

BI@Home:
News from your home away from home

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A WORD FROM RABBI FELLMAN



When I was a camper at Ramah in the Poconos, our division play was, “Eizehu Gibor, What a Hero.” As part of this moving tribute to a beloved staff member who had passed since the summer before, I belted out the chorus of “Onot Ha’Ahavah, Seasons of Love,” in Hebrew, as part of the finale. The song, written the year before for the Broadway musical Rent, questions how to quantify the value of a year in human life, concluding in the chorus that the most effective means is to “measure in love.”

Here we are, a year into COVID and most of us are in the midst of our second Pesach of “not normal.” We have started counting, not the 525,600 minutes of the Rent lyrics, but rather 49 days from the second night of Pesach to Shavuot: the counting of the Omer. The Omer is often seen as a time of spiritual growth, as we move from simple freedom to actualized, values-inspired free life. But it’s also a time of mourning.

Tradition says that nearly two thousand years ago, thousands of Jews died in a plague. That plague lasted for most of the Omer – from the second day of Passover onward – until, on the 33rd day of the Omer (Lag BaOmer), the plague lifted. This past year has given us a small taste of the fear and the mourning that the Omer points us toward.

But the Omer is also about love. This intense period as we bridge from the Exodus from Egypt (marked by Pesach) to the period of receiving the Torah and bringing our first fruits (marked by Shavuot) is one for reflecting on love as well. In the weeks leading up to Pesach, together in Project Zug, we learned about the relationship between God and Israel, between lovers, and about an acceptance of the relationship between the things that we can control and those that we can’t. We discussed this intersection of mourning and joy, of loss and hope, of the past and the future.

The two ends of this arc of the Omer are also marked by the recitation of two different Megillot – Shir HaShirim on Pesach and Ruth on Shavuot. These Megillot, as well as Kohelet which we read on Sukkot, are about love, but they’re about different seasons of love.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z”l, shared that “Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, is about love in the springtime, love when you’re young. The whole book of Shir HaShirim is a duet between two lovers who are obsessed with one another. There’s no mention in the whole book about marriage, children, setting up home, responsibilities to the future; all there is is their passion for one another.” He then went on to share that in the story of Ruth, love manifests differently. “Love as chesed, loving-kindness, love as deed. And it is that chesed that, according to the sages, permeates the book from beginning to end. The chesed that Ruth had to her mother-in-law whom she sees as bereaved and bereft, and returning alone to her people, and she says, no, you can’t go alone... And then Boaz, moved by this kindness he sees on the part of Ruth, and that moves him to extraordinary kindness of his own, taking her as his wife, caring for Naomi, and making sure that they will have a marriage, which will have children, which in the end, four generations down the line has David haMelech, the greatest of Israel’s kings.” (rabbisacks.org/seasons-of-love-rabbi-sacks-on-shavuot/)

As we count the Omer and the days until we can gather again in person as a community, may we also make sure that we are making each day count so that when we mark another year of counting, we, our community, and our world are stronger, more just, kinder, and more compassionate. How are you going to mark this period of the Omer in a way that demonstrates your love? How are you going to make it count?

COUNTING THE DAYS, MAKING THEM COUNT

PAULA SOMMER, BETH ISRAEL PRESIDENT

In BI@Home this month, we are highlighting the Jewish custom of sanctifying time, making it distinct and special. In the period between Passover and Shavuot, we focus on counting the Omer. This is a relatively new tradition for me. When I have tried to do it consistently, however, I recognize that it provides me with heightened intention, helping me focus on the transition period of our travel towards Mt. Sinai.

We often count down to special events – birthdays, anniversaries, New Year's Eve in Times Square, or a shuttle launch at Cape Canaveral. At this time, however, we focus on counting up. Why is that? Is this something like the dueling Hillel/Shammai traditions of candle lighting at Chanukah, where we choose the counting up method of Hillel, to increase the joy?



This year, counting the Omer will certainly feel different. It's not the only counting I'm doing, and the other one is not moving towards a date I can circle on my calendar. It's the count towards a day when we can say this period of pandemic, if not completely over, is lessened enough to resume many activities we've had to put off for over a year now. Much like our ancestors, who did not know just how long they would wander the desert after leaving Mitzrayim, I will also be counting toward something that does not have a defined target date. Like you, I am counting the days until I can spend time in person with an extended group of family and friends again.

I know it will be after Passover. Will we be able to gather before Shavuot? With continued responsible distancing, mask wearing, and community vaccinations, I hope that is a realistic target. May we all be able to focus on the end of this journey toward a more normal reality, as we continue our spiritual journey together as a community.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: ELAINE BASKIN

This month it is my pleasure to spotlight long time member Elaine Baskin. Elaine likes to work quietly behind the scenes, so not everyone may be aware of her many important contributions to Beth Israel and to the larger community.

Elaine has been a coordinator of volunteers at First Night Worcester, a Hospice visitor, a volunteer at Habitat for Humanity Restore, and, when we had Havdalah in the building, she was the BI weekly Seudah Shlishit organizer.

When Elaine sees a need, she jumps in to take care of it. Since the High Holidays, she has been helping the office get out our monthly bulletin. When the bulletin has been printed, a few days before the end of the month, she activates a small team of volunteers to fold and stuff the newsletter, and take the boxes to the post office. Due to COVID restrictions, her team has worked in the parking lot and in their cars, even working during Purim to make the deadline. Elaine, thank you for your gentle efficiency in getting the job done.

Note: Future editions of BI@Home will spotlight others of our unsung heroes, volunteers at BI working mostly behind the scenes. If you have ideas of whom to profile, contact Paula Sommer at psommer2012@gmail.com or call the BI office to arrange to speak with Paula.

YOM HASHOAH COMMUNITY PROGRAM: APRIL 7 AT 7:30 P.M.

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, will be observed on April 8, starting the evening before as all days do on the Jewish Calendar. The Jewish Federation of Central Massachusetts is planning a community-wide program featuring clergy and Jewish lay leaders. The program will be on Zoom. Watch your weekly emails for details.

YOM HAZIKARON/YOM HA'ATZAMUT PROGRAM WITH ARI FELLMAN: APRIL 14 AT 7:30 P.M.

Congregation Beth Israel will commemorate Yom HaZikaron (Israel Memorial Day) and Yom HaAtzmaut (Israel Independence Day) with a presentation by our own Ari Fellman on Wednesday, April 14 right after evening minyan. Just stay on the minyan Zoom and listen as Ari reflects on his experience with the IDF.

RACIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE – JOIN US FOR A WATCH PARTY

On April 18, the Racial Justice Initiative Committee is hosting a Watch Party and discussion at 7:30 p.m. We'll be screening the 2016 documentary about James Baldwin called "I Am Not Your Negro" based on his unfinished manuscript *Remember This House*. Directed by Raoul Peck and narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, this illuminating and moving film recounts Baldwin's life and contributions to American culture and anti-racist thought. A.O. Scott of the New York Times said of the film in 2018, "Though its principal figure, the novelist, playwright and essayist James Baldwin, is a man who has been dead for nearly 30 years, you would be hard-pressed to find a movie that speaks to the present moment with greater clarity and force, insisting on uncomfortable truths and drawing stark lessons from the shadows of history." "I Am Not Your Negro" runs approximately 90 minutes and, for those who would like to stick around, we will have a discussion of the film afterwards, facilitated by Terry Lubarsky.

The Racial Justice Initiative Committee is looking to plan one or more events each month. Do you want more details about this important initiative? Are you interested in participating in planning future events? Contact Alan Harris at alwharris@aol.com.

NEW FUNDRAISING COMMITTEE

Beth Israel has an imperative need to raise more money to support all of our activities and programs, both during the pandemic and beyond. At the Board meeting on March 18, Pat Bizzell agreed to chair a Spring Fund-Raiser Committee and Sheila Trugman, Jayne Fisher, and Sue Alfred stepped up immediately to volunteer. Would you like to join this group? Do you have some good ideas for fund-raising, even if you cannot join at this time? Please email Pat at pbizzell@holycross.edu. Happy Spring!

WHAT'S NEW WITH USY?

BI's USY Chapter is keeping busy! They've been meeting one Sunday a month to study Everyday Moral Dilemmas. The course will finish in April. They will also have a joint meeting with a group of young people from the Church of the Blessed Sacrament to play a trivia game leveraging knowledge of texts we share and also differences in our respective religions.

Laura Traiger has been the USY advisor at BI for ten years. Kol HaKavod to her! We are looking for someone to take over this part-time job. If you are interested or think you know of someone who would make a good USY Advisor, contact Pat Bizzell or Dale Rosenberg.

I asked Laura to reflect on her USY experience for this issue. I'm sure we are all grateful for her long service and would love to know more about what USY has meant to her.

USY AND ME BY LAURA TRAIGER

USY has been an integral part of my life for a long time. Starting in fifth grade as a Kadimanik through my senior year in high school, I was an active member of the organization, serving as co-president with my first cousin, Adam. After college I became a youth director, with my husband Rich serving as a youth advisor, at a congregation in Randolph where two of my first cousins were members. Upon returning to BI in 1998, I served on the youth committee and, beginning in 2010, when my daughter, Shari was of Kadimah age, I became the youth advisor of our Worcester chapter. This year, I am ending my tenure as advisor. I have loved being a part of USY, both as a member and as an advisor.

USY is a great way to develop leadership and communications skills, to understand how Judaism can be an influence in one's life choices, and to give of yourself by volunteering in local and national efforts, all while having fun! During this time of the Omer, where we count the days until we receive the Torah, it is fitting to think of how our kids count. Each one of them is developing and exploring and learning how they can be a part of their family, community and society as a whole. USY provides a safe space for each of them to challenge themselves, introduces them to the opportunities available, and enables them to find a place where they can be counted to make a difference. I am honored to follow in the footsteps of many dedicated advisors from our own congregation who imparted to our children these lessons over the years and whose goals were to ensure that every child felt heard and counted.

PROJECT ZUG – WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN?

DALE ROSENBERG

Many of our members have been gaining new insights and knowledge with Project Zug this year. Zug is Hebrew for “partner” and Project Zug is a Hadar Institute initiative that provides curricula for Chevruta learning. A traditional method of studying Jewish text, Chevruta learning builds knowledge along with strong learning relationships. Learning in Chevruta has long been an essential component of both BI’s Adult Ed and Rimon Religious School.

This year, thanks to a generous donation from Barry Aframe, we engaged in a different kind of partnership – one between us and Project Zug. We have had unlimited access to their catalog of courses. BI members have used that access to learn privately in pairs or small groups, and also to learn in a group setting with facilitation from Rabbi Fellman, Rabbi Ahuvah Loewenthal, and Dale Rosenberg. We’ve had four different group learning experiences in 5781: Unlocking the Machzor, Everyday Moral Dilemmas, Shabbat Rituals, and The Seder and the Song of Songs. In addition, our USY teenagers are involved in their own group learning of the Everyday Moral Dilemmas curriculum.

Many more courses are available from Project Zug and Beth Israel congregants have taken advantage of this bounty throughout the year. It’s still available! There are 4-week and 10-week courses on a variety of subjects. Each class curriculum includes a series of brief video lectures by a scholar along with study sheets that provide text and discussion questions, as well as avenues for more learning. You can join with a Chevruta from BI and study together, or be matched with someone by the staff at Hadar. Here are a few titles of available classes that might be of interest, along with an excerpt from the course developer’s description:

Purpose, Conflict, and Resolution: Leonard Cohen's Vision by Dr. Stephen Hazan Arnoff

Leonard Cohen offers a compelling example of how Jewish and popular culture can meet. This course explores Cohen’s perspectives on Spiritual Purpose, Worldly Conflict, and Resolution with the Divine, offering a voice of human faith, curiosity, empathy, and theology that not only entertains and inspires beyond any particular tradition, but also challenges and enriches Jewish practice and experience specifically. The course is based on listening to and discussing a set of Leonard Cohen’s songs—with occasional poems or excerpts from interviews.

Theology of Psalms: Praying Biblical Poetry by Rabbi Shai Held

Through close literary and theological readings of an array of Psalms—reflecting diverse genres, moods, experiences, and emotions—we will deepen our understanding of the texts and the worldviews they express. We’ll encounter texts that are theologically profound, spiritually audacious, and literarily breathtaking. Along the way, we’ll consider what it means to pray a text as opposed to merely reading or studying it.

The Torah of Music by Joey Weisenberg

Based on Joey Weisenberg’s book (The Torah of Music) and his teaching at communities across the world, this course provides an opportunity to reflect together on the place of music in our Jewish lives—our relationships to God, each other, and ourselves. You’ll be encouraged not only to discuss the texts, exploring 3000 years of music history, but also your own experiences of prayer and Jewish music.

Love, Sex, and Relationships in Jewish Tradition by Rabbi Avi Strausberg

We turn to our tradition for answers to the greatest questions of our times: how to handle the messy business of love, sex and relationships. We’ll dive into texts across the Jewish canon, from Torah to Mishnah, Talmud to the Legal Codes, exploring questions of “What does it mean to love someone,” “What does a holy, healthy sex life look like,” and “Is there such thing as permitted, sacred sex outside of marriage?” No topics are off limits for the rabbis! We turn to our Jewish texts as a jumping off point for our own exploration of what it means to be in a relationship.

To take any of these – and many more – classes at no cost to you, register for them at www.projectzug.org. If you would like the staff there to find a chavruta for you, register for their next “cycle.” Registration starts April 12 and the courses begin May 16. If you learn with a fellow congregant or a friend or relative, you can register and start any time you want. If you’d like help choosing a course and/or navigating the Project Zug website, contact me at dale.rosenberg@bethisraelworc.org.

JOIN BI FOR FUN AND LEARNING WITH MEMBERS TOGETHER PROGRAMS

On select Sunday mornings each month, we meet for a presentation, breakfast, and a chance to hang out with other BI members and their friends, all safely accomplished via Zoom. We have some fascinating programs planned for the next few months. Here is some information on upcoming Members Together Meetings:

Scientists in Synagogues: The Six Days of Creation, the Big Bang, and Some Tidbits of Physics with Elliott Krefetz



On April 11, Elliott Krefetz will speak to Members Together as part of our Scientists in Synagogues series of lectures. Elliott, longtime BI member and longtime scientist will give insights on various topics in a lecture entitled “The Six Days of Creation, the Big Bang, and Some Tidbits of Physics.” Are religious and scientific views on the creation of the universe compatible? Zoom in on April 11 and see what Elliott has to say.

Where in the World Did You Grow Up Jewish? Part 2

On April 25, we’ll have part two of the Sisterhood-sponsored program, “Where in the World Did You Grow Up Jewish?” In the very successful part 1, BI members who had grown up in parts of the United States with small Jewish populations talked about their experiences. This time we’ll hear from people who grew up Jewish outside of this country. We’ll get a sense of what’s the same and what’s different in Jewish communities the world over. Pat Bizzell will moderate this panel discussion.



Looking ahead, we have a Brotherhood sponsored Members Together program on the Yom Kippur War on May 23, and the rescheduled program on Sustainability and the Torah with new dad Noah Slovin on June 6.

Join us at 9:00 a.m. on these Sundays, right after morning minyan. Bring coffee and breakfast, if you like. We’ll have half an hour of schmoozing, breaking into smaller groups if there is a large turnout. Then at 9:30 our guest speakers will present, leaving time for Q&A at the end.

Do you have ideas for future Members Together programs? Email dale.rosenberg@bethisraelworc.org or call the BI office and let’s set up a time to talk.

SHALOSH REGALIM THEN AND NOW WITH RABBI FELLMAN MONDAYS: APRIL 12, APRIL 26, AND MAY 10 AT 7:45 P.M.

The Shalosh Regalim, or Pilgrimage Festivals, are a major focus of religious practice as described in the Torah and Rabbinic texts. Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot were all harvest holidays. They were all also occasions of pilgrimage to the Great Temple in Jerusalem, when it stood.

During this time between two of the festivals, Rabbi Fellman will teach us about their origin and meaning in Ancient Israel, as well as the meanings they have developed in the Diaspora. With no Temple and no longer living an agrarian life, how have Jews celebrated and engaged with these ancient holidays over time? What is their significance today, and how does our celebration and commemoration of these holidays today tie into our heritage and our history? Come to this three-session series (via Zoom) on Monday evenings, to learn from Rabbi Fellman as we count the days from Pesach to Shavuot.

HAVE YOU CHECKED OUT THE NEW WEBSITE?

PAULA SOMMER, PRESIDENT

Have you checked out www.bethisraelworc.org lately? The soft rollout of the updated website happened in early March, in time to get ready for Pesach. Four people worked on this project – Evie Herwitz Harris, Howard Drobner, Caroline Aboody, and consultant Steve Gotler. Steve is former synagogue communications director at 10,000-plus-member Temple Israel near Detroit and an expert on modifying ShulCloud websites, our site's platform.

Steve took Evie's view of what she wanted for the "look and feel" of the updated site, with input from Howard and Caroline, and created a new, streamlined design with customized code supported by ShulCloud. The team went through several iterations of the design, which they tested in a "sandbox" site that was not visible to the public, before reaching the current version.

Based on conversations with synagogue staff and leadership last fall, Evie updated and rewrote the entire website, to better reflect our priorities as an inclusive congregation that cherishes traditions while being open to the needs of a changing world. She selected and updated all the images and figured out the revised structure of the site navigation.

Howard, who had worked last fall on the site to include live streaming for services, lent his expertise to the project and helped with creating some of the new pages. Caroline found Steve and also provided input on modifications to the Calendar and Donation form in the website, as well as updated event listings. Howard and Evie gave up a Sunday for the implementation. Working with Steve, they spent more than six hours on March 7 to change all the pages, images, and overall navigation on the ShulCloud site. They continue to make refinements as we gain more experience with the new design.

There is a wealth of information on our BI website, including the most up-to-date event details, service schedules and Zoom guidelines, a full archive of BI@Home, a Passover 5781 resource page, and much more. If you have an account, you can pay your dues and make donations online through our secure interface, with an updated, easier-to-read payment form. And, when you log in as a member, you will see a Quick Link to a page with all current Zoom links for services and programs. Zoom links are only visible with a BI account. If you need help to set up your account, please call the BI Office.

This update would not have happened if Evie had not stepped up and done a significant amount of work. She has made our previously outdated website not just serviceable, but engaging. I thank her so much for her love and care for the synagogue, which led her to take on this massive project, and I appreciate the effort of all the others who jumped in to help.

GIVE TOT SHABBAT A TRY!



Twice a month our Early Childhood Educator, Rowan Mason, is offering a musical, joyous, live (via Zoom) Tot Shabbat program at 5:15 on Friday afternoons. We gather together and say Friday night blessings, listen to a story, sing songs, and get in the Shabbat mood in a family way. The program is geared towards families with children 7 and under, but it's a lovely, heimish half-hour even if you're old enough for Medicare! Consider signing

on to the Shabbat Zoom a little earlier. I think you will see that hanging out with adorable children lifts your spirits in just the right way. This month Tot Shabbat is on April 9 and April 23.

RIMON UPDATE: TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO COUNT, TEACHING THEM THAT THEY COUNT BY DALE ROSENBERG



Most synagogue religious schools do not currently teach Modern Hebrew conversation. We focus on teaching children to read and understand Hebrew prayer and text. As they get closer to becoming B'nai Mitzvah, they learn to chant Torah and Haftarah in Hebrew. We don't, however, have time to teach conversational Hebrew.

Still, we want them to have a feel for the fact that Hebrew is a living language, and one that is part of their heritage. We want them to learn a little bit, enough to know that if they later want to learn to speak and read Hebrew, there are many opportunities to do so. So, when we've had the Young Emissaries in our classrooms, they've often played Hebrew games with the kids. In Rimon, we used to have snack in Hebrew as well, with the students choosing what they'd like to eat of the options presented, and asking politely, in full sentences, for the desired items. They learned some food words and some grammar in the process.

Now that we are on Zoom and our Shinshinim (Young Emissaries) are back home in Israel, our routines have changed. Still, we learn a few modern Hebrew words, often by playing games. We learn Hebrew words for colors, for some antonyms, and how to count in Hebrew.

We also have learned a lot about bar/bat mitzvah this year, and one of the important messages I try to convey is that at the Jewish age of majority, young people count in a minyan. We need 10 Jewish "adults" – meaning ritual adults, those past the age of bar/bat mitzvah, in order to say certain prayers, including the Mourners Kaddish. By being counted in a minyan, the children of our community learn that they have reached an age when they count in a new way, when they are needed in a different way by their community.

When my son Doran was 14 years old, there was a death in the family of a member of our shul community, a man who had been Doran's bar mitzvah tutor. I told Doran that we would be going to Alan's house the next morning for minyan. He objected ("Do I have to?"). My kids had all been on many shiva calls since they were babies, but Doran was at an age where he was resistant to being in what was mostly an adult setting, and particularly one where he'd have to get up earlier than other days because the minyan was before school. I told him he did have to. He pushed back, saying that Alan and his wife Gavrielle were so popular and they'd have no trouble getting a minyan. "Doran," I said, "You are our original connection with this family. Yes, you have to go."

So, the next morning I woke him up early and we walked over to Alan and Gav's house for the minyan. It was a Monday morning so there was Torah reading, too. Doran and I glared at each other as we walked but he was completely appropriate once we arrived, offering condolences and chatting. Alan and Gav were thrilled to have him there, so glad that one of Alan's students had shown up. Everyone made a huge fuss over him and they gave him an Aliyah and Alan introduced Doran as one of his favorite students to the assembled relatives.

As we left their brownstone and I was about to turn one way to get the subway to work as Doran turned the other way to get the subway to school, he stopped me and said the four words every mother longs to hear: "Mom, you were right." He went on to say, "It was such a little thing to do and it meant so much to them. Can we come back tomorrow?" We did. In that moment Doran knew for certain sure that he counted. May all of our children have that experience and understand their importance to the community.

THE SHALIACH IS COMING! THE SHALIACH IS COMING! BY LIZ BAKER

It's just over a year since we said a hurried good-bye to Dolev and Lior, our 2019-2020 Young Emissaries, who had to return home during the pandemic. Since then, our Central Massachusetts community has received greetings from our past SNEC Israeli Young Emissaries through their articles, videos, and zoom sessions. We hope they reminded you of the past 18 successful years of our Young Emissary Program. Their contributions have helped our community continue to strengthen our partnership with Israel and our personal connections with these young Israelis, who touched our community and our hearts.

As we plan for next year, we have had to make some tough decisions. Communities must make a financial commitment almost a year ahead of time, in order to participate in the Young Emissary program. This past year, as the deadline to commit for the 2021-2022 Young Emissary Program drew near, we were not convinced that COVID would be entirely behind us by August 2021, when the emissaries would arrive. We worried that the potential emissaries' parents would be hesitant to send their 18-year-olds to us, and we thought it would be difficult to find families to host them while our country is still working to control the pandemic.

We have decided, instead, to have a Community Shaliach for the upcoming year. The Community Shlichim are emissaries who do their overseas service after they complete their military service. They are older than the Shinshinim (Young Emissaries), more mature, and live more independently.

Central Massachusetts will be part of a network of communities around the world who have decided that The Jewish Agency for Israel's Post Army Shlichut Program would be another wonderful way to bring Israel closer to us. As with the Young Emissaries, the older Post Army Shlichim are able to bridge the gap between Jews of different backgrounds; they offer a great opportunity for us to enhance our community's relationship to Israel.

Our Shaliach will be living in an apartment, as is required for all Community Shlichim. He will continue the project of building and strengthening Jewish identity among our community members by representing a diverse and vibrant Israel. Our Shaliach will promote Israel experiences, fight against the delegitimization of Israel, teach Hebrew, promote Jewish social activism, and much more. Most importantly, Community Shlichim play a leading role in shaping what Israel and Jewish identity can mean for individuals and communities. When their service here is done, the shlichim bring the spirit of Jewish communities around the world back to Israel.

The Shaliach will be working at all of our community synagogues and religious schools. By introducing opportunities and coordinating programs through our Shaliach, our community can continue to strengthen its Jewish identity, as well as enhance an awareness of the significance of Israel and all of our lives.

We are extremely lucky this year. Central Massachusetts will be bringing one of our past Young Emissaries back as a Shaliach this August. We will reveal who this person is on Yom Ha'atzmaut - so stay tuned.

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Office Hours: Monday thru Friday 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Our staff are now working on site as well as from home. As we continue to practice careful social distancing, the staff is available to you via email and phone. If you need to stop by in person, please call ahead. Do not hesitate to call if you need any information or need to get in touch with someone.



