

RABBI'S RESPONSA

Shalom All,

Close to the beginning of every morning's prayers, we find a blessing upon the act of study. The words tell us that God made us holy with commandments including the imperative to "engage in words of Torah." I want to point out that the word "la'asok" does not mean "to study," but rather "to make our business" the words of the Torah. That Hebrew word, *esek*, in modern conversation would refer to the most common sorts of business. We're talking buying and selling items, lending and investing, laboring to make a profit – you know, business! That is why I find it a little surprising that our classical rabbis decided that it should stay a part of the blessing that we also recite on Saturday morning, ironically a sabbath from matters of business.

But yet, there it is, on page 88 of our Shabbat morning prayer book. Which leaves us to reconstruct the notion of what Torah study can look like. Remember, this is the seventh day of the week, which according to our myth, is the day upon which God rested after the first six days of creation. So how can we both "rest" and engage in "business" on the most holy day of the year? (Yes, you read correctly, Shabbat is considered more holy than Yom Kippur!)

Those same classic rabbis considered it a great sin to remain hunched over the tomes of our people, endlessly learning, without putting that learning to good use. They all studied, but only after the completion of their days' labor. They understood the integration of Torah's values into the actions of one's hands and feet. Well, there are times when it feels like my balance of learning and action is somewhat reversed: I spend a great deal of my time learning and teaching Torah, yet am left with too little time to go out and express the values in my actions. I suspect there might be others of you who feel similarly.

I am so grateful to be a part of a profession that has preserved the tradition of sabbatical – which comes from the word "shabbat." Based on the instructions in the Torah, the land must take an extended rest to recover every seven years if it is to remain fertile. So too, a teacher should be able to step back from their studies and lessons to regenerate and refocus on what they're teaching day in and day out. You might recall that Temple Sinai has given me a short sabbatical each January (rather than a much longer one) during which I am free to make it my "business" to refresh, refocus and return with new material for my work with the congregation. It feels wonderful every year to reach this period, but after the year we've had, January 2021 hasn't come a moment too soon.

This year, I'll be using my sabbatical time to translate the values of our sacred teachings into action. The most oft-repeated commandment in the bible is to care for the widow, the orphan and the foreigner - three categories of the most vulnerable members of that ancient society and, in important ways, of any society. We have so many vulnerable neighbors around us that it feels like a mission that is crying out for my attention. This month, I will be meeting with leaders of color in Stamford to discern ways in which Temple Sinai can serve as their allies in the fight for equality. I'll be volunteering at our local food banks to help get your valuable donations into the bellies of those who live right at the edge of poverty. I'll be

offering my skills to the leadership of Inspirica, Pacific House and Liberation Programs to try to support the individuals who have come much closer to “rock bottom” than I ever have. I will be:

Looking for the lessons of Torah on the streets of Stamford;

Looking for the stories of Torah in the stories of our neighbors;

Looking for the sparks of God in the passion of civil rights leaders;

Looking for the very reason I have committed my life to teaching Torah:
the translation of word into deed.

Thank you for the gift of a sabbatical, Temple Sinai. I am so lucky to have the opportunity to step out of my normal routine for a couple of weeks to live Torah in order to be reminded why it is so critically important that I teach Torah!

L'Shalom – In Peace,
Rabbi Jay TelRav