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CONGREGATION  
SUKKAT SHALOM  
**Bulletin**

*My Journey ... With You*  
by Rabbi Sam Gordon



*"More than I have learned from my teachers, I have learned from my colleagues. And more than I have learned from my colleagues, I have learned from my students."*

The Sukkat Shalom newsletter has always been radically different from the usual synagogue bulletin. It has been focused on the personal life-stories of our congregants. It has recognized that each of us has a narrative of our individual spiritual journeys and growth. The same is true for me, though much of my story has been lived with all of you.

I have served as the rabbi of Sukkat Shalom for 25 years. As I look back on some of the key moments of Sukkat Shalom, I think most especially of the times we came together to support each other. Those were often when we came together in response to events that shook our world. On 9/11 we gathered along with our friends from First Congregational Church. After the Tree of Life Massacre, the larger faith community of Wilmette joined us in our sanctuary.

Throughout these two years of the Covid pandemic, we

responded with creativity and flexibility and continued to serve our congregational family. And amid a frighteningly divisive and polarized society, I would also hope that Sukkat Shalom provides something of an antidote. If we can study, pray, and gather as one community based on mutual respect, then we might indeed be able to repair that which is so broken in our world.

***"Each one of us is a manifestation of the divine presence, and that is what we find in relationship with each other."***

If I have had some measure of success, it has been through creating an institution whose foundation is built on the nurturing of personal relationships -- not only between you and me, but between you and each other. I have often shared my feeling that Sukkat Shalom has been a success if you have found here a good friend, a best friend, or if you brought a good friend into the congregation. Or if during your membership, you have come to rely on another congregant for friendship, support, and encouragement.

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That has been what has led to the success of Sukkat Shalom, but it's also been how I have defined my career. I have studied in universities and colleges and seminaries. I've spent many hours in study halls and retreats and lectures. I've read my share of books. I've been fortunate to sit with some of the giants of Jewish thought of the 20th and 21st Century, and I hope I've learned something from all of that.

But, ultimately, I have learned the most at your kitchen tables, in a hospital waiting room, or in a hallway; in informal encounters in the grocery store, or the cleaners, at Starbucks, at lunch counters; at wedding receptions and shivas, and baby-namings, and bar and bat mitzvah receptions. That's where I have learned and been influenced by those relationships. Each encounter has been an opportunity to be in relationship, and it has been a true gift.

# Nefesh Mountain Attains New Summit in Jewish Music

by Kenny Lyonswright, Cantorial Soloist

We were fortunate to have Nefesh Mountain join us for a weekend in late-April. In addition to providing music for Shabbat and treating us to a fabulous Saturday night concert, they helped to honor Rabbi Gordon at Family School on the Sunday of their visit. It was a visit long delayed.

March 13th, 2020, was the day the world shut down because of Covid. It was also the day that my friends Eric Lindberg and Doni Zasloff, with their band Nefesh Mountain, were supposed to visit Sukkat Shalom for a full weekend of music. I called the two of them on March 10th to tell them we had to cancel. I remember feeling at the time that all the cancellations going on were a bit of an overreaction—until the NBA shut down later that evening.

Fast forward a little over two years, and Nefesh Mountain was finally able to join us in person. To say that Nefesh Mountain is the premier Jewish music group of our time is no understatement. They have been featured in Rolling Stone magazine, reached Number One on the Billboard Bluegrass chart, and recorded with bluegrass royalty (Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, and Bryan Sutton to name a few).

This band has cultivated something really special. Not only is their blend of traditional Jewish liturgy with bluegrass music a captivating match; their vocal and instrumental artistry is top-notch. They maintain a Herculean touring schedule and, in the last two years, have played venues and festivals at the pinnacle of the country/bluegrass universe. Recently, they graced the stage at the legendary Grand Ol' Opry.

Even more special is their ability to tour with their 10-month-old daughter, Willow, by their side. As the parent of a 1-year-old, I cannot imagine doing what they do!

The marriage between old-time or bluegrass music and religious texts and themes is

certainly not a new one, but Judaism is a little late to that party. The broad umbrella of "gospel" music has often included bluegrass -- particularly when the artists sing about praising God or making it to heaven. Certainly, there are tunes that make use of liturgy we share with other religions, such as excerpts from

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the Book of Psalms. What Eric and Doni have done in bringing Jewish texts and Hebrew language into bluegrass is, in many ways, very much part of a rich American tradition.

I hope you enjoyed their weekend at Sukkat Shalom as much as I did. Who knows – maybe we can even get them to return!



**The Jewish bluegrass band Nefesh Mountain, joined by our own Kenny Lyonswright, recently entertained congregants and friends in the sanctuary of Sukkat Shalom.**

## Sukkat Shalom: Our Journey, cont'd

I believe in the sacredness of these holy moments. Martin Buber, in his book, *I and Thou*, explains that God is encountered in the other person -- not just in the other person, but in the space in between us. Each of us is holy. Each one of us is a manifestation of the divine presence, and that is what we find in relationship with each other. It has been the source of my fulfillment. It has provided great meaning and love and support for me.

Victor Hugo wrote: "To love another person is to see the face of God." You have blessed me with the opportunity to find God, to find meaning and inspiration in my relationships with you. I am forever grateful.



This month we finish reading the Book of Leviticus and start Numbers, the fourth book of Torah. It is an important moment in the People of Israel's story. The Book of Numbers details both their physical wandering in the wilderness and their transformation from a group of former slaves to a thriving, united community.

*"We, too, are beginning a new journey and an opportunity to chart a new path for our synagogue."*

We, too, are beginning a new journey and an opportunity to chart a new path for our synagogue. It is customary as we begin a new Book of Torah to recite the blessing, *Hazak, Hazak, v'nitzhazek*, which is translated as, "Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened." So, too, can we offer this blessing as we begin this new chapter in the story of our faith community.

We have much to celebrate as we reflect on Rabbi Gordon's legacy and look forward to the future. Earlier this month, we honored Rabbi Gordon for his 25 years of dedicated service to Sukkat Shalom with a meaningful Shabbat service and lively "Sam's Play List" concert. It was a wonderful opportunity for the congregation to show its appreciation for Rabbi Gordon's vision and leadership, bringing us to this significant moment.

There is so much to look forward to as we begin this new chapter in the life of Sukkat Shalom. As I have shared before, I am honored and thrilled to serve as Acting Senior Rabbi, beginning in July. Our professional staff is already working hard to plan meaningful summertime Shabbat worship in our sanctuary and at Gillson Beach, along with other opportunities to learn and connect in the coming year.

While I will be on family leave from July until mid-September, I look forward to leading meaningful High Holy Day services alongside Cantorial Soloist Kenny Lyonswright. Together with our professional

staff and lay leaders, I am excited for all of us to gather in person to welcome the New Year.

Beginning in July, we will welcome new professional staff members. In the coming weeks, we will announce a new, full-time Director of Education -- the result of a nationwide search conducted by our lay leadership and staff. This new Director of Education will work alongside our staff to lead our Family School/Hebrew School program and develop educational opportunities for families and adults throughout the year.

We also plan to hire an Adjunct Rabbi to serve the community during my Family Leave and to continue throughout the year -- officiating at lifecycle events, leading Shabbat and holiday services, and teaching adult education courses. These new professional staff members will enable us to build on our strengths and help the Sukkat Shalom community to move forward following Rabbi Gordon's retirement.

Our staff and lay leadership are committed to continuing the stellar programming and opportunities for learning, growth, and connection that have defined our community over the years. Most important, I want to assure you that the Sukkat Shalom community and staff is always here for you. It is my hope to personally connect with as many congregants as possible over the coming year. I would love to schedule a time to meet, to catch up, and to hear about your hopes for our shared future. Please be in touch!



**Earlier this spring, the Central School Daisy Troop met at Sukkat Shalom when their usual meeting place was unavailable. Many of the 31 kindergarten girls had never been in a synagogue before and had many questions. Kudos to Executive Director Andy Schultz for making our "sukkah of peace" available to them.**

# Touchpoints Film Series Finds Links to Congregants' Lives and Contemporary Issues

In past months, members of Touchpoints have viewed three films followed by group discussions facilitated by Rabbi Gordon. Here are reviews of the films by our congregants along with the personal reflections they prompted.

## Avalon (1990)

by Sharon Weingarten

I loved the Barry Levinson movie, Avalon. And I know why this 1990 film resonated with me so much. "Avalon is inspired by the experiences of Levinson's own family," my research told me. "His grandparents came to America from Russia, part of a large Jewish family that pooled its resources and brought over one relative after another until all the Krichinsky brothers had settled in Baltimore."



It was my family's story, just a different name and a different city.

***"It was my family's story, just a different name and a different city."***

My family landed in St. Louis. They also worked hard and raised their families in the same neighborhood, pooling resources and becoming partners in a business. Their first business wasn't paperhanging; it was wedding dresses, which required moving one of the brothers to New York to work in the garment district and "make connections." As a child, I thought "the business" was what it was all about. But "the Family," with a capital F, was the real center of their lives.

Unlike the Krichinskys, our family didn't have council meetings, but we did have Sunday night suppers. Every week it felt like a holiday with all the mothers cooking and preparing for those dinners.

In those early days, vacations were three of the families going on a caravan-style road trip to Florida – in the summer when the prices were better. The children started out in the back seats of their family's car, but at every stop (for lunch, a restroom, to stretch legs) the kids ended up with cousins in the back seat of a different car. And the dads took lots of "moving pictures" of just about everything.

Values and money? You spend a third, you save a third, and you give a third. That last third might go to someone who needs it, especially if they were Family. Or a fund for cancer, in memory of their mother. Or it might "buy" seats at the

synagogue with their names on the arm rests.

Assimilating? Unlike the Krichinskys, I don't think anyone in our family arrived on the Fourth of July. But like the Krichinskys, paying taxes was a good thing -- because you were an American!

Unlike the movie, my grandfather didn't have a brother who complained, "You cut the turkey without me!" But we did have an uncle who frequently shouted, "A name is what you make it!"

Many years later, for an assignment in school, I remember asking my father to describe himself in three words. He answered: "I am an American. I am a Jew. I am a businessman and a family man."

Avalon resonated with me so much because it felt so familiar. It was the story of so many of our families. Only the names were different.

## The Lives of Others (2006)

by Lynn Denton

Through Touchpoints, and with Rabbi Gordon's excellent facilitation, we discussed a very compelling movie – The Lives of Others.

The scene is East Berlin in 1983, prior to the Berlin Wall falling in 1989. The story focuses on the Stasi secret police and their ruthless, relentless tactics for spying on and controlling the citizens of East Germany. The Stasi were corrupt and abusive and created a world of fear.

The film focuses on a Stasi officer who is spying on a famous playwright who he believes is being disloyal to the Communist Party. As the officer spies on the playwright and his circle, we watch him go from seeing these people as potential enemies of the state to seeing them as individual human beings -- people who create, love, and live.

There is a parallel to our current time -- certainly during the



***"There is a parallel to our current time -- certainly during the pandemic -- when we have been so unnaturally isolated from others."***



pandemic – when we have been so unnaturally isolated from others. One result has been more anonymity between people and a negative effect on the human empathy we have for each other. The recent trend has been to see others only through the lens of their politics rather than considering the whole person.

The movie is particularly poignant as the current war in Ukraine rages. The tactics of the Russian Army -- targeting civilians and seeming to play by no rules at all -- echoes the irrational tactics of the Stasi. Also relevant is the Stasi's incessant spying on and wiretapping of its residents. While we are fortunate to live in a democracy, one couldn't help but think about all the information that is being collected about us as we search the internet, file medical claims, and shop online.

As always, our discussion was rich and interesting, but also relevant and timely. The movie is sobering and captivating, and well worth finding and watching.

## Pleasantville (1998)

by Ellen Rosenberg

Pleasantville is a 1998 comedy/drama/fantasy film that is a parable of life in the U.S. It stars a young Reese Witherspoon and Tobey Maguire as teenagers Jennifer and David; Joan Allen and William H. Macy (who are ensemble members at Steppenwolf Theatre); and Jeff Daniels. Among the supporting cast are Jane Kaczmarek, Don Knotts, and J.T. Walsh.

***"No one on TV lost their jobs, or was unhappy, or worried about having enough money, or was in want of food or stable housing."***

"Pleasantville" is also the name of a 1950's-era, black-and-white sitcom that is David's favorite TV show. He is a quiet, thoughtful, and introverted teen while his sister Jennifer is outgoing, popular, and shallow. Their mother goes out one night and Jennifer and David fight over what to watch on TV, breaking the remote control in the process. A mysterious repairman shows up and gives them a new remote. When they use it, they find themselves transported into the Pleasantville TV show.

This sitcom mirrors the 1950's TV shows many of us watched as children, where the world was very innocent and there were happy families with small problems that could be quickly solved in 30 minutes. Everyone was well dressed and attractive. Married couples slept in twin beds. This was unlike my home or that of anyone I knew. No one on TV lost their jobs, or was unhappy, or worried about having enough money, or was in want of food or stable housing.

In many ways, the '50s were a time of great prosperity and

economic growth. On the surface, it was a time seemingly without social conflict. In reality, we were experiencing a Cold War with the Soviet Union. At school, we had air raid drills when we had to duck and cover under our desks. There were beat poets, spy trials, and homosexuals were persecuted. Jim Crow was dominant in the South and Blacks were lynched for not "knowing their place." Women were silently very unhappy and "The Second Sex" and "The Feminine Mystique" were published.

I was focused on the symbolism in the film and how it applies to our modern world. We have "alternative facts" and a polarized country that watches different news shows from opposite points of view. Lies become truths if they are repeated often enough. Families and friends are divided by their political beliefs. Healthcare has become politicized by the Covid-19 pandemic and the differing responses to public health recommendations and warnings. Vaccinations and even mask-wearing have become political.

There is a rejection of reality -- not unlike among the characters in Pleasantville.

Life imitates art in terms of the January 6th rioters truly believing that Donald Trump won the 2020 election -- that it was "stolen," and they were taking back their country. Similarly, people in Russia do not believe their Ukrainian relatives who tell them Russian soldiers are killing them and destroying Ukraine because of the unreality of what's being reported on state-controlled media.

On another level, the "Don't Say Gay" law has recently passed in Florida. Books are being banned in schools and libraries for dubious reasons. This seems very much like the response of those threatened by social change in the movie. It shows us that real life is often very different from whatever "reality" we live in.

## HIAS Refugee Family Sponsorship

The Sukkat Shalom Social Justice Committee will be working with HIAS to sponsor a refugee family seeking permanent residence in the United States. If you're interested in helping, please contact Janet Hedrick at [sukkatshalom@sukkatshalom.org](mailto:sukkatshalom@sukkatshalom.org), who can tell you more about specific roles and time commitments.

# Recent Bat Mitzvah Project Earns Praise and Recognition

*Each Bar and Bat Mitzvah student at Sukkat Shalom is required to choose a social justice project tied to or influenced by their Torah portion. Recently, **Amelia Millner**, daughter of Susan and Jason Millner, completed a Bat Mitzvah project that won widespread recognition. Following is her description of the project, taken from her D'Var Torah, and the response of its recipient.*

"This portion is about siblings, which is perfect for me since I have triplet siblings. Unlike Jacob and Esau, I get along well with my siblings -- most of the time. In fact, being the big sister to my siblings has had a strong impact on who I am today. Growing up with them has made me a more compassionate and empathetic person. I have watched them overcome many challenges and I've also learned to include them when things are hard for them.

"In our house, making accommodations and working on inclusion is a part of everyday life. Learning to help each other overcome challenges is something we have always done. Those experiences, along with living with my own disability, has inspired me to choose to work with the Nora Project for my mitzvah project.

"The Nora Project is an organization that works in classrooms to teach about kids with all kinds of disabilities, with a focus on inclusion. This project is personal to me because I have a non-verbal learning disability, and I am very lucky to go to a school that includes everyone.

"The message of inclusion is one of my family inheritances. It's a privilege to be able to learn these important messages of inclusion from my family and help teach others this message as well."

*Earlier this year, Project Nora featured Amelia and her project in the "Volunteer Spotlight" on its website. Here is some of what the organization had to say:*



**Amelia Millner**

## Volunteer Spotlight: Amelia

Last summer, Amelia reached out to The Nora Project (TNP) in hopes of working with us on her Bat Mitzvah project. We love when people, particularly students, come to us with a passion for inclusion and a desire to collaborate. In Amelia's

case, we came up with three paths for her to contribute to TNP and help us further our mission of promoting disability inclusion in schools and communities. Amelia immediately jumped on board with all of them and took all three on beautifully.

The first project was being an ambassador extraordinaire in one of our Storyteller Project classrooms. Amelia visited with some of our fourth graders in Kenilworth, Illinois to share her own experience living with a disability. It was important to Amelia that she share with students what an invisible disability is and how they can be inclusive of all of those with disabilities, visible or invisible.

The second project we asked Amelia to be a part of was conducting some interviews. She spoke so highly of the people in her life and how they have created an incredibly inclusive world for her. We wanted to hear from them about how they view inclusion and disability within their community, home, and school.

The final project we had for Amelia was helping us put together this blog post. We knew we had to share Amelia's work with our supporters to help further her impact. In December, we had the privilege of reading Amelia's Bat Mitzvah speech.

Thank you, Amelia, for reaching out to us to collaborate with you for your Bat Mitzvah! Your passion, generosity, and kindness in all that you have done with us is outstanding. Keep demonstrating an Ability Inclusive Mindset and being the disability advocate that you are. The Nora Project will be cheering you on as you continue to make the world more inclusive for all!

*Congratulations to Amelia, her parents, and siblings for putting her Bat Mitzvah lessons into practice in such a heartfelt and meaningful way!*



# Meet the New Board Members Up for Approval

Two of our congregants have been nominated for open positions on the Board of Directors and will be up for approval by the members of Sukkat Shalom at the annual meeting later this month. Following are brief profiles of the nominees so congregants can get to know them better:

**David Prosperi** was born and raised in Chicago. After years of working in politics and government at the highest level in Washington, D.C., he and his wife Nadine moved back home to Northbrook in 1994. In looking for a spiritual home, Nadine reached out to her cousins, Jo and Newt Minow. Jo suggested that Nadine talk to Rabbi Sam Gordon who, at that time, was leading another congregation.



**David Prosperi**

In the course of their conversations, Rabbi Gordon informed Nadine that he was looking to start a new, non-traditional congregation on the North Shore that would welcome the intermarried and unaffiliated. "The more we talked to Sam, the more interested we became," says David. Ultimately, they became one of the founding families of Sukkat Shalom and Nadine served as the first Vice President of the Board of Directors. David says it has been a wonderful spiritual home for them and their children: Alex, Zach and Claire.

"We love the welcoming spirit of Sukkat Shalom," David says, noting that all three of their children attended Family School and became Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

"When my son Alex had his Bar Mitzvah, it was the first time that my extended family had ever experienced such an event," says David. "Rabbi Gordon explained what each part of the service meant and even invited my parents onto the Bimah. That meant a lot to our entire family."

After years of working in the financial and commodities exchange industry, David took a voluntary retirement offer in November 2020. "I am a big fan of most major sports, particularly pro and college basketball," David says. "If there's a good game somewhere, I will probably be watching!" He continues to do some strategic communications consulting for both paid and pro bono clients and hopes to give back to the congregation that has given so much to his family.

**Howard Masters** grew up in Cherry Hill, New Jersey -- a suburb of Philadelphia. He and his wife, Renee Harkey, have been members of Sukkat Shalom since 2011.

"As an intermarried -- or as we sometimes prefer, intercultural -- couple, we were looking for a Jewish home where we could both fully participate in congregational life," Howard says. He visited Sukkat Shalom's website, where serving the intermarried appears as part of the mission statement. "It was a bold statement that stood in opposition to what so often appears in connection with how Jewish institutions approach intermarriage," he says.

Howard has been very involved for years in Saturday morning Torah study, which continued online during the Covid pandemic. He is also involved in the Book Club and frequently attends adult education opportunities, including Caffeine for the Brain on Sunday mornings. "I appreciate the direct involvement with the clergy as well as the smaller size of the congregation that has allowed us to get to know people," he says.

Howard is a Systems Engineer with Nutanix, where he works with two Account Executives as the "technical half" of the team. He is a voracious reader with diverse interests that include everything from 20th Century American fiction to all kinds of history.

He also notes that he is a trained weather spotter. Weather spotters help the National Weather Service by providing "on the ground" reports of severe weather. We hope Howard can spot where spring has been hiding so far this year!



**Howard Masters**



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