There’s an email I still have in my files. Lori in the office sent it on March 12, 2020, copying then-president David Leers and me. The subject line is, “B’nai Mitzvah Parent Meeting this Sunday.” It reads:

*Good morning parents. Rabbi Mike would like to have a meeting this Sunday with the parents of the Spring B'nai Mitzvah children. No decisions have been made; this meeting is to talk about getting everyone to feel safe, and be on the same page.*

Two days later, there’s another email, this time from me:

*As much as we wanted to have our meeting in person tomorrow, David and I think it wisest to meet by Zoom.  We will send out instructions this evening.*

I don’t have to tell you why we needed this meeting — or why we ultimately moved it online. The day the first email went out, there were 405 recorded Covid-19 infections in the United States. The day the second email went out, there were 674 new cases. By the end of the month, 30,000 new cases were reported in a day. By the end of the year, that number climbed to an unfathomable 300,000.

But in that moment, we weren’t addressing 300,000 people, or even 405. We were addressing six families, here at Beth Elohim, anticipating b’nai mitzvah services for their sweet, wise, creative, and in general delightful kids.

B’nai mitzvah are communal celebrations, milestones not just for a kid and a family, but for a community. We welcome a young person into the adult community of Jews who chant and learn and, we pray, live Torah. We do it in public, with the community present.

But how could we do that when being in community could be deadly? Ultimately, we decided to solve the problem in a way I don’t think any other synagogue did. If our families couldn’t safely come to the Torah, we would bring the Torah to them.

And thus began a series of b’nai mitzvah services celebrated via Zoom — and held in congregants’ backyards. Our first backyard bat mitzvah was of Nosara Maxwell, March 28 of 2020, in Greg and Maya’s backyard in Acton. Since then, our Torah has traveled to homes in Littleton and Groton, Maynard and Bolton, Concord and Harvard and Stow — and in between, at backyards all across Acton.

It was a shlep, of course, and not always easy. Our b’nai mitzvah families learned a lot about the care and feeding of a Torah scroll. Everyone stands when the Torah is lifted. Never rest it on a bare table; always place a fabric underneath it. And, of course, don’t drop it.

Despite all the extra work involved in transporting the scrolls, in retrospect I wouldn’t change a thing. Because bringing Torah out in the world was, in and of itself, a teaching.

Yes, a Torah scroll lives in an *aron*, an ark. But it cannot only live there. It must live out in the world. In our backyards. In our homes. In our hearts.

Three millennia of Jewish thought have left us a legacy not only of Jewish ritual and prayer, but of values — principles rooted in Torah and cultivated in Jewish communities. As you know, we’ve formed a Values Committee to identify our core values, and discuss how to integrate them into our community.

Each of the sermons I’m giving over the course of these high holidays is connected, in some way, to the theme of Jewish values.

Those values, for instance, guided the decision we made about our b’nai mitzvah.

Other solutions — families alone in their homes with clergy on Zoom, removing the Torah reading, gathering in the sanctuary — were considered and rejected.

These decisions were based on competing needs. Public Torah reading reaches at least as far back to the Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We knew we wanted to maintain that element of our Shabbat morning service. Having our students read from the physical scroll was a skill, and experience, that we didn’t want to sacrifice. We wanted to ensure that everyone who desired to participate in the service could do so. It was obviously essential to keep everyone safe from danger.

And so, it was resolved — services would be held outdoors, in people’s backyards, with both clergy and Torah scrolls present.

The factors that I enumerated above, the factors that went into making this decision, may seem like no-brainers, obvious and self-evident. But each one represents a particular value — a Jewish value — that we considered and confirmed. Insisting on reading the Torah is informed by a value: in Hebrew, *Talmud Torah*, the study of Torah. Teaching that skill to children is a value drawn from the words of the *v’ahavta* prayer: *v’shinantam livanecha*, teaching the next generation. Ensuring everyone could participate is a value drawn from the Talmud: *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba’zeh*, “all Jews are responsible for each other.” And keeping everyone safe drew on still another value: *pikauch nefesh*, “saving life,” a value so important that, almost without exception, it eclipses all others.

We did our best to balance all these needs. What it meant was that not only did the physical Torah travel across Middlesex and Worcester counties, but our understanding of the Torah’s values did as well.

Notice that I said “*our* understanding.” When the board began to talk about creating a Jewish values group, there was some concern. Would the group tell the rest of the congregation what to do? Would it become a quasi-rabbinic body, with the power to give a thumbs-up or down to decisions before the congregation?

In a word, no. One of the things you realize when you look at decisions though the lens of Jewish values is that the process, the *act* of considering multiple and at times competing values, is at least as important as the outcome. Rather than being commanded what to do by an outside force, we uncover the unspoken motivations inside of us. Deliberating upon Jewish values and texts helps us become a more fully realized version of ourselves.

Consider the text we read this morning, the story that’s read every Rosh haShanah morning. After Sarah miraculously gives birth to Isaac, she demands that Abraham exile not only Hagar but Ishmael, the son Hagar bore Abraham. Abraham expels both with no notice, sending them off with nothing more than some bread and a skin of water.

The meager rations soon exhausted, Hagar wails into the wilderness over her dying son — when, suddenly, an angel of God appears, revealing a well of water. Ishmael’s suffering is relieved. Hagar’s wailing is answered.

How does this story make us feel? Maybe we see the pain caused to Hagar and Ishmael as the cost of a Jewish home, of Jewish continuity? Maybe we’re upset with Abraham — even if it was justifiable to send mother and child away, surely it was immoral to exile them with such meager rations? Maybe we’re disappointed in Hagar that she didn’t fight harder for her child. Maybe we feel compassion for her, or anger on her behalf.

Each of these instincts has roots in Jewish values. The value of Jewish continuity is expressed in the Hebrew phrase *kehillah kedosha*, “holy community.” On the other hand, you could question the holiness of any community that sends away a mother and child without proper sustenance. In Hebrew we call this value *gemilut chasadim*, “acts of lovingkindness,” — as in *chesed*, “kindness” or “mercy” — or, perhaps *tzedek*, “righteousness.” If you’re disappointed in Hagar’s unwillingness to fight harder for save Ishmael’s life, you might be a person that puts a primacy on *pikuach nefesh*, “saving a life.” If you’re angry at Abraham, you might rack that up to *ahavat ha-ger*, the value of “loving the stranger, immigrant.”

You might be thinking — rabbi, do we really need to call these *Jewish* values? Isn’t taking care of a person in need a basic *human* value?

I would agree. But that too is a Jewish value!

We call that value *b’tzelem Elohim*, words from the opening chapter of Genesis that tell us that, in creating humans, God said, “Let’s make humans in our own image” — meaning that *all human beings are created in the image of God*. The text doesn’t say “let’s make Jews.” Or Muslims or Hindus or Christians, for that matter. Not men, or straight people, or Republicans — or even Democratic Socialists!

Every single human being is divine.

Paradoxically, then, the universal idea of dignity living at the core of every soul — the “basic idea of human value” — is, at root, a Jewish idea. The inherent worth of human beings is a bedrock principle for all streams and denominations of Judaism. It cannot be revoked or rescinded.

And if our value comes from our status as reflections of divinity, so does our ability to make values-based decisions.

Because our model for values-based decision making is none other than God.

In contrast to the omniscient God of our cultural imaginings, throughout Jewish text, God is regularly presented as a Decider Who is frustratingly indecisive.

According to a Midrash, God was even a little ambivalent about the very idea of creating people. As we said, God’s words are, “Let us make humans.” It may have occurred to you while I was talking: if there’s only one god, then what’s with this *let* *us* business? Who’s God talking to?

The Midrash says that God’s talking to the angels. “Let’s make humans,” it turns out, is less a pronouncement from on high and more of a sitting-around-the-writer’s-room brainstorming proposition.

Like, “hey, I know! What if we made *humans*? *WOAH*.”

And, immediately, the angels around the table split into factions — in Hebrew, *kittim kittim v’chavurot chavurot* — and immediately start arguing. (Perhaps they were Jewish angels?) Some like the idea, and some decidedly do *not*.

The names of the arguing angels correspond to values that we hold dear. In one argument, an angel named *Chesed* says: “Let the humans be created! They’ll do acts of *gemilut chasadim*, lovingkindness.” But an angel named *Emet* — “truth” — protests, “Are you kidding? Don’t let the humans be created. They’re all lies!” In another argument, *Tzedek* — justice — insists, “Let the humans be created! They’ll do acts of justice,” and *Shalom*, Peace, counters, “Don’t let the humans be created! They are all conflict.”

At the height of the argument, the Midrash reports God “cast[ing] Truth down to the earth.” Does this mean that God physically threw Truth down — whatever that means? Or sent Truth out of the Heavenly court? It’s not clear. The angels, shocked, argue with God to bring Truth back, but then seemingly return to arguing with each other — but God has a surprise for them.

In the words of Rav Huna the Elder of Sepphoris: As the ministering angels were arguing and fighting with each other, the Holy Blessed One said to them, “Why are you arguing! The human has already been created.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Should we then conclude that God prizes *Chesed* over Truth? Well, the *Chesed* committee might be happy to hear that.

But I wouldn’t interpret this as a hard and fast rule. What I think the Midrash is teaching is that, in that moment, when a decision had to be made, God made the hard choice of prioritizing Mercy over Truth. And Justice over Peace.

It might surprise us. *Emet* and *Shalom*, truth and peace, are essential Jewish values. We’re taught, for instance, that God commands us to be *rodfei shalom*, pursuers of peace. But in this instance, peace does not win out.

This is what decisions are about. This is what it means to be a deciding being, created in image of a deciding God. Very few decisions are simple. More often, we weigh what matters, and do our best.

But we don’t know what matters most unless we think about it. Meditate on it. Talk with each other about it. And, yes, pray on it.

Our model here, as much as it may surprise us, is also God.

In the Talmud, in tractate *Brachot* — “blessings”— the rabbis take note of a phrase in Isaiah, in which God calls the Temple in Jerusalem, *beit tefilati*. *Bayit* or *beit*, you may know means “house,” and *tefilati* means “my prayer” — thus, *beit tefilati* would mean “house of My prayer.”

The rabbis ask, is this literal? “*My* prayer?” — God prays? Really? If so, the Talmud asks, *Nu*? “So what does God pray?

Rav Zutra bar Tovia said that Rav had an answer. It’s not exactly clear *how* Rav knew the answer, but in any event, it was taught that God says: “May it be My will that My compassion conquer My anger, and” — further — “may My compassion prevail over My other attributes…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Did it work? Did God answer God’s own prayer? Does God’s compassion prevail over God’s anger?

Well, in the words of the Talmudic oracular device, the holy Magic 8-ball — “Reply hazy… ask again later.”

You might say that God struggles with that prayer to this day. But if these rabbinic stories tell us anything, it’s that our tradition sees God as our model for reflecting on one’s own values — weighing those values, making decisions based upon those values.

The decision, for instance, to create human beings in the first place.

Rosh haShanah is, of course, the birthday of the world. But, according to our tradition, it’s not the first day of Creation, the “let there be light” day. It’s the *sixth* day, the “let us make humans” day.

Or, in other words, the day choice was created. It wasn’t born in a synagogue. It was born in the soul of every human being, each of us given the Godly power of making decisions based on ethics and values.

But a year and a half of living with Covid — and, for some of us, tragically, dying with Covid — has been a brutal reminder that the way we’ve lived hasn’t always concurred with our values. The death of two-thirds of a million Americans has raised, for some of us, existential questioning. People are quitting jobs, changing careers, getting married. About 20% more houses were sold in November 2020 compared to November 2019, according to U.S. Census data. More than half of respondents to a match.com survey said they’re prioritizing dating and rethinking the qualities they search for in a partner. Pew Research reports that 86% of U.S. adults thought there were lessons humanity should learn from the COVID-19 pandemic.

It’s common to hear of people making changes in their lives after a near-death experience. But what happens when the whole world has a near-death experience?

Has there been a better moment in our lifetimes to look to our timeless Jewish values? Not because they offer a panacea, a life free of trouble. But because they promise a life of meaning, of integrity.

For what we learn in learning Torah fails if it only lives here, in this building.

An *etz chaim* — a tree of life, a living tree, a tradition that promises to change the world that is into the world that could be — must come alive *outside* the synagogue. It must live in boardrooms and classrooms and breakrooms, in wallets and portfolios, party platforms and social media platforms, workshops, printshops, coffeeshops.

And, like it did for our b’nai mitzvah families, in our backyards.

It is so easy to slip into a life molded by someone else’s values, or worse, nobody’s values — the logic of the marketplace, the pull of “productivity,” or some other faceless force. We’re slotted into business models, demographic profiles, algorithms. To corporations, we’re consumers. To politicians, we’re voters. To social media platforms, end-users.

Advances in this kind or profiling have become so sophisticated that we don’t even realize it. We’ve been rightly afraid of tyranny, the tyranny that shows up on balconies and screens shouting absurdly terrifying nonsense. But what about the smooth and subtle tyranny, an invisible network of data points and calculations that invite us to recede into passivity, happy to choose our choices for us?

Is that what we’re here for? To be fit into models we don’t understand, plotted on charts we never see? If we believe in *any* kind of consciousness within the network of the universe, no matter what we call it, that can’t be right.

A tradition like Judaism, which teaches that we’re created in God’s image, envisions us as choosing beings, reflections of the divine that weigh what’s important, consider what choices will manifest light, engender joy, cultivate fairness, propagate peace — and act accordingly.

For millennia, Jews have made these choices in consultation and conversation with Torah. Here, in the past year, that Torah came to our backyards. Can we welcome it to kick off its shoes? Stay awhile? To live in our actions, our choices?

On this birthday of the world, this birthday of humanity, the birthday of choice, we are reminded to ask ourselves — What *do* we believe?

We tell our b’nai mitzvah kids — this Jewish tradition is so important, that we’re willing to shlep a handwritten scroll all over God’s green earth to read it.

But after we read it, what then? After the Torah and the haftarah and the *D’var Torah*, the candy throwing and the *siman tov u’mazl tov* and the thank you cards written and (*gevalt*) mailed, what happens next?

We know that our community can read Torah. It’s beautiful. But after the ark is closed, and we ride off into the rest of our lives — how do we live it?

Why is it important, these beliefs and traditions that some of us have literally given our lives for?

And, ultimately, if they’re so important that they’re worth dying for – *aren’t they worth living for*?

Not just in here, but out there? And then, again, everyplace we go, *everyplace we call* *here*?

All the places of our lives?

This year, may consider these timeless and urgent questions. And may our lives serve as answers.

1. Genesis *Rabbah* 8:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Talmud, *Brachot* 7a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)