noticing. That practice can then engender joy that we carry well into the year.

Sukkot invites appreciation and joy. It is a chance to be with community as we gather for a sacred festival with Hallel and song. It is a chance to be out in the world and appreciate the beauty of nature as we dwell in our Sukkot. Finally, it is a chance to engage our senses as we feel and smell the lulav and etrog.

Please join me for Sukkot this year- we take the Lulav for the first time Thursday during our 9:15 morning services. We will sing Hallel and we will march around the shul in prayers for hope, for salvation, and for rain. It will be meaningful, joyous, and a practice to carry gratitude into the year.

Happy Sukkot!

Rabbi David Booth

SIMCHAT TORAH

OCTOBER 15, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When God gave the Torah at Sinai, the angels rejoiced. They danced in near ecstasy for now God's Torah would enter the world below as well. Now all that was broken might be repaired, now people might learn the spiritual and moral paths that could lead them to improve themselves and the whole world. Now there was a vessel on Earth that could contain God's blessings of wholeness and peace.

The people saw the angels dancing and were bewildered. They were like deaf people watching others dance to music. It appeared frenzied and odd. Yet they were drawn in nevertheless. One person started to sway just a little bit. Another person tapped their hands and feet. And then suddenly, like the bursting of dam, they were all dancing, rejoicing, singing. And only then did God speak in beauty and in hope.

It was Simchat Torah at Kol Emeth. People were dancing, singing. A person stood on the side, unsure what this craziness was all about. He could hear the music, but didn't understand the feeling and the joy so he stayed where he was, watching but not dancing.

It turns out that year the angels on high were also watching Kol Emeth. They wanted to dance, to celebrate, to sing. God told them: you may not yet celebrate. This is still the time for silence, not yet the time for dance. So they waited, biding their time, wanting to sing and dance.

Back at Kol Emeth someone came over and took the person's hand, pulling him into the circle. He resisted for a moment, and then let himself be pulled into the dance. He laughed at himself as he started to smile.

Do you remember the moment in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy steps out into Oz? The film had been black and white up to that moment, and suddenly starts bursting with color. It was like that for him. The joy became more than the music and the experience. It became a moment of celebrating everything he was and everything he could be. It was a celebration to realize that Torah and faith were part of what could help him connect with his best self and that was a reason to smile, to laugh, to dance.

And at that exact moment God said: now you, my angels, may also dance.

We've spent a lot of time together in prayer, now come and celebrate that we are alive, that there is a

world of blessing around us, that even in dark times hope still exists. Come and dance with us this year. The circle isn't complete until YOU are in it.

I invite you to come and rejoice over Torah with Kol Emeth this year. We will celebrate Thursday night beginning at 6:30pm, and then Friday morning at 9:30. There are hakafot, dancing circles, from around 10:30-12 followed by a delicious lunch sponsored by USY. Then we will finish the Torah and start anew. Rick Dinitz and his festive followers will then lead a Musaf service in which rain is guaranteed to fall even inside the Synagogue!!

Happy Sukkot!

Rabbi David Booth

CELEBRATING GAY RABBIS

OCTOBER 23, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My friend and colleague Rabbi Gil Steinlauf came out to his congregation over the Holidays as gay. It was a shocking announcement for many reasons. He has been married to Rabbi Batya Steinlauf for over 20 years, and they have three children together. Further, he is the Rabbi of Adas Israel in Washington DC, the largest Conservative congregation in the DC area.

Like so many things, there are sweet aspects to this story and bitter ones. The sweet aspect? Gil finally has the self confidence to share this essential part of himself with his community. His community has accepted him lovingly and graciously. The Synagogue President wrote, "Along with the other officers of Adas Israel, I stand with Rabbi Steinlauf." His posting of the news on Facebook has over 500 likes plus dozens of loving supportive comments.

The bitter? I really like both of them a great deal. We had a baby sitting coop with their daughter Ilana and my son Josh when both were babies. We saw them occasionally as a family when we lived in New Jersey. I am so moved by Batya's support of Gil, and their shared process in getting to this point, but so sad to see their marriage end. It will be very public for Batya and for the children which may prove challenging to them in a variety of ways going forward.

Rabbi Steinlauf grew up at a time when it was hard to be openly gay. Even now, Middle and High School students, nearly all of whom would say they favor gay marriage, will nonetheless make mocking comments about sexual identity. Gil attended the Jewish Theological Seminary in an era where gay Rabbinical students were not accepted. In other words, there was enormous pressure to not be openly gay.

So here is what I want to celebrate in all of this. I am thrilled that Gil can share who he is with integrity with the people he loves and serves. That means there is now an openness in our culture that allows people to find their own wholeness in ways that were denied twenty or thirty years ago. I am amazed that only eight years after JTS began admitting gay Rabbinical students that the largest Conservative congregation in DC is unequivocally standing behind their now openly gay Rabbi. That is a hugely positive change in a short period of time.

I am sad that for many – and I'm sure for many still today- they cannot share this key aspect of who they

are with others. I want to believe that no other generation will ever again feel compelled to hide even from themselves who they truly are. The damage, both personal and others, is simply too great.

May Gil and Batya both be strengthened in all their endeavors. May God help them through this time of transition, and give them both lives filled with joy, with happiness, and with loving partners.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

DISGENREFICATION

OCTOBER 30, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This past Shabbat we were fortunate to have Marc Brettler as our scholar in residence, courtesy of the Raskin Fund. I want to share a few of his thoughts because they are critical to how we read Torah and where we uncover its authority in our lives.

People have great difficulty in categorizing the genre of Torah which creates enormous confusion in reading. I need to know the genre I'm reading or I open myself up to immense confusion. If I'm reading a real estate ad, I'm going to see and experience something quite different than if I am reading a lot and block listing. If I am reading a novel, I expect one kind of experience and one kind of truth as opposed to the experience of reading Wikipedia.

I want to emphasize that a bit more. When I read Wikipedia, I expect to be looking at the best approximation of objective truth on the subject searched. By contrast, when I read a novel I expect fiction. Yet in fiction I may encounter another kind of truth about the human condition. Even if the events are made up, I may learn something deeply true that could change the way I live or experience the world.

Torah is often misread as history or science. Although it contains historical and scientific information (or at least the best science of that time), the genre is neither history nor science. Torah does NOT aim to teach us objective history in the modern fashion. Rather, Torah means to teach us how to live, how to be in the world. The word Torah is often mistranslated as Law. This error stems from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible from the 2nd Century BCE. A better translation of Torah is instruction.

The Torah, as revealed in its name, intends itself to be an instruction book to life. It teaching through narrative and law how we should live. Law instructs in one way about specific practices and ethical behaviors while narrative fills in the human dimension and gives those laws a texture. The sometimes dysfunctional families of Genesis, then, invite thought and conversation about how we engage family, siblings, and rivalries.

The question of Genesis' historical authenticity becomes a secondary question. The redactors and authors collected sources. Their goal was to form identity and self through these stories. The degree to which they viewed these sources as historically accurate in a modern sense is almost impossible to

judge. I personally think the Adam and Noah stories are entirely legendary with no historic or scientific truth. I am more agnostic on the patriarchal narratives. I personally imagine they are based on oral traditions that date back to real events, but I cannot demonstrate this in a way compelling to modern ideas of history.

Yet the stories retain their authority because of this narrative truth. For me, that has several levels. The stories themselves in their laconic style capture a great deal about what it means to be human and invite a quality of self reflection of what I can be as an individual and within a larger group. It is therefore our stories guiding us in how to be both human and Jewish. We need such stories and practices.

I also believe, though Marc did not articulate this, that God's hand is found in these stories. They include a quality of "ruach hakodesh," divine inspiration that adds to their truth and authority. There is something special going on here that elevates these stories above other great narratives. While I may learn something deep and wonderful from A Picture of Dorian Grey or other great literature, the experience of the Bible is of another level. The Bible wells up from a deep place in the Jewish soul. I believe that deep place also includes a God encounter that adds to the experience and its authority in my own soul and the soul of our people.

This great Book of Books continues to have much to offer as we all strive to make of our lives a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

A TENT OF PEACE

NOVEMBER 6, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Hospitality is a transformational practice for both guest and host. I believe this ancient Jewish spiritual technology retains the capacity to restore and renew Judaism. Abraham used it originally to give birth to our people; the Orthodox community uses it today to grow and appeal to a new generation of Jews. We too need to inspire ourselves to take seriously both what we have to offer and how we can share it with others.

Abraham wanted to offer Judaism to the world. He did so by opening his home. Our Rabbis teach that when the Torah tells us he planted an Ashel, a tree, it really means he opened a sort of wayfarers inn. Anyone who passed by would be welcomed, fed, and given a place to rest. They saw the impact of Abraham's faith on Abraham and Sarah. But they also directly received the hesed, the overflowing love of that faith, into their lives.

It was that experience of hesed, of an overflowing love derived from faith, that inspired some who stayed with Abraham to crave more. Welcomed, named and known, some guests stayed to learn. Some were so drawn by what Abraham had to offer that eventually they joined his camp.

There was no coercion; only invitation and warm welcome. Abraham's Torah was entirely one of hesed. There were no rules and boundaries, but rather teachings of love expressed in an openness to both his home and self. That hesed gave Abraham a space to offer his teaching, his experience of a God wanting us to be more, to do more, to make of ourselves and the world a blessing, with others.

The Orthodox world often lives this teaching. People who attend a service are likely to get a sincere invitation. My wife Carol spent some time with a Los Angeles Orthodox community during her conversion process. There were a few families who entertained her regularly while she was there. From them she learned a Shabbat practice and a Torah study practice that became vital ingredients of her Judaism.

I believe that Orthodoxy's vibrancy derives in large part from this ethic of hospitality. People exploring their own spiritual paths attend an Orthodox shul and find themselves in the warmth of someone's home. That invitation means many who otherwise might not find comfort in the liturgy or the practice stay. A community willing to open its homes is a community ready to say: we really do care about you.

We actually want to get to know you in a true way that can only happen over the breaking of bread.

We at Kol Emeth have tried a number of things to develop an ethos of hospitality. Our Shared Shabbat program is one success. Another is the growing number of people who regularly invite others for Friday night dinner. Shabbat dinner creates a specially intimate time to get to know others, what Heschel calls a Sanctuary in Time. Our young family community has grown and thrived in large part because there are a few of its members who regularly invite others over. That simple act of welcome reverberates and echoes in amazing ways.

This Shabbat we read about the hospitality of Abraham. I'd like to invite you to imbibe his Torah and to open your home to a guest. Invite someone over. A friend to get to know more deeply. Someone you just met for whom an invitation like this can be dinner but also a sense of being known in our community. You don't have to have a fancy home. Abraham did his entertaining in a tent. You don't need fancy food. Shabbat adds all the spice needed. All you need is an open heart. My own experience of hospitality is that the Hesed I have offered returns to me in many varied ways a hundred fold.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

THE PATHS WE CHOOSE

NOVEMBER 20, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We choose who we are. Joseph Soloveitchik teaches that the Creation story itself is a commandment. Where Rashi and others try to understand why Torah starts with narrative rather than law, Soloveitchik sees law in the narrative. We are commanded to form the self.

I think biologists will uncover the basic secrets of life over time. By contrast, our inner ability to self create appears as remote as ever. We too often see ourselves in the grasp of external forces and we too rarely make intentional choices. Yet God promises us that we can do it.

And then we encounter Jacob and Esau again. These twins, so alike and yet so different. The midrash in Tanhuma wants to exaggerate the sameness and so declares that they were identical twins. Thus, all their differences, the hairiness, the trickiness, were chosen. The Midrash, that wants to make Jacob all that is good and Esau all that is bad, teaches the following: "When Jacob and Esau were thirteen, they went on their separate paths. Jacob to the worship of God, and Esau to idolatry."

Esau was never so bad as all that. He was a hunter, a man of the fields, and something of a brute. If one reads his story sensitively, he appears to be a man of intense emotion and anger, but also of great love. He threatens his brother in a moment of rage, but then is filled to overflowing with joy when they connect again decades later. What Esau lacks is intentionality. He is who he is with no effort at growth and change. Jacob, by contrast, spends decades of his life going through a process of growth and change that leads him to an inner wholeness. That inner wholeness was never organic to Jacob; rather it was achieved over decades of hard work.

How did Jacob achieve that transformation? Partly it was through prayer. At the beginning of his journey, Jacob attempts to bargain with God. If you will protect, than I will be yours. At the end of his journey he has learned humility. "I am smaller than all the love You have given me," he says. He has learned that in the face of God's immense hesed, he is small. Paradoxically, that realization of humility is what gives him the strength to overcome the angel. He is no longer looking for false strength or meaning. He has uncovered it at its source, a source that is both with him and beyond him.

We too can uncover that source. Prayer is a key practice that enables us to do that work. In prayer we acknowledge our own place in the world. We present ourselves as partners in sacred work looking for

inspiration and for renewed energy. I often imagine light filling me up as the Ark is opened. That light, for me, is the light God stored up at Creation used again and again to fill us up with blessing and hesed that we can then use to strengthen the work of our own hands.

Shabbat is another way we uncover the source. Shabbat asks us to place aside much of what distracts us during the week, whether it is cell phones and email or the ongoing business of our lives. By setting aside that quieter more focused time we give ourselves space to look at who we are, to engage in the work need to grown and uncover our own hidden wholeness. That is the real Shabbat app.

I believe we are all capable of the growth Jacob experiences and to uncover our own inner wholeness. Yet to do so requires effort and choice. The mitzvot and prayer are there to help uncover that hidden wholeness, to offer a path that leads to a wholeness of self in which we can encounter again God who speaks and brings the world into being.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

LET US GIVE THANKS

NOVEMBER 25, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Thanksgiving is my favorite American holiday. It is the one day on the American calendar that unites people of all races, religions and creeds. Thanksgiving offers a basic human value of appreciating the goodness in our lives and pausing to give thanks for it. We do not take the time to pause and appreciate nearly enough and our lives are the poorer for it.

Blessing food is one Jewish technology to encourage a pause to notice and bless goodness. Blessing food is one of the hardest Jewish acts to fulfill because it is so regular and routine. Yet on the other hand, it can elevate every act of eating into a moment of appreciation and quick exploration of faith.

This year I am endeavoring to bless food every time before I eat. I want to be more intentional about my eating. Partly, I'm hoping this will help me both lose some weight and to keep it off. Also, I'm hoping these food blessings will generally help me connect more with the goodness in my life and help me uncover more joy.

On Thanksgiving, the whole country, across religious and ethnic divides, pauses to bless and take stock of our goodness. By itself, that acknowledgement activates our own gratitude, and may uncover God's blessings in our lives. Perhaps it can also be an inspiration to more regularly bless and so recognize our need for gratitude on a daily basis.

I invite you to begin Thanksgiving with Hamotzi, the blessing over the bread and this brief setting of intention:

O Lord our God, and God of our Ancestors:

We thank you for the blessings of peace, prosperity, and health that abound in this great country. We see so many other parts of the world suffering, and we are grateful for what we have here. We acknowledge those loved ones no longer with us and thank you for the blessings in their lives, the values learned and the special moments shared.

We ask for Your continued protection over the State of Israel. A beacon for freedom in the Middle East, Israel stands strong but under renewed threat of terror. Grant her leaders the wisdom to face the future

and find the uncertain path to peace. Bring an end to terror, violence and bloodshed so that again all that will be heard is “the voice of bride and bridegroom, the voice of young people rejoicing in song.”

We thank you for our souls and for the lives daily in Your care. Each day is a miracle from You – today we notice the blessing of that miracle and thank You as You deserve every day.

Praised are You, God, Our God and Ruler of all, who brings forth bread from the Earth.

Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, Hamotzi Lehem min HaAretz.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving,
Rabbi David Booth

NON-JEWS AND INTERMARRIAGE

DECEMBER 3, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We have been approaching intermarriage the wrong way for the last 50 years. We have chosen to become more integrated into American society for excellent reasons. As American Jews, we have accepted the welcome of this country and chosen to become active participants in the building and developing of the United States.

Imagine a U.S. in which Jews weren't involved in the Civil Rights struggle. Without our contributions, Silicon Valley would have been a very different place. Jews in the United States have taken our Jewish values with us, our creativity and inventiveness, and have been part of making this country a better and wealthier place. We have been marked by the culture, but we have also helped to form it.

As we have been more welcomed, two things have changed. One is that intermarriage rates have gone up, and the second is that we have done less Jewish things. We spend most of our time worrying about the first, when really it is the second that matters. As Jews, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to be involved in the world. The statistics that suggest inevitable decline and assimilation assume we continue to do less and less Jewish things in the world. Yet it is part of our DNA that we are involved, that we aspire to be a light among the nations.

We do have something to say. Judaism teaches powerfully about inner spiritual growth. Prayer is a discipline that trains us in humility and in gratitude. The Zohar teaches that the spine in a body is Jacob's ladder. By imagining / making ourselves aware of the flow of spiritual energy in our spines, we can become aware of our own ability to be connected to this world and to God / the worlds above. Through combining humility, gratitude, and spiritual practice, we can emulate Jacob who becomes whole. We too can find our inner wholeness. Those practices are a gift and an inspiration to Jews and to the world.

Judaism has a message for the world community as well. God created Adam in God's image. Each person is of infinite value. This means systems of justice must be informed by equity and by compassion. It also means our day to day human interactions offer us a chance and a responsibility to help others evoke their own divine image. Judaism's teachings on language, the return of lost object, the building of healthy communities, all remain vital Torah the world needs. When we offer someone compassion or help, we are honoring that image and being deeply Jewish. When we bring out deep Jewish ethics to the worlds of business and technology, we are bringing the light of Torah into the world.

For too long we have been afraid of others. It is time instead to honor others and to reconnect with our own unique message to the world. Abraham invited anyone to come and eat with him. Some chose to stay and learn more; others continued on their way. Non-Jews interested in Judaism or in Jews ought to be honored and welcomed. Just as in the days of Abraham, some of them will choose to stay, others will continue on to other paths knowing more of who we are.

By contrast, we need to do more Jewish acts. We want Jewish families because they raise amazing children who love learning, tzedakah, and justice. We want Jewish homes because they are filled with light and love that comes on Shabbat or Hanukkah. The willingness to pause on Shabbat, to turn off all the media and outside demands, is a chance to acquire wisdom. In the stillness we can be reminded of who we love and who we are in our deepest selves. The more Jewish we do, the more Jewish we learn, the more we want to build Jewish homes and Jewish communities.

For me, being Jewish means living amid the marvels of the west and striving to light the way towards meaning and purpose, towards the sanctity of each person and their God given potential to be a blessing. I want to be a lot more concerned about doing more Jewish acts than of being afraid of others. I chose to honor all humanity, realizing that each Jewish act offers me a path towards inner and outer wholeness. Put another way, I stand in the world with Abraham to be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

LIFTING UP THE DIVINE IMAGE

DECEMBER 11, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The most vital ethical teaching of Judaism occurs at the very beginning of the Bible. God creates us in God's own image. That means we are each of infinite value. The loss or even degradation of a life profanes the image of God. It is profaned in the person hurt or murdered. Yet Jewish mysticism goes a daring step further. That image of God is also lessened and damaged in the self of the person who inflicts the harm.

When a police officer overreacts to someone, particularly because of the color of their skin, that person profanes the image of God. That act of profanation has impact beyond the immediate harm. When God's image is lessened, our capacity of brutality, for hatred, for degrading and harming the other, increases.

The killings in Staten Island and Ferguson are symptoms and causes of something deeper in our society. We have become a culture of hillul hashem, of lessening the image, instead of kiddush hashem, sanctifying the image. I am appalled by violence and loss of life, but then appalled all the more by others using the righteous anger as an excuse for rioting and violence. These strike me as symptoms of hillul hashem. We aren't sure how to respond to the brutality with healing because the brutality itself has taught us only brutality.

I thought of this teaching a few times over Shabbat. When we recited Kiddush on Friday night, friends and family gathered together to welcome Shabbat and to sing, Kiddush recalls God's creation and serves as a reminder that we are all created in God's image. Saturday morning offered another such moment when we all gathered around together for Musaf. There was great energy and joy in being close, in singing together, in making connections through song.

Those moments were of healing, of remembering the energy of blessing we each carry as a gift from God. It reminded everyone present that we can improve the world, that we don't have to accept the messages and actions of brutality as "just the way it is." Blessing and building sacred community offers another pole of healing and caring. I felt we offered an example of kiddush hashem, elevating the Divine Image.

There is something deeply wrong in our culture. I want to suggest that Shabbat and synagogue are one of the times and places that reconnect us with spirit, that remind us of who we are and what it means

that we are created in God's image. I believe it then focuses our hearts and hands to begin building a world based on caring and love instead of brutality and violence.

Every time you magnify the image of God in someone, you elevate yourself and that other person. Every act of love and caring is a fight against Ferguson, every moment of sincere attention a struggle against Staten Island. I am no expert in the right legal response – I instead am suggesting a moral response that can start changing the world today.

May God strengthen the work of our hand to evoke the divine image in everyone with whom we interact and deep within our own selves as well.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

SINGING, MUSIC, AND PRAYER

DECEMBER 18, 2014

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'm in love with prayer and song. As I get ready for my 6 week sabbatical this January to February, I am exploring in a number of ways some of the key elements that make prayer meaningful. Related, I want to expand my own confidence and knowledge of music which plays such a key role to prayer that can touch the heart.

Last Shabbat's visit with Joey Weisenberg, the Cantor and musical specialist from Hadar in New York, helped clarify a few of the key issues.

First, prayer even or especially in a setting like ours must include a degree of dynamism. The Rabbis talk about the difference between kevah, the form of the prayer, and kavannah, the inner intent of the person praying. Rabbi Akiva teaches that there must always be something renewed in one's daily prayer. These two teachings remind me that routine and novelty are both key elements of a meaningful prayer experience.

That means exploring ways of introducing novelty into our structure. Shabbat on Fire is one model, a twice yearly opportunity on Shabbat morning to play, to experiment, to try some new ways of reaching out to God. It means we ought to find other variation from time to time that shakes us out of our own inner routines to go forth as Abraham (lekh-lekha) did to encounter boundless possibility.

Related, Joey pointed out that our era's obsession with novelty contradicts the reflective time and belief in kevah, the fixed part of the prayer service, that our tradition holds. We need to spend the time to understand the liturgy, to penetrate its depths. Sometimes that means an intellectual effort to see the structure of a prayer or service. Sometimes it means entering more fully a song or prayer that in the past we have skated past. It means a willingness to explore the depth and beauty the prayer book offers. Joey pointed out that boredom is a sign that we are getting somewhere. Boredom is a protective measure that turns us away from getting stirred up because we are afraid of the inner change that may be provoked. Services need to be engaging and meaningful at the same time that participants need to bring their own awareness of self into the experience and to allow the experience to be challenging.

Second, leadership and participation are both necessary to life influencing prayer. Leadership needs to be thoughtful about the experience in terms of tunes and authenticity. Those participating also need to

put out their own effort and energy to sustain and partner with the leader. Participants need to exert their own spiritual energy, their willingness to sing out loud, to be attentive, even to be quiet when the prayer is a moment of renewing stillness. This has implications for how we arrange chairs. Joey had many of us congregate around the Reader's Table for Mussaf and it was incredible, the richness of singing that resulted. It also has implications for our own behavior during the service. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that an interruption must be accepted in love because it highlights an area that requires more focus in our own prayer. That means we as participants have to be highly focused, leaving our chatting to the courtyard. It also means we are creating space for others, children, newcomers, people new to our service, and accepting their age and place appropriate responses in love and as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

During my Sabbatical, I plan to visit a number of interesting prayer experiences to learn more. I also want to take voice lessons, and possibly drum lessons, to improve my own confidence and skill as a prayer leader. I want to then build a few groups to explore some different modes for our prayers services for Friday, Saturday, and weekdays.

I need prayer because it helps me connect with my deepest truest self. It is the place I find focus, and give myself the opportunity to experience God. I am so grateful to this singing and praying community because it inspires and challenges me in ways that are sometimes hard but always life sustaining. We need an effort to work together on sustaining and fashioning prayer experiences that inspire us to go forth and be blessing.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

THE GIFT OF LOVE

FEBRUARY 26, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I returned from the gift of a six week Sabbatical last week, and I wanted to share one aspect of my time. I did a number of enjoyable and interesting things, including visiting a number of different synagogues, taking voice and even drum lessons (good progress on the voice, not so much on the drums) and doing some long delayed writing. Amid those other activities, I also spent some time using the space created to be aware of love.

Nearly every day, I spent about 20 minutes reviewing in my mind the people in my life who love and care for me. I thought about my parents, my family, my friends, my colleagues, and the KE community, both as individuals and as a collective. I let myself feel an aspect of how each person or group's love felt for me and then brought to mind the next person. While some people came up almost every time, it was an interesting practice because suddenly a new name would arise. Then I would say: yes, that person is a great supporter of mine, someone who cares for me.

Then, I would focus on where I want to offer my love. I would imagine myself sending out love to family, to the KE community, to my friends all over the world. I also spent time focusing on some challenges in the world. So some days I imagined that loving quality going to people wrestling with hunger, or to whatever trouble spot was in the headlines.

At first, I found the practice difficult. After about a week, though, I began more easily to bring these loving relationships to mind. I would feel filled up with love from those who care for me. I would then have a sense that there was something in me that could flow out to those deserving of and in need of my love and care.

Slowly, I began to experience a sense of love that is the source of both the love people express to me and the love I express to others. That source felt as though it came from outside, and flowed through me and others and the world. That source felt like it was open to me if I choose to make the intentional effort to attune myself to receive it.

I found the practice incredibly moving. It led me to send a number of notes to special people in my life and to share with them how important they are to me. This CyberTorah is meant as such a note to say to the wider community how much I feel held and honored and cared for by all of you. I knew it

intellectually, but allowing myself the time to feel it was an incredible gift that reminded me of how much I am given and how much I have to give.

May we all find the moments and time to feel that flowing source of love in the world and realize our own immense capacity to receive and offer love.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

HIDE AND SEEK

MARCH 4, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'm continually fascinated by the character of Esther and how Rabbinic Judaism sees her. Her name brings echoes of a disturbing Hebrew term, *hester panim*, the hiding of the Divine face. It can mean anything from Earthly suffering and judgement resulting from God's absence in the world to painful depression resulting from God's absence in the self. How then can *hester panim* possibly connect to Esther, the central character in a story that leads to joyous celebration?

The book of Esther is the only Biblical work entirely lacking God's name. God is seemingly absent from the entirety of the story, and we see the tenuous place of Jews in such an environment. God, as it were, has hidden God's face. Yet God is present, merely hidden. Every column but two in the Megillah begin with the word *Melech* or King. God's sovereignty is hidden in the writing of the scroll itself.

Second, Esther begins as the invisible woman. She is seen only for her external beauty. Ahasuerus, the King of Persia, takes her as wife but then seemingly ignores her until she requests an audience in Chapter 5. Further, no one even knows that she is Jewish, so she is hidden in the Palace and concealed in her deepest essence.

The climax of the story is about seeing. Mordecai rises to prominence because he undoes a secret plot. Making the invisible visible raises him to prominence and then positions him to take over after the fall of Haman. Similarly, when the King realizes who both Esther and Haman really are in the final party scene when Esther accuses Haman, the King then chooses love and the path of righteousness.

The Mitzvot of Purim are also about revealing the hidden, of noticing the face of the other. Emanuel Levinas teaches that the face to face encounter is always transformative. When we are truly open to the encounter with another, it always affects us. Purim in its mitzvot draws our attention to the importance of such encounters.

First, we are to give gifts to the poor and needy. Carol and I fulfill this obligation both by giving to Second Harvest and by volunteering at our men's shelter. The shelter is a chance to feed those in need and to have a direct human encounter with them. Having dinner with our guests is a chance for healing. It helps normalize people at a moment of challenge and difficulty in their lives. By giving gifts to the poor, we are required to see their face and encounter them in ways we usually avoid.

Second, we give gifts to our friends. Here also we are urged to take an extra effort to notice people that matter in our lives. Our community effort, led by Elaine Sigal and Kathy Reback, sent out gift baskets to over 700 people this year, including every single congregant, 70 college students, and a few dozen friends of our community. Nearly every basket was hand delivered as people realized the fellow congregants who lived in their neighborhoods. This too is the face to face moment, the loving encounter with the other.

Third, we celebrate and drink. In such a relaxing of inhibitions, we reveal ourselves aspects of the self we normally hide. The practice of wearing costumes similarly hides and reveals at the same time. In play, we discover more about ourselves and our friends.

Finally, we read the Megillah. In the Megillah God also is hidden, but when we read it in joy, we too can have a face to face encounter with the Divine. The moment of hester panim, of God's hidden face, can give way to a revealing that stems from joy and hope.

There is a Bratslav teaching that has become a popular song in Israel today. The lyrics are: in even the greatest of hidings (hester btoch hester), God is still there. No matter what befalls me, I still stand.

May this Purim remind us that we are never alone, and that hope and love are always present.

Shabbat Shalom and a Joyous Purim
Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 12, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation that goes towards hunger relief but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen chametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use

chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with chametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at [Pesach Guide](#).

I hope this helps as you being your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

LET ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY COME AND EAT

MARCH 19, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the Seder begins, we offer an invitation: let all who are hungry come and eat. Every year I am blown away by the openness of this invitation and the incredible way we as a community rise to the occasion to fulfill its promise. I am struck by two yearnings the Seder endeavors to address, the first a hunger for actual food, the second a hunger for community and friendship.

The Seder is a promise of hope. Hope arises from hesed or love. When we know someone cares for us, or when we care for someone else, we realize suddenly the healing possibilities inherent in our actions. Feeding someone who is hungry offers them hope. It relieves the mind of the deadening qualities of real hunger. It strengthens the body to have resources to escape poverty and find new pathways. For the person helping, they remind themselves of their own ability to make a difference. By making a donation to Second Harvest, I remind myself of my capacity to help others and to alleviate the suffering in the world. By bringing blessing and hesed into the lives of others, I remind myself that blessing and hesed exist within me. This also engenders hope.

Hunger exists as a real challenge in our community, as does the quest for meaning in our own lives. Second Harvest has hundreds of thousands of clients every month in Santa Clara. Housing the men's shelter this year has been an aspect of our communal preparation for Passover. Nearly a hundred volunteers have given of their time to serve and visit with the men staying at Kol Emeth. This too is a way to get ready for Passover. Creating such opportunities to volunteer and donate create a fertile ground in the self for the words of hope we will recite at the Seder.

The Seder also invites community and friendship. Soloveitchik teaches that there are two aspects to Adam in the Bible. First, is the Adam who is commanded to fill the earth and master it. Here in Silicon Valley we are very connected to Adam the builder, the maker, the one who forms social and communal structures capable of achieving enormous scientific and physical feats. Yet there is another Adam, an Adam who is lonely. An Adam for whom companionship is about sharing fear, emptiness, joy, a wholeness of self. Silicon Valley is advanced in this area of human interaction.

The Seder is one way of building the sustaining relationships that second part of our selves so craves and needs. When we open our home to others, or receive an invitation, there is something special and sacred that takes place. People come to know each other over the breaking of matzoh, the shared message of

hope in the Seder, in a very different way than in an office building or physics lab.

This year, I urge you to find a way of hosting people around Passover. It may be at the Seder, or at another time. Perhaps you have attended another person's Seder for many years. Maybe host one on the other night this year, not only to reciprocate, but also to invite others, particularly people without a place. Kol Emeth every year offers Seder matching. We host people from our community and from the larger community in need of a place. Last year, one of our members hosted a couple in town for cancer treatments at Stanford. What an amazing gift for both giver and receiver! Feel free to reach out for a place, but also to offer a chair. Who knows? Maybe your guest will turn out to be Elijah...

I wish you blessing in your preparations, and may those preparations create pathways in your own heart towards love, blessing, and hope.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

WHO ARE WE?

MARCH 26, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Passover is the moment when we read the mission statement of the Jewish people. The Seder reminds us that God's outstretched arm means hope exists even in the darkest places of our souls and in the world as whole. It is a story that calls forth from those of us who reenact it year after year a responsibility to be part of light and hope. For some, it is a story that calls on us to be active morally in the world, to be agents of freedom. For others, it is a story to be active in faith, to realize that God's touch on the human soul is a great source of blessing and renewal.

At this moment I am also exploring what the mission statement of Kol Emeth ought to be. Our Synagogue must be a source of light in the world. It must be a place that inspires us to do good in the world and provides a platform to gather around other like minded people to fulfill Abraham's commandment to be a blessing. Kol Emeth also needs to foster connections to the land and people of Israel so that we work intentionally to remain one people in love with our land.

At the same time, our mission ought to reflect our surroundings. Silicon Valley is an amazing place of innovation. In particular, it is innovation that comes from start-ups, a system that empowers individuals and small groups with relatively modest funding to do amazing things. There is an economic system here that enables an individual with a great idea to change the world.

At Kol Emeth, our greatest successes have been similarly entrepreneurial on the part of both staff and lay leadership. Camp Kol Emeth last November, for example, happened because two members loved camp as children and wanted to create an experience for young families that drew on those fond and loving memories. Kim Samek and Christine Tachner came to me and Rabbi Matzkin and then ran with the idea. We supported them, but they did the hard work for sure.

The Silicon Valley Beit Midrash is happening because a group of us are in love with the transformative power Jewish study can have on people. Tom Johanix, Martha Amram, and I all were talking in the courtyard one Shabbat afternoon and realized there was a great need for a place to offer serious Jewish learning here in Northern California. The result is two retreats of full day cross generational learning. Ours is the only program of its type outside of New York and Israel, and the only one of its type that appeals to large numbers of people in their 20s as well as people in other age demographics. Hosting a men's shelter for the month of March is similarly driven by active leaders like Elizabeth Eastman. There

are numerous other examples at Kol Emeth of this kind of people driven creativity.

Moses hoped that all the people would be prophets. Moses was not worried about hierarchy or his own authority. He wanted everyone to connect with the deep source of creativity and renewal we often call God. When Rabbis and lay leaders become gate keepers, we risk jamming up that divine flow and getting in the way of creativity around value and mission that bring a presence of God and holiness into our community and the world.

We need a community that values the divine image in its members, and therefore listens when they bring forth their own unique Torah. That personal revelation and creativity ought to be encouraged, supported, and given tangible form. Some such ideas may have only a short time, serving a specific moment and purpose, while others may transform our community for years.

So here is a proposal for a new mission statement, one that reflects our values and purpose and location:

Kol Emeth is an everybody friendly community for sacred Jewish gatherings. We see experimentation, Jewish learning, faith, and practice as tools to fulfill God's call to Abraham, to be a blessing to the world with a special connection to Israel. Kol Emeth is a place to grow, to pray, and to find face to face connections. It is a place to be inspired, to find strength and insight to be better Jews and better human beings.

I'm curious of your thoughts and your ideas. What is your Torah, your revelation, that can help us better realize the promise of our own Kol Emeth community?

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER FOR THE SEDER TABLE

APRIL 2, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

O God and God of our Ancestors:

As we sit together at the Seder, let us look around and appreciate the faces and people who are sharing this meal with us tonight. Help us take stock of other family and friends who are blessings in our lives. May those relationships, the love that we offer and receive from others, help open and broaden us. This is a night of redemption; may the redeeming power of love be part of our Seder.

We see oppression and fear everywhere in the world. May You strengthen those who seek peace, may You offer comfort to those who are afraid. We pledge to add our own voices and resources to fighting hunger, human trafficking, and so many of the other ways one person oppresses and even enslaves another. Strengthen the work of our hands.

We see challenges to the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Help us find a path to peace, and help us bring an end to anti-Semitism that seems newly resurgent. Strengthen us to respond wisely and appropriately to keep our families, our community, and our beloved Israel safe, strong, and thriving.

At this time of hope and redemption, help us also reconnect with meaning our own lives. We sing of Elijah the Prophet, the bringer of hope. As we imagine his entrance, we pledge to imagine our own inner qualities of hope. We will see them as flowing rivers that connect with Your own power to redeem. Help tonight to fill us with that light of hope.

In all of these ways, help us be Your partners in fulfilling Abraham's mission, the mission of the Jewish people, to be a blessing to the world. So may it be Your will!

Amen.

Happy Passover!

Rabbi David Booth

YOM HASHOAH, HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

APRIL 16, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Ours is an era accustomed to large numbers. One million. One billion. A google. And yet, as much as we use such numbers with ease, they are distant from our immediate ability to grasp. They became inhuman, conceptual, entirely of the intellect. So when we talk about 6 million Jews murdered, 11 million human beings slaughtered, by the Nazis, it's easy to say but hard to feel.

The problem is worsened precisely because the Nazis wanted to dehumanize their victims and turn them into numbers. Jews were herded even worse than cattle, given no space for the most basic functions of life. They were worked as slaves and then slaughtered. They had numbers stamped on their arms, bar coded as if they were inventory. The Nazis made every effort to strip them of their humanity, and make them numbers.

The Nazis succeed when we say 6 million Jews perished, 11 million people were slaughtered, and we feel little or nothing. When we let the large numbers overwhelm our heart, it is as if the individual human beings created in God's image are murdered all over again. We must remember each person, each name, each individual.

Every single person slaughtered was someone's child. Many of them were someone's parent, or friend, or lover. They all had people who cared about them and for them. They all had people who knew them, their names, their habits, their stories. Each and everyone one of them. We must strive to remember not the 6 million Jews, but each individual Jew, each singular person with a future and a past and people who loved them.

Today, 70 years from the liberation, we want their loss to mean something or at least to change something for the better. Perhaps today, Yom HaShoah, we can treat those around us differently than we sometimes do. The Nazis wanted to dehumanize us; let us strive to humanize. Everyone with whom we interact is someone's child, perhaps someone's parent, friend, lover. Can we today make the time to hear their stories, to honor their humanity, to see God's image present in them?

But here's an even greater challenge. The Holocaust lasted for five years, or perhaps ten depending on what you include. Its repercussion continues today. What the Nazis did lasted not just one day, but years and even decades. Can we change our interactions with others to respect humanity, to help people

uncover their names and know their stories will be heard, not just today, but tomorrow, and the next day, and the next seven decades?

May the memories of those perished in the Holocaust be for a blessing, and may their loss inspire to deeds of love and compassion.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

YOM HAATZMAUT, ISRAELI INDEPENDENCE DAY

APRIL 23, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I intend to celebrate today, because I love Israel. Walking through Jerusalem one encounters the sights, smells, tastes, of all world Jewry. In Machane Yehuda, the open air food market, one sees Bukhari food, Russian food, Middle Eastern food, all blended into one location. Walking through neighborhoods on Shabbat is to hear the melodies Jews have developed and learned all over the world. Truly, Israel is the home of the Jewish people.

And yet amid my intention to celebrate, I feel worry. I am worried because college campuses seem increasingly opposed to Israel and even to Jews. When a Stanford student candidate for the school senate is asked if her Jewish identity will influence her stance on divestment from Israel, we have a Jewish problem as well as a problem for Israel. When student groups nationally begin to support the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, Israel and the Jewish community has a problem.

Amid my intention to celebrate, I feel worry. I'm worried about the U.S. negotiations with Iran. Iran cannot have a nuclear bomb, ever. Not now, not ten years from now. Further, any agreement needs some verification. Iran is ready to hide things from inspectors. Without verification, a treaty means little. I would love Iran to renounce her nuclear ambitions and become more open to the West. Long term, that could change the country in ways fundamentally good for Israel and the world. But these current talks leave me worried.

And I worry about Israel herself. As the nation's politics mature, Israelis are wrestling with identity. Are Arab Israelis as Israeli as Jewish Israelis? What is the place of guest workers who have now been guests for two generations? I have always felt Israel was strongest when her borders were secure and her arm was outstretched in peace. When that hand gets slapped again and again, it's tempting to stop offering it. But Israel is strongest when that hand is offered, desirous of helping everyone in that region live amid prosperity and freedom.

I intend to celebrate. Because Israel is a democracy, with greater freedom for women and gays and lesbians than any other nation in the Middle East and than many in the world. I intend to celebrate because Hanaton, the Conservative movement Kibbutz, is thriving and offering a model of hopeful Zionism and pluralism to Israelis of many types and ideologies. I intend to celebrate because of

charitable groups like AICAT in the south of Israel that train subsistence farmers from around the world, including many Muslims, better methods to lift themselves and their communities out of poverty. And I intend to celebrate because we have so many friends here in the United States and elsewhere in the world who care about Israel and want to see Israel thrive and prosper.

As Israel celebrates her 67th birthday, may God grant Israel blessing, peace, and strength. Now, let's celebrate!!

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

FINDING REDEMPTION

APRIL 30, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I believe it is Adam's failure to take responsibility, his choice to deceive himself as much as God, that is the real sin of the Garden. God keeps asking us to take responsibility. God says to Cain, where is your brother? And Cain evades, saying, Am I my brother's keeper? We, as the readers, understand intuitively that the answer is yes. God is always and every day asking: are you ready to take responsibility? Are you ready to step away from the posture of self-deception, and step forward?

The Midrash sees the redemption from Egypt as an undoing of the mark of the snake. The Israelites are redeemed and in that moment of redemption discover the power of words, intentions, and deeds that match. The Sfat Emet points out that Pesach could mean Pe Sakh, the mouth speaks. That is, it is in the Exodus from Egypt, and especially the crossing of the Sea, that we uncover again the ability to speak in a way that matters.

Passover has ended; we have been redeemed again. Now is a time to allow the redemptive possibility of the holiday to transform our inner selves so that we can lead a redeemed existence. The Israelites lost track of their transformation less than 50 days later in the events of the Golden Calf. I wonder if we can hold onto our own possibilities of inner change longer.

For me, a key step in this process is to work at matching our words, intentions, and deeds. Can I hear the call of Passover to see hurt and loss in the world and act when I am able? But even more deeply, can I be honest with myself, and slow down my speech so that my intentions and deeds can catch up with my words?

Now that we are back in the world of chametz and ego, can we take the extra effort to carry redeemed language, language that matches intention to deed, into the rest of our lives? May God grant us that strength!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

ENCOUNTERING GOD AGAIN

MAY 7, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I feel there is a great crisis of theology in our era. Even for people who believe in God, what we mean by that relationship varies so immensely that I sometimes wonder if there is even a common referent at all. For those who doubt or don't believe, the problem is even more immense.

One place we see this challenge is the decreasing interest in prayer and prayer communities. Prayer leaders have a responsibility to bring engaging, dynamic prayer to the community, but participants need something to which they can connect. Put another way, when I arrive with my own prayer agenda, the leader may add or detract, but the experience is already something I want that will engage me.

The disconnect has several origins. Maimonides convinced us that God is neither corporal nor knowable at all. Those who engage in theology often get stuck at this point. A God beyond human comprehension, a God who cannot have a relationship with us (though we can have a relationship with God) may be intellectually interesting but, at least to me, isn't spiritually compelling.

In addition, we are so used to theology as what others believe. If God is a kindly old man with a beard, then much of the 20th and 21st centuries argue against such a being existing. We may respect other beliefs, but ultimately see them only as comfort against the potential meaninglessness of the world in which we live. They aren't true or real.

There are other stopping places people experience, whether from their own personal narrative, an experience they have had in the world, or the western framework within which most of us think, work, and live.

Over the next few weeks, I want to explore my own emerging theology. I wonder if Kol Emeth might be uniquely positioned to engage in serious real conversations about encountering God anew in ways that matter. Could we create a theological language meaningful to a believer today that would share a reference of meaning with an atheist? Could we start to talk about what is happening in prayer so that I have a meaningful encounter that heals and sustains me when I pray?

I want to begin this process of exploration and conversation, realizing I can't do it on my own. I need this amazing and thoughtful community for feedback, reactions, ideas, as we together explore a new kind of

God encounter. I believe we can all benefit enormously from the journey!

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

GOD OF LOVE

MAY 14, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a God of love we encounter in our dreams. Dream space was something people used to know, but we have become alienated from it, and in so doing have lost touch with God. We are so obsessed with what is real that we have lost touch with what is true.

There is an inner landscape, a place of visions and images and dreams, that serves as a bridge between this world and the next. Yet that inner landscape is where the truth and wholeness of the self is located.

We create binary opposites in the West, but the truth is more varied than that. For us, there is only true and untrue, real and imaginary. Mystics and psychologists know there are other addresses and possibilities. Corbin referred to this space as the Sacred Imaginal, a place between the real and the imaginary that bridges the gap between our own lived experiences and the deep truths that connect all of us.

Just as mathematics serves as the bridge between this world and the world of scientific possibility, the sacred imaginal sits between this world and spiritual possibility. Put another way, our experience of God in that inner landscape matters far more than its external referent. If we can find the shared coordinates, I wonder if there isn't an inner dreamscape, a place of the sacred imaginal, in which the atheist and theist can meet, play, and be healed.

There is a God of love we encounter in our dreams. God in that place is connected to all that is, in a joyous and exuberant fashion. God most ancient looks upon us, and when that gaze encounters us we sing unto God a new song. The Zohar describes this aspect of God as a smiling face, at ease and at peace. It corresponds to our own inner self in that place of true connection, where we let go of our ego demands and self definitions to encounter the all. That place is a place of real experience. That is the place we can encounter God.

In prayer, we name that God Shokhen Ad, God who dwells eternally. God is present always, but our inner journeys bring us to this aspect on Shabbat morning most intensely. The quiet peace and rest of Shabbat create an opening for us to experience the gaze of the Ancient of Days. This encounter with the All soothes, heals the red from our eyes, and reminds us of our own inner wellsprings of blessing.

As we get ready for Shavuot, this is an aspect of self / of God worth experiencing. I invite you at a moment of quiet or of prayer to envision a divine ancient face, gazing at the world, and at you, lovingly. Allow that penetrating gaze to be one of acceptance, hope, of invitation. By stimulating those parts of our brain that deal with love and hope, we strengthen our own capacity for the same. By encountering this God in prayer in our inner landscape, whatever the external reality, we engender the ability to be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

FAITH IS A CHOICE

MAY 21, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Faith is a choice. At least for me, I see the possibility of God rather than the necessity. That is, it is possible that the Universe – and my life – have no meaning. Yet my own passional nature, my own experience of existence, argues otherwise to me. And so I choose meaning and God.

We are biological machines in which consciousness resides. Yet there is a mystery to that consciousness. Something emerges from neurons and connections that is greater than the sum of the parts. That something remains somewhat mysterious even to its possessor. There are aspects of myself that are clear to me; others that are hidden, mysterious, contradictory. The Talmud says that God wants the heart. The heart means our deepest, truest selves, our innermost location. When we choose in our core self to reach out, God is waiting.

The Talmud also says that all is in the hands of God, save only “fear of heaven.” Fear of heaven means this passional choice towards meaning. That is the greatest choice we make, one that determines how we see the universe around us. Is this heaven or hell? The answer resides in my deepest self.

For me, the choice to believe means that I live in a place that can potentially be heaven. Prayer becomes a practice to let my soul speak, to connect with that deepest place which yearns for meaning and God. Prayer is where I remind myself of myself and so uncover my inner strength to be a blessing.

Shabbat, kashrut, other ritual practices, are all part of that moment of choosing to hear God. They reinforce my choice, help me connect in the self and out of the self. There is a still small voice to Shabbat where I sometimes meet God. In kashrut, there is a daily reminder that I sanctify this whole world, that even in what I eat, holiness can be found and made.

Shavuot celebrates the moment when the Jewish people received Torah. Every year, I stay up all night and then pray as the day is breaking. I say Shma right around sunrise, I read the story of revelation. And some years, when I am feeling the blessing, the light shines in my own heart as well, something in me is reawakened, and I affirm again: I matter, you matter, and in this location, I meet God.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

AN IRANIAN DEAL

JUNE 24, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My intent had been to take a hiatus from CyberTorah, yet two incidents this last week invite response. The first is the horrible tragedy in Charleston. A community in Bible study was brutally attacked, resulting in nine murders by a young man steeped in racist ideology. Even more disturbing, that young man appears to be suffering from mental illness. Again, the insufficient resources for mental illness, combined with a disturbingly robust racist ideology, created a violent conflagration.

All week I have been studying and teaching in our own Beit Midrash; we have dedicated our learning to the Charleston community as we study ethics between people. Something has to change, and it must begin with a change in us, a change where we listen more attentively to those in need and search for ways to better support families and individuals suffering from mental illness, where we work intentionally to overcome racism, and where we refuse to tolerate hateful speech lest it lead to hateful, murderous action.

Second is my growing concern that next week will see a deal with Iran. Many report that the United States is close to a deal with Iran that will end sanctions. I'd like to see an end to sanctions, because I believe a more open, prosperous Iran will not long tolerate the religious extremists who currently rule that country. However, to feel good about such an agreement, I'd need to see several elements.

1. Inspections. Throughout the years, Iran has demonstrated a willingness to lie and to hide from inspectors. Any agreement must allow open access to Iranian sites so that experts can guarantee Iran cannot develop a nuclear weapon.
2. Sanctions ought to be phased out. Once eliminated, they are awfully hard to re-establish. I would feel much better about confidence-building that gradually lifts sanctions, so that Iran re-enters the world community by actively demonstrating its ability to be a trustworthy state.
3. The agreement ought to have no expiration date. I want a nuclear-free Iran today, tomorrow, a decade, and a century from now. An agreement that allows Iran to develop a weapon 10 years from now only postpones the crisis this creates for Israel and the world. This agreement ought to end, not postpone, that threat.

4. Finally, the agreement ought to be connected with Iranian funding of instability and terror throughout the region. I find it difficult to reconcile our findings about Iranian support of terror with our willingness to offer concessions in this area.

Iran has consistently been unwilling to make an agreement, so the June 30th deadline may well come and go. But if there is some agreement, I urge you to look it over carefully, and to write to your Congresspeople who will review the deal.

This is a key moment for Israel, the United States, and the world community. An irrational and untrustworthy actor like Iran with access to a nuclear device will only create an arms race in the Middle East and massive instability throughout the world. We must use our voices to urge an agreement that removes Iran as a nuclear threat.

Peace is more than the absence of violence; it is the presence of wholeness. God creates such peace / wholeness on high. May we also find the courage and strength to create such a wholeness on Earth, where peace is our goal, and where people are judged for the content of their character.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

IRAN, ISRAEL, AND THE UNITED STATES

AUGUST 13, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I returned last week from a lovely vacation in the Northwest. I had a blissful time away, and feel so grateful to come home to Kol Emeth and Palo Alto. Thank you to everyone who has welcomed me back so graciously! It's really good to be home.

I want to share with you some thoughts on Iran, but before that, I want to mark the one year anniversary of the tragedy in Ferguson. I plan to reach out to First AME of Palo Alto today to mark that anniversary and explore ways that we in our community can be a blessing to affect healing and change on race relations in the United States.

May God help everyone realize we are created in the divine image, all deserving of respect and love. Inspire us to look past the color of someone's skin and to see only the content of their character.

Last night, I attended a terrific session hosted by Beth Am on the Iran deal. I'd like to share with you my own take-aways:

1. No matter what we do, Iran remains a major threat. Abe Soefer, one of the presenters, referred to Iran as a criminal organization. They are exporters of terror, particularly against Israel. They support Assad's murderous regime. The Republican Guard, elite military units, continue to explore ways of expanding Iranian power in the region and their own enrichment through smuggling. This is all over and above their efforts to develop a nuclear weapon.
2. The deal is, in many ways, already made. The United Nations has passed the agreement, meaning sanctions will be lifted by the United Nations, Europe, China, etc, if Iran complies with the terms of the agreement. The two main parties still to approve this arrangement are the US and Iran. Since Obama is treating this agreement as a Presidential decree rather than a treaty, 2/3s of Congress will have to reject the deal to override the President's veto. It could happen, but seems unlikely to me. Even Schumer, who will vote against the deal, has made it clear that he won't use his leadership position to round up more votes and he has carefully avoided saying how he will vote after Obama's veto.
3. Obama's advocacy for this deal, combined with Netanyahu's advocacy against it, has for the first time in decades made Israel a partisan issue. The battleground is the Democrat party. Republicans will vote against the deal in overwhelming numbers: the question is how many Democrats will vote against a sitting President of their own party. The issue is divisive inside the Jewish community as

well. In the gathering of perhaps 500 people last night from six different congregations, both presenters for and against drew meaningful applause.

Based on these three points, I have a few conclusions to share as well:

Israel and the United States must remain close allies willing to share military equipment against the threat that Iran poses. This is why Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, a member of the Netanyahu's Likud party, called on Netanyahu to tone down his rhetoric. He referred to Israel as the junior partner in our long term friendship and called upon Netanyahu to show respect and rebuild ties. Whether this deal is implemented or not, whether Iran cheats (which I think they will) or doesn't, Israel and the United States must continue to nurture a close, strong friendship that transcends party lines.

The American Jewish community is a key part of sustaining that friendship. This deal is hurting a lot of people personally. For some, it's hard to understand how anyone can support it. For others, it's hard to see how someone can abandon the President and a chance for peace. People are losing friendships over it. Rabbis (myself included) are hesitant to speak out lest we hurt, offend, and alienate. The American Jewish community MUST find a way to allow division within our community, to argue and advocate strongly and forcefully, and still remain a community. Clal Yisrael, a sense of shared Jewish community, is necessary for a strong Israel.

Finally, Iran must remain isolated and pressured as long as it continues its illegal activities. Supporters of this arrangement believe this will create a 15 year window to transform the regime. I'd love that to be true. I'm skeptical. Either way, the world community, especially the United States and Israel, need to confront Iran on its violent, murderous activities in a robust and forceful manner. If they don't, I worry the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians will all start nuclear programs, that Iran's ability to sow instability will increase, and the risk of a worldwide conflagration will increase enormously.

I urge you to read more, from people who have studied and thought about this issue in great detail. A few resources I've read recently:

<http://www.hoover.org/research/abraham-d-sofaer-joint-comprehensive-plan-action-jcpoa>

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/opinion/nicholas-kristof-mr-obama-try-these-arguments-for-your-iran-deal.html?_r=0<http://forward.com/news/breaking-news/318655/reuven-rivlin-tells-netanyahu-to-play-nice-with-obama/>

This is a moment to study and to advocate. If you are so moved, this is a consequential moment to write a letter to Congress, to support a political advocacy group with whom you agree, to find other ways of making your voice heard.

This is also a moment to breathe, to remember that our greatest strength as a Jewish community is our deep familial connection to one another. Families fight sometimes, and sometimes painfully so. But as long as they can come back to dinner together, they are still family and still there for each other. Our community must remain a strong family, arguing, but still breaking bread together so that we are there for each other and for Israel.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

IT IS GOOD TO BE JOYFUL

AUGUST 19, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I feel the need to advocate for joy this week. We're entering a time traditionally associated with introspection. Yet too often that introspection becomes an exercise in unproductive guilt rather than a more honest and potentially joyous assessment of who I am and who I have the potential to be.

When I teach converts, I have them write me three essays, one of which is an annotated list of their current observance. I always have to coach them to write what they are doing, because left to their own devices, they have become Jewish enough to focus only on what they are failing to do.

So exercise number one: I invite you to make a list of your mitzvot. They could be Jewish-related observance like coming to shul or lighting candles on Friday night. They could be more humanly-related mitzvot like volunteer work or thoughtfulness around issues of speech at work or at home. Now that you have this remarkable list, feel happy with yourself. You should feel good because you are making lots of meaning-filled choices, and that is always hard. If you want, examine which of these motivate you to do more and set some goals for the coming year.

When I do pre-marital counseling, I urge couples to work on a budget together as a communication tool. I urge them to name their values first, and plan their budget second. How we spend time and money are two of the most powerful ways in which we express ourselves in the world.

Exercise number two: write down three values that matter to you. Limit yourself to no more than four and no less than two. More, and most of us can't honor so many values; less, and we are below our human capacity. Now, take a look at how you spend time and money. Does it match your values? In what ways do you feel good, and are there changes, places where you feel out of balance?

As you conclude these two exercises, return to joy. The easy and unproductive path is to turn now towards guilt and to allow feelings of unworthiness to prevent any ability to value ourselves in this moment, let alone to find the strength to change. Remind yourself of joy, of valuing what you ARE doing and the values you DO hold. Joy can enable us to find strength and affect real inner change.

For me, and for many, the last step is a turn towards God. There is joy in knowing that I am charting a path towards God, towards a lure in the Universe that invites blessing and goodness. It is joyous to know

I am not alone in finding my path. It is joyous to know that I am on a path towards a Being of love who can fill me with blessing.

May this season of introspection bring you joy and growth!!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

AS WE SET OUT

AUGUST 27, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every year, I set out. And every year, I find myself beset by the same enemies. I encounter my impatience and ego. I re-discover my desire for control, and encounter again my behaviors, like stress eating, that seem to always be my traveling companions. I work through Elul to change, but now find myself at the next year, still setting out on the same journey.

Change requires something different. I am armed: I have intelligence, and understanding, and at least a modicum of faith. For me, faith is connected with an inner compass that knows I have strayed, am out of balance, lacking in wholeness. That inner sense reminds me sometimes loudly and sometimes in a still small voice that I'm on the wrong track (again). It alerts me when I find my path, however briefly, and reminds me that there is a path at all.

The Torah says twice: when you go out to war. On one level, the Torah offers an ethic of war that is a gift to modernity by offering an ethic even amid the necessity of violence. Yet on another level, Torah offers an inner process to lasting change, realizing that the work continues year after year. When you go out to war. Every year, every day, there is the struggle towards wholeness, towards connecting with that inner voice that reminds us who we want to be.

Next, the Torah offers instructions should you take a female captive. Here, Torah introduces the first effort at humanizing the captive and creating checks and delays to violence and abuse. It is an intriguing view into the ancient mind. This female captive is shaved, her nails cut, she wears something new. It takes away her exotic nature and removes the erotic of the captured object. Now the capturer must wait a month and then decide: is she kept or returned home? By our standards, sexist beyond words. But in that place and time, the first effort at rights adhering even to female captives.

That inner struggle that we have also may include taking a captive. We may take hold of our self-destructive behavior, our hurtful acts, our misdirected emotion, and we see it for what it really is. I'm eating only out of stress. I'm getting impatient because I feel powerless. Now we are ready to decide. My stress eating? That has to be sent away. My anxiety about the future? Stripped of its destructive allure, there is something holy in that anxiety. I need to accept it, integrate it, make it a part of my own now revealed wholeness.

We need this whole month leading to Yom Kippur because the process takes time and self-honesty. Further, the language of the Torah repeats to remind us that this is an iterative process. Each year, I encounter my self again and while I may have grown, there is still more to do, still a journey of the self that calls out to me.

This Elul, may we be granted the strength and the wisdom to set out on this much-needed inner process, so that we arrive at Yom Kippur ready to release our own inner captives and so be healed and transformed.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

GET INVOLVED

SEPTEMBER 2, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Torah law is a magnificent structure. We often miss its larger import because we get stuck in the weeds of antiquity and because it is the basis of modern jurisprudence and ethics. Yet as the great Modern Orthodox scholar Saul Berman points out, Torah law continues to have a great deal to say to modernity.

For one thing, Jewish law begins not with reason or rules, but with people. Unlike Western Jurisprudence that all too often wants a general principle, Torah law realizes that the individual and the community are the purpose of the law. Case law keeps humanity at the center. Further, Jewish law exists in part to serve the community. This means that people can have obligations placed upon them because they are part of a human community.

One example of this is the return of lost objects. I am grateful to Rabbi Lewis for teaching me that in Exodus we are commanded to return objects to an enemy, while in Deuteronomy we are required to return them to a comrade. The Hasidim teach that this linguistic variation teaches that returning lost objects converts an enemy into a friend. By staying engaged, by being involved and responsible for one another, we create community.

The Sfat Emet goes even a step further. Commenting on this rule of returning lost objects, he says, “When people accustom themselves to returning lost objects, that person gradually becomes unable to turn away. This is true for the physical and for the spiritual... Then all the more so in the person him or herself such that they cannot bear their own lessening and thus find salvation.”

When a person takes up the practice of returning lost objects, it leads to a spiritual ascent. First is the return of the lost object. Second is the need to help lost souls. That person becomes attuned to pain and loss of all kinds and reaches out to help people find their way. Third, an inner transformation takes place such that the person is able to save themselves, to detect their own moments of being out of balance or lost and to restore the order.

With that in mind, I suggest a three part practice for Elul. First, to make a practice of picking up trash when we see it. There’s enough even in our clean neighborhoods that we can begin to develop the practice of being involved, of seeing and then doing.

Second, since part of the reason we return lost objects is to build community, I want to suggest we reclaim a lost communication medium, namely email. I find email often stressful and transactional. I suggest that we all make an effort to send one email each day (I've managed about 3 a week in the two weeks I've been trying this) to appreciate someone else or restore a connection.

And finally, I urge us to make time for lost souls when we encounter them. When we see someone in need of our attention or time, to pause for a cup of coffee or a walk or a lunch and help that person find their way again.

If we can do this, I believe the change the Sfat Emet suggests can take place and we will find our own way such that Yom Kippur can truly cleanse and transform us.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

And join me for a special movie and Selichot services this Saturday. Details on the Announcements bar to the left.

AM I A MODERN SEGREGATIONIST?

SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

On Labor Day, my family and I went to Lake Anza in Berkeley. It is one of the few lakes that allows swimming in the Bay Area. The place was packed with people on a beautiful warm Monday off. What most surprised me, however, was how many Black and Hispanic people I saw. My daughter Maytal pointed out that while Palo Alto and the South Bay is diverse, that diversity is less visible.

Yet even in that more diverse crowd, there were few interactions. The Latinos mostly came and went with other Latinos, as did the Black people, or the White people, or the Israelis. I did see one interracial group barbecuing together, but that was about it. Has our integration always been this segregated?

The title on my home forbids Blacks, Asians, and Hispanic from living here in other than domestic capacity. Such title restrictions are common. It is easier to invalidate them through law than to remove them from the deed. This means as recently as the 1950s people saw such a clause as both legal and ethical.

And yet, easy as it is to say that we have moved on from such legal segregation, there remains a new and more subtle segregation. I don't believe myself to have a racist bone in my body, and yet I have to work at having Black friends. I do have some, but I can count them on one hand. I'm not sure how I got to such a point. Partly, housing prices and personal choice makes my neighborhood more segregated. Partly, my own work and community are largely Jewish. Yet I've begun to feel something is missing.

While I've worked on overcoming this segregation in my personal life, I've seldom been intentional in my Rabbinic life. This year I want to change that. I reached out to Pastor Kamala Smith at University AME Zion Church in Palo Alto. I was moved to call by his leadership locally after the tragedy in Charleston. Pastor Smith not only took my call, but invited me to coffee. We talked and planned how to bring our communities together.

We want to start with children. Pastor Smith, after convening a communal conversation about race, is organizing a free children's faire this Shabbat from 12-4pm at Cubberley Community Center in Palo Alto. It will be a chance to bring a seldom-seen ethnically diverse community together. If we can get children of different backgrounds together, perhaps we can create hope, a sense of a wider community of which we can be members.

Please note that while I normally only advertise Shabbat-related events on Shabbat, this possibility of healing seems important enough to attend and to advertise the event. It is within the eruv and is a free event.

We are also planning a pulpit exchange on MLK Weekend in January and are looking for other ways to learn, worship, or play together.

My own experience of racial divide is more of subtlety. I want to counter it with intentionality. Every human being is created in the image of God. It is time for me to see more of God's color.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THREE ACTIONS

SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It has been such a joy to greet the New Year. As we enter the 10 days of Repentance, this gift of time to heal ourselves, our relationships, and the world, I want to offer 3 specific actions to mark our return to our truest selves.

1. Join the “Judaism’s 10 Best Ideas” book club. We are forming four study groups on different weeknights in people’s homes facilitated by Ellen Bob, Morey Schapira, Michael Kahan and Nechama Tamler beginning the second week of October. We will be studying Art Green’s new book, Judaism’s 10 Best Ideas. The book is deceptively simple – there are 10 short chapters that focus on the most meaningful aspects of what Judaism has to offer the self and the world. Those new to this kind of learning will be introduced to a wonderful entrance into Jewish thought. Those more experienced will be reconnected through Green’s thoughtful choices to why we love Judaism so much and what it has to offer the world.

The intent is to have groups of around 15 people so that participants can learn together as well as form a community. I will kick off the learning by leading a study session on chapter 1 at the break on Yom Kippur at the Beth Am site. Then each group will meet during the second week of October with a home to be announced. You pick the session you want and can even make up a session with a different group if you have a conflict. Each session stands on its own, but there is much to be gained by going to all. Session 10 will be a potluck Friday night in my backyard to pull us all back together again.

To sign up, you can simply respond to this email or place a “sticky dot” on the sign-up form that will be at the greeter’s table on Yom Kippur. In addition, if you are able to host one of the sessions, please let us know that as well.

2. Kol Emeth is again participating in a food drive with Second Harvest. There are hundreds of thousands of people in San Mateo and Santa Clara County without enough to eat. There are tens of thousands of food-insecure children in our own area. As we share festive meals, we ought to ensure those who are hungry can also eat. As we fast, we ought to remember REAL hunger, when no delicious break-the-fast awaits. I encourage you to bring a bag of groceries with you to Kol Nidre and/or to make a donation at [tinyurl.com/KEFoodDrive2015](https://www.tinyurl.com/KEFoodDrive2015). If you donate by check or another method, please mention our Drive ID #28967, so that they know you are part of the KE food drive. Last year, we raised well over

\$10,000 and collected tons of food. The problem now is just as severe if not worse; let's do even more this year.

3. Reach out to people in your life. This is a profound week of healing. I invite us all to think of those relationships that need honoring and to reach out to express appreciation to parents, mentors, friends, and others who care for us and offer us love and support. I also invite us to reach out to those people from whom we are estranged, separated, or simply in need of being closer. This is the week to seek forgiveness and to enter Yom Kippur ready to focus on our own process of change.

I am so grateful to be a part of the Kol Emeth community, and to have this wonderful CyberTorah community as well. Your responses, your comments, and your appreciation all touch me greatly. I thank you and wish you a New Year of drawing closer to your truest self.

L'Shana Tova,
Rabbi David Booth

CELEBRATE SUKKOT

SEPTEMBER 24, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is something very special about Avinu Malkeynu. Even the band Phish covered it once. The melody speaks to something deep in our hearts as we call out to God's love. For me, the moment at the end of Neilah as we sing Avinu Malkeynu reminds me of community, of faith, of joy. I feel so connected in that moment of song. Yet all too easily, that feeling fades from my consciousness.

Sukkot is the keystone, the place we reaffirm the structure of meaning forged at Yom Kippur so that it can stay with us all year long. Our Sukkot are enclosed shelters that are also wide open to the world. When we build them, and then eat in them with family and friends, we are opening ourselves to another more intimate experience that matches and enhances our Yom Kippur moment.

One the teens suggested that we fast on Yom Kippur to remind ourselves of those who experience real hunger. The Sukkah also, as an open temporary structure, reminds us of those without housing and in need. It both awakens our compassion, hopefully inspiring charitable giving, and our gratitude, as we appreciate the true blessings of what we have.

Sukkot is rooted in nature, in growing things and being outside. Where Yom Kippur is filled with liturgy and intensity, Sukkot is filled with deep appreciation and joy. I invite everyone to find a way of celebrating Sukkot this year.

Perhaps you will come to services next Monday or Tuesday morning at 9:15. On Monday, we will shake the lulav and etrog for the first time and parade around Kol Emeth with them. There will also be parallel children's programming so that families can attend. The Bible commands us to gather together. I encourage you to find the time from work or school to privilege spiritual living as well. And for those with vacation time, all the more so!

You could build a Sukkah. They can be done quickly and easily (see the Halakhah Corner to the left). Once built, you can invite friends to eat with you and use your Sukkah to expand and deepen your friendships and feeling of community.

Lastly, you could focus on joy during this week of celebration. What activities / friends / places bring out happiness for you? It is a commandment to rejoice on Sukkot. I invite you to make time for these

activities that help awaken happiness in you.

Sukkot Samech!!

Rabbi David Booth

SIMCHAT TORAH

OCTOBER 1, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I felt something special as Yom Kippur services finished. There was something about being together, about singing with intensity, that was both meaningful and incredibly joyous. I left on a real high, feeling both renewed in self and connected more deeply to community. That sense of community was broad – it was a deep connection to our Kol Emeth community, but also to my other communities, united across time and space through prayer. And hovering above it, in it, the presence of God.

Yom Kippur and Sukkot are book ends. Yom Kippur is the pathway to meaning and a good life through serious introspection. It is a moment when we evaluate who we are and what we are doing, and look for how our observance and our mitzvot can enrich that sacred journey. Sukkot is a pathway to meaning through joy. It is when we remind ourselves that Jewish practice is a way of life that regularly connects us to our deepest selves and to our moral connections with the world through joy and song.

We feel drawn to be together for the serious pole of Yom Kippur. We come out for all our complex reasons. But the joyous pole seems somehow less necessary and so we let the rest of our life get in the way. I want to invite you this year to take both bookends seriously, to join the dance as well as the introspection.

The Baal Shem Tov talks about joy and about dance. He comments on the Hasidic practice of ecstatic dancing that occurs every Shabbat as well as on Simchat Torah. The practice for him is emulating the joy of the angels. It is the chance to be part of joy, connected to the community, to the world, to God. Those inside the circle have a responsibility to reach out and invite others in; those on the outskirts need to motivate themselves to join the circle.

We need more joy in our lives. We need more community and deep human connection. It only happens when we reach out and make the effort. I invite you to come to Simchat Torah, to join the dance, to take a Torah, or grab the hand of someone you've known for years or just met a second ago, and realize joy. We need you to enliven / deepen our joy.

Simchat Torah at Kol Emeth is quite special. Monday night begins at 6:30pm with dancing and singing through around 8:30pm. Tuesday morning, the dancing starts around 10:30am (services begin at 9:30), with a lunch, and then concluding the Torah. Musaf is particularly fun – with a guarantee of rain indoors.

I hope to dance with you over Simchat Torah!!

May we all be blessed with a year that includes great joy!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL ZIONISM

OCTOBER 21, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Abraham has a mission and a promise. The mission: to be a blessing, and in particular to create a community dedicated to moral and holy living that can be an example to the rest of the world. God gives Abraham that mission at a moment when the world is on fire.

Noah and the flood are a distant memory. Yet God's intent of a fresh start has failed. The Tower of Babel tells of a community interested only in ego by creating a massive monument at enormous human and financial expense, to show that they have arrived. According to the Midrash, the Tower's builders are far more concerned when material is lost than when people die in the construction. The postdiluvian world turns out just like the prediluvian world.

At this moment, when God could so easily despair about us as humans, Abraham is invited to be God's partner in a new approach to healing and cleansing the world. Abraham's mission is to create one community, one covenantal congregation to show a better way. We are to be a blessing so that the families of the Earth will be blessed. Our mission has nothing to do with conquest; it has to do with the creation and spreading of blessing.

The promise is a place in which to build that community. Israel is meant to be a land unlike other lands because the people who will inhabit it will build something special that can serve as an example of what it would mean to create a community based on the propagation of blessing. We are now in the midst of our third attempt to make good on that vision of Israel and the Jewish community.

As Americans, being a Zionist can mean a theological commitment to a Jewish homeland in Israel that strives to be different than any other nation in the world. An example: last week in Raanana, yet another "lone wolf" terrorist stabbed two people at a bus stop. The Mayor quickly arrived at the scene and held back others who wanted to attack the attacker. He reportedly said that this is how we do things in Israel. We use the courts and the police. This is what it means to honor the sacred image and to be a light among the nations.

As Americans, being a Zionist can mean standing with Israel at moments like this, so filled with darkness. Israelis needs to know that we care as a new wave of violence against Jewish Israelis begins. This violence was inspired in part by fears of an Israeli take-over of the Temple Mount with no basis in fact. It

is inspired in part by the violence of ISIS. Yet whatever the causes, and whatever we think of the Israeli response to the crisis, Israelis ought to know that we care, that our hearts break when people lose their children or experience random and terrifying violence in city squares and bus stops.

And as American Theological Zionists, support for Israel includes a yearning to find a path to heal the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael, between Jew and Arab. Those brothers came together to bury their father Abraham because they realized that they had more in common than that which separated them. We too must continue to look for ways of sowing and encouraging peace.

May this upsurge in violence be brought to a swift end. May those entrusted with protecting the citizens and keeping the land safe be guided with wisdom and compassion and be safe on their missions. And may those people and voices in Israeli society that offer aid and assistance in crises around the world, who train young subsistence farmers from Muslim countries new techniques to lift their villages out of poverty, who work to build bridges and sow peace, be strengthened. Let us soon see a day on which our mission and our promise can be fulfilled as an example to the whole world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRAYER?

OCTOBER 28, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've been thinking a lot about why I pray and why I intuitively know it to be such a basic human necessity. I've been thinking about it in part because my own prayer, through effort and study, has become much richer over the last few years. And I'm thinking about it in part because it feels harder to draw people into a more traditional prayer experience.

The struggles, the physical pull away from prayer, has never been stronger. We are so used to a constant level of stimulation that we instinctively react against the slowing down that prayer requires. The something that is happening in prayer takes time to emerge. It cannot be made more efficient with better processing power or higher bandwidth. It requires a wholeness of self that can emerge only over time.

At the same time, we are so used to passive entertainment, like movies, sporting events, or the theater that when we sit down to pray in a Synagogue we expect to be entertained. Prayer is an active action that requires some preparation and an agenda. If we sit down to pray waiting to see God, we are likely to be disappointed. If, however, we actively engage in prayer, and in stimulating the imagination that aids us in the divine encounter, God may indeed "peep out" and respond.

(I use the language of "peep out" because of the midrash that when God first encountered Abraham, God "peeped out" at him from an illuminated or burning palace.)

I pray to attain gratitude and quiet. I pray to create space in my consciousness for my soul to speak to me. I pray to attune myself to God in the world.

I pray with a sense of obligation and connection to a particular practice and liturgical tradition. That connection reminds me that my need to connect with God and to make room for sacred attunement is a *hovah*, an obligation. This obligation has an ongoing quality expressed but never contained in daily prayer. The particular liturgical connection roots my own quest in a shared practice of a whole people throughout time.

I know for many the traditional prayer practices of Judaism feel sometimes overwhelming and slow. Yet I want to make a personal case for the beauty and inspiration contained within it. For many years, I was

skilled in the techniques of prayer but found my prayer life mediocre at best. Then I began the long hard work of bringing my heart, my sorrow and joy and wholeness of self, into the prayer practices. When I succeed, my prayers brim over with meaning. When I find the courage to share my heart, to offer myself as an offering, my prayers become my soul's song of love to God.

Shabbat Shalom –
Rabbi David Booth

CYBERTORAH: OUR NEW SIDDURIM

NOVEMBER 10, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Rabbinical Assembly has just announced the publication of a new Shabbat siddur modeled off of *Lev Shalem*, the beautiful mahzor we began using a few years back. We are planning to purchase these books for Kol Emeth, and so we invite congregants to sponsor books for Kol Emeth, as well as to purchase ones for personal use.

You can see sample pages at rabbinicalassembly.org/siddur. We will place the order by the end of November, and will receive the books sometime in early 2016. To sponsor or purchase some of these new siddurim, please return the order form that was mailed to all Kol Emeth members this week, or call the Kol Emeth Office ([650-948-7498](tel:650-948-7498)) with your order information. Orders are due Monday, November 23.

As you will see, this new siddur provides a number of entry places into the beauty of prayer and traditional liturgy. There is more transliteration, better and more poetic translation, and marvelous commentary and additional readings, all invitations into prayer.

Prayers are most often an uplifting spiritual experience being put into words by a poet. For example, the prayer associated with waking up, *Modeh Ani*, reads literally: *I am thankful before you, most high and eternal King, for returning my soul to me amid Your great faith*. The poet who wrote these words must have been filled with a profound sense of appreciation upon waking up, of experiencing the sheer joy of life.

Then he managed to capture something of his own faith in the words he chose. God is eternal, contrasting with our more ephemeral nature. Further, it is God's belief in us that makes us exist. God's great belief leads to existent reality. The siddur, by collecting such crystalized moments, can be an amazing barrier or an amazing gateway into prayer.

It can be a barrier when we are too much reading what someone else has written. Your own faith may differ from the person who wrote *Modeh Ani*, leaving you unaffected by the poetry of the words. Or in a particular moment, the author of the prayer may feel so far above spiritually that we feel intimidated and so don't even know how to begin.

It can be a gateway, however, when the sharing of experience invites and challenges us to find our inner experience. I do not feel grateful every morning. Sometimes I feel tired or grumpy. *Modeh Ani* becomes a spiritual challenge, a daily reminder, to awaken with gratitude and with faith. The set words help me restore touch with something I need in my own inner self.

Many prayers are like this. The opening weekday prayers, *You, God, created everything in wisdom*, is poetry to the sunrise. The poet connects the beauty of the daily experience into a moment of faith. As we read it, it can awaken gratitude and appreciation in us. It invites also to connect those feelings to a source, a

source of all that is which we call God.

The new siddur, by using updated language and improved poetic translation, helps those less comfortable with the Hebrew to find their way in. Further, the commentary is another way to uncover focus and intent in a particular moment or prayer. Finally, the transliteration invites everyone to be a part of our singing community.

These new books will be an invitation into ancient words and poetry, amid modern thoughts, and invites our own spiritual reaction. May the new books invite a new wholeness to take root in each of us.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

THE POETRY OF PRAYER

NOVEMBER 12, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Prayers have their own poetry. Let's look at the poetry of one familiar prayer, the blessing over bread, or the hamotzi. Here is my own translation: Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of All, who causes the Earth to bring forth bread. The theology at first glance is odd. I understand the blessing that praises God for the fruit of the tree. That is a process that occurs naturally. Bread, however, only exists through human effort. God doesn't bring forth bread from the earth.

To unravel this mystery, let's first look at the words in their original context. The words themselves are a slight reworking of Psalm 104. There, the Psalmist proclaims:

God makes grass grow for the cattle,

*and plants for people to cultivate –
bringing forth food from the earth.*

The Psalmist praises God for ever renewing the world. God gives us what we need and then we use that sustenance to live. God gives us produce and we turn it into food.

The author of the blessing, however, has radically reimagined what God does and is. God has become a partner in the process. After all, the growing of wheat involves a lot of human cultivation. Perhaps the author of the blessing realizes that even the natural processes by which wheat grows are natural ones requiring no metaphysical explanation.

The wonder of the blessing is in the meeting place of God with the world and with humanity. God is the engine of creation, processes both biological and physical. God is the source of life energy that ultimately enables life to flourish. Further, God is our partner in creation. God does more than cause the wheat to grow. God walks with us in the creativity to make bread. God is there in the life-giving impulse, strengthening it and enhancing it.

The person who composed this blessing reworked a biblical idea into a rich theology of God as the ultimate cause of all that is. Further, the poetry of the words allows that theology to attain a vibrant, immediate quality. Even in that loaf of bread, so essential to life, God is found. Even in the mundane act of the baker, God is present.

The siddur is laden with such examples. We are fortunate this Shabbat to welcome Rabbi Ed Feld, the chair of the Siddur Committee of the Conservative Movement, as our Scholar in Residence. He will talk about the new siddur, as well as the poetry of prayer and the difficulty of prayer.

I invite you to what promises to be an inspiring Shabbat, as well as a unique chance to see the Rabbinical Assembly's new siddur before it goes to print. More on this weekend's visit with Rabbi Feld can be found [here](#).

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

TERROR IN PARIS

NOVEMBER 19, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the days shorten, we are heading towards the darkest part of the year. Human-made darkness this year has added to the dark in ways that challenge our safety, our compassion, and our western values. I pray for those who lost loved ones Friday in Paris at the same time that I cast about for the right kind of response. The kind of horror perpetrated by terrorists last Friday night is horrific on three levels.

First, the violence itself. The whole concept of suicide terrorism takes advantage of gullible, disaffected teens. The perpetrators are almost always young people steeped in radical forms of Islam, wrestling with their own feelings of emptiness, who then are seduced into the dramatic meaning created by such an attack. Older leaders cynically use religion to deceive young people.

Those murders inflict violence and terror in a modern Western city like Paris on a massive level. The brutality of the act – it targeted people at a rock concert, people out to dinner on a Friday night, alongside other innocents out to enjoy the weekend – was evil. It was planned and executed with the desire to murder innocent civilians and to spread terror across a Western city.

Second, the perversion of religion. God is about nurturing that part of ourselves which brings blessings into the world. The Torah says again and again to choose life. Faith, for me, is turning towards God to find the ways that sustain and propagate life through love. Islam has developed a malignant strain today that seeks instead mastery at any cost. In this perverted theology, there must be a new Islamic dominance in the political realm that can impose theological law and Islam around the world.

There are other strains of Islam dedicated to life and love. But if even 10% of Muslims are attracted by such a theology, I would argue there is something wrong that Islamic leaders themselves desperately need to address. This profanation of God's name then weakens religion in general. Yet devotion to God can inspire the noblest of what it means to be human. We cannot allow this threat to undermine religion. We must become equally passionate in advocating for a religion that is life-affirming and based on blessing.

Third, this type of assault strikes the most basic values of Western culture. Terrorists who represent a foreign enemy and a radical religion are terrifying enough. When they are also citizens of France, or refugees from the Middle East, we have an even bigger problem. Europe is letting in Middle Eastern

refugees as one of the greatest acts of love ever in history. It is in some ways a response to Europe's failures in the 1930s. Now, that act of love has seemingly become dangerous, even foolhardy. We always knew the risk that some bad agents would slip through. Now that they have, how can we react without turning our backs on the legitimately suffering displaced people?

Further, the sense of a fifth column inside a Western nation challenges freedom of expression and rule of law. If we limit our freedoms, we are giving the fanatics and terrorists another victory. Yet if we don't find legal and military responses to protect innocents, our own citizens remain at significant risk. The weapon of terror is effective because our responses are our most dearly held values.

We are heading into the darkest time of the year. And yet, we intentionally light candles. It is a reminder that we can bring light and blessing into our homes and lives even when all seems lost, darkest, most hopeless.

In that spirit:

May the God of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who is also God of all the world, offer comfort and love to those in mourning. May they feel the presence of millions who mourn their loss and offer their love.

May the city of Paris be restored to its light and beauty. It is one of the great cities of the world. God grant its leaders the wisdom to restore the broken buildings, but also the broken confidence, so that it may again be the City of Lights.

May our leaders, here and in Europe, be granted wisdom in their response to this incident. May they find ways to fight against domestic threats and the threats abroad. May they limit the spread of ISIS and the dark fantasy of a strand of Islam that will destroy life and history, the past, present and future, in its ludicrous efforts to lead.

Finally, may we all remember the blessings of Western culture, its commitment to freedom and openness, to faith rooted in blessing and life, so that as we respond to violence we are also cultivating light and hope.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 24, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year feels somehow more filled with turmoil. Sometimes, when the news is so filled with violence and chaos, I feel self-centered in allowing myself to appreciate the blessings that I have. Yet, it is through gratitude that I find patience, attention, and love. That is, rituals of appreciation give me the energy to be a blessing in the world.

At such a time of turmoil, our gratitude practices ought to include generosity as well. Many have the practice of giving a little tzedakah before Shabbat; perhaps we can do the same before Thanksgiving as well. One project that Kol Emeth is supporting is the collection of gift certificates for families receiving support from Shalom Bayit.

Kol Emeth is adopting a woman we are calling Tatiana. She is blind and determined to build a life for herself after finalizing a divorce. With this effort spearheaded by our own Roslyn Sholin, we are inviting people to pick up gift certificates for food or merchandise to drop them off at the shul by Nov 30th.

Those gift cards will then be given to families in need, including “Tatiana,” to empower them to care for their own children. Another great charity at this time is Second Harvest, which addresses hunger issues in our area. A donation to either allows us to share our own blessings with others.

Then, during the meal itself, I invite you to spend some time reflecting on the blessings in your own life. Perhaps, as so many do, go around the table saying that for which you are thankful. Once the meal is over, before everyone disperses, perhaps gather for a Birkhat Hamazon, the grace after meals. You can find the text and a translation here: www.lookstein.org/lessonplans/bh/bh_text.pdf.

An abbreviated English text might be:

Thank You, God, for this wonderful meal and for the food and drink we eat every day. You have commanded us to eat, be satisfied, and to bless. We bless You who nourishes the world. We thank You also for our homes and shelters, places to live. And in particular, we invoke Your blessings for Israel and Jerusalem, for peace and for wholeness.

God, You are good and You do good. Ours is a time of uncertainty, of violence, and of terror. Grant us soon and

speedily ways towards peace that ensure every person will know they carry within them the divine image of God.

May You who creates order in the heavens be our partner to make shalom, order, here on Earth as well. Amen.

Happy Thanksgiving and super early Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

JUDAISM'S 10 BEST IDEAS

DECEMBER 3, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Judaism believes in our ability to change the world for the better. Abraham's most basic commandment from God is to "be a blessing." By doing so, the "families of the Earth" will be blessed through Abraham. Where so many peoples have origin stories that then go on to command conquest and teach superiority, Abraham is given a special mission to bring blessing to everyone. Our mission is to bring blessing, not conquest.

Rashi teaches that God had, until that moment, held the sole power to bless, but now had given that power to Abraham and his descendants. God invites Abraham into partnership with the divine. As Rabbi Eddie Feinstein points out, God learns that the moral degradation of humanity requires a human partner to heal. Rashi points out that all Jews are empowered in this act of world repair.

During the middle ages, this idea of fixing the world took on a mystical cast in the notion of Tikkun Olam. For the mystics, the exile and suffering of the world were indicative of an imbalance in the heavens. Prayer, mitzvot, certain kinds of intentionality during ritual, would restore that balance.

Shabbat meals, for example, were about unifying God's disparate aspects into one. At Friday night, Shechinah, God's feminine aspect, dines with us. At lunch it is Atika, God's deepest, most essential essence. Then at the third meal, we dine with Abba v'Emma, the aspect of God that rules the world as we experience it. If we offer them the right kind of meal, they are influenced by the love of Atika, and the week ahead will be ruled over by God's love and justice.

Tikkun Olam took on a this-worldly aspect in the 1950s and 60s as people began to use the term to mean fixing social ills. Jews became leaders in so many socially-oriented causes because we believe our actions really can change the world in ways both physical and spiritual. The world may be out of balance, but it can be brought back into balance. We, as descendants of Abraham, have the power to bring that kind of blessing into the world.

As many of you know, we have book groups around the community studying Art Green's new book *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas*. This month, those groups are exploring in more detail the concept of Tikkun Olam. You are invited! Just send me or Ruthie (ruthie@kolemeth.org) an email with your preferred day of the week (Sunday, Monday, or Wednesday evenings), and we will find you a group.

These intimate (7-12 people in each group) groups are facilitated by amazing teachers – Nechama Tamler, Ellen Bob, Morey Schapira, and Michael Kahan. The study creates new community around reconnecting with our most essential Jewish ideas. I hope, if you aren't already involved, that you will join in!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

SAN BERNARDINO

DECEMBER 10, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am worried about my reaction to the tragedy in San Bernardino on two levels. First, I found myself numbed to it. By contrast with Paris, or Tel Aviv, or so many other incidents of murder and terror, I saw the headlines and initially gave it little attention. I'm worried that I'm getting used to it, inured to regular occurrences of mass murder and terror.

Yet we are created in the image of God. Every death, every murder, is a loss of infinite value. I dare not get used to such loss. I need to be shocked and upset and in mourning each time because each time the divine image is lessened; lovers, children, parents have been lost forever.

Second, these murders are done in God's name. I believe in God who brings out the truest essence of people. As the process theologians put it, God is in part the lure, the pull to do good, to be a source of blessing. I am so disturbed by God being invoked in murder and in terror. It does damage to religion because people who might be drawn to faith that heals, faith that transforms, instead turn away. If it leads to such incidents, I want nothing of it, they say. I am heartbroken to see faith inspire murder, whether in Paris, San Bernardino, or Israel.

And yet faith is how we heal, how we comfort one another, and how we uncover our capacity to be a blessing in the world. Our endeavor as Jews is to be a blessing to all the families of the Earth. I believe God wants that of all humanity. Our job is to uncover our own ability to bring good and blessing to one another, to all people's and nations. Faith is one path that helps us achieve that divine mission.

A prayer for this tragedy:

May God who creates peace, who is good and does good, inspire us not to violence, but to blessing. May we find the strength to feel loss even when it is repetitive, inexplicable, and awful. May God grant us the strength to access our own inner resources of compassion to offer comfort to those in mourning, to those who have lost loved ones, to those who are afraid.

And yet, God, we know that prayer is only beginning. Prayer is the inspiration for good action, the moment to connect with You, source of blessing. Help us then to find the political, legal, and military pathways to bring about an end to terror and violence. Guide our leaders and all of us in the democratic

West to wisdom towards a path that can restore Your holy name as it belongs – as a source of peace and blessing and safety, to the whole world.

Then may it be fulfilled that each person may sit at rest under their citrus tree, content with their portion, renewed and inspired to be blessing to all the families that walk this Earth.

Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER FOR RAIN

DECEMBER 17, 2015

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the rainy season (hopefully) begins in earnest, a prayer:

May the God of our ancestors, and the whole world, bring rain. May the rain come for a blessing and not a curse. May it bring snow and water that enlivens, storms that cleanse and make way for new growth and life.

May the rain bring with it a measure of God's hesed, God's overflowing love. As the rain falls, may our own reservoirs of love and compassion be renewed and refilled. For love is the opposite of fear, compassion the opposite of hate.

May the strength of the storms and wind remind us of our own capacity for destruction. As we strive to contain the potential of the storm's destruction, may we be reminded to find ways of containing humanity's powers of destruction. Grant us the wisdom to see when it is the destructive power of others that must be sandbagged, and when it is our own.

May the winds come and the rains fall, restoring life and hesed to the world. Meishev ha ruach u' mored hageshem. Let the rains, the winds, and our own compassion, power and strength, come into the world to bring blessing and not a curse.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be on hiatus for a few weeks, resuming in January.

HELPING SYRIAN REFUGEES

JANUARY 11, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We know what it is like to be refugees. From the Exodus from Egypt through to the Holocaust, Jews have all too often been displaced people in search of a home. We are blessed to live in an era where we now have that home in Israel, a place that will always take every Jew from anywhere in the world.

Yet we are living in the midst of one of the great refugee crises of our era. The violent destruction of ISIS, Assad, and terror fomented by Iran, means that millions of Syrians and others in the Middle East are themselves displaced people, refugees in search of a place.

Many of those refugees have made their way to Greece and are in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, as they lack even the most basic clothing and food. Our neighbors, Kathy Levinson and Naomi Fine, are planning to travel to Greece in mid-January to bring help and supplies to these refugees. They are organizing ten large duffel bags to take with them.

Kol Emeth is collecting supplies through January 18th, when we will help fill those duffels. Kol Emeth has offered to take responsibility for filling two duffels. **The link to what is needed is here: [Items for Refugees](#)**. Please update the google doc if you buy supplies, so we can make sure we have sufficient supplies. Due to mailing costs, any extra items collected will be donated locally through JFCS and Shalom Bayit.

Items can be dropped off at KE during normal office hours, or on Monday the 18th (MLK Jr. Day) from 1-2pm. We will then be packing and organizing the duffels from 2-4pm on the 18th. Please note that we won't be able to accept additional items after 2pm on the 18th, because the duffels will already be packed!!

We are also accepting donations to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund to help pay for mailing and other expenses. Any additional funds raised will go directly to European refugee efforts through IsraAid. If you donate to the discretionary fund, please indicate Refugees in the memo line. You will notice us storing the items over the next few days, and I invite you to be a part of this effort.

In addition, I draw your attention to an educational event on this topic organized by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where both Rabbi Graff and I attended Rabbinical School. It will be

live-streamed on Feb 2nd and looks quite impressive. You can find it [here](#).

When we had nowhere to go, almost no one lifted their hands to help. Today, when we see others in a situation all too reminiscent of our not too distant past, let us raise a hand in support. And let's show these primarily Syrian Arab refugees what it really means to be Jewish. It means to care about every human life. It means to feel a connection and commitment simply because we are human and created in the image of God.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

PULPIT EXCHANGE

JANUARY 14, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

People of color are almost invisible in Silicon Valley. The Black community here is shrinking. And so we create the illusion that racial problems exist elsewhere, since we so rarely encounter them here. And yet, their absence is as much a part of the problem as their presence.

I did not know until recently that University Church, a Black Church in Palo Alto, is one of the oldest houses of worship in the city. I went to their 93rd anniversary celebration because I have become friends with their pastor, Kaloma Smith. There's a great picture of me with a bunch of clergy friends that I posted to Facebook – 20 or so Black pastors and me.

Reverend Smith and I have been talking to each other since August. We've both been looking for ways to combat racism by bringing people together. He sponsored a kids' fair that Kol Emeth attended and co-sponsored back in the early Fall. If we can bring young people together to play, we can remind everyone that we are all created in the image of God.

This weekend is Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. Reverend Smith and I are doing a pulpit exchange to bring our adult communities together this weekend. He will be visiting Kol Emeth, along with some of his members, and speaking at our services on Shabbat morning. I in turn will be going there on Sunday morning for their 11am service, to pray and to speak. I hope many of you will join me to show his predominately Black congregants that we are interested in creating closer ties.

Neither of us is sure of the next step. We'd like to create a context to learn together, perhaps around sacred text, so that some more intimate friendships can be forged. We'd like to learn from each other about our shared and separate challenges. We need more allies, especially in the Black community, who care about Israel and are willing to stand up against anti-Semitism. We too need to step up for that community.

Please join me and Reverend Smith for an amazing weekend. University Church is located at 3549 Middlefield Rd. in Palo Alto.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

SUMMARY OF MY COMMENTS TO UNIVERSITY AME ZION CHURCH ON MLK WEEKEND

JANUARY 21, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am honored to share this pulpit this morning with Pastor Smith. He is a true man of God, so it is with fear and trembling that I stand at his pulpit to offer a few words.

I believe God talks to us today. Yet we are busy stuffing our ears with cotton, so we don't hear. We stare at our screens, check our emails and our snapchats and forget to listen. We get so busy that we lose the capacity to hear. But God is still talking.

I believe that God lives in every moment simultaneously. As a result, God spoke, is speaking, and will speak. One place we can listen for God is in the Bible, and especially in the places where God talks to people. Look, for example, at the story of Adam and Eve. They eat that apple, and God comes along. They evade, Adam insisting Eve made him do it, Eve insisting the snake made them do it. Their real sin wasn't eating the apple. Their real sin was refusing to take responsibility for what they did.

Fast forward to Cain and Abel, the first brothers. Cain gets angry at Abel and doesn't know how to control his rage. He lashes out and murders Cain. And again God comes along. Cain says, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He too evades responsibility. I'm not responsible for other, he says, and God sends him out as a wanderer.

Go forward to that man Moses. He saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite and he acted. He took responsibility for his brother. He saw two Israelites fighting and he acted. Moses unstopped his ears and so was ready for God to say, Moses, Moses. Moses, are you ready to take responsibility for your own actions? Moses, are you ready to be your brothers' and sisters' keeper? And you know what Moses said? Hineni, I'm ready. That's why he was the one to take the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised Land.

The Sages of the Mishnah were listening too. They looked closely at that language in the Cain and Abel story and saw a message for them. When Cain killed Abel it says that Abel's bloods, plural, were crying out. Why plural? Bloods refers to both Abel and all his future descendants, teaching that anyone who kills a single person kills a whole world. Anyone who saves a single life saves a whole world. We have to take responsibility for each other. God is saying: Yes, you are your brother's keeper.

Or go forward to a few decades ago. Dr. King was listening too. And he held up a mirror to this country of its brutality, its unwillingness to see God's divine image in every human life. Those who marched with him, like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, changed the world, saving innumerable lives and infinite worlds. They listened, and they got others to listen alongside them.

But the work isn't done. We need to unstopper our ears, to get ourselves ready to hear. We are responsible for what we do, and we are responsible for what we do to others. Sometimes that is a call to make big societal changes, ensuring that police officers wear body cams and are trained to see everyone as a human being of infinite value.

Sometimes this work is on a personal level. Moses already taught us that it isn't far away or over the sea. Sometimes it is as easy as looking anew at that guy down the hall who we treat with disrespect because he isn't good enough or because he's a rival. It is time to look at every single person and see a uniquely valuable human life that must be honored and guarded.

I pray to the God of our shared heritage, the God of all this world, to open our ears to hear, to strengthen the work of our hands, and to help us be partners in a creating a world that is all one promised land. Amen.

CYBERTORAH: THE FOUR PLAGUES OF SILICON VALLEY. FIRST PLAGUE – BUSYNESS

FEBRUARY 1, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

3000 years ago, Pharaoh worked the Israelites so hard that they became “kotzar ruach,” short of spirit. They were forced to gather straw, make bricks, and construct mighty storehouses for their taskmasters. The work was so soul-breaking that when Moses arrived to redeem them, they had a hard time hearing his words of hope and redemption. That whole generation was ultimately lost; it was only their children who could develop a width of spirit to accept redemption.

Now, 3000 years later, we are relatively free. Yet in an ironic reversal, we have become our own harsh taskmasters. Life in Silicon Valley is expensive, and the expectations we create for schooling, travel, and lifestyle increase what is already a back-breaking cost. We find ourselves again kotzar ruach, short of spirit.

Further, we intensify the pressure as we make busyness its own kind of status symbol. A full schedule becomes a badge of importance. Making sure we have slightly too much to do means we are truly and sincerely needed. We are used to optimizing everything, including our own selves.

In this rush to optimize, to appear busy to others, we have shortened our own spirits. It affects us economically as well as spiritually. Real creativity occurs only within an expansiveness of spirit. Great ideas are surprises that come upon us because we are receptive. Amid busyness, we lose our receptivity.

Spiritually too, we are lacking receptivity. The attentive quality that prayer demands is lost on us as we glance at our watches or worry about our next activity. I suspect part of the reason Shabbat morning at Kol Emeth is such a wondrous location is because it does last much of the day. We simply arrive and set aside our need to optimize, do, create, and allow ourselves to enter the flow of the morning, whether it is with prayer, learning, or coffee.

Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis’ great critique of the emerging commercial culture, includes a scene with a Minister. That Minister is filled with “bonhomie” and a practiced ease with others. He wants to make the Church optimal, to market what they are doing well. Lewis shows how easily religion becomes just as much a part of the surrounding society as any other institution. Kierkegaard has much the same worry when he talks about the difference between the institution of the Church, which becomes like any other

organization, and the eternal Divine message, that must remain other and compelling.

How can Kol Emeth become an oasis in which time feels abundant, in which we expand our spirits to appreciate others and to discover our own inner blessings? Shabbat morning at Kol Emeth is one step: I want to begin imagining more. Synagogue ought to be a true Sanctuary, a different kind of space and community. Kol Emeth needs to be about God's compelling message of hope and freedom, one in which our souls are expanded through practice, community, and learning to become truly redeemed.

I'd love to hear your own thoughts / ideas as we together help Kol Emeth become an answer to many of our problems and questions.

Next week: Loneliness.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THE PLAGUES OF SILICON VALLEY II: LONELINESS

FEBRUARY 4, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God creates the first human, Adam. The first thing Adam notices about himself is loneliness. He finds no fitting helper, no partner. God affirms the lack, saying, “It is not good for Adam to be lonely.” God then creates Eve so Adam will have what Soloveitchik calls covenantal companionship: a friend and partner with whom to share his deepest stories and self. And also a friend towards whom to develop a similar attentiveness.

Like Adam and Eve, we all experience loneliness. We have all been driven from the Garden as we enter adolescence and adulthood, leaving behind our mothers’ wombs and then our childhood homes. When we are little, we feel known wholly by our parents; growing up includes a realization that we are alone in a deep, existential fashion.

And yet friendships can alleviate that loneliness. When shared, loneliness can transform into something redemptive as we realize we have the power to speak, to be heard, and to listen. Modern research supports the redemptive quality of meaningful friendships. People with friends and social experiences live longer, have lower levels of stress, and report greater levels of happiness than those without.

Our Rabbis urge us to acquire friends, realizing that creating meaningful friendships requires intentional energy. There are a number of factors in the Valley today that keep us from this intentional effort. First is the plague of busyness I mentioned last week. My friend Justin and I try to have dinner together once a month. In practice, it typically takes three months to find a date. If someone gets sick or has to cancel, it can be as long as six months in between, which feels all too typical of my friendships.

Second is distance. We don’t necessarily live near our friends, and we tend to retreat into our isolated houses or apartments. Few adults choose to live in communal spaces in the United States. I almost never spontaneously run into a friend and decide to do something together. As a result, activities that are far more pleasant communally, like watching a sports event, become isolated acts.

Finally is the absence of hospitality. People rarely entertain anymore, and when they do, it feels quite effortful. The notion of a casual potluck, or having dinner with another family each week, is quite rare. And so that most relaxed and inviting of social situations, a shared meal, almost never happens.

There are other ways to live. I feel our kiddush on Shabbat creates opportunities for spontaneous encounters. Summer Friday night potlucks do a nice job of inviting community and friendship. But I'd like us to go deeper.

I have two immediate thoughts. One is to create a game room at Kol Emeth on Shabbat afternoon. Many of my friends are people with whom I have shared a game or activity. So for those of us who want, there will be an open room to play bridge, mahjong, Settlers of Catan, or whatever else people want to play. I particularly want games that require a group so that we NEED to fill some chairs. Related, Rabbi Graff and I want to create a hevruta room on some Shabbatot with materials to study and an openness to step in and join a conversation about our values and selves.

Second, I want to encourage people again to open their homes on Friday night. In particular, we are going to have an experimental Friday night on Feb 19th at 8pm. I'm hoping people will have friends and others over for dinner first, and then join us for services and dessert (I promise nice chocolate...) Breaking bread together at a Shabbos table is another place where I have formed real connections with others.

What are some of your suggestions, as we think of ways to make Kol Emeth a location that helps provide the blessing of true friendships?

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be on a two week hiatus. I have interviews for our new Education Director and a few days of vacation coming up.

A FEW OF MY FAVORITE (FRIDAY) NIGHT THINGS

FEBRUARY 17, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I sleep the best on Friday nights. Something about the rituals of entering Shabbat help me lay down my burdens, creating space in my heart for joy and rest, faith and hope. After lighting the candles, I exhale and surprise myself by how much I release of my stress and effort. The week for me is about doing and striving and building; Shabbat is about love and faith.

After I light candles, nearly every week I resist going to services. I exhale and feel first a sense of relief, at which point my own inertia rears its head. Yet once I get going, once I'm praying and singing with community, I realize how much I need the prayer ritual as well. It is reconnecting with people, with purpose, with God. Imagining the Shabbat bride entering my Synagogue and my heart unlocks something that gets stuck during the week, releasing a different and more whole aspect of myself.

For me, there are three "don'ts" that power my Shabbat. One is **walking. I don't get in my car on Shabbat.** By limiting my world, I more fully experience the area around me. Second is **refraining from electronics.** By setting aside my cellphone, computer, and television, I give myself permission to fully appreciate the people around me. Third is **refraining from anything commercial.** By letting go of bills to be paid and investments to be watched, I create room for the spiritual.

There are also two "dos" that power my Shabbat. First is **prayer.** There is something about the songs, music, and quiet of Friday night that helps me lay my worries aside and intentionally focus on meaning and purpose in my life, on faith, hope, and joy. Second is **Friday night dinner.** There is something wonderful about the quiet extended meal, the chance to get to strengthen relationships and connections, that is life-affirming for me.

This Friday, we are trying an experiment to invite more of us to engage in those "dos" of Shabbat. First, I am hoping people will make time this Friday to invite others over and/or to create a nice Shabbat meal for your home. If you have time, preparing a nice meal is terrific. But in the absence of time, a take-out pizza with some Challah makes a pretty amazing Shabbat meal. As the Talmud teaches, Shabbat itself flavors the food better than any spice.

Then come to services! We are offering an 8pm service Friday night in the hopes of creating some

community at Kol Emeth around Friday night. Our service will be filled with joyous song especially designed to open the heart. We are also experimenting with percussion, clapping, hand drums, any simple percussive instruments that need no tuning or repair. I am thrilled to announce that **Cierra from University AME Zion Church** is helping out with the service on percussion. She is such a talented young person and it is fun to forge this prayer connection with our community. After the service, we will have a nice oneg for dessert, so wait on dessert until you come to shul!

I hope to sing with you this Shabbat, to eat some chocolate together, and remind ourselves of our most whole selves.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THE PLAGUES OF SILICON VALLEY III – PURPOSELESSNESS

FEBRUARY 25, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Aaron lives in the shadow of Moses. Himself a talented and eloquent speaker, as well as a leader, Aaron is the older brother of the greatest orator, lawgiver, and leader in history. I imagine Aaron loses his way. He becomes the prophet to Moses while Moses is prophet to God, and in the moment of diminishment feels a jealousy towards his marvelous brother that probably made him loathe himself all the more. He even spreads gossip about Moses, picking on his wife, no less. He is out of touch with himself and takes it out on poor Tziporah.

Moses saves him by noticing something special in Aaron. Aaron may not be the great lawgiver, but he is the great pastor. He is loving, caring, and a source of blessing. Moses blesses and consecrates Aaron, seeing in him the capacity to be the High Priest. It is that loving touch of brothers that inspires Aaron to become Moses' needed complement, a lover and pursuer of peace.

We also lose sight of our purpose. We live in the shadow of amazing achievement and wealth. We know people who have won Nobel Prizes and invented great technologies. We live near people worth astronomical fortunes. We pray with individuals who have transformed the world for the better through their charitable endeavors. And so it is easy to lose sight of our own blessings, our own ability to be a blessing.

I wonder – who have been the Moses figures in your life? Who offered you compassion and hope when you most needed it? I had someone recently send me an email telling me that I am a good parent, and that whenever they wonder how best to parent their children, they think, “What would the Booths do?” and it almost always works out. Those words came at a moment when I have been doubting my own parenting, wondering if I have made mistakes that led Josh into his challenges, mistakes that are hurting my daughters in ways I can't see. It was exactly the words of encouragement needed to remind me I have it in me to be a loving parent, a real blessing to my children.

Synagogue exists to respond to this plague of purposelessness. We can listen to people's stories, see

their hidden blessings, and be a place of compassion that lets people uncover their own capacity to be and do good. "Humanity does not live on bread alone, but rather on that which comes from God's mouth." We need purpose to survive. Food sustains the body; purpose sustains the self. Purpose emerges from loving contact, from compassion, from receiving a word of inspiration or of love. Hear O Israel; sometimes the greatest blessing is just to listen to someone and remind them they are surrounded by care.

The Valley used to be a place of great purpose, and for some, it still is. We need to remind one another that we each have a part to play in healing the world, in transforming our way of life, so that it's filled with blessing and love.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THE PLAGUES OF SILICON VALLEY IV – SUCCESS NARROWLY DEFINED

MARCH 3, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was talking to an older man with a death sentence. That is, his doctors told him his cancer was going to kill him within a year. We met a few times, ostensibly to study the afterlife. In truth, to learn from each other. He ended up living nearly three years and experienced every day as an incredible joyous gift. I learned far more from him than he from me.

Once we were discussing success. He had worked on some of the fundamental technologies of the Valley; he contributed to some of the early work which led to the electronics we have today. Yet he felt a failure in business. I was shocked. Here was a well off man who had been at Bell Labs and HP early on feeling as though he had made no contribution.

“How can you say that?” I asked. He responded, “The guy down the hall won a Nobel prize. The guys on the floor above me made hundreds of millions. What do I have to show for it.” At first I thought he was joking. No- he was deadly, tragically serious.

God, says the Mishnah, differs from humans. When a person creates a coin, all subsequent coins stamped in that image are identical. We, by contrast, are created in the stamp of Adam and yet are unique. Thus each person ought to say, “The world was created for my sake.”

Our job isn't to win Nobel prizes, go to fabulous colleges, or make huge amounts of cash. Our job is to take responsibility for ourselves and for others, to strive to uncover our own unique abilities, and to be a blessing in the world. By defining success in such a narrow fashion, we are stealing from people their own capacity to be a blessing in the world. If I try to be like Zuckerberg I'm on a fool's errand that robs the world of what I have to offer. It is far more important to delve deeply into my own gifts and blessings than to compare myself to others. My offerings are greater when they are authentically mine. The more I try to emulate others, the less I have to offer.

Moses had it easy; God told him his mission. For the rest of us, it is hard. Our culture pushes us around, the world values only certain types of achievement and success, and it all creates a buzzing that clouds our capacity to connect with our true purpose. One key role of the Synagogue is to create a place that values the divine image in each person. Synagogue ought to value people uncovering their own contributions, the ways they can be a blessing in the world. It ought to make no difference at shul whether that achievement is a great contribution to scholarship, driving a truck, volunteering at a shelter, or leading a great corporation. They all are examples of real people finding their own ways to be a blessing.

It is time to sing a new song, a song that honors people as they are and for who they are. Ours is a world so desperately in need of blessing. Part of the Synagogue's blessing can be a kind of force multiplier as we help others find their own blessings. Let's be a part of that new song, a song that sees and honors multiple paths to honor and success.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

AS ADAR ENTERS, JOY INCREASES

MARCH 10, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In honor of the new month of Adar, the oldest recorded Jewish joke, from Josephus circa 80 CE. I found this joke while studying with a congregant.

There was a Jewish mercenary, an archer of great repute, traveling with the Roman legions. Once, as they were stopped, the General asked the augurs for guidance on which direction to travel.

The augurs said “We shall watch that bird on the horizon and see which way it flies. Then we shall move in that direction.” They waited and finally the bird took wing. Immediately the bird tumbled to the ground.

They turned in surprise and the Jewish archer said, “I saw the bird take wing and I shot it for dinner!”

There are a few things to say about this joke. First, Jewish archers were commonly hired in Roman times by the legions. During the revolt, they were gradually replaced by Arab archers. So the joke itself contains a bit of nostalgia.

Second, the Emperors were often referred to with bird imagery and metaphor. While this was usually eagles, it was sometimes more generic. So the joke may in part be at the expense of the Emperor.

And finally, Josephus himself was a traitor and the story is odd because while it celebrates Jewish archery, it glosses over kosher slaughter that is needed for birds.

The joke survives into the modern day but in somewhat modified form: An elderly woman in her 90s who survived the Holocaust now lives alone in Brooklyn. Despite all her son’s entreaties, she refuses to move to live with him in California. Worried about his mother, he buys a parrot and pays a huge amount to have it trained to speak all of his mother’s languages so at least she will have the bird to keep her company. He sends her the bird, and then calls a day or two later.

“How are you liking the parrot?” He asks. She says, “He was delicious, but I prefer chicken.”

The joke retains an essential core, but has changed to fit our context. It makes fun of Jewish immigrants,

but also of a changing landscape in which we care for our parents through others. It lives in a context of increasing wealth and acceptance in a Jewish landscape where younger people speak the American language but where there is an imagined older generation that doesn't. The mother appears as the butt of the joke, but on a close read it may be her son instead who tries to show love through money instead of physical presence.

Laughter is healing and jokes are sometimes instructive. If you haven't ever seen this site, take a look: <http://oldjewstellingjokes.com/>. It's great to get a joke a day leading up to Purim!

Happy Adar,

Rabbi David Booth

PRACTICES OF WHOLENESS

MARCH 17, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Vulnerability is essential to wholeness. Perfection, by contrast, is the enemy of wholeness. If I am perfect, then I cannot even love others, for to be perfect means I cannot be hurt or damaged. I know that to love is to be vulnerable to the other, to be subject to pain and loss as a result of the words and deeds of my beloved.

When we are vulnerable and share our stories and our experiences and our heart with others, we create sacred community. Sacred community is a place where we can be our authentic selves. Sacred community never says, “You aren’t good enough.” Sacred community instead says, “You are heard, seen and noticed. You are deserving of our love and attention.”

Sacred communities thrive when they develop practices that hold and honor vulnerability and stand against the more prevalent shaming practices of our culture. Shabbat hospitality is one such practice of vulnerability. There are many reasons we avoid hosting, all of which boil down to “I’m not good enough.” Maybe my house isn’t clean enough, or my apartment is too small, or my dining room furniture doesn’t really fit in my dining room. So I close my home, afraid that you will shame me. And we both lose out. Further, as a guest, my expectations can derail the experience. If I expect a certain kind of meal, or space, or cleanliness, I am measuring. I am looking for my host to be good enough. And then I may judge. And I might tell them that spaghetti or pizza isn’t good enough for Shabbat. I might, through my body language, communicate my discomfort in their space.

Instead, if I enter without expectation but instead in gratitude, the blessing of the meal becomes possible. I appreciate that someone else had the courage to open their home to me. I value that they spent the time to cook me food. I see that in their openness that they are inviting connection. Now we are on a path to foster wholeness and blessing.

This Shabbat is our second 8pm Friday night service. We are experimenting with a later service in the hopes people will be vulnerable. I want you to invite someone to your Shabbat table and to serve them a meal. As part of the practice, I urge you to only sort of clean your home. Leave some clutter; don’t try to make it perfect. And as part of the practice make a good meal, but bluntly, don’t spend too much time on it. Focus more on the blessings than on the food; more on the human connection than the physical space.

And then come to Kol Emeth for an 8pm service all about being whole. We will use percussion to enter into song, we will dance as we enter Shabbat, and we will endeavor to create a space where our vulnerability and our wholeness can be nurtured and valued. Then we will have (amazing!!) desserts prepared by Pepe, as we create a space to share, to talk, and to be whole.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

WHOLENESS II: GRATITUDE

MARCH 31, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

“Each morning when I wake up I open my eyes and I say: Thank you Hashem for my neshamah and for giving me another day.”

For years I heard these words, a loose translation of Modeh Ani sung to the tune of “You are my Sunshine,” each and every morning. As my wife would get the kids up each morning, I’d hear them singing this translation that they learned at preschool. (I suspect the translation originated with Chabad).

I was never a part of the ritual. It was Carol’s thing. I was always moved by it, but also somehow felt it was not serious, like saying the Shma or the Amidah. It was a lovely practice, but secondary and slightly beneath what I would do. It was cute and folksy. I suspect part of my ambivalence was the pure beauty of the ritual itself and my lack of place in it.

Then she stopped doing it. Partly, our kids got older and their morning routines become more independent. Partly, Carol started using some of that morning time for exercise because the kids were more mature. And I found myself missing it.

For the last year or so, I’ve been saying Modeh Ani each morning. Weirdly, I find myself saying it just like Carol used to do with the children. I’ve begun doing it because I realize I need gratitude each morning. I wake up in a variety of ways. Sometimes I’m ready to leap from my bed like a lion, to seize the day; other days it is hard to get out of bed as I resist taking back on my responsibilities, cares, and concerns.

This simple gratitude practice, perhaps because I remember it connected to love, helps remind me of the good in front of me. The song often inspires me to look out my window (maybe since it’s “You are my sunshine”) and appreciate the beauty of the world around me. It inspires me to note the people in my life who love me. It reminds me that I get to do so many wonderful things, and offer myself in service to others, and that this is a wonderful blessing.

Last week I wrote about vulnerability and how essential sharing of ourselves is to combating shame and finding real wholeness. By contrast, ours is a culture of scarcity and of lack. We are never quite enough, and so we never quite make it to gratitude let alone wholeness. Jewish prayer urges a different posture that invites noticing what is enough, of seeing that we are holy beings created in the divine image.

Yesterday morning I heard Carol in my almost 15 year old daughter's room singing Modeh Ani to the tune of You are my Sunshine. I saw her and Maytal lying on her bed, sharing a moment of love together before embracing the new day. I walked in and sang with them.

Praised are You, God, for the life you grant me each day and each moment.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Special message:

My name is Naomi Barkan. I am a sixth grader at Gideon Hausner Jewish day school and a Kol Emeth congregant. I am looking toward to my Bat-Mitzvah in 2017 and as a part of my learning at Hausner my sixth grade class and I are raising money to help impoverished villages in Malawi, Africa. This is a summary of our project and how you can help.

What if you had to walk 30 kilometers just to get disease-filled water everyday? Your life would be totally different, right? Well that is what people have to do in Malawi, Africa. My Sixth Grade class and I are raising money to help the people of Malawi have access to local, cleaner water. Our goal is to raise \$6,000 to build two wells in two different villages. These wells will be just outside the village so the people will not have to walk so far just to get water. The water will also be cleaner and less likely to get people sick. Even in drought years, these wells will almost always have water because they will be fed by both rainwater and groundwater. If you would like to help, please click on the link below to donate to our fund, [Hunger Stops Here](#).

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

APRIL 8, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called chametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Chametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed, clearly marked area, and then selling it. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. Please note that sour cream should have a kosher for passover label as it sometimes has gluten. If any of these items are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, pasta sauce, and ketchup with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for Passover label.

In addition, following the ruling this year of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen chametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes. For those who eat legumes, they may similarly purchase items before Pesach that

include corn products, like potato chips or pure ice cream (do not purchase ice creams with candy, cookies, or other additives as they may include chametz.)

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them kosher for Passover. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be kashered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be kashered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with chametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are kashered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at rabbinicalassembly.org. They have posted a .pdf there called Passover Guide.

I hope this helps as you being your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboath@kolemeth.org or go the [subscribe](#) page.

HOLY SEX

APRIL 15, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In my study of Mussar, one area of concern is how to moderate sexual thoughts and desires. I worry that such desires are pervasively misunderstood so that their holiness is never understood. Further, our culture awakens them frequently as a spur to commerce, leaving us often in a wrongly stimulated state. Sexual thought and desire is sacred. God creates our physical selves for more than procreation. Rabbinic tradition urges us to enjoy the world; the Talmud calls it a sin to see a beautiful tree and fail to enjoy that beauty. Maimonides permits essentially any sexual act between a married couple provided they both consent. Jewish mysticism talks about the holiness of sexual pleasure.

Sexual intimacy has a sacred task. It provides a pathway to emotional and spiritual intimacy. In Judaism, soul and body are partners. When they work together for good, they lead a person's whole essence towards the sacred. The physicality of sexual intimacy uses the intensity of the sexual urge, the feeling of connection, and transforms it through the soul into a transcendent meeting of the other. That moment of meeting, of merging with one's erotic partner, points towards another merger, d'vekut, the merger with God.

Yet our culture knows that "sex sells." As a result, we are bombarded with a variety of sexual images, words, and situations. People use these urges to grab our eyeballs and sell us something. Such images are disconnected from intimacy and instead focus on awakening only the body while putting the soul to sleep.

This is my most basic concern about pornography (aside from the deep concern about the crime which surrounds it). Pornography highlights the sexual act itself utterly divorced from emotional intimacy. In all these cases, urges and thoughts are stimulated with no sacred outlet. We are left dazed, weirdly stimulated, and disconnected.

Before Passover, we clean out the chametz from our homes. Chametz, that mixture of water and one of the five grains allowed to rise for more than 18 minutes, becomes symbolic of the evil urge. As we physically distance ourselves from chametz, we work to distance ourselves spiritually from our evil urges. Body and soul together create a far more intense transformative outcome than either alone. The physicality of the cleaning can be an aid to spiritual growth.

This year I invite you to distance yourself from sexual images and thoughts designed for commerce. If the image wants to grab your attention to sell you something, don't watch. If the click through is meant to tease in order to get you to look at some ads, stick with the news article. I suspect that the effort will create an awareness of how much these teasing images have become all pervasive. I hope the effort will help us realize the mind states such images awaken, and draw us back to sexual thoughts that connect and engender intimacy.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

SEARCHING FOR CHAMETZ

APRIL 21, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Many have the practice on the night before Passover of symbolically completing the home preparation. Typically, the home has been already cleaned of chametz: product of wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye plus liquid allowed to sit for more than 18 minutes. A token amount is left and then hidden throughout the house. The leader recites a blessing:

Praised are You, God, Ruler of All, who makes us holy through your commandments and commands us to burn the chametz.

Participants have a feather and a candle by which to search. As the last bits of chametz are gathered, people traditionally say:

All leaven or anything leavened which is in my possession, which I have neither seen nor removed, and about which I am unaware, shall be considered nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.

Rabbinic literature equates the chametz with our evil inclination. Thus, the removal and burning of chametz symbolically inspires a similar inner process to find the sources of bubbling ego, of frothy desire, that needs to be extinguished and removed for spiritual growth. Some go through their homes cleaning, and also envision themselves in the recesses of their self as well, trying to clean out the fear, the anxiety, the negative experiences driven by insecurity, by worries that we are unsafe or unloved.

This cleansing lets us enter the redemption of the holiday, more secure in our self and in our loves, aware that we are worthy of being loved and of loving. That leads to a redemption from the plagues of Silicon Valley, busyness, loneliness, singular focus on achievement, and purposelessness. All these plagues are driven by insecurity and ego.

When we focus instead on love and gratitude we encounter redemption. Redemption is the realization of purpose. Redemption is knowing we love others and are loved ourselves. Redemption is the permission to be joyous, connected to one another, to the world, to God.

And yet; we save out this little bit of chametz. We declare: even that of which I am unaware, I'm letting it go. We are never perfect. The cleaning for Passover can become obsessive; this last practice is a warning. Clean; do what you can. But also realize we live in an imperfect world. At some point we have

to stop and the spiritual practice is to let go.

Put another way, ego can never be extinguished entirely. I will always have fears and anxieties, always hold a deep worry about my worthiness to be loved. AND at some point I can accept that about myself. I can realize that even though I am imperfect, even though I am sometimes driven by those negative emotions, I can chose to orient myself towards love and gratitude. I can chose a lot of who I am and I chose to be a blessing in the world.

So I invite you this year to clean out the chametz. I invite you, by candlelight, to finish the job knowing the job can't be finished. And perhaps to add to the declaration:

All leaven or anything leavened is nullified and as the dust of the Earth. I realize I still have fears and worries, that ego still bubbles in me. Nonetheless, I chose to turn away from these curses and towards blessing. I enter Passover open to the possibility of growth, that I have cleaned away a lot of the barriers, and now I welcome the chance to rediscover joy, gratitude and blessing.

Shabbat Shalom and a joyous and Kosher Passover

Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

YOM HASHOAH

MAY 5, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Today is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust remembrance day. I'm finding it too easy to forget about it. After all, the Holocaust ended over 70 years ago. There are still a few survivors around to remind me, but it's all too easy to enjoy the quiet, the security, the safety of Palo Alto.

The survivors are slowly disappearing. 70 years means people who remember the Holocaust are at least in their late 70s. The Psalmist comments on human life, that we are granted 70 years, 80 with vigor. Maybe we have a bit more these days, but still. The survivors are disappearing.

No one is going to hold these memories, the truth of what really happened, except for you and me. No one is going to bear witness to senseless slaughter, to murderous hatred, except for you and me. There is going to be no one else to say to the world: Never Again. Never again will we stand silent while our people are slaughtered, and never will we stand silent in the face of genocide anywhere in the world.

A prayer for this day of strength and sorrow:

May It be Your will, God of our ancestors, God of us today and God of those who burned and died, who were slaughtered, shot, gassed and murdered, that we are granted strength in the face of sorrow, hope in the face of hatred, faith in the face of such overwhelming loss.

You promised that if we would be Your people, You would be our God. And yet we were slaughtered, the faithful and learned alongside the assimilated. Help guide us to faith in the embers of despair, help us connect with You even though we so much more easily feel and experience Your absence. Your face, though hidden, is still there. Turn towards us in love, remind us of Your presence among the slaughtered and the beaten and the tortured, for You have said, "In all your trouble, I too am there."

Help us, in rekindling faith, to rekindle faith and hope in what humanity can be. Give us the strength to bear witness to the 6 million, to hear the stories of those still alive today, and to carry those stories and lessons and witnessing to another generation so that all will know what was, what can be, and what is asked of us today.

Help us say, "Never again," not as empty words but in meaningful action. We see Jewish communities in Israel, in Europe and elsewhere in the world under threat. Guide and strengthen our hands to show

them solidarity and support, to know that all Jews feel bound together and responsible for one another. Help us aid them in receiving the resources and political support so essential to continued safety and security.

At the same time, God, broaden our hearts to see hints and echoes of hatred and baseless dehumanization anywhere it occurs. Give us the courage to speak out against genocide, against murder and persecution, whenever and wherever it occurs. Remind us that we are all created in Your image and that our covenant demands that we honor and protect that Divine image wherever it occurs.

Offer us comfort on this day of sorrow, and walk with us in making the words Never Again be filled with meaning and blessing.

Amen.

Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

MEGILAT HAATZMAUT: THE SCROLL OF INDEPENDENCE

MAY 12, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sixty-eight years ago a group of Jews took an amazing leap of faith in themselves, in the world, and in God. That leap of faith was greater because the Holocaust had ended just three years earlier. At a time when any rational people would have been consumed by despair, that group of Jews instead found hope and purpose.

Their purpose? To build a home for the Jewish people. There were tens of thousands of refugees from Europe with no place to go. There were tens of thousands of Jews living precariously in Arab lands with nowhere else to go. Home is that place where they have to take you. Jews desperately needed such a place.

That group of halutzim, pioneers, reminded the world that Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people and that we had maintained in our prayers and in our hearts an unbroken yearning for the land of our ancestors and the land of the Bible. Rav Kook, one of the early Zionist Rabbinic figures, saw settling the land as a sacred opportunity to restore people, sacred text, and place back together.

Their hopes for this new state were grand. It would be a place of equality regardless of gender or religion or background. It would call out the prophetic voice of morality as a basis for the state. The cry of Amos to see the poor, or of Jeremiah to act morally, would be owned by a modern state as a basis to their government.

These brave pioneers also reached out to the Arabs living in Israel and those readying themselves to attack the nascent state. They invited Arab Israelis to help in the building of the state; they called upon the surrounding countries in peace and friendship. It was courage and hope of a kind rarely if ever seen on the political stage. And then they declared:

ACCORDINGLY, WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ERETZ-ISRAEL AND OF THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT, ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND, BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT AND ON THE STRENGTH OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, HEREBY DECLARE

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

We are the beneficiaries of their courage sixty-eight years later. We are blessed to live at a time when we can argue about how best to achieve their vision. We are blessed to live in a moment when we wrestle with terms like “Jewish” and “democratic.” When the prophetic aspirations of the founders of Israel are a goad and a challenge to organizations like JNF or the Jaffa Institute, that serves at risk teens both Arab and Jewish Israeli.

Tonight we will celebrate at Maariv with the reading of the Scroll. Tomorrow morning at our 6:45 minyan we will recite Hallel and sing in joy at the miracle that is Israel. Then I invite everyone to the JCC all afternoon and evening for song, carnival, and celebration of the miracle that is the land of Israel.

Happy Yom HaAtzmaut-

Rabbi David Booth

CASTIGATE YOUR NEIGHBOR

MAY 19, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am always in need of feedback and honest criticism. I consider it a loving act when someone helps me to grow by sharing a thought, a concern, or something they noticed. Yet I know for myself that it can sometimes be hard to hear, and I know also that it is always hard to offer.

The Torah commands us to “reprove your neighbor,” meaning it’s a positive commandment to criticize. The Talmud teaches that the generation of the time of Ruth and Boaz had no idea how to fulfill this mitzvah. If someone would tell them, “there’s a mote on your eye,” the other would respond, “there’s a beam on your teeth!” Meaning: you tell me what my problems are, and I’ll point out yours!!

The Talmud goes a step further. Perhaps the real problem was that no one knew how to OFFER the critique. Hard as it is to hear criticism, it is even hard to offer it. Maimonides, in his own teachings about this mitzvah, further instructs the person to choose their words carefully so that the critique can be heard. The Baal Shem Tov takes it a step further and urges us to see critique as an act of love. Only once we are in touch with our love for the person, for our desire to help them, can we offer critique. The Baal Shem Tov also teaches that the highest form of critique is a lived example. Rather than calling someone’s attention to a failing, we simply live in a such an authentic and powerful fashion that others are drawn to emulate us.

There is also a Torah in receiving the critique or feedback. For me, I remind myself that people offer critique only when they care about a person or an institution. Thus, as soon as someone is calling my attention to something, it is a signal that they care. Further, we all have the hardest time finding the right words when we care the most. So even when the words sound angry or hurtful, I must remind myself that the words originate in care and love. And then I work to hear the wisdom contained in them.

I write this for two reasons. First, I have been at Kol Emeth now for nearly ten years. When I first arrived, I invited honest feedback and talk as the basis of healthy relationship. I feel a need to remind everyone that I care and I want to know your thoughts, feelings, experiences of my work and of Kol Emeth. Second, the ability to offer and receive feedback in love is essential to a healthy community.

May God grant all of us the strength to speak with gentleness and love, and to hear in others their care for us.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

HOLDING ONE ANOTHER UP

MAY 26, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When the Israelites stood at Sinai, they stood together. Having left the oppression of Pharaoh, they were seeking meaning. Sinai provided them a gateway into purpose. Remarkably, the unity and shared purpose nevertheless left great room for each individual. They constituted a supportive community dedicated to finding and sharing each person's unique blessings.

God's supernal creation, humanity, is unlike anything else. The Mishnah teaches: When a person creates a stamp, each coin stamped in that image will be identical. God, however, in creating Adam (really in placing the divine image in each of us) nevertheless creates each person as a unique individual. That is, we are all created from that first stamp, from such similar genetic material, and yet we all have unique personalities and blessings.

The Torah commands us to be a blessing. Abraham is told that he and his descendants will be the vehicle through which blessing enters the world. This creates a responsibility on the individual to uncover their own purpose, their own capacity, to be a vessel of blessing in the world. When we find that capacity, we know what are supposed to be doing, we know who we are, and we uncover great joy.

Sinai is the next step in enabling people to connect with their own blessings. Only uniquely spiritual individuals can uncover their blessings and purpose on their own. Abraham is a spiritual marvel because he uncovered monotheism amid paganism. Moshe's greatness lay in his capacity to uncover morality amid the oppression and violence of Egypt. Yet most of us need help.

Torah invites us to create a community of inspiration. A Torah community sees the divine image in everyone, and celebrates people whenever they fulfill God's will to be a blessing. That means wood hewers are just as praiseworthy as CEOs, that teachers and techies are all seen as people searching for their contributions to humanity.

How do we do this? There are both positive and negative commandments. We stop asking people about what school they are attending or how high up in the company they are. We avoid trying to figure out status and salary. We do start inquiring how people feel. We ask about the quality of their work. Are they finding ways to be a blessing? Are they fulfilled in their work?

We also praise one another for gentle speech, for inspiring words, and for being present with us. We truly look at members of our community and search for words of blessing – what do they need to hear from us today? Perhaps it is an invitation to dinner; maybe it is simply to listen. Perhaps they need some input or appreciation.

I believe that if we orient ourselves towards being a Torah community dedicated to enabling its members to find their hidden and revealed blessings that we will create immense good in the world and that God's face will shine on us.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note there will be no CyberTorah next week as I will be away over Memorial Day to celebrate my parents' 50th wedding anniversary!

LIVING DIFFERENTLY

JUNE 9, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's time to live differently. It's time to realize that we are created in the image of God, meaning we are enough. We are gifted a pure soul, so that even when we feel lost, alone, less than we need to be, our soul is still pure and present.

Once, and every day, God's voice reverberate(d)(s) through the universe. The midrash teaches that when God spoke at Sinai, the echoes were heard in every corner of the world. That voice also confused the senses, so that people heard the sounds, but also smelled a sweet fragrance and saw visions of great beauty.

That voice still calls out every day. When we get too wrapped up in our success, in how others view us, in how busy we are, we stop up our ears. We forget the divine image in which we are created, we stop realizing the purity of our souls. It is exhausting and diminishes our capacity for growth and for joy.

Torah is one place to remind ourselves of who we really are. Torah is an invitation to a different kind of life, one that values each individual person (for we are commanded never to count people) and one that promises us agency. Abraham is told to be a blessing. We too can be a blessing, a voice that can reverberate in someone's life and remind them of their worth.

Living differently means wanting to grow, it means letting our focus on the material and outward measures of success give way to a new measure of blessing, of love, of caring. Torah is a direct path to that kind of living. Torah study inspires, inviting us to more fully express our own capacities for attention, for love, for listening. It's time to live differently.

Sometimes we are up at night because we are worried. We toss and turn, or self-medicate to a dreamless sleep. But once a year we live differently. We stay up all night intentionally, to study, to ready ourselves to hear that sweet voice sweep through the universe all over again. We ready ourselves to live differently and to recapture joy and purpose.

Come join me for our Shavuot study sessions this year starting Saturday at 8:00pm. There is learning throughout the evening, including blintzes at 1:30am. At 5:15am we join together for an amazing sunrise service in the courtyard. Feel welcome to come to any aspect of the night.

CYBERTORAH IS ON VACATION

JUNE 16, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

CyberTorah is on vacation while I am in Israel. My weekly commentary will resume later in the summer.

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

AUGUST 25, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This summer has been filled with profanation of the divine image. Whether the attack on the airport in Istanbul (which I missed by just 20 hours) or in Nice, terrorists acting in the name of God are instead profaning the divine image in others through murder and terror. Islam that at times has been associated with great learning and wisdom now seems cancerous with hatred and violence. Police officers who see only skin color and hurt or murder blacks profane the divine image. Black people who then are “inspired” to attack police officers or other whites similarly profane the divine image.

The Torah tells us we are created in the image of God. This is no passive observation: rather, it is a way of life, a practice that has the potential to change the world. We need to be actively seeking the Divine Image in others, especially when it is hard to see.

God’s image is so clear; how can we be blind to it? Well, if you hold a pebble in front of your eye, says the Baal Shem Tov, you can block out the sun which is enormous. Similarly, our egos and fears are right in front of our faces and blind us all too easily to the Image in others. While I was in Istanbul, we saw a lot of Islamic women in burkas, the black gowns worn for modesty that leave open only a slit for the eyes. I found it frightening initially, partly because it was so foreign to me, and partly because a covered face feels slightly sinister. (Maybe that’s the same reason). At the airport, I saw a woman in her burka holding her baby and playing peek-a-boo. It made me laugh: the baby was sensitive enough to her mother that just covering over the eye slit made the game. In that laughter, and that humanizing act, I rediscovered the divine image in this woman and it alleviated my fear the rest of the trip.

Prayer is one practice that helps alert us to the divine image. Prayer slows us down and reminds us of gratitude and humility. One prayer upon leaving the house could be, “Enable me to see the divine image in everyone I encounter.” Then, after a social encounter one might say, “Thank you God for letting me see that divine image.” Or as sometimes happens, “Help me next time to do better!”

A second practice is to help others see the image in our words and actions. When we listen and focus on being present; of speaking in kindness and wisdom; of helping others find their way to joy and hope, we make it easy for others to find the image in us.

What if we set an intention of searching for the divine image in politics? While Jeff Rosen makes it easy

to find, I believe that image resides also in Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Politicians use negative ads and character attacks because we the voters respond. If we instead insisted on first looking for the good intention behind each policy or assertion, I doubt it would change our votes but it would transform our discourse.

The Divine Image in humanity is in need of healing. If we can't heal it in a community like Kol Emeth, where can we? My intention today: I will seek the Divine Image in every encounter, and I will try to evoke it in myself as well. When I fail, I will accept that I got distracted, and simply reaffirm my intent to see that Image next time. I invite you to join me in this intent.

And in this modest way we will try to heal the world.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

TEN YEARS

SEPTEMBER 1, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have been at Kol Emeth for ten years. We celebrated this past Shabbat, and I wanted to share with all of you my gratitude and a few reflections.

Moving to a new community is inherently an act of faith. Now, ten years later, I feel more able to say from knowledge what makes KE so special. First and foremost, what distinguishes members of Kol Emeth is a passion for Jewish living. That passion expresses itself in a variety of ways, but there is a thoughtfulness about Jewish choices that I encounter again and again, in pre-marital counseling sessions, in bar and bar mitzvah family meetings, in talks in the courtyard. We are passionate and intense about uncovering in Judaism a pathway to meaningful living.

Second, the quality of this community. This is a place that cares. I have seen that in action both as a giver of chesed, of caring acts, as well as a receiver. Receiving that care amplified for me the knowledge in my heart that we are part of a truly special community. It made me feel cared for, known, held at a difficult moment in my life.

Third is acceptance. Rabbinic work creates an opportunity to share your strengths and blessings but also leaves nowhere to hide your weakness and challenges. People are quick to praise me for my strengths, and helpful and caring in working with me when problems arise. This is a community where I got to reclaim my first name, a place that shows me so much respect as Rabbi, but also wants to get to know me as David.

Fourth, the people with whom I get to work. I feel so grateful to Rabbi Lewis for being such a mensch. He creates space for me to be the kind of Rabbi I am. His humility and spiritual leadership are an example to me. Similarly, Rabbi Graff is an amazing partner and friend who offers deep spirituality and learning to so many. Jeff Schwarz in his friendship, his piety, his intense caring for every student, motivates me and inspires me on a regular basis. There are so many others to mention that I dare not try. Suffice it to say that lay leadership, KE employees, and members of our community make my job possible and joyous. I am truly fortunate in the people with whom and for whom I work.

Finally, the mission of this community. We are a place that values Torah learning and mitzvot. We are a community wrestling with God and faith. I see in our Shabbat practices a window into what time can be

like when it is spacious, filled by community, engaged in by people fully present. I see in our commitment to prayer and liturgy a practice that leads to wisdom and reflection. And I am inspired to be in a place that sees in mitzvot a pathway to blessing. Kol Emeth people are open to growth. All of us look at who we are and how Judaism can strengthen our blessings and provide us with a pathway to more meaning filled whole living.

I am honored to be one of the Rabbis at Kol Emeth and grateful for being a member of this amazing community. The Torah tells us to eat, be satisfied, and then to bless. This is a moment of such fullness of joy and appreciation that I can only bless. Thank you God, for carrying us together to this time. May this moment inspire us to reconnect again and again with the wisdom of Torah and mitzvot to fill our lives with blessings.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

MY LEGS WERE PRAYING

SEPTEMBER 8, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theological and Civil Rights activist, was accosted after marching with Martin Luther King. “How,” this traditionalist wanted to know, “could you have skipped minchah, the afternoon prayer?” Behind this question was an accusation: why would you, as a traditional Jew, get involved in the Civil Rights struggle?

His response? “My legs were praying.” There is a time for minchah and there is a time for marching. He knew that marching with Martin Luther King sent a message to the forces of hate in the United States. He knew that being seen on that march helped show others that the divine image is in everyone, white and black, Jewish and other.

This past summer was filled with violence inspired by hatred and othering. Othering is when you look at someone different, whether because of religion, ethnicity, or race and say: that person isn’t fully human. I can hurt / kill / brutalize that person because in a key way they are less than I. Thus we saw extremist Islam inspired attacks in France, Turkey, and here at home. Thus we saw racial violence at home on a worse level than in years.

Our community says no to violence and hatred. We say yes to shared humanity. We are joining with dozens of other houses of worship, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, black, brown and white, to march for humanity and blessing. This September 11th, beginning at 1:30pm at Etz Chayim in Palo Alto (4161 Alma Street), we will march 2.5 miles for peace.

We are coming together because we have to. We have to stand together, arm in arm, across the diversity of our area. We have to show ourselves and all onlookers tempted toward othering that we are all created in God’s image. Like Heschel in his moment, it’s time to march and make a statement.

I’m calling on all of us, like Moses’ challenge to Pharaoh, to come out Sunday, young and old alike. It is time to stand and be counted, time to pray with our legs. We need to show up as Jews and as humans, ready to bring our distinctiveness right alongside our uniqueness. If the march feels too long, please meet us for an amazing interfaith gathering at Mitchell Park around 4pm.

We will make some new friends and connections. This is a long journey; our march Sunday a first step

towards reclaiming our country and our world for peace. I'll be at Etz Chayim Sunday at 1:30pm. Will you join me?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ELUL IS HERE

SEPTEMBER 15, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the holidays draw near, a few thoughts on getting ready. For many of us, getting ready is practical. We make sure we have our tickets; we arrange meals. Families figure out their travel plans. Otherwise, we are busy with everything else we do.

Yet Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur invite spiritual preparation as much or more than the practical. The details give us a place to hide. We feel ready for the holiday because the table is set, but the inner work never happened.

Now is the time to hear the sound of the shofar. To get ready so that the holidays can be filled with meaning and a time where we actually change ourselves for the better. I suggest a few thought or journaling exercises to figure out your curriculum for this new year. These are all hard questions, so I urge you spend some time on each. Perhaps allocate 30 minutes for each question, starting with sitting quietly to organize your thoughts, then to write or think, and to conclude again with a minute or two of quiet and reflection.

1. What are two or three values for you at this point in your life? Why are they important to you? In what ways do you act on them? Mitzvot are actions associated with Torah values. What are the mitzvot associated with your values?
 - Do you feel good about your values? Are there values you hold but don't act on? If you were to imagine yourself in a year looking back again, what might you add / remove to give yourself a greater feeling of living a values driven life?
2. Take a look at your calendar. If you use a tool like google calendar, or a paper organizer, spend some time reviewing how you spent your time last year. Perhaps look in detail at a week or two, or randomly pick a few weeks throughout the year. On what did you focus? How much time was allocated to your values?
 - Do you feel good about the way your spent your time, or do you feel captured by your calendar? Idolatry takes on many forms. When our schedules begin to own us, we are dominated by the work of our own hands and find no meaning there. What would allow future you to feel like the schedule was a tool to bring your own blessings and values into the world?
3. Take a look at your budget. Ask some of the same questions. On what did you spend money? For what are you saving? Does your budget feel in line with your values?

- Dollars are the currency of desire. The way we spend money shows our desires in a tangible, physical way. Are you desiring in a way that feels meaningful to you? How can you tweak or even radically change your budget so that next year you can say: I used money and expressed desire in a way that matched my values, aspirations and beliefs?

This time before Rosh Hashanah offers a gift. Let us use it well!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

SERVING GOD IN JOY

SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the summer, I had the fortune to celebrate with Rabbi Ehud Bandel at the Wall in Jerusalem. He led a lovely bar mitzvah service that felt personal, joyous, and filled with spiritual meaning. I learned three things from him that I want to bring to Kol Emeth.

1. He got the family up to dance. Singing mazel tov is always a highlight for me of a bar or bat mitzvah. Then getting everyone to dance around added a whole other level of joy. The motion added something as my whole body, including my voice, got into the act. We've been doing that at Kol Emeth since I returned from Israel and it has been wonderful.
2. Bringing back candy. As many of you know, there is a long custom of showering bar and bat mitzvah students with candy. Kol Emeth stopped doing this years ago, in part because it got a little out of hand. With the support of the board, we are going to bring candy back. I believe it is possible to have a moment of rejoicing, to instruct participants to shower the family with sweet rather than a 95 mile an hour fastball. This too can bring a special moment into the celebration, a chance amid something of great holiness and solemnity that is fun and gives the children a chance to express some energy in a joyous way. Granted, we're then giving them a sugar high... We are inviting people to use Sunkist Fruit Gems. They are kosher and totally allergen free.
3. Giving the parents a chance to bless their children. I've seen this done a lot of ways. There is a risk here of parents bringing into Synagogue the trappings of our achievement oriented culture. It is neither the time nor the place to talk about a child's academic or sports or other achievement. It is however the time and the place for parents to express words of blessing. Blessings are an act of noticing and a way of expressing love. I so enjoy watching the parents during a bar or bat mitzvah, seeing how they look at their child or follow every word in the siddur. It is very special to me. I am delighted to again invite parents to express a short and meaningful blessing to their children. I will provide parents with a few templates along with the option of writing their own blessing. I will urge the blessings to be focused and concise. I believe this will be meaningful for all of us as we hear the hopes and blessings of loving parents to beloved children.

In addition, I've been thinking about alternative bar and bat mitzvah offerings. I've got a small group from the Board interested in exploring some outside the Sanctuary options for families. If you are interested in being part of this taskforce, please let me know. We will start our work post High Holidays with suggestions for the Board and the community in the winter or spring.

I believe in our service and want it to be filled with joy and meaning. I feel these changes are good steps that will help more people experience the joy of celebrating and of communal worship.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A Guide to Surviving Rosh Hashanah or: Seven Tips to Meaning-Filled Days of Awe

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are overwhelming and liturgically dense. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the experience. Worse, since we do it every year, it's easy to let it all pass over us and get bored. Here follow seven tips to having a meaningful, spiritual, experience during the Holidays.

1. Make the experience personal. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur speak directly to each one of us both as community and as individuals. What fears do you face this New Year? What memories do you have of other Holidays? The High Holidays confront us with the passage of time and our own mortality. It asks us to stand forward and defend the meaning of our lives. What have you done with the last year? Of what are you ashamed? Of what are you proud? Most importantly, what do you want to do differently?
2. Write / Say your own prayers. The Machzor contains the prayers of Am Israel, of the Jewish people. It does not necessarily contain the prayer of each one of us. If we allow ourselves to be limited by the confines of the book, we never allow ourselves to give voice to what is in our souls. We ought to have moments where the printed page becomes irrelevant to our thoughts and prayers. Its words inspire us and challenge us – but then we relate and express our own personal concerns. What is your Avinu Malkeynu – what would you say to God as you approached before the Divine Throne? What is a personal confession – speak in “I” instead of we. I have sinned by talking when I should have listened, for example. Personal prayer enriches, expands, and makes meaningful communal prayer.
3. Read the English and use the Transliteration. For most of us, the Hebrew can only be read but not understood. For many of us, even reading the Hebrew is difficult or impossible. It is good to say the blessings (the Barukh Atah... sections) in Hebrew, but the rest can be recited in any language. Our Machzor has amazing translations and fabulous comments researched over years. There are transliterated version of nearly everything we sing. Use them!
4. Bring or Borrow a Book. It is hard to stay focused on prayer for as long as the service lasts. It is perfectly appropriate to read something of a Jewish / High Holidays theme as Torah L'Shma – the study of Torah – during the service. I always used to study Mishnah. There will be a selection of books in the back from my library. Feel free to pick up a book and study a bit during the service. These books are either the Synagogue's or mine so I would ask you return them to the back when you are through.

5. Enjoy your Friends. The Holidays appropriately include a social component. It's inspiring to be together with Jewish people. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are holy experiences of Am Yisrael, the Jewish people together. The warmth and camaraderie is an important part of what makes these days special. Stepping outside for a few minutes to talk with an old friend can be as meaningful as time spent in the service.
6. Know that you are a good person. The Holidays are here to help us become better Jews and people. They are solemn days, not sad days. Particularly on Yom Kippur, the Machzor emphasizes our inadequacies in the face of God. It also emphasizes that the choices we make and the mere fact of our covenantal loving relationship with God bestow upon us tremendous value. Sometimes we feel judged and inadequate in the face of what we have failed to do. The true purpose of the Holidays is to build us up and inspire us to do more.
7. Observe the days as Holidays. Taking the days off work or school adds a great deal to the experience. Refraining from business, money and media create space for family, community and purpose. If you have to go to work, at least try and leave the evening free for holiday meals and self-reflection. The more you allow yourself to carve out reflective and celebratory time, the more these holidays can touch the soul.

May we all be blessed with days of joy and reflection, of growth and renewed feelings of purpose and blessing. And may God bless all of us with a good, healthy, and prosperous New Year.

L'Shana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

GETTING READY FOR YOM KIPPUR

OCTOBER 6, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Ten Days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur create a false sense of security. In fact, there are only 6 days: 2 are Rosh Hashanah itself, 1 is Shabbat, and 1 is Yom Kippur. The sacred opportunity to repair relationships, to seek healing and change in our own lives, has an immediacy when we realize the time is short. I want to suggest three practices to help us orient ourselves towards the cleansing and healing possibility of Yom Kippur.

1. **Tzedakah, Charity.** The problem of hunger in our community continues to worsen. The continuing economic turmoil means that Second Harvest has seen their need increase by nearly 10% each year for the last three years. Last year, we raised over a ton of food and over \$7000 dollars to play our part in alleviating this need in Santa Clara and San Mateo county. This year, we need to do even more because the need is greater. I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you before Kol Nidre, and to go to shfb.org/ and donate. Please indicate that you are part of the Kol Emeth food drive. Other worthy charities with this same goal include Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger and Jewish Family and Children's Services.
2. **Teshuvah, Repentance.** These ten days, short though they are, are a unique chance to affirm and heal broken relationships. I suggest finding time to call, email, message, or even speak to in person, friends, family, and acquaintances with whom we may have had issues over the year. There is something deeply cleansing in saying: will you forgive me for that which I have done intentionally or unintentionally? It's a way of asking for healing, for a new start, without needing to assign blame or even to list out all that has happened. I am every year caught with too little time for this practice, and every year amazed by its healing power to set aside that which gets in the way.
3. **Wearing White / Fasting.** Fasting on Yom Kippur orients us away from the material and towards the need for moral and spiritual change in our lives. My daughter commented that the fasting, by giving her physical discomfort, helps her let go of her worries about school and life and instead focus on her Yom Kippur needs. By the same token, wearing white on Yom Kippur is an external ritual that can create internal change. By dressing up as though we were cleansed, we can in fact become cleansed. I urge everyone to wear white – it's quite amazing to see the whole congregation letting go of vanity and turning towards spiritual renewal.

May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have a transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

LET'S BLOW THE ROOF OFF

OCTOBER 13, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Sukkot invites us to blow the roof of our homes. That is, we are supposed to spend a week in temporary huts outside – and the roof is nothing more than nature and the world. The design parameters of the Sukkah require the roof to be made of plant material – palm branches, bamboo mats, trimmings from the yard. Further, that roof has to cover the sukkah such that there is more shade than sun, and that a person can see the stars.

By making our roof out of nature and the world, we are inviting an openness and creativity into our souls greater than our usual more cloistered and home bound existence. There is a pleasant quality to sitting in the Sukkah that invites joy. But there is also a sense of being in the world that sometimes distracts. The bees are attracted to the protein, the nights especially this year may be cold, and so forth.

I encourage everyone to find ways of being in the Sukkah and getting out of our usual habits and homes. That change shakes things up inside and stimulates our creativity and joy. At Kol Emeth, we are trying a few new things alongside some ancient practices.

Come to our new Pop Up restaurant next Wednesday night at 6pm. Featuring Kol Emeth chefs, it's an informal meal to enjoy great food and great company. Or to our Havdalah and Jazz in the Sukkah on Saturday the 22nd beginning at 8pm. We'll have food, music, and a multigenerational gathering in joy! (The event is preceded by a special game time / fun time for children at 7pm). Bring your smart phones to photograph and post on facebook, twitter, etc, about the experience!!

The Sukkah also requires three walls. There is a structure that permits the creativity to flow. So come to first day Sukkot services on Monday the 17th when we will march around with our lulavim and etrogim in the hope of rain and hope. We move, we dance, we sing. It bookends the experience of Yom Kippur beautifully by reconnecting us with our bodies and the world. The lulav parade is around 11:30. We will also offer Camp Sukkot, a set of informal Sukkot based activities for children.

Whatever you do this Sukkot, blow the roof off. Make a change, open yourself up to the world. Then anything can happen!!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MUSIC IN THE SYNAGOGUE

OCTOBER 20, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I love music. I don't have a particular favorite genre, though I often listen to guitar of all kinds. I also love song, the sense of voices joining together and creating a melody out of the human self. My wife has a book of folk and camp songs and every now and then she and my daughters get it out and sing together and it's really lovely.

I also love the music of prayer. There is something about using melody as an instrument to awaken the soul. When we sing avinu malkeynu together at Neilah, something greater than the words is taking place. When we hum while putting the Torah away, something profound happens inside the soul.

Jewish law places some boundaries on musical instruments during prayer. On Shabbat and Holidays, we are prohibited from repairing or building things. As a result, string or wind instruments are forbidden because they require tuning or the replacing of a reed. By contrast, simple percussion, like clapping, banging on a book, or even using a hand drum, is permissible.

To me, there is a logic beyond the halachah. Guitar and wind instruments draw attention to the instrument and the player. In a performance environment, it appropriately draws the ear to the beauty of the experience. In a prayer context, however, there is a risk that the prayer of the person and the community gets overwhelmed by the guitar. When that happens, the prayer risks becoming a show, albeit a lovely and potentially moving one.

As a result, we are going to experiment with music this Sukkot. Friday night we are going to use guitar during kabbalat Shabbat before sunset. We will sing together with guitar to welcome Shabbat, and then focus on our voices during the remainder of the service. Saturday night we will have a musical Havdalah including jazz performed by some of our own congregants. We want to sing, rejoice, and listen to some beautiful music.

Simchat Torah we will double down on human voices as we dance, sing, and have a great time celebrating the gift of Torah. Come either Monday night at 6:30pm or Tuesday morning (we start at 9:30am and then start dancing around 10:30. We're at KE until around 2:30, so come whenever you can.)

For the future, I'm curious to experiment in two areas. First, how can we look at our current services and make them more songful, more filled with music and joy? Can we get a group together sitting among everyone else and ready to be a choir to help introduce new tunes and strengthen our singing? Second, how can we play with instruments while still honoring Jewish practice and the centrality of prayer? Could we have an alternative Shabbat morning minyan with percussion? What about more use of instruments during Kabbalat Shabbat or Havdalah?

I love music, but I neither play nor even read music. As we experiment, I need help and support to explore ways of using instruments to enhance our experiences, to find ways of using percussion and rhythm to make our existing singing deeper and more powerful. If you have expertise or ideas in this area, I am looking for help. I need people who can play, people who feel rhythm, and have some ideas for music and tunes to incorporate into what we do. I'm excited to explore and learn more about what might be possible.

I wish you a joyous Sukkot filled with song, music and prayer!

Rabbi David Booth

CJLS

NOVEMBER 8, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was in New York last for a meeting of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. I want to share with you some of the Teshuvot, Rabbinic Responsa, that we explored so you can get a sense of the variety and value of the conversations.

Rabbi Pamela Barmash wrote a terrific Teshuvah on saying birkhat hamazon, the grace after meals, even when there is no bread. People who do not eat gluten, whether for allergy or other reasons, were unclear if they could lead the grace after meals. Her teshuvah demonstrates that a full meal always requires the grace after meals even without bread. Further, she offers an option to say hamotzi over gluten free products designed to emulate bread. The committee passed the teshuvah by a wide margin.

I am working on a teshuvah on modesty in thought and dress. In essence, I am arguing that modesty is as much or more about controlling our own eyes as trying to control other people's dress. Those who use modesty standards to cover and control women are misreading the sources. My teshuvah argues for people to dress slightly more modestly than the norm for any particular context. For example, it is fine to wear a modest bathing suit versus a tiny speedo or bikini. The committee will vote on this electronically by January.

We looked at a Teshuvah by Jeremy Kalmonofsky on alternative methods of burial. It was a fascinating piece that got me thinking much more about greening our funerals. In particular, he remains opposed to cremation, but urged people to consider stacked burial (ie, going further down), using only plain pine caskets for environmental reasons (or even no casket). He also taught me that while cemeteries often have rules about caskets and cement liners, almost no states (including California) require them. It makes me want to reach out to Sinai and figure out if there are some green possibilities in what we do. This paper was still in draft form, likely to be voted on in June.

One other paper worthy of mention came from Len Sharzer. Rabbi Sharzer wrote a draft teshuvah on the status of transgender people in Judaism. The paper was fascinating. I learned a great deal about transgender people and it helped me frame what some of the issues are, especially around circumcision, marriage, and conversion. The paper was very well received, though still in a first draft. I'm considering helping Rabbi Sharzer to flesh out some of the halakhic issues that are still needed to make it a first class paper.

In all cases, the conversations were thought provoking and challenging. You can see the committee wrestling with how halakhah meshes with a variety of unanticipated modern issues, or in the case of transgender people, looking back towards (Mishnaic) precedent to respond to our modern envisioning of gender and sexual identity. I feel blessed to be part of this group, and elevated by the learning and conversation that takes place.

Kol Tov,

Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL EDITION: PRESIDENT ELECT TRUMP

NOVEMBER 9, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was totally surprised by the election outcome last night. Over the weekend, I thought anything could happen, but by Monday the polls and stock market rebound led me to assume Clinton would win. The shock is leading to some strong reactions.

Catastrophizing is a thought process of imagining worst case outcomes. It is painful and leads to sorrow and depression. While the worst does sometimes happen, holding perspective matters. The election results yesterday were surprising to nearly everyone, and for many heartbreaking and for many thrilling. I, like so many, thought for sure Tuesday morning I would go to sleep with Hillary Clinton as our President Elect.

I urge all of us to take a breath, to appreciate the sunshine and the beauty of God's world. Let's keep perspective, realizing Trump and Clinton were both gracious in their speeches, and over 100 million people participated in the richness of American democracy.

Perhaps too, given the deep divides we see revealed, the election can remind and inspire us to listen to people of differing views and experience. If we can be inspired towards compassion, chesed, then something good can emerge.

If the nasty language and personal attacks so emblematic of this election can repel us and inspire us instead to turn towards positive conversation, dayenu. If the awareness of deep divides can inspire us to reach across and listen, to genuinely want to understand those dayenu. And most of all, if this election helps each of us clarify our own hopes and aspirations for our country, dayenu.

For those rejoicing, congratulations. For those in mourning, allow yourself grief and shock amid perspective. And soon, as the emotion recedes, may God help us turn back to the task at hand. I pray we can all work together to make this world a better place as we learn and grow and are inspired by one another, seeing in every other person an image of God.

In Friendship,

Rabbi David Booth

LEONARD COHEN

NOVEMBER 17, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Leonard Cohen, arguably one of the greatest lyricists of all time, passed away last week. His most well-known song, Hallelujah, exemplifies his talents as a writer. It blends biblical themes, jumping from King David to Samson. "I've heard there was a secret chord that David played to please the Lord..." This line echoes Rabbinic legends of David being up at midnight and finding musical inspiration as the wind blew in through the window and moved the chords of his harp.

Then Cohen goes right for the jugular. "Your faith was strong but you needed proof and you saw her bathing on the roof." The most disturbing incident of David's life, his adulterous / abusive affair with Bathsheba becomes his search for proof of God. Or perhaps it is his descent into immorality because he needed proof. The ambiguity in the lyrics is wonderful.

This one stanza gets even more complex. "She tied you to her kitchen chair. She broke your throne and she cut your hair." Somehow, Samson gets pulled into the mix. Cohen also plays with who has the power. Before, it was David, but now Bathsheba dominates and abuses. It is David tied to the broken throne. The interplay of power in relationships, the search for meaning in another person, the absence of faith, all rear their disturbing and challenging heads.

Cohen's lyrics often capture Biblical images and themes and rework them into a profoundly disturbing modern idiom. His writing is one brilliant example of modern midrash in which self-doubt, challenges of faith, abuse and hurt appear regularly. He challenges us with the emptiness of atheism and self-doubt even as he himself lives through that emptiness. Put another way, he is always searching for elusive meaning. His poetic voice searches for faith in something, all too often coming up empty. He knows that could he but believe there would be power in that faith, but yet there is too much separating him from God and himself to arrive at such a promised land.

Cohen himself led a tumultuous life of creative and spiritual seeking. He observed Shabbat throughout his life, but also spent ten years as a Zen monk. He credited meditation with helping him control his depression. He lived hard and you could hear it in the increasing depth and then damage to his voice. How symbolic, that his voice, so beautiful and clear, became gravelly and rough. And yet, for all his challenge to faith, his was an authentically Jewish voice, a voice wrestling with God and self and emerging still strong but marked by the experience.

May his memory be for a blessing, and his intense musical poetry continue to inspire us to be Jews who wrestle with God and ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

LET US GIVE THANKS

NOVEMBER 22, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This is a moment for gratitude. In 1863, Lincoln first called on this country to observe Thanksgiving. That was a moment of civil war, of brother fighting brother. In the midst of bloodshed, Lincoln called for gratitude. He knew gratitude could be a step towards ending the war because when we appreciate the good in our lives, we open ourselves up to compassion.

Jewish mystical traditions recognize the transformative power of gratitude. For the kabbalists, gratitude is one path towards Hesed or compassion. When we appreciate, when we recognize the good in the world around us, we free our minds from hurt and anger and instead allow love to flow. Abraham's journey to a new land opened wells from which life giving water could flow. Even in arid landscapes, Abraham could bring life and blessings.

All the more so for us. At a moment of great national division, let us focus on gratitude. Let us take a few days of shared national appreciation for this diverse and wonderful country dedicated to the principle that all humans are created equal, with certain unalienable rights endowed by our Creator. Red states and blue states are all going to sit down to Thanksgiving dinner; what an amazing gift. Further, Abraham has already shown us the way. His son Isaac rediscovered the wells his father had dug and reopened them. The wells are there in our souls to be opened. Gratitude can be the means by which we reopen them.

I am grateful that my family will be together for Thanksgiving. My son Josh, who lives in Seattle now, is making the trip to join his two younger sisters. I feel blessed that he is alive and wants to be with us. I am grateful that my wife and I can set a table filled with delicious food. Carol, as many of you know, is a convert to Judaism. Thanksgiving is a place where her family traditions of hers can be a part of our larger family.

I am grateful that I will wake up, restored to life and energy. Praised is God, who gives strength to the weary. I am grateful to look out at the world, the leaves and colors, the rain and the sun. I am grateful to be a part of the Kol Emeth community, a place that values my gifts and gives me purpose. For all this, I am grateful.

I invite you this Thanksgiving to make your own list of gratitude. It will elevate the mood, restore energy,

and open up wellsprings of compassion. Then we will be better positioned to decide what is next, what bridges this moment invites us to build, what actions in the world are needed to bring more Hesed, more of God's overwhelming love, into this sometimes dark and pained world.

I believe we will be called upon to build more bridges within and without our community. We need to keep building our connection with AME Zion Church in Palo Alto. We need to find ways of building connections with our local Muslim community. We need to build bridges with places in this country that feel ignored, unheard, and belittled. We need to find ways of honoring our members diverse political viewpoints. There are a lot of challenges in front of us. Let's take a first step, a step of gratitude, to help grant us the strength to act with compassion and blessing in the days ahead.

Happy Thanksgiving and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ASCENDING SPIRITUAL RUNGS

DECEMBER 15, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In the Kabbalah, Jacob is the model of spiritual growth. Abraham is the exemplar of hesed, of love beyond measure. Isaac is gevurah, tremendous strength. Jacob is the vessel that can contain both because he is capable of ascending spiritual rungs.

Life is iterative, meaning the same lessons and challenges arise again and again. However, we can learn. That process of learning creates the potential for spiritual growth. However, once we overcome those challenges and ascend to a new rung, new (and often related) challenges arise.

I may for example learn to practice gratitude by calling to mind five things each day for which I am grateful. I may struggle at first to come up with five things every day. My ingratitude and selfishness will regularly rise up to create the illusion that there aren't five such moments to appreciate. Over time, with effort and blessings from God, I may overcome that resistance. Once that process becomes internalized, I am then able to ascend a rung.

A new lesson of gratitude may then arise. Perhaps my ego-self will get in the way of seeing the goodness of particular loved ones, or blind me from the role God is playing in my life. Then I will need a new set of practices to work on that area of resistance so that I may again grow. Each rung brings a risk of stagnation because I may be blind even to new problems and think I have overcome more than I have.

Jacob shows us an example of this kind of growth. Upon his return to Israel he has a moment of intense gratitude when he says, "I am smaller than all the hesed, the abounding love, that I have received." This moment of humility brings with it immense spiritual growth. He realizes more than simple gratitude. He realizes that the blessings of his life, for all its toil and turmoil, are overwhelming. In their face, he can be nothing but humble.

But that realization eludes him for twenty years. It is a lesson that takes the first half of his life. And that moment, that understanding, is one key reason why the Torah notes that Jacob is "whole in everything." Whole, meaning he now understands his own place, whole in his humility, whole in his ability to experience gratitude.

I am working on gratitude right now. At this moment, I feel overwhelmed and smaller than all the

goodness I have received. I feel so blessed to live in this place, to be a part of the Kol Emeth community, to have you as a reader of my weekly thoughts. There are so many kindnesses of word thought and deed over the years. For all that, and more that I cannot yet see, I am so grateful.

May we all, through gratitude, find our own inner wholeness and acquire the strength to ascend new spiritual rungs.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT WE SEE IN THESE LIGHTS

DECEMBER 28, 2016

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This year I've been studying Degel Machne Ephraim, a Hasidic commentary written by the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, Moshe Hayim Ephraim. I learned from him three elements to see in the lights of Chanukah.

1. Gratitude. The Degel says that God's goodness flows into the world like streams into the ocean. That is, the goodness is unquenchable, overwhelming, marvelous. As we light our Chanukah candles, in these dark days, I invite you to notice goodness and light. Perhaps express something for which you are grateful corresponding to each candle. Or perhaps notice something in gratitude that is good in the world.

2. Our capacity for good. The Degel notices that we all possess various characteristics and qualities. Each quality has a good and an evil way of being expressed in the world. For example, I may be competitive. This can mean I want to win regardless of the cost to others. Or it could mean I am driven to do good, to keep doing better, driven by my competitiveness to do and be more. The Chanukah lights help us see past our ego selves and our physical desires to the goodness that can emerge from our qualities. So another Chanukah practice is: each day note a quality or characteristic about yourself and then challenge yourself to see the good ways in which that quality can be expressed.

3. Finally, the Degel suggests the Chanukah lights illumine a path to faith. For him, "Greece" is symbolic of the material, of the aesthetic, of pursuits of the here and now that distract from our moral and spiritual development. How much time do we spend binge watching and how much time examining our souls? The candles illumine the truth of our answer and may motivate us to see our way to faith and moral growth. For him, the experience of God carries with it a need to speak truth to power, to develop the prophetic need to speak and react when evil happens in the world. But Greece lulls us to sleep, back to our beds, our TVs and smartphones. The candles can wake us up again, helping us to truly see.

I wish everyone a joyous Chanukah filled with light, joy, and hope.

Happy Chanukah,

Rabbi David Booth

WHAT THIS YEAR ASKS OF US

JANUARY 5, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every year has its particular challenges. This secular year will be no exception. Here are some areas that need attention this year:

1. Fighting the desire to draw red lines. There are so many efforts across political, social, and religious life to draw red lines. These people are too (fill in the blank) and therefore must be condemned. There is a great temptation right now to “other” people – to say that a certain mindset or skin color or religion means another person is dangerous. I want us to resist this temptation to “other.” 50% of America can’t be outside the bounds of political discourse; 1 billion Muslims aren’t evil. How can we find ways of reacting that promote blessings of safety and healing without othering so many?
2. Building bridges. Our society is divided along so many lines and basis. We need intentional healing work to create connections. I am particularly focused on deepening our relationship with AME Zion Church in Palo Alto and working together with area synagogues to develop a relationship with our local Muslim community. I need help and lay leaders for both, so if you are interested, please let me know.
3. Responding to refugees. We are living through one of the greatest dislocations in human history. While most of the press covers Syrian refugees, there are hundreds of thousands of Africans as well who have walked across huge parts of Africa to escape famine and war. I believe this is the humanitarian challenge of our moment. I intend to partner with IsraAid this year to help educate us about the challenges and give us an outlet through which we can help. We will also be inviting Kol Emeth members to learn more about local efforts to help teen refugees in our area who need homes and help.
4. Praying. Messages denigrating traditional religion and prayer abound. Yet all the evidence shows the profound importance of communities like Kol Emeth. Singing together is life sustaining; communities like Kol Emeth are provide essential spiritual homes that promote civic virtue. We believe that liturgy is a key path to gratitude and faith. We need to promote synagogue and prayer because they are such key elements holding our society together. There is a wonderful Jewish teaching – the work is beyond our capacity to finish, but nevertheless we have to do our part. This year has plenty of important work in front of us: let us as individuals and as a Kol Emeth community set out to be the kind of blessing the world so desperately needs.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE POWER OF LOVE

JANUARY 12, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Martin Luther King Jr. believed in people, in God, and in love. The astonishing depth of his three part faith enabled him to change the way in which race relations are perceived in America. Had he but once given into the temptation to violence, which would have been so understandable given the myriad challenges he faced, the fundamental change he wrought would have been undone. He believed passionately that people needed to see the violence and dehumanization with which blacks were assaulted. Their own soft racism that tolerated and allowed such dehumanization to persist would be stripped away as a result of knowledge.

He changed the world and reminded us of who we should be. He reminded us that we are created in the image of God and therefore deserving of love.

For most of my life, his legacy was distant. I appreciated his oratory and was inspired to look past the color of people's skin to the content of their character. But I didn't do much. Last year, that changed for me.

In the wake of the charged and violent tenor of race relations in the last few years, I was moved to pick up the phone and call Reverend Kaloma Smith, the pastor of AME Zion in Palo Alto, an historically black church. I called out of hope and love and was met with love. Reverend Smith and I have become friends and are passionate about deepening the connections between our two communities.

Last year, we joined together over MLK weekend. We studied Amos together in the Spring. And we marched for brother and sisterhood in the Fall. This year we look forward to another opportunity to build something between our congregations that can engender understanding and foster hope.

This coming weekend celebrates MLK's legacy of love and hope. Reverend Smith will join us along with some members of his community for services Saturday morning. He will speak at around 11:30am. We will then make our way to Palo Alto AME Zion University Church Sunday morning. Their services start at 9:30am and they are located at 3549 Middlefield Road in Palo Alto. From there, we plan to create some gatherings around our shared musical heritage. Klezmer and Jazz line up in wonderful ways. By enjoying music together, we can create a different and more open conversation. Reverend Smith and I are in a JCRC program that will take us to Israel in the Fall as well.

After my email last week, a number of people have stepped forward to help deepen these ties. If you are interested, let me know. There's more we can do!

May King's legacy of love and hope inspire us towards the effective possibilities of non-violence to elicit world changing blessing.

Shabbat Shalom and see you in Church!

Rabbi David Booth

RECEPTIVITY

JANUARY 26, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a curious exchange towards the beginning of the Exodus narrative. Moses goes to Pharaoh and demands that he let the people go. However, the request is a limited one. He says, "Let the men go three days into the desert to worship God and then they will return." Pharaoh refuses; but what is the nature of Moses' request? Is he telling the truth? Suppose Pharaoh had accepted the request. Would the Israelites really have come back? And further, what good is it to leave with only the men?

I have always thought this request was nothing more than a ruse. That is, Moses never really meant it. He expected Pharaoh to refuse and then that would set in motion the whole drama of redemption with its miracles and plagues. But let us imagine for just a moment that Moses is serious. What is it that God expects from Pharaoh?

Let's step back one moment. Moses has two primary qualifications to lead the people to redemption. First, he sees ethical dilemmas and he jumps in, whether to save the Israelite from the taskmaster or Jethro's daughters from some toughs at the well. Second, he is able to listen and be present. The miracle of the burning bush requires Moses first to turn aside and then to take the time to notice the great miracle. Most of us would have passed it right by.

This suggests that the political and spiritual leadership needed by God draws from a moral engagement and a receptivity to the world and others. What if, then, Moses' request of Pharaoh is just such a test? If Pharaoh were to say "yes," it would imply an openness to the needs of others. It would show a receptivity to the faith request of a whole enslaved people.

Had such a thing happened, the whole story might have been different. Instead of being a story of Pharaoh's stubbornness, it would have been a story of discovering receptivity and hope in Egypt. Maybe there never would have been a separate Jewish people. Rather, we would have been partners with Egypt in bringing hope into the whole world, creating light everywhere. It would have transformed political systems as well as spiritual systems. It might have meant the world was ready for peace because the political was ready to enter into the drama of redemption.

Of course, that's not how the story goes. Instead, we became a small people with a great message. That message, that faith penetrates the darkness, that we can imagine a world better than this, that we are

commanded to be a blessing, has lost none of its urgency. We need to keep working on our own receptivity to live that message, always hoping that the Pharaohs of the world will finally set aside their own personal aggrandizement, their own stubbornness and love of power, to finally redeem the political as well.

The Bar Mitzvah student at Minchah this past Shabbat shared a beautiful message. He noted Pharaoh's inability to listen and wondered if we all might learn to listen better. Maybe, this beautiful thirteen year old suggested, if we could all learn to listen to one another a bit better, to leave aside the hate and bitterness so plaguing our political discourse, God might be able to get to work.

All I can say is: I'm with you. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi David Booth

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

FEBRUARY 2, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rabbinic literature is dedicated to respectful dialogue across large divides. By preserving minority opinions and framing a process of discourse, this literature models how we can talk even when the world seems to be falling apart. One such classic story is the Oven of Achnai. I won't belabor the story here – essentially, Rabbi Eliezer ends up arguing with the rest of the Rabbis about the purity of a particular oven. Many teach this story because Rabbi Eliezer invokes a variety of miracles to prove his point, all rejected by the Rabbis. Finally, a heavenly voice calls out in support of Rabbi Eliezer, saying he is right here and in all cases. The Rabbis essentially rule God out of order in favor of majority rule and logical argumentation.

Yet less often taught, which I learned from Joel Rubinstein at NYU in his amazing book *Talmudic Stories*, is the key word of the whole story: Kavod or Respect. This story mourns the inability of the Rabbis to see past this dispute. Their long history and connections are abandoned as the Rabbis cast out Rabbi Eliezer. It wreaks needless harm and devastation on the world and the sanctity of their endeavor.

We too live in an era lacking in kavod. Online and elsewhere insults and nasty demonizing language predominate. Our political culture, left and right, has been infected by a crudity that poisons real discourse. We need to find ways again to talk respectfully to one another even when the gaps are real and painful.

Martin Luther King talks a lot about breaking the cycle of hate. Our tendency is to respond to hate and anger with hate and anger of our own. Yet nothing changes until we choose love. When confronted with love, hate in the long run will be defeated. He staked his life on love and changed our world as a result.

Online, I regularly see anger and hateful words. I see insults when someone strays slightly from “orthodoxy.” My daughter saw a link from a woman questioning the efficacy of the women’s march.

A man made a nasty youtube video accusing this woman of being a “secret” Trump supporter and then proceeded to use sexist language to belittle her all while defending the women’s march.

Kol Emeth endeavors to be an intentionally pluralistic community. We know that perhaps 15% of our congregation supports Trump and we choose to create a safe space for a minority. That work, in our

increasingly polarized era, is only going to get harder. Yet that means we are all the more committed to the effort.

Dr. King warned passionately of the temptation to use immoral ends to achieve moral means. But he called on his followers to be different and to realize that a moral transformation of our civilization required moral means to achieve moral ends. Inspired by his words, I am calling on our community to speak with respect and love even across deep political divides. Inspired by Dr. King, I am calling upon us to leave behind insults and demonization in favors of respect and argumentation. We need in forthright ways to state our positions and to advocate for the changes we seek in our culture. Yet we need to do so in a fashion that is filled with blessing.

Perhaps in this small way we can begin to heal that which is broken and bring about the change we so desperately need.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

BEING READY

FEBRUARY 16, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the Israelites prepare to leave Egypt, the Torah describes them as “arising armed.” They left somehow with weaponry, almost like an armed camp. Later, as we see them engaging with the Amalekites and others, it explains where all the weapons came from. Yet it’s a strange moment- how did this slave people succeed in becoming an armed camp?

Degel Machane Ephraim, a late 1900s Hasidic commentator, notices this problem and says that “arising armed” actually means “arising prepared.” They were ready. After 400 years of slavery, and one year of a drama of hope and redemption, they were finally ready to leave behind the shackles of slavery and become free people.

Despite God’s promises, they had repeatedly given up hope over the year of Moses’ message. Only now, at the very end, were they finally ready to listen and to leave. We see this with refugees from disasters throughout history. Many are never ready to leave even the most horrible of situations. There are Jews who stayed until they could no longer leave, somehow believing the Nazi death apparatus would never get them, or that the German people would wake up and shut it all down.

That the Israelites were ready, then, is significant and unusual. They had prepared themselves for what was coming. The Degel goes on to say, “In all things, a person must ready themselves to be a vessel and to be prepared for that matter.” Yet by the same token, our success is rooted in God, “for God has the salvation.” There is then a paradox of preparation. We must orient ourselves to the task, knowing that the task lies beyond us. Only with help from God, from the inner place in which God offers us direction and strength, can we find the outcome we so desperately seek.

Prayer, for example, requires preparation. A person must be receptive as the individual seeks gratitude, joy, and faith. They must ready themselves by being aware of the truth of their own self, their own needs and hopes, which they bring into the prayer experience. In the presence of that effort, prayer can be genuinely life changing.

This wisdom applies in all areas of our life. By arising prepared, by taking the time to orient myself as a vessel to the task at hand, I open myself up to the possibility of wisdom and meaning in that which I place before myself. By also knowing that my own preparation is met by God creates both a strength and a humility that leads to thoughtful, caring action.

I suggest a prayer before engaging in any meaningful task that lies in front of you. Take 3 long breaths. Then say, “I am open to the task in front of me. I want to approach it with strength and wisdom. Offer me

now the direction and energy I need.” Then take three more long breaths. Such a simple practice may open up new channels of strength and capacity within you to approach the world with wisdom, grace, and power.

Shabbat Shalom-

David

FATHER FIGURES

FEBRUARY 23, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Moses has three fathers in his life. By contrast, Moses has a direct connection with his mother. After she sends him away, she is later hired to be his nursemaid. Yet Amram, Moses' father, never interacts with Moses directly. Even the Midrash never imagines a direct encounter between Moses and Amram.

Pharaoh becomes Moses' second father figure. We see little of the relationship in the Torah; we know only that Moses is forced to flee from him after rescuing an Israelite from the hands of an Egyptian taskmaster. Pharaoh is the figure of justice without mercy. Moses has broken the law by killing the taskmaster. But Pharaoh refuses to allow the context of the act, or their relationship, to change his judgment. So Moses learns justice from Pharaoh, but not mercy or love.

Moses' third father figure is Jethro, the Priest of Midian and Moses' father-in-law. I've often been intrigued by the relationship between in-laws and their children by marriage. It is as close as one gets to choosing a parent. It is also a parental relationship entered as an adult. There can be love and mentoring freed from the baggage of childhood and adolescence. At their best, such relationships enable a loving growth that enormously complements the role of birth parents.

In this regard, Moses wins the father-in-law lottery. Jethro is a spiritual and caring presence, deeply committed to his children but with room in his heart for this new dynamic presence in his daughter's life. Midrashim and modern movies alike imagine Jethro teaching Moses a new appreciation of God, of holiness, of being aware of the spiritual. I would go further and say he adds the element of love into Moses' life.

Jethro journeys out to see Moses immediately before the moment of revelation and the ten commandments. He brings Moses' wife and children to him. Unlike Pharaoh, Jethro is moved by Moses' successes and the role of God in the world. He compliments and blesses even as he offers critical advice. His is a loving, thoughtful, mentoring presence.

Moses learns justice and judgment from Pharaoh. But it is Jethro who enables the revelation by enriching that awareness of law with love. Our tradition believes in law and practice but always through the lens of love. Unfiltered law is evil; law filtered by love is life sustaining.

Amram plays a third hidden role. His absence leaves Moses yearning. The Mishnah teaches that the wise person learns from everyone; Amram's absence makes Moses more receptive to the father figures he will need in his life. Further, as Moses sees that each father figure offers him something but not everything, it further creates a yearning for God.

I believe Moses became Moses in part because of all three father figures in his life. From Pharaoh, he learned of justice and law. From Jethro, love and compassion. And absent Amram? A yearning that finally led him to God.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HOAXES, VANDALISM, AND REAL COURAGE

MARCH 2, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

After hearing the news of the bomb threat at the OFJCC, my daughter said, “Will Kehillah be next?” How is a loving and honest parent supposed to answer that question? My younger daughter, who attends public school, asked a similar question, “Will Kol Emeth be targeted?”

I tried to answer honestly. Kehillah may be targeted. Other schools have received bomb threats, but all the threats so far have been hoaxes. They are meant to scare people, to take a cheap and seemingly risk free opportunity to express hatred. No synagogues have been targeted this time around, so I suppose it is less likely that Kol Emeth will receive such a call.

My son called me last night. He wanted to talk about the desecration of two Jewish cemeteries. Josh isn't the most Jewishly active right now, so I was surprised at how upset he was. He asked what one is supposed to do. He had said kaddish: was that the right thing? I told him I thought it was an amazing response.

I was at a learning session last night for an interfaith trip to Israel I am taking in the Fall along with Pastor Smith from University AME Church. When I got there, Pastor Smith asked how I was doing with all the threats. He commented on the desecration of the two cemeteries, saying, “Who does that?” I just nodded in agreement to a question that none of us know how to answer.

We are all asking ourselves questions that don't have answers. Why are small minded people cowardly disrupting the lives of others? How is it possible that attention grabbing hate can be so motivating? And: how do we as a community respond?

I am reminded of Pharaoh's efforts to disrupt and destroy the Jewish people. The more he did, the more we increased. One response, then, is to double down on what we are doing. This threat to us reminds all of us how connected we are, how much our Jewish commitments and connections really mean to us. That's why #IstandwiththeJCC, and that's why my son was motivated to say a kaddish.

The hatred is also bringing us friends. The Muslim community has donated tens of thousands of dollars to help rebuild the cemeteries. Pastor Smith knows what it's like to live in a community receiving bomb threats and these haters have only deepened our connection and friendship.

I can't predict what happens next. But I will say this: threats like this only remind us of our strengths and our friendships.

There are many responses, including rewards being offered for the capture of these vandals and prank callers. Law enforcement is working diligently on their end. Hopefully we can make these crimes expensive for their perpetrators and so deter others from more such copycat actions.

We also are called up in this moment to stand together. Synagogues, schools, JCCs, camps- all of us share a common mission to be a light in this sometimes dark world, to provide community and warmth and learning in a myriad of ways. Now is the moment to stand up and together for who we are and what we believe.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

PURIM

MARCH 9, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A long time ago in a country far far away....

Purim is a genuinely strange holiday. I'm going to focus on only one aspect of its inherent weirdness, the name itself. Purim is the only holiday to celebrate events outside of Israel that affect only a small portion of the Jewish people. As a result, it is the only such holiday for which we do not recite Hallel. Purim's name reflects that foreign origin. It is named from "Pur, that is, the lot." Purim is a Persian word.

This short verse provides more strangeness. There are two connections to Yom Kippur, our oldest and most primitive holiday. First, Yom Kippur also features a lottery. The center of the Yom Kippur offering is the two goats, one for God and one sent to Azazel. It is the only other mention in the Bible of this kind of lottery that will determine the fate of the Jewish people. Second Yom hakiPURIM, the Biblical name for Yom Kippur, hides within it the name PURIM.

One more bit of strangeness, though this hardly exhausts the list. Not once in the story of Esther is God's name mentioned. God acts behind the scenes or not at all. The narrative has its own force with no explicit mentions of miracles or God's power. God, however, is weirdly hidden in the scroll itself. The first word of nearly every column is the word "HaMelech, the King." It echoes the High Holiday liturgy by reminding us of God's sovereignty.

For the Rabbis, Purim and Yom Kippur provide bookends to the year. Yom Kippur is all about seriousness and repentance, about finding God and meaning in intentionality and prayer. Yom Kippur asks us to put aside our doubt and reach out to God in order to become better people through prayer and repentance. The work is hard but straightforward.

Purim, with so many echoes of the High Holidays, asks something different. This strange holiday invites us to search for meaning even when it appears hidden. It invites us to use different tools to grow and become blessings. Joy and community, laughter and fun are its primary techniques. Purim substitutes letting go of inhibitions and pretend play for intentionality and prayer.

God may be hidden, says Purim, so let's all have some fun to find God! Like a child playing peek-a-boo, the hiddenness invites us into a game. And it is through that game that something redemptive and

hopeful can be found as we giggle and grow and laugh.

The echoes of the High Holidays in the silliness of Purim are strange. And yet they call our attention to the sometimes absurdity of our life and our search for purpose and meaning. By giving us some tools, tools that live in exile and distance from God, tools that are empowered by doubt and absence, Purim may be giving us exactly what we need to find a conditional meaning that can redeem us in this moment.

May your Purim be filled with joy, with laughter, and with healing.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 16, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz.

It is customary to make a donation but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and frozen fruit. Please note that sour cream should have a kosher for passover label as it sometimes has gluten. If any of these items are purchased during Passover, they must have a kosher for Passover mark because any quantity of chametz is forbidden during Passover. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, pasta sauce, and ketchup with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for Passover label.

In addition, following the ruling this year of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen

Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes. For those who eat legumes, they may similarly purchase items before Pesach that include corn products, like potato chips or pure ice cream (do not purchase ice creams with candy, cookies, or other additives as they may include chametz.)

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at rabbinicalassembly.org. They have posted a .pdf there called Passover Guide. Or link directly to the Pesach Guide [here](#).

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

To be added to the CyberTorah list, please email me at Rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

A COMMUNITY OF CARING

MARCH 23, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Kol Emeth strives to be a community of caring. When people are experiencing illness, grief, or other life events like a new baby, the Kol Emeth community wants to be there for you. I'd like to tell you some of the things that we do, and encourage you to reach out when you are in need.

Meal Train

The Kol Emeth Hesed committee uses Mealtrain, a website that allows us to organize and offer meals to those in need. If you've had a surgery, or a new baby, or some other challenge that would make receiving meals a good thing, just let the Kol Emeth office know. Someone from Chesed will reach out and set up the Mealtrain. Then we will invite people from your neighborhood and other friends of yours to bring meals. We also have food we keep on hand at Kol Emeth in the "Chesed freezer" for this purpose so that we can meet an immediate need before we can set up the mealtrain.

Visits

Both Rabbi Graff, Rabbi Schwartz and I want to visit people. Or put another way, when it becomes hard for you to come to us we want to come to you. We make hospital and home visits as needed. Related, we have a friendly visitors program where we match elderly or home bound people with visitors. If you know someone who would appreciate a friendly visitor, please email me or Rabbi Graff.

Shiva

The Hesed committee does a wonderful job preparing a home for Shiva. When someone passes away, the Rabbis inform the Hesed committee who then reaches out to the family. They offer help in setting the home up for the meal immediately following the funeral, and to have someone on hand to help with setup and clean up each night of Shiva. We can also help provide some of the food for that first meal of condolence.

Mi Sheberakh List

Kol Emeth maintains a list of people on whose behalf we pray for healing every Shabbat. If you have a

name you'd like included in our list, just send an email to the Kol Emeth office.

Cards

Finally, Kol Emeth is starting something new. For years we have sent out condolences cards but we are now adding in get-well cards. Whenever we know someone has been sick or in the hospital, we will send out cards with hopes for healing and recovery. Our intent is to let people know we as a community are with you in a difficult moment.

I want to know and help if something is going on in your life. But I have no way of knowing unless you reach out and tell me. The hospitals and rehab centers no longer communicate with Synagogues due to HIPAA (Privacy) rules. So if you or someone you know is wrestling with illness, please let me, Rabbi Graff, or the Kol Emeth office know. We all want to be part of your circle of caring.

If you are interested in helping with our Chesed efforts, you can reach out to me, Rabbi Graff or our wonderful volunteer organizers: Chesed co-chairs – Carol Tannenwald and Davina Brown

(lucata@aol.com, browntow@pacbell.net)

Mealtrain captain – Barchi Gillai (bgillai@gmail.com)

Shiva support captain – Helen Rutt (hdrutt@usa.net)

Friendly Visitors – Judy Lurie (lurie2@sbcglobal.net)

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THIS PASSOVER, FREE A SLAVE: SPECIAL CYBERTORAH FROM RABBI GRAFF

MARCH 30, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In a week and a half, we will sit at our seder tables and sing, Avadim hayinu, “we were slaves in Egypt,” atah b’nei chorin, “now we are free.” The unfathomable reality, however, is that slavery is more prevalent in our world today than ever before. The UN International Labor Organization estimates that 21 million people are slaves on our planet today. Asia and the Pacific have the most slaves, around 11.7 million people. Sub-Saharan Africa has approximately 3.7 million people enslaved. But nowhere is immune from it. U.S. officials estimate that there are about 60,000 slaves in this country, and about 18,000 slaves are trafficked to and through the United States each year.

What does it mean to be a slave? We’re talking about people who are forced to work, without pay, under threat of violence, and they cannot walk away. They are found in mines, quarries, farms, factories, fishing boats, brothels, and private homes. How does this happen? Most often it is people who are poor and in debt. They borrow \$100 in an emergency and are forced to “work it off” over decades, the interest on the debt always growing so that they can never be free of it, and the debt then being extended to their children. Or sometimes a family is so desperately poor that they agree to send off one child to a farm or factory for a supposedly “good job,” never to see them again.

The problem is mind-boggling. What’s encouraging though is that there are coalitions of good people on the ground, changing this reality, educating communities in India, Nepal, Ghana, Congo, Haiti, and right here, and they are literally freeing slaves. I, and dozens of other Conservative rabbis, participated in a webinar this week with a leading umbrella organization in this effort, Free the Slaves. [Click here](#) to read more about the work that they do. The problem is complex and fighting slavery requires many different approaches. But it has been boiled down to a dollar amount.

The cost for securing long-term freedom for a single slave in the developing world averages out to about \$800. We’re not just talking about buying a person out of slavery. We’re talking about schooling, vocational training, legal, medical, and psychological support. And this can be done, through vetted organizations on the ground, for roughly \$800. My colleague, Rabbi Debra Orenstein, told her family that her goal was to free 18 slaves. Her 7-year-old daughter asked her, “Why only 18?” And so, after some soul-searching, Rabbi Orenstein and her congregation set a goal of freeing 100 slaves, raising \$80,000. They’re not there yet. But they are almost half way. And Rabbi Orenstein has made it her

mission to spread the word about Free the Slaves throughout the Jewish world. Free the Slaves has an elaborate website with a large section focused on Judaism. [Click here](#) to see links to “Seder Starters” and other ways to integrate slavery awareness into your Passover preparations. You can also look at [Rabbi Debra Orenstein’s website](#), with lots of articles and other resources she has written on the subject.

Some people are putting a padlock on their seder plate this year, to prompt a discussion about the persistence of slavery. Some are donating money as a way of honoring the hosts of the seder they are going to. I’m trying to figure out how to share this information with my kids this Passover. How do I tell them that slavery is not gone? It is illegal, but it persists around our globe in unprecedented numbers – 21 million people, 5 million of whom are children. I welcome your thoughts. What I want them to take away though is that we have the power to help free slaves.

And Passover is the ultimate time to do it.

I talked about Free the Slaves in my sermon this past shabbat, and afterward, Rabbi George Schlesinger rushed up to me, saying “You want to free some slaves today, right here? Ask anyone who is willing to donate \$40 this week to Free the Slaves to raise their hand, to commit right now.” At the end of the service, I followed his suggestion. I asked the congregation who would commit to donating \$40. And at least 60 people raised their hands. If all of us do what we said we would do, we just freed 3 slaves. I am writing to you, to invite you to join in this mitzvah as well. Let us make this Passover truly a holiday of liberation.

Rabbi Sarah Graff

CLEANSING OURSELVES AND OUR HOMES

APRIL 6, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Priests, upon building the Mishkan or movable Sanctuary, were commanded regularly to wash their hands as a preparation for various rituals. Handwashing was a biblical commandment to ready themselves for worship. Over time, Rabbinic tradition expanded the commandment for the Cohanim to wash to be a broader commandment. All Jews, now, are to wash before eating and praying.

Like so much of Biblical and Rabbinic wisdom, this simple mitzvah functions on multiple levels all at once. On one level, handwashing became such a universal Jewish practice that Jewish communities in the Middle Ages were often afflicted less by plague and disease because they were washing their hands on a regular basis. Thus, this mitzvah filled a medical physical role in keeping Jewish communities healthier.

Yet it also functions on a level of spiritual preparation. In addition to the physical, this ritual invites a spiritual level into eating. Before eating, we wash our hands because we are commanded to do so. We rinse our hands with water from a vessel, say a blessing, and lift them up. That lifting identifies the potential of sacredness to enter into and be expressed by our body. Mystics imagine a flow of blessing coming into the world. Food symbolizing that more significant life force of which we become aware when we say a blessing. Handwashing reminds us of gratitude for our lives. The ritual washing goes beyond the physical to the spiritual and reminds us of the life force flowing from God that sustains all life.

Jewish tradition further invites washing before any moment of prayer or spiritual living. I have the practice of washing when I wake up in the morning. Among the first things I do, the washing and blessing are a chance to invite meaning and purpose into my day as it starts. I wash; I take a breath. I imagine divine energy flowing into my body. It helps me set an intention for the day as it begins.

I went on rounds with Bruce Feldstein, the Jewish Chaplain at Stanford Hospital. He is an MD by training and so very in the habit of washing his hands before seeing a patient. He has added to the ritual, however. Before he enters a patient unit he washes his hands, and then lifts his hands as he takes a breath. The biblical commandment informs his spiritual preparation before seeing a patient. He orients himself towards the sacred task of bringing comfort into a hospital room. This enables him to become an incredibly comforting presence. The ritual cleans his hands to keep illness out, but also functions as a

moment to cleanse his soul, to orient him towards the kind of intention he wants to bring into that place of pain and illness.

I invite you to incorporate hand washing with a blessing into your practice as a centering ritual. It cleans the body, but also readies the soul and self for focus. For me, it is a daily reminder to be grateful for my life, and to be present and focused in all the work that I do.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

APRIL 26, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Zionism today must include a strong educational component. We as American Jews are committed to the State of Israel as lovers and as family. That means we have disagreements – or even aspects of Israeli society we don't talk to or about – but we still feel a connection. Nicky Morris captures this in poetic fashion:

I know these people will be important to me / will be the ancestors / I forgive over and over and find something of them in my own actions.

We share an overlap of self with Israelis. And yet, as time passes, there is an ever increasing risk of foreignness. The risk increases every year as Israeli identity forms according to its own logic, place and cultural imperatives. A lack of understanding emerges purely from distance: distance of place, culture, literature.

I believe strongly that American Jews have a moral obligation to find ways of entering Israeli culture. This includes high literature and culture – Amos Oz or Agnon, but also popular culture like the TV show Ramzor. It means reading popular newspapers like Yediot Aharonot (available in English at ynetnews.com) and looking at the culture, food and sports sections.

This is why we are bringing Rachel Korazim to Kol Emeth this weekend for an amazing deep dive into Israeli identity. She will use poetry and music to explore the ways in which the Israeli self is forming and finding expression. For example, she will show through literature how the early Zionist understanding of the Holocaust gave way to a dawning comprehension of the bewilderment and heroism of the victims and the survivors. She will explore the emergence of new Jewish voices in the culture as Jews from Arabic lands reclaim their own voice. In the past, we always called these refugees from Arabic countries Sephardim, but in fact they are deeply part of Middle Eastern culture and are only now finding their voice in Israeli literature and identity.

Finally, she will explore the amazing spiritual awakening happening in the secular community. She will show how they are using popular Israeli music, often laden with Biblical and Midrashic allusions, in prayer and other spiritual gatherings.

Rachel Korazim is an amazing teacher. I've studied with her multiple times and have always been moved and influenced by what she has to share. The Song of Songs talks of the passion lovers have to come to know each other. As lovers of Israel, let's come together to come to know our beloved in her wholeness.

I look forward to spending an amazing Shabbat with you!

Rabbi Booth

CROWDSOURCING

MAY 4, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've seen people post to Facebook for help in a variety of areas with great success. Sometimes people ask for child raising techniques or professional services or where to get dinner in Budapest and amazingly someone on Facebook has an answer. I'd like to try something similar in two areas for Kol Emeth.

Question 1: How can we at Kol Emeth better help solve the problems of hunger and homelessness in our area?

Hunger in Santa Clara County remains stubbornly high. Second Harvest reports approximately 250,000 clients a year, meaning hundreds of thousands of people are food insecure in our area. Further, the high cost of housing means many are homeless or living out of their cars or RVs. When I drive on Park or El Camino and see all the RVs permanently parked, it breaks my heart. A few years ago, we found a bold way to make a difference by hosting a Men's Shelter under Elizabeth Eastman's leadership. The City of Palo Alto, in our third year of offering the program, got in our way and the Shelter went elsewhere.

So, how can we at Kol Emeth make a meaningful impact on this challenge in our area? How can we do something that invites the incredible volunteer energy from our community to do good? That Shelter was wonderful for us. It built community, it gave us an outlet for blessing, and it focused our mission around helping those in need. Are there other such programs or opportunities in our area?

Question 2: How can we build connections among our membership and the people of Israel?

The deepest Zionism stems from Ahavat Israel, love for the people and place of Israel. Under Barbara Schapira's leadership, we created a connection with the Arava in the south of Israel. We helped build a medical center and we created an arts exchange program with residents there. It helped establish some human connections and create a sense of a place and a people in the minds of our adults and young people.

Prior to our partnership with the Arava, Barbara and the IAC organized first an oral history project of people's Israel stories and then a picture collection of people's Israel photography. All these events had a human connection, a fun quality, and built emotional connections with Israel and Israelis.

I'd like to continue such work. What could we do as a community to engage with the people of Israel again? Is there a good Zionist project like helping build that medical center where we can be involved in the building of the Land? I loved that project because we brought healing to Israel and we helped address in a small way the housing crisis there by making the Arava more appealing and safe. Any ideas now?

I'd be grateful for help, or resources, or ideas. If you have contacts who might be able to help, let me know that as well. If you are interested in being involved in either of these areas, that too is a great need.

I feel passionate about our community being dedicated to good work at home and building loving bonds with Israel. I'm hoping to use this forum to help us find pathways to blessing in our shared mission.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

LOSS AND SHIVA

MAY 11, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is something uniquely beautiful about a house of Shiva. To review: Shiva is the seven day mourning period Jews observe that begins with the day of the funeral. Based on the people a Cohen may bury, we understand that people sit shiva for their parents, their spouse, their children, and their siblings.

During those seven days there are both negative and positive commandments. People sit on low stools, they remain in the house, they do not shave, they refrain from marital relations. Also during that time people come to the house to visit and pray. Family often gathers together to remember their loved one and to comfort one another. Sometimes a house of Shiva has the feel of a family reunion as young cousins run around together and older relatives catch up, talk, and hang out. That sense of togetherness, even when focused on topics other than the loss, is itself a source of comfort.

The beauty of Shiva starts from these practices. It invites the family to create space for their mourning. The sorrow and feelings of loss aren't forced into a day or two, or a single ceremony. Instead, there is time for feelings to ebb and flow and find expression in stories, in hugs, and in distracting moments with family. The rituals of Shiva also intentionally create a different kind of time, a break from reality, that postpones some of the emptiness that emerges from a return to a routine that includes beloved absence.

The visitors in a Shiva house are sacred witnesses. They do something very counter cultural: they wait and they listen. Emulating Job's friends, the visitors wait for the mourner to speak. That interaction instructs the visitors on how best to offer comfort. I have seen mourners who needed me to listen, who needed me to tell stories, who needed me to just sit quietly with them. As a visitor, I wait to be taught by the mourner.

A person may bring food into the house of Shiva, but not out. This mitzvah inspires several acts. First, it encourages the visitors to host the family in their own home. It makes the home a gathering place in which visitors linger even after the service. That fills the home with people, adding to memories of loss and grief, warmth and comfort. By creating a space for mourning, Shiva paradoxically reclaims the house for living.

Finally, the stories I hear in a house of Shiva have a marvelous quality. Even the closest relatives often learn new facets of their loved ones. Especially in these days, when people often live so far from family, Shiva is a chance to learn about the relative of a dear friend and about that person's upbringing and early life. There is an intimacy to the encounter that supports community and friendship.

Shiva does have its challenges. Being seven days in one's home with visitors and family can be overwhelming. It is intentionally a relief when it is over. I believe the practice has great wisdom in filling our time and effort to carry us through those most intense days of loss and grieving.

By the same token, it can be especially hard for those who are more private. I also notice sometimes that people who have lost someone due to dementia, a stroke, or some long term illness that impacted cognitive ability, have already gone through much of the mourning and loss. Sometimes there are feelings of relief after someone has died simply because of the burden of caring. Such feelings are all normal and can be carried into a house of Shiva. In such instances, I see people abbreviating the Shiva or using the shul as the space for prayer.

I pray that all of us are kept away from loss, and that when we do experience loss we will find these rituals here to hold us, to comfort us, and to carry us back in to living.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HATE SPEECH

JUNE 16, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I'm currently on sabbatical, enjoying some quiet and restorative time. I wanted to share a pre-Shabbat thought with you inspired by the week's news.

In the early nineties hateful and dehumanizing speech fostered an environment in which an unbalanced individual reacted by assassinating Yitzhak Rabin. People called him an enemy of the state and a murderer. This week we are again seeing how overwrought angry language can motivate unbalanced people towards real acts of violence. When an unbalanced individual wants to strike back at Republicans through violence, something has gone wrong in our culture.

Nancy Pelosi responded initially with a call for unity and then shortly thereafter with an accusation that Trump had started the hateful and violent language. I suspect we could go back a bit further, but her assessment illustrates the depth of the problem. It doesn't matter who started it: it matters who will stop it.

I'm calling on everyone I know to use thoughtful rhetoric and discussion. It's time to stop using profanity or hate speech towards anyone. It's time to stop the invective and the unhelpful historical analogies. It's time to stop posting fantasies of violence, even though you yourself know they are only an expression of an honestly felt frustration at a particular moment.

By contrast, it's time to engage in real discourse. To seek to understand as well as to vent. To call to task political and other figures when they fail or violate your values with argument and facts. It's time to ask questions as Shai Held and Yehuda Kurtzer have done.

As Jews, we have always felt words matter. The story of Korach, whose beginning we read tomorrow, warns us what happens when the language and egos get out of control. We need to be a model of how words can be used and refuse to be infected by the hateful and overwrought language that all too easily spins out of control.

May Shabbat, with its invitation to rest from media culture, offer a rest of speech that can inspire wise words and helpful teachings going forward.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

CHARLOTTESVILLE AND BEYOND

AUGUST 18, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Torah begins with a radical assertion. We are created in the image of God. This assertion comes before Babel, Abraham, or even Noah. It means: every single human being, Jew or non-Jew, white or black, is created in the image of God.

Amid witness instructions in death penalty cases, the Mishnah in Sanhedrin expands on this notion. Why, asks the Mishnah, was Adam created singly? To teach that no one can say their lineage is better than anyone else's. Racism is nonsense for the Mishnah because we are all descended from that first Adam created in the image of God. Our differences, says the Mishnah, reflect the infinite manifesting itself in our limited form. After all, when a King mints a coin, says the Mishnah, each subsequent coin is identical. Not so God. We are all minted in the form of Adam, and yet each of us possesses a uniqueness. Our differences of skin color, religion, political viewpoint precisely show the glory of God.

Even more radically, the instructions in the Mishnah are directed at someone testifying against an accused murderer. Even in that case, even in front of a hateful violent thug, we are commanded to see the divine image, to realize that saving a single life is like saving a whole world. We may not demonize others. We are all in God's image. Instructions like this profoundly affect testimony. The Rabbis choose to err on the side of shared humanity, of reminding witnesses of the sacred value even of an accused murderer.

Racial divides and other baseless hatreds and bigotry stubbornly persist. Charlottesville was frightening in part because for the first time in a long time, different hate groups responded to a call and gathered together. A fragmented group of Neo-Nazis, white supremacists and the Klu Klux Klan living in the shadows of the internet emerged into the light of day. They proclaimed their hatred and their bigotry, and one of their number murdered a counter protester.

We cannot meet hatred with hatred or violence with violence. We cannot let the efforts to dehumanize others infect us. We ought instead to build bridges in friendship across religious, racial, and political divides. We must celebrate our shared humanity and offer teachings in Synagogue and on the street and in our daily interactions that celebrate the divine image implanted within each of us. Violence of any sort cannot infect our politics and discourse. Dr. King, the great teacher of human dignity, believed in non-violence as a means and as a method because only through non-violence do you teach in your actions

that each life has value.

We have a responsibility to fight against racism and for equality. The same Mishnah that urges caution in testimony urges action as well. We must stand up for the Divine Image against those who would deny it. That means to speak out against racism and bigotry in all its forms. It means making clear that white supremacist ideology represents a hateful dead end that cannot be condoned.

We are created Equal and endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights and infinite value. Let us in our deeds, words, and actions embody those values and in so doing evoke that Image from all those around us.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

DEUTERONOMY AS SCIENCE FICTION

AUGUST 25, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Jewish writers have always been disproportionately involved in science fiction. Whether Isaac Asimov or Gene Roddenberry, such authors and world creators would imagine a possible future and then set up moral dilemmas based on that imaginative possibility. Much of Jewish science fiction is hopeful. Jews aren't so much writers of dystopian fiction. Rather, they tend to imagine how the future could become better.

This quality of imagination has deep roots in Jewish history. Whether the stories of the golem dating back to the 4th century CE, or the Prophetic imagination itself, Judaism is deeply rooted in hopeful imagination. Indeed, from this perspective, Deuteronomy is one of the oldest books of science fiction.

Moses stands outside the land looking in. He gives this last speech to the people in which he describes the perfect society. Mitzvot, God's commandments, become the advanced technology that will enable the Israelites to build a just society in the service of the God. The Ten Commandments are a summary of the environment of observance and law that will create a space within which community and love can thrive.

Even for the biblical critic, who suggests Deuteronomy was written sometime in the 6th or 7th century BCE, well after the Israelites are in the land, Deuteronomy remains hopeful fiction. The writers at that time look at the reality of their community. They see division and civil war. They see idolatry and murder. And it creates a moral divide in their hearts. They see the world as it is and have the courage to imagine it as it should be. This hopeful imagination prompts them to write a story about Moses in which he calls the people back to the promise of the Book of Exodus while also building on and deepening those laws and stories to suggest a framework for a perfected society.

Deuteronomy inspires King Josiah for a period of righteous reform. It has influenced Western legal concepts of property rights, torts and judicial process. Even though it describes a society that only ever existed in its writer's imagination, the book creates an aspiration that has advanced justice throughout the world.

We are now a month away from Rosh Hashanah. I invite you to harness your imagination in hopeful ways to picture what could be in our society. How can we advance the cause of justice? How can the

advanced moral and spiritual technology of the mitzvot become a bigger part of our lives to give us the tools to effect the changes we want in ourselves and the world? In what ways might YOU use the 10 commandments to save the world?

The first step towards change is hopeful imagination. Even in the darkest moments, it is the leap of hope that enables the leap of faith. Now is the time for imagination, so that a month from now we can be ready for the embrace of hope and a move from imagination to action.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

HOUSTON

AUGUST 29, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the last few days, the images of destruction and devastation in Houston have saddened and moved us. I know for many of us those images also make us want to help in some tangible way. Our Torah teaches us to not stand idly by, that we as Jews are motivated by loss and suffering wherever it occurs. We also have some in the congregation with family and friends in Houston, and so far, thank God, everyone with whom I have spoken is safe and well.

Our prayers are with everyone there for safety in the difficult days ahead. Though the worst of the storm has passed, the water continues to rise and so the devastation may get worse before it gets better. We want to pray and to do. With that in mind, I want to bring to your attention IsraAID's relief efforts in Houston. IsraAID is an Israeli based emergency relief agency. They go with great Zionist passion, to teach the world that Jewish ethics impels us to care for humans in difficulty wherever they may be.

Donations can be made either on line or by mail: globalgiving.org/projects/harvey-flood-relief-in-texas/
give.classy.org/hurricane-harvey

Checks can be mailed to IsraAID US, 555 College Ave., Palo Alto 94306.

In addition, IsraAID is looking for volunteers. Here is the job description: IsraAID is seeking highly skilled volunteers to support its psychosocial support efforts for victims of Hurricane Harvey. We are specifically looking for 2-3 experienced psychosocial professionals with backgrounds in social work, counseling or expressive therapy (art, drama, music) to

- a) create and facilitate child-friendly spaces within shelters to support affected children and their parents.
- b) Provide psychological and emotional support and tools for individual and community resilience-building, processing, coping and healing.

Additional desired skills:

Experience in the field working in prior emergency situations

Proficiency in Spanish

Minimum deployment length is 10 days.

IsraAID will cover all expenses incurred over this time period (flights, accommodation, meals). Please note that this is an emergency situation and tasks, accommodations and daily operations are all subject to change based on the weather and the situation on the ground.

Please contact infousa@israaid.org.

May God grant health and strength to those undergoing hardship, and enable those who would help to succeed in their relief efforts.

Amen.

Rabbi David Booth

CURRICULUM VITAE

SEPTEMBER 1, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The key first step in the Teshuvah process, the process of reorienting one's behavior in a Godly direction, is noticing hurtful or spiritually damaging behavior. This seems so obvious. We can only change when we know there is a problem that requires change. And yet, as obvious as it is, developing the insight to see when and where we are slipping off the path requires effort and intentionality.

Moses instructs us to set up Judges and Police officers. The plain thrust of these next few Torah readings is to create systems of justice and public practices that lead to healthy civil society. Laws work only within a system of justice in which the legal authorities can be trusted. Torah urges us to create a system that treats all fairly and in which bribery is a serious offense. Impartiality becomes a cornerstone.

The Hasidic masters take this teaching a step further. There need to be the external systems of justice but there also need to be internal ones. At this time of year, in the month of Elul that precedes Rosh Hashanah, we are in dire need of our own internal guardians and judges. We ought to be attentive to our behavior.

This process of awareness requires inner work. First I need to become reflective of my own behavior. I need to notice and analyze my daily interactions. How am I in conversation with others? Where are the ways and places I show or lack compassion? When and how am I working on my own spiritual life? By asking non-judgmental but challenging questions of myself, I begin to develop the inner awareness needed for change and growth.

We say of God that God "neither sleeps nor slumbers." We as human beings sleep even while awake. We ignore or pretend or don't even see how we are hurting others, or failing to uncover compassion or stumbling through life without intentionality. The shofar gets sounded each morning this Jewish month to wake us up, to help us notice.

When I notice that I am off direction, heading away, I hope for compassionate awareness. Yes, I am hurting others. And by the way, I've seen this behavior in myself before. Such habits are hard to change and deeply embedded. Right now, I am simply aware. Soon, as Rosh Hashanah draws nearer, I will examine how I might change. But for now, it's enough to open my eyes and become self aware.

Further, the compassionate awareness allows change because it enables me to open my eyes and imagine a different course. When I am harshly judgmental of myself, I either go back to sleep or wallow in unproductive guilt. Elul invites us to take our time, to find the inner resources to change through a loving process of awareness.

So over the next few weeks, let us notice and inquire, compassionately of ourselves:

What do our interactions with others look like?

Where do I show compassion? How and where am I working on my spiritual life, a life devoted to meaning?

As we uncover and notice the answers, a curriculum of meaning for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur will emerge.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

ELUL IS HERE

SEPTEMBER 8, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the holidays draw near, a few thoughts on getting ready. For many of us, getting ready is practical. We make sure we have our tickets; we arrange meals. Families figure out their travel plans. Otherwise, we are busy with everything else we do.

Yet Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur invite spiritual preparation as much or more than the practical. The details give us a place to hide. We feel ready for the holiday because the table is set, but the inner work never happened.

Now is the time to hear the sound of the shofar. To get ready so that the holidays can be filled with meaning and a time where we actually change ourselves for the better. I suggest a few thought or journaling exercises to figure out your curriculum for this new year. These are all hard questions, so I urge you spend some time on each. Perhaps allocate 30 minutes for each question, starting with sitting quietly to organize your thoughts, then to write or think, and to conclude again with a minute or two of quiet and reflection.

1. What are two or three values for you at this point in your life? Why are they important to you? In what ways do you act on them? Mitzvot are actions associated with Torah values. What are the mitzvot associated with your values?
 - Do you feel good about your values? Are there values you hold but don't act on? If you were to imagine yourself in a year looking back again, what might you add / remove to give yourself a greater feeling of living a values driven life?
2. Take a look at your calendar. If you use a tool like google calendar, or a paper organizer, spend some time reviewing how you spent your time last year. Perhaps look in detail at a week or two, or randomly pick a few weeks throughout the year. On what did you focus? How much time was allocated to your values?
 - Do you feel good about the way your spent your time, or do you feel captured by your calendar? Idolatry takes on many forms. When our schedules begin to own us, we are dominated by the work of our own hands and find no meaning there. What would allow future you to feel like the schedule was a tool to bring your own blessings and values into the world?
3. Take a look at your budget. Ask some of the same questions. On what did you spend money? For what are you saving? Does your budget feel in line with your values?

- Dollars are the currency of desire. The way we spend money shows our desires in a tangible, physical way. Are you desiring in a way that feels meaningful to you? How can you tweak or even radically change your budget so that next year you can say: I used money and expressed desire in a way that match my values, aspirations and beliefs?

This time before Rosh Hashanah offers a gift. Let us use it well!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TIKKUN OLAM

SEPTEMBER 15, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Kol Emeth holds Tikkun Olam, a desire to repair that which is broken, as a key value. As Rosh Hashanah comes near, I'd like to highlight a few of our Tikkun Olam projects, and how you can be involved. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of humanity and invokes regularly our obligation to one another simply because we are human. The mitzvot of Tikkun Olam honor that connection and human responsibility.

Each year, we have concern for our local community. In particular, Kol Emeth has worked hard to alleviate hunger and homelessness in our area. For that reason, every year we collect food leading up to Kol Nidre. I invite you to bring a full grocery bag anytime to Kol Emeth or Beth Am before Yom Kippur, even the very moments leading up to the service. Under Jeff Schwarz's leadership, we will distribute them via Jewish Family and Children's Services to those who are hungry or food insecure. Related, at this time I invite people to donate to Second Harvest, our local food bank, so that families and children can get the food they so desperately need.

In addition, this year we will be hosting a family shelter at Kol Emeth in January. There will be more details as it gets closer. We will need volunteers to cook, serve, and spend the night. Our congregation will become a home for one week to those with nowhere else to sleep. We will make real the blessing of our house of worship being a home to those in need. I am so grateful to Amanda Curtis for taking on leadership so we can host this shelter.

Yet, Tikkun Olam impels us beyond our own immediate community. Each year or two we look for an international or Israeli cause in which we can make a difference as a community. Some may remember our partnership with the Arava and our success in helping to build a medical center there. We retain that friendship and are planning with JNF some ways of deepening it in the future.

However, this year we felt IsraAID's work in resettlement of Yazidis and others was a great world emergency. As a result, we are partnering with them to provide social services in their refugee work in Germany and Greece. Recipients of their help include the oppressed Yazidi community as well as the vast Syrian refugee community. In addition, they have been active in relief efforts in Houston and will be sending a team to Florida as well.

We chose to partner with IsraAID because of the importance of their work and the subtle Zionism of their effort under the leadership of Rabbi Graff. IsraAID exemplifies the work of Tikkun Olam as an Israeli organization. They help anyone and teach that Jews and Israelis are invested in making the world a better place. Their deeds teach as profoundly as the best arguments or fact sheets about what it can mean to have a Jewish place. Sukkot this year will include a few opportunities to learn about and support their work.

Lastly, the recent devastating hurricanes require a response from us. We will be partnering with the local community to send relief missions to both Houston and Florida. In addition, as the need becomes more clear, I plan to invite us at Hanukkah this year to remember and support those recovering from these massive storms. In particular, I'm hoping people will take the resources from one night's worth of gifts and instead donate them to IsraAID or other relief efforts. That would make our Hanukkah a true night of dedication.

We are blessed in so many ways. At this time of year, we remember the responsibility of those blessings. Through our Tikkun Olam efforts, we endeavor at Kol Emeth to have a local, international, and Israeli awareness. Laurie Kahn chairs Tikkun Olam. We both invite people to be involved in these various projects as we all strive to heal that which is broken.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

EREV ROSH HASHANAH

SEPTEMBER 19, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As the New Year rapidly approaches, a thought on ritual and an opportunity to build connections.

One key Biblical name for Rosh Hashanah is Yom Truah, the day of sounding. In other words, the Shofar is the essential Biblical aspect of this holiday. When we hear it being sounded, we are fulfilling the most central mitzvah of the day. This mitzvah is meant to startle; to draw our attention; to touch us in a deep way.

One story told of the Shofar: The blast of the Shofar is Sarah's cry when she heard of the binding of Isaac. That deep soul sorrow that burst forth from her is held and captured in the Shofar every year. As we hold our own sorry, loss and pain, we hear it echoed in the cry of the Shofar.

Another story: The Shofar blast calls us forth. It once called the people of Israel at times of difficulty to rally; now we are called at this moment to rally together, to draw strength from one another, and to change. We hear in the Shofar call a call to action, to see what is broken in ourselves and the world, and to see how we can make a difference in healing those problems.

A last story: The Shofar comes to startle, to wake us up. We spend our lives in slumber but for these holidays we need to awaken to who we really are and what the world is around us. Too often, we go through the motions without enough thought. The Shofar calls our full attention.

This year, I want to make the Shofar truly central to our Rosh Hashanah experience. If you own a Shofar, bring it with you to Rosh Hashanah at the Beth Am facility. Keep it with you until we get to the Shofar service and then when you the call for Tkeya Gedolah, join in with the sounding. In Musaf as well, as we approach the end of the service, there will be a second Tkeya Gedolah- please join in.

This will give us a hint of the Biblical experience of Rosh Hashanah. We will be surrounded by the sound of the Shofar from every corner of the room. Perhaps in this way its sound will penetrate our heart, giving voice to our anguish, our hope, and our desire to be truly awake to this moment.

The opportunity. As some of you may know, the local Muslim community invited Jews to join them for Ramadan feasts around town. We are wanting to reciprocate at Sukkot this year by calling on our

members to consider hosting a Muslim in their Sukkah. If you want to participate, email Susan Silver at silver_s@sbcglobal.net, our Interfaith Committee chair, and she will connect you with a local Muslim. Please let her know your name, where you live, ages of any children, when you plan to have the meal, and how many seats you have. The signup deadline for the Muslim – Sukkot outreach is September 25th.

You will then be given the name of an individual or family to connect and invite to your Sukkah for an interfaith and intercultural meal! Participants will receive some guidance and a teaching to share at the table.

I wish everyone a new Jewish year filled with goodness, with hope, and with blessings for the whole world.

Lshana Tova-

Rabbi David Booth

HAPPY NEW JEWISH YEAR

SEPTEMBER 20, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Lshana Tova to everyone! We look towards a new Jewish year in hope and in possibility. As we gather together for the holidays, community lifts us up and reminds us of the enlivening aspect of human connection in sacred community. My family and I wish you a good New Year, with chances to experience goodness and to offer it to others. We wish you a year of health and of healing. Of prosperity and also of chances to help others. And finally, a year of building and new beginnings.

Lshana Tova to all!

Rabbi David Booth

GIFTING AND GROWING

SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Gifting and Growing

Yom Kippur, more than any other Jewish day, connects us as a people and invites action to change ourselves and the world. I want to suggest three ways to make the day- and the year- as meaningful as possible.

Ritual strengthens the day's ability to get us in touch with our truest selves. In addition to fasting, it is a strong custom to wear white on Yom Kippur, echoing the promise of the prophet that our "sins will be cleansed as white as the driven snow." By dressing in white, we clothe our outsides to help effect the change inside. Many people wear a kittel, a simple white robe.

There are three times people wear that robe: Yom Kippur, at a wedding, and as a funeral shroud. It is worn as a funeral shroud to make the funeral simple and modest, reflecting our awareness of wrapping the body rather than adorning it. We wear it at a wedding to symbolize a kind of rebirth, a return to life in the moment of union. Yom Kippur then carries into both the solemnity of death but also the joy of new beginnings. The kittel keeps vanity at bay and instead focuses on lasting values.

As you put on those white garments, you may think about what you want to change in yourself or in the world. What stains or darkness need to be washed away? What would it feel like to have those stains driven away? Yom Kippur challenges us to do the work of cleansing but also reminds us that we can encounter a power of love and forgiveness that can change us far beyond the limits of our imagination. I invite you to wear white this Yom Kippur to help imagine and effect that sense of change.

At Yom Kippur, we choose to fast. Yet there are hundreds of thousands of people in our own area who are food insecure and confront hunger every day. When our fast ends, we go to feasts that more than make up for the lost calories. Others are not so fortunate. For this reason, I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you to Kol Nidre to donate to Jewish Family and Children's Services. Donations are greatly appreciated as well. Clothed in white and in deeds of lovingkindness are two ways to enter Yom Kippur with a readiness to allow the day to touch us deeply.

Finally, Honey Meir-Levi has been working with a number of KE people to develop a program called

Aging with Intention. We are forming an initial cohort of 15 people to be the pilot for this material. The group will meet over the fall to explore issues like the path of our lives, the experience of our body, and the legacy we leave behind. If you are interested in being part of the cohort, let me know and I will connect you with Honey. I wish everyone a meaning filled fast amid the hope that Yom Kippur can cleanse and heal.

Lshana Tova-

Rabbi David Booth

SHOOTING IN VEGAS

OCTOBER 3, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I looked at Facebook yesterday morning and saw this message from my friend Felipe Goodman, a Rabbi in Las Vegas. I hadn't read the news yet, so his posting caught me off guard.

Dear Friends;

We are all horrified and shocked by the events that took place last night in our city. Many of us just woke up and are trying to understand what exactly happened last night. The most important thing right now is to make sure all our families and friends are ok and safe. Please, please send me an email letting me know you are ok rabbi@bethsholomlv.org or call TBS. Also, if you know of a family in crisis or someone who needs help please let me know. It is important that we come together at a time like this. If you are sitting at home watching the news and you are wondering what you can do... Please donate blood this morning, it is important. Our tradition requires us to engage in acts of Pikuach Nefesh (life saving measures) at times like these.

I immediately looked at the news and was horrified at the violence and devastation. A lone gunman, with unknown motives, opened fire from a hotel window and killed 59 people and injured hundreds. After the scenes of natural destruction in Houston, Florida, Mexico, and Puerto Rico this seemed somehow especially tragic.

I find myself in tears over Rabbi Goodman's post. He just wants an email from people to know they are safe. He is encouraging people to donate blood so that hundreds injured can get the medical care they need. These are such basics of community and of caring. They had a prayer vigil last night at his Synagogue partly to mourn but also to simply gather amid sorrow and loss.

I feel overwhelmed by the images. I feel upset, sick even, to understand how someone could do this and how it is even possible to take that kind of firepower into a hotel room and set up as a sniper. It feels like a deep wound as we've seemingly set a new bar for these kinds of horrific shootings.

As Sukkot quickly comes upon us I urge you to think of taking three steps:

1. Find a way to donate blood. This murderous assault reminds all of us that in every community blood

donations save lives every day that never make the press. We can all easily make sure there is enough blood for everyone in need.

2. Donate to IsraAid. Their work in Puerto Rico, Houston, Mexico, and Florida is saving lives and rebuilding community.
3. Come to services Thursday for Sukkot. I know, this seems like an outlier. But I am so moved by Rabbi Goodman's words, and so reminded about how important community is. We don't realize when things are stable how much we need Synagogue. So come and be a part of our community so that we can always be there for one another.

Evil disheartens. I hope that somehow this horrible act can inspire us to do good, to build communities that matter, and to help those in need.

May God offer comfort to those in mourning, healing to those wounded, and strength to all of us.

Rabbi David Booth

COME TO SIMCHAT TORAH!

OCTOBER 10, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Come to Simchat Torah!

If you do one new Jewish thing this Tishrei, make it coming to Simchat Torah on Friday, October 13th. Simchat Torah, especially at Kol Emeth, is wonderful, fun, spiritual, crazy and just a great time. Let me give you three good reasons to make time in your schedule to spend a week day celebrating Torah:

1. Simchat Torah reacts to the seriousness of the High Holidays with a counterpoint of joy. Yom Kippur has a needed seriousness as we contemplate the length of our days and the legacy we want to leave in the world. Simchat Torah provides a needed contrast as we set aside worries and questions and simply celebrate the blessing of each day. Torah is a gift that provides meaning and texture to our lives. Simchat Torah is a chance to simply accept that blessing, to thank God we are alive and able to experience happiness. We need the seriousness and the joy.

2. The service itself is great fun. We take all the Sfrei Torah out of the Ark as we begin to sing and dance. Everyone who wants gets a chance to dance holding a Torah as our wonderful song leaders lead us in folk, liturgical, and Israeli songs. We dance into the Social Hall and out into the Courtyard. It's the best Jewish workout this side of Jerusalem. A variety of adult beverages are also offered to facilitate the joy.

After the dancing concludes, we set up a few stations of Torah readers, including out in the Sukkah. That station is known for people picking TV themes or popular melodies to use as we recite the Torah blessings. While people are reading Torah, others are enjoying lunch. Then we join together to finish the book of Deuteronomy and immediately start Genesis. In this way, we are never without Torah; it is always an ongoing open book in our lives.

Finally, Rick Dinitz gets his Buffoon Choir together to lead us in a Musaf service guaranteed to make you appreciate the prayer for rain in a new and more immediate way. (People are advised to bring raincoats and umbrellas should they wish to engage in the buffoonery). The kids participate too, with various props and puns.

3. Joy is transformative. Yom Kippur is challenging, demanding that we examine our lives and make right that which is wrong. We use rituals of prayer and contemplation. Yet if we end at Yom Kippur, we have

left behind one of our best tools, joy. It is at Simchat Torah that joy and celebration are fully expressed. Yes, there is need for serious contemplation. But there is also a need to dance and sing and drink.

The Rabbis have the concept of simchah shel mitzvah – the joy of observance. It means that when we observe mitzvot, they provide our lives with a deep and sustaining meaning. When Torah becomes a part of how we express ourselves as human beings, our lives become imbued with joyous purpose. The joy of Simchat Torah frames the demands of Yom Kippur into a whole that can be realized. One without the other leaves us somewhat spiritually unbalanced. Together, they imbue the spiritual person with a desire out of solemnity and joy to become more.

Simchat Torah falls on a Friday this year. I realize how hard it can be to have a day away from school or work. I want to urge you make this meaningful choice and celebrate the marvelous, joyous gift of Torah together with the community of Kol Emeth.

Gemar Hatimah Tovah – May we all be sealed in the book of life for goodness, peace, and joy!

Rabbi David Booth

THOUGHTS FROM SANTA ROSA

OCTOBER 20, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I spent Wednesday in Santa Rosa helping the Jewish community there and learning from first responders about the situation. I wanted to share a few observations:

1. Kol Emeth is an amazing community. Rabbi Graff, who organized the day, sent out a call for food and supplies. We were quickly oversubscribed. Dozens made food for 300+ people and nine of us gave of our entire day. I am honored to be part of a community that responds so quickly and emphatically to need.

2. One person can make a difference. Shomrei Torah, a congregation in Santa Rosa, decided to open their doors to children in need of a place. Schools have been closed there for nearly two weeks. Parents are trying to work and put their lives back together. The camp, for Jews and non-Jews, has grown each day. All this happened because of the initiative of Rabbi Stephanie Kramer in partnership with IsraAID. Their combined social hall / Sanctuary was taken over by the camp. They helped staff it and found the volunteers to run the camp and care for the children. It has grown each day as the word has gotten out, so they don't even know exactly what to prepare for. It was a tremendous effort and offering to the whole Santa Rosa Community. Our task was to bring up and serve the lunch to the 130 or so students + the staff and to help a bit with the campers.

3. The Jewish community has resilience in crisis. One of the members of Shomrei Torah died in the fires. In addition to lunch for the camp, we fed about 150 people dinner after the memorial service. I was moved to see the community gather in such numbers. People wanted to be together. The Federation was helping with the camp; IsraAID was providing organizational help; we were there with dinner and lunch. That is the power of community.

4. Gratitude emerges amid loss. People there were so grateful. In addition to being thanked for our efforts, people were grateful to have homes. Thirty or so members of that congregation lost their homes. They were grateful to be alive, relieved that it was only belongings they had lost. Some were mourning pets who died in the fires even as they were grateful to have insurance and support and places to go and funds to rebuild.

5. First responders are truly amazing. We spoke to a fire fighter who had arrived about 12 hours into the fires and been on site since. He had not seen his children in 12 days. He spoke about his strike team of

five engines that goes to trouble spots to help contain the fire. His courage and willingness to face life threatening danger to keep others safe inspired our whole group. We spoke to National Guard troops there to keep order. These young men and women were called up as reservists and honored to serve.

6. Courage comes in small ways too. Many had to evacuate their homes at 2am Saturday morning, including one of the Rabbis. He officiated at a Bat Mitzvah a few hours later in his jeans and a t-shirt because that was all he had available. I spoke with the Bat Mitzvah girl. She and her family had an incredible day in which they simply celebrated the blessings of life and family and Judaism. I guarantee you they will never forget it.

7. Finally, socio-economic divides matter. We saw a shelter for people who had lost their housing. It was clear for them it will take much longer to return to normalcy. They may lack insurance, or were insecure in their housing to begin with. We saw only a hint of the challenges yet to be faced by those more economically insecure. So what can we do? At this point, I have two tangible suggestions. First IsraAID continues to impress me more and more. Their work as first responders to crisis anywhere in the world is amazing. They are active in Houston, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and here. I urge you to support their incredible work: www.classy.org/campaign/kol-emeth/c145203

Second, housing is going to be an issue in Santa Rosa. People are dislocated and want to stay close to home and work and school. We offered some options down in Palo Alto, but that wasn't what people wanted. If you or someone you know has a second home in the Santa Rosa area, consider renting for the next 12-24 months as people rebuild. There is insurance money for rentals, but a lack of available inventory to rent. If you have a place and can rent it, it would make an amazing difference in people's lives. Please let me know and I will put you in touch with Rabbi Kramer.

I feel blessed to be among those providing help, and grateful that for a few hours we could offer some compassion and aid to those affected by these terrible fires. May God strengthen everyone as they navigate the time ahead.

I am also attaching a prayer I wrote for First Responders:

O God and God of our ancestors:

Bless and protect the first responders to the fires. May God protect and guide them as they make difficult choices and intentionally place themselves in dangers to protect the lives and property of others. May they be held safe in Your sheltering Sukkah even as they open themselves to danger. And

may those who bring with them healing and care be offered a share of Your great power to heal.
May God offer strength and comfort to all those dislocated, and help them restore and find order and peace.
Amen.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

Please note I am off to Israel on Sunday and gone for almost two weeks. I'll look forward to being in touch upon my return.

REDREAMING

NOVEMBER 10, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I got back last week from an interfaith clergy trip to Israel. I have a lot to share about the experience and what I learned. I must say that travelling with Christian clergy greatly enriched my experience. Christians are quicker to look for God in their travel and study. They more naturally talk the language of faith. They inspired me to think more deeply about my own relationship with God and how I talk about it.

For today, though, I want to focus on one encounter. We met with Rabbi Tamar Appelbaum, the founding Rabbi of Kehilat Zion. Kehilat Zion is an experiment to overcome some of the divisions in Jerusalem and respond to a yearning there. The congregation brings together men and women, Ashkenazi and Mizrachi Jews. There is a combination of melodies amid a traditional service.

Everyone sings. The whole room brought it. I closed my eyes and was surrounded by and in the music of the place. They are doing more than praying. They are healing themselves, giving themselves permission to dream. Tamar said something beautiful: we have to pray because prayer is where we dream. Why, she asks, was Israel the land of our dreams? Does that mean we arrive and stop dreaming?

She challenged us to redream, to imagine anew what is possible. She is answering a deep yearning to create some wholeness in a city that can feel very divided. In a place that sees great diversity and great separation, she is creating a platform of wholeness that brings together secular and religious, Mizrachi and Ashkenazi, even Jew and Arab. You can feel in the room that something special is happening.

I was impressed by her sincerity, her clarity of vision, and the spirituality that flows from her.

She said something else beautiful. Her father used to be work in a tire repair. He said when people come in to fix their broken tire, it is also their soul that is broken. And so he would fix them mint tea and sit with them and then fix their tire.

I'm guessing Rabbi Appelbaum makes a lot of mint tea.

In other words, her vision is about a yearning in the city and about healing individual souls.

I am inspired and wondering. What might that look like for us? Can we have a vision about the yearnings in Silicon Valley and about healing individual souls?

I want us to have the courage to redream prayer. I love praying and I love traditional liturgy. How can we create / further develop the kind of focused and joyous service? How can we sing more with greater intensity and joy? How can we bring ourselves into the service, expressing gratitude and yearning?

I want us to redream the way we talk about Israel. I learned a lot on this trip. I saw many aspiring to redream, to create islands of connection and love amid what can sometimes be division. We at Kol Emeth are strongly connected to Israel. Can we be a model of conversation and learning about Israel so that we can be part of redreaming, part of bringing a greater wholeness to a place that we love so deeply?

Finally, I want us to redream the way we build community. How can we create deeper friendships and connections? How can we turn outwards to the many problems in Silicon Valley that we yearn to solve? Housing issues and depression are foremost in my mind. Is there a way we at Kol Emeth can move the dial, can be a place that helps to nurture those deep wounds in our community?

We are about to enter a time of wandering, away from our home. I would love us to use that time to create conversations about these three topics and see how we redream Kol Emeth and its role in Silicon Valley. I dream of a return to a promised land of a new facility hand in hand with a renewed vision of our role inside our new building and in the region.

Pastor Kaloma Smith of AME Zion University, who came with me on the trip, said that miracles are when people plant seeds and God causes them to grow beyond our expectations. Let us dream together, let us plant seeds together, and let us discover how they can bear fruit with God's help beyond our wildest expectations.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi David Booth

REDREAMING ISRAEL

NOVEMBER 17, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Herzl said: if you will it, it is no dream. For two thousand years in our hearts and prayer books we held the hope, the dream, of a restored Israel. There is a yearning for Israel felt in Rabbinic literature, a sense that we are out of our homes and that God will bring us back. Herzl turned that yearning into a movement. People dreamed and acted and donated and in 1948 our dream became a reality.

Yet if Israel is the place of our dreams, then I worry we are done dreaming. And there is so much more to dream. Israel is more than a geographic location. It is the manifestation of Jewish sovereignty, which means that our aspirations, our dreams, remain big and challenging. It is more than the place of our dreams; it is the place of our dreaming.

Here in the United States, I find we too often lose sight of our dreaming. Instead, we defend what is or argue that what is isn't enough. Both positions are right which makes the argument particularly vexing and deeply rooted.

I want to change the dialogue and the way we talk about Israel. Several years ago I proposed an American Theological Zionism and I want to convene a study group to make good on that aspiration. I want us to study. What is the hope and promise of Israel? What is our aspiration in imagining a sovereign nation? We often hold Israel to a high standard. I want to articulate some of where those standards come from in Jewish thought, and what it might mean for Israel to dream with us.

I want us to study, based in part on materials from the Hartman Institute, of what we are dreaming. I'd like to look at Biblical and Talmudic and Zionist texts side by side, all of them sacred documents. I'd like to immerse ourselves in the values we as a people have articulated around statehood and power. I'd like to explore new ways we might be a voice for good in this dialogue so that we can be a bridge that allows for the Israel conversation we so need to be having.

I also want us to learn about Israel today, to help us join the values conversations taking place in the land from its people. We risk a distance between ourselves in the United States and the Jews building Israel. It requires intentional effort on our part to learn so that we can become a part of that conversation.

I plan to offer a monthly class on Shabbat morning to begin examining these issues. We will start this

Shabbat at 10am in my office. We will study the Declaration of Independence as a sacred Jewish text. We will look at its aspirations and its hope. This document is bold and challenging and remains a key place of aspirational dreaming about Israel. From there, we will explore a variety of questions of peoplehood, theology, and ethics as we raise the questions of what it means to be sovereign, what it means to now, after 2000 years, have power.

I look forward to studying and will update the community as we learn and make progress in enriching the way we talk about Israel.

Shabbat Shalom –

Rabbi David Booth

LET US GIVE THANKS

NOVEMBER 22, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Thanksgiving is a great moment to appreciate our blessings and to think of ways we can help others. Our tables groan under the weight of abundance. Let us both appreciate and be moved to aid those who suffer from food insecurity.

The Zohar teaches that moments of overflowing abundance demand that we share that abundance with others. Thanksgiving is a good time to donate to Second Harvest, our local food pantry. We eat our bountiful dinners in the knowledge that we have also fed others.

My family, along with many others, begins our Thanksgiving feast by going around the table and saying those things for which we are thankful. Family and health always lead the list. The blessing of being together for a happy occasion similarly moves us to give thanks.

Thanksgiving begins by blessing the bread – by reminding ourselves that “people do not live by bread alone, but depend upon Hashem’s speech.” I propose this year the following prayer be read immediately prior to reciting hamotzi, the blessing over the bread, at Thanksgiving this year:

O Lord our God, and God of our Ancestors:

Thank you, God, for the blessings of life and community. We note those who have passed away, and mourn their absence even as we celebrate their lives.

The Psalmist asks, “Who are we? What are we? What is the meaning of our lives?” This year we have learned how important it is to value each day, how fragile life can be. We pray for an end to terror, mass shootings, and all the other ways in which violence has become a part of our regular lives.

We ask for your wisdom in the ways we talk to one another. Remind us of listening as well as talking; inspire us to learn as well as to teach. Help restore civility in speech and a political discourse that edifies.

We ask also for Your continued protection over the State of Israel. Grant her leaders the wisdom to face the future and find the uncertain path to peace. Help Israelis to see the value in diverse forms

of Judaism, inspiring them to make room for new and innovative ways of being Jewish. Let the Western Wall be large enough for all who would worship there, inspiring all to see the value in an egalitarian space open to world Jewry.

We thank you for the blessing of our lives, for the value of our days. We thank you for the strength and wealth of this great country. We thank you for the peaceful home You have granted us here, a calm in a stormy world.

We thank you for our souls and for the lives daily in Your care. Each day is a miracle from You – today we notice the blessing of that miracle and thank You as You deserve every day.

May we soon and speedily see peace throughout the world, a day in which nation will no longer fight against nation, a day in which war will fade away as a bad memory. Let the day soon and speedily come when we beat our swords into plows, our guns into spades to work the Earth. On that day peace will come across all the lands, and the world will come to know You.

Praised are You, God, Our God and Ruler of all, who brings forth bread from the Earth.
Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, Hamotzi Lehem min HaAretz.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving,

Rabbi David Booth

NOW IS THE TIME

DECEMBER 1, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

December 13th, the leadership team for our building project will be proposing that the Board approve breaking ground for our new building. This much anticipated moment is key for our future as a community. Our current beloved building has served us well over decades, indeed well past what we ought to have expected from it. I, like many of you, have many fond memories in it, including the bar and bat mitzvahs of my three children, funerals for people I love, and celebrations with friends and community.

And yet, it is time. The building was built for a particular moment, and with love we were able to far surpass its original intended usage and life. We need a new home, a home that can help us aspire towards the future and hold who we are now. This moment gives us a chance to imagine who we can be into this new Jewish era while also reflecting on the core that makes us who we are as a community. What have we stashed in the attic that we can let go, and what is the true soul of Kol Emeth?

The new design is beautiful, spacious, and open to the world. We are building for more than a generation- we are building for 50 or even 100 years. A facility that reflects our deepest values while also inviting us to spread our wings in creative ways of bringing Torah and prayer to a world so desperately in need of the nurturing that faith and Jewish teaching offers.

I want to share three numbers with you that are key to what comes next.

First is the break ground number. We need \$500,000 more out of \$18 million raised to reach our mandated 80% of construction budget. We are close, but the road remains challenging. Second is \$25 million, which is the entire project budget, including an endowment. To reach these needed heights, everyone must step forward. We can't get there if we wait for others to be generous. This is the moment to stretch generously. This is the high impact moment where your dollars can save and transform Kol Emeth.

The third number is our participation number. It's around 45% right now and we have only just started. That number needs to exceed 90% by the time we finish our building. This building needs to be all of ours. When we sit in our new Sanctuary, I want everyone to feel they were part of willing this new campus into being. When we have a celebration in our new Social Hall, I want everyone to know they

helped make it happen.

I have been amazed by people's generosity. People have opened their hearts to give lovingly because this is their community and their spiritual home. We need you to be part of this. It isn't about how much you give- it's about making that stretch of love to be part of Kol Emeth's future.

We cannot do this without you. The only people to give to this project are the people who care about Kol Emeth. And that is us. There isn't anyone else's money to come in. The project is a stretch for us as a community meaning we need everyone. And that vote is coming soon, Dec. 13th, which means we need you now.

Please open your hearts. Please give until it feels good, until you know you have stretched and made yourself part of this project. Give so that we as a community can prove that this is about all of us, every single one. Then our new home will be a tribute to who we have been, and a campus for the future of who we can be, with God's help and great faith.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

REDREAMING PRAYER

DECEMBER 6, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Over the last year or so, I've visited a variety of prayer experiences that have turned me on to the idea of redreaming prayer. In particular, I've learned a few things:

1. Music really matters. Whether it's voice or instrumental, the best services create a rich musical environment that invites in its participants.
2. Message really matters. The service has to say something to its participants. It could be as simple as invitation into joy or gratitude, or a more sophisticated message about how we live our lives, but it has to have a message.
3. Leadership is key as is "followership," the involvement of the participants. Great leadership without great followership creates a dry experience. Only when both are combined does something special and sacred occur.
4. Finally, the music has to be of truly high quality. A strumming guitar doesn't change a service. A person with real musical passion for prayer does.
5. Pluralism matters. Different experiences touch different people.

With these lessons in mind, I have created with Cantor Sharon Bernstein an alternative Shabbat service call Kol Sasson, The Voice of Joy. Cantor Bernstein has then worked with three KE members, Adam Tachner, Lisa Kolbe, and Ben Lehmann, to create a prayer team who work together to fashion a musical and spiritual environment filled with ruach and song.

This service meets for the second time this Shabbat, December 9th, at 10:30. It will end around 12 and include song and learning. Come and check it out! I believe you will be inspired and find in it a service that is joyous, intimate, and shorter.

Rabbi Eilberg has also been focusing on these lessons and created a wonderful Contemplative Service that meets monthly, with the next session being Dec 23rd at 10:30. Here too there is a focused and intimate chance to sit, to breathe, and to sing. Rabbi Eilberg brings wonderful leadership to the experience to help Shabbat heal us on our deepest levels.

There are other experiments and offerings as well. This Friday, for example, Cantor Bernstein is leading a Sephardic Friday night that has been quite wonderful. It includes dinner and then singing after. Please

do sign up!

I want us to redream prayer, to see if we can find a way of learning the above lessons and creating some experiences that can take root and become part of the fabric of our community so that prayer can be a cornerstone for our community and so that everyone can find a place that touches their soul.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Booth

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

DECEMBER 15, 2017

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

If all goes well, our last Shabbat at Kol Emeth will be mid-February. Around such a move and transition, there is a lot of loss, fear, and expectation. This building has been our home for decades. Many of us have celebrated key moments here and all of us have found a place. What happens as we move?

First we must offer thanks to those who built this current facility. We must also notice and appreciate the gifts and moments we have received from it and in it. We will celebrate our facility on Jan 28th with a fair that includes pictures and tree plantings. We will take a moment to lovingly say goodbye.

Second is to have faith. Elaine Sigal, our executive director, has worked with Martha Amram's relocation committee to make sure every event over the next two years has a place. It is a huge process, but we have homes for each event, activity, and gathering from Shabbat morning to Talmud class, from book events to minyan. Together in trust and faith we can and will navigate our time away. I am grateful for the Jewish and wider religious community being so generous in taking us in during this time of transition.

Third is to acknowledge the worry. We know what our place is now. How will this move and this new facility change our place in Kol Emeth? Kol Emeth has always been more than a physical plant. We are a community holding a set of ideals. This new place will give us a chance to change and grow while creating a physical location to hold these ideals.

We care that everyone has a place in our community. Kol Emeth has an egalitarian commitment deep in our soul. That means we honor all the ways in which people can contribute. This includes those who volunteer their time, who donate funds, and those who come and participate in our programs and services. On Shabbat morning people come to pray who are worth millions next to people on the verge of homelessness and everyone in between. Our new Sanctuary will have doors wide enough for all.

We want to build community. The new Courtyard and Social Hall will give us a space in which to build and develop our sacred community. It will be our center, and it will be open to all of us.

With God's help and our own intentionality, this transition can be a moment of new vision while valuing our deepest commitments. The humility and inclusiveness, the commitment to Torah learning and

prayer, are all key values that will be part of the foundation of our new building.

I need your help to carry Kol Emeth across this nearly two year period from one home to the next. I plan to create small focus groups in people's homes so that we can all envision and imagine who we are and what we can be. I want to hear every voice in small settings so that together we can be part of something essential for our community over the next generations.

No one left behind.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

I HAVE A DREAM

JANUARY 12, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are dreamers. Herzl captured the Jewish dream in saying, “If you will it, it is no dream.” Though he specifically meant the founding of Israel, it applies more broadly as a Jewish concept. It echoes Hillel: if not now, when? We are fundamentally a people of hope and dreams. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God brought us out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Even in darkness and slavery, there is still hope. We waited amid exile for 2000 years, but now we have Israel.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, who I heard during my recent interfaith trip to Israel, reminded all of us that Jews are a people who dream. She warned that we must continue to dream and redream. If we forget to dream, we forget to be Jewish. She inspires many in Jerusalem to redream Jerusalem as a more open pluralistic place with many communities able to talk and pray together. For her, Hesed, love and compassion, need greater nurturing in Israel. Only if we can re-dream a world filled with great compassion can we build such a world.

I went on that recent trip with Pastor Kaloma Smith, our guest this coming Shabbat and the minister of University Church in Palo Alto, an historically Black Church. When Rabbi Applebaum spoke, I could see how moved he was by her words. And we both realized: the African American community today is also founded on a dream. Not of Herzl, but of Martin Luther King.

Dr. King had the courage in a time of darkness and racial segregation to dream. He dreamed of a better world, when the children of former slaveowners could sit down at the table of brotherhood with the children of slaves. He looked at the words “all men are created equal” and found the faith and hope to give those words new meaning, to re-dream what those words could mean to us. He too was inspired by God’s great capacity for compassion, and dreamed of a world where such love and compassion could bring people together. His dream changed our world.

Pastor Smith and I have built a friendship on shared faith, and on dreams of what our communities can be. This Martin Luther King Weekend we are again doing a pulpit exchange to foster connection and friendships. Pastor Smith will be speaking at KE on Shabbat morning and I will be speaking at University Church in Palo Alto on Sunday morning. (Their service begins at 9:30.)

I want us to be inspired to re-dream, to look at our lives and find hope, to be inspired by two such

different faith communities coming together to show what is possible when we are united by good will and compassion. I want us to remember Herzl's words alongside Dr. King's, to see how the great teachers of faith and community always remind us to dream, to hope, and to dream again. If you will it, it is no dream. And we have a dream of a better world that is founded on hesed, on compassion. We have a dream.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

REDREAMING PRAYER

JANUARY 19, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Rabbi Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain points out, Jews are a people of hope. Pessimism and optimism hold no appeal to the Jew, because we have seen that history is filled with good and bad. Yet hope remains. When people of good will are willing to dream together, hope emerges, and change can enter the world. From Abraham to Herzl, we have always been ready to dream even amid the greatest darkness.

Rabbi Tamar Appelbaum beautifully said that “prayer is where we dream.” Prayer is more than recitation and worship. It is a basic human activity that inspires hope and reminds us of our ability to be a blessing in the world. Psalm 100 reminds us to “serve God in joy, to come before God in joyous song.” Good prayer brings us joy, it reminds us of gratitude, and it challenges us to dream.

This year, we at Kol Emeth are redreaming prayer. We are wondering in hope how prayer can be joyous and inspirational, a place of dreaming. I'd like to focus on Shabbat morning in the Main Sanctuary right now, but intend to look at other places and moments over the next few weeks.

On Shabbat morning there are three moments that lift me up, each in a unique way. One is as we bring the Torah out to be read. We sing a niggun together, we clap and jump. As the Torah is returned to the Ark, we often hum the tune for etz chayim after we are finished singing the words. The melody seems to rise from the congregation in a beautiful and organic way. There is a reflective intensity to it.

Finally is the prayer for healing. As we recite that prayer, I feel a quiet and focus in the room. Everyone is in that prayer. Some express a heartfelt yearning for healing for loved ones, friends, or themselves. Others respect that emotional intensity and add their own hopes to those being expressed around them.

There are two area I wrestle with on Shabbat morning. One is my own level of engagement and that of the people around me. I have times where I feel really focused and into the experience and other moments where my mind drifts. I find the energy around me contributes. When people seem really into it, it pulls me in. And vice versa.

What are the barriers to my engagement? One is simply the length of the service. 3 hours is a long time

to hold focused attention. Second is the music. Some daveners really pull me in. Yet the key factor is my own effort. Some Shabbatot I am ready to make the effort, to return to attention even when my mind drifts, ready to be present even when I don't love the musical leadership.

Second, I wrestle with the quantity of recitation. We read the whole Torah each Shabbat morning. I love being part of the narrative flow and I love being in sync with the Jewish world. I love the poetry of the Haftorot. And yet; it's a lot of recitation. It's a long time to pay attention in a fashion that is primarily passive. I love the idea of it, and yet find the reality of it challenging.

In redreaming prayer on Shabbat morning, how can we maximize the blessings of the service and minimize the challenges? Are there way we can help reinforce each other in bringing more focus and attention? Can the service be shorter without losing its traditional participatory quality? How can the Amidah attain the same focus as the prayer for healing?

I'd love to know your reactions. What moves you in prayer? What distances you or makes it hard to connect? What are some of your yearnings or dreams for prayer especially on Shabbat morning (I promise to ask again about other moments). Abraham got up to pray the morning service for the very first time to express a dream of a world based on justice and love in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gemoraah.. As his descendants, let us dream anew of how prayer can lead us from darkness to light, to world filled with justice and love.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

HOLDING ON

JANUARY 26, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are about to become sacred guardians. As we leave a beloved facility that has given us so much, we are now entrusted with the soul of Kol Emeth. Our building has given that soul a home for over 50 years. It has been a place for celebrations and for loss. It has been a place to form new friendships and to share our most meaningful stories.

The building has been a guardian of our deepest places, the carrier of the holy community that is Kol Emeth. I am grateful for what this facility has given and gifted me and all of us. It has given the KE community more than it ever could have asked. We plan to celebrate our facility this Sunday from 10:30-2pm with clippings from the Olive Tree, photos, and creating a new time capsule. Plus of course lunch!

Now we find ourselves with a responsibility of great import. For almost two years, we will have no facility. Instead, we will have our services and programs in a variety of locations including the JCC for Shabbat morning and Etz Chayim for weekday minyanim and Religious School. The community has been amazing in taking us in and creating space for us to operate.

Yet in rebuilding, the greatest risk is fragmentation. Without a single central location to hold our very essence we may lose our connection to one another and to our sense of shared identity. I am charging all of us with a key mission over the next two years: to hold onto each other in love. To remember that we are one community. And to preserve the essence that makes Kol Emeth so special.

To hold onto each other in love. We will have to make an extra effort to be together. Please make it. Help us see each other in the holiness of Shabbat, even if it's at the JCC or someone's living room. Come to a social or holiday event because when you are there, you are part of the community and helping us hold onto the sacredness that is Kol Emeth.

Remember that we are one community. There are going to be challenges and bumps in the road in our time of wandering. It is natural in such a moment to become upset or even angry. I invite you instead to help. Let me or Elaine or Rabbi Graff know when something challenges you. Help us get the word out to people about where we are. Invite people to be with us. It is a task too big for staff: everyone has to be invested in holding us together.

Finally, preserve that which makes Kol Emeth so special. Our time of wandering is a moment to dream of what can be and also to hold onto what makes us the sacred and special community that we are. I want to know: what makes Kol Emeth special to you? What are the qualities of this community that make up our soul, that are at the essence of who we are? This is the time to get in touch with the deepest core of who we are to see how we can grow into our new home. We will have structured conversations about who we are and who we can be over the next 18 months to help fill our new facility with sacredness and meaning.

I feel blessed to be a part of this community. More than any facility, I feel blessed by the people who are here. Not because of any achievements, though our members boast many. Rather, because this is a community that cares for one another, prays with one another, and stands for Abraham's call to be a blessing to the world. I pledge to give freely of myself to hold onto everyone, to remember the unity of our community, and to preserve the sacred core of Kol Emeth. I ask that you partner with me because we can only do it together.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

FEAR AND HOPE

FEBRUARY 2, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The building is getting to be sad. The plaques, beloved memories connected to them, have come down. My office is now more boxes than books or furniture. Shelves previously full are empty. Packaging material abounds. I find it awakens two feelings: sadness at leaving, and insecurity about what is to come.

Rabbi Nachman teaches: the whole world is a narrow bridge, the main thing is not to be overwhelmed by fear. Stability is illusory. Even the ground on which we rely shook a few weeks ago. Yet the illusion we so carefully construct of stability and groundedness comforts. This moment of transition reminds us of impermanence. A facility that has held us for decades soon will no longer exist. And that awakens fear.

The fear is real and it can be destructive. Fear creates reactions in us that narrows our focus and increases our stress. Unaddressed, it expresses itself in anger and loss of patience. We must remind ourselves: Yes, there is fear and it is normal and natural for me to feel it. We must be compassionate with ourselves. And while I am afraid, I do not need to be overwhelmed by that fear. I can choose loving responses instead.

Insecurity awakens its own feelings of being out of place. In part, we feel unstable because we don't know what the next stage will feel like. But even more: we have found our place here; will we still feel that place there? And the truth is: we have hopes and plans, but we don't and can't know.

That insecure place can be generative. Like Abraham, whose journeys and unsettled nature engendered great spiritual powers, we too can learn and gain from this experience. It can give us new perspective and insight. As we navigate it with compassion and courage, we learn that we can have balance even during the Earthquake, and that we will find a place not only in the new building, but amid the many transitions that await us in other areas of our life.

That learning comes from compassion and embracing all the complex feelings we have. If we deny our fear and insecurity, it comes out even more violently. But if we accept the feelings, and have compassion with ourselves, we can avoid being overwhelmed.

If we can take the next step, to embrace the instability and accept it as a challenging but potent tool for

learning and growth, then this can even become something positive in our lives.

We are on this journey together. This Shabbat is dedicated to conversation and sharing to hold some of that fear and insecurity to help strengthen us as a community along the way. Please be in the Sanctuary this coming Shabbat for it.

Our process will sometimes feel like a narrow bridge; the main thing is not to be overwhelmed by fear, but instead to walk in the footsteps of Abraham towards blessing. Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

MOVING OUT

FEBRUARY 9, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are rapidly approaching our last Shabbat in the Kol Emeth building. As we begin the leave taking process, emotions are high and we all need to hold on to each other lovingly. Yesterday someone came to the shul to sit in the Sanctuary probably for the last time. We sat together, talked, and cried as we reminisced about special moments we had each shared in that space. As we go, let us comfort each other as we share stories and listen.

As part of our leave taking, we will be making our way to the JCC for Shabbat services. We also want to have a living room minyan that meets somewhere in the Barron Park neighborhood. The minyan is meant to create a more intimate havurah style option. It will be a gift to those used to walking to KE, but also a chance for others to experience something home based and very spiritually focused.

Tina Dinitz has been kind enough to start pulling this together, but needs help organizing and participating. The idea is to meet twice a month in a private home, once a month with Torah reading and once a month with Torah discussion. Given who is involved, I can guarantee amazing singing as well. Please let me know if you are interested in helping to organize or to participate.

Further, we are struggling to pack up everything at Kol Emeth. If you have a few free hours during the day this week, come by KE and fill up some boxes. It will make a huge difference to the staff.

I want to pause in gratitude for Elaine Sigal, Tamika Hayes, Aviva Saitz, Shimrit Elnatan, and Brandon Reinartz. In addition to their normal workload, they have been doing incredible effort getting us packed up and ready for the move. It has been incredible hours of work and a true labor of love. Pepe Sanchez and Berenise Aguayo similarly have been so dedicated, packing up our kitchen, books, and everything else we will need both long and short term.

And I dare not forget Melinda Joffe and Avril Sohn who are getting the school together for our move over to Etz Chayim. On top of all the normal day to day to work, they are putting in extra hours to get us together and figure out what goes to the JCC, what to Etz, and what to long term storage.

Lastly, our relocation committee chaired by Martha Amram deserves great appreciation for all their time and effort. I am so grateful to Reba Cohen, Lucy Milgram, Jack Levin, and Adam Tachner who have

donated incredible hours to figure out where we will be for all our activities over the next two years.
Thank you all so much.

Please join us this Shabbat, and then again on the 17th as we celebrate our last Shabbat in this facility. It will be a moment to celebrate our founders, our participants, and this space that has so lovingly held us over these 50+ years. Shabbat Shalom.

Please note this weekend I will be in Los Angeles with our teens. As a result, there will be no CyberTorah next week.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CARRYING THE HOLINESS – SPECIAL CYBERTORAH FROM RABBI GRAFF

FEBRUARY 16, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It is hard to believe this is our last week at Kol Emeth as we know it. I find myself savoring so many things – the way the light shines through the stained glass at different times of day, the last kiddushes in this courtyard, the last classes in Room 8. This place is full of memories for all of us – bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, conversations under the olive tree, throwing bracha balls in Torah for Tots. I am excited for all the new memories we will make in our new building, and on the adventure of the transition period ahead. Still, change is hard.

It seems bashert (meant to be) that this week's Torah portion is Terumah. God tells us to build the Mishkan, to create an elaborate sanctuary and meeting place in the desert, and then... to deconstruct and move it! There are no professional packers or movers involved in this process. Everyone is asked to participate, to hold a piece of the holy structure, and to carry it on the journey.

This is where we are now as a congregation. We have the opportunity, and the need, to pick up Kol Emeth and to carry it. I want to invite you to carry a piece of our Mishkan. We need to carry and care for the actual holy objects of Kol Emeth. We need to carry and sustain the holy activities of Kol Emeth. And we need to carry and nourish the community of Kol Emeth, not letting anyone get left behind, and in fact, welcoming new people into the community along the way.

Below is a list of some of the pieces of our Mishkan that need carrying. Please step up! We need you on this holy journey.

Daily Minyan (Mon-Thurs 7:45pm at Etz Chayim, Thurs 6:45am at Etz Chayim, Sunday 9:15am and 7:45pm at KE offices, 2525 Charleston)

- Commit to attending evening minyan on a specific night of the week or day of the month.
- Be willing to lead the minyan one night of the week (especially Wednesday or Thursday).
- Be the Key Captain for one night of minyan (able to unlock and re-lock the door to Etz Chayim if necessary).

Keeping Each Other Informed

- Help Rabbi Graff organize a Buddy System – buddies to call those who may not check the website for places, times, etc, or who could use a human connection with Kol Emeth.
- Volunteer to be a buddy – Call 1-2 people regularly to inform them about Kol Emeth events, check in, and keep connected with the community.
- Tell us you would like to receive calls about events or you would just like to have a KE buddy.
- Volunteer to email friends, chavura, your child's class... to keep people informed and involved.

Rides

- Volunteer to drive someone who lives near you to shabbat services at the JCC.

Shabbat Morning at the JCC

- Greet people at the JCC – Help welcome and direct people to our shabbat services and kids programs. Sign up [here](#), or contact Naomi Mitchell at naomibatya@yahoo.com.
- Pass out Books – Help pass out and collect siddurim and chumashim during shabbat morning services.
- Take care of our tallitot – Help fold and put away tallitot each week.
- Join Parasha Partners – Study Torah with a 5th or 6th grader in Dale Pearlman's dynamic intergenerational parasha class. 10:15-11:15am on Saturdays when school meets.
- Make an extra effort to come on shabbat, especially when there is a bar/bat mitzvah. Your presence is what will make it feel like Kol Emeth!
- Help beautify our new prayer spaces. Share your ideas with Rabbi Graff.

Living Room Minyan – Intimate shabbat morning davening in a home in Barron Park. Once a month with Torah reading. Once a month with Torah discussion. Contact Rabbi Lewis or Tina Dinitz:

shellyj.lewis@gmail.com, gardencoach@dinitz.org.

- Read Torah, lead a service, or lead a Torah discussion at the Living Room Minyan. Help recruit Torah readers. Help set up or clean up.

Host an event at your home

- Volunteer to host a meeting, shabbat dinner, school class event, Sukkot event, or other event at your home.

- Host an outdoor Friday night service and potluck dinner this June/July/August. Needs to be within walking distance of Barron Park.
- Host a small Friday night service in your home (10-15 people, no dinner). Needs to be within walking distance of Barron Park.

Mishloach Manot

- Help assemble and deliver Mishloach Manot packages, helping our community stay connected at this important time. Contact Elaine Sigal: execdir@kolemeth.org.

Help Pack up the Shul, Give stuff away, Store various items

- Call the office or just show up.

After laying out the details of the building of the Mishkan, the Torah reveals the brilliant secret of this project. V'asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham. "Let them make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them." God doesn't dwell in a particular building. God dwells in those who build the building. God dwells in those who dedicate themselves to building holy community.

Think about what piece of our Mishkan you can pick up and carry. We need you!

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Graff

A SHECHEYANU MOMENT

FEBRUARY 23, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Spiritual practice guides us towards sustaining gratitude. Day to day, we easily become used to the good in our lives and forget to notice or appreciate it. Blessings generally draw our attention back towards normal expected goodness so that we can remember and appreciate it more fully. Saying hamotzi before a meal alerts us to the simple blessing of food so easily taken for granted.

Nefesh HaChayim, Chaim of Volozhin's mid 19th century work of spiritual Mussar, takes blessings a further level. He teaches that all physicality has both a physical element and a spiritual element. This means that eating a piece of bread functions equally on two levels. One, the physical, sustains the body through calories and nutrition. This level is revealed, open, automatic in its function.

Yet the bread also functions on a spiritual level when we take the time to notice it. The spiritual level activates only upon awareness. Blessings alerts us to the spiritual nurturing quality of food and allow the food to feed our soul as well as our body. He suggests imagining the blessing to invite God's life sustaining energy into the universe. The bread becomes a conduit to feel deep blessing inside the self. It awakens us to joy and hidden inner capacity.

There are also special moments that require blessing for a slightly different reason. We feel joy at a bar or bat mitzvah or wedding, or other moments when we say "sheheyanu," the prayer for God bringing us to a special moment of joy. And yet: that joy initially functions only on the physical revealed level. As an external event, it may trigger happiness. Yet such happiness is vulnerable to other external events. Over time, the moment fades and we return to our status quo.

By contrast, the blessing, "Praised are You God, ruler of all, who has sustained us and brought us to this moment," attaches a spiritual hidden connection. Each time we say the blessing, we create a continuity of joyous moments. Each moment by itself is ephemeral: together they remind us of an eternal quality of joy to which we can attach ourselves. Joy becomes a quality that can reside in our heart, sustaining us even in dark moments and becoming so much stronger in the joyous ones.

This Sunday we left our Kol Emeth facility to move to the JCC and Etz Chayim while we build our wonderful new facility. As we put the Sifre Torah in the Ark, the community spontaneously burst into Sheheyanu. It is joyous to be together, to be so warmly welcomed by the JCC (and a special thank you to

all the Moldaw residents who came to greet us), and joyous to have reached a moment to build a genuine contribution to the sacred architecture of this community even amid the sadness of leaving a home that has given us so much.

We have many challenges and bumps in the road in front of us, and we need to treasure the blessing of this moment. We are the only Church or Synagogue in the area with the confidence and community support to rebuild. We know that this building can be a catalyst for our future, inviting us into new possibilities to develop the ethical and spiritual character of our congregation and of Silicon Valley. Those words of blessing draw out hidden possibilities in our move to make this a physical AND spiritual transformation.

I feel blessed to be a part of Kol Emeth at this special moment. Thank you, God, for sustaining all of us to reach this moment. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

GET SO DRUNK

FEBRUARY 28, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've always been perplexed by the commandment to drink at Purim. In a tradition that so values intentionality, it seems odd at best that once a year we are commanded to intentionally cloud our judgment such that we cannot tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai, between good and bad.

Perhaps there is an answer in the Esther story itself. At the beginning of the story, the King banishes Vashti because she refused to dance before him and his courtiers perhaps in nothing other than her crown. His courtiers encourage his abusive behavior. So desperate to curry favor, they are drunk on power. They cannot tell the difference between good and evil and end up encouraging Ahasuerus' behavior.

The story goes on to show us Esther using the only power she has available to her. In the world of Persia, Esther can only influence the narrative through her sexuality. This influence lets her steer the King, but ultimately it means she fades out again, unable to act.

These stories echo strangely in the last few months. How can serial abusers like Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby, Shlomo Carlebach, or Steve Wynn get away with their behaviors for so long? Their enablers are so drunk on money and success and power that they lose their ability to tell the difference between good and evil. Instead of taking a stand, they pretend it is what everyone does, that it's just the way the industry is, and the benefits outweigh the costs.

Or the recent shooting in Parkland. The murder and loss of 17 innocent lives ought to spur us into action. I feel great empathy for those who lost their lives, and for the shooter himself who is a very disturbed young man. I don't know the right political solutions. I would urge our political leaders to take seriously measures that can stop this kind of violence in the future. It's not about gun control vs. mental health concerns- it's about a deep and abiding concern for the sanctity of human life. Background checks before gun purchases seem common sense to me, as does a system that can see and help someone like Nikolas Cruz before he hurts others or himself. Yet I am sure there are better answers out there if we sober up and get serious about honoring human life.

We think we are sober. But the truth is: we have a hard time seeing the difference between good and

evil all the time. Purim comes along to say: get drunk (though drink safely and only what is comfortable for you) to remember the difference between sobriety and drunkenness. In the morning sober up and start to see the real difference between good and evil.

We need to be part of changing the world to sober up. We need to call others on their enabling behavior when we see it. We need to encourage our political leaders to stop playing games and start honoring the image of God in everyone. Imagine if across the aisle politicians felt pressured to preserve human life and dignity. I feel that criteria would suddenly illuminate a lot of measures in a myriad of areas that would make our lives so much better. Let's pressure them to take life seriously.

So enjoy Purim. Feel what it means to lose sight of good and evil for a day. And then sober up and recall what it feels like to know the difference. Then we can work towards a day of celebrating how seriously we honor human life and dignity in all its forms.

Happy Purim!

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

MARCH 9, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation that goes towards hunger relief but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label. Food processing includes flour and other hametz derivatives in a variety of ways that do not require labeling but do render a food unkosher for Passover.

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kosher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of Pesach rules at <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/jewish-law/holidays/pesah>

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

NAOMI LEVY

MARCH 16, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

From where does the spirit emerge? We live in an age so invested in scientific endeavor that we risk losing sight of the meaning of our lives. The stories that we tell and the narratives in which we live determine who we are far more than biology or DNA.

For example, we retell the Passover story year after year and in that telling form identity. We are reminded amid affluence of poverty; we are reminded in our settled places what it is to be a refugee. From these stories emerge a deep quality of the Jewish self that cares passionately about the well being of others. The story has inspired generations of Jews to work in myriads of ways to make society better.

Science is a tool and like all tools carries a mindset. To a person with a hammer, every problem is a nail. To someone embedded in the power of science, every problem that isn't replicable and testable is beneath consideration. And yet: the meaning of our lives sits in that place of narrative and spirit that is neither testable nor replicable.

A few weeks ago, I was at Beit Teshuvah, a Jewish based recovery program for addicts in Los Angeles. A woman got up and talked about her journey to sobriety. She explained that alcohol and drugs had filled an emptiness in her. It had led her on a destructive path to the point that her husband had to ask her to leave. She could no longer be with her 2 year old son. That moment made her realize something had to change.

That night she bore witness to a year of sobriety. Her husband and now 4 year old were there at the service, and they hugged and kissed and held each other. Her journey had more challenges in front of her, but the blessings of health and sobriety were evident to the naked eye. That journey from slavery to freedom captures something deep in the human soul from which we dare not lose connection.

This Shabbat we have a special scholar, Rabbi Naomi Levy. Her most recent book, *Einstein and the Rabbi*, probes Einstein's own search for meaning, and how key purpose filled living is for each of us. She brings a warmth and presence that shows what spirit filled living is all about. She is also a remarkable singer. In addition to her writings, Rabbi Levy has created a new community in LA called Nashuva which centers around soul enlivening song and action to heal the world.

Please join us for an amazing weekend as we engender a mindset committed to meaning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER FOR BUSYNESS

MARCH 23, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We were fortunate this week to have Rabbi Naomi Levy as our scholar in residence. Among some wonderful sessions, she challenged us to bring meaning into our prayer lives. She read us a few prayers she has written, including one on the occasion of adopting a child, and another for lighting a shiva candle. She then invited us to leave aside our pre-conceptions of prayer, and of God, and simply to write.

She reminded us that we don't even have to believe in God to write prayer. Perhaps we can write to our best selves or the part of our self that needs to be heard. At her urging, I began to write.

I wrote a prayer of busyness, of preparation for holidays and over commitments. I share it with you as an invitation to breathe and clear your own mind. I hope it also serves as an invitation to write something of your own. It is hard to know what will emerge; I invite you to be open to the creative experience. Just put pen to paper and something will happen.

If you do write something, it ought to remain with you alone. Bring it with you to Synagogue: say it at or after the Amidah or anywhere else it begs to be said. Perhaps it will have a place at your Passover Seder; perhaps it will remind you of something you need to share with people you love.

Here is a prayer I wrote, that I hope can offer some redemption as Passover approaches.

A Prayer for Busyness

Elohei Nishima, My Soul God. I lose you sometimes in the rush of the moment, the full feel of my calendar. I open up to see my day, and I see every moment filled and scheduled.

And it creates the illusion: You aren't there.

But I've chosen all those appointed times, some directly and some as loving outcomes of other choices and commitments. What would it mean to find You there?

Can I breathe at the moment of starting and see: You are there in the teaching and the contact and the community.

Can I exhale and know: Even here, in what feels so full, there is spaciousness and abundance, and room for You, my Soul God?

Guide me to see You even in over-fullness, even to breathe You in when it feels as though I lack even a moment to breathe.

Elohai Nishama, my Soul God, God of my breath, let me breathe You in.

Shabbat shalom!

Rabbi David Booth

HOPE – THE JEWISH SUPERPOWER

MARCH 30, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've always loved superhero movies. As I matured as a Jew, I was delighted to learn how strong Jewish influence has been on this genre, from the golem to Superman and Spiderman. Jews and Jewish legends are part of the lifeblood of this popular form, and our ethics pervade it through and through.

I got to wondering. What is the super power of the Jewish people? We are one of the only peoples of antiquity to survive with continuous culture. Further, we are a people who have influenced the world ethically, spiritually, and physically beyond what anyone would have expected. What superpower enabled that influence and longevity?

Rabbi Levy hinted at it last week. She taught the less known answer to the question, Who is wise? For Pirkei Avot the answer is: one who learns from everyone. Yet the Tosefta answers differently: one who can see the sliver of the new moon. This wisdom comes from our ability to hope in darkness. It comes from our knowledge that even when all seems lost, the moon will yet be renewed.

Our superpower is hope. We know, that with God's help, the world can be better than it is now. We see that we can help tug humanity towards its best self even when the work takes generations. We realize that even when change may not be visible, we can still see the molad, the sliver of light being birthed. Our superpower is to hope even when by all logical reason we ought to give up. Our superpower is to believe in God and humanity despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Passover is nearly here. Our most central story reminds us to hope. To have the courage to see past the darkness and know: the sliver of light will soon be seen. In darkest slavery of Egypt, Israelites hoped for redemption and their hope was answered.

Despite millennia of persecution, Jews have had the courage to reach out to friends and make their homes in myriads of countries. From that courage has come a great impact on the world and on the Jewish people. We have sometimes said in anger: Pour out Your wrath, but more often we have extended hands in friendship and created wealth, prosperity, science, and great ethical and spiritual teachings. All because we had this incredible superpower: hope.

Last weekend thousands of young people marched in shock at school shootings. They addressed the

adults and said: you are doing it wrong. Figure out how to talk to one another and come up with a way that values and sanctifies human life. From their youth came hope. I am moved by their example and inspired to hope. It is time to find a way in our seemingly dysfunctional and broken political culture to create real dialogue and actual reforms around gun control and mental health that can save lives and see the ray of light that is the divine image in each person.

Passover reminds us: that sliver of hope becomes the full moon, bright almost as day. That is a key reason Passover always starts on the new moon. Light fills the world even at night to instruct and remind: if you hope, you can change the world.

Sometimes it happens in an instant, other times it takes generations. The Israelites almost lost hope at the very moment of redemption because it took 400 hundred years. That story reminds us to hope with patience, knowing that God's energy cannot be held back forever.

As you celebrate Passover this year, I invite you to hope. Look at the darkest places in your life; what would it mean to see a sliver of light? Look at the darkness in the world and imagine: maybe I can see just the merest hint of light. And then we will emerge strong, renewed, ready to bring that light out into the day.

Shabbat shalom and Happy Passover,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note there will be no CyberTorah next week due to Passover.

WHAT IS THE REDEMPTION YOU SEEK?

APRIL 13, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I stand in front of the Ark every single week, most weeks twice a week. I do not take it lightly. There is a sanctity to that location, an invitation, a feeling that prayers perhaps can be heard more completely in that moment. And yet, I often find the moment passing me by. I know I should open my heart fully and wholly. But I resist.

There is an intimacy in revealing my deepest fears and hopes. I find myself reluctant. Partly, the emotional intimacy overwhelms me in that moment. I'm not ready to be vulnerable and reveal myself even though no one else in the room will even know. I'm afraid of what I will meet there. If my truest hopes and prayers emerge, how will it affect me? All that inchoate unaddressed emotional weight may overwhelm if I once give it voice.

Further, I am afraid. What if my prayer isn't heard? What if God is silent in the face of my most intimate prayer, my deepest hope? In some way, hearing no would be safer than hearing nothing. My greatest hopes for redemption mean a lot to me. That makes me afraid to even give them voice, lest they not be heard.

We sing a melody as the Ark is opened. Bay Ana Rachtz- may it be God's will that my heart will be opened. Our hope on Shabbat is for heart-openings, for each of us to discover our deepest prayers and hopes. We have that from which we want redemption; we all have our Egyptian bondage. On Shabbat we pray for God to open our hearts so that redemption can happen.

We have to find ways of voicing this prayer, of opening our heart, even when that process of opening exposes worries and fears and dark places. Only when the heart opening happens can healing be possible. And yet, I resist. It is so intimate and so frightening.

I know some of my own most intimate hopes. I pray that my children will thrive, and especially that my son will find some measure of joy and function in his life. I pray for this community and that I will find my own capacity to be the kind of leader and Rabbi Kol Emeth deserves. I want to be blessed and filled with blessing so that my own best self can emerge joyously.

I'm curious to know some of your hopes for redemption. I invite you to say them out loud, even to write

them down. If you want, share them with me privately either via email or in person. I would be delighted to sit with you, especially if we have never had time to talk one on one. I suspect such a conversation would be incredibly meaningful and uplifting. Just email me back and I will read what you write or find some time to be together. Yet whether you share them with me, or with God, or with the Universe, I believe finding the strength to say them matters.

Bay Ana Rachetz. May You give us the strength to open our hearts. Open our hearts for good, for us and Israel and the world. Help us learn that open-heartedness, even though it is intimate and frightening and hard, is a key path to finding our own wholeness and joy.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

YOM HAATZMAUT

APRIL 19, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Today marks the 70th anniversary of a daring experiment in Jewish national aspirations and ethics. 70 years ago, Ben Gurion and so many others took the risk of declaring a state. At the time, the biggest risk seemed to be the surrounding Arab nations. And in the short run, that was true.

Yet the bigger risk was creating a geo-political entity informed by Jewish sources that would have real power. Suddenly, the Jewish people through the Jewish State would be forced into questions about how to treat minorities, when and how to wield power, and what it means to build a State for all its inhabitants while also carrying a burden of responsibility for and to the rest of the Jewish world.

These founders were people of great ambition. They set out to create a Jewish and democratic state. They asserted rights for women and minorities. They called out in peace to the Arab world. The aspirations were appropriately great and have created continued tensions for Israel that remain to be resolved.

Our Rabbis teach: Disagreements for the sake of heaven are bound to last. They stick around because they describe tensions that remain for communities and cultures. Israel, for example, wrestles with being Jewish and Democratic. How do the rights of non-Jewish minorities get honored in the Jewish state? What responsibilities does Israel have to Jews elsewhere in the world?

1967 exacerbated those tensions in a great military victory. Suddenly, the Jewish State became a superpower in control of territories that were majority Palestinian. How to manage the security needs of those areas competes with the aspiration of the State to be a home to all its citizens and to react with great concern for human rights to everyone, Jewish and Arab and other.

Today is a day for celebration and contemplation. We need to celebrate the many and varied achievements. The tech revolution in Israel means Israel, in a short 70 years, has gone from a risky endeavor to a mighty economic and military power in the region. Israel has welcomed millions of refugees from Arab countries, from Russia, from Ethiopia. What an incredible legacy.

At the same time, Israel wrestles daily with the dilemmas of being a Jewish State. Israel represents a working through of Jewish ethics in the real world. As compromises and tensions occur, inevitably those

ethics emerge in a variety of ways. As power mixes with idealism, a heady brew emerges. I so want Israel to represent the best of Jewish ethics and to be a true beacon of what a State can be. When she falls short, I mourn. And when she succeeds, I rejoice.

The conflicts are many and varied but I would never turn back. We the Jewish people need Israel on practical, ethical and spiritual levels. The French community has discovered the importance of a Jewish State ready to take any Jew, just as the Russian or Yemenite or Ethiopian communities discovered before them. We need a place of refuge.

Second, ethics are wonderful when one has no power. Israel forces a reality – it really is questions of WHEN we go to war. Deuteronomy offers military ethic with the language of when, rather than if. Now that Israel is a real state Jews must wrestle with the realities of power. Ethics are about more now than how a businessperson treats their workers. It emerges into the very systems and structures of the whole economy. As hard as the challenges are, and as often as we stumble, Torah means nothing if it cannot live in the real world of power.

And spiritually: our hearts yearn for Zion. In an era of increased loneliness, Israel is the promise of home. Our hearts turn towards a people and a place and it elevates us. Israel reminds us that we yearn for God too, for a love to touch us and open our hearts greater than all the other human loves we have encountered.

May God bless Israel on this, her 70th birthday. May her citizens be inspired to carry the burden of Jewish history to continue building a Jewish State of robust democracy and egalitarianism, always strong and always strong in her pursuit of peace.

Amen.

Rabbi David Booth

DAY OF HALACHA

MAY 4, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have always been fascinated by the legal process in Judaism. I am intrigued by how Halacha, Jewish law, has influenced and shaped modern western legal traditions and I am moved by the ways in which it continues to help frame moral issues. The Sunday Talmud group, for example, has been studying issues of torts and damages for the last several years. We have seen how Jewish law is a radical endeavor that simultaneously functions on the legal, ethical, and spiritual dimension.

Halachah presumes something in the Universe that creates ethical authority. Halachic texts rarely reference God directly. Even those that do often call God “the merciful one” or “the place.” Instead, there is an assumption that something about the encounter between people necessitates legal and ethical principles. A binding moral principle simply exists and the system is propelled by it.

In our own era, with functioning western legal systems, Halacha remains a central aspect of my Jewish and human experience. Halachic practice guides me in ritual moral behavior. I find myself held to a higher standard than Western law in speech and regular interactions because I strive to live within an Halachic system.

This fascination has led me to be a member of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the Conservative Movement. As a member, I am one of 25 Rabbis who write and vote on key issues in Jewish for the Movement. I have written two papers, one on non-Jews opening the Ark, and one on a Conservative movement approach to modesty practices. I have also had the fortune to study and debate numerous other papers on topics ranging from Electricity on Shabbat to Jews testifying in death penalty cases.

This year, the CJLS wants to raise up our internal Halachic process and learn together. The Committee has chosen a wonderful paper by Rabbi Danny Nevins on the status of genetically modified organisms in Halacha. Congregations around the world will be studying his paper Sunday both to better appreciate the way Halachic process functions in the Conservative movement and to explore the ethical issues around GMOs.

I will be leading a session in partnership with Sarah Kummerfeld on Sunday at 10:15 at the KE offices, 2525 E Charleston in Mountain View. Sarah works in the biotech industry and is an expert on related

matters to GMOs. We will study the sources, the science, and the process by which Rabbi Nevins arrives at his conclusions. Please join us for what promises to be a wonderful movement wide opportunity to learn and see how Halacha might help guide us in our daily lives on the key moral considerations of this moment in history.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

REPAIRING THE JEWISH WORLD (VIEW)

MAY 11, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I worry that Judaism is broken. Mostly, I worry that our theology is so badly damaged that we no longer even agree on what we mean by the word God. Judaism has to be more than an ethnic identity for me to be interested. The moral and spiritual teachings of Judaism are where I engage because they help me live my life.

God asks us to observe God's laws. When theology is broken, those words mean nothing. What if: God meant something to all of us. What if God stood for a few related ideas. What if God could mean:

1. The ethical impulse. That is, what if God meant that aspect of the self that inspires us to do good. What if we saw the God-encounter occurring precisely at the moment we are inspired to feed the homeless or fight for gun control? That is, God includes that ethical awakening.
2. A source of love and healing. What if God consciousness meant something that inspires love and healing in us? God could mean: the way in which song or prayer unlocks certain inner pathways that normally are hard to access. God could mean: the feeling I get when I feel connected to the Universe beyond myself. Multiple studies show this feeling of mindfulness, of connection, engenders well being and invites joy. God could mean: the way I direct my mind / soul to have that experience of well being and joy.
3. A source of creativity. We have always known that each of us contain depths not always accessible. That is, I have more creativity and strength than that which I normally access. I know that imaginative exercises help unlock that potential. What if God was shorthand for what I imagine unlocking those pathways and potential?

Our lack of faith is a lack of imagination. God is. Or put another way, the experience we have of God comes from within ourselves. We can have a faith experience that reaches out to God and which touches only a tiny aspect of the wholeness of God. Our experience of God happens through the mind and through the imagination.

Our imagination is the bridge between this world and the next. When I imagine that reciting God's holiness can fill me with blessing, I find it has real impact on my day and even week. When I remind myself of gratitude in blessing the bread before dinner and imagine God's life energy flowing into me and the world, it promotes my well-being. By imagining God, we evoke something in the self and in the

world that can only be touched in that place of mind.

We are so worked up about knowing things in certainty that we are giving up on a key aspect of human living that arises in faith. Yet there are huge areas of the human experience that are about uncertainty and love and fear. It is in the stories we tell and in our imagination that we encounter meaning. We need to rediscover the hope and the confidence to imagine blessing so that we can BE a blessing.

God says: Listen to my laws that it will go well with you. This statement is true in a different way than we usually imagine. When we allow ourselves the freedom to imagine, to live as if God is in our lives, then great joy and creativity follows. When we accept God's laws we are really accepting our deep connection to the Universe that we name as God. That connection leads to joy.

I invite you into imagination. We don't all have to agree on exactly what God is. Rather, perhaps we can allow our imagination to name as God certain experiences that can deeply enrich our lives. Then we can heal the image of God in the mind and allow disparate levels of belief to share an understanding of prayer and mitzvot. This is a path that can lead us towards great meaning and joy.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

SHAVUOT

MAY 18, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rabbinic Judaism lacks a word for revelation. We say “The Giving Of Torah” instead. The moment at Sinai becomes the stand in for the Divine Encounter. Which means a lot more is going on at Sinai than simply receiving a set of rules.

When the Israelites arrived at Sinai, they spent three days in intense spiritual preparation. They washed their clothes, they cleansed themselves. I imagine they prepared their minds and bodies and worked hard to overcome their fears.

They didn't know what to expect or what this divine encounter would evoke in them. To know that everything might change, to realize your life may be upended even in redemption, is terrifying. They were ready and so they declared: we will do it and then we will understand it. In other words, they were totally open to the transformative possibility of the encounter. The giving of Torah meant a submission, a willingness to be changed. They realized they could only appreciate the depth of Torah by living it.

In some ways, the Golden Calf that follows is the more normal human response. After this life changing moment, they retreat back to the familiar. They move away from the radical and redemptive change back to their old habits of idolatry. The midrash teaches they were offered eternal life and gave it up with the sin of the Golden Calf. In other words, turning towards that change takes ongoing constant effort even when the change is redemptive and life affirming.

We too are getting ready for revelation. Sunday morning at 5 am we have a sunrise service following an all night study session at Beth Am. (There are also services at 9:15). We spend the night getting ready, without really knowing what we will encounter.

And yet, there are so many ways to hide, so many Golden Calves beckoning. I might hide in my preparations for the holiday – getting so immersed in cooking and preparing study sheets that I forget to do my own inner work. I might hide in the Warriors games which are such a wonderful distraction, but risk becoming a hiding place. All of these are worthwhile endeavors, and all call to me to hide.

Instead, I invite you to make use of these few hours leading up to Shavuot. What if you were ready and

open to something on Shavuot? What if you prepared yourself to be open to Torah, open to God, open to the Divine, open to life affirming changes that would change your life for the better? What if after the Warriors game you spent 20 minutes thinking of where you can be a blessing, of what you seek?

Were we to do that, we might find redemption. Meaning: we might find the sense of obligation and hope, the courage and love, to make of our lives something of real value. It could give us the courage to make the changes in ourselves and our community that can truly heal us and the world. We might encounter in ourselves/ stemming from God an illuminating path that brings us back to choosing life and blessing.

That is what we are offered every year. This year, let us search for the courage to be open, to listen, and to find redemption.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Shavuot

Rabbi David Booth

THE BURDENS WE LOVINGLY CARRY

MAY 25, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

When the Israelites lived in the desert for 40 years, Judaism had to be portable. They built a Sanctuary within which God could dwell, but that Sanctuary itself could be lifted and carried with the people. The Israelites themselves carried this burden every time the people moved. For this reason, the Israelites took a census of all the people to see how many could be involved in carrying the Sanctuary.

According to Degel Machane Ephraim, an Hasidic Torah commentator from the late 1700s, the Israelites were evoking God's presence in the people by carrying this burden. The physical external ritual engendered an inner change. Carrying the Sanctuary enabled their hearts to open. The sense of being needed, of sacred responsibility, itself led to a quality of open heartedness. According to the Degel, what God really wants is the heart. The burden helped remind them to open their heart, to pray and serve with true devotion.

In the last few months, we at Kol Emeth have learned that our community is more portable than we thought. We have gone into spaces at the JCC, Etz Chayim, Beth Am, and made for ourselves a Sanctuary. More than that, we have held a sense of being at Kol Emeth even when the physical aspect of Kol Emeth is a construction site.

We are doing the carrying. As we carry, we are reminded of a sacred duty to keep this community together. We have to make extra effort to include people we would be more likely to see were we to have our building. We need additional intentionality to bring our joy and ruach into new and unfamiliar spaces.

Yet I am finding that the carrying itself inspires commitment. We know we are all needed, and that reminds us of how important it is to hold onto our community even as we imagine a wonderful new future.

This time reminds me that Judaism itself exists solely in our hearts. So I wonder: why do you carry Judaism? What makes the burden worthwhile? For me, Judaism is a path and a faith that gives meaning and texture to my life. It gives me a structure to create strong friendships and family in holidays, and to deepen myself morally in study. It offers me a faith system that renews me regularly and helps me stay connected with my most essential self.

I hear especially from Bar and Bat Mitzvah parents how important it is to them for their children to continue to be Jewish. For some, it is family / historical connection. For others, there is a deep connection to the teachings or practices of Judaism.

In our era, we also have taken a variety of census studies of the Jewish people. What those studies show again and again is that Jewish meaning sustains Jewish continuity. We need to be carrying something of value or else our children are reluctant to take on the burden.

I believe that Judaism committed to egalitarian practices amid a strong and thoughtful connection to Jewish tradition and law is essential to modern living. Yet that Judaism exists only when we choose to carry it into the world. We need more than our familial / historical connection- we need a path of life that leads to blessing.

Why do you carry Judaism? What are the values / beliefs / practices that make this burden worthwhile and even life sustaining? I would love you to share with me for I feel it would be deeply enriching of my own Jewish practice.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be on hiatus through mid August.

LOVE THE STRANGER

JULY 13, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

36 times in the Torah we are commanded to love the stranger for we were strangers. In other words, the experience of being refugees and immigrants ought to incline us towards compassion and care for other immigrants and refugees. Further, we know what it is to have little to no power and so when we have power, we ought to act towards the powerless with love and affection. This is why the Psalmist reminds us that God looks out for the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan.

Separating parents from children at the border violates this deep Torah ethic. The idea of placing children into the foster care system after their parents are detained at the border is wrong and foolish. Wrong because it separates children, some 5 and under, from loving parents. Foolish, because it gives off a deeply troubling image of U.S. immigration law to the rest of world while incurring unnecessary expense and administration.

I am relieved that the courts have ordered young children reunited with their parents. That is simply the right thing, regardless of long term immigration status.

I have always loved the Emma Lazarus poem, *The New Colossus*. Bring us your tired, poor, yearning to breathe free. The United States has grown and benefited so much from immigrants. And those same immigrants have become a part of the fabric of our nation in ways that have enriched us economically, socially, and politically.

I fear our immigration system is broken. Shockingly to me, this separation policy isn't new, but rather an expansion of existing practice since 1997. How can this have been our law and practice for over 20 years? Parents must be reunited with their children to fulfill the words of the prophet that hearts of parents should be turned to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.

I urge you to reach out to your elected representative on two topics. First, to end this policy of family separation and reunite families and children as quickly as possible. Second, to work together to fix our immigration system so that the United States can once again be a refuge for those who have been tossed away in so many other places and who then become such an amazing blessing for us. Our system is broken when laws aren't enforced or are so clumsy or problematic that enforcing them creates human rights challenges. We need a clear, legal system of immigration that protects asylum seekers, brings us

the future employees we need, and keeps us safe from a variety of potential threats.

The Sultan of Turkey, after the expulsion of Jews from Spain, welcomed the Jewish community into Turkey. At the time he is reputed to have said, "Ferdinand's loss is my gain." So few in the world are ready to take those in need of asylum, or simply looking for a place of hope and possibility to live. I believe those regimes' loss will be our great gain.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

ISRAEL AND BROKENNESS

JULY 20, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This weekend marks Tisha B'av, a day of mourning and sadness for the Jewish people. We recall the destruction of both Temples, the expulsion from Spain, and so many other moments of loss and dislocation.

Yet the way we remember intrigues me. There is no anger or animosity in our memory. Instead, we worry that we caused the suffering ourselves through our own failings. According to the Rabbis, the first Temple was destroyed because of idolatrous practice among Jews; the second Temple due to discord and baseless hatred. We see in tragedy not geopolitical events (after all, it was the Babylonians and the Romans who destroyed the two Temples) but a moral call.

Put another way, Tisha B'av reminds us that being Jewish means a call to make the world a better place through the service of God. We will read this Shabbat of Moses speaking to the people as they prepare to enter the land. He calls them to responsibility, to see that inhabiting the land requires building in it a just society. A key way to avoid future tragedies is to form a people and a State that honors the divine image in everyone embedded in its laws, practices, and prayers.

This week I am pained as I see two moves away from that moral vision. First, a Conservative Rabbi in Haifa was arrested at 5:30 Thursday morning. His crime? Officiating at weddings. Wedding law in Israel since 2013 has made it a crime to officiate at a wedding and not register it with the state. This is the first time Israeli police have acted on a complaint about this law. The Rabbi is scheduled to teach on Tisha B'av at the President's residence and some think it was a move to embarrass President Rivlin. This outrageous arrest deserves condemnation and hopefully a rethinking of Israeli law around religious pluralism.

Second is the National Law passed by the Knesset on Thursday. This law affirms the Jewish nature of the state, but for the first time since its founding repudiates the place of its Arab-Israeli minority. The Arabic language has been downgraded; the bold and amazing assertion of the Declaration to "all the inhabitants" of Israel rescinded in favor of the state being "unique to the Jewish people." This is an overreach and a mistake. Israel is strong and wealthy enough to honor its Arab minority (I am talking here of Arab-Israeli citizens since 1948). I challenge Israel to be strong enough to act morally towards its minorities especially amid challenges; I pray that Israeli democracy can be robust enough to maintain

the difficult balance between Jewish and democratic values.

And yet, Tisha B'av contains hope as well as loss and introspection. We can be better than we have been; when we sit and hear Lamentations we are reminding ourselves that what is broken can be mended. Tisha B'av begins a countdown to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to assert that hope and consolation remain even in despair.

Israeli democracy IS strong. The issues of religious pluralism are becoming an Israeli issue, rather than a Diaspora issue. Rabbi Haiyun was born in Israel and arrested for marrying dozens of Israelis. I believe the more this touches average Israelis, the more likelihood that laws will change for the better. The National Law is more complicated; yet Israel is in fact so powerful that I believe the anxiety and nationalism that propels this law can slowly give way to a sense of being part of the world community with a more open concept of Israeli identity and citizenship that still holds Judaism central.

It may take time, yet I still believe in faith that we can and will do better. If we turn towards Israel in this moment in love, with hurt rather than blame, with challenge rather than anger, I believe we can be part of helping Israelis see their place as moral exemplars in what can sometimes be a dark world. I am saddened and hurt by these examples of brokenness and pray that I will have the strength and compassion to be among those who effect healing through love.

Shabbat Shalom, with hopes of an easy fast

Rabbi David Booth

FINDING COMFORT

AUGUST 3, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

An image: My son is 14 years old. We are at Tahoe enjoying vacation. He decides to opt out of an afternoon outing, choosing instead to stay in the little house we have rented. He goes outside to enjoy the warmth and sunlight and falls asleep. Without any sunscreen.

When we return hours later, poor Josh is bright red along his back and parts of his face where he fell asleep. It's a terrible burn. Uncomfortable and blistering, he cannot sleep. My wife stays up most of the night, rubbing his back with burn lotion, comforting and loving him.

A couple has been married for decades. One partner has recently had surgery. They both feel their age more than they used to. And he cares for her. Brings her tea and makes her dinner. And just sits there, offering comfort and presence.

Comfort, My people, Comfort, says God.

We talk a lot about success and achievement and hopes. We even talk some about love and connection. I want us to talk more about comfort. Receiving comfort at a moment of loss or illness is to receive the truest freewill gift that can be offered. It can be an expression of love, yet it can also be an expression of shared humanity.

We are alone in a very basic way in the world. We experience sensations, both blessings and curses, pleasant and unpleasant. When we experience, we crave sharing. Comfort becomes the offering that

helps hold us in the unpleasant, in the pain, in the place of brokenness. When we receive such an offering from someone, it changes the curse to reveal hidden blessing, the unpleasant, to evoke hidden love.

The promise of the Prophet to us this time of year is of a comfort even greater than our human capacity. God can offer a comfort beyond the human because God's offer is limitless and unbounded. God knows and is with us, offering always love and comfort. That promise exists in the very essence and nature of what it means to be God.

We have the capacity to imagine that boundless comfort from our own experience of receiving love and comfort. This is why Isaiah uses the example of comforting a barren woman. In the most extreme of broken hopes, God can still bring comfort. Even when all seems darkest, there is still the possibility of receiving strength and comfort from the Divine.

I invite you to spend some time in the next few weeks reminding yourself of moments where you have received or offered comfort. I suggest you call to mind the experience in all of its texture. What was the relationship? What was the nature of the comfort offered? Was there touch, words, gestures of love? And to savor in memory that experience. Then, into a breath of recollection, recite: Shma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. May the One hear me and may this moment of comfort I recall invite more comfort into my soul to feel accompanied, held and loved.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

JUST LISTEN

AUGUST 10, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We live in an era of permanent hearing loss. Our ears are so bombarded by noise at a volume and regularity previously unimaginable that our hearing is degrading at a younger and faster rate than ever before in history. This is especially sad because there is no way to reverse hearing decline. The best we can do is artificial enhancement through hearing aids.

I worry that our hearing problem is compounded by a listening problem. That is, we are so bombarded by talk and slogans that we are losing the ability to really listen. Listening to someone else requires patience and compassion; our ego and fears easily overcome such capacities. When that happens, talk becomes only an instrument of achieving our will.

Moses is chosen by God to lead the Jewish people because he knows how to listen. He saw the burning bush and took the time to notice, in quiet, that a miracle was occurring. The Midrash even imagines a greater compassion. He left his flock because one sheep had gone astray. He was pursuing her to bring her back to safety. He was going to her to be with her where she was and in that moment of love he encountered God.

Torah says: If only you would listen. All we need to do is listen more. We have to practice listening before the capacity becomes degraded altogether and we forget what it means to hear. Talk can be a tool of relationship, a way to build bridges founded in love and care. For us to achieve that level of discourse, we must start with listening.

I want to invite you to practice listening. When we listen, we hear the world around us amid all its beauty, cacophony, and joy. When we listen, we can hear the people we care about and see past some of the externalities to the amazing and loving people we cherish so deeply. When we listen, it can change the way we interact at work, as we hear the human concerns and deep commitments that motivate so much behavior.

I want you to share a moment of listening with me. If, by pausing to listen, you hear / notice something, I'd love to know. I have a theory that such listening can be transformative, and I want to hear of your experience with this exercise.

Torah says: If you would only listen. If we can only learn to listen, I believe we can hear God and be transformed into a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David

HEARING THE SHOFAR

AUGUST 17, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Attuning the ear, paying attention, is difficult. Once we have made the decision to listen, the question becomes: listen to what? There are so many distractions and noises calling for our attention, we need to learn where and how to train our ears.

I was at kiddush on Shabbat with hundreds of people in the courtyard at the JCC. There were all kinds of noises and distractions, from the work on some scaffolding, to various conversations, to the birds flying over the courtyard. I held a little six month old for a few minutes, and saw him looking around all the time at the various sounds and sights.

We spend the first year or so of our life learning how to filter sounds and to pay attention to the important ones. We start learning how to notice our parent's voices, how to pay attention to the person facing us even when there are lots of other interesting noises going on. We figure out speech versus nonsense.

Elul, the month preceding the High Holidays, comes along to help us repair our capacity for listening. We have been trained to be on the alert for risk and for ways to advance our interests. Elul invites us to be on the alert for meaning and purpose. Elul asks us to pay attention to our friends, family, coworkers, out of love rather than self-interest. Elul is inviting us back into the capacity of hearing we learned as babies.

We start by sounding the shofar each day of this month. The cacophony of the shofar challenges us to renew how we think of meaningful sound. According to the Rabbis, the shofar's cry reminds us of Sarah. Satan brought her the news that Abraham had brought Isaac up to Moriah to sacrifice him. He paused dramatically, implying for a moment that Abraham really had killed Isaac. In that moment, Sarah cried out in such pain that her soul left her body. We hear the echo of that cry in the shofar.

The shofar is the cry of all our pain, all our loss, that stops up our ears. It is all the alarm and fear that draws our attention but gets in the way of listening. We practice being called to alertness, hearing a cry of pain, and then to have quiet. Instead of acting immediately, we are called upon to hear the call of the shofar, and then to listen. Had Sarah listened for a moment more, her worry and fear would have been alleviated. Abraham, after all, saved his son. We, perhaps, can listen.

Our capacity for listening needs repair and practice. People have sent me some lovely stories of listening and the relationships or experiences that practice offered to them. Amid so much noise and distraction, let's work on repairing our capacity to listen. Let's pause, give ourselves a moment of breath, as we wait for meaning. Let's breathe through fear and pain and loss, so that we can hear the truth of our own lives as well.

I wish you a meaningful month of Elul.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HEARING THE CRIES OF THOSE IN NEED

AUGUST 24, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We live in a culture that easily walls itself off from the cries of those in need. We drive by homeless and people on the verge of homelessness all the time and barely notice. We live and work next to people struggling to get by, many of them food insecure, many of them even serving us food, and we barely hear their voices. As we ready ourselves for the holidays, now is the time to listen.

The Talmud tells of a certain pious Jew whom Elijah would visit. That Jew built himself a guard house and Elijah never came to see him again. The Talmud asks: But surely protecting one's home is a good thing? Yes; however, when he built that gate, he walled himself off from the cries of the poor.

In other words, Elijah said: if you want to hear me, if you want this access to God that I offer, you need to develop a capacity for listening. If you don't hear the cries of the poor, you can't hear God either.

I worry we live in another era of walled off living. We have stoppered our ears and hardened our hearts. The effect? Walling ourselves off from God. Let us listen.

Second Harvest reports that the number of clients they serve has doubled in the last ten years. In these ten years of affluence and growth, hunger has increased. How can we allow that to stand? The fastest growing group of hunger insecure people in our area is students. Young people struggling to attend places like Stanford or Santa Clara University are hit with sky high rents that leave them with inadequate resources to feed themselves. They go to Second Harvest so they can have enough calories for the week.

And in this same moment, giving to local hunger needs is declining. I don't know whether charitable giving is declining or people are changing their priorities, but this great need in our immediate area is scrambling for resources. They tend to get a big infusion of cash in December and struggle the rest of the year.

As we ready ourselves for Rosh Hashanah, I challenge all of us to open our hearts to those in need. Please find a way to give to Second Harvest, Jewish Family and Children's Services, or other groups addressing the needs of hunger and homelessness in our area. We can and must be a part of the solution.

I believe if we listen, if we open our hearts to these cries, then we will open our hearts more fully. I believe these acts of compassion can change us in deep ways and allow God to be in our lives more fully and wholly.

Strengthen us, God, to hear and to act for those in need. And hear us also in our own moments of need when we cry out to You.

So it may be Your will.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD

AUGUST 31, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

According to tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. Except, not exactly. According to Rabbinic Chronology, Rosh Hashanah marks the 6th day of creation rather than the first. What are we celebrating? The creation of humanity, especially God's noticing of our potential to be "very good" and a blessing in the world.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of meaning. Rosh Hashanah is the day when humanity first opened their eyes filled with moral potential. It is the day when choice entered the world, when the possibility of doing and being good came into being. Rosh Hashanah stands as a bookmark to Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah celebrates our inherent potential for goodness; Yom Kippur the opportunity to reestablish that inherent goodness even when we veer off track.

The midrash teaches: when each soul is sent from the garden of Eden into the world, it leaves with great sadness and regret. As that soul leaves, it swears to serve God and to elevate the holy sparks it will encounter in the world so that it can return, refined and purified, to Eden. Once the soul joins the body, it strives, but it also forgets. A distance emerges between our truest self and the self we express each day.

As we get ready for Rosh Hashanah, we need to remind ourselves of that true self God created on the sixth day. For this reason, we have the practice of Selichot, a gathering in the darkness of night, in the stillness before dawn, of who we can still be.

This year, we are trying something a bit different to challenge our inertia and connect with our deepest selves. Rosh Hashanah includes a celebration of nature and beauty, so I wanted us to be outside in a beautiful place. In addition, I thought sunrise could inspire change in us and perhaps in the beauty and

new beginning of the morning invite our own reflections on renewal and gratitude.

With that in mind, we will gather at Baylands at the end of San Antonio at 6am Sunday Sept 2nd for prayers of penitence and healing followed by the morning service as the sun rises. Please bring a flashlight and a folding chair if you want one. We will offer selichot prayers from 6-6:30 and then greet the new day with Shacharit. At 7am or so we will have a light bagel and coffee breakfast.

I look forward to greeting the sunrise with you, noticing the beauty of the world, and in that moment reminding ourselves of our own deep creative capacity to be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PARKING AND GRATITUDE

SEPTEMBER 7, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As many of you know, we are currently building the new Kol Emeth. As one outcome of this, all our services for the holidays this year will be at the Beth Am facility. This means we will be a bit more crowded than in the past, and that there will be a dearth of parking.

Elaine Sigal has already sent a letter with many of the details about parking. Please do read it. Among other things, we are encouraging members to carpool and to use only one car per family. In addition, we are offering a coupon to use Lyft for anyone between Sunnyvale and Menlo Park.

Here is my concern: I worry that people will arrive late and have nowhere to park. I am concerned that people will get frustrated as well. Yet the truth is, we can as a community look out for each other. We can make the space at Beth Am to allow everyone to be a part of our holidays and for us collectively to know that we brought our best, most sacred selves into the picture before we even arrived at services.

For those who can, please do walk or bike both for Jewish ritual reasons and to create space for others. Second, for those who are driving, please do use one car per family or else set up a carpool with other families to allow for a few arrival / departure times, or use Lyft.

Most importantly, bring your most compassionate appreciative self to the morning. Elaine Sigal has been working incredible hours in an impossible situation to try and create the maximum amount of space for people. Please appreciate her efforts. Similarly, we have facilities staff and parking attendants who work long days making sure we can arrive safely and have a place to park. Thank them when you arrive and when you depart.

Similarly, Rabbi Graff's Service in the Round may end up with more people than the capacity of the Beit Kehillah. Please know that we will try and get as many people as possible into the room, but we are limited by fire code and need to ensure the safety of our members to 240 attendees. Bring your flexible compassionate self to services and you will already be doing the work of Rosh Hashanah before you even enter the room. And if we do run out of space, I promise you that I am doing my best to create a richly meaningful service up in the Main Sanctuary as well, at which there will be ample seating. The same issue will apply for the alternative Kol Nidre that I am leading with Rick Dinitz and Louis Newman on Yom Kippur.

And lastly, thank each other for working together to hold our community at this time of transition. We each can create a little space for everyone else. I am grateful that people are prepared to make that bit of extra effort to allow all of us to be together for the holidays.

This year, we have a special blessing to be all together at the holidays. Let us hold that in joy, and make the extra effort to facilitate the experience, being accessible and joyous for all.

Shabbat Shalom and Lshana Tova,

Rabbi David Booth

GETTING READY FOR YOM KIPPUR

SEPTEMBER 14, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Ten Days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur create a false sense of security. In fact, there are only 6 days. 2 are Rosh Hashanah itself, 1 is Shabbat, and 1 is Yom Kippur. The sacred opportunity to repair relationships, to seek healing and change in our own lives, has an immediacy when we realize the time is short. I want to suggest three practices to help us orient ourselves towards the cleansing and healing possibility of Yom Kippur.

1. Tzedakah, Charity. Look towards our own needs, we are nearing the end of our capital campaign. At this time of drawing together as a community, we see how important a Synagogue community is and how much we need our new campus. If you have not yet donated, please do! There is great merit in helping to build a house of worship and study and we so want everyone to feel they were part of building our new campus. If you have given, thank you! People have stretched to an incredible degree to make this happen and I am overwhelmed with appreciation and joy. We have a matching grant offered to us, so every additional gift gets doubled.

Looking at our larger community, the problem of hunger in our community continues. Last year, we raised over a ton of food and over \$7000 dollars to play our part in alleviating this need in Santa Clara and San Mateo county. This year, we need to do even more because the need is greater. I invite you to bring a bag of groceries with you before Kol Nidre, and to go to

<https://www.shfb.org/CongregationKolEmeth> and donate. Please indicate that you are part of the Kol Emeth food drive. Other worthy charities with this same goal include Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger and Jewish Family and Children's Services.

2. Teshuvah, Repentance. These ten days, short though they are, are a unique chance to affirm and heal broken relationships. I suggest finding time to call, email, message, or even speak in person, to friends, family, acquaintances with whom we may have had issues over the year. There is something deeply cleansing in saying: will you forgive me for that which I have done intentionally or unintentionally? It's a way of asking for healing, for a new start, without needing to assign blame or even to list out all that has happened. I am every year caught with too little time for this practice, and every year amazed by its healing power to set aside that which gets in the way.
3. Wearing White / Fasting. Fasting on Yom Kippur orients us away from the material and towards the need for moral and spiritual change in our lives. My daughter commented that the fasting, by giving her physical discomfort, helps her let go of her worries about school and life and instead focus on her

Yom Kippur needs. By the same token, wearing white on Yom Kippur is an external ritual that can create internal change. By dressing up as though we were cleansed, we can in fact become cleansed. I urge everyone to wear white- it's quite amazing to see the whole congregation letting go of vanity and turning towards spiritual renewal.

May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have a transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

DON'T BE A SHEEP

SEPTEMBER 17, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Most often, we live on autopilot. We aren't so much making choices as following habits and patterns of behavior. This is why data analytics are beginning to accurately predict people's preferences and behaviors. Given enough tracking and correlation, big data can start to predict what we do since there is so little change in how we are. I left home on an errand yesterday and turned as I normally do toward El Camino even though my errand was the other way. I was on autopilot and had to turn around.

That turning, the reorienting to where we need to be, is called Teshuvah, often approximately translated as repentance. We are on autopilot, sleepwalking and rarely if ever making real choices. Then comes Rosh Hashanah with the Shofar blasts: awaken, Israel! Notice – you are heading the wrong way and failing to utilize your deep human capacity to be attentive and turn the other way.

Untanetokef, at the middle of Musaf for both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, imagines God seated on God's throne, as we pass before God like a census or a flock of sheep. Yet the prayer offers a more complex view of human nature. We are told of the book of remembrance in which God writes even though each "human hand seals it."

There is an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, we are like sheep before the shepherd, brought before God for our fate to be determined for the next year. And then: we each of us as humans are writing in the book, placing our own hands on the book of remembrance. Are we sheep or people?

The piyyut may be asking us exactly that question, are you sheep or people? When we are asleep, going through the motions, following our habits, living within the narrow band of behavior that Big Data can predict, we are like sheep and God judges us as all the other living things. Our fate is determined because our behavior is already predictable and known. God knows what will happen to us because we are living like sheep.

Yet there is another mode, the mode of Teshuvah. We can be awakened by the Shofar and reminded that we can make decisions, that we can act as human beings created in the image of God. Then we are writing in the book ourselves because our behavior can no longer be known in advance even by God. In our choice to create the self anew, we become more fully human. We have become partners with God by dedicating ourselves to real choice, real service of God and humanity.

Teshuvah means we are ready to take responsibility for our behavior. That we are ready to walk with God, not before God like sheep. We are ready to hold onto human dignity and majesty in its essential holiness. This is the hard choice; the difficult willingness to be responsible for who we are and what we do. And yet: it is also the joyous choice, where we become beings worthy of knowing and being known by God.

Awaken, O Israel! So that we can be children of Adam and Eve, majestic beings created in the image of God and worthy of being known by God, transformed and ready to bring blessing into the world.

May we all inscribe ourselves in the book of life,

Rabbi David Booth

THE MUSSAR OF SUKKOT

SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Mussar is the Jewish spiritual practice of personal growth. With Mussar, we look at particular behaviors towards a more full understanding of how we might improve through study and practice. I believe Sukkot has a Mussar message that I would like to share.

For Mussar, what are the mitzvot?

The Mitzvot are the technology by which we do the work of self-creation. Mitzvot guide and direct our actions in ways that, with the proper intention, align us towards our truest selves. It follows the Talmudic teaching of Rava who says the mitzvot come to “smelt (Itzaraf) the self.” In other words, mitzvot allow the lead of the self to be forged into steel. It embodies behaviors that help us cast off the dross and weaknesses embedded in the self.

The Mussar of Sukkot

The Mussar of the Sukkah

Rav Eliyahu Dessler in his work Michtav d’Eliyahu (Letter of Elijah) writes that the Sukkah offers a Mussar lesson by teaching of the impermanence of the physical. We leave our permanent homes for flimsy structures, reminding us that even our solid seeming homes are less permanent than we think. The Israelites dwelt in sukkot in the desert for the same reason. God could have given them luxury condominiums but instead chose temporary structures to remind us of the temporary quality of all that is physical.

Rav Kook makes a similar observation, pointing out that Sukkot are part of the defense of Israel. Military helps with the physical, but without accompanying values there is nothing worth defending.

The Mussar of the Four Species

The four species symbolize parts of the body. For some, they represent the lips, the eyes, and spine, and the heart. In this typology, we need an alignment of speech, sight, will, and passion. By blessing these physical items, we invite blessing into those senses and actions.

For others, the four species represent the sexual organs and fertility. In this view, Sukkot Mussar is oriented towards our sexual urges. We bless them and hold them and orient them towards meaning and holiness and away from empty self-gratification and objectification.

Finally, for all views, the sensual nature of the four species invites an uplifting of our physicality. Rather than denigrating physicality as some traditions do, Sukkot invites us to sanctify our bodies and physical selves. Sukkot asks us to gain perspective on when our bodies and physical selves can be tools of uplift and holiness.

Some Mussar Practices for Sukkot

Sitting in a Sukkah can be a Mussar practice. Take a breath; appreciate the surroundings and the openness to the world. Note both the freedom the Sukkah provides and the temporary nature of its construction. On a cold night, the Sukkah is less inviting than a temperature controlled living room. Notice the conditions and what it awakens.

Using the Lulav and Etrog can be an invitation to think about how I generally use my body and to explore pathways towards holiness. Here the outcomes are too individual to make specific practices. But one example could be volunteering in a shelter or foodbank so that my body is being used to feed and house others. Another might be how I conduct myself around food.

Finally, Sukkot is a great time to assess the values that live under the Sukkah. You might take the time to say: What are three key values to me? What are the actions, the mitzvot, that I do to act on these values? That Mussar exercise could then orient towards an affirmation and greater commitment to key values.

Chag Sameach,

Rabbi David Booth

SILICON VALLEY BEIT MIDRASH

OCTOBER 12, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Torah learning is the key act of Jewish living. There is a reason the Rabbis say Torah study is greater than all other commandments. It instructs and guides us in how to treat others and points us towards God. Without Torah, human civilization and the human spirit are at great risk.

Torah is the basis of Jewish – and human – ethics. The Rabbis teach: an unlearned person cannot be pious. We hold values, some intuitively and some through learning. I believe we know on a deep level how wrong it is to hurt someone else; I believe we know on a deep level that kindness must be offered to others.

However, feeling those values of human life in deep ways is insufficient without practices that act on those values. For example, we know to value the elderly. Yet we need to be taught to give an older person our seat on the train or a bus. We know integrity matters; it is in Torah learning that we figure out how to practice integrity with kindness. While values have an intuitive element, ethical behaviors are learned. Torah study guides us towards those ethical behaviors.

Similarly, the role of spiritual living comes from something that yearns for God in the self. That yearning, that feeling and craving of divine connection, gets activated when we study and learn ways of connecting with the divine. In studying the practices of Shabbat, I have found a pathway into faith. In enriching my learning about prayer, I have found God.

The word drash itself reflects the sense of God being found in study. The word drash in the Bible means to inquire of God, to look for prophetic inspiration. For example, Rebecca goes to “inquire, Idrosh, of God” when the twins Jacob and Esau struggled in her womb. The Rabbis radically reinterpreted the word to mean inquiry and study into Torah text. Thus, Torah study is itself the sacramental and foundational act of Judaism. It is where the God encounter happens and where we learn how to make good on our values.

We began the Torah again this week. Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis reminds us that studying those words is the most essential Jewish act. Kol Emeth is creating a new context for Torah learning beginning on Oct 23rd at 7pm at the Beth Am campus. We are going to bring back the Silicon Valley Beit Midrash for a 9 week series with three classes offered on three different topics. There will be a Hebrew class

taught by Jeff Schwarz, a class on Israeli culture and music from Nechama Tamler and Tzipi Zach, and I will be teaching an intro to Talmud class on Talmudic ethics.

Our intent is to offer classes of substance at three different levels. We want to create a weekly context of deep learning and community. As a result, the classes will end at 8:15 with an invitation to a social hour of adult beverages and snacks to reflect on the learning and to create community.

The announcement bar on the side has registration links. All classes are limited to 20 attendees, so please sign up to guarantee a space.

I look forward to embarking on a journey of learning and growth as we take hold of our Judaism!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

REFUGEES

OCTOBER 19, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Abraham was part of one the greatest population movements in recorded history. As a result of war, drought, and famine, the fertile near east experienced a period of starvation and movement. It was in this context that Abraham went forth. And when he arrived, he wasn't so welcome. He immediately was part of yet another war and forbidden from owning property. It took a lot of faith before Abraham could settle in that land.

Fast forward to 1945. Another great migration, triggered by World War II, was ongoing. People were moving in the tens and even hundreds of thousands from war torn Europe. Among those refugees were thousands of Jews, people who had been forced out of their homes. Post war, those homes had been stolen and taken, never to be recovered. Many Jews ended up in the United States, and many in the land of Israel. We were delivered from a terrible circumstance to what has become really two lands of promise for the Jewish people.

We are living through another such great migration. Violence and failed governments in both South America and the Middle East have triggered a great movement of people. Steve Shapiro, who passed away just a few weeks ago, saw this crisis coming years ago. He wanted to send blankets and toiletries to UN refugee camps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. He took it very personally. He saw that the world had turned away in the 1940s and feared we were doing so again.

I feel Steve's motivation was deeply inspired by his Judaism. God says repeatedly in Torah to look out for the stranger. We know what it is like to be refugees, lost and homeless. We know how we were treated by the world when we have been refugees. Part of being Jewish is being different, embracing a unique and divinely inspired ethic that sometimes demands unusual behavior of us. In this instance, I believe it means a sense of responsibility to refugees. Our experience may awaken in us a desire to react now as we wish others had to us in the 1940s.

I want to turn towards the humanitarian aspect of this challenge. When I was in Rabbinical school in the nineties, I had a student from Uzbekistan. She had missed Middle School due to war; she had survived horrible things with her family intact. She was brilliant but needed extra help in certain areas because she had simply missed years of her education. Her experience reminds me of how important it is to preserve the human promise to be found amid those who today are refugees.

That is why I love the work IsraAid does. They get humanitarian teams on the ground during crisis. They are active in Lesbos, Greece helping to receive waves of refugees. They are active in resettlement camps in Europe, helping to provide education, water, food, and basic services. They are working with Yazidis to help preserve a culture ISIS attempted to destroy. They are motivated as Jews, as Israelis, and as human beings in their work. May God strengthen their hands.

As we remember the movements of Abraham, let us be inspired this week to alleviate the suffering of those moving and running and fleeing today. I invite you to join me in donating to IsraAid or any other such humanitarian organization. Where the world has always turned away, let us turn towards the suffering and do what we can to alleviate it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

RESILIENCE

OCTOBER 26, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We read all about Abraham and Sarah this time of year. As we explore their stories, we see deeply flawed individuals. Abraham has great difficulties dealing with others, whether his distrust of the Egyptians or of the Canaanites. Sarah is incredibly jealous of her handmaiden Hagar and even drives her out. These flaws lead to real failings. Abraham essentially sells Sarah to Pharaoh for safety and wealth; Sarah nearly murders Hagar and Ishmael.

And yet, despite these failings, Abraham and Sarah are spiritual giants. They are innovators of faith and monotheism. The Torah speaks of the “souls they made in Haran.” Their charismatic and deeply intellectual teaching drew people in as this new faith began to take root in their tents.

Further, the true depth of their faith emerges precisely because of their failings. They stumble, they lose trust, and they learn. Abraham doubts God’s promise after decades of infertility, and finally amid great persistence learns of God’s trust worthiness. His faith is deepened by his challenge and his doubting. His is a tested faith forged amid the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

I worry today that we have lost sight of resilience. Our society values success and expects that success to be attained early and often. If we aren’t the founders of a scalable disruptive internet concern by thirty, or a Nobel Prize winner by thirty five, we might as well give up. Yet when you look at those who have succeeded, great success is often not only preceded by great failure but predicated upon great failure.

Teshuvah, repentance, means both that we can change and that we WILL stumble. Failings are necessary because it is in failure that we learn and grow. The Midrash teaches that Abraham was forged in the ten tests God put him through. God didn’t need to test him; God needed to forge him. Had Abraham given up, he would have been forgotten. But he found the resilience of faith to learn from each test, to grow, and so became the greatest of the Patriarchs.

Imagine if we too looked at failure in that way. Failure is a chance to learn. Pain and loss a moment to reflect and rediscover gratitude and purpose. Imagine if we were as quick to share our failures and the lessons learned as our successes. I feel we would be more whole as people, and I also feel we would be more successful in the world.

This year we are starting the Resilience Project. This Project will start with three events designed to invite a more whole self into our lives that sees multiple paths to success and understands failure as necessary and often even helpful. Our first event will feature Susan Wojicki, Jeff Rosen, and David Waksberg, all incredibly successful people, sharing moments of failure in their own lives and how they learned and grew as a result. In other words, we want to prove to our hearts that truly successful people have biographies replete with challenges and even failures.

This will be followed by a workshop in partnership with University Church on MLK Sunday to work on growth mindset, a way of thinking that sees in failure an opportunity for growth. And finally, we will look at stories of hope amid darkness later in the winter / early spring.

I believe we have a greater potential for happiness and wholeness than is often developed. We need God to get there, and we also need a new way of talking to one another that values failure and that sees there are as many paths to success and meaning as there are people. For we are all created in the image of God, and yet each of us are unique.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

TREE OF LIFE

OCTOBER 31, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rabbi Jeff Meyers, Rabbi of Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, was locked out of his Sanctuary until Monday mid-day. Forensic and other police work meant the building was kept sealed. He returned Monday morning, appalled by what he saw. Glass was shattered. The Sanctuary was filled with bullet holes.

He could see the seats where his 11 members had been killed. If they are anything like Kol Emeth, he knew exactly where each person would have been. He went in, knowing it would be wrenching and painful and awful. He went in knowing that it would remind him of how broken his Sanctuary is, how broken his community is, how broken the world is. And he went in anyway.

He said that hate will not close his building. It will take time, but they will return, and they will fill that space again with prayer. For the next two weeks, his community will be immersed in funerals as the dead are laid to rest. Only then can they truly begin to even imagine what healing will look like.

We are a people committed to tikkun olam, repair of the world. When we see broken glass, it awakens in us a desire to repair and rebuild. When we see shattered lives, it awakens our compassion and impels us to offer comfort and love. I see so much that is shattered. Shattered is our sense of security, shattered is elements of our faith, shattered is the way we talk to each other.

Please know that we are looking carefully at security issues in our new building because of this attack. Also know that all our partner institutions who have so lovingly taken us in are reviewing security immediately to make us all as safe as possible.

I am calling on all of us to help pick up the broken glass and effect healing and repair. I urge you to write letters of love and consolation to members of Tree of Life Synagogue. Their address is 5898 Wilkins Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15217. We have already sent them well over 400 letters.

I am calling on us to be together this Shabbat. We will read the names of those murdered and recite mourners kaddish for them. We will recite words of healing for those injured, and prayers for the whole community. And we will be together, strengthened and reminded of faith by one another's presence.

I am calling on us to donate to Tree of Life Synagogue to aid them in their rebuilding. You can [donate here](#)

I also urge you to donate to HIAS or IsraAid or other meaningful Jewish charities. The shooter specifically attacked HIAS and felt he had “to act” because of refugee Shabbat. All the more reason to support organizations like HIAS that offer humanitarian aid to refugees and immigrants.

Lastly, we must work together to prevent this kind of violence in our society. I am shocked by the availability of such destructive power and the military grade ammunition the shooter was able to legally buy. I am also shocked by the continued degradation of the sacred image in our political discourse. People yell and use hateful speech far too easily and quickly. We need to call on our political leaders to let go of partisan differences and work together to find a new path of political discourse and a new approach to gun rights that can restore civility and safety to our world.

I hope to see you this Shabbat as we pray and sing together and hold one another in this terrible moment.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

THE SPIRITUALITY OF WELCOME

NOVEMBER 16, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Synagogues are customarily known as holy communities. In other words, Kol Emeth would be formally called the Holy Community of Kol Emeth. Names matter. Both words are of great significance in defining what it means to be a Synagogue community.

For a Synagogue to be a holy community it must have walls. That is, it must stand for something. We are here to answer God's call to be a blessing to the world. Synagogues must focus on Torah and learning to inspire moral action and spiritual growth. Without ethical and spiritual support, the walls will fall.

Yet those walls, as important as they are, must also have wide open doors. There is a story in the Talmud that Rabban Gamliel barred all but the elite from the House of Study. During a time when he was deposed, they allowed everyone entrance. And the need was great- they had to set up hundreds of extra seats. In other words, making the walls too high and the doors too narrow kept hundreds away from the life nurturing quality of Torah.

We easily fall into the trap of defending the walls when we should be opening the doors. Rabban Gamliel's motives were pure. He worried that if everyone came to the Study House, the quality of learning would diminish and Torah would be lost from Israel. We too worry sometimes about what needs to be protected and unintentionally close the doors and thereby weaken our community.

Communities, to live, must care for one another and must allow new people to enter and feel welcomed and embraced. Think back to the first time you came to Kol Emeth or some other Synagogue. What brought you in the door in the first place? Maybe it was Shabbat services or a family program or a cultural event. Or maybe it was an invitation from a friend. Whatever it was, someone built a door for you. And you had a reason or a need to walk through that door.

What happens next is critical. If you encounter something of meaning- the holy- you may want to stay in the room. And if you also encounter a community ready to make space for you -then there is a strong chance you will stick around and see what this Congregation has to offer. Absent either aspect- the meaning or the community- people most likely do not return or do so only rarely or in a purely transactional way.

We are fortunate at Kol Emeth this Shabbat to welcome Dr. Ron Wolfson, one of the great thinkers on Synagogues and meaning and welcome in our era. I have always learned a great deal from him, both on the most practical level (offer someone a book to the right place when they come in. Say hello to the people around you at services) to the sublime (Abraham's ethic of hospitality is embedded in the image of an open tent. Our houses of study and worship ought to emulate that ethic.)

I urge you to attend one of his sessions to learn and think more about our own doorways and walls. How can this community open the doors in such a way that people will feel inspired to enter? What can we do inside our new building to fill it with meaning and blessing so that our members will know we are in the presence of something critical and beautiful? I feel Dr. Wolfson can help us a great deal in addressing these questions and working towards that kind of answers that will enable Kol Emeth to be a true Holy Community.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 21, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The last few weeks have been incredibly challenging and draining. From the horrors of the Pittsburgh shooting to the wildfires across California, it has been hard to breathe. And yet, amid all this, I am grateful. I am grateful that the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette put the Mourners Kaddish on its front page the Shabbat after this horrible anti-semitic incident. I am grateful to first responders and family and friends who have given each other comfort and support and love. I am grateful to the outpouring of love I have experienced here at Kol Emeth and grateful to live in this place with this community.

A prayer of gratitude to be recited before dinner at Thanksgiving:

Source of life and blessing, bless us and this wonderful meal. We offer thanksgiving for the blessings of life and breath, for air that is safe to breath and homes that keep us protected from the elements. In appreciation of our own blessings of abundance, we pledge to donate to Second Harvest to ensure that we do our part in making sure everyone has enough to eat.

We also express appreciation for the love and support we have seen from people across ethnic and religious divides. Thank You for enabling the United States to foster a religious experience that has brought together Jews and Christians and Muslims and Hindus when our houses of worship are desecrated. We see how unusual this is in the world and thank You for such blessings.

We ask for Your continued blessings and love. May you open the hearts of all to gratitude, reminding everyone how deeply connected we all are. May you help us breathe deeply of the air and remind us of how fortunate we are to be alive.

Baruch Atah Adonia, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam, Hamotzi Lechem Min Haaretz. Praised are You, God, who brings forth bread from the Earth. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Thanksgiving,

Rabbi David Booth

REDEFINING NEIGHBORS ON GIVING TUESDAY

NOVEMBER 27, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Abraham does an amazing thing. Three men approach his tent. He has never met them before. He does not know who they are or from where they are coming. He has no idea of their intentions or personality. Yet as soon as he sees them, he reaches out. He welcomes them into his tent and feeds them from his own table.

I believe this moment was defining for the deep meaning of being Jewish. Being Jewish means teaching about God and about humans created in the divine image. That means on a deep level we are all neighbors, all part of the same human community. All of Jewish revelation, ethics, and halachah can be seen as an extended meditation on this theme.

In the last couple of years, I have been forced to think differently about neighbors. I know my neighbors. Yet in my neighborhood is a growing community of people who are quasi homeless. Visible and yet invisible.

We see on El Camino, on Park Dr., in sections of East Palo Alto and Mountain View, a growing number of RVs in which people are living. Some are essentially migrant workers doing time limited contract work for whom the RV is a convenient and inexpensive alternative to our insane housing market. Others live here more permanently and lack the resources to enter the more traditional housing market. Yet they are our neighbors.

I have seen families in some, children who are growing up in a small RV with no permanent water or power hookup. Even conveniences like flush toilets that we take for granted are fraught because they lack a sewage hookup. Carol and I were walking a few weeks ago and a smallish RV appeared to house a family of four. I have no idea if those children are going to school nor why their parents have made this choice, or even if they have other alternatives.

I've been wanting to learn from the example of Abraham. It is harder for us because the people living in the RV's are private. They don't necessarily want to be bothered and are most likely worried that people who try and interact with them may want to force them to move or have their RV towed.

And yet, I am not ready to give up. We are partnering with Live Moves, an amazing local charity that addresses issues of hunger and homelessness in our area. In partnership with them, we are gathering backpacks, socks, coloring books, and other items we think will be useful for those living in RV's.

Here is what I am asking you to do. First, go to [Amazon using this link](#). We have created an Amazon gift registry to purchase the items we want to donate. We are about half way to our goal and need your help. Buy what you can and ship it to Eve's registry address, which should come up when you select shipping. That will send the items directly to our offices, 2525 Charleston Rd in Mountain View, 94303. Please select a shipping option that will have the items arrive by Dec 1st.

Second, join us this Sunday Dec 2nd at 11:15 at the office to pack up the items and meet with a representative from Live Moves who will educate us on the circumstances of those in the RVs. We have to learn in order to help.

Hopefully, this can be our first step in living up to Abraham's ideal as we seek to broaden what it means to be a neighbor. Hopefully, this can give us something concrete to do for those suffering as a result of the crazy costs of housing in this area. I easily get overwhelmed by the size of the problem, so perhaps this can be a first step that helps us bring blessings into the lives of others.

I wish you a lovely week, Shabbat, and beginning of Hanukkah.

Rabbi David Booth

LIMITLESS BLESSING

DECEMBER 7, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

So here is the story so far. Cain kills his brother Abel. Ishmael plays rough with his much younger brother, Isaac, and Sarah sends him away. Jacob and Esau are rivals; Esau threatens to murder his brother, who knows about Cain and Abel. So off he goes for 20 years. And now we get to Joseph and his brothers. Joseph goes out to meet his brothers and they strip off his coat, throw him into a pit, and then sell him into slavery.

The same terrible things keep happening and the healing we so want to see in the story keeps failing to occur. It is heartbreaking and so deeply true. Cain worries that he lives in a world where God's love can only touch him OR Abel. In such a world, there is only one choice. Sarah sees a world in which only Isaac OR Ishmael can be safe. What else can she do? Jacob lives in a world where only he OR Esau can be blessed. What choices are there?

And yet, there is another way. Cain refuses to be his brother's keeper; Jacob never tries to reconcile with Esau (though perhaps Esau seeks a connection with Jacob). There is a different choice, a choice to see the true world of God's infinite love. Love and blessing don't have to be limited capacities when we embrace moral action. The minute we take responsibility for the other, our ability to love and be loved becomes limitless.

Amos warns us that we are deaf to the cries of the poor and blind to the needs of the hungry. Our attention is so rooted in our own day to day needs, we lose the ability to care about others. As we lose that quality of hearing and sight, we become consumed with getting our own share, our own part of what we are due. And in that state of mind, love and blessing, like everything else, are limited commodities that must be held, protected, and defended when necessary.

By contrast, when we retrain our eyes, when we look at the other, something changes. We see that our ability to care, our capacity to see, is limitless. Our brother or sister is not our competitor for the limited love and blessing in the world. Instead, they are as in need of the love and care we have to offer as we are for the love and care of others. In this one way (and perhaps this way only) we are all the same and all of limitless capacity.

I can love with my whole being and still have more love in my heart. I can care for others and still have

room to care again. Even more, my acceptance of responsibility helps me develop a greater and greater capacity for love, to learn in moral teaching a greater and greater sense of how I can use my limited resources to express my limitless care. Knowing this is true of me, I can believe it is true in others as well.

This encounter with the loving other invites a connection to the greater Other whom we name God. Sometimes we encounter God in our limited definition and restricted sense of self that is grasping and clinging to what little we have. When we encounter God in this way, we hear a harsh voice of judgment. While true, it is only one thin echo of the truth of God. By contrast, when we allow ourselves to encounter God in our more true and limitless self, a self that sees the other and cares, a self who feeds the hungry and clothes the naked, we encounter a God of love, a limitless Other from whom flows an overwhelming Hesed (love, care, compassion) into the world.

Joseph uncovers this capacity in himself. He remains true to Potiphar in the face of great temptation to betray him and embraces the limited possibilities of love and blessing. By staying true he opens a pathway to reconciliation with his brothers that will finally redeem the entire book of Genesis by reminding us that brothers can care for each other, that brothers can share a faith and destiny in love. He becomes Joseph the Tzadik, Joseph the righteous. He shows us the way to embrace our own responsibilities to the other, and in that embrace discovers the limitless quality of God's love in the world.

I believe that if we take even one step of being our brother's keeper, if we take even one step of caring for the other, we will be met by God. We too will realize that what we thought was limited and constrained is in fact beyond measure and can never be contained.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MAY YOU BE BLESSED

DECEMBER 14, 2018

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Every Friday night, I bless my children. When they were growing, it happened at the Shabbat table. I would call them one at a time, in order of their birth, and bless them. There were minor variations over the years. Sometimes, a child didn't like it when I held their head, so I would hold their hands instead. Other times, they were away for school or other trips, and I would bless them by phone. But I never missed a Friday.

My two older children now live in Seattle and New York. I call them each Friday and bless them over the phone. The first few times I blessed Naomi in this more virtual fashion, she cried. She was adjusting to college life and being away from home. The blessing reminded her that there was a place – or rather, a family – that embraced her and loved her for who she is.

At first, the virtual blessing was hard for her because it reminded her of how homesick she was. Over time, that blessing came to symbolize a love and sense of being cared for regardless of her physical location that strengthens her daily.

Blessings are a language that allow love and relationship to be communicated. I find the set ritual lets me express something bigger than any words I might find. As eloquent as I can sometimes be, the ritual reminds me of the power of human contact and the benefit gained from words that echo across time. I use the language of the Joseph story to bless my son Joshua. Jacob blesses his children, saying their blessing will be that the Jewish people will bless their children to be like Ephraim and Menashe.

Ephraim and Menashe were distant from Jacob. They grew up in a foreign land and only came to know their family again as adults. And yet, they held onto who they were and to their connection to God. There are many midrashic traditions that suggest we bless this way in the hopes that our children will continue a deep connection to God and Judaism.

I want to suggest a related meaning. As people, we all crave being loved and being known. Knowing that we are loved enables us to unlock our positive altruistic characteristics. Its absence awakens more negative self focused traits. We know that people who experience abuse or bullying themselves are more likely to act in self focused anti-social ways for immediate personal benefit. And we know that people who are loved and experience positive interaction are better able to offer love and altruism into

the world.

A blessing enables us to act in the place of God because we are opening a person's ability to do good in the world by showing them love. Jacob's blessing over Ephraim and Menashe reminds them of how connected they are, how much they are loved, and enables them to become great leaders. I bless my children as an invitation into their most whole selves. I bless friends and congregants from time to time because I believe it opens a pathway to love.

May you be blessed to know that you are loved and known. And may that knowledge help you discover in your own self and soul the power to be a loving person who is truly a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom!

CyberTorah will be on hiatus through the middle of January. Happy secular new Year!

ACQUIRING WISDOM

JANUARY 11, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Heschel makes a key point in his monumental book *The Sabbath*. The modern era has seen an incredible increase in human majesty and power. We have probed the functions of the cell and of the atom to great effect. Breakthroughs in physics and biology have enabled huge leaps in our ability to exercise power on the world and on the human body.

Yet that same advance has been absent from moral philosophy. As great as we have become in the physical world, we have developed little if at all in the spiritual realm. Indeed, all too often we denigrate the need for personal growth and moral development as an arena for the foolish. Luzzatto raises this same issue in *Way of the Upright*, his foundational work of Mussar, in the 18th century. He notes that everyone agrees on the need for moral and spiritual development. Further, people know much of what they should be doing to achieve growth.

Yet because the process seems less intellectually challenging, because it is something that requires in its nature an egalitarian quality, elites perceive of such discussions as the arena for simpletons and fools. Luzzatto warns us that our egos prevent us from the kind of moral and spiritual growth we would otherwise attain.

The modern era, with all its amazing achievements, is also an era of unmitigated ego. We have genuinely uncovered great scientific mysteries; yet the depths of the human heart remain a mystery. We have grown enormously in our power to change the world in deep ways; yet there has been little thought on how and when we should use such powers. We rush forward with little contemplation, creating dangers to our own inner worlds and the potential for massive devastation to the external world and climate as well.

Heschel offers Shabbat us one solution. By creating an Island in Time, a day devoted to contemplation, community, unplugging, we create a day in which meaning and purpose can be explored. We create an opportunity to slow ourselves down, to take a refreshing breath (shabbat v'yinafash) and create context for the other 6 days of the week. I believe more Shabbat in people's lives would lead to a greater wisdom in the ways in which we use the vast powers we are uncovering.

I offer an additional tool to invite moral and spiritual growth: the study of Talmud and Torah. I have

dedicated my life to the study and teaching of Jewish text because I believe within it are great tools for helping Jews and humanity acquire the needed wisdom to accompany our incredible power. I have experienced directly through study tools for moral growth and practices for spiritual uplift that have provided texture and meaning to my life.

It is in that spirit that I invite you to the winter session of the Silicon Valley Beit Midrash. I will be teaching a course called *Rabbis Behaving Badly: Anger and Forgiveness in the Talmud*. We will look directly at anger, anger triggers, and Talmudic stories of anger, aware of the great dangers that result from anger. This will be followed by a deep dive into one of the greatest tools for healing we have: forgiveness.

I am also pleased to announce that Jake Marmer, an up and coming Jewish writer and poet, will be teaching an amazing class on modern Jewish literature and its deep roots in Jewish sources. This course will also invite an opportunity for people to create some of their own writing. Jake is an incredible person and scholar; I highly recommend studying with him.

And finally Jeff Schwarz will be teaching Intro to Hebrew. If you already know the aleph bet and would like to develop some comfort with reading, this is the class for you. Newcomers are welcome.

Sessions begin Jan 22nd at 7pm at Beth Am in Los Altos. Please register on the sidebar now or click [this link!](#)

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MLK AND RESILIENCE

JANUARY 18, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Martin Luther King had a lot of Moses in him. He was a larger than life figure with gigantic outsize capacity, though still with human flaws. He, like Moses, never sought leadership, instead taking it on because he had the God given gifts needed for that particular moment of redemption. I believe God is working all the time to make the world a better place; but we have to listen, to pay attention, in order for God's work to be done.

MLK lived through a lot and had every reason to become discouraged. There were so many moments in his own personal narrative as well as the events on the larger national scene that would have caused any sane person to give up. There were sufficient threats and darkness that he ought to have retreated back to a small Church somewhere and just lived quietly.

Yet he had a mission. A mission to help move towards creating a true brother and sisterhood of humanity. And that mission, even in his darkest moments, reminded him that there is hope and the possibility of redemption. We don't know when the light will dawn, only that it must. And MLK was a great man because that was enough for him.

We need reminders of his legacy, we need to tell his story, because we need the reminder that amid all our imperfections and challenges, amid all the setbacks and failures we experience in our own lives and in the larger world, the light must still come. Hope and faith inspire the resilience we need to keep on keeping on until we can make our way to the great changes in ourselves and the world that we so hopefully seek.

Resilience is the key. It is the secret ingredient of faith and hope that lets us get through the inevitable darkness and struggle to find the glimmers of light that eventually become the sunrise. Resilience stems from outward facing purpose. It arises because we have a mission that sits outside of time to be a blessing to the world. We have that mission in the darkness and the light.

This year, we are telling the story of Dr. King in partnership with University AME Zion Church of Palo Alto. On Shabbat, Pastor Smith will be with us to share words of hope and inspiration. We will then have a special kiddush lunch exploring purpose and resilience in our own lives, followed by a lecture from the great Dr. Denise Pope.

Saturday night will be a special musical Gospel Havdalah as we enjoy music and community from our two traditions. And then Sunday I will be speaking at the Church, followed by a brunch and an activity of learning resilience in our bodies.

I invite you to join me for a wonderful Shabbat and weekend. And for those who read CyberTorah from other areas, I invite you seek out ways in your own community to reaffirm the mission of Moses, of Dr. King, of all those who have found the way even in the darkness to bring hope and light into the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LOVING SPEECH

JANUARY 25, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The moment of revelation at Sinai was unlike any other moment in the history of humanity. The Torah itself captures the power of the moment by identifying that the people “heard the lights and saw the sounds.” The impact of God’s speech was so great that it created a confusion of senses. The Rabbis imagine that impact going one step further. They teach that when God spoke a delicious fragrance entered the world. The people experienced the revelation as an enlivening, energizing aroma.

Imagine if we strove to talk that way. Imagine if we strove to talk with such authenticity, honesty, and compassion that people experienced our words as a delightful fragrance. In the same way that smelling a rose or a delicious spring day can revive and heal, imagine if our speech towards others revived and healed.

Right now, we use our words about achievement and how we compare to others and about what we want from the people around us. My daughter is a senior in high school. She is regularly asked by adults which college she will attend in the fall, clearly meant to show interest and caring in her. Yet people listen for colleges of perceived status in her application list. This question sends her a message that the most important thing about her right now is her academic achievement.

There are lots of examples of this. People are quick to ask where someone works. Board members sometimes get hit with complaints or concerns about the Synagogue when they are at services. We often use our words to communicate judgment and complaints. I want to challenge us to use speech to communicate healing, encouragement, and love.

Imagine if people asked my daughter more about how she is, or what she is reading or what she does for fun. These kinds of open-ended questions indicate interest in her rather than in her achievements. As adults, what if we asked each other about how we are? What if we focused on books we are reading, charities to which we contribute? What if we asked people what they care about in the world?

If we engage in conversation in these ways, it will enliven and inspire people. If we think before speaking that we want our words to be experienced as loving and healing, our words could have a depth and quality that they lack currently. All it would require would be a moment, a brief pause and respite, to fill our words with compassion in place of judgment, with curiosity in place of complaint.

God spoke and transformed humanity. God's speech was whole, centered, and offered in great love. Those qualities are accessible to us as human beings. I invite us to infuse our speech with a wholeness, a centered quality, a loving quality free from judgment. I believe if we make that effort, we can transform for the good the lives of those around us and with whom we speak.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LAWS OF THE LAND

FEBRUARY 1, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Ethics sit at the center of Judaism. The Rabbis argue on the core teaching of Torah. Rabbi Ishmael places God at the center by quoting, “Listen to God’s voice.” For him, obedience and observance is Judaism. Rabbi Akiva by contrast emphasizes ethical behavior. For him, the core of Torah is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Ethics stem from our encounter with the other and from the divine encounter. Either way, we live in a web of obligations to the other that creates justice in the world.

I was privileged last week to attend Jeff Rosen’s swearing in for his third term as District Attorney for Santa Clara County. He gave an amazing speech that highlighted our responsibility to bend the moral arc of history towards justice. When people of good will strive to bring justice into the world, our actions can bend the arc of history and create a more just society.

He noted that as humans our vision is limited. We can only see but so far. Nevertheless, we are commanded to unceasingly work to bring justice – and I would add blessing – into the world. Our limited eyesight, to me, shows the need for God. It is through our belief in God’s authority and in God’s goodness that we know there is a direction, we know there is a promised land, within which true justice can be achieved. Our is not to complete the work, but we must keep up our efforts.

This week we will read of a whole set of laws and ethical teachings rooted in the most mundane of human behavior. It is in our daily interactions, our establishment of just laws and fair commerce, that we create the ground upon which a just society can be built. These laws begin a process of imagination that created a whole corpus first of Jewish and then Western law and ethics.

I especially love the way the Talmud further develops and even innovates within the playground of Biblical law and ethics. The Rabbis of that era saw Torah and God pointing them towards something better. They were courageous in their willingness to innovate on their own *svara*, reasoning to bend that moral arc closer to justice. They created a whole system of civil law loosely based on Torah so that the economy and commerce of their era could function with just laws. They overturned other laws, like that of the rebellious son, because they felt their enforcement would bend away from justice.

Their work was imperfect. I wish they had eliminated slavery, for example, but the Talmud dutifully records laws of owning slaves. Their treatment of sexuality and women also has huge lacunae that orient

away from justice. And yet, I feel the effort and the faith that makes Rabbinic Judaism such an incredible contribution to spiritual and ethical literature.

We know we cannot create a true promised land of perfect justice. That knowledge, however, awakens a deep need for faith in me. I pray for God's guidance to help me, and all of us, transcend the limitations of our particular moment and viewpoint so that we can be partners with God in bending the moral arc of the universe more towards justice.

May God strengthen all of us to lead the world into such a promised land. And may God continue to encourage us even in moments when we seem to slip away from justice or when our own efforts may appear to fall on deaf ears, knowing that in time to come we will indeed bring more justice and blessing into the world. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF MUSIC

FEBRUARY 8, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Ruach, spirited energy, elevates prayer into something transformative. Singing together has many health benefits and the sense of shared community is also good for longevity and wellness. Combined, they can create pathways for joy that elevate and heal.

Liturgy and communal prayer create a regular opportunity for this kind of ruach and communal experience. The need for a minyan is a basic health concern; the importance of singing together is essential for happiness. Put another way, Shabbat services are one of the healthiest things you can do in a week.

Creating the rich environment of song and prayer we crave takes creative energy and intentionality. We are blessed with many amazing prayer leaders and with a community that loves song. When invited, we get great joy going in our services. I have started a practice from the Bratslav tradition of jumping up and down as we sing a wordless melody or niggun. It makes me smile; the ridiculousness creates another path to joy.

Yet the work is significant to hold that energy throughout our service. I want Shabbat to be transformative, impactful and joyous. Learning and relational moments are one aspect; a rich environment of song the other.

This is why we are bringing out Hazzan Joanna Dulkan this Shabbat. She will lead services and teach us tools and skills to create more ruach and joy in our prayer experience. Hazzan Dulkan was part of the team that edited our new prayer book, as well as a talented and charismatic prayer leader in her own right. She will bring us a Shabbat filled with joy and wonder, but also teach us how to elevate Shabbatot into the future.

I hope you can join us Friday night and Saturday morning at the OFJCC and Saturday night in a private home. Registration is on the sidebar. I look forward to singing and celebrating with you!

Rabbi David Booth

One final note: Last week the KE Leadership sent a note condemning the hate speech on BART and

urging support against the anti-semitism displayed towards Manny's in San Francisco. JCRC, Jewish Community Relations Council, has done great work in both areas. They worked with BART to change their policies and remove the offending ads; they also have been working to find ways to help Manny's. Below are a few calls to action in his support via JCRC.

1. Patronize Manny's.
2. Join the Collective. In order for Manny's to continue over the long term and to be affordable, it needs to be people-powered via a collective. If folks want to help, they can join the Manny's Collective [here](#) and become a subscriber.
3. Support the Space. Show your support by posting positively on your social networks, rating Manny's highly on [Yelp](#), [Google](#) and [Facebook](#) and [donating here](#).

Make a difference!

HEVRE KADISHA

FEBRUARY 15, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Among the greatest of the commandments is caring for the dead. Often called hesed shel emet, a true act of love, these mitzvot are particularly loving because they can by their nature never be repaid. We believe the soul leaves the body upon death, yet the body retains value and deserves love and care as it is prepared for its final resting.

Many communities maintain a Hevra Kadisha, a holy community, to prepare bodies for burial. Their task is to gather with the body. They wash and clean it, feet facing toward the door. After the body is thoroughly cleaned, they pour an additional measure of water to purify the body. All that has been in life is washed away. The soul that is pure returns to God; the body that has taken on so much is cleansed and purified by other humans.

After the purification, dirt from Israel is placed on the forehead of the person. They are then wrapped in white burial shrouds called "tachrichim." Psalms and verses are recited at various parts of the ritual to enable participants to stay focused on the holy and loving quality of their behavior.

In addition to the purification, Jewish tradition mandates an attendant to the body from the moment of death until the burial takes place. This attendant, called a "shomer/et," sits with the body the night before the funeral so that there is never a point where the body is unattended. The shomer often recites psalms or other readings, or perhaps engages in some study, while attending.

Both of these rituals are best performed by members of the same community. While there are professional societies, there is something special about volunteer members taking this responsibility on as an act of love. The intention becomes pure. The volunteers care for the body of the deceased because he or she is a member of the community, perhaps even someone they knew.

At Kol Emeth, we have been unable to start a Hevra Kadisha because there was nowhere locally to cleanse the bodies. However, Sinai Memorial Chapel is now building a room in their Redwood City facility. As a result, we are partnering with Peninsula Sinai, CBJ, and Sinai Memorial to create a local Hevra Kadishah.

The first step will be a class beginning in March. The class creates no obligation. Some people go and

realize they cannot do the work, while others experience the cleaning or attending as incredibly meaningful. If you are interested, please let me know. Len Lehmann has kindly agreed to lead the KE contingent.

This summer, our community will step forward more fully in caring for our dead in a loving and respectful manner deeply informed by Jewish tradition. I am proud and honored to be part of such an effort.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE NEW BUILDING

FEBRUARY 22, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have been excited to see the new Kol Emeth being built. I've never been so excited about plumbing and heating before! As the building takes shape, I want to share some of the story our building will tell.

The new Kol Emeth will remind us of who we are, inspire us and function as a catalyst to be a blessing at Synagogue, in our homes and work places, and in the world. The open courtyard will be at the center, reminding us of the centrality of community and that our mission goes well beyond the Synagogue's walls.

Our Ark evokes Moses' encounter with the Divine. This week we read of Moses' revelation. After the failure of the Golden Calf, Moses wanted a more immediate knowing of God. God placed Moses in the cleft in the rock and then passed by Moses. The Torah describes Moses experiencing God as compassionate, loving and forgiving. Our Ark will echo that story with two enormous stones creating a space of revelation in between.

The ceiling in our Sanctuary evokes a huppah because we believe that joy and love are essential to meaningful living. The undulations of a tallit holding and embracing us will frame our prayer experiences around joy and love amid the experience of God.

Our building tells the story of being in the Desert. That time of journeying was filled with growth and dynamic change for the Jewish people. In this way the building itself can inspire experimentation and innovation.

Further, that time in the Desert was so generative because it was away from the distractions of the world, from the fleshpots of Egypt. We too are creating a true Sanctuary, away from the clutter and noise that permeates modern culture. The open spaces and natural materials will invite kavod rosh, a deep mindfulness that comes from creating a space within which we can touch the infinite.

Our time in the desert reminds us of the earth itself. Our new facility will be net-zero energy and will aspire towards zero waste. It will have greenery and life to be part of sustaining the delicate environment in which we live.

Lastly, our Sanctuary faces towards Israel. We orient ourselves towards the Promised Land. Our facility challenges us to be a blessing as we work together to build a promised land. It invites responsibility here in Silicon Valley and a deep connection to the land of Israel as well.

We have been in transition for one year now. We hope to enter our new building very early in 2020. May it be soon and speedily!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE GIFTS OF PURIM

MARCH 1, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am in love with the way we do Mishloach Manot at Kol Emeth. Over the last few years, a team of nearly 100 volunteers have turned community wide Mishloach Manot into a vital part of our congregation. Mishloach Manot, sent gifts, are one of four key commandments for Purim. The Megillah itself commands us to send gifts of food to our neighbors. Kol Emeth now makes sure that every single KE member receives a basket and gives each of us the opportunity to be part of the mitzvah by designating friends and community members to receive the baskets.

It is a major undertaking. There are buyers of food and other goodies, there are stuffers who fill the bags, and a massive delivery effort to get the baskets to each member. I have heard terrific feedback from longstanding members, from new members, from active members, from members who rarely attend. Finding that basket on your doorstep is a message of inclusion, an invitation to realize that the KE community continues to embrace each person and household.

As you sponsor names this year, I'd encourage you to add a handful of extra names to your list. Perhaps include someone you met at services, or whose child goes to religious school with your child, or someone on the list you have never met before. It is an easy way to surprise someone with an act of caring.

Many of our members continue to make their own baskets, myself included. This is also a marvelous and appreciated gesture. In the past, we brought baskets with us to the Megillah reading. However, that public gesture left some feeling left out as they saw all the baskets of others and had none themselves. Now people bring the baskets directly to people's homes on the day of Purim. Carol and I walked around our neighborhood delivering baskets last year and ended up returning home with about as much as we had brought with us.

Should you choose to make baskets this year, here is a recipe for Hamentashen:

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tsp baking power
- 1/3 cup crisco or margarine (I always make mine pareve since I am giving them to others)
- 1 egg

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/4 water
- pinch of salt
- Mix ingredients together to make a sticky dough. Preheat oven to 375. Use about 1/2 the dough, roll it out and cut circles about 3 inches in diameter. Place 1 tsp filling in center and pinch one side. Fold second and then third to make triangular shape. Cook for 15 minutes

Fillings include:

apricot or raspberry preserves

And here is a recipe for a chocolate filling:

- 6 Tbl crisco
- 4 oz unsweetened chocolate
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 flour
- 1 tsp vanilla
- pinch of salt

Melt crisco and chocolate in a saucepan, mixing frequently. Remove from heat. Add one egg at a time, making sure it is fully mixed in. Add in remaining ingredients and mix briskly for 1 minute. Refrigerate. Fill Hamentaschen (if you can resist eating this pure chocolate....)

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

NETANYAHU AND THE WHIFF OF DEFEAT

MARCH 8, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel goes to the polls April 9th, and a lot of things can happen. Israeli politics are so different than American politics that I feel we need a bit of background to understand what we are hearing.

Israelis vote for parties rather than people. The US press sets it up as a contest between Netanyahu, the current Prime Minister, and Benny Ganz, the leading center left challenger. In reality, it's about two races. One is which party has the most seats, and two is what party has the best path to forming a coalition. Blue and White, Ganz' new party, for example, could be the largest and still have no ability to form a government if other right-leaning parties have enough seats to keep a center-left coalition from forming. The same could happen to Likud.

Netanyahu, for the first time in a while, may lose the role of Prime Minister. He is afraid, which is why he encouraged a reprehensible deal between the remnants of the old Religious Zionist party with the racist remnants of the Kahana party. A deal like this can't be worth the premiership because it invites a hateful element into Israeli politics that for years has been wisely and legally excluded. (As an aside, it also shows the incredible weakness of the Religious Zionists, who used to be the kingmakers of Israeli politics. By connecting themselves so closely to the politics of the right, they have become irrelevant.)

And for the first time he has a real challenger in the person of Benny Ganz, a former head of the Israeli military. Ganz is running as a centrist. He is talking more about the need for change than what that change will be. He has allied himself with Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, to create a large governing bloc to be called Blue and White.

Their hope may be to govern WITH Likud. Lapid was recorded saying that they hoped for the following scenario. If they end up with a meaningful number of seats more than Likud, Netanyahu will resign. At that point, they will join Likud in a centrist coalition that works to implement the Trump peace plan for the Middle East. I realize to American ears that sounds strange, but keep in mind 70% of Israelis view Trump favorably.

And lastly, the threat of indictment over Netanyahu. The Attorney General of Israel has indicated an intent to indict Netanyahu on bribery and public trust charges. That indictment is pending based on some legal maneuvering that will occur in the next few months. If he is indicted, which seems likely, the

Supreme Court may force his resignation.

How this pending indictment affects the election is hard to say. Early polling shows little impact to small lift for Likud. But that may change as the elections draw closer. I hope Israel can avoid a constitutional crisis by the Court demanding a sitting Prime Minister resign and a Prime Minister tempted to pass laws that protect him from prosecution.

But the real question isn't whether Netanyahu will be Prime Minister. He has won several elections now by being seen as the least bad alternative. The real question for Israelis is which parties do they want in the government. The ads on the right are all about Ganz, the leader of Blue and White, as an unknown and as an opponent of the Iran deal. The parties on the right are trying to rally their voters by painting Ganz as a security risk and the Blue and White party as a collection of egos rather than serious people.

I'm personally a fan of Yesh Atid. I like their centrist stance and their advocacy for religious pluralism. I've heard Lapid talk about economics and he seems smart and thoughtful. I also think a governing coalition led by Blue and White avoids a constitutional dilemma and keeps some dangerous bigots out of the government. Yet there is a risk. An Israeli voter could even agree with all this and still vote for Likud or one of the other right leaning parties because of the relatively untried nature of Ganz. A party that calls for something new without clarifying that new is risky. And its hard to accept risk when you have neighbors like Syria and Iran.

May God guide Israelis to a government that can lead a strong, secure Israel seeking after peace for all its inhabitants and neighbors.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE NEW PURIM SCROLL

MARCH 15, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was going through some old papers and uncovered the following curious manuscript. Here is my best translation. All errors are entirely my own:

It came to pass in the days of President Trump, in that land of Silicon Valley that is in California, that the Jews declared a great feast and party called Purim. All around them could be seen silver, gold, Teslas, and multi-million dollar homes. And some of them even owned the gold and the Teslas and the multi million dollar homes.

Haman's aplenty surrounded them, and yet for all their noise and threat, little real danger emerged. White supremacist and anti-semites found new platforms on the right, and an emergent anti-semitism masked as anti-Israeli rhetoric rose on the left. But truth was, as scary and frightening as these trends were, the Jews in those days had many allies and power to fight back and keep the fear at bay.

And yet, amid all their comfort, a deep disquiet arose. And there was in those days a woman named Hadassah, and sometimes called Esther, who spoke to that deep disquiet. She had grown up in a Jewish home with a love for Shabbat dinner. Her family went to services at least twice a year, and sometimes three times.

Now, though, it had been a while since she had made her way into Synagogue. And she realized amid that deep disquiet that she was missing something. She had friends, and community, but she craved a community of meaning that wanted to know her and a place for her to share her stories and for her stories to be heard. For she was lonely, and it is not good for people to be lonely.

Her uncle Mordecai invited her to come with him to Shabbat. And she went. And she didn't like it very much. It was hard to follow the services. And she couldn't use her cell phone. And it was just all a little too slow. But she stayed, because she loved her uncle Mordecai.

And she met a few other people at Kiddush. And that was kind of nice. Or at least nice enough to come back the following week. And in the fullness of time, she began to appreciate the slower pace of Shabbat. She started to see how special it was to leave time to sing and learn together and share kiddush. She went to a learner's service and realized how beautiful the prayers really were.

She still liked to arrive late. And she still didn't go every week. But somehow, she began to feel as though she had a place to hold her, where she didn't have to worry about her job title or her accomplishments. Where people were interested in who she was more than what she did.

Mordecai told her: we need you here. We need your help too. Judaism will survive whatever you choose, but you will no longer be part of this story unless you step in and step up. At first she told him no. She was too busy, work was too hard. But then she realized she wanted to be more a part of things and she wanted to help others find this place of faith and warmth she hadn't even realized she needed.

And they sent out words of welcome, and letters and invitations. They experimented with interesting programs and classes that spoke to their values and faith. And lo, the community thrived. And at a time when religion seemed under threat, they built and grew. And they were part of the heart and soul of Silicon Valley, a key place that helped root a whole region in deeper values that helped turn that deep disquiet into a feeling of joy and purpose.

And they declared a feast that year to celebrate, and drink, and rejoice. Because amid all the darkness, and fears, there is still song and still joy. And that is reason enough to celebrate.

The text ends here. I guess that means we should celebrate too!

Happy Purim and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah next week in observance of Purim.

SPECIAL EDITION

MARCH 15, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I had already scheduled CyberTorah to go out this morning, but I woke up to the horror in New Zealand. And so I am sending a second notice, which I will also send to the local Muslim community.

People of true faith know that God's love extends to all humanity, whether we call him Adonai, Allah, God or anything else. When someone infected by hate targets a place of worship of any kind, we must all stand up in condemnation. I am filled with compassion for those murdered today, with prayers of healing for those hurt and suffering loss, and outrage that yet another place of worship has been targeted by hate. May God hold safe the souls of those murdered at the two mosques in New Zealand.

When a hate filled individual attacked Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, local Muslims joined us in comfort and consolation. Today, I stand with them, offering our comfort, our love, and our shock and outrage at this terrible act of violence.

May this be a Shabbat of healing for the entire world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THE LESSONS OF PURIM

MARCH 29, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

For some reason this year when I arrived at Purim, I felt overwhelmed by the strangeness of it. Why are we putting so much effort into getting young and old together to celebrate this odd story? With the help of teachers (Carol, my wife, helped me think this through) and amazing community, I feel I got to a place of meaning for me.

Purim is about Jewish strength. The story recalls a win (hat tip to my daughter Maytal) in a series of losses throughout history. How many times has the Jewish community found itself at the mercy of a King or despot and then had to leave? This was a story where we defended ourselves and found a measure of temporary power. For generations of Jews living in quixotic regimes, such a story is inspiring and necessary. For us today, it reminds us of the need for a strong Israel. We no longer live at the whim of foreign powers and can, when needed, defend ourselves. (I see chapter 9 as describing a limited self-defense action against only those known as our “enemies,” meaning those ready and armed to kill the Jewish community of Persia.)

Purim is about stepping up and being Jewish. Mordecai tells Esther that Judaism will continue regardless of her choice. Yet if she chooses to opt out, her name will be forgotten. For us too, Judaism isn't at risk. Yet our own connection to these life-giving teachings and practices requires intentional choice. Modern American culture is overwhelming in many ways. Being Jewish requires a choice. Kara, in her lovely Purim puppet show, kept demonstrating the bravery of Esther as she stood up for her people. The shpiel (go KE Religious School!) kept demonstrating how important it is to choose Jewish even in the face of so many secular options. Mordecai chose to be Jewish under great pressure to just give in and bow to Haman. Esther wrestled with her own choices in finding the bravery to stand up for her people. We too face a thousand challenges every day to being intentional in our Judaism. While we rarely face physical threats, Jewish living requires intentional choice and it is much easier to go through the motions of our lives than to choose meaning. Purim challenges us to find the strength to step up.

Purim is about laughing. Humor is a key weapon in fighting despair. We easily get overwhelmed by the darkness in the world around us. When we lose our ability to laugh, we lose our ability to rediscover hope. If we can start by laughing, even ridiculing, evil, it can lead to more genuine joy. That first forced laughter prepares the way for something more genuine. Then, when we crack up in surprise, something generative is released. When Sarah is told she will bear a child to Abraham, she laughs. Aviva Zornberg

teaches that her laughter was the crack-up that enabled the life-giving flow to return to her body. Joy unlocks our capacity for hope. And through hope that the world can be redeemed. Put another way, if we arrive at Passover without Purim, we cannot embrace Passover's message of light amid darkness, of new birth even when all seems lost.

Finally, **Purim for us was about being a blessing to the world.** We raised over \$1,000 at Purim this year for Ecumenical Hunger Program, a local charity dedicated to helping people struggling with food insecurity. We also wrote dozens of letters of love to local mosques after the shooting in New Zealand. They stood up for us after Pittsburgh; we are standing up for them now.

So now, a few days post Purim, I realize something generative and hopeful is taking root in me that the holiday engendered. And so I am grateful to the wisdom of our tradition in forcing me out, getting me to laugh, and awakening to a new day of light.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A GUIDE FOR THE PASSOVER PERPLEXED

APRIL 5, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As Passover draws near, it is time to get our homes and kitchens ready for this special Holiday. One of the most preparation intensive Holy Days on the Jewish calendar, Passover is meaningful because it is hard work. We are specifically commanded in the Torah to neither eat leavened products, called hametz, nor to possess them. That process of cleaning takes on a spiritual dimension as we symbolically cleanse our souls and prepare ourselves for God's service.

Hametz is the combination of wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye with water. This specifically makes bread, pasta, cereals, cakes, crackers, and liquids with grains in them like beer or scotch forbidden for eating or drinking. Jews can neither eat nor own these items during Passover. As a result, there is a custom of separating out left over chametz and placing it in a closed clearly marked area and then sold. If you would like, you may designate me as your agent to sell your chametz. It is customary to make a donation that goes towards hunger relief but not required. Simply send me an email designating me as your agent to sell chametz.

Fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased at any time without any Rabbinic supervision. Such items are always considered Kosher. Further, dishwashing soaps, toothpaste, and other non-food items are not considered food and therefore are not subject to needing kosher supervision.

Prior to Pesach, some items can be purchased with only a regular kosher label but no special kosher for Passover label. Such items include fresh natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt, spices, frozen fruit juices, milk, butter, and frozen fruit. Processed foods like flavored yogurts, sour cream, pasta sauce, and ketchup (all of which sometimes contains gluten) with many complicated ingredients may include chametz and should be purchased only with a kosher for passover label. Food processing includes flour and other hametz derivatives in a variety of ways that do not require labeling but do render a food unkosher of Passover. (For example, glucose is sometimes a wheat derivative but does not contain gluten).

In addition, following the ruling of Rabbi David Golinkin and the CJLS, I permit the eating of legumes and corn during Pesach. They must also be purchased prior to the holiday and cannot be cooked or processed. Please keep in mind that many continue to honor the traditional Ashkenazi practice of

refraining from legumes. Cooking legumes in one's kitchen does not make the kitchen Hametz. If a person who eats legumes is hosting someone who does not, simply serve only items without legumes.

All other packaged or processed items must have a kosher for Passover label because they may use chametz in their production. Ingredient lists on packaged items are unreliable because chametz items occur in a variety of additives and are sometimes used for processing or as preservatives. If you have questions, please contact me. I have carefully researched Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free Flour and certify it as ok for those who eat kitniyot.

Ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then run on their highest setting for one half hour to make them Kosher for Pesach. Self cleaning ovens can be run through one cycle, washed down, and then run through a second cycle to kasher. Microwave ovens are thoroughly cleaned and then a cup of water is boiled in them for two minutes.

Glassware is thoroughly cleaned in hot soapy water and is then considered kosher for Passover. Metal utensils, provided they are solid metal pieces, can be koshered by cleaning them and then being fully immersed in boiling water. Earthenware and plastics cannot be koshered for use on Passover. Only when such items have never been in contact with Hametz can they be used.

Finally, the Rabbinical Assembly permits the use of dishwashers during Passover. They are koshered by refraining from using them for 24 hours and then running them through a cycle with detergent. The Rabbinical Assembly has a more detailed description of [Pesach rules \(click here\)](#).

I hope this helps as you begin your Passover preparations. I wish everyone a wonderful and kosher Passover.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

WHISPER CAMPAIGN

APRIL 12, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Civil discourse in our culture is broken. Insults fly too freely. Politics becomes all about personal attack. Differences of view come to be viewed as differences of ethics such that conversation across differences becomes nearly impossible. This area in particular suffers because there is a relative uniformity of view on a variety of topics. Uniformity breeds intolerance and fighting intolerance requires intentionality.

I want Kol Emeth to be different. We are a community that cares for one another. We are bound by more than our political beliefs, and there ought to be a baseline of how we treat one another regardless of how we see the world. Yet real change requires learning and then practice. Fighting against this damage takes effort.

Along with Ethan Kuniyoshi, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, and Lia Rensin, we are going to offer an innovative class on the Mussar of Speech. Drawing on the model of Google's Whisper Campaigns, we will design a virtual course to offer text, learning, and online community around improving the way we speak and engage with each other. Further, we are partnering with Gesher L'Torah in Georgia, a Conservative Synagogue, in order to reach outside our community for a different place with a different political context. Gesher L'Torah's community is more purple than our very blue area, and we hope that will broaden our context for this discussion to learn how to hold and honor difference.

Google in recent years has done online courses for its employees by sending out weekly emails with content and exercises. Then there is feedback and engagement among the group as a community of practice is created online. Ethan and I believe that we can use this method to bring some great Mussar teaching and exercises to our community.

If you choose to sign up, here is what will happen. Each week on Monday, starting after Passover, I will send out an email to all subscribers with a topic, a text or two, and an exercise. Wednesday, you will receive a second email with a related summary, and an invitation for comment and reflection. Friday, we will send a third email out that will summarize the feedback. Rabbi Michael Bernstein at Gesher L'Torah will help design the curriculum and will send identical emails to his community.

At the conclusion, we will have an optional gathering at Shavuot night that will include some reflections

from both congregations.

I hope you will sign up! If you are interested, [please click here to register.](#)

Warmly,

Rabbi David Booth

CLEANING FOR PASSOVER

APRIL 19, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It's that time of year when Jews get a little crazy. We clean our homes, scrub everything out, and get ready for Passover. We work quite hard to make sure that not even the merest smidge of chametz remains. That external work parallels an inner process. That is, the cleaning itself points towards a deeply spiritual practice.

Hametz, the combination of water + one of the five grains + more than 18 minutes sitting, is both forbidden at Pesach and never offered on the altar. This led the Rabbis to notice something uncouth, unclean, slightly wrong, about the bubbling and frothing of chametz yeasting. They saw the hametz as symbolic of the evil urge, meaning that our process of cleaning the house is also a process of working through our own problematic behavior.

Some sources identify hametz even more specifically as the bubbling up of ego. Some amount of ego is needed. We cannot live the whole year without a sense of self, without taking up the space we need in the world to share our gifts and blessings. By the same token, as Alan Morinis teaches, there is a "right amount of space." We need to create room for others, create space to let go of our ego needs and appreciate blessing and goodness.

The more we compare ourselves to others, the unhappier we get. When people spend too long on social media, imagining how much better other's lives are, they get progressively unhappier. By contrast, face to face social interactions almost always increase health and wellbeing because we are interacting rather than comparing.

While it may be impossible to totally let go of such damaging comparisons, perhaps Passover can create an opportunity to eliminate such hametz for one week.

During Passover, any time a thought of jealousy or even comparison with someone else arises, take a breath. Notice the thought. Then, think of something positive or for which you are grateful ABOUT THAT PERSON. It can be even the most trivial of things.

In this way, for one week, we can clean out the chametz of our ego, stop the needless comparisons we make with others that only serve to obstruct our spiritual growth. I suspect this will unlock some extra

joy and so add to the celebration of Passover.

I wish you a joyous Passover filled with redemption, gratitude and joy.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SOVEREIGNTY!

APRIL 25, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My dear friend and hevruta (study partner) pointed me to a 1920s Zionist Haggadah. It has some fascinating changes. For example, on the passage “This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of the Egypt,” they say: “This the bread of affliction: that we aren’t living in Israel.” For them, the affliction was living outside of Israel and the remedy to come and eat and drink of the land.

The four questions includes this: “Why is this time different than all other times? In all other times we were quiet, now we are all matzah.” The authors of this Haggadah saw a key difference in their historical moment that Jews were now acting in political ways and speaking out to the world.

Or Avadim Hayenu, we were slaves to Pharaoh, becomes instead: “We were slaves and now we are all slaves living in Exile as it was to Pharaoh.” Their experience of living in Europe was one of exile and oppression. They craved sovereignty and a place to bless. So when the Haggadah says “Blessed is The Place,” a euphemism for God, this Haggadah says, “Blessed is the place, Israel!”

I find myself drawn again and again back to this Haggadah and the hopes of those early Zionists. In the 1920s life in Israel was hard. Somewhere between 25-50% of those who came in this era returned to Europe because conditions were so bad. And yet, despite this, they saw hope in Israel. Even though the communities in Europe were relatively settled and even prosperous, they saw no future there. By contrast, a place where they could imagine a sovereign Jewish state promised our own ability to make our mistakes and our own successes.

At the time, the Tel Aviv newspaper reported an arrest of a burglar. This led Bialik to comment that a sovereign future means having a place where Jewish burglars are arrested by Jewish policemen. True self-governance includes managing crime as much as figuring out how to maintain order. Being sovereign includes having Jewish organized crime alongside a thriving tech industry.

Israel has matured as a state. The innocent aspirations of the 1920s have given rise to the realities of a regional military and economic superpower struggling to hold on to its Jewish and democratic self. For the first time in millennia, a Jewish majority CAN impose its will on a minority. For the first time in millennia, Jews are wrestling with when to use military force and how far to go in maintaining security.

In such a context, surrounded by the immature and often violent Arab political culture, nationalism infused by militarism has arisen. Israelis want to be safe and the Jewish majority is proud of its Jewish identity. The challenge for a mature state is so different than that of the earlier settlers. Now they are redeemed; the question is what will be done with that freedom.

As we celebrate Passover this year, as we yearn for the idealized Israel of the Haggadah, I invite us to connect with the real Israel of today. Maybe we can broaden our four questions this year.

How are the challenges for Israel and Israelis this year different from other years? Before we had no power; now we are a powerful nation. What responsibilities and challenges arise from power? Before we were oppressed and sought redemption; now how can we balance the democratic and Jewish nature of the state? And finally, what place do American Jews play in this and what is our voice and role?

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Passover,

Rabbi David Booth

SHOOTING IN POWAY

MAY 3, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I really enjoyed Passover. I found the holiday uplifting and joyous. I was filled with gratitude and wanting to bring that quality of appreciation into my life outside the holiday. So we made Havdalah after Shabbat and I went upstairs to check my cellphone and then go out for chametz (in our case, an ice cream cone. I'm past wanting pizza at 9 at night...).

I had a text from Pastor Smith wanting to know how I was doing. Filled with anxiety, I checked the news and learned of the terrible shooting in Poway. And all the energy and joy was sucked out of me in one sad moment. The shooting in Pittsburgh was horrific and tragic but also energizing. It inspired me and so many others to do more Jewishly as an act of defiance. It reminded me of all our friends and the enormous good will that exists in the United States.

Somehow this shooting just seemed like normal life. This is how it is going to be now. We are going to have shootings in Synagogues from time to time. People will run their cars into pedestrians because they imagine some of them to be Muslim. And that feels exhausting and horrible.

I went on a walkthrough with our amazing building leadership team to evaluate new security needs at the facility in light of the last few months. And here too I felt drained and sad. Our beautiful building cannot become an armed fortress closed off from our supportive and loving neighborhood. I can't imagine cowering in fear every time we gather. And yet we must make changes so the facility is harder to enter and we are more secure.

There is light even amid this darkness. The Chabad Rabbi of Poway is a great spiritual leader and his faith shines through when you hear him talk. His strong voice will strengthen his community. He believes God jammed the assault rifle. I am tremendously moved by such faith. One ray of light: faith more than fear will sustain us.

I am also moved by the interfaith connections that now exist. I have received many letters from both Christian and Muslim leaders offering their support and love. It has been hard for Jews and Muslims to find common ground in recent years. While we mourn these attacks, the attempt by some to deny our shared humanity is reminding others that faith can and does unite us. These hateful extremists are perversely opening a pathway of communication. Another ray of light: friendship and love can protect

us.

I am appalled and exhausted by the violence that is possible in our culture. There is a political dimension to our response which is why I support legislation that bans or limits military assault style weapons. At the same time, we must meet the causes of violence with love. All four recent perpetrators (I mean the attacker in Pittsburgh, in New Zealand, in Sunnyvale, and in Poway) were isolated individuals. The three gunmen lived far too much in social media hearing views that reinforced their own hatreds and inadequacies where an attack seemed heroic. I believe communities of faith have a great task to confront the loneliness and social isolation that infects the modern era. We know how to build communities and how to create good social connections in face to face relationships. We are good at reminding people they are created in God's image. Perhaps this can be another ray of light.

May God offer comfort to those mourning the passing of Lori Kaye, murdered in Poway last Shabbat. May God offer healing and strength to those hurt there and in Sunnyvale. And finally, may God strengthen us to find energy and hope that brings healing into our world so in need of repair.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

STAYING CONNECTED TO GRATITUDE

MAY 10, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Exercise: At the end of the day, take five long breaths. Then draw to mind three good things that happened to you today. As you recall those good events, say the following: “My ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh, and oppressed as exiles in (your family’s land of origin). Now this has happened to me. Thank you, God.” Repeat twice more. Breathe five more times. For bonus credit, say Shma as well.

Comments: Being grateful is hard-wired into Jewish identity. At the birth of Judah, from whom the very word “Jewish” comes, his mother Leah says, “I am grateful to God.” Rashi explains further: she meant, God has given me more than I deserve. I believe that Passover comes in large part to reset our sense of what we deserve in order to promote a greater awareness of gratitude in our lives.

It is easy to set our sense of what we deserve quite high. I deserve a good life, beautiful weather, perfect children, a terrific and meaningful job, etc., etc. When I have that mindset, any setback becomes devastating while each achievement becomes only what was supposed to happen. In such a space, I become stressed, worried, and anxious even amid abundance.

Then Passover comes along and warns me. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. God brought us out with a mighty hand and we could have been left there. In other words, we are owed nothing. The world, God, the divine, has already offered us everything we are owed. Any other goodness, however large or small, is a gift, more than we are owed.

Dayenu holds this in its utter absurdity. We say, had God brought us to the Sea of Reeds but not brought us through on dry land, Dayenu. In other words, had we drowned at the Sea, that would have been enough. And yet: can we appreciate each act, each goodness, regardless of what precedes or follows? Can I appreciate the wonderful Passover I had with the Kol Emeth community even though I hear immediately after of such tragic loss in Poway? Dayenu urges us to say yes.

So imagine: as each good thing happens to you, what if you made the time to really appreciate it and realize that it could have been different. Thank you, God, for my home. My ancestors were slaves in Egypt and oppressed and poor in the Ukraine and now I have this lovely home in which to live and feel secure. Thank you, God that my daughter likes to take walks in our beautiful neighborhood with me. My ancestors were slaves in Egypt, poor and oppressed in Ukraine. It could have been different, and I am so

grateful for what I have.

We are surrounded by darkness and light every day. The holiday of Passover sends us the message that especially in such a world, gratitude becomes a key means by which we uncover hope and joy in our lives. I believe that hope is our greatest tool to world repair because only when we are in touch with hope and possibility do we see the ways in which we can be partners with God in repairing this evidently broken world.

May God bring comfort to the mourners in Poway, healing to those injured, and strength to all of us to hope and yearn for a better world.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

COMPASSION

MAY 17, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Exercise: Think of someone about whom you care with compassion. Perhaps imagine your love / concern / compassion flowing towards them as a beam of light or a stream of water. Now bring to mind someone with whom you have difficulties or even of whom you are jealous. Think of their own circumstance. Is there room here for compassion? Think of their love for their families, or their desires to achieve, or just your shared humanity. Now imagine compassion from you flowing towards them as well.

In Hebrew, the word for compassion is rachamim, which comes from the Hebrew word for womb. Compassion is the unbounded love of a mother for a child. Compassion is the place where the boundaries that normally separate us are released. When compassion awakens, we feel empathy and connection with others because we all share a deep human connection, just as a mother and child are both one being and separate.

During my year in Israel, I got a bad flu. I had been living on my own for 7 years and had a wonderful wife taking care of me. Nevertheless, something about being sick and so far away from home made me really miss my mother. I called her and told her “I feel so sick.” “Oh David, I’m so sorry.” She laughed at the ridiculousness of my calling her from such a distance because I felt sick. And yet, it was comforting to hear her voice and know that she had true compassion for me. Not because of anything she wanted from me, or anything I might do in return, but merely and beautifully out of compassion for her son.

And then years later I found myself stroking my daughter’s hair while she was sick. She was feverish and feeling yucky. And yet, my presence helped her feel better for at least a few moments. The offering of compassion proved to be healing.

We spend most of our time remembering that we are separate from everyone else. We get concerned about our goals, our needs, our wants. And it exhausts us because we are putting so much effort into remembering that we are different than everyone else. We have no space for compassion. Our separateness becomes a kind of wall that isolates.

Compassion calls us back to a different mode, a mode in which we remember that we are connected. It is a mode that reminds us of our ability to be renewed and enlivened through our human connection.

I read of a lovely practice from the Dalai Lama. Whenever he sees wealth or belongings that could awaken jealousy, he instead invites compassion. How great that this person can bring such goodness to his family! How wonderful for him to be able to enjoy all these material possessions! After all, since we are connected on such a deep level, I have the smallest piece of his enjoyment awakened in me. Instead of negatively reacting to what I don't have, I instead challenge myself to appreciate how great this is for him.

I invite you to find opportunities for compassion this summer. It could be to close family and friends. It could be offered to random strangers or others. It could even be extended to those from whom you feel most distant and so reminding yourself that even the greatest of divides can still be bridged through our shared humanity.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

*Please note that CyberTorah is now going on summer hiatus, scheduled to resume sometime in August.

TURNING FROM ANGER TO LOVE

AUGUST 2, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In 1938, the west organized the Evian conference to address the growing challenge of Jewish refugees desperately fleeing Germany, Austria, and parts of Eastern Europe as the horror of the Nazi program became clear. Evian was a disaster. No one wanted to accept Jewish refugees. The Australian representative went so far as to declare “We have no real refugee problem and we are not desirous of importing one.” Instead of finding a place of refuge, Evian only further emboldened the Nazi program. Had any nation on Earth found the compassion to open its doors, millions of Jews would have been saved and World War II might have been derailed before it even began. There was a chance to invite God in with compassion and love; instead the nations of the world turned away from suffering and moved closer to war.

We see a similar moment in the story of Balaak and Balaam. The Israelites, refugees from Egypt, are heading to the promised land. Balaak sees them and instead of reacting in compassion gives into fear. He wants to bar Israel from his lands and seeks out the great prophet Balaam to curse them. Balaam is a fascinating biblical figure, the only non-Jewish prophet of note. The language of his story echoes that of Abraham. I wonder: perhaps Balaam was a proto-Abraham. If he could find his own inner reservoir of compassion and love, perhaps he could have opened another pathway for God into the world. Instead, he gave into a blend of avarice and fear and attempted to curse Israel seven times. Yet again and again God forced words of blessing instead, including the words, “How glorious are your tents, Israel, your dwellings Jacob.”

Here too there was a chance to invite God in through compassion. Had Balaak remembered his connections to the Israelites, or Balaam found his love for humanity, war and destruction would have been averted.

I worry today that we stand at our own Balaak moment. When President Trump urges congresswomen to go back to their own countries, he serves only to indulge in hateful speech and to embolden racists and xenophobes. Such language has no place in our political discourse. I find myself profoundly sad that this can happen in our country. I want to invite God back in and worry that words drive us further from the divine.

I am saddened by the conditions at our southern border. The Inspector General of the DHS identified

children going without meals for days, saw such serious overcrowding that people are held and forced in a standing position for days on end. Such treatment is unacceptable from the United States of America. Whatever our immigration policy should be, we cannot treat human beings in this fashion.

Further, I am saddened by the overuse of Holocaust. I worry that we demean the memory of the genocide and hatred that led to the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews. I am saddened also that such metaphors turn our need for more humanitarian treatment of immigrants into a partisan fight over the right time to use the term “concentration camps.”

We had a President who spoke differently about immigration. Ronald Reagan, in his last address as President, said in part:

“You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey or Japan, but you cannot become a German, a Turk, or Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the Earth, can come to live in America and become an American.”

It’s the great life force of each generation of new Americans that guarantees that America’s triumph shall continue unsurpassed into the next century and beyond. Other countries may seek to compete with us; but in one vital area, as a beacon of freedom and opportunity that draws the people of the world, no country on earth comes close.

This, I believe, is one of the most important sources of America’s greatness. We lead the world because, unique among nations, we draw our people — our strength — from every country and every corner of the world. And by doing so we continuously renew and enrich our nation.

I believe God can be found in those words because they invite in compassion. I believe the nations that have welcomed Jews have prospered because policies of openness invite dynamism and because compassion invites the blessings of God. I wonder if our immigration policy could draw on this ethic and create a far better system than our current broken policies.

I have been participating in daily vigils at Page Mill and El Camino at 12noon each day (except Shabbat) to draw awareness of the humanitarian crisis at our southern border and will participate in a vigil at 6pm at Palo Alto City Hall on August 11

th, Tisha Bav, a day in which we remind ourselves of the brokenness in the world and that we can and

must do better. I hope you can join. This isn't about our views on immigration policy or the current administration; this is about the need to live up to basic American and Jewish ideals of how we treat the stranger.

There is too much anger right now in our politics. I am not angry; I am sad. I am searching not for outrage but for compassion and justice. As Micah the prophet instructs, all God requires of us is to act justly, with compassion, and humility.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note CyberTorah will resume more regularly in August.

SANCTIFYING LIFE

AUGUST 9, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Human life is sacred. Our shared humanity creates an obligation to honor and protect that sacredness. When our actions can honor human life or prevent murder, we have a divine responsibility to act. Mitzvot can be violated to save a human life because saving a life saves an entire world. At this moment of violence and murder and mass shootings, we have a responsibility to act and affirm the infinite value of each human life in ways that can prevent violence and that affirm our shared humanity.

I believe there are three key ways to make a difference in this epidemic of violence, when there have been more mass shootings than days in the year so far (as reported in USA Today).

First, I am deeply concerned about the availability of guns that can be easily modified for rapid fire shooting. The shooter at the Gilroy festival obtained his weapon legally in Nevada, for example. Even though California's laws are more restrictive, federal solutions are needed for effective limits. I urge you to reach out to Congress and encourage them to heavily limit the sale of these weapons as well as their ammunition, to increase background checks, and to pass "red-flag" laws that make it easier to remove weapons from people who are a danger to themselves or others.

Second, the sensationalizing of these crimes makes them more attractive to the perpetrators. Most of these mass shooters experience social isolation and anxiety. They rarely have face-to-face community. Online communities of hate can further inflame already unbalanced individuals to perceive of violence as a heroic act that will let them be seen and known. By devoting so much press coverage to the perpetrators, we give them an unholy outlet through which to have an impact. I urge you to write to your favorite media outlet and encourage them to stop sensationalizing these shootings. Urge newspapers and online media to write about them less. They should focus on the victims and their lives, and profile the heroes who may stop or limit an attack. We should stop calling these shooters "lone wolves," as if they were mighty warriors. They are sad, lonely people unable to find a healthy way of connecting. Finally, click less. Every time we read yet another story rehashing what we already knew or telling us one more detail about the shooter's life, we encourage the next attack.

Third, let's be serious about valuing each human life. These shootings highlight an epidemic of isolation and loneliness. We need to stop the violence AND build more whole communities in which people find healthier ways to be seen, known, and loved. Synagogues play a key role in creating shared sacred

spaces that are multi-generational and loving. Jewish ritual can be a tool to combat loneliness by opening our homes at Shabbat or festival times or seeing in Kiddush a chance to respond lovingly to loneliness and social isolation. Jewish teachings and ethics can remind everyone of the deep sacred value of life. Sustaining Kol Emeth as an institution dedicated to building whole and holy community with a broad outreach agenda is a key response that sanctifies the names of those murdered, that brings healing into the world, and may even prevent a shooting by grounding and humanizing a vulnerable person.

It is time to act in ways that see each life as holy and meaningful. We can fight the hate by urging policy solutions to limit gun violence, to focus sensationalist media, and honor the humanity of the people around us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ETHNIC STUDIES

AUGUST 16, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

In 2016, California initiated a process to create a required ethnic studies course for high school students. This well-meaning effort has been hijacked by an anti-Israel and anti-Semitic agenda that could create decades of harm. Fortunately, the Jewish community is well organized to respond to this kind of hateful material, and we are having an impact.

The curriculum has two key problems. First, it singles out Israel for specific and out-of-context criticism. Among other issues, the curriculum calls the Boycott, Divestiture, and Sanctions movement a “global social movement that currently aims to establish freedom for Palestinians living under apartheid conditions.” Further, the curriculum quotes without much context a Palestinian rapper who among other things identifies the press as being controlled by Jews. The material quickly moves from anti-Israel to anti-Semitic.

The second issue concerns Jews in California. The Persian Jewish community (60,000-plus) is ignored amid a discussion of Middle Eastern people in California. There is no mention of Jews in the curriculum even though there are close to one million Jews living in California. The inability to even see a Jewish minority from the Middle East or more established Jewish communities suggests at best blindness and at worst genuine anti-Semitism intentionally erasing Jews.

The curriculum has received deservedly harsh and overwhelming criticism. JCRC, JIMENA and others have brought attention to this problematic material and helped show the team developing the curriculum that a new draft is needed. At this point, JCRC informs me that the first draft is being discarded in favor of a new one.

This means we are having an impact. Our concerns are resonating and the curriculum is being started again from scratch. To those who commented, yasher koach. Your words had impact and derailed something that would have inculcated a generation of Californians with negative Jewish stereotypes. A team from Kol Emeth and Etz Chaim met with our State Senators to explain our concerns and get their support on the needed changes to this curriculum. There will most likely be additional such hearings and meetings in September. If you are interested in being involved, please contact Carmel Johnson. More people means more impact. At this point, any further input should ask for transparency of process, avoidance of hateful language, and a focus on critical rather than dogmatic thinking.

Were this anti-Semitic and anti-Israel material to go forward, a generation of California high school students would be indoctrinated in negative stereotypes and out-of-context information. It could cause incalculable damage to the Jewish community and to widespread support of Israel. We must stop this small group from seizing control of a curricular initiative to spread calumnies and false information. I applaud JCRC, our KE team that met with local representatives, and everyone who has made clear that we need a do-over. We need to keep organized, keep up the pressure, and help the state formulate a curriculum that honestly and helpfully teaches ethnic diversity in California.

I will continue to stay aware of the process. I will let you know as things develop how you can help.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

ADMITTING MISTAKES

AUGUST 23, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I find it difficult to admit when I am wrong. Especially in an area where I have some expertise or a reputation, if I err, it takes effort to backtrack and admit that I said / did the wrong thing. Further, we have some distrust of people who change their minds. We worry they may lack constancy or be weak. We call them flip-floppers with a sense that they hold their finger out to see which way the wind blows.

We see in the Torah numerous examples where people fail to take responsibility for their own actions with disastrous results. Whether Adam and Eve blaming each other and the snake for eating the forbidden fruit, or Cain after killing Abel, the Torah is replete with people unable to take responsibility.

Even Moses does this. At the end of his life, Moses addresses the Israelites. He tells them God has forbidden him to enter the land. The story in Numbers tells of the people complaining about a lack of water. God tells Moses to speak to a rock and water will come forth. Moses instead hits the rock. His anger causes God to forbid him from entering the Holy land.

Yet now, in Deuteronomy, Moses fails to take responsibility for his angry reaction. Instead, he blames the people, telling them it was their fault that he cannot enter Israel. I wonder: if Adam and Eve had taken responsibility, could we have stayed in the Garden? If Moses had taken responsibility, might God have let him enter Israel?

The Talmud tells a funny anecdote of a Cohen who has questionable status. Evidence keeps arriving that first causes the court to remove him as a Cohen, then restore him, and then remove him again. They ask the question: should the court hold by its first ruling? After all, by flip flopping like this, do they damage the prestige of the court? Yet despite this worry, the Talmud is clear that the truth matters more than the Court's honor.

Both the Talmud and the Torah urge us to accept responsibility for our actions and to admit when we are wrong. My family has a practice that if someone asserts something that proves to be wrong, they have to say, "You were right and I was wrong and how could I have ever doubted you?" This slightly silly humility practice gives us a way to back down and worry more about getting the right answer than being the one who has it.

As we begin a move towards Rosh Hashanah and the renewal it promises, I invite you to begin practicing a humility that lets you admit mistakes and back down from errors. This humility is the keystone for self-transformation. Only if we admit we are wrong are we capable of changing.

The next time you make a mistake, try admitting the mistake. Perhaps use my family's silly practice. Even more, admit to yourself where you have gone wrong. And know that by admitting a mistake, the possibility of correcting it and growing now exists.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

FINDING THE LIFE-POINT

AUGUST 30, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The meaning of life will not arrive in 140 characters or less. Nor will it arrive via a cable news channel or any of the other endless “information” streams to which we are attached and addicted. It will not arrive in sound and thunder or earthquakes. And, paradoxically, it will not arise in the teaching or writing of another person.

It can only arrive from within.

Each of us possesses a nikudat-hayot, a life point. That place is the deepest most essential foundation of the self. It is our truest place, unshadowed and pure. It is also the place of closest contact with the Divine. Though deep inside, it also shines through into the universe and connects us to all that lives.

And yet, we rarely give heed to that life point. Amid all the noise, busyness, and materiality of modern life, we lose contact with that inner true self. This is a source of great sorrow for the world for that place of truth brings in its wake a love and compassion for all living things. Were we more connected to our true self, we would be more connected to all that is.

We read the story of Hannah at Rosh Hashanah in part because she found the courage to connect to her life point and from that place of meaning found words of prayer and hope that led to the birth of a son, Samuel. She found real power and redemption by looking past jealousies, by finding strength through love, and became a model for us of true heart prayer.

This month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holidays, invites study and quiet that reawakens the connection to our pure and holy nikudat-hayot. In partnership with Beth Tzedec Synagogue in Toronto and their Senior Rabbi, Steve Wernick, Rabbi Graff, Ethan Kuniyoshi and I have created a three week “whisper course” on the story of Hannah and its power to transform our lives through honesty, humility, and prayer.

Google developed whisper courses as a way to teach particular topics or modules at people’s pace in an organized communal way that allows people to move at their own schedule and pace. They include regular short emails, a chance to offer feedback, and specific exercises to master new material.

For our course, each participant will receive three short emails during the week with exercises and study material. The exercises will requires just a few minutes each day and with regular practice will deepen our connection to our one life-point. We will also create a forum for feedback so that participants can share their experiences with others. This innovative educational approach creates a personalized daily practice at your own schedule and pace. It offers doable exercises that can have real impact in the context of overscheduled lives and busy job expectations. We will share this course with members of Beth Tzedec as well to give a broader perspective and connect us to the larger Conservative world.

I hope you will join the course! I look forward to this model of virtual study with you.

If you would like to register, [click here](#). You will then receive our welcome email and the first emails the week after Labor Day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SELF-CREATION

SEPTEMBER 6, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Our capacity for self-creation is infinite. At Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the creation of the world to remind us that God's creative power dwells in each of us as well. We have immense capacity to determine the type of person we want to be. We are held back by illusion and fear far more than external limits.

Teshuvah, repentance, is one key tool of self creation and transformation. According to Maimonides, Teshuvah has three key stages. First, we must examine our behaviors and deeds. Only through careful self-examination can we realize our need for correction. Though it seems trivial to say, without self-awareness no inner change is possible.

Second, we must verbally confess that which we wish to change or heal in the self. Just as God creates the world through speech-acts, so too the work of self creation begins with speech. The world of thought must be carried into the world of speech to finally be articulated into action.

Third, we must change our behavior. Thought and speech now must emerge into our lived reality and behavior. We must so change the self that now, when that which previously led to a stumbling occurs, we do the right thing. We transform ourselves into a new person who has been elevated beyond the previous self.

At the beginning, we may do this work in areas that are easier to change. Perhaps we will explore one specific behavior or capacity and through the power of Teshuvah realize our power to become a new being. Once we discover the power of Teshuvah in our lives, we may become encouraged to realize that our ability to grow and become a new person is far greater than the specific behavior. Given such encouragement, we may look at broader areas of the self for transformation through Teshuvah.

I would like to invite you to ready yourself for the Holidays this year in two ways. First, we have set up an anonymous link to share / confess an area you need to work on this year. **Please complete this form.** Your response will be submitted to a spreadsheet automatically without any personal identifying information. Please indicate if you are willing to have your confession shared at the Holidays (anonymously of course). Even though anonymous, this potentially public confession can enable a Teshuvah process of real change for you.

Second, a three week series on transformation for the month of Elul begins Tuesday. [Register here](#). I will be offering a class with Dr. Ray Pestrong on Geologic and Personal Transformation, Rabbi Graff and Jeff Schwartz will be offering a class on the possibilities of transformation in the liturgy, and Jacques Adler will be leading a pottery workshop limited to 10 students. We will study on three Tuesday evenings from 7-8:15pm and then have a beer and wine reception until 9pm.

I wish you an Elul of introspection and personal transformation where you can discover your own God given capacity for personal transformation through the power of Teshuvah.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MORAH DEREKH

SEPTEMBER 13, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are blessed at Kol Emeth to have a wonderful Jewish educator in Sarah Miller. In just a little more than a year, we have seen her great creativity, her wonderful teaching ability, and great programmatic strength. In partnership, we are envisioning new approaches to Jewish learning that can impact children and seniors, tots, and young adults.

Sarah's role goes beyond being a teacher or administrator. She is a spiritual leader for our young families, a teacher of Torah for children and adults, and a key part of our clergy team with me and Rabbi Graff. She is a partner in KE policy decisions alongside our executive director, Elaine Sigal and the Rabbis.

Sarah thinks programmatically as well as spiritually. For example, we will be releasing butterflies at the end of first day Rosh Hashanah services to complete our theme this High Holidays of transformation. Sarah has helped us pick a theme that is both wonderfully attractive and engaging and that has a deep spiritual message. She will lead our youth programs this High Holidays and she will offer comments and thoughts to the main Sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah.

Together, Sarah and I are transforming our religious school into Jewish and Hebrew enrichment that will be engaging, deeply educational, and foundational for our children's Jewish identity. That model will also become the basis for a new hands-on program for seniors once we move into our new building.

Sarah deserves to be recognized for this role she is playing in the Kol Emeth community. In consultation with the Board, I have invited Sarah to be part of our clergy team as a Morah Derekh, a Guide on the Way, an offer she has accepted with great appreciation, love, and joy, effective immediately.

We have chosen a term for a very special kind of guide, one with the responsibility to lead us towards a more Torah-enriched community. This title honors her compassionate work with families at difficult moments and her spiritual leadership at Junior Congregation, First Fridays, and beyond. We want to name and acknowledge the nature and quality of her work.

She and I are also creating a program of study for her to grow in her knowledge of theology, her strength in Jewish text, and her liturgical knowledge. We believe this curriculum can become an example for

other Synagogues, continuing Kol Emeth's commitment to be a leader in the Synagogue world.

Sarah remains committed to her responsibilities of making sure we have excellent programs for tots, children, and teens. She is stepping forward to some additional responsibilities and learning so that she can grow and become an even more effective educator and spiritual leader.

Rabbi Graff and I are honored to welcome her to our clergy team. I hope you can find some time to get to know her if you haven't already, and to congratulate her on her new role. We are planning a celebration for Nov 23rd when we will formally install her as our first Morah Derekh.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

VOICE OF LOVE

SEPTEMBER 20, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a voice of the body and desire that calls us. When we heed the siren's call of this world and of our flesh, we get pulled towards the desires of this moment and pulled away from the world of faith and purpose. It is the voice that says: I want, I want. Or even louder: I need, I need. And sometimes (often?) we listen.

When we listen different things happen. Sometimes there is a moment of joy even in the I want, I want of the self. We feel, for a time, full and satisfied. But that feeling does not last, cannot last, because our hunger ever renews itself, ever demands more, and opens its maw wider and wider until the world itself contains too little to satisfy us.

Or we are satisfied for a moment, in the mud and dirt of our bodies (God created Adam from the Adamah, the dust, of the Earth.) Full, we are lured into sleep, silencing that voice of need and want by falling out of consciousness.

At the same time, we yearn to be found. There is another voice, a voice that is lonely and seeks to have its loneliness known. A voice that says: I love, I love. When we listen to this voice, to the still small voice of the life-point, we discover connection and true fulfillment. We discover hidden jewels in the people around us that the I want I need voice never leaves room to see.

And we find those treasures in the self as well. As we realize with love the beautiful dazzling quality of the people around us, our own goodness reflects and refracts back to us. Others are worthy of love and so am I. The shofar sounds and we are startled awake, startled to realize that connection and faith (in God? In each other? In the world?) is what we really need.

Every day we choose, we create the self. We decide. Will I listen to the I want I want voice or will we choose loneliness and love, loss and life? Seductively, the I want voice seems easier, better, more settled. And yet: it is the voice of loneliness and love that sustains us through the year. It is this voice that empowers us to become in the image of God, sacred beings tasked with healing a broken world.

We can choose. We can awaken from our slumber and our hiding. The work is hard yet we dare not desist. We will be repaid for our labor, but in currency this world does not know how to count. And this is

the surest path I know to healing our wounds and strengthening us to be partners with God's work. Heal us, that we may be healed.

I am lost. With you, I am alone. This year as the Holidays approach, let us in our shared loneliness discover the redemptive power that comes from love, shared loneliness, and the willingness to heed our own inner voice reminding us to love and be loved.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

BUTTERFLIES

SEPTEMBER 27, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rosh Hashanah suggests we have the power to transform ourselves and our lives. Just as God created the world, we have the power to create the self. This year at Kol Emeth, we are playing with a few ways to experience transformation.

Bring Your Shofar

The Shofar calls our attention. It awakens us and challenges us. It is both battle cry and the sound of a broken heart. Its noise focuses us and reminds us of hope. I invite you to bring your shofar to services this year. As we sound the shofar, we will fill the whole Sanctuary with shofarot to immerse ourselves in its great power. During the Shofar service and Musaf I am hoping people will add their own shofarot to the sounds from the front to create a something very special.

Butterflies at 1pm!!

At the end of services on first day Rosh Hashanah, we plan to release hundreds of butterflies. Butterflies emerge in beauty from the earthiness of the caterpillar. We too have hopes for change and growth that can take wing this year. Join us at 1pm as we release the butterflies and inspire our hope. We will also be releasing some butterflies with the children's services at 12:15pm in the courtyard to which all are welcome.

Alternative Services

Rabbi Graff and Rabbi Eilberg will again lead Rosh Hashanah in the Round in the Beit Kehillah at the Beth Am campus on first day Rosh Hashanah. This engaging alternative service is heart- filled and rich with meaning. Come with curiosity and openness!

And then at Kol Nidre, join me, Rick Dinitz, and Louis Newman for an alternative Kol Nidre again in the Beit Kehillah at Beth Am. Our service will include meditation, learning, and liturgy. It will help begin a process of growth and change that invites us to experience Yom Kippur in a new way.

Children's Services

Finally, this year we are once again offering a Play and Pray space for our youngest families. This play space for babies and toddlers is a great place to be with a baby! We hope everyone will check it out and help make our youngest families feel the welcome at Kol Emeth.

I wish you all a L'Shana Tova, a year of goodness and health, a year in which the world can become more whole as we also rediscover our hidden wholeness.

Rabbi David Booth

GETTING READY FOR YOM KIPPUR

OCTOBER 4, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are in a special time, the ten days of Repentance. During this time we imagine the gates of heaven being open to us and our hopes to better ourselves and the world. The effort we invest returns back to us many times. We need specific practices to help us effect the inner change we want and to help bring about the larger external changes this broken world so badly needs.

First is Tzedakah or Charity. If we want to heal ourselves and the world, we have the tools at hand right now by donating to institutions and causes that strive to bring healing into the world.

You recently received your Kol Nidre appeal. **Please support** the holy work of our congregation. We pray, play, and learn together and do acts of Tikkun Olam, world repair, regularly. This happens only because you, our members, care and support us. Especially this year, as we transition to a new building, any gift to Kol Nidre will have outsize impact.

In addition, **hunger and homelessness** remain perennial challenges throughout the world. Locally, we see more and more RVs parked along central streets; homeless programs seem to close when they need to expand. I urge you to support Second Harvest of Santa Clara and San Mateo County. Bring a bag of groceries with you to Kol Nidre for our annual food drive; [donate here](#). Other worthy charities with the same goal include LifeMoves and Jewish Family and Children's Service.

This is also a moment to **heal broken relationships** and to invest further in healthy ones. **Find time to call**, email, message, or speak in person, to friends, family, acquaintances with whom we may have had issues over the year. Ask for forgiveness; remind people that you care for and love them.

Finally, on Yom Kippur itself, **wear white**. Fasting reminds us to focus from the material to the spiritual and ethical; wearing white invites us to imagine being cleansed and ready for a new start. By dressing up as though we are pure, we move ourselves towards wholeness. I urge everyone to wear white- it's quite amazing to see the whole congregation letting go of vanity and turning towards spiritual renewal.

May you find these days of preparation meaningful and meaning filled, and may you have a transformative and healing day this Yom Kippur. An easy fast as well!!

Let us all be sealed for life, for health, for prosperity, and for peace.

Rabbi David Booth

HAPPY YOM KIPPUR!

OCTOBER 11, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Yom Kippur is the happiest day on the Jewish calendar. On Yom Kippur we remind ourselves that we have choice and capacity to begin anew. We can notice our failings, the places we stumble and fall, and find the inner resources and strength to pick ourselves up and start anew. The prophet uses the metaphor of stumbling for our failings because a stumble is ephemeral. We can recover and continue our walk on the path of righteousness.

Contrary to modern genetics, which all too often asserts we are prisoners of our biology, Judaism knows we can choose. Our biology and upbringing may make certain choices harder for some than others, but we all possess free will. Teshuvah is the promise that we can change, can become a new being.

Second is that with which we are met. Yom Kippur promises that God will cleanse us. When we make the effort to grow and change, to rise up from our stumblings, we are met by a power greater than us that lifts us above and beyond the capacity we imagined we had to change. We are washed clean as we discover new found capacity to rise from our stumbling and continue on our way, renewed, strengthened, and supported.

And so today, inspired by Yom Kippur, we get ready for Sukkot. Sukkot is our festival of joy. It is the time for the world to experience this new self, to see all the healing and wholeness we can now bring into the world. We use our whole body in the mitzvot of Sukkot as we take the lulav and etrog. We venture into our Sukkot, outside in the world that God has created. Synagogue leads us out to Sukkot which finally invites us to bring our blessings into the whole world.

We need to bring the new compassionate self into our work, friendships, and family and into our work healing the world. That is one of the key lessons of Tishrei, this month of Jewish holidays.

So join us for Sukkot services Monday as we take up the Lulav and Etrog and remind ourselves that with our whole selves and bodies we now take the Judaism and self-transformation we have gained from Yom Kippur into the world with joy.

Lshana Tova-

David

JOY

OCTOBER 18, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We talk a lot about success and personal fulfillment today. Rarely, however, do we talk about joy. Joy is bigger than happiness. Happiness is connected to a particular moment or experience. I am happy because I got a present or went out to dinner. Happiness is ephemeral; joy is deeper.

What brings joy? Research suggests gratitude increases joy. When we take the time to appreciate the good things in our lives, it makes us more contented and joyous. The effort to appreciate changes our perspective towards a more positive pole.

Judaism encourages us to say a blessing before and after eating. We are also encouraged to bless the ocean and a beautiful sunset or a powerful storm. Each of these blessings over day-to-day activities or events reminds us to appreciate the goodness that surrounds us all the time and to which we all too easily become accustomed. Blessings increase joy.

Human connection increases joy. When we are with others our blood pressure is more stable. Anxiety lessens. Such connection removes barriers of worry to make room for joy. That is why a shared meal can be so wonderful. As we nourish our body with food, the human connection nourishes our soul.

Purpose and meaning increase joy. When we know we are doing something meaningful, we appreciate the task and have an inner sense that we are on the right track. That too enables joy.

Do you know what does not increase joy? Money and material belongings. While they can increase ephemeral happiness, studies show that our happiness returns to its basis level relatively quickly after we receive a thing or more money.

Along comes Sukkot to remind us what Western culture is only discovering. Live in a Sukkah and it will increase gratitude for our homes and normal lives. Share meals with people and we build community as we say food blessings. And we treasure the material object of the etrog only to throw it away at the conclusion of the holiday. In other words, it's not about the material objects. It's about the awareness of blessing that the holiday creates.

There are a few days of Sukkot left. I urge you to find opportunities for joy. Notice with appreciation the

good things in your life, whether it is your home, loved ones, or the beauty of our area. Share a meal with someone about whom you care. And join our community for one of its Sukkot celebrations to remember that our lives have great meaning and purpose.

Happy Sukkot!

Rabbi David Booth

TREE OF LIFE

NOVEMBER 1, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

A year ago, a gunman entered Tree of Life Synagogue and murdered 11 congregants in the most violent attack against Jews in U.S. history. As we mourn their loss, I suggest three lessons:

First, anti-semitism exists as a real threat. It is propagated in new ways now that enable micro communities of hate to form. Small self-reinforcing communities can then inspire some of the most unbalanced of its members to murderous deeds. We need to take seriously safety at Jewish places of worship and gathering. We also need to respond robustly to the dissemination of hateful ideas.

Second, we have many friends. Last year after the attack, here in Palo Alto and around the country, the Jewish community gathered. That gathering welcomed Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other leaders who showed up to remind us that we are part of a larger community. We need to open our doors more, building more bridges and social connections, so that we can be there for each other.

Finally, we must remember those who were murdered. Tree of Life continues planning for a rebuilding that will include a memorial. Those murdered were the ones who came early to Synagogue, the ones for whom it was their place and their community. They were:

Irving Younger

Melvin Wax

Rose Mallinger

Bernice and Sylvan Simon

Jerry Rabinowitz

Joyce Fienberg

Richard Gottfried

Daniel Stein

Cecil and David Rosenthal

May their memories be an inspiration for acts of prayer, for showing up to shul, and for celebrating Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note I am on vacation this weekend, so no CyberTorah next week.

THE CJLS

NOVEMBER 15, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I spent this week in New York at the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. The Committee meets twice a year to debate and establish halakhic guidelines for the Conservative movement. Consisting of 25 Rabbis and 5 non voting movement representatives, the Committee has played a key role over the years in finding pathways to greater inclusion and meaningful practice that are deeply rooted in Jewish law and learning.

We studied several teshuvot, Rabbinic responsa, on a variety of topics. I brought a teshuvah on the wearing of tekhelet, the blue thread, to the committee. While the Torah clearly commands us to wear tekhelet on our tallitot, the practice fell into disuse most likely because we lost our ability to make the dye. I suggested that since we again can make the dye, people ought to wear tekhelet on their tallitot. Part of this story is our renewed presence in the land of Israel. I believe wearing tekhelet is a strong statement of connection to Israel in a way that encourages us to help Israel and Israelis commit themselves to the ethical teachings of Torah. My teshuvah passed and is now a formally accepted practice in the movement.

We also studied and debated inclusion of people who are not neurotypical. There was great passion to create halakhic pathways to rituals that will meet people where they are in terms of ability. We talked a lot about how to write such a paper. A current draft starts from questions about who is eligible for particular rituals. By the end, I think the committee was more inclined to talk about the obligation to include all abilities and then to offer halakhic guidelines on how to appropriately modify rituals to make them open. (Ie, permitting people unable to speak to use an electronic voice system to read or lead on Shabbat.) This paper will see additional revisions and work before the work is concluded.

There was also a teshuvah on sustainability in our era. This Teshuvah focused on the mitzvah of ba'al tashkhit, do not waste, and expanded it into a larger responsibility to care for our resources. It also expanded rules around liability for unintended consequence to create a responsibility for systems that create pollution or waste. When we have agency to reduce unneeded waste, we must do so. When we can reduce unintended damaging consequences, we must. It remains in process and will hopefully create a Jewish legal basis true healthy stewardship of our planet's resources in the very near future.

I believe there is a great interest in the process of Halakhah and am honored that Kol Emeth is

participating in the second annual day of Halakhah in which Conservative Synagogues around the world study one of our teshuvot. This year we are studying Rabbi Barmash's teshuvah on Women and Mitzvot. It is a wonderful teshuvah that brings to culmination decades of halakhic process on the status of women. We will gather early December for our chance to study.

I hope to find other opportunities to bring the learning from the Committee to CyberTorah and the Kol Emeth community. I am grateful that I can be a part of this group and grateful that Kol Emeth gives me the time to be at the meetings and write my own papers.

I look forward to studying with you!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SETTLEMENTS

NOVEMBER 22, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am intrigued by the different reactions this week to Secretary Pompeo's acceptance of the (potential) legality of Israeli settlements. Israeli Jews and American Jews are each seeing this change through a different lens which highlights an increasing divide between our two communities (and the growing importance of events like Z3 at the OFJCC a few weeks ago.)

First, what he did. Pompeo accepted Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank and was careful to avoid commenting on any specific settlement. He said, "After carefully studying all sides of the legal debate... the establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not, per se, inconsistent with international law." This reversed several decades of US opposition to any Jewish Israeli construction across the pre 1967 borders, commonly referred to as the Green Line.

In the United States, this created a divisive reaction. Some strongly support the move while others, including such mainstream organizations as the Reform Movement condemned. Even AIPAC had a tepid tweet that seemed to criticize the move. My Facebook feed exploded with mostly negative reaction. Overall, American Jews were divided.

For most American Jews, when they hear the word settlement they imagine some tiny outpost in the middle of nowhere. As a result, with strong support among American Jews for a two-state solution, this comment engendered negative reaction. The worry is that it emboldens those who want to hold onto all the territories and makes a future separation more difficult.

Israelis reacted differently. Settlements includes tiny outposts but also Maale Adumim, a major Jerusalem suburb. Israelis are split on the tiny out-of-the-way places but have a consensus on the unity of Jerusalem and the integrity of some of the larger settlement blocs like Gush Etzion. For Israelis, this is separate from a conversation about a two state solution. Those who support a two state solution often imagine that land swaps for these major population centers. Legitimizing an illegal outpost deep in the West Bank is one thing; Maale Adumim another. As a result, most Israeli Jews supported the declaration.

The mainstream Israeli press had a hard time understanding the American Jewish reaction. I saw for example in Yediot Ahronot, a centrist paper, the theory that Trump did this both to shore up support

among evangelicals and among Jews. Yediot didn't understand that many American Jews would see this move negatively. Partly, this reflects a different sense of Jewish Israeli identity. Yet it also reflects a greater, closer, more nuanced view of what Pompeo's words mean. The paper assumed American Jews would respond as positively as Israeli Jews.

We are one people and one faith. We are experienced in disagreement and know in our hearts that we need each other for Israel and Judaism to thrive in the world. Our communities may increasingly see Israeli politics through different lenses determined by our larger context. Literature that used to describe American and Israelis Jews as siblings now often imagines them as cousins. We ARE further apart. At the same time, we love our cousins and want to understand them. I encourage you to advocate for whatever you believe AND to seek great understanding about why many Israelis may see things differently.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 25, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

These are trying times. The news is both dispiriting and exhausting. We find ourselves glued to events that rivet our attention and yet little seems to change. In such an environment, its easy to lose our capacity for hope. Were that to occur, our world would truly become a dark place.

Thanksgiving seems so important this year. The world is going to slow down a bit this week. We will make an effort to gather with friends and family and to share a meal. Particularly meaningful to me, Thanksgiving coincides with the beginning of the Jewish month of Kislev in which Hanukkah occurs. A festival of gratitude overlaps with a reminder that we can always bring light into darkness.

This year, I encourage you to experience gratitude during the quieter days. Perhaps begin each day this week with a few breaths following by 5 things for which you are grateful. Then you might choose to say the Shma. You could be grateful for things as quotidian as running water or electricity. You could be grateful for the beauty of the world, or the blessing of rain. You could be grateful for work, or people you know, or family you love.

And then at Thanksgiving, I encourage you to bless the bread. Barukh Atah Adonai, Elohenu Melekeh Haloam, HaMotzi Lechem Min Haaretz. Thank you, God, for the blessing of food and this meal. It is a wonder we can nourish and restore our bodies. That restoration can strengthen us again to kindle the lights of hope so desperately needed in this all too dark world.

I'm also planning to light a candle this year at my Thanksgiving meal to remind me of the beginning of Kislev. I will light the candle to remind myself that I have many ways to bring light into the world. I will remind myself that I am not a prisoner of events, doomed to darkness, but rather that I can be one light in the world that invites others to join with me until we create a world filled with love and compassion. I encourage you to do so as well.

During the meal, create moments of gratitude and hope. You might begin the meal with an invitation for people to share something for which they are grateful; maybe end the meal with something about which people feel hopeful. As you begin with a blessing over the bread, perhaps end the meal with the grace after meals. My family usually sings the full ritual; the shortest version I know is:

Thank you, God, for this bread and meal that we have shared.

I believe gratitude is the first step towards hope. And that hope can strengthen us to be a light in the darkness, to realize the work is greater than any one of us but that nevertheless we must do what we can.

May your Thanksgiving be filled with community, with good food, and with a restoration of hope and light.

Happy Thanksgiving and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

CLIMBING THE LADDER

DECEMBER 6, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I was talking to my daughter over Thanksgiving. She is applying for some internships and feeling that she is emerging into the adult world. She reflected that there are times she feels ready, able, and at the right life stage. At other moments, she feels like she is too young, not ready, and still a kid. I laughed and told her: welcome to the club.

In some ways, I do feel settled and confident and sure of myself. Yet in others, I continue to question and doubt and worry. I find myself wondering if I am sufficient, if I can be enough, for what is asked of me.

When I enter that place of doubt, I tend to compare myself to others in a way that leaves me wanting. That person has made more money, this one has more followers on Facebook, that one is more successful. Sometimes that motivates me even more to push, but often it leaves me feeling sad, insufficient and down.

Jacob also experiences the feeling of not-enoughness. Jacob flees from his ostensibly murderous brother Esau. On his first night alone, he is frightened, sad, and overwhelmed. In that moment of crisis, he encounters a place and has a dream-vision. He sees a ladder going to Heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

Isaiah Horowitz, the 16th century mystic and writer of *Shnei Lukhot HaBrit*, describes the ladder as the key to the Jewish spiritual endeavor. Ours cannot be a settled faith. We always need to be ascending rungs, realizing that we are sometimes pulled back as we seek to arise. Jewish spirituality is in movement from when God tells Abraham to get up and go. We need to be climbing or we are falling.

What we encounter as we ascend is categorically different than the physical world of achievement. Here we are not comparing or measuring or judging. Instead, we are encountering a profound love, a realization of deep connection. This experience engenders a desire to connect and heal as it reminds us that we are loved and appreciated for exactly who we are.

Gratitude and kindness are among the tools that help us ascend. When I remind myself of that for which I am thankful, it reconnects me to joy and meaning. I just feel better. I clear away the comparisons and the worries of insufficiency. I am grateful that I have a family who loves me. I am grateful for community.

I am grateful for food and running water. As I remind myself of each act of gratitude, I ascend a rung and get closer to appreciating myself and then the people around me more wholly as well.

As I ascend further, my own love and compassion becomes stimulated. I feel more connected to others as I feel better about myself. This reminds me that I live in service. It is not about am I enough, but rather how can I serve. It is less about my own insufficiency, and more about what gifts do I have to share.

We are all going up and down the ladder. We are all spending time feeling like we aren't enough. Yet we can also get up, rise up, and remember as unready as we may be, we can all bring more gratitude, more love, more connection, into this world so in need of healing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

SEEING BY THE LIGHT OF THE MENORAH

DECEMBER 13, 2019

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Rarely do we talk about the spiritual preparation for Hanukkah, and yet like every holiday it contains deep messages that require intentionality to appreciate and notice. Hanukkah brings light into darkness, which highlights both the light and the darkness. Darkness serves many purposes. Among them, a reminder of appreciating sight and realizing how much the world opens to us with light.

I remember once eating at a restaurant in Tel Aviv called BlackOut. The restaurant was totally dark to give people the experience of blindness. Amid the dark, I felt claustrophobic to the point that I got drenched in sweat and almost left until I breathed through it and pulled myself together. When I walked outside, I was amazed by the way light opened up the world to me.

Hanukkah lights have an effect because they are candles. When we light the menorah, especially if we turn off the other lights to appreciate their beauty, the candles highlight faces. It is as if the darkness lets me turn off the various distractions while the lights highlight the divine image in the people around me. The light and the dark remind me how important it is to truly see the faces of the people around us.

Our Rabbis teach that that humanity can be God's candles. That is, our ethical and spiritual behavior, as it were, opens the world up for God. We, through our actions, can invite hope and meaning into our lives. When we do that, we become illuminated and are seen by God.

Put another way, Hanukkah reminds us that we are in partnership with God. The sight experience around the candles creates a spiritual commandment to breathe and make the effort to see others. Blessing the candles, for examples, alerts us to make the time to see one another more wholly than we usually do. Requiring that we only enjoy the light of the candles creates a restorative space of love and connection that strengthens us to have time and attention for others at other times.

And once we see others, we realize that we have obligations to treat them ethically in ways that honor their sacred humanity. Seeing a shining face means I want to think seriously about my behavior and how I, through pursuing justice tempered by humility, can give those other faces their own room and space to shine.

Those behaviors than create a light on high that shines the way for God. Such spiritual effort and ethical

behavior invites God to see the world and to act. We make it possible for the divine to elevate our own individual behaviors and to help pull the world in a better direction.

I suggest the following practice in preparation for Hanukkah. As we live amid the greater darkness of the next few weeks, lets us pursue light. In particular, I invite you to make the time to appreciate good qualities in other people. Look for their light. What makes someone you love, care about, work with, special? Can you uncover good qualities in someone with whom you don't have a strong connection or even have issues towards? The more we look for these lights, the more we will see our own light and God's light.

I wish you a happy Hanukkah and new year!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that CyberTorah will be on hiatus for a few weeks. Enjoy Hanukkah and the secular New Year!

A RENEWED BEGINNING

JANUARY 10, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Shabbat prayer is an essential part of my week. I believe greatly in the power of prayer to transform the self and to awaken deep reservoirs of joy, gratitude, and meaning. I open myself up to God, I take a breath from the pressures of the week, and I restore my deepest self. The focused quiet surrounded by loving community creates receptivity to the Divine; singing in community elevates the spirit.

Rabbi Akiva taught that we must never make our prayers fixed. A great risk of prayer, especially richly liturgical prayer like ours, is to become rote. Related, there is a risk of prayer becoming about the form and structure rather than the deep meaning contained in the act of prayer.

Rashi in the same vein teaches that true prayer is the service of the heart. That is, the siddur is a tool to open the heart. Being stuck in fixed or limited ways of praying turns what should be a heart moment into a sterile ritual. By contrast, bringing deep focus to a prayer experience is the foundation for a heart opening experience.

Shabbat morning begins with Psukei Dzimra, the recitation of Psalms, in order to settle the mind and create receptivity for the rest of the prayer experience. The Mishnah in Berakhot teaches that this practice originated with the “original pious ones,” a particular group known for their love of prayer, in the second century. They would sit for a time before beginning with the liturgy to create “kavod rosh,” a state of mindfulness.

Over the years, this original heart practice became a set ritual. That ritual has power; reciting those Psalms triggers real focus and turns thoughts away from our immediate mundane concerns (what did I have for breakfast? That annoyance rattling around my head) towards humility and gratitude (my soul thirsts for God; Thank you, God, for all the goodness in my life).

In some communities, Psukei Dzimra is recited individually, reaching a crescendo as a leader steps forward to begin with Shacharit and the praise of God in eternity. Our community, like many, has a practice of reciting each Psalm at its beginning and ending and singing some selections as we go.

Rabbi Graff and I are suggesting a new mode for Psukei Dzimra. For the next two months we will focus on mindfulness through silence and song. We want to create a space in which people can still recite the Psalms

and sing with community. Yet also a space where people can sing and then have some time to sit and breathe. Or any mixture that brings meaning to each participant.

Towards this end, we will begin with song, singing gratitude to God for the purity of our soul. Then we will have some silence in which people may read, meditate, or some mixture thereof. Somewhere in that quiet we will join again for a chant followed by a few more minutes of quiet and a closing song about our mouths being open in praise of the divine.

I believe those who love the words of the liturgy will love this mode because it will allow us to move at our own pacing. I believe those who want fewer words will love this as they can recite a much smaller selection with greater focus. And finally, for those who crave some quiet, this will offer a chance to meditate and ready oneself for joy and gratitude.

We intend for this mode to take 15 minutes in total which we hope will also create a few minutes later in the service to study the liturgy. Please keep in mind this means the Torah service will begin about 10 minutes earlier than it currently does, closer to 10am than 10:10 am.

I look forward to sharing this mode of prayer with you and hope that we as a community find it rich and sustaining for a focused quiet that strengthens us for the week and the joys and challenges in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

KINDNESS

JANUARY 17, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Exercise: Take note of people's behaviors. Look intentionally to see kindness and even love in people's actions. Can you especially see the hidden kindness even from people with whom you disagree? Each day, collect at least three such moments of kindness or love that you see from other people.

Teachings on Kindness: According to the Psalmist, the world itself is built on *Hesed*, or love. That is, the true world is one of kindness, human connection, and acts of caring. It is the world of illusion that beguiles us into thinking animosity, division, and anger are the basis of things. When we are so tricked, we fall into a trap of increasing cycles of irritation and efforts to impose our will on others to remove the threat they pose to our safety and well being.

By contrast, when we elevate ourselves into the true world, that is, the world of *Hesed* or Love, we realize that a willingness to listen, alongside acts of compassion and efforts to bring people together, is the true path to ensuring our safety. Further, once we realize we are safe and surrounded by world building love, then joy emerges!

We are practiced in anger and division; we need to intentionally commit ourselves to practicing kindness. Like any healthy habit, practices of kindness require thought and planning. If I awaken and set the intention of bringing kindness into my interactions today, that intention has great impact on the quality of my day and the type of goodness I bring to others. By contrast, when I forget to set that intention, I am vulnerable to the temptations of the lower world that invites anger and division.

The exercise above is meant as a first step into kindness practices. We are so conditioned to see the threats and dangers that others pose that we have all but lost our capacity to see the goodness in others. Yet God created all of us in God's image. We are all supernal beings with great potential to bring blessing into the world around us.

By taking the time to draw the eye to acts of kindness around us, we will notice them more and more. Instead of allowing the illusions of the world to draw our minds only to violence and anger, this practice will change our habits to see that the world is in fact built on love. And once we begin to see that, and know that in our hearts, we will begin to realize the impact of our own acts of love and compassion.

May God grant all of us the strength this week to pause, to take a breath, and retrain our eyes to see the kindness that daily surrounds us. As we develop that sight, may we also see the kindness that, You, God, daily offer us as well in the air that we breathe, or the food that we eat, and in so many other ways. We praise You Who stands behind and strengthens all acts of kindness. Then, God, helps us to realize that we too can be your partners in building this world on our own acts of love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

KINDNESS PART II

JANUARY 24, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Exercise: Last week, I invited you to notice the good in others. This week is going to be harder. I'd like you to refer back to your list of 3 such acts of kindness you noted in the people around you. Then I want you to go to those people and share with them what you noticed. If you don't remember or have records, look for new acts of kindness each day and both note them and tell the people you see offering the kindness.

Teachings on Kindness: The real world, the world of blessing, is also a world that requires noticing. Think for a moment about Moses. God picks Moses in part because he is capable of watching and seeing and paying attention. The miracle of the burning bush requires attention to notice. God's hand in the world is dramatic, and yet we still need to look for the miracles. Most people would only notice that the bush was burning; to see it isn't being consumed requires attention and patience. Most people would never even realize a miracle had taken place.

When we see an act of love or kindness and name it, we encourage that person to notice their own goodness and love. By doing that, we help them see their own capacity to bring wholeness and healing into the world. This helps remind them of the importance of their path and the significance of their deeds. It helps illuminate for them that they are on a path of great importance to the world.

The naming is simple. "I notice that you were sweet to your grandchild today. I loved what you did." Or "I saw the effort you brought into that difficult work moment. I was touched by your compassion." That naming is a kind of blessing because it helps people see themselves as actors of compassion in the world. Too often we see only the hurt and negativity we bring; it takes a word from someone else to see the visible impact of our kindness.

We praise God who is the source of blessing. When we notice in someone else that they are bringing kindness into the world, we are blessing them because we see that God's blessing has overflowed from them into the world. God needs us to bring love into this world because God's love spreads out from each of us. God is the source; we are both the recipients and the channels from which God's love can spread forth and flourish.

By naming that kindness, by offering a blessing to the person who engages in an act of love, we then

involve ourselves in that chain of blessing that originates from God. We become God's partners in creating a world founded on love because we are naming that love and calling it forth from one another. We become God's instruments in the world and magnify the way that loving energy can flow and influence the world of our day to day experiences.

May that Divine energy of compassion fill all of us to overflowing so that we in turn can regularly offer of it to others!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

MERCAZ ELECTIONS

JANUARY 31, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The World Zionist Congress is an international elected platform open to Jews around the world that determines funding and policies around Aliyah to Israel, issues of religious pluralism, and so much more. Any Jew who believes in Israel is eligible to vote.

I'm urging you to vote slate #6, the Mercaz platform of the Conservative movement. The slate stands for religious pluralism, combating world wide anti-Semitism, and an unrestricted right of return. The strength of the Mercaz slate will greatly impact the Conservative movement's ability to function in Israel. And unlike Israeli politics as a whole, the WZO Congress gives Mercaz a vote and a voice.

Sheri Robbins, a long time KE member, is a delegate this year. I'm attaching her letter. Join me in voting Mercaz! Please note there is a \$7.50 fee to vote.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Dear Fellow Congregant,

The polls are now open, and we American Jews have the opportunity to cast our ballots in the 2020 World Zionist Congress election which will directly help shape the future of Israel. As a delegate to the World Zionist Congress on MERCAZ Slate #6, I'm asking you to support MERCAZ Slate #6 with your

vote in this important election.

A strong vote for MERCAZ Slate #6 will send a clear and compelling message to Israeli leaders that pluralism, democracy, and equality are critical to a thriving future in Israel. This election also impacts the allocation of \$1 billion in funding. Together we can ensure that Conservative/Masorti Judaism receives its fair share of this money for communities and programs in Israel, and throughout the world.

So, please sign up today to cast your ballot for Mercaz Slate #6 by going to the following link to register and vote: <<https://www.mercaz2020.org/?source=email&>>

Online voting is open through March 11, 2020, but why wait?

Thank you,

Sheri Robbins

TU B'SHVAT

FEBRUARY 7, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

God created the Universe in seven days and gave us the task of caring for our surroundings. Adam and Eve are told to “tend and protect” the garden. This means there is a human obligation from God to care for the world. Similarly, the midrash teaches that we are to plant trees even when we ourselves will see no benefit from them. A story is told of an old man planting a fruit tree. Honi, a magical / mystical Talmudic figure, asks, “Why bother? You will never eat the fruit of this tree.” The old man replied: “Others planted trees for me; I too plant for the future.” Not only must we care for the world; we must leave it in better shape, better able to sustain and provide for life, than we found it.

One of the most basic environmental commandments is baal taschit, meaning do not destroy. A recent Teshuvah of the Conservative movement wisely extended this commandment from a focused prohibition against wasteful behavior to a larger concern of caring for the environment and making sure we do not destroy the world. Sustainability is a basic Jewish value.

This year we will celebrate Tu b'Shvat in our new building. I am excited for you to see the progress so far and get your own sense of what it will be like to enter the building and how close we are to that moment. I am also excited that our first holiday celebration will be the New Year for trees, a day that has become a celebration of nature and a reminder to care for the Earth.

Our new building is going to be net zero energy. With solar panels on the roof, we will produce as much or more renewable energy than we use. It will be net zero waste, meaning we will use compostable and recyclable items for kiddush and office use. We will send as little as 5% of our garbage to the dump. Being net zero waste means working together to create systems that make it easy to separate our garbage, easy to compost, and leave as small an impact on the world as possible. Our religious school will be part of this effort, helping by making signage and systems to make this all possible.

We have systems to collect runoff and gray water from other uses so that our landscaping can be largely reclaimed and collected rainwater. That will make Kol Emeth drought resistant and a model of what it means to care for the Earth and to use our resources wisely. Kol Emeth is designed to fulfill the mitzvot of caring for the Earth, of ensuring the future is able to better sustain life than the present, and to sustain the world rather than damage it.

When we left the old Kol Emeth, many of us collected soil. Bring that soil with you Sunday to plant new

trees for our landscaping. In that way, we will bring breath to the world with our hands and with the soil of the old Kol Emeth as we ourselves form the new. We will celebrate Tu b'Shvat by planting trees and reminding ourselves that we have an obligation to sustain and care for the world with our own hands.

In this way, the new Kol Emeth can inspire all of us in our homes and places of work to sustain, tend, and heal the Earth. We can then be partners with God in maintaining the truth of the Psalmist: You (God) extend Your hand, and sustain all life that is.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Tu b'Shvat,

Rabbi David Booth

SHABBAT ACROSS KOL EMETH

FEBRUARY 14, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The holiest location in Judaism is the Shabbat table. Friday night dinner, especially with guests present, creates a unique opportunity to breathe and restore our souls. The week can be challenging. The news is often overwhelming, work demands can be immense, and our families bring us joy but also exact a cost. And so it is easy to slip out of alignment, to feel disconnected and unmoored.

When we feel disconnected, our values no longer guide as they should. We find it more and more difficult to bring our best most caring self into our daily interactions. Instead we feel stressed, overwhelmed, alone.

Shabbat dinner can be a cure even if you don't serve chicken soup. Shabbat dinner means interacting with others around challah and light. It invites conversations of meaning that value the soul of each person present. It may include song that can restore the soul. It can re-align us and re-connect us with our values, with our community, and with God.

This year I invite you to be a host for Shabbat Across Kol Emeth. We are part of a national initiative to encourage as many people as possible in the United States to have a Shabbat dinner on Feb 28th. To participate, simply invite anyone you like to join you for Shabbat. Perhaps invite a friend from synagogue, or someone at Kol Emeth you want to know better. Alternatively, invite someone from work or another context who you think would enjoy a Shabbat meal and whom you would like to get to know better.

Dinner can be anything. For some, it makes sense to prepare a delicious and elegant meal. For others, take-out pizza is the right choice. In other words, privilege having people over and don't let anything stop you! Use the ritual that is right for you. Our website has [Shabbat resources](#) including kiddush, hamotzi, the grace after meals, and the candle lighting.

Yet this is YOUR meal. You get to decide exactly what and how much you will do. I feel kiddush and hamotzi create a sacred vessel for a meal. I also love engaging in some Torah study and offering thanksgiving at the end of meal. You are the host, so you offer the ritual that feels most meaningful to you.

Our culture discourages spiritual meaning and ritual. Allow yourself to plan out the meal with the meaning you want to offer. It's okay to stumble a bit over the Hebrew. To this day, I get nervous whenever I say Friday night kiddush. (It's a strange mental block. My father always used to ask me to lead kiddush when I was a

teen. That discomfort and nervousness still linger). It's okay to tell your guests—and your family—a plan for the evening to elevate a normal dinner to something sacred. I promise you that if invited, nearly everyone will be excited to go along and try something new or to reconnect with something they remember.

Finally, enjoy! And please do let me know if you plan to participate. I am curious to know about your experience!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HEALING IN REVELATION

FEBRUARY 21, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The moment of revelation happened once. Moses and the Israelites experienced it at Sinai. Torah reflects the crystallization in words of that experience of the Divine. Yet the moment of revelation also happens every moment. The Torah calls us all the time towards love and justice and to a deep realization that love and justice reinforce each other. The laws of Mishpatim that we read this Shabbat are there to help create justice in the world, that we might see the image of God in our fellow. Law allows us to create a space within which our creativity and uniqueness can flourish. It protects us by creating limits that enable growth and flourishing.

Without these laws, the chaos that would ensue would allow only those with the greatest strength or cleverness to prevail. The rest of us would be forced into their will, becoming either servants or extraneous people, cast aside because we serve no end to those who dominate all that is. Instead, laws create a living ethic that binds all of us to justice. Power becomes balanced and limited so that everyone has room for their particular fragment of the divine to be evoked into the world.

The laws of Torah flow from a place of love. Limits and the ethics they bring into human experience allow for a flourishing that would otherwise be all too quickly stifled. And that happens because one moment of revelation was recorded, crystallized, put into words. Imagine if we worked to capture every moment of revelation!

I want to suggest that God can be felt all the time. There is a potential revelation in every moment. And we can tell when we are encountering God when we are called to love and justice. If we feel a desire to block, to control, to criticize, we are failing to encounter the Divine. By contrast, when we are inspired to notice and see the good and loving acts of others, when we are lifted up to offer care and kindness to others, then we know that we are encountering the Divine.

I believe that if we can cultivate kindness intentionally, we will be cultivating the precise tool needed at this moment to heal and repair our all too broken world. I believe that noticing the good in others will help us acquire faith; I believe that telling others of the good we see in them will inspire them to grow in their kindness. Further, as we engage in such acts of noticing and calling out goodness, I believe we will inspire others to do the same.

In this way, we can create a special inspiration and feeling in the walls of Kol Emeth that will radiate out to our homes, our communities, our places of work, and begin to inspire others to turn away from the harsh judgments and language, the daily cruelty, and towards the love that God invites.

May God grant us the strength to turn away from hatred, from anger, from contempt, and towards love and kindness, and may God let others see our example and be inspired so that we can create a wave of love that can heal our broken world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that there will be no CyberTorah the next two weeks. I'll resume the week after Purim.

COVID-19

MARCH 6, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Practice: Focus on becoming a vector of blessing rather than a vector of disease. The next time you wash your hands, instead of singing the abc song or something else to make sure you spend long enough scrubbing, do this instead: Call to mind an act of kindness, hesed, you were offered today. Think about it for a moment, how it felt, who the person was. Then think of a kindness you can offer to someone else between now and the next time you wash.

Further thought: Everyone is talking right now about Covid-19. We are following the disease and its spread in an unprecedented manner. Such coverage awakens caution which can quickly become fear. I worry about three groups: our elderly, most at risk for the disease, our children, least able to understand what is happening around them, and medical professionals and first responders.

We need to be thoughtful and caring of each group. We want to slow the spread of the disease by handwashing, by refraining from hugs and hand shakes, and avoiding as much as possible touching our faces. Typically, the virus spreads by touching something contaminated and then touching your face where it can enter the body. It is an act of kindness, hesed, towards those most at risk and to medical professionals to slow the spread so that there are sufficient resources to care for those who are ill. We are partners with God in bringing healing into the world.

Children know this is going on. They are hearing all the adults and even their friends at school talking about it. We need to reassure them. Less than 2% of all cases involve under 20s. I was visiting some cousins, aged 8, 11, and 13, this week in Washington DC. When I told them that people under 20 aren't getting sick, they looked relieved. The next night at dinner their parents told me they hadn't thought about reassuring their children. They were grateful that I had shared this information because their children remembered it, shared it with their friends, and clearly felt safer.

We also need to plan. Enough people may become ill that it overwhelms our care givers. There may be a need to help and we will wait and see. We as an institution will keep following CDC and local health guidelines. I also suggest thinking through how we can be in touch with our community to offer support as needed. It may be as simple as an older person with the disease needing help getting groceries and aspirin. It may be as simple as reassuring people that they are part of a network that cares for them.

We cannot let ourselves be overwhelmed by fear. This virus has quickly spread across the world. I challenge us to act with such kindness and blessing towards others, encouraging them to do the same, so that it too spreads over the whole world. Imagine: we can be ground zero for kindness and blessing.

I wish everyone a Shabbat of rest and healing.

Rabbi David Booth

CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER

MARCH 13, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am not a medical practitioner. I have no expertise in the spread of infectious disease. I, like you, am living through an unprecedented effort to contain a disease that could have devastating effects on our community. I find it overwhelming. I also find my responsibility as Rabbi frightening. Along with Elaine, Rabbi Graff, and Sarah Miller, I am charged with caring for this community and that has gotten a lot more challenging and confusing.

You will see a more detailed email from Elaine about our response internally over the next few weeks. Here, I want to talk about something I do know about: kindness or hesed. People are going to need caring in ways we never imagined, alleviating loneliness and isolation as we care for those who need help. I believe Kol Emeth can play a key role in caring for our members at a time of crisis. I would like to organize volunteers to help in a few areas of hesed.

First, calling. It would be easy to become self focused right now. Yet I worry about our community. Without in person classes and events, people who rely upon Kol Emeth as one of their places of human contact need to feel loved and seen. Further, we have members impacted in a variety of ways, including families with children now at home, elderly people at risk of severe disease, and so many other reasons why hearing a friendly voice could be uplifting. I want to encourage you to join our calling team. Let's call each other and stay connected as a community, and let's make a special point of calling members most likely to need a connection and possibly help. If you made 2 calls a week and inspired those people to call two more people, it would spread love and connection quickly through all of Kol Emeth.

Second, grocery shopping, rides and food deliveries. People may need help getting groceries or other items. Especially for our oldest members, it would be a great kindness to reach out and offer help. If you are willing to make a grocery run for someone or can bring someone meals, or are open to offering rides to someone in need, please click on the [link](#). If you think you need or will need help, similarly follow the link and indicate your need.

Finally, we need to bring kindness into all our interactions. People are stressed and afraid. Appreciate people who are caring for you; recognize the extra stress everyone is experiencing by offering compassion. We can be leaders of caring and help other uncover the inner resources they need to move through this scary moment with grace and love. If we act kindly to others, we can inspire them to do the same. Think how

quickly it would spread...

Mystics teach that God sometimes moves from the seat of Mercy to the seat of Judgement. When that happens, destruction and death is unleashed into the world indiscriminately. They believe that our actions of caring for one another can slowly move God back to the seat of Mercy. This feels like such a moment; we must respond with kindness, hesed, and make kindness as viral and contagious as this awful disease.

If you are willing to help in any of the ways above, or have other ideas, please respond and let me know.

May God strengthen and guide our medical providers and help all of us find a path to bring caring and compassion into this moment so that we can push away fear, isolation, and anxiety as we inspire ever more viral acts of love!

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER LEADING INTO SHABBAT + SOME HALAKHIC ISSUES OF ISOLATION

MARCH 20, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I want to suggest the following prayer to enter Shabbat this week.

Sit in a comfortable chair. Take 3 settling long breaths. As you breathe, call to mind 3-4 good things that happened to you today. Think of them fully, calling the experience to mind. Breathe again, 3 long breaths. Now say the following prayer:

As I set out on this journey of unknowns, be with me, God. Protect me from illness and all the dangers of this uncharted path. Strengthen along the way those who would care for me, whether physicians, medical researchers, food delivery people or the cable guy here and abroad. Bring me to a new place of calm and gratitude so that I can be strengthened to find my own way in this challenging time. Bring comfort to those who have already lost loved ones. Help me learn how I can be of service as a source of healing in the world.

May God's angels of peace bring wholeness to us and to the world as Shabbat enters.

Shalom Aleichem Malakhei Hashareit!! I invite you to sing Shalom Aleichem!

(Click here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-wAAAtCvPnQ> for the song)

Grant all of us a Shabbat of rest.

Shabbat Shalom and love to all – Rabbi David Booth

Halakhic Issues from Coronavirus

The unprecedented experience of most of the world Jewish community being under “shelter at home” or variant rules brings up a variety of Halakhic issues. Jewish living is so based on face- to-face connection that our inability to gather creates a spiritual and observance challenge. I want to outline a few of the issues and how we at Kol Emeth are responding.

1.

Virtual Minyan. A minyan requires 10 to make a prayer quorum. With such a quorum, one can say “matters of communal holiness” like Barchu and the Torah reading. Kaddish has customarily been included in such matters. A minyan cannot be constituted virtually because we have to be in the presence of 10 other Jews. The Talmud offers the case of a multi-room hall in which people are gathered in various rooms and can see and hear one another. To form a minyan, they must be in the same room. However, onlookers can respond with “amen” and fulfill their responsibilities for prayer and Birkhat HaMazon, the grace after meals. In this current environment, I am following the ruling of Rabbi Benny Lau. He asserted that we cannot form a virtual minyan—meaning no Barchu or Torah reading. However, since Kaddish is only by custom requiring a minyan, we can recite Kaddish. So our daily and Shabbat minyan will still say mourners’ Kaddish but we will not read from Torah (though we may study it) nor will we say Barchu.

2.

Shabbat practice. Shabbat generally is a day of rest in which we focus on being rather than doing. In our era, that particularly includes unplugging. However, our inability to gather means that unplugging could create immense loneliness and separation. So we are following a pluralistic approach. I will stream services only before Shabbat. I will lead Friday night services but they will end before sundown. I feel that I need to unplug and I am concerned that the text and writing needed to access a Zoom violate Shabbat. Rabbi Graff feels strongly that our community needs a way to connect on Shabbat. As a result, she, and sometimes Rabbi Eilberg, will offer a Zoom option on Shabbat. We will also invite our singing group to convene for those who want. Rabbi Graff is identifying the emergency and sense of isolation to overcome the Rabbinic prohibition against temporary writing (as in the case of a sign on a screen, for example.) I am concerned that this may be a Biblical prohibition since there is a record of it.

3.

Funerals. In the event of a death during this time of small to no gatherings, the practices will be constrained. I spoke to Sinai yesterday and clarified what will happen. They are still operating and will pick up bodies etc. Funerals will be at the graveside only, with just immediate family, attendance limited to 10 people including the Rabbi. There will be no communal shiva in person. We will instead create a Zoom call with family and those who want to join.

This is an unsettling and unprecedented time. I wanted to share with you a few of the ways we are wrestling with our relationship to Jewish law and practice as we navigate caring for our community.

IN MEMORY OF THE OLD KOL EMETH

MARCH 27, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I thought something unrelated to Covid-19 could be nice, so here it is:

As we prepare to enter our new building, a few words of praise for the old. First, a memory. It's "Making Room for Shabbat." A three year-old who has come a few times is wearing eyeglasses. She is nervous, unused to them. At Likhah Dodi she dances with me for a minute and I tell her that her eyeglasses look so good on her. She smiles shyly and touches the glasses and then goes off to sit with her parents again. Years later, at a First Friday, I see that same little girl, now a madrichah, dancing with three or four other children.

I have so many memories of that space. My first Shabbat as Rabbi; each of my children's bar and bat mitzvahs. Intense moments of prayer and learning together. Those memories are tied up with the people involved, but also the space that so lovingly held them.

It was in many ways an innovative space. Designed by founding member Harry Newman, a Palo Alto architect, the old Kol Emeth made use of indoor space that organically connected with outdoor space. Newman's design invited us into the courtyard and helped make that space a joyous beating heart of our community.

Harry donated his time to design KE. He spent hours on the site, supervising all the details and even doing some of the construction work himself. In the course of his career he designed homes, office buildings, schools, libraries, and hospitals in Palo Alto and the Bay Area, but Kol Emeth was his favorite and most cherished project.

I learned from talking to his son Mark, a long-time KE member, that Harry designed the entire Synagogue when the first stage was built, including the Sanctuary. Once that project started, they discovered not only that the plans were completed and ready, but that all the necessary permitting had been done at the time of the original building.

The old building invited us to approach God in humility. It was usable, inviting, designed for us to pray, and play and learn together. It was forward-thinking—Harry had designed some future options—but never imagined that our community would triple in size from when the Sanctuary was built.

For me, the Courtyard was the best part of that Synagogue. I loved being there by the olive tree with people, enjoying kiddush or watching singing underneath the sunshade. I loved seeing Kol Shabbat students rush into the Social Hall to get tea. The Sanctuary too was a place of great spiritual intensity. Our singing and dancing, our joy and our grief, filled that room to overflowing.

I also loved the Small Sanctuary. That space was so inviting for minyan and for learning. There is something for me about being surrounded by books and tables with an Ark at the center that invites great intention and focus. Harry also designed that room very cleverly. It sat at the center of the back part of the building and mirrored the (eventual) Sanctuary. It was in truth a Small Sanctuary that pointed us towards the Courtyard and the main Sanctuary.

I am grateful to the old Kol Emeth. I am grateful to Harry Newman who designed it, to Meyer Scher who got us the land, to Steve Shapiro who made sure we built the Sanctuary, and to so many others who created a place that had room for us to fill it with our joy, with our hopes and prayers, and with our moments of loss.

The old Kol Emeth lasted for nearly 50 years and it gave us more than we deserved. It inspired our new building, reminding us to keep the Courtyard at the center and to create a space of humility. As we approach entering our new building, may all our thoughts and memories of the old Kol Emeth help inspire us to feel the new with joy and purpose and Torah and compassion.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

PASSOVER IN PLAGUE: SHOPPING DURING COVID

APRIL 1, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I love Passover. I am heartbroken that I cannot have guests this year and am still trying to make sense of all of this. And yet, I love the holiday and its message of redemption. I believe that Passover can remind us that there is always hope. We can find comfort in tradition and faith at a time of uncertainty. Further, we can be uplifted in song and practice that WILL connect us as a people even while we each celebrate in our own homes.

Normally, the preparations for Passover are sufficiently demanding. This year, however, it's gotten worse because availability is spotty, it's hard to get to stores, and hours are sometimes limited. As a result, the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement has published a kosher guide for this year with particular leniencies for the Covid epidemic. You can find it here:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/kashrut-subcommittee-recommendations-passover-5780-light-covid-19>.

I will address several of the Halakhic concerns and invite you to read the full paper.

Seder

With the strict rules against communal gatherings, people should have Seder only with the people in their household. I will be streaming a Seder at 6pm on Wednesday April 8th and Rabbi Graff and her family will pre-record the grace after meals and the singing at the end of the Haggadah for those who want to stream. In addition, we will leave the Zoom call active from the 6pm call for anyone who wants to share their Seder meal virtually. We encourage families to reach out to guests and family members who cannot attend, up to and including inviting them to attend Seder virtually. The Sephardic Rabbinat of Israel has encouraged families to start a Zoom call prior to the beginning of the festival so that family and friends can feel a connection.

Cleaning

Cleaning should be as usual. If, however, the people in the house are unable to manage the cleaning due to age or infirmity, I suggest a minimal cleaning that involves wiping down all surfaces and removing all

visible chametz.

Food

There does seem to be kosher for Passover food available at the usual places: Mollie Stone's, Lucky's, Pars in San Jose, and others. Last year, the Law Committee approved all Jews to eat kitniyot, meaning beans, legumes, rice. This year we recommend that all do so in order to make sure sufficient food is available.

All dairy, fresh vegetables, eggs, pure oils, and kosher fish (ie, fish that is kosher even if not marked so) can be purchased before Passover begins with no Passover mark. Normally, these items cannot be purchased during the holiday. If however they are simply unavailable to you until the middle days, people may purchase them this year only.

Second, some usually require other processed kosher foods to have a special Passover mark. I personally tend to be more lenient as long as they are clearly marked as having no flour or other hametz products. Feel free to purchase anything marked Gluten Free. Other items should be checked carefully to make sure none of the ingredients are derived from wheat, barley, oats, spelt or rye.

Third, all baked items like matzoh and Passover cakes must have a kosher for Passover mark as should candy.

Finally, normally any open items are discarded or set away during Passover. This year, you may set aside and sell anything open that is clearly hametz, like flour. Other items, like spices, may be used on two conditions:

1. They are otherwise unavailable or it is unsafe to get them.
2. You are reasonably certain no chametz got into them.

This year is anything but usual. And yet, I believe our Seders can be a light of hope in what is otherwise an uncertain and strange moment.

I wish you a joyous Passover!

Rabbi David Booth

THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION

APRIL 3, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

T.S. Eliot once wrote that April is the cruelest month. His metaphor of a hinted at yet seldom arriving spring has given way this year to a literal reality. Millions are out of work because of the Covid shelter-in-place rules. Many of those millions are day laborers with little to no social networks, and some are illegal immigrants with no access to governmental help.

Workers like these depend on their daily salaries. They rarely have meaningful financial reserves and housing is tenuous under the best of circumstances. To suddenly have income completely disappear for an indefinite period is a devastating blow.

Skyrocketing housing costs mean people rent and sublet places outside legal structures. Some only rent a couch for sleeping – with the expectation that they will be out at work or social events all day and only need a place to sleep. Now they are sheltered in place. Prohibitions against evictions do nothing in these cases since the arrangement is under the table.

This necessary health quarantine is exposing deep financial inequity. While not new, the crisis is disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable in our culture. The Seder tells us that matzah is the bread of poverty and that the abundance of our Seder requires us to invite in all those who are hungry to come and eat. It means nothing to celebrate the Seder and forget about the needy around us. We have to find a way to make good on that value of the Seder.

I have a few suggestions. First, there are a myriad of meaningful charities. I suggest [LifeMoves](#), based in Menlo Park. They have been doing amazing work for years around homelessness. Their work has become even more needed in the last few weeks. They are on the front lines with the people most in need of emergency rental assistance, and help securing and keeping housing. You can [click here](#) to help right now. Most of us will receive relief checks from the federal government. I urge you to donate as much of that as you can.

Second, LifeMoves has a few projects we can do from home. Among them: making no sew blankets for use in their shelters and making and decorating snack bags and care packages for the families and especially children they are feeding. You can either drop off your donations at the LifeMoves Office (181 Constitution Drive, Menlo Park) or arrange for a no-contact pick-up from your home by a Kol Emeth volunteer. Please find more [details on donations and delivery here.](#)

Passover reminds us that sitting in our house is a great blessing. We remember times in Jewish history where none of us had permanent places to live. Being able to shelter in place is already a sign of affluence – many in Santa Clara county live in crowded places or places they may soon lose. Let us be inspired by the message of the Hagaddah to help those most in need in this cruelest of months.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Passover,

Rabbi David Booth

A NEW FOUR QUESTIONS FOR THIS YEAR + AN ANSWER

APRIL 7, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Why is this night different than all other nights?

1. On all other Seder Nights we are together in spirit and in body.

Tonight; we are alone.

2. On all other Seder nights Jews open their doors to friends, to family, Jew and non-Jew, stranger and companion.

On this Seder night, our doors are closed.

3. On all other Seder nights, we together tell the story of the Exodus in our own ways.

This Seder night we must tell the story alone, only with our own household.

4. On all other Seder nights we gather across the generations.

This Seder night we can only connect through Zoom.

This night is different because a plague is in the land and we choose to sit alone in our households to save the lives of those most at risk. This night is different because we believe in saving life as the most sacred of our commitments.

And yet, this night is the same because we turn in hope to You for our redemption. You are the great healer; strengthen the hands of those who heal on the front lines and the wisdom of those who search for a cure. Bring us forth soon and speedily to rebuild community and heal that which is wounded.

This night is the same because many sit without bread; hungry in the face of massive displacement and unemployment. We cannot invite those who are hungry; instead we look for other ways to make sure people in our community are fed. Remind us to give so that everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, has somewhere to sit and something to eat.

Finally, we will open our doors this year to Elijah. Elijah comes with Your promise of hope. When we invite in Elijah, we invite in compassion, empathy, and the possibility of a new beginning. How dare we

close our doors? Let them instead be wide open, for as Rabbi Shimon says, for us, the whole matter depends on love.

Help us to celebrate the Passover, each in our own way and in our own home, and as we join our voices together separately remind us that we are one people.

This year in our homes, quarantined; next year again together with healing and new found hope.

Happy Passover!

Rabbi David Booth

IN BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR

APRIL 13, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

We are in between. In the middle of Passover and in the middle of quarantine. Today we know how much longer Passover is; but we remain unsure how long we will stay in our homes and what we will discover when we are able to exit. This kind of uncertainty can lead to a darkness of despair and inwardness that leaves no room for hope.

The Rabbis teach: a jailed person cannot free him or herself. We each have the capacity to heal others and we need others in order to be healed. We live in a web of deep interconnection. This quarantine reminds us how much havoc occurs as that web is untangled. It is all the more incumbent upon us to heal what we can and help those whom we may.

I have already asked you to feed those who are hungry and to help those on the brink of homelessness find homes. Please continue to [give to LifeMoves](#) and so many other worthy causes helping day laborers and others, including immigrants here legally and here without legal entry. Today, in the midst of Passover, I want you to remember your own homes.

Many of us employ gardeners, house cleaners, and others. I encourage you to continue paying even if you are no longer receiving service. Send a check to your cleaner; pay your nail salon technician or barber as if you had gotten the normal services you would receive. We want those people to be there when we emerge from quarantine, and even more we want them to be housed and fed during this time of separation.

Further, we are blessed by the plethora of people who continue to make our lives possible. Tip the Doordash delivery person; write a thank you note with a check to the sanitation workers who collect your garbage. That UPS person? Make sure he or she knows how grateful you are for what they are doing. There are people out everyday risking exposure to keep life functioning. Let us remember and appreciate what they are doing.

I believe if we spend some time in gratitude, some time remembering those who care for us, that our own mood of despair can be pierced by hope. The jailed cannot free him or herself; but sometimes the act of caring for others, of helping others rediscover hope, can itself be freeing.

I believe God is the hope of all. I believe that when we are partners with God in caring for others then God in turn reaches out to us. Offering gratitude to others alleviates stress; caring for those who provide us with

services similarly creates a quality of caring that can enter our own lives from God, the divine, the deepest recesses of our soul.

May these last days of Passover be filled with hope and redemption, so that we can be renewed to be God's partners in healing what can be healed at this time of separation and quarantine. And [join all of us](#) Thursday evening at 8:30pm for a special 15-minute service to mark the end of Passover as one community, one people, one Kol Emeth. We need you now more than ever!

Happy Passover,

Rabbi David Booth

MAY GOD BLESS THE WORK OF OUR HANDS

APRIL 24, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I feel anxious and I feel blessed. I feel anxious when I worry about what I have, and how Covid may take away from me material things I want / crave / hope for. I feel blessed when I notice the people in my life who love me, the meaningful tasks I have that sustain spiritual community, and take note of my access to material comfort. I feel anxious when I compare myself to others and worry if I will have enough or be enough. I feel blessed when I seek out ways I can be of service to God and humanity.

Every day, I try turning towards the blessing. I cannot make myself be enough for this overwhelming moment. I can however get in touch with how I can be of service, how I can be a source of healing and repair at a time of brokenness and pain.

I have already urged you to support [LifeMoves](#) as well as other hunger and homeless programs. At the same time, I've been looking for ways to help with our hands, to actually make something.

In partnership with Natalie Telis, Eve Ferber, and Jeff Schwarz, we have four projects to share with you. Our wonderful Tikkun Olam team has created a [resource page](#) and a form to participate. When you complete an item, please let us know on [this form](#). You can also indicate that you would like a volunteer to pick up the completed item for delivery, or that you would like to help with delivery of other completed items.

We have four projects:

1. Making cloth masks for frontline LifeMoves staff interacting with clients on a regular basis. Their work is essential to keeping people housed, fed, and safe. To safely do their work, they need several thousand masks. They cannot get them quickly enough right now to keep with the need.
2. Making no-stitch blankets for homeless people. While the weather is getting nicer, it's still pretty cold at night. There are sadly more and more people without adequate housing despite all the eviction protections. These blankets will warm people up on those cold nights.
3. Making snacks bags to help feed the children that LifeMoves cares for on a regular basis. People have in some cases lost access to other food support they receive in "normal" times. They are in desperate need of packaged food they can give to people now living under Shelter in Place rules.

4. Mountain View Community Service Association is conducting a food drive. They are in need of all kinds of non-perishable food items. We can arrange for a non-contact drop off at the Ulmans' home or for you to get a pick up. Wish list for food is [here](#).

Each of these projects is a chance to do something meaningful with our hands. Each of these projects will immediately improve someone's life in our community. I urge you to take some of the worry and anxiety, the fears about what will be, and take that energy to do something now that is of service. This is a way of choosing blessing, and I believe it will help YOU feel better knowing that you have stepped forward to be a partner with God in bringing healing and repair to the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

LIVING AFTER

MAY 1, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

To live in unprecedented times means to live after. It means: something has happened that I never could have imagined. It means my image of myself has as yet to catch up to the new reality of my life. It means in part I still live before this all happened and wake up surprised at my current reality.

This happened to Aaron. He was living in a world where he and his sons were set to become the Priests (Cohanim) for Israel. He was Moses' partner in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. And now he was giving his children and grandchildren a critical role in the spiritual life and leadership of his people.

And then something unexpected happened. Nadav and Avihu took upon themselves to offer strange fire before God. That is, in the middle of a ritual of sacrifice, they brought forward their own offering. According to some, they were attempting to seize leadership from Moses and Aaron. According to others, they were so overwhelmed with their love of God that they were consumed. Either way, Aaron suddenly lives in an unexpected world of loss. Where he had known such fullness, he was now empty.

Aaron's initial response is silence. He bites back the curse, the anger, and instead says nothing to Moses or to God. Yet he lives the rest of his life after and in response to what happened. He becomes a pursuer and lover of peace as if to say to God: you tore wholeness and joy from me. I will dedicate myself to protecting others from such loss. Aaron does it because of what God did to him, in spite of what God did to him. He chooses holiness and healing and steps away from anger and despair.

We are living after. Who could have imagined six weeks ago that we would be living in quarantine with no end in sight? Who could have imagined that we cannot and still don't understand what will follow this time? For many of us, our image of ourselves in the world still lags behind the new reality. In part, this is because so much uncertainty remains. And the challenge of living after.

We are daily presented a choice. That lag between our imagined lives and our real lives can generate anger, despair, and withdrawal from the world. Particularly given the need for separation and quarantine, we risk an insular and inwards move away from others—emotionally and spiritually as well as physically.

I challenge us instead to respond as Aaron did. To begin in silence. To sit with our situation as it is. To breathe and be with what is right now. To find the tools to be in the world with uncertainty. We must start with

silence to find the inner tools that will allow us to grow.

Then we can find ways to dedicate our lives to healing. We are living in a time of illness; let us become agents of God's healing. Aaron had a job from God to serve the people. Those acts of service sustained him in loss and gave him a new purpose in the after world. We too need to uncover our ways of being in service so that we also can find our purpose in the world.

May God bring healing into the world soon and speedily. May God strengthen the hands of physicians and nurses and researchers to be Your partners in healing. And May God guide us into service and partnership to become agents of healing, people who build community and friendships and serve those most in need and find time for those only a little in need. Let us together be God's agents of healing so that the after world in which we live can become a new place of wholeness and joy.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

COUNTING THE QUARANTINE

MAY 8, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

At about 9:30pm each evening, I drive my daughters a little nuts. My omer counting app starts buzzing at me, reminding me to count the omer for that evening. We are inevitably in the middle of something else, maybe an episode of Modern Family or a card game. Initially, they wanted me to turn the thing off or make it less aggravating. Yet somewhere after the first week they gave in and now we pause whatever we are doing, I open the app, and we count.

We count in part because the Torah tells us to. From the day after Passover count seven complete weeks. We count because this commandment reminds us at the beginning of each Jewish day that we are blessed to have another. Time is our most precious commodity and the ways we use it speak volumes of who we are choosing to be.

The Rabbis teach: we ought to live as if we are exactly balanced between good and evil, blessing and curse, and that the next thing we do will tip the balance one way or the other. And further, we should imagine this to be true of the whole world, so our next choice will tip all of Creation either to blessing or curse. We should live as if each day, each action, each moment, holds enormous significance.

And yet: we live as if each moment matters little. We watch too much Netflix or put off calling the people we most love or care about in the world. We unproductively worry about what the future may hold and risk spending our days in anxiety or emptiness. We realize that each week or year holds value, but I worry sometimes we forget that each moment counts.

So I urge you to take this time of Omer, and this time of quarantine, as a sacred opportunity. You no longer have to commute to work; your day-to-day routines have been altered, in some cases quite dramatically. All these changes can be an invitation to self-reflection.

First, look at the places of worry and concern in your life. You cannot stop the worry from arising; but you can control the next thought. Whenever worry arises, especially unproductive worry around which you have no agency, I urge you to immediately bring to mind something for which you are grateful. No need to connect the gratitude to the worry. Appreciate the beauty of the day or a loving interaction or simply the blessing of a good night's sleep. You will still have worries, but this practice of gratitude will help hold them gently.

Second, take stock of the people you love. Can you be in touch with the people you care about most? I've heard many people arranging zoom calls with family or college friends and deepening relationships. With some of the extra time some you have now, what about writing a letter to someone you love? Can you find a way to express love to the people who matter most in your life?

Third, look at your values. What 2-3 values matter most to you? How do you act on those values? Are there ways you can make good on them now, or create a plan for what you will do as the quarantine lessens? There are many opportunities now to learn and grow during these slowed-down days. Be realistic but also

challenge yourself. This isn't about writing the next great novel or learning to speak Japanese; this is reconnecting with your deepest values and reminding yourself how you want to make good on them.

We have been forced into a different kind of time. Yet God is there to walk with us. It's easy for each day to blend together and to dream our way through this. I want to suggest following the wisdom of Torah and counting each day with agency, love, and values. Then we can imagine ourselves walking with God and moving the world to good and blessing.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Booth

Please note: CyberTorah will take a one-week hiatus next week.

OUR (ENFORCED) SABBATICAL

MAY 22, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I always thought the Sabbatical year the most unrealistic of mitzvot and practices. According to the Torah, every seven years we are required to let all agricultural activity cease in the land of Israel. In Biblical times, that meant an almost total closure of an economy which was land-based. The Bible promises abundance in the year leading up to the Sabbatical so that there will be enough for everyone to eat. Yet I've always wondered about that and wondered if people ever followed such a law.

And then Covid hit. And we have undergone a kind of Sabbatical. Huge swaths of our economy have been turned off; those of us still working are mostly working from home. I got some Indian takeout the other night; El Camino had a fraction of the usual 6pm traffic. We have ceased in a way I never thought we could out of a passion to save lives.

Yet there are spiritual opportunities here. First, this is a moment to feel a connection to every person on the planet. We are all sharing a fear and an experience as never before in human history. Such connection ought to awaken our compassion. This is why we are [raising money for LifeMoves](#); this is why we are inviting people to [make food and blankets for distribution](#). I encourage you to find an act of compassion that will help those most in need.

Second, we are forced to be closer to home. I have noticed my neighbors more (we are even grocery shopping for an elderly neighbor) and appreciate people who have found ways to reach out. A home down the street puts up a joke of the day. I love that effort to be in touch even as we are distanced. So a second spiritual opportunity is to treasure the connection to home and neighborhood.

Finally, the world is quieter than it was 2 months ago. I hear airplanes and cars less; the impact of human civilization is smaller than it has been in decades. Watching the cleanness of the air and the return of wildlife can be inspiring. Maybe there is a way to balance human economy and care for the planet. Perhaps this can inspire better stewardship of the world's resources.

And in that quiet, in that time freed from commutes and overscheduling, can we allow something of our heart-self to emerge? I suggest embracing the quiet rather than rushing to fill it with more noise or Netflix. This can be a time of prayer and meditation on what matters most to you so that as the noises of the world return you can be more in touch with who you want to be as you emerge.

I would not have chosen this Sabbatical. The pain and loss is deep, wrenching, and worldwide. And yet, there is in it a spiritual possibility. We can give some meaning to the loss if it can help us grow and acquire wisdom and compassion. We can redeem the pain if it helps us become more connected and thoughtful in how we interact with others and this beautiful world that God creates.

May God bring healing and wisdom and renewed growth; and help us uncover a heart of wisdom to live more joyous meaningful lives whenever we do emerge.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

GRATITUDE

MAY 28, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Shavuot is first and foremost a holiday of gratitude. We celebrate the first fruits as the early harvest begins. Thank you God, for life and continued sustenance. We celebrate the giving of Torah. Thank you God for giving us a path to meaning and purpose-filled living. I would like to honor Shavuot by appreciating Kol Emeth and the way we have embodied being a holy Congregation during the quarantine.

Zoom Shul

I am so grateful to the innovative and dynamic team with whom I work. Over a 10-day period we moved Kol Emeth online. Rabbi Graff, Sarah Miller, Elaine Sigal, Pepe Sanchez, Aviva Saitz, Shimrit Elnatan, and Tamika Hayes moved heavens and earth to set it all up and to execute. We decided to use the medium for what it offered rather than replicate what we did in person. We are offering a 10-minute morning meditation; we hosted an interactive Seder with music clips from YouTube; we arranged a scavenger hunt for hametz in the Smithsonian. Thank you to an amazing team for seizing the moment. And the community has come out! Our events have never been so well attended.

Calls

We identified some of our most at-risk and isolated members, and over 80 people volunteered to make weekly calls. Those calls have in many cases blossomed into real friendship. Our chesed effort has been organized with loving care by Flaurie S. Imberman, and we are now reaching well over 100 members every week—ensuring that they are okay, cared for, and have enough food. Related, before Passover we tried to call every single member and wish them a good Pesach (we're currently doing the same for Shavuot). Dale Pearlman rallied dozens of members and helped to reach nearly every single member of our community. We have stepped forward as a congregation to show we care for one another.

Tikkun Olam

Kol Emeth also realized that our obligations extend beyond our own community. Since the Covid outbreak, our Tikkun Olam team of Natalie Telis, Eve Ferber, Jeff Schwarz, and I have worked to raise over \$4,000 for LifeMoves, plus an additional \$40,000 for the Mountain View Day Center. We have sent many volunteers to

IsraAid to help distribute food to the most needy in our area, and made blankets, masks, and food bags, both to help aid workers keep working and to keep the hungry and homeless fed and warm. I am truly grateful to Kara and Miguel Sanchez for their outstanding leadership in this area. And I am moved by the way our congregation has stepped forward to help.

Community Support

Finally, I am so amazed by the community as a whole. People have come to Zoom prayers and events; people have supported the congregation by volunteering, by participating and by donating. People have been so appreciative of all our work. I know all of us on staff are motivated by all the kindness, appreciation, and involvement.

We have chosen to save lives and to stay connected. We as a community have realized that we have to be in touch and that this health crisis requires us to find new virtual ways of connecting. I do not yet know what the summer and the High Holidays will bring; I do know that everyone has been so flexible, open, and supportive during a time that could have been so difficult for us as a synagogue. Instead, it has become a moment of incredible thriving, where we as a community have shown ourselves to be as needed, as much a source of hope and blessing, as ever in the history of Kol Emeth.

I wish you a lovely Shavuot filled with gratitude and joy!

Rabbi David Booth

LEANING IN

JUNE 5, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Right now, everything seems higher stakes because any decision might spread disease and potentially lead to a death. I worry about Kol Emeth and fear my decisions about opening might irreparably damage our community. I usually coach myself to remember that the worst rarely if ever happens. And yet, right now, we are living in a worst case scenario.

My normal tendency, confronted with such fears and worries that are both within and outside my control, is to hide. Better to think of other things, to keep my head down and do my work day to day. And while there is value in counting my blessings and putting one foot in front of the other, the feelings and the worries remain and become potentially damaging to me and others if I do not address them.

The Israelites faced such a moment when they sent the spies to look at the land of Israel. Those spies, men of renown, go into the land to see what is there. To them, the inhabitants of the land seem like giants while they seem like grasshoppers. Their fear distorts their vision so that the problems and challenges seem beyond their reach.

When they return to the Israelites to report, they hide from the fear and attack Moses. They say, “The land is a place that eats its inhabitants. We cannot overcome it.” Rather than talking to Moses of their concerns and fears, they spread rumors. Finally, they turn their energy against Moses, saying, “Why did he bring us here to die in the desert?”

I totally understand their fears. Every challenge seemed too big for them. How could they, a generation of slaves, expect to conquer all the Canaanites? They had no military training; they did not know strategy or tactics. And so in the face of their fears, they lashed out at Moses and gave up their chance to enter the promised land.

I too feel overwhelmed. How can I comfort a mourner when I’m not supposed to go to their house? How can we have High Holidays in this new normal? I wasn’t trained to stream video or make high quality productions. I never imagined parenting my children in the middle of a quarantine. What am I even supposed to do?

Yet Caleb and Joshua find another answer. They too see the might of the Canaanites, but they react

differently. They lean into their fears. They counsel the people: We can do this because God is with us. And so they alone of all that generation enter the promised land.

We too can lean into our fears and worries. Yes, Covid has magnified many worries and caused some of the things we fear most to materialize. And it's scary and unsettling. But we are not alone in this. God who redeems is with us, to strengthen our hands and guide our legs.

When I forget to lean into that fear, to remember why I am afraid, I become stressed, irritable, and I sleep poorly. By contrast, when I own the fear and remember that I am afraid because of love and care and faith, then I am miraculously strengthened. That fear no longer rules me and hope enters my heart. I sleep better, I am more pleasant to be around and I make decisions that help me better be a source of blessing in the world.

I don't want to be afraid. I want to wish all of this away. But I invite you to stand with me in leaning into our fears, in holding onto those whom we love, and finding a new path of blessing. I am afraid and I don't know what to do. And God is with me to help me find a way.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

HIGH HOLIDAYS SURVEY

JUNE 19, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

[Please complete your High Holidays survey here.](#)

If we can spare a moment of inward reflection, the coming fall Holidays require our attention. They will be radically different from what we have known in the past. Most of our liturgical elements will, out of health necessity, be streamed; we hope for some in-person components, but this depends on permission from the county and our own internal assessment of health and safety.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are essential times of Jewish gathering and self-reflection. We connect as a community and look towards a new year for inspiration. For many this is the singular Jewish communal connection of the year. So as I (along with Rabbi Graff and Sarah Miller) think through the meaning of the holidays, I am forced to wrestle with their essence.

Everything will be different. What is the core of the holidays? We won't be together to sing Avinu Malkeynu at the end of Neilah. I know what will be lost; what can be saved? What about that moment and so many others makes them so inspiring and soul-sustaining for us?

I love the feeling of being together at the holidays. I love the singing, I love the chance for study and introspection. I also love sitting with people and talking. Honestly, one of my favorite things is sitting with someone during the service and talking while they aren't sure whether they should pay attention to the service since the Rabbi is sitting there, or talk to the Rabbi since I am sitting there...

Yet I believe there can be new ways of connecting with the essence of these sacred days. I believe we are a creative people who have survived thousands of years of challenge and persecution. We have the tools of resilience for this.

After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis of the Mishnah had the courage to connect with their deepest values and radically create a Judaism dedicated to the service of God, the observance of Mitzvot, and the nurturing of the Jewish people. They moved away from a centralized, Temple-based Judaism to an incredibly flexible, decentralized structure based on the Jewish home and the local house of study and prayer.

Kol Emeth, and the Jewish world, needs our shared creativity to create this year a season of celebration that honors our deepest values. So I am turning to you. What are your core values of the Holidays? What are the critical moments that speak to you most deeply?

Drilling down further, what helps you stay connected during a virtual experience? If we can only have small (or no) in-person gatherings, what would you be hoping for in such experiences? If you could hear the Shofar in person with whatever-sized gathering is allowed at that time (almost certain to be between 25-100 people) would you?

I'm attaching a survey with this CyberTorah. For those who aren't KE members, I still encourage you to [respond to the survey](#). Even though you are connected elsewhere, the complications of this process are vast and I would be grateful for a variety of perspectives.

For all the challenges of the past few months, it has also been a time of renewal and growth. It has helped us as a congregation focus on caring for our members, finding new ways to connect, and to look for how we can bring healing and wholeness to the world. I know we can similarly seize the opportunities to make this High Holidays unique, memorable, and sustaining for us.

With love,
Rabbi David Booth

PS: CyberTorah will be on hiatus until mid-August. I'll be away (or at least on vacation...) for most of July. In the interim, you can view my [recent talk](#) on antisemitism and the Black Lives Matter movement.

RADICALISM AND AMERICAN LIBERTY

JULY 3, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am planning on some quieter time for the rest of July as I take some vacation. I'm looking forward to some time with a lot less zoom and a lot more outdoors. I have always felt that being in nature lifts up my spirit and reminds me of joy and gratitude.

As I leave, I wanted to share with you a YouTube video about "Radicalism and American Liberty."

Please [click here to watch the new drash](#).

For all of these talks, I've been trying to lean into where my heart is in this moment, where I am yearning, hoping, or even experiencing pain, and then sharing with you my own thoughts and reactions.

I wish you a lovely Shabbat and look forward to seeing you upon my return at the end of the month. May health, understanding, and a new spirit of seeing God's image in every human being permeate the world.

Warmly,
Rabbi David Booth

GRATITUDE AND CELEBRATION

JULY 31, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have just returned from vacation today and I look forward to reconnecting with all of you. CyberTorah will more formally resume in a couple of weeks, but I wanted to share three things with you.

First is gratitude. I feel so blessed to be among the Rabbis here and to be part of this community. At a time of fragmentation and crisis, of isolation, we at Kol Emeth have found ways to be present for one another, to strengthen our community, to learn, and to support Jewish life in this area. You inspire me. I am amazed by how many people participate in our classes and activities, by how many people reach out to check in and express caring, by how people have stood up to support the shul. I believe we will emerge from quarantine strengthened on practical, ethical, and spiritual levels. Nothing is too marvelous for God. I feel the Divine inspiring us that this can be a time of growth and reflection.

Second is celebration. As you may know, we received our certificate of occupancy for our new building. While we cannot yet open or celebrate as we would like, we do want to sanctify and use that new space. This Shabbat, Carol and I will lead zoom services from our new Sanctuary beginning at 10:30 (link on the sidebar). This is the first time I am streaming on Shabbat. Our new Sanctuary has tech installed that enables me to do this without directly engaging any of the tech. (You can also read Rabbi Joshua Heller's [teshuvah on streaming services](#).) Join us for lovely interactive Shabbat service that will include a brief tour of the new Sanctuary. (And thank you to Peter Wexler for making it possible!)

The following two weeks we will also stream from the courtyard of our new Synagogue as we celebrate the bat mitzvah of Talya Afar and the bar mitzvah of Sam Kafka. For each of those services, we will gather with just a minyan of family so we can call these amazing young people to the Torah. For that service, we will be wearing masks and not singing so the gathering meets Covid guidelines. I am thrilled we can again celebrate. It's time for a simcha!!

Finally, is travel. We could not go physically to Israel this year so we have instead created an incredible virtual tour of Israel unlike anything you have done before. We will spend five evenings next week getting to know five unique and amazing Israelis exploring issues of their Jewish identity. It will take place Sunday – Thursday from 7-9pm. If you cannot make all the sessions, you are still more than welcome. Our connection to Israel comes from knowing people and understanding an emerging and rich Jewish Israeli culture. This tour will illuminate, educate, and inspire future in-person travel.

I look forward to celebrating and “travelling” with you over the next few weeks!! May this time bring us wisdom to grow morally, quiet to connect spiritually, and connection to remind us how dear community and Synagogue are in our hearts.

With love and wishes for a joyous Shabbat-
Rabbi David Booth

HIGH HOLIDAYS PLANNING

AUGUST 7, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My dearest community,

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are among my favorite times at Kol Emeth. I love the month of Tishrei, so full of Jewish celebration, gatherings, and shared meals. I have to admit, as I began working with Rabbi Graff, Sarah Miller, and others to plan this year, I felt heartbroken with all that we won't have. In this time of pandemic, it is nearly impossible to gather in person and that will be harder when we are so drawn to Jewish community and prayer.

And yet, we are working on creating offerings and celebrations that will bring meaning into the holidays. This year, everything will be different, and that can be good. The holidays are meant to create a time for self-reflection. Perhaps our quiet and isolation can facilitate personal and spiritual growth. Joy comes from many places; perhaps caring for each other at this time and reflecting on our blessings can be a source of joy.

As our planning has continued, I have started to get excited about what we can do this year and how the quality of difference has the potential to make these holidays the most memorable and impactful we have ever had.

I'd like to share with you where we are in our planning right now. As you know, the situation remains dynamic and so things may change as time goes on. However, our intent is to be largely virtual in our offerings, with the possible exception of limited in-person gatherings on 2nd day Rosh Hashanah and possibly Yom Kippur afternoon.

Connections

We want to feel connected this year. So, we will be preparing High Holidays bags for every member, that will include a mahzor, a yizkor book, some honey, and a Havdalah kit. We will set up times for you to drive through the parking lot of our new building to pick up your bag. For families with children, the bags will have fun additional material so that our children's services can be interactive. We are also exploring a way to have people come as households into the Sanctuary and perhaps spend a few minutes in front of the open ark.

For selichot this year, we will join Conservative Synagogues around the country for an evening of teaching and prayer organized by the Rabbinical Assembly. This will be a unique opportunity to hear Rabbinic and Cantorial voices from around the country. We are also joining many Synagogues across denominations in creating resources we will share with you for a meaningful evening of Rosh Hashanah at home.

Streamed Services

Many of our offerings this year will be virtual. We hope to use both Zoom and a streaming platform so that you can have an interactive experience or a higher-quality stream. This will also allow us to broadcast our services widely this year. For Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we will offer morning services from about 9am -12:30pm, with clearly delineated time blocks for different segments of the service, as well as services for Erev Rosh Hashanah, Kol Nidre and Neilah, the service concluding Yom Kippur. Options will include: a Morning Gratitude Shacharit, a traditional Torah service with a minyan in our courtyard, a Rosh Hashanah in the Round style Torah service with group aliyot, Musaf with speakers from our community, traditional Yom Kippur services with Yizkor, an alternative Yom Kippur Musaf that I will lead, and more. Each morning will also include family and children services from 10:30am -12pm. We will conclude Yom Kippur with a massive community-wide virtual service for every KE member so we can feel connected to one another as the Jewish year begins in earnest!

In-Person Experiences

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we hope to create an in-person experience at Bol Park that will feature Shofar sounding, tashlikh, and a butterfly release! We would create multiple time slots and limit attendance to county guidelines, so that everyone can attend safely and securely. This event would require registration for contact tracing, and people would wear masks and observe social distancing. If this proves possible, we would offer as many parallel services as needed to make sure anyone who wants can attend. We would then offer a similar plan at Kol Emeth in our outdoors space for Yom Kippur, that would include a study session, an in-person Minchah, a spiritual hike, and so forth. We would also stream sessions so that everyone can participate.

These offerings are based on the survey we sent out in June, county health guidelines, our Covid task force, and our deep commitment to creating a meaningful and joyous season that keeps our community safe and healthy.

Any additional reactions or feedback are most welcome.

The Holidays are going to be very different this year. And yet, I am starting to get excited for the new opportunities they will bring. Together, I believe we will make these holidays sacred, special, and joyous. I am truly looking forward to sharing the Holy Days with you and finding a way to connect during this spiritual and communal time of year.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

ISRAEL UPDATE: ELECTIONS AND PEACE WITH THE UAE

AUGUST 20, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

Israel right now has one of the least stable governments in history. The coalition between Likud and the remnants of Blue and White will last only as long as Netanyahu and Gantz feel their political future requires the other. The opposition put forward a bill forbidding someone under indictment from forming a government. Gantz and his allies abstained. Had they voted in favor, the government would have fallen with a tremendous lack of clarity of who the caretaker Prime Minister would be.

A month ago, Netanyahu wanted elections and started violating the coalition agreement. In particular, he brought forward an annual budget instead of the agreed upon 2 year budget. As his own internal polling showed weakness, he backed down and the crisis was averted.

Abstaining was an assault on Netanyahu. Friendly coalition partners support their team; this came as close to permanently removing Netanyahu from power as one can imagine. At the same time, by not voting at all, the government remains in power. Gantz apparently felt his own political future, and the future of Israel, was better served by an abstention. Gantz's polling also shows him losing seats if elections were held, meaning he would lose his place at the table of power.

Into this volatile mix came a bombshell. The United Arab Emirates, one of the oil rich gulf states, announced a comprehensive peace accord with Israel. It affirms several years of growing closeness and is a major diplomatic achievement. There are signs that Oman and Morocco may follow, and hints that within a few years even Saudi Arabia would move towards normalization. This accord formalizes a growing alliance from the Gulf States and moderate Arab powers with Israel to contain Iranian adventurism and to stimulate economic growth.

I believe this accord will be a key step towards helping Palestinians attain statehood. In the past, Arab countries have financed the Palestinians, including terror groups, and often used their cause for their own internal political problems. Unstable monarchies have preferred to direct their people's anger and frustration towards the "Zionist entity" rather than noticing their own problems at home. If Sunni Arab funding for terror dries up, that would be an amazing step. If Arab leaders move towards wanting a real solution, instead of benefiting from continued strife, progress becomes possible.

An option of peace in the region for Israelis makes statehood a lot more valuable; it would encourage Israelis to make real compromises with Palestinians in order to keep defense and economic connections with the Gulf States. Similarly, if the Palestinians feel pressure from their Gulf funders to figure this out, I believe real plans with actual maps will emerge. The external pressures that now push against a deal that creates two functioning states will be reoriented precisely towards such an agreement.

I am grateful for this agreement and hope it will decades hence be seen as a key step in lasting Middle East peace.

Shabbat Shalom-

Rabbi David Booth

HIGH HOLIDAYS FINAL PLANS

AUGUST 28, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

After careful planning and consultation with our Covid Taskforce and the KE Board, I am pleased to announce our High Holidays schedule. We have worked hard to be safe while also creating connection. We want to follow all guidelines and offer something that is rich, memorable and impactful. This email will summarize our offerings. Please also watch for a separate KE email, with signups and more in-depth details on times and links.

In preparation for the holidays, we will be offering a chance to sign up in advance to spend 10 minutes on Sept 6th with your household in the Sanctuary at the Ark, so you can have a spiritual moment in person and a chance to be in our new Sanctuary. Then, please come to KE on Sept 13th to pick up our interactive bags to help you bring the holidays home with you. The bags will include a loaner copy of our mahzor, a Yizkor book, a special booklet for Rosh Hashanah eve and Tashlikh, among other gifts to make the holidays at home more meaningful.

Selichot this year will be part of a national effort with the Rabbinical Assembly. They are offering programs for 7 hours on that night. We will send you links as they become available for learning and services from a variety of Conservative congregations.

As Rosh Hashanah arrives, all but one of our offerings this year will be virtual. In addition to Zoom, many of our offerings will also be streamed from our website on a YouTube Live link. If you have friends or family who want the Zoom link, please use our High Holidays registration form (which will be distributed shortly). We are offering our services to all this year with no charge.

Services on Rosh Hashanah will be from 9am-12:30pm with units for morning prayers, Torah reading, and Musaf. We will also offer a full set of family and children's services both days from 10:30am-12pm. Family programs will require registration. We will have options both days, including a special gratitude and Torah service led by Rabbi Graff, as well as a contemplative service with Rabbi Eilberg second day.

Rosh Hashanah second day we are offering two identical in-person services, one at 4pm and one at 5:30, to gather to hear the Shofar, pray together, and to release butterflies in celebration of the New Year. Each session will have no more than 60 people observing social distancing protocols. The Shofar will be sounded in the Sanctuary with the doors closed to avoid risk. This service will require pre-registration

for contact tracing, and one of the services will also be streamed if you want to participate virtually. We are also participating in a community-wide endeavor to have people sound the Shofar at 3pm on 2nd Day Rosh Hashanah from their driveway everywhere.

Yom Kippur services will follow a similar template, running throughout the day with Kol Nidre at 6:15pm and then Neilah the following night at 6:15pm. Rabbi Graff will speak Sunday night, Kol Nidre, and I will speak Monday morning after the Torah service. Yizkor will immediately follow my sermon around 11:15 or so. I will be offering an alternative Musaf that day. And again we will have family and children's services throughout.

Finally, Yom Kippur ends at 7:30pm on Sept 28th. We are hoping the entire community will join us for Havdalah together. We cannot join in person- but we need each other more than ever. Your Rosh Hashanah bag will include a Havdalah set to share this beautiful service together as a congregation.

I never would have imagined that this month of Jewish holidays would look like this; and yet, I am getting excited about what we are offering. I believe it will have real beauty and meaning and will help us feel connected and enlivened as we enter the new Jewish year, with profound hopes for a year of healing, peace, and respect for human dignity.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

SEPTEMBER 3, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is an old story of a Rabbi who moves to a new congregation where they are arguing about whether to sit or stand for the Shma. The Rabbi consults with the Board, many members, and simply cannot figure out what the practice originally was. At the advice of the President, the Rabbi goes to the oldest living member of the congregation.

The Rabbi explains everything, and that there is no way to sort this out. The woman scratches her head, and says, "I'm not sure what the practice was..." The Rabbi adds, frustrated: "Please help me, they keep yelling and screaming at each other!" "Yes," she says, "the yelling and screaming, that was the practice!!"

Among the things I love about this story is that this happened to me in my first two Synagogues. Both had the practice of standing for the Shma. And yet, the Mishnah is quite clear: we should remain in the position in which we find ourselves when we recite Shma. That is, God can be with us in whatever posture. Sitting, standing, in grief, in joy, when we go out and when we come in, God is there in all of it.

So right now it would be easy to see this as a time of curses. Illness, violence, racism, looting and riots, fires, surely we are living in the curses described in this weeks Torah reading. And yet, there are also words of comfort: Arise, arise, for your light has dawned, says the Prophet, amid times far worse than ours. In other words, even when surrounded by curses, there is still light and blessing. And the more we remember the blessing, the more we are able to build the world we need for when we emerge from these strange times.

We are less frenetic than we were six months ago. Though many complain of boredom, there is also a time to reflect. Our culture of overstimulation has given way and there is a chance for something deeper to emerge. There are opportunities now for learning and music and so much culture that were previously open only to a select few able to travel or afford such offerings.

We are more connected than ever before. With our time to reflect, I wonder if we can feel more connected to people. As the Prophet says, Raise your eyes and look around. Never before has a virus affected every human so dramatically. Perhaps this is why the whole world is wrestling with questions of race right now. Perhaps this can be a moment to remember that race and ethnicity are tools by which we uncover our sacred selves rather than something to divide and be judged by.

Says the Prophet: God shall be your light everlasting. I believe a new light is dawning, I believe God is working in us, and I believe we are surrounded right now by immense blessing that can empower us to heal the world and change our custom from screaming and yelling and fighting to learning and caring and healing.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

THE ILLUSION OF COMMUNICATION IS THAT IT HAPPENS

SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

My mother always used to have a sign in her office that said, “The illusion of communication is that it happens.” I remember as a teen being bemused by the seeming paradox. Yet the more I have thought about it, the greater the hidden wisdom. We talk, we write, we express ourselves in so many ways. And yet: we can never REALLY know how those words or actions are understood by others.

The Talmud in Bava Batra explores how this arises in contract and legal discussions. There is inherent ambiguity in any bill of sale or other commercial action, and the Talmud spends significant time defining the larger meaning of certain terms. For example, if one purchases a house, they buy everything attached to the house but none of the contents unless they specify “the house and all that it contains.” And even then, they own the items associated with the house, like a washing machine or furniture, but not the seller’s personal items, like clothing.

While we can (and should) endeavor to define legal language as carefully as possible, other areas of conversation are inherently more confusing. I sometimes joke that I speak Carol, by which I mean I’ve spent enough time with my wife that I understand some of the hidden references and meanings in the words she uses or the way she expresses herself. Yet that comment notes how hard it is to really understand anyone. I’ve been married to Carol for over 27 years and I’m only beginning to develop some fluency...

Moses also stands these last few weeks at the entrance to Israel trying to say: here is what I really meant in the previous four books of the Torah. I have always been trying to inspire you to enter this land and create a society based on justice, love, and faith in God. The great orator knows that his words mean only what the community hears. And so he tries, and stutters, and speaks, so there can be no confusion. And even so the Bible may be the most misunderstood book in human history.

We have a lot of work in front of us. We need to think about our words and how they will be understood by others. We need to think also about what others say and why they are saying those words. What in their background or personal story has led to this comment? Am I right to be hurt or is there more to the words than I saw at first? Where are they sitting right now that leads to this and does that awaken compassion or even understanding?

The illusion of communication is that it happens. And if we don't find a way to speak words of peace and compassion to one another the whole world will be consumed by misunderstanding, hatred, and violence. Rosh Hashanah comes along to remind us that we choose the world we will make, that we along with God are authors of creation.

May God help us speak and listen with great care, for then we will unlock those gates of prayer and hope.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE FOR YOM KIPPUR

SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As we prepare for Yom Kippur, I want to share with you the exercise I used on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. It is a three step meditation that can help clarify where and how we can impact the world in positive ways of compassion and genuine healing change.

First: Gratitude. Sit quietly for a minute or so. Breathe three long breaths. Call to mind 10 things for which you are grateful. They could be big things, like having a job amid Covid, or smaller things, like gratitude that you turn on the tap and fresh water flows. Take a breath between each place of gratitude.

Second: Value. Take three more breaths. Now call to mind 10 good things you do in the world. Again, they could be dramatic, like gifts to tzedakah or volunteerism, or working in a healing or helping profession. They could be less visible, like loving gestures to children or friends or spouses. Challenge yourself to identify 10 areas where you contribute to the world. Breathe in between each item.

Third: Hope. Take three more long deep breaths. Challenge yourself to think of 10 ways you can help bring blessing and healing into the world this year. Maybe they can be large changes of commitment or time, or more simple acts that will affect the people around you. Perhaps it is to be more caring to loved ones. Maybe it is rebuilding a broken relationship. Or volunteering to deliver food to those in need at a time of immense hunger. Breathe between each and take the time to identify 10 acts, however big or small.

As you enter Yom Kippur, carry with you the knowledge of gratitude: you are surrounded by so much good. And your own value. You already are doing loving, caring, acts that bring blessing into the world. And hope for the future. You don't have to be overwhelmed by what is going on in the world right now. You can make a difference and you can do so immediately.

I believe Yom Kippur can inspire us to be God's partners in healing the world. And I know watching Kol Emeth that we can and will be a force for good in this new Jewish year.

L'shana Tova

Rabbi David Booth

A SUKKAH OF YOUR VERY OWN

OCTOBER 1, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The Sukkah is the most Covid-safe Jewish ritual we have. Where nearly everything we do this season involves large indoor gatherings, Sukkot is for each home and outside. The Sukkah is a reminder of our journey in the desert but even more that Judaism belongs to every Jew. We need our own Sukkah, our own Jewish heart.

Every Sukkah is unique. Mine is built around an arbor the previous homeowners created. It is a canvas wall and bamboo mats set around an existing structure with a fourth open wall that looks out to our backyard. We decorate it with “sukkah lights” (they can be bought very cheaply on Dec 26th...) and some hangings we purchased in Israel.

I have seen others made of PVC piping, or lumber, or fabric held together by metal rods. Each Sukkah, like every Jew, is unique. And there are numerous ways to build a Sukkah. As long as it has 2.5 walls, and a covering made of natural materials that lets in more shade than sun, it is a kosher Sukkah. There are lots of ways to do it, lots of ways to be Jewish, as we each put our own personality and self into our temporary structure.

Then the Sukkah becomes for one week the place that Judaism is done. More than the Synagogue, the Jewish home, really the backyard or balcony, becomes the primary space where we do Jewish. And we all do it in our own voices and our own ways. Some invite guests – and this year some will, socially distanced, maybe at their own table, maybe via zoom. Others take advantage of the time to be outside, with the world and the stars, to sit and think and grow.

It's yours and it belongs to you. Since it's in your house and your yard, no one can tell you what it should look like or be. You can draw learning or inspiration or halakhic guidelines from others, but ultimately you decide.

I pray that this Sukkot inspires you to grow Jewishly. Maybe you will build a Sukkah for the first time, or for the first time after some years. Maybe you won't but you will sit outside more – even under an awning – and say: today for this moment this is my Sukkah and my Jewish.

The Sukkah reminds us that as much as our homes seem to shelter us, the world, with the flow of clean life sustaining breath, promotes health and wellbeing. So too, Jewish faith and practice. Owned,

personal, fluid, sustains us and connects us even in moments of separation, loneliness, and fear. We sit and we imagine God's loving presence for which we so deeply yearn.

Hag Samekh!

Rabbi David Booth

DAVID THE GROUCH

OCTOBER 8, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I've been a little grumpy recently. The holidays have been great, but Covid and all its social restrictions just keep going. Also, for all of us, it's been such an effort to sustain ourselves and get to this point. Everything is harder right now. And now the air quality got bad again...

I'm generally an upbeat person. I don't like feeling this way. My first reaction was to decide I was just going to stop feeling grumpy, overwhelmed, and frustrated. You can imagine how that went. Those feelings just went deeper and deeper and I felt worse. That made the frustration worse which was then compounded by stress.

I've realized that what I need to do is lean into what I am feeling. It's okay to feel upset and overwhelmed right now. I need to offer myself the same compassion I would to anyone else who felt this way. And as I bring that compassion to myself, I realize I don't have to be controlled by those feelings. They are something I am feeling but they are not me.

By letting myself feel compassion, I also leave myself room to feel something other than the grumpiness and frustration. Yes, things are aggravating. And I am surrounded by blessings. I have people who love me and care for me, I have drinkable water, and most days breathable air.

Letting myself notice my blessings also invites me to look at purpose. I'm choosing to be frustrated because I care about the people around me. I'm living with these difficulties because I want to preserve life and health and I'm frustrated in part because I so yearn to be with all of you again. So the feelings are real, and they come from something sacred and good in me.

God tells us to choose life. I believe this is what God means. We need to remember even in moments of frustration and challenge that we are accepting the challenges and living through the frustrations because of love and compassion. Torah comes along to be a reminder that life is filled with twists and turns and horrific events. Yet even amid those challenges, we can still choose life. And when we do, we suddenly realize that we have far greater power than we ever imagined.

Some of us really can help bring this vaccine into the world, and others of us have political or economic power that can truly heal and help. All of us can find ways to help the people around us. All of us have

ways we can be God's partner in healing this broken world.

That realization to me is a source of immense joy. Not always happiness, because the joy sometimes emerges amid the grumpiness. But joy nevertheless.

Simchat Torah is here. This weekend we will find a way to celebrate as we sing and dance together while apart. This weekend we will sanctify our new building as I lead you on a virtual tour of 7 of our most sacred new spaces. And this year the clouds will part and our hearts will be suffused with joy.

I believe that joy can then strengthen us for the months to come which may be filled with challenges and unexpected twists and turns but also with blessings and purpose.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!

Rabbi David Booth

WHERE NEXT

OCTOBER 15, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I will admit it: I feel pretty good about the holidays. Kol Emeth did something very special as we showed up for each other. In a time that could have felt isolating, we experienced community. In a time that could have been anxious and sad, we shared joy and hope. It was a team effort, Rabbis, Board, staff, community. Everyone committed to the same goal of making these High Holidays memorable and great and everyone showing up for each other.

Now, having seen the possibilities, I am asking myself where to go with what I learned. I feel Kol Emeth took on a hugely significant role in our lives this past month and was there for us at a critical time. Further, I believe many of the programs we have been able to craft in the last few months have done more than just be substitutions. From our virtual Israel trip to our family Fridays, the KE team has used Zoom and streaming to do and be more than we ever imagined.

So where should we go with what we have learned? We have months more of some kind of quarantine, and then years of openness to apply the learnings of these last few months. What should we be doing with what we have learned and experienced?

I tend to reach out to smart and thoughtful people whenever I want to create creative solutions. Who better than the KE community and other readers of CyberTorah? The synagogue survey pre-High Holidays was hugely influential and helpful in crafting our experiences, reinforcing my sense that getting input can help shape creative and positive thinking.

People from around the country came to our services this year, many from areas with little or no developed Jewish community. Should that be something to develop into the future? How can we reach young people and families burned out on Zoom and tech? As we experiment with in-person activities, how do we hold our community together as some participate and many stay virtual?

I would love to know your thoughts and ideas. What would you suggest we be thinking about right now? What should our priorities be? What do you think you learned from the experiences so far?

The mission of Congregation Kol Emeth is to create a joyous and welcoming pluralistic community that brings people closer to each other and their faith through Torah-infused Judaism. That hasn't changed.

What have we learned that can help us do this better?

I look forward to reading your responses!

May this new year be one of peace, health, and joy.

Rabbi David Booth

Please note I will be on vacation next week. CyberTorah will take a two-week hiatus. As a result, I will respond to your comments when I return. I can't wait to see them all!

DON'T FORGET TO BREATHE

OCTOBER 29, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

American democracy is essential to the Jewish people and the state of Israel. We have found the (second) most conducive home to the Jewish community here in the history of the diasporic world. Built into American democracy is a tolerance for otherness, a respect for religious difference, and a deep inherent philo-semitism unseen in other Western countries. Jews have been here from the very beginning and our community is an essential part of the American fabric.

By the same token, the United States is and remains a close ally of Israel because our democratic interests align. The Middle East is a complex place filled with authoritarian regimes and sponsors of world terror. Israel has one of the more stable and long lasting democracies in the world and functions as an incubator for U.S. tech firms. We are tied together in deep ways by philosophy, government, and economy.

There are forces at work in the United States that support anti-Semitism and anti-Israel views, anti Israel views being ones that challenges the legitimacy of Israel to exist. We must work hard to speak out and advocate against hate, anti-Semitism, and anti-Semitism masked as criticisms of Israel. At the same time, we must remember that we do this from a place of great national good will. We are blessed with many allies; we remain a powerful minority.

American democracy is the linchpin. I have never seen an election like this where so many people on both the left and the right are frightened that democracy itself, that the American system, will be broken. We are living through changing times and new ways of communicating and doing politics, and we don't know yet what the new norms are going to be. It is scary, upsetting, and deeply concerning because we have such a wonderful legacy of freedom, democracy, and possibility in this country.

Social media is part of the new. These tools of communication have, over a short period of time, become omnipresent. Many nefarious actors are taking advantage of these platforms in destructive ways. Further, the nature of those platforms themselves amplify divisions and news bubbles. How they can be used productively, in support of democracy and communal connection, remains untested. Many KE members at Google, Youtube, Facebook and elsewhere are working hard to figure that out. Until we see that progress, it is part of what is frightening.

I believe that the Founders did a good job creating a system that could stand imperfection and that could survive and thrive amid dramatic global change. I believe the system is designed to lurch and meander and then have countervailing forces that bring us back to democracy and freedom for all. This is not our first crisis. This is just the first one in a while.

Nov 3rd is an important day and you should vote. The record high turnouts being projected are a sign of strength. People care and want to make their voices heard. I want you to vote with understanding. Vote your heart, your beliefs. And vote with empathy for people choosing otherwise, whether on local or national issues. I know people in our community with a variety of political views and every single one of them loves America and Israel.

I believe we will have a lot to do on November 4th. I know that we can do it. With less than a week to go, breathe. Think. Vote. And work on empathy for all in these wrenching, divisive, and frightening times.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi David Booth

A PRAYER POST ELECTION

NOVEMBER 5, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I want to offer a prayer, but before I do that I want to offer compassion. It's been an agonizing roller coaster of a week. As I write this, results are still coming in and things may not be decided for quite some time. In such an environment, we can find ourselves stressed, worried, overwhelmed. I want to offer that if you want to talk, Rabbi Graff, Sarah Miller, and I are here for you. Just email and let us know if you want some time to be together and be comforted.

I am also wondering if a gathering to heal or be together would have meaning. If you would like something, I'm considering a gathering Wednesday at 5 or 7pm. Please let me know—if there is enough interest we will offer a service of healing and processing to simply hold one another in this time of uncertainty. One person wondered if we ought to have a separate gathering based on political orientation. I'm also open to that if there is interest. Let me know and know that the whole clergy team is here for you no matter who the President is, no matter who controls the Senate or the House. Kol Emeth is and remains a place of celebration, of comfort, and of joy.

A Prayer

Now that the polls have closed, open our hearts.

Now that the election has ended, let this be a new beginning

Grant us equanimity to live with the legal outcomes and a hope for peaceful transitions.

We are tired, spent, anxious.

Remind us that our real hope lies in You, God.

And in Your call to treat every person knowing

They hold in themselves the Divine image.

May the winners and losers find the fortitude to accept

All the legal outcomes; may they reach across the aisle

To foster laws and policies that can best enable peace and health in every State of the Union.

May the next administration dedicate itself to policies

Of Peace and Understanding between all people

With no place for baseless hatred.

Help us join together as one nation,

Neither red nor blue, but American together
Dedicated to the promise of peace, liberty and freedom
That is the founding promise of our nation.
Help we pray this election to pass without violence
And remind us that we are all brothers and sisters, children of Adam and Eve.
So may it be Your will
Amen.

YEARNING

NOVEMBER 13, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

It is not good for Adam to be alone...

Being human means being alone. We live in our own subjective experience, separated in the darkness behind our eyes from all that is. And at the same exact moment, we are part of all that is. We breathe and our breath goes back into the world. Our consciousness imagines our self to be limited by our bodies but this too is an illusion.

And so in that paradox of aloneness and connection, yearning comes into being. As our will and ego emerge from within the self, we sense the paradox and we want to resolve it. We know that love is possible, that deep connection with another person exists. We know in our bones that we are part of a greater whole. And we also know that we live and die alone.

The Torah shows Adam's aloneness, and offers us stories of how we yearn and find connection. As we turn to the story of Isaac, we encounter a story of wholeness and connection. Isaac encounters Rebecca in the fields. He has lost his mother and father; he is alone. For him, that yearning has been a teacher. It has brought him out to meditate, to sit, to experience the paradox of his separation and connection. And in that place of breath and contemplation, a wholeness emerges in him.

From that place of wholeness, he encounters Rebecca for the first time. And the Torah uncharacteristically offers us romance. "He took Rebecca as his wife and loved her and was comforted for the loss of his mother." From wholeness wells love. And from the love, he finds comfort. He can share the story of his mother with Rebecca, and she, lovingly, will hold the story with Isaac. In that way he finds comfort knowing that he remains deeply alone and deeply connected.

Isaac's servant, who finds Rebecca and brings her to Isaac, shows the yearning and its capacity to be waylaid. He could have been seduced by beauty or wealth in looking for a partner for Isaac. Instead, he searches after an example of hesed, of compassion, and finds it in Rebecca's offer to bring him water. Water on the mystical level is always about life and blessing. So she offers life and blessing and the servant has eyes open to see it.

Our yearnings often delude us. We think: we yearn for a thing; or we strive after control of others. The

physical world pulls us with incredible strength and the more we give in to its illusions the stronger its hold becomes on us. When we do that, when the ego self seeks to expand beyond its boundaries, we exhaust ourselves and our energies of blessing and love in trying to grasp, hold, and control.

By contrast, our soul, our deepest self, invites us to contract, let the breath in, to let go of our need for control and to go forth into the chaos and vulnerability of authentic relationship where anything can happen. It is in that place of genuine encounter that our loneliness can be met by the unique alterity of the Other and be transformed into something that can redeem, comfort, and strengthen.

May we all be blessed to breathe into our yearnings, to open ourselves up to genuine empathetic and curious encounter, and in that place find real comfort as we further strengthen our own capacity to offer blessing and hesed.

With a wish of Shabbat joy and rest,

Rabbi David Booth

BLESSINGS OF THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 19, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have always been a big fan of Thanksgiving. I love the way it unites all Americans around gratitude and family. It draws us together to notice the blessings of this country and of our lives. It is a moment—a moment we so desperately need—of national unity and appreciation.

For my family, Thanksgiving is the one American calendar holiday that we have wholeheartedly embraced. The meal is more from Carol's family and gives her a moment where her heritage takes center stage. Thanksgiving also has a Shabbat-like quality for us, so that I am surprised when I can turn on the lights, or play some music when people are arriving.

Thanksgiving this year like so much else will be different. Yet I believe Thanksgiving can be a moment of national unity and a moment to reconnect with gratitude and a shared sense of purpose. With that in mind, a few thoughts:

1. Thanksgiving is about connecting with people you love. Even if you can't be with those people physically, I suggest creating an opportunity around Thanksgiving to reach out. Zoom or phone are wonderful tools. Outdoor walks or sitting together in small groups is also a great way to reconnect and honor friendships and connections.
2. Gratitude. This has been a hard time for all of us and people have made great effort to make this time more tolerable and good. Perhaps write a letter to someone offering a class or event that you really like. Maybe a note to your grocery store clerk, or someone who has been making an extra effort to be in touch. I suggest one note each day of next week, with the exception of Shabbat.
3. Donate. Hunger has only gotten worse in our area. The economic impact of Covid has been very uneven. Some are devastated while others are just fine. I invite you to donate to Second Harvest or IsraAid. Carol and I have been delivering groceries every other Tuesday to people in need in Palo Alto. I see directly the importance and value of this work. They need our support more than ever.
4. Have a meal that is familiar and redolent of Thanksgiving. Whether you eat alone or with others, and whether you have a shared Zoom meal or not, I hope you can find the energy and capacity to make something special and celebratory. A smaller gathering can be an invitation to more reflection. Maybe

you can discuss or meditate on healing at this time of brokenness.

I know it will be different, and I pray it can be healing for all of us. May God heal the brokenness and division that afflicts our land, and remind us all of deep wellsprings of gratitude and empathy.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Early Thanksgiving!

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that due to the holiday, CyberTorah will be off the next two weeks.

VIRTUAL ISRAEL

DECEMBER 4, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I am a great lover of Israel. The opportunity to create our own place, to build a homeland for the Jewish people, is among the great blessings of our era. By having our own State, we are forced into the world of politics. That is, our values and ethics developed in a time of powerlessness are now tested and refined in the world of power.

While this carries many challenges, it is ultimately a great blessing. That is, I would rather wrestle with governments making difficult choices, struggling through ways to create a Jewish and democratic state with room for its Arab and other minorities, than live in exile and powerlessness. Jews have always argued over policies and leadership; now we do that from within a place of relative power and security.

Creating a state with its own inner dynamics has a great risk. American Judaism has its own inner logic that differs from the Jewish community of Israel. Israel has become more Mizrahi (Jews descended from immigrants and exiles from the Arab world). The political situation means a stronger sense of immediate risk from their surroundings that sometimes emerges into views that are hard for Americans to understand. In such a time, the divide between our two communities risks widening.

For this reason, Kol Emeth has been partnering with Congregation Beth Jacob to create the Virtual Israel program. Working with Rabbi Joshua Weisberg, we are developing a program that takes advantage of the virtual world. We have offered intimate evenings where we get to meet people representing different elements of Israeli society so that we can draw closer as people, so that we can better understand some of the inner dynamics motivating people in Israeli society. These videos and programs are now starting to be offered at synagogues around the country. Rabbi Weisberg has created something special with our creative help.

Tuesday we have one more such evening with a Christian Monk named Olivier. His journey as a Christian and as an Israeli is fascinating. He lives in a monastery outside of Jerusalem with quiet hours from 8pm to 8am every single day. Normally, it would be almost impossible to get to know him. Rabbi Weisberg has met him and created a short film about him to be followed by an interview with me and Rabbi Ezray.

If you have joined Virtual Israel before, you know how great it has been. If you haven't joined before,

please come to this event. It will be a unique chance to get to know an immigrant drawn to Israel by religion that is deeply Christian. We will hear about his spiritual journeys and his views on the State of Israel as a non-Jew.

Please [register now](#) for the Zoom link! I can't wait to see you Tuesday evening at 7:30.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

ILLUMINATION

DECEMBER 10, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

There is a deep human need to bring light into darkness. Traditions across the globe have light festivals in the darkest days to remind us that the light will return. Perhaps even in their origins they are sympathetic magic, that by lighting candles we can compel the light to return to our universe. Every tradition tells their own story, but they all return back to bringing light into darkness, hope into despair.

The Jewish version, Hanukkah, has two origin stories. The most frequently told is particularistic. It tells of the Maccabees and their successful rebellion against the Greeks. The light of the Menorah remembers that victory and the miracle which followed when oil that should have only lasted one day instead burned for eight.

Yet my favorite Hanukkah story is not about the Maccabees, but instead about Adam and Eve. I believe Hanukkah has a message for the Jewish people but also for the world. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit according to Jewish tradition, in Tishrei, the Jewish month closest to September. They are exiled from the garden and they realize that the days are getting shorter. They fear their sin has broken the world. Light is lessening and soon all will be engulfed in darkness. So when that first winter solstice occurs, and the days begin to lengthen, they were grateful and amazed. From that year forth they would light candles in the darkest time of the year to remind themselves that light and hope remain.

We are living in a time of darkness and separation. The days are getting shorter, and the covid counts are getting higher. We are confronting a national divide unseen in decades. In such a moment, it would be easy to give into despair, to imagine like Adam and Eve, that the light is leaving the universe and we are plunging into darkness and eternal separation.

Yet Judaism like so many other spiritual traditions knows this is a lie of our shadow selves, what the Talmud calls the evil inclination. We light the menorah to remind ourselves of hope and remember that we have to be ready to act, to light the way. We are the ones to bring hope and unity back into our lives and civil society. Each night, Jews add one more candle so that Hanukkah becomes eight nights of increasing light and hope.

This year, Conservative synagogues across the country are gathering for a special candle lighting on the eighth night, December 17th. This grass roots initiative organized by Kol Emeth will bring together

synagogues from all fifty states to celebrate, to remind ourselves of gratitude, and to be a light in the darkness. I am grateful for Sarah Miller's partnership and Rabbi Graff's incredible help and support. The pandemic, for all its power to separate, has inspired us to do a candle lighting on a national scale that we never could have dreamed of previously.

It is a chance to bring together—as equals and as friends—synagogues in large urban areas with meaningful resources, and smaller communities that have struggled mightily. It is a reminder that we need unity and that we can and must support each other. It will be a vaccination of hope and gratitude for the next months of the pandemic, hopefully giving us the strength to arrive through this whole.

This event also offers a lesson for the post-Covid future. In a time when larger urban synagogues seemingly have all resources, this kind of national effort is a way to strengthen Judaism in all fifty states. By sharing resources, we are creating something unique and inspiring that is just as accessible to a tiny community in Wyoming or Alaska as it is to a booming Jewish center like Palo Alto. Further, by organizing it ourselves, we model an approach that any synagogue with a great idea can emulate. We intend to step up as leaders in the movement and in the Jewish world. People have rushed to be a part of this because we are all yearning for connection and for healing.

Jewish tradition teaches that human souls are like candles for God. We, as it were, light the way for God, we through our actions help God bring light and unity and compassion back into our fractured world and nation. Hanukkah is the time to light our candles. In so doing, we remember that we have the God given power to bring light and healing to a fractured world. And we recall that our deeds light the way for God to help us in the great task of repairing and healing the world.

Join us for IllumiNation on YouTube Live, Dec 17th at 5:30pm PST.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Hanukkah!

Rabbi David Booth

P.S: Please note there will be no CyberTorah next week.

LIGHT ONE CANDLE

DECEMBER 23, 2020

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

I have had occasional days where I fail to step outside at all. On a day like that, I realize by the later afternoon that I have missed the restorative light of the sun, the warmth even in winter of being outdoors, and the inspiration that comes from appreciating the beauty of the world. And it reminds me: even if I'm working from home, even if I exercise inside, I still need to be in the world and I still need light and breath.

Hanukkah this year offered me light and breath. At a time of isolation, we gathered thousands from every state in the United States to light our Menorahs. Kol Emeth organized a vaccination for hope, an inoculation to inspire us to bring out light into these next few months as (hopefully) a wave of healing comes into the world.

At a time of being apart, we gathered in a parking lot to hear Hanukkah songs and rocked out! I saw cars shaking, people dancing, and people singing. When I walked up to the front to say a few words, people were shouting greetings and clearly so excited to be together. We found breath because we came together to light and sing.

Hanukkah happened in such a joyous and inspiring way because Kol Emeth willed it into the world. We knew God needed us this year to light the way, to inspire, and invite healing and comfort from above. We all knew an extra effort was going to be needed and we each found enough strength together to kindle a great Menorah of hope.

It happened because Sarah Miller, Rabbi Sarah Graff, Risa Beckwith, Pepe Sanchez, and everyone else on the KE staff put an extra spark into their work to help kindle our lights of hope and healing. It happened because people like the Tassas and the Silvers and the Saals and the Chohans added some fuel in their sponsorship so that the lights would ignite and sustain us.

It happened most because you all came out. People were there in their hundreds, and at IllumiNation in their thousands. I believe we had 300 people at the laser show; at least ten times that number at IllumiNation.

Hanukkah this year was a reminder. A reminder that even when it feels like we are stuck inside and

alone we can still find safe ways to be together. Even when it seems dark, we are capable of walking with God to bring new light into the world.

In a year of challenges, we kindled the lights of Hanukkah. A great miracle happened here and I believe it can inspire us and carry us to the redemption and healing that awaits.

Thank you to everyone for bringing light and hope into my Hanukkah!!

With love and Shabbat wishes-
Rabbi David Booth

SPECIAL CYBERTORAH FROM RABBI SARAH GRAFF

JANUARY 8, 2021

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

As this week comes to a close and we prepare for shabbat, I want to acknowledge the trauma we and our country experienced on Wednesday, seeing fellow Americans attack our capitol, disrupt our democratic process, and threaten the safety of our leaders.

By nighttime on Wednesday, Scott and I were drained and depressed, yet still drawn to the media for more film footage and articles on the events of the day. Our daughters, however, took a different approach. They decided, as they often do, to listen to musical theatre and sing their hearts out. Interestingly, the album they chose was Hamilton. And the first song that came up was “One Last Time,” the song in which George Washington tells Alexander Hamilton that he’s not going to run for a 3rd term as president.

Shocked and saddened, Hamilton sings, “Mister President, they will say you’re weak.”

Washington: “No, they will see we’re strong.”

Hamilton: “Your position is so unique.”

Washington: “So I’ll use it to move them along.”

Hamilton: “Why do you have to say goodbye?”

Washington: “If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on. It outlives me when I’m gone.”

The juxtaposition of the song with the day’s events was painful, but also powerful. As the girls continued to sing along with the Black and Latino actors portraying America’s founding fathers, I couldn’t help but marvel at the brilliance of the democratic institutions they created.

Every morning I try to study a bit of Torah as part of my daily prayer routine. Yesterday, though, after I put on my tallis and tefillin, I got my computer and pulled up the Constitution as my morning Torah. The site I landed on had little boxes that would pop up when I hovered over a law that has been amended. I found it moving to read the exact wording of how slavery was abolished, and how women and people of color were given the right to vote. I also found it moving to see all the laws that haven’t changed – the details of our electoral process, of our legislative process, of our judicial system, and of so many other facets of our government that still continue as they were originally designed over 230 years ago. Our constitution is the Torah of our country. It is a gift, and it is worthy of our study.

In the real Torah, we begin the book of Exodus this week. Our parasha, Shemot (Exodus 1:1 – 6:1) has one story after another of people facing difficult situations with courage and humility. Pharaoh decrees that all Hebrew baby boys must be killed, yet the midwives, “fearing God,” defy Pharaoh and enable the babies to live. Moses’ mother refuses to accept death as the only option for her baby. Then Pharaoh’s daughter knowingly adopts this Hebrew baby, in flagrant violation of her father’s order. Moses stands up for a slave being beaten by an Egyptian, for a Hebrew being wronged by another Hebrew, and for Midianite girls being harassed at the well. But he is unsure of his ability to go to Pharaoh and lead the people out of slavery. He reluctantly accepts the job, with God’s assurance that “I will be with you.”

There is so much we can take from this parasha this week – the courage to stand up for what we believe is right, to risk our lives to save others, to lead in a time of a crisis. I am struck by a sense of common humanity that comes through in these stories. An Egyptian princess, a Hebrew girl, a midwife, a Moses – they are all human beings, with their own needs and fears. Yet they’re somehow able to feel the humanity of others and reach out across a divide. May our leaders find inspiration in these stories, and may we as well.

Finally, a reflection from our prayers. The daily morning service begins with 3 profound statements.

Thank You God for making me in Your image.

Thank You God for making me a Jew.

Thank You God for making me free.

The last two days I’ve found extra meaning in pausing after each of these statements, thinking about what these words mean to me.

Thank you God, for creating me in Your image. Help me to see Your image in me and in every person: in those closest to me, and in those who seem most different.

Thank You God for making me a Jew. For giving me a history, an identity, and a community to turn to when events seem overwhelming. Help me to live by our Jewish values and help heal our country and make it a better place.

Thank You God for making me free. For the gift of living in the United States. For the ability to speak freely, to vote freely, to practice Judaism freely. And for free will to choose in each moment, a path of blessing, of compassion, of gratitude, of goodness.

As we enter into shabbat, I encourage each of us to turn away from the appalling events of the week. Turn away from our devices and the media, and turn instead to our sacred texts: our Torah, our prayer book, and our Constitution. Reflect upon the values on which our country and our Jewish traditions are founded. And reflect upon the values that are most precious to you.

Sing, rest, laugh, pray. Connect with other human beings, and with your soul.

May you be blessed with hope and healing and courage and peace and vision for a better future. And may our country and leaders be too.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Graff

OPENING OUR EYES TO THE NEEDS AROUND US

FEBRUARY 19, 2021

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

This is a special CyberTorah from Rabbi Graff.

The pandemic has brought many changes to my daily existence. I wake up and go to my computer, to Zoom into Kol Emeth's virtual Morning Gratitude group. Meanwhile, Scott takes Orli, our 5th grader, to Hausner, where she learns with a mask on all day and sits 6 feet away from her fellow students. Scott comes home, makes his coffee (no more coffee and free lunches provided by his workplace), and we all disappear into the spaces where we will work and do school virtually for the day. It has been a challenging year in many ways, but also a year of growth and creativity and strengthening.

As we prepare for Purim this week, I want to focus my attention beyond my own home and hamentaschen. Our fellow congregants, Kara and Miguel Sanchez, have helped open my eyes to how differently others in our community are experiencing the pandemic. Miguel is originally from Mexico and Kara teaches Spanish at Stanford, in addition to being a beloved Torah for Tots leader. For many years, the two of them have made themselves available as resources to the Latino community in Mountain View, helping people navigate the immigration system, the public school system, and many day-to-day challenges. What they are seeing now though is a community in much deeper crisis, suffering disproportionately from COVID itself and facing economic devastation.

Many families who had been able to rent small apartments are now doing anything they can to avoid becoming homeless. For some, that means forgoing food and medicine so that they can pay rent. For some, it means unofficially subletting their bedroom to another family, leaving their own family to live on a couch in the shared living room. How do kids do school from home when their home is a room with 10 people?

Kara and Miguel told me about a single mom they helped, who was living in a single room with her 3 teenage daughters. Kara and Miguel helped get the girls computers for virtual school. Then the family all got COVID and the mom's cleaning income dried up. They had a falling out with their landlady, and they needed to move out abruptly. After a few nights in a hotel, they decided their best option was to drive to Chicago and move in with relatives there. Kara and Miguel met up with the woman and her daughters the night they left. They gave them winter coats and \$1000 of their own money, hoping it

would somehow make a difference. Three weeks later, the woman texted Miguel. They had settled in with her brothers in Chicago. She had gotten a job as a nighttime janitor. And she was using Kara and Miguel's money to buy a used car. She felt like they could live again.

I often hesitate to give people money when it seems like the problems are so much bigger than my little bandaid can fix. Kara and Miguel are showing me that sometimes emergency help can be the difference between life and death. Sometimes, some money for food or medicine or rent can turn someone from devastation to hope.

As we approach Purim, our tradition is asking us to be agents of hope, to look beyond ourselves and fulfill the mitzvah of Matanot L'Evyonim, giving to those in need. Our Tikkun Olam Committee is highlighting an inspiring local organization called WeHOPE as one way that we can make a difference.

WeHOPE provides emergency food and shelter for homeless and food-insecure people in our area. They also operate a fleet of mobile hygiene vehicles that provide free showers and laundry services to people living in RVs, cars, and on the street. And, they operate HOPE Health Mobiles, trailers where people can get case management, medical assessments, and access to the internet.

I encourage you to check out the [WeHOPE website](#), where you can find out more and donate to our Kol Emeth Matanot L'Evyonim effort for them. In addition, we have organized a Laundry Detergent and Underwear Drive, to provide these much needed items for WeHOPE's shelter in East Palo Alto and for their mobile shower and laundry trucks. You can purchase items on our [Amazon Gift List](#) and they will be delivered directly to WeHOPE. At checkout, just choose WeHOPE / Alicia Garcia's Gift Registry Address. It took me about 60 seconds to purchase underwear that will go directly to people who need it.

We are taught that Purim has 4 primary mitzvot:

1. To hear the Megillah. Join us [Thursday night, February 25, at 7pm on Zoom](#) for Megillah reading and an original "Under the Sea" Purim Shpiel, written by Sarah Miller and performed by Kol Emeth kids. We'll read the megillah on [Friday morning](#) as well.
2. To enjoy a Purim Seudah, a festive meal on Purim day.
3. To send Mishloach Manot, gifts of food to fellow Jews.
4. To give Matanot L'Evyonim. The sages teach that every Jew should give to two individuals a minimum of the amount of money for a meal, or the equivalent in food or other items.

Most years, Matanot L'Evyonim has been last on my Purim priority list. This is a year that it needs to be first. There is so much need around us, if we open our eyes. Please contribute in whatever ways you are able.

Happy Purim and Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Graff

HOW IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT?

MARCH 19, 2021

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

How is this Passover going to be different than all other Passovers?

Well, last year we were in a global pandemic and this year we are in a global pandemic. This year we have added hope in the form of a vaccine. We have added hope in watching all the medical professionals and researchers dedicate themselves to healing. We have added hope seeing all the ways our community and so many others have worked and donated and advocated to help those most hurt by the pandemic.

Last year we were isolated at home. This year, we are still isolated but we know we can connect in virtual ways and find deep meaning in them. This year, we know that streaming isn't perfect but also has benefits.

Last year, we didn't know what the future would bring and how bad the pandemic would be. This year, we still have questions of how this will end. Yet this year we know that being Jewish and serving God cannot be stopped by a virus. We know that we can survive and even thrive amid great disruption and illness.

Last year, we had a communal virtual Seder. This year, I am officially inviting you to our second streaming Seder! But it will be a little different – because it will have an Ethiopian twist. Alongside the traditional Haggadah, we will see some videos of Ethiopian practices for some of the steps and learn about their Exodus story.

We are ready for some liberation. I invite you to join me, Tyler Dean, Elaine Moise and so many others to celebrate the Seder together. We will sing and learn and offer up our own hope for a speedy liberation from the pandemic. Starting at 6pm on March 28th, we will join for Seder. At around 7pm, I will invite those who want to linger and enjoy a Seder meal together. In addition, there are separate links to YouTube videos of Rabbi Graff's family singing Hallel and the Grace After Meals.

[Click here to register](#). (please note: this is a free event. We are using a new website so you will have to “buy” a ticket. There is no charge. The ticket is free but the website seems to require it.)

I also encourage people to think of others who could use a Seder. Invite someone to join you for Seder

via video conference, even if you've never had your own Seder before. This is a chance to connect with others and connect with Jewish tradition in ways we never imagined.

Both Rabbi Graff and I wish you a joyous Seder, whether it's with family or on your own, whether via video or in person, knowing that we will pray for redemption and healing for us and for the whole world this year.

Next year in person!!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Booth

HERE WE GO AGAIN!

MARCH 26, 2021

CATEGORIES: COMMENTARY

The best tweet of Tuesday's election in Israel came from the government itself. According to the government minister, "The official in charge of counting the votes has crashed and gone to sleep. More results in two hours." Aside from the humorous human element to this tweet, it captures the exhaustion around repeated inconclusive elections. They keep going to the polls and nothing stable emerges.

I believe there are two fundamental problems afflicting Israeli political culture. They are systemic rather than ideological concerns. They affect both the right and the left equally and both concerns make a stable coalition nearly impossible.

Problem #1: Netanyahu himself. Netanyahu has been Prime Minister for so long and with such political efficacy (like him or hate him, he's one of the most shrewd Israeli politicians in history) that Israeli voters care more about whether they want Netanyahu to be Prime Minister than any issue. As a result, natural allies like Gidon Sa'ar and Avigdor Lieberman have sworn never to sit with Netanyahu. The religious parties have become defined by their loyalty to Netanyahu. Similarly, his opponents focus more on getting him out of office than their own policies. The Blue & White party in the last election brought together three leading figures united in their opposition to Netanyahu.

Related is the atomization of Israeli parties. Likud garnered about 30 seats; Yesh Atid, the next largest party, 17. From there we go to many parties between 5-9 seats. Netanyahu has blocked the emergence of any rival, creating only two choices for the politically ambitious Likud politician. Either accept Netanyahu as the face of the party or leave and start a new party. This has resulted in people like Sa'ar and Bennett breaking from Likud and forming their own parties. By the same token, the collapse of the big left parties, especially Labor, has created a still unfilled void.

Problem #2: The increasing move to the right of the religious parties. During the last two decades, Israel's religious parties have moved from being centrist kingmakers to Netanyahu's dearest allies. This further complicates coalition building. For the center-left, it makes the math almost unworkable. Since the religious block won't join them, they have few remaining allies. For the right, the problem is similar. Since there are figures on the right opposed to the religious parties (like Avigdor Lieberman), the right block is internally split and can't get to a coalition. The religious parties, who used to be key to stability, now are a large enough bloc to complicate everyone's coalition math.

For Israel to get unstuck, at least one of these problems has to be solved. At this point, there are a few possible options going forward:

1. Lapid forms a get Netanyahu out coalition. For this to happen, Naftali Bennett, Gidon Sa'ar and Avidgor Lieberman must join with the center and center left. They will also need the Arab-Israeli parties for this to happen. While theoretically possible, this is highly unlikely.
2. Netanyahu forms a coalition. To do this, Netanyahu has two possible paths. One is to convince his old number two, Gidon Sa'ar, to join him. Sa'ar has pledged never to do this, but never can be very short in Israeli politics. The other possibility? Netanyahu is in discussion with an Arab-Islamist party. The leader of that party has not ruled out joining a Netanyahu led coalition. Given Netanyahu's previous success in finding a path where no one said it could be done, I'd rate this 50-50.
3. New elections in the fall. This Knesset is deeply divided with no clear winner. Yet no one wants more elections, creating pressure on the parties to figure out a path to either #1 or #2. So I'd rate this most likely, but still unlikely.

In other words, there are three unlikely possible outcomes, none of them offering long term stability. One of these two problems has to be solved for long term stability. If the religious parties go back to being centrists, a center or center left pathway opens. Similarly, if larger more stable blocs form, some person or party may develop a following to inject more stability back into the system.

For now, I predict more instability, short term coalitions, and a search for every vote and seat. The silver lining here is that it has pushed people out of their natural allies to search for unseen voters. For example, Yesh Atid campaigned for the votes of American olim. Netanyahu is going after Arab-Israeli votes. Something dynamic is at work; it may lead to a new more inclusive stability after another couple of cycles.

In the meantime, I pray for Israel, for its leaders and elected officials. May God grant them wisdom and understanding to look past personal animus and ego towards good governance for Israel and all its people.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Pesach!

Rabbi David Booth

Check out my new youtube sermon, "Finding order in chaos."

[Click here to watch the video.](#)