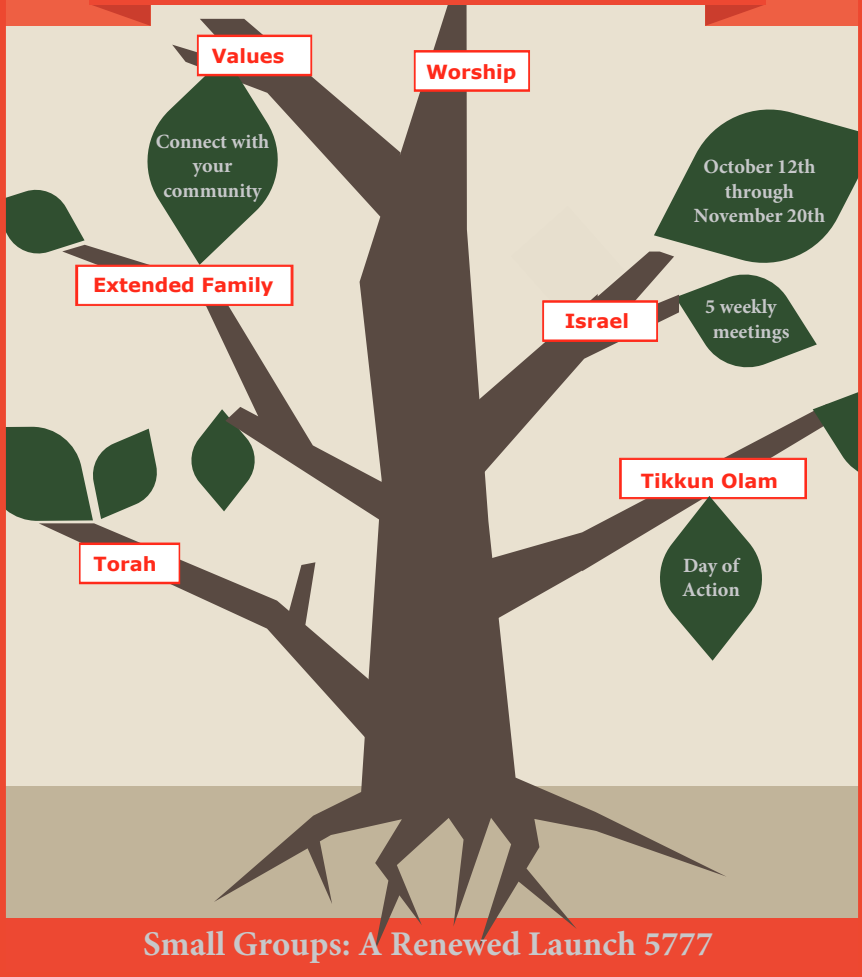


Leading a Life of Significance: Why Judaism Matters



By Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz
Congregation B'nai Israel

Sign up at www.cbi18.org

Leading a Life of Significance: Why Judaism Matters

Table of Contents

Introduction

Week 1. **V**alues: Priorities for Character Development

Week 2. **E**xtended Family: A Chosen People

Week 3. **T**orah: Sacred Text

Week 4. **W**orship Texts

Week 5. **I**srael: A Jewish National Home

Tikkun Olam: Healing the World

Afterword: A Letter to Your Children



Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz is a caring mentor to his congregants, a scholar, and a member of the Rabbinical Assembly Committee of Law and Standards. A graduate of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Boston University School of Law, Rabbi Spitz is the author of three books and many articles dealing with spirituality and Jewish law,

and has taught the philosophy of Jewish law at the American Jewish University. He lives in Tustin, California with his wife, Linda; they are the parents of Joseph, Jonathan and Anna Rose.



CONGREGATION B'NAI ISRAEL

RABBI ELIE KAPLAN SPITZ

2111 Bryan Avenue

Tustin, California 92782

ELIESPITZ@GMAIL.COM; (714) 730-9693

Acknowledgements

Gratitude to Steve Gladen of Saddleback Church for challenging me, "Rabbis come to me to discuss small groups, but have yet to address the overriding question of why synagogues are needed. In our case we are the Purpose Driven Church, and since our inception Pastor Rick Warren has laid out our five missions. What defines Judaism and its place in your people's lives?" This campaign of small group study is an attempted response.

Thanks to Ana Cottle, our operations specialist, who has partnered in preparing the material- both online and in printed form. Her creative flair and thoughtfulness have added much; Helene Coulter, our operations manager, who assists with my computer challenges and makes sure that the bills for this project got paid; and Sandy Klein, our executive director, who guided and monitored the project, with all the details involved, assuring that deadlines got met with a fine product.

Ideas came from many: Gila Willner, a sounding board who helped clarify the goals and the title; Rabbis K'vod Wieder and Rachel Kort of Temple Beth El for their havrutah in planning their own small group launch; Rabbi Robin Foonberg and our Rabbinic Intern Ariel Sholklauber, who offered guidance after reading the first draft; and Sue Ann Cross and Miriam Ninyo, our Social Action chairs, who organized the closing November 20th event.

Special thanks to my friends at American Jewish University: Rabbi Adam Greenwald for permission to draw material from his outstanding guide on Judaism, *Standing on One Foot* (Los Angeles: American Jewish University, 2015); Professor Ron Wolfson, who encouraged me to launch small groups at CBI last year as a prototype for synagogues nationally and for his ongoing support; and to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, my havrutah in continued learning.

Last, I want to thank you, the participants in our small groups. You motivate me to produce this material and offer the enormous satisfaction of taking up the challenge of hosting and conversing. Please write me with questions, updates, and comments.

Blessings,

Elie Spitz

Introduction:

Leading a Life of Significance: Why Judaism Matters



The goal of this year's small groups is to explore the why and what of Judaism. The assumptions of these conversations are that we seek a life that matters to those around us, that we leave the world a bit better for our presence, and that Judaism makes a vital contribution to the quality of our lives. And yet, questions persist: Why should we invest in a particular identity when living in our open, American culture? In what ways is cultivating Jewish identity a significant factor in meaning making, belonging, and the motivation to do good?

The small group experience will enable personalized conversations. This packet of materials provides texts and videos as a common ground for reflection. At the same time, this is not a survey of Judaism's "hows," which we will offer at CBI on Sunday afternoons beginning October 23rd.

Judaism in the Torah answers the question of "why": we are called to serve as a "*mamlekhet kohanim v'goy kadosh*" - "a nation of priests, a holy people" (Exodus 19:6). We will further examine what that means as a source of purpose in our collective and personal lives. Essentially, the Jewish "why" is that we are witnesses for God's Presence in the world, testifying to the perspective of a caring Creator seeking hope, justice, and peace for all people and demanding that we engage in bringing that vision into reality.

In exploring Judaism's content (the what), we will focus on six dimensions corresponding to the six points of the Jewish star, the *Mogen David*:

Values

Extended Family

Torah

Worship

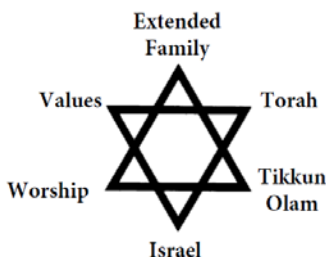
Israel

Tikkun olam

For ease of remembering, consider these acronyms:

VET

WIT



To vet is to examine closely. In this case the vetting process allows for achieving a worldview. Wit is defined as putting ideas together with a touch of humor or more specifically, a positive mindset entailing action.

Judaism is the accumulated wisdom of our people, a people identified with the yearning to live a life of significance. When the Torah exhorts, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy” (Leviticus 19: 2), the word “holy” refers to the quest to see the world through God’s eyes and to act accordingly. God in this context is conceived as the parent of the whole of creation. In that Biblical calling, holiness is a goal, rather than a state of being. Holiness calls on us to act justly and kindly. Judaism is the story of an extended family with a distinctive history, values, sacred text, forms of worship, and a homeland. How do the six facets of VET and WIT noted above fit together? In our own personal history, what role does Judaism play? How much more would we want to invest in learning and living Judaism’s teachings?

A place to begin is with a personal inventory. Consider writing answers or discussing the following:

The most significant Jewish moments in my life were?

What I find most attractive about Judaism:

What I find most troubling about Judaism:

I want to further explore my Jewish belonging because:

Judaism as a Religion:

Judaism as a religion is distinctive and yet shares much in common with other faiths. A religion is the accumulated wisdom of a community, which collectively shares many lifetimes. In the words of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, religions are analogous to a deck of cards, holding largely the same insights into the human condition and therefore, similar values. And yet, how the deck is stacked, which cards get placed on top, differs. As examples, for Christianity the top card is “salvation”; Islam emphasizes “submission”; and Judaism “righteousness.” In each faith there are soup kitchens and a belief in an afterlife, but again, the emphasis differs, as does the primary question that the religion seeks to answer.

Among the most influential Jewish teachers of the 20th century was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: Born in Poland, educated in Germany, and active in the United States as a professor and social activist. His critique of contemporary religion, although written over fifty years ago, is still worth considering:

“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.

“When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion only speaks in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.

“Religion is an answer to man’s ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of religion is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer.”

Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

Does Heschel’s critique of religion resonate with you?

***What are (some of) your big questions?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The six topics that follow bring Judaism into sharper focus by exploring how Judaism enriches your life. A person need not be Jewish or believe in God to lead a good life. And yet, Judaism serves to educate, motivate, and elevate us toward goodness and holiness by offering a community with ancient wisdom and rituals, along with ongoing belonging, care-giving, and enduring values. May your conversations delving into WIT and VET illuminate “Why Judaism Matters” in leading your life of significance.

For Further Study:

Videos:

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of England, “Why I am a Jew” - with animation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CABiFbpQP8o&feature=youtu.be>

Elie Spitz, sermon: Jewish vitality emerges from communal conversation on what really matters. The Torah's laws and narratives are the foundation of Jewish engagement, stretching us to interpret and find meaning. <https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/ki-tetzei/>

Arthur Green, *Judaism's Ten Best Ideas*:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CFF8AB3D8C8BBDC> (also a worthwhile book, published by Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014)

Essay:

Religion in a Free Society,” by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

http://gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/HESCHEL_ON_RELIGION.pdf

Book:

Rabbi Harold Kushner, *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life* (NY: Knopf, 2015).

Week 1: Values: Priorities for Character Development



The Jewish tradition clarifies values in order to instill those positive qualities into how we behave, defining our personal character and enabling goodness and holiness. Among the core values in Judaism are gratitude, humility, self-discipline, service, wonder, patience, compassion, and justice. The holidays are meant to convey these values and to offer a setting for self-examination and implementation. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, for instance, we are prompted to reflect on how we have fallen short of our best selves and to ask how we could improve. Each of the forty-nine days between the second night of Passover and the holyday of Shavuot focuses on a facet of personality to prepare ourselves for “the receiving of Torah.” Shabbat conveys that all people and living creatures are entitled to the dignity of rest and interpersonal connection and that our self-worth transcends our material worth. Religion offers a vocabulary for improving our character, with such words as grace (receiving more than deserved); sin (falling short of our expectation of goodness); and repentance (the capacity to make amends and change). In the Jewish tradition, there is a whole discipline, called *mussar*, for consciously developing our inner life and how we treat others.

Holiness as the Goal:

The core charge to the Israelites in the Torah is “You shall be to me a nation of priests, a holy people” (Exodus 19:6). The word *kadosh*, “holy,” is a religious term. God declares the Sabbath day as holy, the first time that the word is used in the Bible (Genesis 2:3). Time is potentially holy as a three-step process: set apart from the rest of the work week, enabling the experience of wholeness, and elevation toward a Divine perspective and embrace. Likewise, the Hebrew term for

marriage is *kiddushin* (the same three-stem root). Here too marriage entails the choosing of a mate from all the many people in the world and with that commitment finding wholeness and ideally an elevation toward a larger than an individual's life perspective. A "priest" in the Torah served as a bridge between God and the people. A holy people is expected to make accessible the moral expectations of a God for whom human behavior matters.

Commenting on the verse from Exodus, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes:

"God as Creator of the world, cares for all people. Israel has no monopoly on God. Israel, however, does have a special relationship to God. This is true not only when the rest of the world is pagan, but will also be true in the future, even after all the nations will have turned to God. The notion that the people Israel have been chosen is not a claim of superiority. The Bible never hesitates to chronicle and condemn the Israelites' shortcomings and God's disappointment with them. To speak of Israel as God's Chosen People is a historical truth (it is through Israel that the Bible and the notion of ethical monotheism came into the world) and an assertion of divine power to select any people as the bearers of that revelation. An additional dimension of in the notion of chosenness is that God's Torah belongs to an entire people, not only to professional clergy or an intellectual elite." (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*. NY: RA/USCJ, 2001, pp. 437-438)



Reflection: What does it mean to you to be part of a "Holy People?" In what ways does this charge answer the question of "Why" be Jewish?

What Does God Expect of Us?

To uncover the core values of Judaism that emerge from that "why," let us examine what the prophets and sages said were God's key demands. These first two paragraphs are taken from Moses' farewell addresses to the people. The aged leader

prepares the Israelites for their life in the Promised Land, where he will not physically join them.

שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד.

וְאָהַבְתָּ, אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מַאֲדְךָ.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם--עַל-לִבְבְּךָ.

וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ, וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבִלְכֻתְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.

וְקָשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת, עַל-יָדְךָ; וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת, בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.

וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

1. "Hear O' Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is one. And you shall love YHVH your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recall them when you stay at home and when you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. Bind them as a sign on your arm and your forehead and inscribe them on the doorposts of your home and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9)

2. "And now, Israel, what does YHVH your God expect of you? Only that you revere YHVH your God, so that you walk in God's ways, love God, and serve YHVH your God with all your heart and soul. You must keep YHVH's commandments and laws, which I charge you with today, for your good. Become aware that the heavens in their expansiveness belong to the Lord your God, as well as the earth and all that is on it. And yet, YHVH chose to love your ancestors, so that you, their lineal descendants, are chosen from among all peoples even now. Therefore, cut away the thickening from around your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For YHVH your God is supreme...who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow and befriends the stranger, providing food and clothing. So, you too must befriend

the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”
(Deuteronomy 10:12-19)

The following selection is from the prophet Micah (6:8), who preached in the south of Judea over 2700 years ago. The sages would identify these words as an exemplary summation of God’s expectations:

הָגִיד לְךָ אָדָם, מַה-טוֹב ; וּמָה- יי דוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ, כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט
וְהַצָּנֵעַ לָכֶת, עִם-אֱלֹקֶיךָ.

3. “[God] has told you, O human, what is good, and what YHWH requires of you: Only do justice; and to love goodness; and to walk modestly with your God.”

Hillel and Shammai are the first of many pairs of rabbis who would debate each other on Jewish Law. They lived in Israel in the first century of the Common Era. An example of their difference emerges in considering their views on the lighting of Hanukkah candles (Talmud, *Shabbat* 21b). Shammai held that we should light all eight candles the first night, representing the physical miracle of a full craft of oil that would diminish each day but keep burning. Hillel, in contrast, emphasized that the candles presented our response to the miracle, which each night grows in wonder so that on the final night all the flames are burning. In this case, as was true for most (but not all) of their disputes, Hillel prevailed. A literal orientation versus a greater focus on the underlying message comes into play in the following story of Shammai and Hillel’s responses to a convert:

4. A prospective convert to Judaism stated that he would accept Judaism only if a rabbi would teach him the entire Torah while he, the questioner, stood on one foot. He approached Shammai, who took the man’s request as mockery for it was impossible to do what was asked, and therefore chased him away with a stick. The man then asked Hillel, who responded: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this- go and study it!”
(Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a)



Some reflections on these texts:

The first text is known as “The Shema”: What does it mean to love God? What is the connection between such a feeling and the various rituals that follow? What are the values in this paragraph that we are expected to teach our children?

Second text: What is “the thickening from around your heart?” How does such “thickening” impede character? How might it be removed?

In Micah’s three-point summary of expectations, what does it mean to “walk modestly with your God?” How is that actualized? What prevents us from doing so?

In the story from the Talmud, why does it matter that the questioner was a prospective convert? In what ways did Shammai and Hillel hear the question differently? What are Hillel’s expectations of the prospective convert?

Questions at the End of Life

Judaism’s teachings on what we are asked at the end of life also indicate priorities. The following is the third-century, Babylonian-sage Rava’s description of our final accounting: When they escort a person to judgment, the [Heavenly Tribunal] asks:

“Were you honest in your business dealings?

Did you set aside time for Torah study?

Did you devote yourself to your family?

Did you live with hope in a redeemed world?”

(Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a)



For reflection: Why does Rava begin with business dealings? What does it mean to live with hope in a redeemed world? What would it take for the world to become better? Is such improvement realistic?

Character Development Includes Learning to Pause

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, a 19th century sage, said, "If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?" By better he meant the ability to live with those attributes that define the kind of person we aspire to be. Toward that end, Jewish rituals cultivate the capacity to pause before acting. We are prompted to pause before we start the day with formulaic words of gratitude to appreciate the gift of life. We have a blessing to pause before we take a bite to express gratitude in order to elevate our feeding into dining. Learning to pause before we respond allows us to guard from venting negative emotion that causes hurt, rather than reflecting on what we would thoughtfully want to say. A pause enables self-control and choice, rather than acting mindlessly from instinct or habit.

Eulogy Values

Columnist David Brooks has authored *The Road to Character*, in which he looks at inspirational figures who identified their flaws and turned them into strengths. In the following five-minute Ted Talk, he focuses on the difference between building a workplace resume and character traits: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MILWTeApqIM>. Eulogy traits include both our *middot*, personal attributes, and where we have invested our time.



Reflection: What did Brooks learn from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik about the two types of Adam? Why do we tend to invest more attention in daily life to resume building than eulogy value making? How could we more consciously invest in eulogy values?

Life's Curriculum:

Up close each of us is incomplete, whether in our ability to act wisely or to feel content. There are gaps between our expectations and the reality on the ground. And yet, life's satisfaction emerges from clarifying expectations and making progress toward those achievements. Alan Morinis, a contemporary teacher of Mussar, says that our weaknesses are

our curriculum. Religious services are designed as a time for reflection to digest our week, to reflect on our relationships, and to identify personal weaknesses that need addressing. Elie Wiesel pointed out that a sage in our tradition is called a *talmid chacham*, a student of wisdom. Wisdom emerges from a mindset of perpetual learning. *Hitlamdut* is the Hebrew word for an inquisitiveness that opens us to draw insight from every situation and each person. In the words of Ben Zoma, the second century, Israeli sage, “Who is wise? The one who learns from each person” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1).



Leading a Life of Significance

Who has modeled for you the values of a life well lived? Describe. What are the core values that are your guiding lights of goodness? When do you reflect on how you could be more whole?

For Further Study:

Videos: Sermon by Rabbi Spitz: A twelve-minute talk in honor of Hal and Rose Kravitz’s 61st wedding anniversary:

<https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/mattot-masei-72-stations-to-paradise/>

For Reflection: Why did Adam and Eve in the story “Paradise” choose to return home? In what ways do the struggles of life add content to relationships?

David Brooks, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pcZ4-etOrc> An hour conversation with Katie Couric on “The Road to Character.”

Reflection: What is one nugget that you take away from this conversation.

Books:

Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2008)

Ira Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Road of Mussar* (New York: Aviv Press, 2013)

Ron Wolfson, *The Seven Questions You are Asked in Heaven: Reviewing and Renewing Your Life on Earth* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009).

Week 2: Extended Family: A Chosen People



Many Jews say, "I am proud of being Jewish, but I am not religious." In that sense, Judaism is quite different than Christianity for Judaism is the saga of an extended family in relationship with God. For many Jews the belonging to our distinctive people defines core identity even if they are not inclined to pray or doubt the existence of God. At the same time, Judaism's abiding narrative is that of a people living in relationship with God. Our spiritual identity is marked by group moments: we emerged as a slave clan from Egypt under Moses' leadership and we stood shoulder-to-shoulder at Mount Sinai as God addressed us collectively. Imbedded in that history is a spiritual calling. The prophet Isaiah repeatedly challenged the Israelites to serve as "a light unto the nations" (42:6; 49:6; 60:3). Earlier, before the giving of the Ten Commandments, God had said to the Israelites,

וַעֲתָהּ, אִם-שְׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי, וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם, אֶת-בְּרִיתִי--וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֹגֵלָה
מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים, כִּי-לִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ.

וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מְמֻלָּכֶת כֹּהֲנִים, וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ : אֵלֶּה, הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר,
אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"Now then, if you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples for all the earth is Mine. You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).



Reflection: What is a favorite Jewish object in your possession? What is its story and significance to you? How does it link with belonging to a "religious people?"

“Chosen people,” choosing, or both?

Chosen is a central concept in Jewish history and is problematic for we who live in an open society. As the Catholic Church proclaimed in 1965 of Judaism- “there are many paths to God”- so I too affirm the integrity and spiritual wisdom of other faiths. And yet, the concept of chosen is part of the package of Jewish identity and a source of trouble. In describing the covenant entered into at Mount Sinai, there are two very different rabbinic imaginings as to what took place:

1. When God offered to give the Torah to Israel, God offered the Torah not to Israel alone, but to all the nations.

First God went to the descendants of Esau and said to them: “Will you accept the Torah?”

They responded, “What is written in it?”

God said to them, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).

They replied, “Master of the Universe, the essence of their father [Esau] is a murderer, as it is said, ‘...but the hands are the hands of Esau’ (Genesis 27:22), and his father promised him the sword alone: ‘By the sword you shall live’ (Genesis 27:22). We are not able to accept the Torah.”

God went to the descendants of Ammon and Moab and said to them: “Will you accept the Torah?”

They said: “What is written in it?”

God replied: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:13).

They said: “Master of the Universe, the very essence of those people comes only from adultery, as it is said, ‘Thus were the two daughters of Lot pregnant from their father’ (Genesis 19:36). We are not able to accept the Torah.”

God went to the descendants of Ishmael and said to them: “Will you accept the Torah?”

They said, “What is written in it?”

God answered, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:13).

They said: “Master of the Universe, the very essence of those people is only from stealing and robbery, as it is said, ‘And he shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against everyone and

everyone's hand against him' (Genesis 16:12). We are not able to accept the Torah." There was no nation that God did not approach and ask if it wanted to accept the Torah.

Afterwards, God came to Israel. They said to him: "We will do and we will obey" (Exodus 24:7).

Midrash Sifrei, Deuteronomy 33:2

2. The Torah tells us that prior to the revelation at Sinai, the people of Israel "stood beneath the mountain" (Exodus 19:17). How does one stand beneath a mountain? The Talmud interprets this to mean that "G-d held the mountain over them like a jar and said to them: If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here shall be your grave."

Talmud, *Shabbat* 88a



Reflection: What does it mean to you to be a "nation of priests, a holy people?"

The first story is one of choosing and the second is of a "shot-gun wedding." For many of us, our Judaism feels like a duty, the memory of family members hanging over us like that mountain. And yet, Judaism is also a choice. To what extent does it feel like an obligation to maintain Judaism? Explain. In what ways is it a choice? How do these two different orientations factor into your own Jewish commitment as a discomfort or as a draw?

***Video:** "Are Jews a Chosen People?"

<https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/pinchas-are-jews-a-chosen-people/> Consider watching this sermon in which I focus on the blessing recited before a Torah reading, "that You have chosen us from among all the peoples and given to us Torah." What is the meaning of that blessing for you? How does it add significance to your life?

Anti-Semitism: Glue or an Impediment?



Reflection: Please consider viewing this short clip of Woody Allen from *Annie Hall* and his take on “Easter Dinner”-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8TSvMx2wPI>. Some questions: Do you find it amusing? If so, why? Have you ever felt yourself in a similar situation? Explain

Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* addresses God, “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can’t You choose someone else?” and he then invites a stranger to his home for a meal. In Joseph Telushkin and Dennis Prager’s *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism* (New York: Touchstone, 2003), they conclude that the duty to collectively aspire to high moral ideals is the source of resentment and anti-Semitism.

Elie Wiesel said that anti-Semitism is largely irrational and not subject to explanation. He points to the following line in the Torah as the first expression of that dangerous distrust: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous and powerful for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they many join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.’ So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor....” (Exodus 1:8-11)



Reflection: Have you ever experienced anti-Semitism? Describe and how does that event(s) impact on your identity? What do you see as the reasons for anti-Semitism? To what degree has anti-Semitism held the Jews together as a people? What is your guidance for the Jewish people in a world without anti-Semitism?

Judaism at Its Best:

We Jews have survived, in the face of both suffering and celebration, as a dynamic, intensely-identified people across centuries and continents. When the Torah describes the seven nations that occupied the Land of Israel at the time of Joshua's conquest, those nations are now gone. Although peoples in modern Egypt and Greece value their past, their spoken language and faith differ greatly. When we even examine an English text such as the Magna Carta of 1215 on display in the British Museum, we become aware of how hard it is to read, because the written language has changed so much. And yet, when a bar or bat mitzvah chants from the Torah or haftarah, the words look the same across time and retain significance. That continuity is worth celebrating.

Judaism is composed of the native born and those adopted into the family. Just as a parent loves adopted children equally with biological offspring, so Jews who join the Jewish people are fully Jewish and beloved. Already in the 12th century, Maimonides responded to the following question from a former priest, Obadiah: "When I chant the Amidah prayer, it begins 'God and God of my ancestors.' Should I recite this line?" And Maimonides answered, "Yes. You are fully a member of the Jewish people. Your spiritual ancestors are Abraham and Sarah." And I would add that in the Bible, Abraham and Sarah were Jews by choice, as was Joseph's wife, Osnat; Moses wife, Zipporah; and Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David. A convert brings the richness of his or her familial past to expand and deepen the Judaism of his or her own family. Currently, one in six American Jews was brought up in another faith. In many cases, there are also non-Jews in our families. When preaching one rabbi friend even refrains from saying "being Jewish," to "doing Jewish" so as to expand inclusiveness. We as an extended family are enriched by our diversity and shared commitment.



Leading a Life of Significance Reflection: Why do you believe that Judaism has survived across the generations amidst dispersion? What duties emerge for you as a result of your Jewish belonging? What is

gained by belonging to a group with a higher purpose?

For further study:

Song: Debbie Friedman's "Wherever you go there is always someone Jewish"-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHu87vWimTg>

Videos:

- Elie Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, explaining his mission as a witness:
<http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/?id=2028>;
- Steven Spielberg's 2016 Harvard Commencement Speech, emphasizing that anti-Semitism endures:
<http://mideasttruth.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=12053>
- Dennis Prager, "Are the Jews the Chosen People,"
<http://www.dennisprager.com/are-the-jews-the-chosen-people/>

Book:

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's* (1949, reprinted in 1995 by Jewish Lights Publishing)- a beautiful eulogy for Eastern European Jewry and its values of piety.

Week 3: Torah: Sacred Text



Torah is a “sacred document” as our people’s inspired effort to see the world through God’s eyes. Non-Orthodox rabbis identify the Torah’s origins as a collection of oral traditions that were woven together by a series of editors. In that light, the Torah’s ideas have both a historical context and transcend place and time. The Five Books of Moses distills the wisdom of our people with precisely chosen words, stories, and laws. Any sentence, let alone any *parashah* (weekly reading), warrants extensive analysis. And so we start from the beginning, namely with the creation story.

Creation

The Torah’s creation story conveys core values, rather than a scientific description of how the world emerged. Some of the lessons of the opening chapter of Genesis are that the world has a Creator, implying a purpose and unity, and that the world is foundationally good and ordered. Imbedded in that description is a statement on the uniqueness of humanity, namely that we were created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. The text reads as follows:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים, נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ; וַיִּרְדּוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף
הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ, וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ, הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה,
בָּרָא אֹתָם.

וַיִּבְרָךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹקִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ,
וּכְבִּשְׁהָ; וַיִּרְדּוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם, וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הָרֹמֶשֶׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים, הִנֵּה נִתְּנִי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-
הָאָרֶץ, וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בּו פְּרִי-עֵץ, זֶרַע זֶרַע: לָכֶם יִהְיֶה, לְאֹכְלָהּ.

וּלְכָל-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וּלְכָל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל רֹמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ נִפְשׁ
חַיָּה, אֶת-כָּל-יֶרֶק עֹשֶׂב, לְאָכְלָהּ; וַיְהִי-כֵן.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וַהֲנֵה טוֹב מְאֹד; וַיְהִי-עָרֵב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר, יוֹם
הַשְּׁשִׁי.

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in the Divine image, in the image of God were they created; male and female were they created. God blessed them and said to them,

"Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."...God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and morning, the sixth day.
Genesis 1:26-31

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg analyzes the implications of "created in the image of God," as follows:

"Being in the image of God means that each human being is born with three intrinsic dignities- infinite value, equality and uniqueness. These dignities are mine, yours, and everybody's. They are independent of any other factor, such as heritage, status, wealth, or health.

"Since every human being is an image of God, there is no preferred image- God is neither white nor black; male nor female; Jew or non-Jew. Then all people should be treated as if they are equal."



Reflection: If you saw yourself as "created in the image of God," what would that mean as to how you saw yourself and the actions that might ensue? In what sense is this concept a "religious" teaching?

Rashi's Opening Commentary to Torah

The most influential commentator of the Torah is Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhaki, 1040-1105). A French vintner and educator, Rashi drew selectively from past rabbinic writings and added concise comments to the whole of Torah and most of the Talmud. In 1475, Rashi's commentary to the Torah was the first Hebrew book printed. His influence grew and has endured for traditional students of the Biblical text. His opening commentary to Genesis, which follows, reveals his worldview and understanding of the nature of the Torah.

In the beginning... Rabbi Isaac said, The Torah which is the Law book of Israel should have begun with the verse, "This month shall be unto you the first of the months" (Exodus 12:1), which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it begins with the account of Creation? Because the thought expressed in the text, "He declared to His people the strength of His works in order that he might give them the heritage of the nations" (Psalm 109:6). For should the people of the world say to Israel, "You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan," Israel may reply to them, "All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed by He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When he willed He gave it to them and when He will He took it from them and gave it to us" (*Yalkut*, Exodus 12:2).



Reflections: Rashi lived during the First Crusade (1095), initiating the religiously fueled quest to recapture the Holy Land for Christianity. How did Rashi view the authority of Bible? What does his comment say about the goals of Torah as a religious text? What might you say in response?

Torah as a Series of Covenantal Moments

A covenant establishes an enduring relationship. While a contract is limited to the terms of the writing, a covenant is a

commitment that encompasses more than can be put into writing. A wedding, for instance, establishes a covenant between two people to remain faithful and caring for each other. That public pledge is transformational. Throughout the Torah, there are a series of such covenantal moments, which define God's relationship to both the whole of humanity and to the Jewish people. Consider the following accounts:

Rainbow Connection: Covenant with Noah

God said to Noah, "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you – birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well – all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God further said, "This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come: I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and earth."

(Genesis 9:8-13)

Lech Lecha: Covenant with Abraham

וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֲרָצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ,
אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ.

וְאָעֲשֶׂהָ, לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְאַבְרָכְךָ, וְאַגְדִּלָּה שְׁמִי; וְהָיָה, בְּרָכָה.

וְאַבְרָכָה, מְבָרְכֶיךָ, וּמְקַלְלֶךָ, אֶאָר; וְנִבְרָכוּ בְּךָ, כָּל מְשִׁפְחַת הָאָדָמָה.

God said to Abram: "Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

(Genesis 12:1-3)

Revelation at Sinai: Covenant with the Jewish People

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. Moses went up to God and YHVH called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.” Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that God had commanded him. All the people answered as one, saying “All that YHVH has spoken we will do!”

(*Exodus 19:1-8*)



Reflections:

The Covenant of the Rainbow: What does this universal covenant say about the nature of God’s relationship with creation?

God’s covenant with Abraham: What is God’s promise to Abraham and expectations of him? What does it mean “and you shall be a blessing?”

God’s covenant at Mount Sinai: Why did God speak to the entire people rather than just to Moses or the leaders? What is God’s promise and expectations of this covenant? What does belonging to a covenantal people mean for you in your life?

An Expanse of Time:

The word “Torah” is also used to refer to the whole of Hebrew Scripture, known in Hebrew as *Tanakh*- standing as an

acronym for three books: *Torah* (the Five Books of Moses) *Nevi'im* (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (latter writings). From Abraham to the destruction of the First Temple is an expanse of close to 1500 years, during which many stories and diverse views on God and Israel unfold. Books like Job, for instance, challenge God's justice and others like Psalms present love poems to God. I share below a timetable just to put into perspective the broad sweep of Hebrew Scripture.

The Prophets:

Tanakh presents prophets chastising the people for their moral failings as a breach of God's covenant and comforting them with the assurance that God welcomes repentance. The rabbis drew the following selection from Isaiah for reading on Yom Kippur:

Is this the Fast I have Chosen?

Shout it aloud, do not hold back!
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

For day after day they seek Me out;
they seem eager to know My ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not
forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come
near them.

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen it? Why
have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed?'
Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit
all your workers! Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and
in striking each other with wicked fists! You cannot fast as you
do today and expect your voice to be heard on high!

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,

Only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to YHVH?

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.

Isaiah 58:1-8



Reflections: Why did the Jewish people preserve such chastisements as sacred text? Is the prophet saying that God does not want the people to fast? In contemporary terms of a marriage, what is the role of a symbolic gift, such as the bringing of flowers? What is the baseline of faithfulness that God expects? Do we have contemporary prophets? Cite an example of such a person that moves you.

“Torah” as Rabbinic literature

“Torah” is also used more broadly to refer to the whole of rabbinic literature, which encompasses the Talmud. The Talmud contains the discussions of the rabbis across 700 years on how to apply the rules of the Five Books of Moses, plus long-standing practices, to the daily lives of the Jewish people. Pyramid in form, the authoritative texts on how to live as a Jew begin with the Torah at the apex, lower down is the Talmud, and beneath are the ongoing debates on how to apply Jewish values and precedent to new challenges. Read the following selection of Talmud to glean how debate has an honored place in the Jewish tradition and how the determinations of law were based on the merits of an argument.

Talmud: The Oven of Akhnai

This colorful story from the Talmud presents a debate over a new technology, the oven of Akhnai, which by mixing clay coils and sand increased the heat of the oven potentially preventing ritual taint by a creature, such as a lizard, caught inside. A majority vote by the sages determined legal outcome. In this case, Rabbi Eliezer was known for his aristocratic bearing and wealth. His positions usually carried the vote. Rabbi Joshua, in contrast, had a curved spine and made coal, a lowly profession. And yet, Rabbi Yehoshua would speak for his colleagues and even challenge a voice from Heaven. Listen in:

It was taught: On that day [of the debate regarding the ritual purity of an oven] Rabbi Eliezer advanced every legal argument in the world, but they [the other rabbis] didn't accept his [lenient] view. He said to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, let the carob tree prove it" – the carob tree was uprooted from its place by one hundred cubits (some say, 400 cubits!). They replied to him, "You cannot bring proof from a carob tree!" He said to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, let this stream of water prove it" – the water flowed backwards. They replied to him, "You can't prove it with a stream of water!"

He [Rabbi Eliezer] retorted to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, let the walls of the study hall prove it" – the study house walls started to fall until Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them: "If Scholars of Torah are arguing with each other – what is your part in this?" They didn't fall out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, but they did not straighten upright from respect for Rabbi Eliezer, and they remain thus. [Rabbi Eliezer] came back and said, "If the halakhah is according to my view, let Heaven prove it!" A divine voice called out, "What's between you and Rabbi Eliezer, with whom the law accords in each case!" Rabbi Yehoshua stood up on his feet and declared, "It is not in heaven!" (Deuteronomy 30:12)

What "is not in heaven?" Rabby Yirmiyah says, since

the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we no longer listen to heavenly voices, for it says, “to follow the majority” (Exodus 23)

Rabbi Natan found Elijah and asked him, “What did the Holy One do at that moment?” He replied, “[God] laughed and said, “My children have defeated me, My children have defeated me!” (*Bava Metziah* 59b)



Reflections: Why did God laugh? What does it say about Judaism that the rabbis will determine Jewish interpretation of Scripture, rather than rely on prophecy or supernatural signs?

*Consider watching the following sermon by Rabbi Spitz on the need to interpret text, using the example of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”-

<https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/the-torah-alone/>

A Final Word on “Torah.”

The weave of the laws and narratives of the Torah is akin to a letter from a loving, Divine parent. Recorded over generations by our ancestors, the text of Torah invites ongoing interpretation. New cultural and social understandings provide novel questions, a shifting of priorities, and extract fresh understandings of the Torah’s meaning. Torah places our attention on the intention to elevate our lives toward holiness.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, contemporary neo-mystic and artist, tells the story of bringing his preschoolers into the sanctuary and standing with them before the ark. He asked, “What do you think is behind those curtains?” He delighted in the answers, particularly the fourth.

One child said, “nothing.”

Another added, “just some old Torah.”

A third, “a car.”

And a fourth with wide eyes exclaimed, “a large mirror.”

Each of the responses presents a perspective of Jews today. For some, there is nothing behind the curtains or it is just some “old Torah.” The parchment for them has little value, because religious ceremonies have failed to touch them or its ideas were presented so poorly that they feel irrelevant. The “car” conveys that what we see on television often becomes our reality and may lead to the skewed perspective, that only material objects are real and of value. And then that fourth answer: Torah at its best is a giant mirror, holding up ourselves both individually and communally for a revealing, inquiring look: What do you see and is this your best self? To draw wisdom from the Torah is to join the collective conversations of the generations before us on how to lead a holy life and with humility and courage wrestle with its applicability to our own lives.



Closing reflection: With which Biblical character as you most identified? Why? In what ways does having a sacred literature inform meaning in your life?

For Further study:

Bradley Shavit Artson, *Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Visions, and Dreams* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2001)- fine collection of Torah commentaries for our time.

Reuven Hammer, *The Torah Revolution: Fourteen Truths that Changed the World* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2015)

Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) Well-written description of the evolving understanding of how the oral traditions were woven into the Torah text.

Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz, *Swimming in the Sea of the Talmud: Lessons for Everyday Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998)- Excerpts from the Talmud conveying core concepts with a useful commentary.

Week 4: Worship Texts



In Hebrew the word for worship is *avodah*, meaning “service.” In the account of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses famously says to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” but in God’s Biblical instructions there is an additional Hebrew word, *v’yavduney*: “Let my people go and they will serve me” (Exodus 7:16). The Exodus replaced the degradation of slaving as an object that belongs to another person into the universal dignity of serving as a vessel of the Divine. The Torah repeatedly warns against idol worship. Such forbidden practice goes beyond bowing down to a stone or a carved figure. Idolatry is treating a means as the ultimate goal. Obsessing over work, money, power, or the latest videogame are forms of idolatry. Worship is a response to seeing life in all its parts as a Divine gift, acts that place the ultimate good as our ultimate focus.

The threefold “vet”- values as priorities, extended family belonging, and Torah as inspired wisdom- offers a worldview. Worship is a response. In the Jewish tradition, deeds of Divine service are called *mitzvot*, Divine expectations. There are two kinds of *mitzvot*, expressions of our closeness to God [*bein adam l’Makom*] and tending to the needs of others [*bein adam l’havaro*]. Communal prayer serves to educate and prompt appreciation for what we might otherwise take for granted. Such proscribed words express praise or gratitude, as well as the yearning for forgiveness, health, or a world at peace. When we write a check for *tzedakah* (charity) or march on behalf of a worthy cause, those are also forms of worship. The Jewish calendar contains sacred days, including the weekly Sabbath. The holidays and other rituals are diverse and complimentary, evoking the range of human emotion. To experience the holidays for one year is to encounter the sweep of Jewish

history. Observing the holidays is to pause from the conveyor belt of time in order to savor moments of family, community, God, and our selves.

Worship is placing our attention on what is greater than us. This is simultaneously easy and hard. For many of us, our views of God are unclear and even uncomfortable due to off-putting certainties of a controlling God held by many “believers” around us. The vocabulary of prayer, coupled with the challenge of Hebrew, may feel off awkward, such as referring to God as a King. Prayer, like Torah, or the performance of a ritual such as lighting Shabbat candles needs explanation and personalization. The words on the page or traditions onto themselves are analogous to tealeaves. There is little satisfaction in licking a dry tealeaf. To craft a soothing and uplifting cup of tea requires combining the tealeaf with hot water in a vessel, coupled with brewing time. By analogy as to how ritual becomes uplifting, our own life experience is the hot water and the vessel is focused attention. Patience is required to let the words and meaning of an action sink in to become our own expression, enabling both comfort and transcendence.

Personal Prayer: Letters to [and from] God

In most cases, we monitor what we say based on the reactions that we seek. Even when speaking with a therapist, whom we pay dearly to hear our dark secrets, we are on guard because we want acceptance. In contrast, when we let go of theological analysis and speak with God as if God is listening, we imagine that God knows us, holds our confidences, and will still love us. Our words to God are distinctly unfiltered, revealing to ourselves what we would otherwise ignore. This is the potential power of personal prayer: honest self-expression.



Reflection: By putting our words into writing, we externalize what might otherwise float within as emotions or elusive thoughts. Writing also allows us to reread and reflect. To enhance your appreciation for the potential power of prayer, consider writing a letter to God. We have a tradition of doing so at the Western Wall in

Jerusalem and then slipping that note between the cracks of the massive stones. Yet, we need not be in Jerusalem to encounter God. God's mailbox is accessible wherever we open our heart.

Letters to "and from" God: Choose a set time to write, such as ten minutes, and begin: Dear God... write your private letter openly, allowing the words to flow spontaneously. After completing your letter, reread what you have written and pause to become aware of what emerged, in particular consider what surprised you about your letter. Now, begin a second letter as if God was answering you, an act of Divine empathy. Set aside an equivalent time as you gave for the first letter. Begin: Dear (and fill in your name) and allow the words to emerge unselfconsciously. Reread, becoming aware of the nature and wisdom of the response. Some questions to consider: What did you learn? How is writing to and from God the same and different than writing to a friend?

Proscribed Prayers and Blessings

Judaism's traditional prayers are daily journeys toward a conversation with God. The central prayer is the *amidah*, the standing prayer, which presents us as a communal representative coming before God the Sovereign. Our petitions ask God to complete creation, enabling a world of peace. The prayers before the *amidah* prepare us by acknowledging our physicality (*birchot ha'shahar*); opening us emotionally with psalms (*pesukei d'zimra*); and evoking our relationship with God, by the chanting of the Shema, which is composed of three paragraphs from the Torah, plus three surrounding blessings acknowledging God as Creator, Teacher, and Redeemer. The following are a few selections from the daily prayers as tastes of traditional liturgy (English based on *Siddur Lev Shalem*):

Ahavat Olam (recited just before the Shema):

You have loved us deeply, *Adonai* our God, and showered us with boundless compassion. *Avinu Malkeinu*, for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You and to whom You taught the laws of life, so may You be gracious to us and instruct us. Kind creator have compassion for us, open our hearts so that we may

understand and, with love, discern, hear and study, observe, perform, and fulfill all the teaching of Your Torah with love. Enlighten our eyes with Your Torah, attach our hearts to your *mitzvot*; unify our hearts to love and revere Your name so that we never lose hope. As we trust in Your great, holy-awe inspiring name, we will delight and rejoice in your deliverance.

Sim Shalom [among the closing words of the *Amidah*]

Grant peace to the world, goodness, and blessing, grace, love, and compassion, for us and for all the people Israel. Bless us, our creator united as one with the light of Your presence; by that light, *Adonai* our God, You have given us a guide to life, the love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life, and peace. May it please You to bless Your people Israel at every season and at all times with Your gift of peace. Blessed are You, *Adonai*, who blesses your people Israel [and the whole of creation] with peace.

Aleinu [among the closing prayers]

It is for us to praise the ruler of all, to acclaim the Creator, who has not made us merely a nation, nor formed us all earthly families, nor given us an ordinary destiny. And so we bow, acknowledging the supreme sovereign, the Holy One, who is praised- who spreads out the heavens and establishes the earth, whose glory abides in the highest heavens, and whose powerful presence resides in the highest heights. This is our God, none else; ours is the true sovereign, there is no other. As is written in the Torah: “Know this day and take it to heart, that *Adonai* is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.”



Reflection: In reciting the three prayers above, what phrase(s) resonated for you? What is the benefit of praying in the plural, which is usually the format of Jewish communal prayer? When, if at all, do you pray with your own words and what is gained? Do you have a favorite prayer? What is it and what associations does it have for you?

Ritual

Rituals are words or actions that add to our words or express more than words. Many prayers have ritual moves, such as the steps and bows of the *Amidah*, which convey our entrance before God's throne. Placing our hands on our children's heads as we bless them on Friday night suggests the actions of the Priests of old in blessing the people. Putting on a *talit* (a prayer shawl) is both a directive of the Torah as a symbol of the commandments and suggestive of God's protective embrace. Jewish rituals guide us from the first words of gratitude that we recite when we open our eyes (*modeh ani*) to the last words traditionally recited before death (*Shema*). Each of the holidays has distinctive rituals, from waving the lulav on Sukkot, lighting candles for Hanukkah, or eating matzah on Passover. Rituals of the holidays are performative acts, helping to define the message and meaning of the sacred day.

Sacred Days

The following three quotes focus on the nature of Jewish holydays.

"Festivals act as lodging for travelers making their way through the year. These festival inns are special accommodations not solely for rest or retreat from the world, but also places to halt and take our bearings to make sure we are traveling and not going around in circles."

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

The Jewish Holidays (1993)

"How does one keep alive that incredible feeling of encountering God at Sinai and feeling more human, more significant than you ever did before? One of the ways the Torah offers us is the setting aside of special days when ordinary concerns are transcended so that our souls are free to concentrate on the eternal, even as married couples clear a day to mark their wedding anniversary, to recapture the way they felt about each other and what they promised each other on their wedding day,

with a concentration that their busy lives otherwise don't afford them."

Rabbi Harold Kushner

To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking (1984)

"The Jewish religion affirms the life that is here and now. At the same time, Jewish tradition insists that the final goal of paradise regained is equally worthy of our loyalty and effort. Judaism is the Jewish way to get humanity from the world as it is now to the world of final perfection. To get from here to there, you need both the goal and a process to keep you going over the long haul of history. In Judaism, the holidays supply both.

"In the face of widespread evil and suffering, the holy days teach the central idea of redemption. They keep the idea real by restaging the great events of Jewish history that validate hope. In their variety, the holidays incorporate rich living experiences that sustain the human capacity to hold steadfast on course.

"Sacred days give sustenance to spiritual life and a dimension of depth to physical life. The holy days provide a record of the struggle to be faithful to the covenant. While chronicling history, they distill the lessons learned along the way. And, because they are popular, the holidays make the dream and the process of its realization the possession of the entire people."

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg

The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays (1933)

[Selections above are drawn from Rabbi Adam Greenwald's *While Standing on One Foot*]



Reflection: The only holyday presented in the Ten Commandments is the Sabbath. Why is the Sabbath, the 4th command, so central to Judaism? How do you observe of the Sabbath and what has this ritual added to your life? What more would you want to do to enhance "a day set apart?"

*Consider watching this video that links ritual with social action in the Jewish tradition-

<https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/what-is-the-link-between-the-command-open-your-hand-and-the-three-pilgrimage-holidays/>

For discussion: What part of the wedding ceremony most consistently moves you? What is your favorite Jewish holyday? Explain its meaning and values for you.



Closing reflection: In what ways does worship enhance your life? What is your favorite prayer? Say more about it.

For further study:

Video on the religious life: The following is a half-hour conversation with Abraham Joshua Heschel filmed a few weeks before his death in 1972, responding to questions of core belief: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEKX9xcRCho>

Books:

On the siddur: Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer* (New York: Schocken, 1995), uplifting guide to traditional prayer.

On the holidays: Michael Strassfield, *The Jewish Holidays* (NY: William Morrow, 2001), good overview of the holidays, with engaging sidebar of illuminating commentaries.

Jewish ritual observance:

Bradley Shavit Artson, *It's a Mitzvah: Step-by-Step to Jewish Living* (New York: Behrman House, 1995).

Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1979).

Week 5: Israel A Jewish National Home



For Jews, the land of Israel is Homeland: a land sworn to Abraham for his descendants and to Moses as the place that he shall lead the Israelites. When the Torah speaks of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, the land of Israel is consistently mentioned as part of the agreement. The story of the Jewish people began in Israel, was the setting for the Kings and the prophets, and for two thousand years of dispersion was an ongoing longing. The Passover seder and Yom Kippur fast would end with the shared chant, “Next year in Jerusalem.” That dream of a Jewish national home became reality in 1948. Fifty years before, Theodor Herzl at the First Zionist Conference proclaimed the need for a Jewish State and became known for his line, “If you will it, it is no dream.”

Support for the creation of the State grew as a result of the guilt over the Holocaust. Those horrific events, during which one out of every three Jews in the world was murdered, underscored the need for a Jewish refuge. And yet, the impetus for that State is far more expansive and durable. For more than 2,000 years, Jews have prayed daily facing toward Jerusalem. Each meal was concluded with the blessing, “Praised are You who rebuilds Jerusalem.” The longing for the Promised Land was already reflected in Psalm 137, which described the aftermath of the first expulsion in 586 BCE by the Babylonians:

By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Among the weeping willows, we hung our harps.
Our captors demanded that we sing a song,
They would say: “Sing us a song of Zion!”
How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?
If I forget you Jerusalem, let me forget my right hand.

Consider the following Reggae recording, “By the Rivers of Babylon” by Jimmy Cliff:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdDCu-x8ew8>. And

“Jerusalem,” by Matisyahu:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyWp1Je5HUU>.



Reflection: In what ways is the Jewish longing for the Promised Land distinctive? How did that longing lead to the Jews return?

Ha-Tikvah, “Israel’s National Anthem,” conveys a fulfilled yearning.

Hebrew	Transliteration	English translation
כל עוד בלבב פנימה	<i>Kol ‘od balevav penimah</i>	As long as in the heart, within,
נפש יהודי הומיה	<i>Nefesh yehudi homiyah,</i>	A Jewish soul still yearns,
ולפאתי מזרח,	<i>Ul(e)fa’atei mizrach</i>	And onward, towards the
קדומה,	<i>kadimah,</i>	ends of the east,
עין לציון צופיה,	<i>‘Ayin letziyon tzofiyah;</i>	an eye still gazes toward Zion;
עוד לא אבדה	<i>‘Od lo avdah tikvateinu,</i>	Our hope is not yet lost,
תקוותנו,		
התקוה בת שנות	<i>Hatikvah bat sh(e)not</i>	The hope two thousand
אלפים,	<i>‘alpayim,</i>	years old,
להיות עם חפשי	<i>Lihyot ‘am chofshi</i>	To be a free nation in our
בארצנו,	<i>b(e)’artzeinu,</i>	land,
רץ ציון	<i>‘Eretz-Tziyon</i>	The land of Zion and
ירושלים.	<i>viy(e)rushalayim.</i>	Jerusalem.



Reflections: When you hear Israel's national anthem what feelings are evoked? What was and is the place of "hope" in Jewish life? What are your hopes for the Jewish State?

When reading the Declaration of the State of Israel, we have another window into Israel's formation as a modern State. Read by David Ben-Gurion on May 18, 1948, the final day of the British Mandate, there was much uncertainty how the Jewish State would survive due to a lack of armament and mighty armies arrayed against her. This bold Declaration surveys the Jewish past and looks forward with enduring pledges.

Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

Eretz-Yisrael was the birthplace of the Jewish People. Here their spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance, and gave of the world of the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the People kept faith with it throughout their Diaspora and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.

In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodor Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish People to national re-birth in its own country. This right was recognized in The Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations, which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between

the Jewish People and Eretz-Yisrael and to the right of the Jewish People to rebuild its national home.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people – the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe – was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Yisrael the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish People the status of a fully privileged member of the family of nations.

Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz-Yisrael, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom, and honest toil in their national homeland.

In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi wickedness. And, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Yisrael. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish People to establish their State is irrevocable.

This right is the natural right of the Jewish People to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

Accordingly, we members of the People's Council, representatives of the Jewish community of Eretz-Yisrael and of the Zionist movement, are here assembled on the day of the termination of the British mandate over Eretz-Yisrael 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-Yisrael, to be known in the State of Israel.

The state of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will

guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

The State of Israel is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of Eretz-Israel.

We appeal to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the comity of nations.

We appeal - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

We extend our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

Placing our trust in the "Rock of Israel", we affix our signatures to this proclamation at this session of the Provisional Council of State, on the soil of the homeland, in the city of Tel-Aviv, on this Sabbath eve, the 5th day of Iyar, 5708 (14th May, 1948).



Reflections: A source of controversy in composing this Declaration was whether to mention God. A compromise was reached between religious and secular by using the euphemism, "Rock of Israel."

What impresses you about this Declaration?

Political Realities and the Challenge of Power

Israel has altered Jewish identity. No longer are Jews ridiculed as stateless. We have a place in contemporary history and world politics. When we arrive at LAX among the international flags on display is that of the State of Israel. Among the greetings during Disneyland's "Small World" ride is the word "Shalom." Israel has provided Jews with enhanced dignity wherever they live. And yet, Israel is a paradox: a dream fulfilled and lacking peace; a small isolated country and a dynamo in the world economy; speaking an ancient language and a leader in the latest technologies; successful in ingathering a dispersed people and marked by great social divides.

Although Israel is small in numbers, there is a greater concentration of reporters and many more stories per capita on its politics and daily life than any other country in the world. Due to Jewish history, Jews fear antisemitism. Such paranoia is justified by the massive number of UN Resolutions against Israel's human rights record, where Israel is judged by a far higher standard than any other country in the world, and the many one-sided international condemnations and boycotts of Israel over its unsuccessful negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel also lives in a dangerous neighborhood, where gunfire can be heard from across its borders, and repeatedly rockets fired from Gaza or Lebanon have terrorized Israel. Since Israel's inception, she has fought many wars with the recognition that if she ever lost, the Jewish State would cease to exist.

The Israelite prophets and later the rabbinic sages, who lacked actual political power, set a high moral bar for the Jewish people. In our time, Israel's political leaders confront vulnerabilities over the untrustworthiness of Israel's neighbors. Israelis differ in assessing the immediate threat to Israel's security and the potential gains of political concessions. Among American Jews discussions on Israel's political future usually leads to more division than unity and such discussions are all too often taboo. Israel today is a source of enormous pride and even spiritual uplift, but is far from a fulfilled ideal.



Reflections:

Are you drawn to reading news accounts of Israel?

How do you explain that fascination?

Have you visited Israel? If so, what surprised you? What troubled you? What moved you?

What is your vision for Israel in twenty years? How realistic is such change? What is your guidance on how American Jews might more effectively discuss Israel's future?

What would you tell your children as to why Israel is important for the Jewish people and a blessing for you?

For further study:

Video: Passionate conversation on Israel's purpose and settlements between Daniel Gordis and Peter Beinart held at CBI (09/11/16): <https://www.cbi18.org/sermons/debate-beinart-gordis/>

Books: Histories of modern Israel:

Daniel Gordis, *A Brief History of Israel* (2016)

Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (New York: Random House, 2013)

Yossi Klein Halevi, *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013)

Place of Israel in Jewish Consciousness:

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967, 1973)

Tikkun Olam: Healing the World



Jewish prayer is obsessed with the healing of the world. The weekday *Amidah*, the thrice-daily standing prayer, provides an outline of the necessary steps to bring peace. It is as if we are pleading, “Dear Creator, Complete what you have begun.” But, a test of prayer’s efficacy is whether it leads to our action. For we are taught that we are God’s limbs in effecting change. In the *Aleinu* prayer- composed during the Second Temple in the early centuries before the common era and now located toward the end of the daily service- we ask that God “heal the world under God’s sovereignty.” For the Jewish mystics, “*tikkun olam*,” healing the world, is explicitly a human duty. Lurianic kabbalah of the 16th century emphasizes that each time we complete a *mitzvah*, a Divine expectation, we gather holy sparks producing a change in creation and in God.

The Pursuit of Righteousness

The sages of Israel of the 2nd century debate the question, what is the most important verse in the Torah? As recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud (Nedarim 9:4), Rabbi Akiva states, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Ben Azzai rejoins, “This is the record of Adam’s line- when God created Adam, God so fashioned in the likeness of God (Genesis 5:1). The two verses complement each other. The first states how we are to act toward other people. The second gives the underlying reason: we are all of equal value before God. This emphasis on helping others is also found in the thirty-six repetitions in the Torah to take care of the stranger, widow, and orphan. Similarly, Moses on behalf of God charges the Israelites, “Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue! (Deuteronomy 16:20). Even God is challenged when Abraham states regarding the potential

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, “Shall not the judge of all the world do justly!” (Genesis 18:25).



Reflection: What might you hold as the most important line of the Torah? How does that line link to action? How do you understand the term “righteousness?”

Tzedakah: Righteous Giving

Unlike the concept of charity, which derives from the Greek word *caritas* and means “kindness,” *tzedakah* comes from the Hebrew root *tzedek*, meaning “justice.” Giving, whether funds or care, to those in need fulfills the duty to act justly. The rabbis will even state that it benefits the recipient when the giver is motivated by duty. For in acting kindly as a duty, there is a greater likelihood of a repeat performance for such action, as tugs on the heart are less predictable.

Such a duty to act is stated in the Torah as follows:

If there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that YHVH your God is giving you, do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he lacks. Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return YHVH your God will bless you in all your endeavors. For there will never cease to be needy ones among you (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

And yet, how we give does matter. The following are Maimonides guidelines for the giver, rather than a source of judgment by others:

7:1 It is a positive commandment to give *tzedakah* to the poor, according to what is appropriate for the person, if this is within the financial capacity of the donor, as Deuteronomy 15:8 states: “You must open your hand to him.”

7:2 Anyone who sees a poor person asking and turns his eyes away from him and does not give him *tzedakah* transgresses a negative commandment as Deuteronomy 15:7 states: “Do not harden your heart or close your hand against your brother, the poor person.”

7:3 We are commanded to give a poor person according to what he lacks. If he lacks clothes, we should clothe him. If he lacks household utensils, we should purchase them for him. If he is unmarried, we should help him marry. And for an unmarried woman, we should find a husband for her. You are commanded to fill his lack, but you are not obligated to enrich him.

7:5 When a poor person comes and asks for his needs to be met and the giver does not have the financial capacity, he should give him according to his financial capacity. How much? The most desirable way of performing the mitzvah is to give one-fifth of one’s financial resources. Giving one-tenth is an ordinary measure. Giving less than that reflects stinginess. Even a poor person who lives from *tzedakah* is obligated to give *tzedakah* to another person.

7:6 When a poor person whose identity is unknown says: “I am hungry, provide me with food,” we do not investigate whether he is a deceiver. Instead, we provide him with food immediately. If he was unclothed and said: “Clothe me,” we investigate.

7:7 We provide *tzedakah* for the non-Jewish poor together with the poor of the Jewish people as an expression of the ways of peace.

7:10 When a person does not want to give *tzedakah* or desires to give less than what is appropriate for him, the court should compel him and give him stripes for rebellious conduct until he gives the amount it was estimated that he should give.

(Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Tzedakah*)



Reflections: To what degree does paying taxes meet the obligation to give *tzedakah*? Have you ever needed assistance, whether financial or caregiving? If so, what did you learn from that experience? If you never have, what does that say about your good fortune and your duty to help others?

Our Possessions

In the Ethics of the Sages (5:12), people's relationship to material possessions is described as in four ways: Some say, "mine is mine and yours is yours"- this is the average. However, some say that this is the (evil) characteristic of Sodom;

"Mine is yours and yours is mine"- the trait of simpleton;

"Mine is yours and yours is yours"- the trait of the saintly;

"Yours is mine and mine is mine" – the trait of a scoundrel.



Reflections: This description acknowledges retaining private possession is healthy. How do you choose with whom to share? To what degree is your sharing done in concentric circles with family at the center and moving out toward the greater world?

Foundations of Human Dignity

Seeing each person as created in the image of God is the spiritual underpinning of generosity. The rabbis of the early centuries of Israel, stated that foundation as follows:

Therefore, Adam was created alone in the world, in order to teach you that whoever destroys a single life, the Torah considers it as though he destroyed the entire world. And whoever saves a single life, the Torah considers it as though he saved the entire world.

And it is also for the sake of peace among people, so that no one can say to their fellow "My father was greater than your father."

And, finally, in order to display the greatness of the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One – since when a person stamps many coins with a single mold, they are all alike. But when the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One, fashioned all human beings with the hold with which the first person was formed, not one of them is like any other.

Therefore, each and every human being is obligated to say, “For my sake the world was created.” (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5)



Reflections:

This statement speaks of human equality, but what does it teach about generosity? This statement speaks of a universal concern, in what sense is this statement Jewish?

Judaism's Components Are Complementary

The efforts of a group give context and motivation to do good. In the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.” Jewish values, belonging to an extended family and Torah’s teachings (VET) mandate righteousness. Worship’s test is whether it motivates action. We naturally give first to immediate family, then to extended family, and then to community in which we live and finally, the larger world. Giving to Jewish causes is an act of family care and if family fails to take care of family, who else can we count on? And yet, we are also obligated to help the stranger. Our sages teach us to act in concentric circles with something in each category. The image of God as universal parent counting on us to do God’s work is central to Jewish faith. The question is not what is unique about Jewish generosity, rather it is how generosity emerges from Jewish belonging.

In seeking to answer “How Does Judaism Matter in Leading a Life of Significance?” each of the six components that

we have explored has an essential, complementary role. These six facets (VET+WIT) offer a worldview and paths of relationship with other people and God. People naturally emphasize particular components, but each is necessary to compose for the unique symphony of Judaism. Judaism offers community, history, values, music, sacred text, holidays, liturgy, a homeland that serve to both educate and celebrate our many gifts. The word significance contains the word “sign.” What we do conveys what matters to us. Judaism matters because it elevates us toward holiness, encompassing God’s perspective, while seeking on a daily level to enliven our belonging, joy, and the significance of our lives.



Reflection: How do acts of kindness and justice contribute to your feeling the significance of your life? Who are your heroes of generosity?

Afterword



I share the letter below as a way to sum up.

My beloved children,

I write to you in order to speak from my heart on “Why Judaism Matters in Leading a Life of Significance.” I write knowing that others are listening in, so I choose to shift this letter to my grandchildren. I know that you do not yet have a spouse, let alone children. But, many of those to whom I write do and for them the choices of a spouse are already made. I therefore address grandchildren, because regardless of their parents shared or lack of shared faith, those grandchildren are the future of the Jewish people. I am concerned about the possible dilution of Jewish identity of the next generation even when both parents are Jewish. And I write at a time in which the majority of Americans are marrying someone who is not Jewish, a relatively new phenomenon. I am buoyed by a recent statistic that 61% of children in intermarriages see their prime religious identity as Jewish. I am also aware of last year’s Pew finding that Judaism is the most admired religion in America. At the same time, not only is the fastest-growing religious segment of Americans “none,” it is also the largest group if you count Christians by their denominations. In sum, we Jews are like everyone else, only more so. We are more likely than others to go to college and to earn graduate degrees. We are also more likely to get married later and to have fewer children. We also consistently say, “I am proud of being Jewish,” and yet, increasingly fail to act on that pride by affiliation and foregoing formal Jewish education for the next generation, which leads me again to focus on grandchildren.

My future grandchildren,

I pause to appreciate your presence in my life. When becoming your grandparent, I became an ancestor: a reminder that I am a link in a chain of generations. I knew my grandfather, Joseph Spitz. He was born in the 19th century in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. He fought in World War I, on the losing side. He was a wonderful storyteller, handsome and complicated. His difficult youth as an indentured servant and then a runaway left him with a rough edge. And yet, I was privileged to know him and my four-foot, eight-inch grandmother, Julia, who was an embodiment of kindness and a master of her wig-making craft. In recalling these grandparents, I regret never having met my mother's parents, who were murdered during the Holocaust. And yet, stories of my grandmother's High School attendance in Pittsburgh and her return to the Carpathian village before the First World War, where her marriage was arranged, fascinated me. And the bedtime tales of my grandfather Marcus' piety and wisdom, told with tearful love, shaped me profoundly. I know that my role as your grandfather is a privilege and a responsibility. I want you to know that I love you unconditionally. I also want to convey in this letter, why I pray that you love Judaism and see it as a core component of your identity.

Judaism is a choice and yet on a primal level, you are Jewish because of birth. So it is for me, my religious identity was as much a given as the color of my hair or more profoundly, the gift of wonderful parents. Judaism is the accumulated wisdom of our extended family, which offers grounding and the gift of knowing who you are. Abraham and Sarah founded our family and Moses is our rabbi, with many illustrious prophets and sages who followed. They left us with the charge to seek holiness. Much suffering marks our collective history. And yet, from those bitter memories has emerged our character. We are a people of hope, humility, and service. Just as the bitter herbs at Pesach offer the eye-watering taste of slavery, the pain of the past is essential to becoming fully who you are. Avoidance of all

pain leads to superficiality. Seek authenticity. And yet, we as a people do not see ourselves as victims, but as an empathic source of goodness. In the words of God's call to Abraham and Sarah, "You shall be a blessing...and the nations of the world shall be blessed by you." In that light, our Biblical tale of Exodus has served us, and many others, as a source of hope, an empowerment for change. Ours is to hear the words of the Torah: "I place before you blessing and curse, life and death, choose life!" (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Joy is at the center of Judaism. I am drawn to the line of psalms (100:2), "Serve God with celebration, come before God with rejoicing." (100:2). The goal of our worship is to add to our contentment and awareness. The rhythms of secular life push us to do more, to acquire more, to define our worth by externals. The Sabbath is a pause, a timeout in the best sense: the setting aside of time to prioritize being. On Shabbat we set one day apart to experience wholeness with our families, community, and God. We are given context to fall in love with the world again. And in that process to recognize the goodness of our lives and to selflessly share that goodness. This is the move toward holiness, to seeing the world through the eyes of a caring Creator while knowing that we are God's limbs.

Our holydays, both Biblical and rabbinic, combine as puzzle pieces presenting a picture of our collective history and the values that inform our identity. When Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was asked his favorite holiday, he replied, "The one that I am observing when I am observing it." My prayer is that you should love each of the holidays, for they are each distinctive, and that you should have the discipline to observe all of them. For the richness of each is informed by its relationship with the others. I also pray that you learn to sing those songs that echo the happiness and yearnings of our people. Many of our traditional songs are drawn from the Bible, particularly psalms. The melodies encompass the diversity of our earth, for we Jews have lived everywhere. There are also emerging songs. Sing. Combining breath and melody will open

you emotionally, enhancing your connection with others and with God. And learn the words of our sacred texts, which echo across time. My mother use to say, "Life is the best teacher." The wisdom of our tradition is a distillation of the wisdom gleaned across many lifetimes. To know that wisdom is to better grasp what really matters and how to best live it.

Love Israel, despite the reality that the modern State is but a place with many troubles. Israel is homeland, evoking the origins of our people and a dream of sovereignty fulfilled. I recall standing in 1991 at the Convention Center of Washington D.C. at the first gathering of survivors of the Holocaust and their children. President Reagan and Elie Wiesel were on the podium. As voices united in the singing of *Hatikvah*, my mother cried and so did many others around her. Life had moved forward, there was so much to celebrate and sadness over those who were gone. I imagined those emotions combining with the miracle that is the rebirth of the Jewish people in our homeland. And yet, love is being able to speak openly. In Israel citizens differ on how to best forge a politically secure, morally sound future. Our prophets in the past railed against injustice in the Land of Israel. Those voices challenge us. Israel is a nation among nations and yet, for us as our homeland, we are called to both assure her survival and her identity. Where there are values expressed, such as denying women's rights at the *Kotel*, it is your place to stand alongside of them to secure their rights. Likewise, the Bible repeatedly tells us to treat all by the same law in the Promised Land. Equality for Palestinians and the dignity of their own self-determination strike me as the values that have shaped our calling as a holy people. I love the feeling of being at home in Israel, where Jewish holydays create a distinctive rhythm and where place and purpose are more fully present. Go there. Feel the past and the dignity of the present.

Join the conversation across time and the globe that is the study of sacred, Jewish text. In order to study on the highest level, learn Hebrew. And, enjoy learning of all kinds. To read, listen, and watch is to delight in life and to grow. To learn,

Maimonides emphasized, whether math or science- and I would add to create art or music- is to appreciate the depth and goodness of creation. Learn to sit with silence, too. For your inner life is also a great frontier, worthy of your time and effort. And most importantly, act kindly and justly. The test of a Jewish life is how it refines your sensitivity and your drive to make a difference. I had the privilege to know Elie Wiesel. His words and deeds remain a source of uplift and challenge. He said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference; The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference; And, the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference; Because of indifference one dies before one actually dies."

My dear grandchildren, I love you. May you lead holy lives, the goal of our people, in which you feel beloved by the source of Creation and in which you know that you are worthy of that love. May you find joy and depths of content in Jewish belonging, a content that informs your significance. Yours is the treasure of an enormous legacy of the Jewish past and the vibrancy of an extended family of which your participation matters.

May you become ancestors, who will bequeath a vibrant, enriched Judaism to your progeny, too.

L'shalom,

Grandpa Elie



Final reflections:

What touched you in my letter?
How would you have written it
differently to your children?

For further action at Congregation B'nai Israel:

TIKKUN OLAM ENGAGEMENT SESSION

Join Rabbi Spitz for the small group culmination followed by lunch.

Nov. 20, 11:30am

SHABBAT SHAHOME:

Host or attend a Friday night dinner.

SUNDAY SUPPER:

Cook and serve those in need.

Oct. 9; Nov. 13; Dec. 11, 4-7pm

BLOOD DRIVE:

Donate at CBI's Red Cross blood drive:

Dec. 5, 1-7pm

CONGREGANT CARE:

Assist with transportation needs, meals, running errands, & socializing for congregants who are ill or isolated.

CHESED/COMFORT COMMITTEE:

This is CBI's link to members who have had a loss, surgery or a birth. Make phone calls and reach out so the congregant feels acknowledged and cared for. Offer meals and help with Shiva set-ups.

HEALTH & WELLNESS PRESENTATION:

Jewish Cancer Genetics Nov. 6, 10am

LIGHTHOUSE BREAKFAST:

Serve breakfast to homeless.

Oct. 23, 9:45-11:15am

FAMILY PROMISE:

Family Promise offers temporary housing for Orange County residents who are looking for jobs and permanent housing. CBI joins as a "support" congregation by providing four dinners. Nov. 13-19

COOKING FOR COMFORT:

Assemble ready to cook kosher meals for congregants who would like a kosher meal in times of need (loss of family member, illness, new baby).

FLU SHOT CLINIC:

Free flu shots in CBI's Social Hall sponsored by Hoag Community Benefit.

Oct. 16, 10:30am-2pm

