

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Erev Rosh Hashana 5770

MEANING AND MITZVAH

Two years ago, shortly after my first grandson was born, my daughter-in-law called me. “Could you check your calendar? Are you busy on May 2, 2010?”

“Uh – not that I know of. Why?”

“Because that’s the day we would like to have Neriya’s *upshirin*. Please put it on your calendar!”

I smiled as I hung up the phone. An *upshirin* is a ceremony in which a boy’s hair is cut for the first time when he turns three years old. The custom is kabbalistic and its origins and meanings are obscure. It may come from the Biblical law that forbids harvesting fruit trees until they are three years old. An anthropologist explains that it may mark a boy’s leaving the world of women, symbolized by his long hair, and entering the world of men. In the traditional Jewish world, when a boy turns three he begins wearing *tzitzit*, a *tallit katan* under his clothing, and begins to study Torah.

When my son was born twenty-nine years ago, most Jews had never heard of an *upshirin*, much less participated in one. Judy and I had never considered letting Adam’s hair grow for three years, nor did any of my rabbinical school colleagues consider this custom.

Times have changed. In recent years there have been boys in our own Silverman Preschool who received their first haircut at an *upshirin* and this spring I was asked by two families to help them arrange *upshirin* for their sons. I was caught

completely off guard by these requests. I had never even attended an *upshirin*, much less organized or officiated at one. I thought my grandson's would be my first. I was honest with these families and told them that although I had never been to an *upshirin*, I would research the details and celebrate with them.

When I got off the phone, I racked my brain: how could I figure out what to do. I did the first thing I could think of. I called my son. "What do you do at an *upshirin*?" I asked him. "I don't know," he said. "You've been a rabbi a lot longer than me!"

My next step was to turn to the most immediate authoritative source of Jewish knowledge I could think of: the internet. Fortunately, I found a plethora of material, some of it even accurate, and I was told by one of the families who requested my help that I could find demonstration videos on Youtube. I also discovered an entire cottage industry that has been created around *upshirin*. Not only can you order special *upshirin* invitations, but you can purchase party favors as well! One of the most popular is a little bag that holds strands of the recently shorn locks to send home with guests.

When the fateful day arrived I must confess that I was relieved that the family had done a lot of research and planned the *upshirin* on their own. My presence was desired to add rabbinic weight to the festivities and of course, for my finely honed barbering skills.

Before I left the house I said to Judy, "I'll see you later. It's nice to be invited but I really don't understand why anyone would want to follow this custom, it's so...so ...kabbalistic!"

"How can you say that!" she responded. "You are always telling people to bring

Jewish rituals into their lives. You tell them to keep Shabbat and to make their kitchens Kosher and to build Sukkot, and they probably don't understand why anyone would want to follow those customs either...everything you are asking them to do is so..so..irrational.

“And what's wrong with Jews celebrating an *upshirin*?” she continued. “Just because we didn't do with our son, it doesn't mean that it is not worth doing. In fact, maybe if we had thought about it, we would have waited until Adam was three and celebrated his first haircut at an *upshirin*.”

Appropriately chastened, I left the house.

I was completely unprepared for how moved I was by the *upshirin* I attended and how meaningful and joyous it was for all involved. The *upshirin* was held outside in a public park on a beautiful day. Friends and family were invited to the celebration, which included a post haircut barbecue.

The parents had prepared their son for the ceremony and he had his long hair tied back in a number of small pigtails. He sat on a special chair and everyone gathered around him and fawned over him. His father explained the history and meaning of the *upshirin* and then grandparents, aunts, and uncles, were honored by cutting off his pigtails one by one. I was honored with the next to last cut, followed by his parents. His father then sat him on his lap and they repeated the *alef bet* together, which the toddler had learned especially for the occasion. We closed with a *she'hechyanu* and wished each other *mazal tov*.

In front of our eyes the toddler was transformed into a little boy. He and his new

hairstyle happily ran off to play with his friends. He began his formal Jewish education with us last week in our Silverman Preschool and God willing, will one day celebrate his Bar Mitzvah in this sanctuary. As I drove away I found myself looking forward to my own grandson's *upshirin*.

This experience led me to wonder how many other opportunities for sacred moments have been missed by our failure to embrace new *mitzvot* and bring new rituals into our lives. All of us have allowed incalculable opportunities for celebration and meaning to pass us by because of our assumptions, prejudices, and fears.

I grew up in a time when ethnic, rather than religious, Jewish identity was celebrated. Perhaps because of this there was a general devaluing of traditional Jewish practices. It was a time when as many boys were circumcised in the hospital as at a *B'rit Milah*, and baby girls were named in the synagogue via a hastily uttered prayer following a grandfather's *aliya* instead of at their own distinct ceremony.

I remember standing at the grave at my grandparents' funerals and walking away from the casket left above ground. As I looked back it was lowered and covered not by family and friends, but by cemetery workers. For them it was a job, and they did it well, but it was not a sacred act. I have an adopted cousin who was named in the synagogue but whose mother was told nothing about bringing her to the *mikva* for formal conversion to Judaism.

Judy and I were married when I was a first year rabbinical student. The rabbi who married us was surprised when we told him we wanted a custom hand made *ketuba* rather than the printed one he normally used. He did not even suggest a

kabbalat panim, the bride's pre-wedding ceremony reception, a *chatan's tish*, the groom's reception, nor a public *ketuba* signing or *bedeken*, the groom veiling his bride, or *yichud*, a few moments in private for the bride and groom immediately following the ceremony. At the time these rituals were not commonly performed.

It has therefore been fascinating and inspiring for me to see Jews, particularly young Jews, returning to ritual and *mitzvah* in their lives. Most of the weddings at which I officiate have a *bedeken* and often circling by the bride and groom. The majority of Jewish baby boys I name are circumcised at a *brit milah* and many young families have some form of *Shabbat* celebrations in their homes. Although admittedly rarer, I also know families that have sworn off cheeseburgers and decided to keep Kosher because they found it meaningful and spiritual.

I personally find a great deal of meaning and beauty in observing Jewish rituals and celebrating the festive days of Jewish year. Perhaps because of this, I spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about Jews who don't. What stops them? It seems to me that there are least four major impediments to Jews becoming more observant.

The first is that the observance of Jewish rituals limits your participation in American life and takes you out of the mainstream. If you observe Shabbat from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, you can't go to work, or to the malls, movies, or beach, like everyone else. If you observe Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, you miss school or need to take vacation or personal days at work to attend services. During *Pesach* you eat cheese on *matza* while everyone around you gorges on submarine sandwiches. If you keep kosher year round, you munch peanuts and carrots

and celery at baseball games while everyone else eats hot dogs and pepperoni pizza. If you are an observant Jew you are much more limited in your choices than the average American, and your social and lifestyle choices limit your participation in broader society.

The second reason that prevents Jews from observing *mitzvot* is connected to the first. If you are religiously observant, you are at least, in some, way visibly different or “other” from those around you. You don’t dress or act like everyone else. You stand out. You draw attention to yourself. If you stay out of school or don’t come to work on Shavuot, everyone wonders where you are and may even resent your taking extra “vacation.” If you eat *matza* instead of bread on *Pesach*, people notice and sometimes are showered with your crumbs. If you wear a *kippah* or *tzitzit* in public, you are making a statement that you are a Jew.

Most people like to fit in. They don’t want to make waves. They don’t want to be different. They don’t want to stand out. No matter how much we talk about our fierce individualism or not following the pack, most of us are more comfortable conforming. If you are Jewishly observant you inevitably stand out and at least at times, feel uncomfortable or out of place, no matter how secure you are with your Jewish identity.

The third reason that I believe Jews are not more observant is that many rituals and customs seem weird and strange to the uninitiated. I have mentioned more than once the perplexed and frightened looks I sometimes receive from workmen when I leave the Goodman Chapel during morning *minyan* to answer the door and they see me standing in my tallit and tefillin - the strange boxes on my head and arm. Parading

around the synagogue with a *lulav* and *etrog* seems juvenile or even pagan, until you get into the swing of things. Singing Kiddush on Friday nights or the *motzi* over challah is foreign and uncomfortable the first few times you say them.

It is difficult to perform a task or participate in a ceremony when you have no idea what to do and what it means, especially when it seems so strange and foreign to begin with.

And finally, in our society in which free will and freedom of expression and choice are celebrated, Jews are very resistant to anyone telling them what to do. Mitzvah, after all, means “good deed” only in the vernacular. It’s true meaning is commandment - something we are required to do.

I remember well a Ritual Committee meeting several years ago during which we discussed our policy of insisting women cover their heads when they come up to the *bimah*. I was not and still am not a big fan of the policy. My thoughts are: the *bimah* is not any more sacred than the rest of the sanctuary and we are an egalitarian congregation in which men and women are equal in synagogue life. Why should women have to keep their heads covered only when they are on the *bimah* and not when they sit in the congregation? If we insist that men wear *kippot* in the synagogue, shouldn’t we insist that women keep their heads covered as well?

A long discussion ensued. The Ritual Committee decided that we should test the congregational waters on a proposed policy which required that women keep their heads covered in the sanctuary at all times. It was left to me to send up the trial balloon. I wrote a Shofar article expounding upon the “women covering their heads”

policy being considered.

Never before and never since have I received as much feedback on any one issue, and it was uniformly negative. The Ritual Committee quickly dropped its initiative, but I was fascinated by the feedback I received. Almost none of it had to do with the questions of Jewish ritual, history, or egalitarianism. Almost all of it boiled down to one sentence: “How dare you tell me what to do!”

In some ways this objection does not make sense because the truth is, someone is always telling us what to do (or where to go). Limitation on personal freedom is a price we pay to live a civilized society. All of us are told, for example, that we must stop at red lights, pay our taxes, and may not yell “fire” in a crowded room. None of us is allowed to take our neighbor’s property or dig up their yard.

But I do understand what “No one is going to tell me what do” means. We live in a free country. We, the people, are allowed many freedoms and choices. In our society there are few restrictions on actions that do not affect or harm others. Who or what is being harmed if a woman enters the sanctuary with her head uncovered? What real difference does it make? You cannot even say that *halacha*, Jewish Law is being violated or “Jewish tradition” offended. In traditional Jewish communities married women cover their heads not to dress like men but because of *tzniut*, or modesty, and they cover their heads not just in the synagogue but at all times.

There is no historical precedent for Jewish women covering their heads for egalitarian reasons so that their religious dress is the same as men. Therefore, on what authority does the Tifereth Israel Synagogue Ritual Committee demand that women

cover their heads? Does the Ritual Committee in this matter represent the congregation, Rabbi, or does it presume to speak on behalf of the Almighty?

(For the record, the Ritual Committee was not speaking on my behalf though I agreed with its proposal. Rabbis are the *moreh d'atra*, the congregational authority on religious and ritual issues, but as I just established, women covering their heads in the synagogue for egalitarian reasons is a matter of custom, not *halacha*.)

To sum things up, in my opinion these are the four major roadblocks to Jews increasing their religious observance: 1.) Jewish religious observance is out of sync with mainstream American life, 2.) Jewish religious observance makes you visibly different from those around you, 3.) Jewish ritual sometimes feels different, “weird”, or incomprehensible, and 4.) the word *mitzvah* means “commandment” and none of us likes being told what to do, especially when we can’t confirm a valid source of authority.

So, where do we go from here? If I was going to be logical about it I would now begin to address these roadblocks and share with you how to overcome them. Instead, I want to step back and look at the issue of *mitzvah* and ritual observance more globally. Before we can begin to overcome the impediments to living a religious life, we first must address the question: “Why is it important to lead a life filled with Jewish observance?”

For Jews the answer is fairly straightforward: observing *mitzvot* is our way of acknowledging the sacred in our lives. It is our way of getting in touch with God and God’s Presence in the world. It is our way of responding to what we believe is God’s will.

When we observe Shabbat, we are grateful not only for God giving us life and sustenance, but for showing us the need for reflection and rest, as well. Passover is a reminder of our people's history and experience. We assert the sacred quality of freedom and renew our pledge to erase slavery and servitude wherever it still exists.

The wedding ceremony brings to life the Bible's words: "It is not good for a human being to be alone" and that love is only fully realized in committed and consecrated monogamous relationships. When we celebrate the birth and naming of a baby, we acknowledge the chain of love and heritage that is passed down from generation to generation and celebrate the creation of new life and our faith in a better tomorrow.

Mitzvot and Jewish rituals are ways that we connect with God and with each other. Unfortunately, they are all too often seen as folk customs or cultural celebrations rather than expressions of our faith and spirituality.

Tomorrow I am going to continue sharing my thoughts about the role *mitzvot* play in Jewish life and address some of the specific issues I have raised tonight. I am also going share some exciting new about one particular *mitzvah* that our congregational is going to have a pivotal role in bringing to San Diego (no, I am not going to tell you tonight. You will just have to come back tomorrow to find out!), but I do want to leave you with one way the members of our community can begin to explore the connection between Judaism, God, and their lives in the coming year.

Our congregation is partnering with the Jewish Theological Seminary and other Conservative congregations in the Mitzvah Initiative. The Mitzvah Initiative is not a

class, but rather a twenty session seminar in which members of our congregation will be invited to discuss and explore the concept of *mitzvah*, as well as specific *mitzvot*. Traditional texts will be the beginning but not the end of the discussion. Participants in the Mitzvah Initiative will be encouraged to engage in a no holds barred uncensored discussion of some of the central questions of Jewish life: why should Judaism be important to me? And how and to what degree should Judaism shape my and my family's life? What do I think of the entire concept of *mitzvot* - commandments? Is there a *Metzaveh* - a Divine Commander or is there not, and how does my answer reflect my relationship with not only Judaism but the world?

This seminar will be run in two sessions: Sunday mornings have been reserved for Silverman Preschool and Abraham Ratner Torah School parents. Those with young children are in the process of making a Jewish home, raising Jewish children, and creating Jewish memories. This session will give them an opportunity to share and receive support from their peers, those who are in a similar stage of their life. This session will begin toward the end of Torah School, at 11:00 a.m. and conclude when Torah school ends at 12:30 p.m. If there is sufficient interest, we will arrange child care for children younger than Torah School age.

We have also scheduled a Thursday evening session at 7:00 p.m., open to everyone. We believe that by providing a mid-week opportunity for learning and sharing, those who have not been able to attend one of our Rabbi Aaron S. Gold Institute for Adult Jewish Studies Sunday classes will be able to participate.

My role in these classes will be more listener than teacher, and I am keenly

interested in what you have to teach me.

I do hope you will avail yourself of this opportunity to bring the beauty of Judaism and ritual observance into your life. I look forward to sharing this journey with you and helping you discover how living a life of *mitzvot* can elevate and help you find meaning in your lives.

Shana Tova.

Tifereth Israel Synagogue
High Holy Days 5770
First Day Rosh Hashana

MITZVAH AND MIKVAH

A couple of months ago a member of the congregation lent me a book to read: “The Year of Living Biblically—One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible.” by A.J. Jacobs.

A.J. Jacobs is an editor for Esquire magazine and in his free time, looks for peculiar topics to research and write about. In his previous book, “The Know-It-All,” he tells about reading the entire Encyclopedia from cover to cover. In “The Year of Living Biblically” he describes his experience of living twelve full months according to the *pshat*, the literal meaning, of the Biblical text for .

The “Year of Living Biblically” has been out for a couple of years and it’s a book I would not have picked up on my own. From the cover, “The Year of Living Biblically” looks a little silly and its premise, that a modern man could somehow live in literal accordance with the Bible, seems ridiculous. The Bible was written a very long ago in a very different age and for a very different culture than ours today. Many of its ordinances are no longer observed and I wondered how exactly Mr. Jacobs planned to carry out the prescribed animal sacrifices or to stone adulterers to death.

But since I trusted the person who recommended the book and I was looking for a little light reading, I decided to give it a try. Despite my misgivings, I was pleasantly surprised.

Before I read the book, one of my major problems with “The Year of Living

Biblically,” was its premise that someone could live according to the literal meaning of the Bible. The truth is that the Bible is never read literally by anyone, regardless of religious persuasion or denomination. The Bible is always read through the lens of an interpretive tradition. There is always someone or something interpreting and explaining what the Bible really means.

For Jews this is especially true. As I have taught repeatedly, Judaism, while based on the Bible, is not a Biblical Religion. Judaism is a rabbinic religion. Jews do not do what the Bible says, we act in accordance with what the rabbis of the Talmud and subsequent tradition tell us the Bible *means*.

For example, the Torah says we may not seethe the kid in its mother’s milk. The rabbis say that what the Torah really means is that we may not eat, cook, or derive benefit from any combination of milk and meat. The Torah says that Jews should stone murderers to death. The rabbis restricted the use of capital punishment and once the Temple was destroyed, it was no longer practiced. The Torah says to put a thread of blue on the *tzitzit* of your *tallit*. The rabbis say that since we can no longer positively identify the source of the dye the Torah specifies, we no longer have blue strands on our *tallit*. (Footnote: as Joe Bendah will tell you, there are some authorities today who claim to have rediscovered the dye and blue *tzitziot* are available for those who agree with them.)

Therefore, I thought that anyone who claimed that they could follow the Bible literally would either end up making a mockery of tradition or end up in jail for violating any number of civil laws. (When was the last time you saw an adulterer being stoned to

death?)

The “Year of Living Biblically” turned out to be a much more thoughtful and well researched book than I imagined. Jacobs understands that the Bible is never read in a vacuum but through interpretive traditions. He explores several of these interpretive traditions, both Christian and Jewish. Additionally, the book is a fast and funny read. I give it a “thumbs up” but its value as entertainment is not why I am bringing it to your attention today.

What intrigued me the most about “The Year of Living Biblically” was the religious evolution its author went through as he began to lead a life governed by *mitzvot*, Biblical commandments.

Jacobs begins his journey as a self proclaimed atheist. Though Jewish by birth, he writes: “I grew up in an extremely secular home in New York City. I am officially Jewish, but I’m Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant. Which is to say: not very. I attended no Hebrew school, ate no matzoh. The closest my family came to observing Judaism was that paradoxical classic of assimilation: a Star of David on top of our Christmas Tree.” (p. 4)

Living in literal accordance with the Bible means that one has to follow its laws and ordinances. These are what we Jews call “*mitzvot*.” Jacobs did not follow every single *mitzvah*, and those he did follow he sometimes followed literally but at other times in accordance with rabbinic tradition. Either way he often found himself at odds not only with society, but his family as well.

Some examples: in accordance with the Bible’s instruction not to cut one’s beard

and *payot*, the corner locks of one's hair, he let them both grow wild. He invited a rabbi to his house to make sure that his garments did not violate the ordinance of *shatnez*, the mixing of wool and linen in a single garment. He prayed several times a day to a Deity he at first did not believe in, refrained from haughty acts and unkind words, and even threw pebbles at an adulterer because that's what the Bible calls for. Refusing to sit in a chair that might have been occupied by a ritually impure woman, he carried around his own three legged stool. Some of the things he did were patently absurd, but many were quite reasonable for a Jew who is religiously observant.

A.J. Jacobs began his journey in order to write a book and not to change his life, but after he year of living biblically, he ended up doing both.

He started his adventure as an atheist, but after joining a group of ecstatic Chassidim celebrating *Simchat Torah*, he writes: "I swing from emotion to emotion: terror that I'll be crushed...But occasionally I swing to delirious happiness. I don't know if I feel God...But a couple of times that night, I feel something transcendent, something that melts away the present and the past and the deadlines and the MasterCard bills and puts me squarely in the moment. At least for a few seconds, there is no difference between me and Jacob, my biblical alter ego." (p. 86)

And he shares his thinking about the restrictions he imposed upon himself by following Biblical commandments: "I'd always been taught to fetishize freedom of choice. It's the American way. It's why I went to Brown University, where they don't have any requirements...But more and more I'm starting to see the beauty in a more rigid framework. The structure, the stable architecture of religion...What should I do on

Friday night? Stay home with my family. Should I waste my time reading about Cameron Diaz's love life? No. Should I give to the homeless guy on 77th? Yes. Should I be stricter with [my son] Jasper? Yes. There's something paradoxically liberating about surrendering yourself to a minimal-choice lifestyle, especially as our choices multiply like cable [tv] channels." (P. 142-143)

As I continued to read about A.J. Jacob's journey and eventual qualified embrace of Judaism and a life of *mitzvot*, I could not help but reflect on the wisdom of our ancient rabbis. A long time ago they pondered whether it was appropriate to encourage religious behavior that is performed for the wrong reason. For example, should we praise people if they only give *tzedakah* for personal glory? Should we laud the person who gives up pork because they are afraid of trichinosis rather than because the pig is not kosher? And what about non-Jews who want to convert to Judaism because they are marrying a Jew and not out of personal desire? Should we accept them or push them away?

The rabbis have an open and receptive response to all those who want to perform *mitzvot* for what might be less than exemplary reasons: Yes, you should encourage them and laud their actions. Why? "*Betoch lo lishma, ba lishma.*" – because "Someone who performs a *mitzvah* for an extraneous reason will eventually come to perform the *mitzvah* for the appropriate reason." That is, the rabbis long ago posited what A.J. Jacobs discovered during his year of living biblically. Sometimes the meaning of a *mitzvah* does not precede the act but follows it.

Last night I spoke about four major impediments to performing *mitzvot* and living

a life filled with Jewish ritual: 1.) Jewish religious observance is out of sync with mainstream American life, 2.) Jewish religious observance makes you visibly different from those around you, 3.) Jewish ritual sometimes feels different, “weird”, or incomprehensible, and 4.) the word *mitzvah* means “commandment” and none of us likes being told what to do, especially when we can’t confirm a valid source of authority.

I also suggested why we should be interested in religious life to begin with: *mitzvot* are the way that Jews acknowledge and bless the sacred in our lives. *Mitzvot* are what makes Judaism unique. It is our way of getting in touch with God and experiencing God’s Presence in the world. *Mitzvot* are our way of responding to God’s will. They are the everyday religious behaviors that connect us with our past, present, future, and the infinite. Performing *mitzvot* helps us shape our lives so that we think and act in ways that bring glory to God, blessings to our fellow human beings, and helps us find and fulfill our role in creation.

I thought about spending the next few minutes allotted to me this morning to rhapsodize and pontificate about the riches to be mined by living your life centered around the rhythms of the Jewish year and life cycle and the beauty of Torah study. But I won’t. Instead of a leap of faith, I am asking you to take what those wiser than me have called a “leap of action.” You need to close your eyes, set aside your hesitation, ignore the impediments, and start to live “Jewish”. Not a benign kind of Jewish that is about helping the poor and saving the whales, but a serious kind of Jewish which is rooted in Jewish behavior as well as thought. *Betoch Lishma*—first you must do, *ba lishma*—and in doing you come to see the performance of *Mitzvot*, Jewish rituals,

holidays, and prayer as transcendent moments in which we experience the connection between heaven and earth, between past, present, and future, and ourselves and all Creation.

There is another impediment to living a life of *mitzvot* that I have not mentioned up to now. Many Jews think if they take only some and not all *mitzvot* into their lives, that they are hypocrites. That is, if you abstain from eating pork but don't buy kosher meat, you are making a meaningless gesture. If you pray with *tallit* and *tefillin* one day a week instead of each morning, your practice is faithless. If you don't go to the malls on *Shabbat* but do go to museums, you are inconsistent.

This is simply not so. A rabbi I knew when I lived in Tampa, Florida was fond of saying that every *mitzvah* stands on its own and has its own weight, importance, and significance. Many Orthodox Jews I know claim the opposite. They say you must accept the entire package and accept it all at once to be authentically religious. While I believe that more is better, I also believe that the best way to begin experimenting with *mitzvot* in your life is through baby steps. You need to begin with simple rituals and once you develop a comfort with them, then you add more. Otherwise you might feel overwhelmed and quite possibly want to throw it all aside. Never forget that each *mitzvah* stands on its own and is only one step on our pathway to God.

One of Judaism's most illustrious scholars, Rabbi Akiva, did not begin to study Torah until he was 40 years old. The *midrash* explains how he found the courage to sit in the classroom with students much younger than he. He once saw water dripping on a stone. He noticed that despite the hardness of the rock, an indentation had formed,

eroded by the constant drip of water. He thought to himself, if something as soft as water, over time, can penetrate that hard rock, then surely Torah, over time, can penetrate my hard head!

One is never too old to begin studying Torah and the process of bringing more Judaism into your life is not fast and furious, but measured and subtle. You have to give it time. You have to be open and have patience. And you shouldn't first ask the question: "why should I do this?" The reason often follows the action.

I suggest that you start with something simple like lighting Shabbat candles every Friday night. Once that becomes a natural part of your week, add a Challah to your Friday night dinner and say *motzi*, then add *kiddush*. If you have children, bless them with the words of our tradition found in every prayerbook: May God guard you and protect you. If you are married, bless your wife with the words of Proverbs: *Eshet Chayil*, "A Woman of Valor who can find." Bless your husband with words of the Psalmist: "May the Lord bless you from Zion...and [may you] live to see children's children!" (Psalm 128) Once you are comfortable with these rituals, then you can go to the next step: inviting family and friends over on *Shabbat* to share and expand your experience. In fact, you don't even need to wait. Why not invite others to join you and to learn with you on your religious journey.

This year I have decided to invest my own time and energy into helping members of the congregation explore the idea of *mitzvah* in their lives. (If you were here last night, please forgive the repetition.) Our congregation is partnering with the Jewish Theological Seminary and other Conservative congregations in the Mitzvah

Initiative. The Mitzvah Initiative is not a class, but rather a twenty session seminar in which members of our congregation will be invited to discuss and explore the concept of *mitzvah*, as well as specific *mitzvot*. Traditional texts will be the beginning but not the end of the discussion. Participants in the Mitzvah Initiative will be encouraged to engage in a no holds barred uncensored discussion of some of the central questions of Jewish life: why should Judaism be important to me? And how and to what degree should Judaism shape my and my family's life? What do I think of the entire concept of *mitzvot* - commandments? Is there a *Metzaveh* - a Divine Commander or is there not, and how does my answer reflect my relationship with not only Judaism but the world?

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My role in these classes will be more listener than teacher, and I am keenly

interested in what you have to teach me.

I do hope you will avail yourself of this opportunity to bring the beauty of Judaism and ritual observance into your life.

Normally, that would have been the end of the sermon. But this year I am adding a postscript because I have exciting news to share with you.

For as long as I have lived in San Diego, I have brought a contingent of Jews by Choice to Los Angeles to complete their conversion process in the spring. The final step of conversion for men, women, and children is meeting with a *Bet Din*, a panel of three rabbis, to be quizzed about their knowledge and affirm their acceptance of Judaism, and then immersion in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath. A modern *mikvah* looks like an indoor in ground spa but the water comes from natural sources.

We journey to Los Angeles, not because there are not enough rabbis in San Diego to form a *Bet Din*, but because the only *mikvah* in Southern California that non-Orthodox Jews are allowed to use for conversion is managed by the Rabbinical Assembly and located at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

San Diego has three *mikvaot* but they are all under Orthodox auspices and the Orthodox community does not allow them to be used for conversions, Orthodox conversions included? Why? It has to do with religious politics but I do not want to dwell on this now. These Orthodox *mikvaot* are used only for *taharat hamishpacha*, the rituals of family purity.

A couple of years ago author Anita Diamant spoke at "Options," the San Diego

United Jewish Federation's annual Women's Division event. She spoke about Mayyim Hayyim, a modern community *mikvah*-education center which opened a few years ago in Newton, Massachusetts, near Boston. This *mikvah* is available for conversion rituals, *taharat ha-mishpacha*, family purity, and new *mikvah* rituals. For example, grooms as well as brides have begun immersing in the *mikvah* before their wedding. Cancer survivors immerse in the *mikvah* as a sign of renewal and recovery, as have women who have suffered miscarriages. The *mikvah* has been used as a way of recovering from (or celebrating!) divorce, and some men and women immerse before every *Shabbat* and holiday.

A group of women who attended Options were inspired by Diamant's presentation and quickly formed a committee to build a community *mikvah* here in San Diego. They explored several sites, including the grounds of several of San Diego's synagogues. Our Board was very interested in having the *mikvah* here and made the committee an offer that would be hard to refuse.

After several site studies and months of debate by the *mikvah* committee, we were thrilled when they chose Tifereth Israel Synagogue as the site of the future *mikvah*-education center. It will be located on what is now the fenced grass field adjacent to the lower parking lot. It will be a free standing building on land which we are leasing to the *mikvah* for 50 years with a possible 50 year extension. The *mikvah* will function as a fully separate and independent legal entity from Tifereth Israel, but we plan to have a close relationship and will make spaces in our facility available for use when it is needed and appropriate.

Lest you think this is but a dream, we are currently finalizing a lease with the *mikvah* committee and the site has been visited by soil engineers and architects who will be submitting proposals for the design contract. Construction is still a few years away but we are confident that we soon have a *mikvah* in San Diego that is open to all Jews to use.

I have spoken this Rosh Hashana about renewing the observance of *mitzvot* and traditional Jewish rituals in our lives. The use of a *mikvah* by Jews is a tradition that, although once shunted aside, is now experiencing growth and renewal. The construction of a *mikvah* on our site will give all of our members and friends an opportunity to experiment with and explore this incredibly spiritual ritual. I hope that as the project progresses the members of Tifereth Israel will not only support this important communal project, but also be first in line to see how immersing in a *mikvah* can add another layer of meaning and spirituality to our lives.

I hope you will join me in celebrating this much needed addition to the San Diego Jewish community. I also hope you will join me in looking forward to a New Year filled with joy, blessing, good health, fulfillment, and growth.

Shana Tova.

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Kol Nidre 5770

WHY I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT HEALTHCARE THIS YEAR

About a month ago, shortly before beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul, I was invited to participate in a conference call with President Barak Obama. Needless to say, I was quite flattered, at least until I learned that 1,000 other rabbis were on the line.

The White House had requested an opportunity for the President to speak to rabbis before the High Holy Days and the call was coordinated by a coalition of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.

President Obama began by wishing all of us a *Shana Tova*, a happy New Year, and then reassured us of his commitment to a secure, democratic, and Jewish State of Israel, and a two state solution for peace in the Middle East. He then turned to the reason for his call. He wanted us to speak about healthcare reform during the upcoming High Holy Days. He even quoted the *Unetaneh Tokef*, implying that universal healthcare is one way that we humans can make sure that the question: “Who shall live and who shall die” is a lesser burden in our hands. His address was followed by short presentations from representatives of the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements of Judaism about Jewish tradition’s emphasis on healing and providing for the poor, and how the current healthcare system leaves many Americans without sufficient and affordable access to physicians, hospitals, and medication. Something has to be done, we were told.

When the call ended I was disappointed and unsatisfied. I guess I had expected

to hear something I did not already know. Most Americans agree that our healthcare system has major problems and needs fixing. Most Americans also believe that all citizens deserve access to appropriate, expert, and affordable healthcare. Almost every rabbi and Jewish communal leader acknowledges that Judaism places high value on the healing arts and that the “haves” have a responsibility to the “have-nots.”

The president wanted rabbis, during these High Holy Days, to speak about the need to provide affordable and accessible healthcare to all Americans. For a few minutes I was almost tempted to do so. It would have been easy. It would have been a walk in the park. I could have quoted Biblical and Talmudic sources about the *mitzvah* of healing the ill. I could have cited Isaiah’s call for us to allow the fast of this day to turn our eyes toward the poor and helpless of our society. And I could have called for the leaders of our country to do their utmost to find a fair and equitable solution to the problem, one that would provide healthcare to every American at a cost that we as individuals, and the country as a whole, could afford. It would have been a “no brainer.”

But, as Noam Neusner wrote in an editorial in “The Forward,” “Does anyone really think that as American Jews follow[ing] the healthcare debate, they are wondering to themselves: ‘What does my rabbi think?’...If the rabbis follow Obama’s directive to speak about healthcare, they might well invent a new phrase for the lexicon: ‘Rosh Hashana riots.’...[Their congregants] might mutter loud enough to be heard: ‘If I wanted to hear an ignoramus talk about healthcare, I would have stayed at home and watched the TV news...Or worse, they may decide: ‘Ach, I haven’t listened to this rabbi before. Why should I start now?’” (The Forward, Sept. 4, 2009, p.9)

Nevertheless, I could have given a sermon about the importance of providing

affordable healthcare for all Americans tonight. But in order not to ignite a “Yom Kippur riot” it would have been what we call in the business a “mom, flag, and apple pie sermon.” It would need to be a sermon that would be vague, ambiguous, and overgeneralized. It would need to be a sermon that few disagreed with and everyone could feel good about. In other words, a “cop out.”

It would have been a cop out the same way the conference call with President Obama and the representatives from the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements was. The problem, you see, is not getting everyone to agree that there is a problem with healthcare, but getting everyone to agree on a solution. During the Rabbinic conference call there was a blatant lack of specifics. No one laid out a plan. Everyone, including the president, was trying to be so non-political, that they ended up saying very little.

If I spoke about healthcare today I would end up doing the same. If I dared to support or critique any specific approach to dealing the America’s healthcare crisis, I would be perceived as playing politics and end up alienating half of the congregation. Someone might even stand up to argue with me, or stage a walk out. So instead, I choose to say nothing.

I am not the only rabbi who is not speaking about healthcare this year. A few days ago I called a colleague and asked him if he was going to speak about healthcare during the holidays. “No,” he said. He did not participate in the conference call nor was he going to speak about healthcare. When I asked him why, he told me that he tries to stay away from political issues during the High Holy Days. I told him that I wasn’t going to talk about healthcare either and how sad I was that both of us were going to stay

away from such a vital Jewish and humanitarian issue as the need for accessible and affordable healthcare for all Americans because it is “too political.”

When I discussed my dilemma with family and friends, I half jokingly said that I long for the days of President Gerald Ford. I have long been fascinated by the life of President Ford. He was vilified for pardoning President Richard Nixon and lost the next election in which he ran for the presidency on his own merits. Later in life he was recognized and honored as a hero by Americans of all political persuasions.

Why, at least in retrospect, was he so warmly celebrated as a great leader? Because he got along with people on both sides of the aisle and was known for building consensus and compromise. He was a friend to all, including those with whom he bitterly disagreed. When Ford was nominated to the Vice Presidency upon the resignation of Spiro Agnew, Ford, during his hearing before the House Committee on the Judiciary, said: “I believe in friendly compromise. I said over in the Senate hearings that truth is the glue that holds government together. Compromise is the oil that makes governments go.”

At the time of President Ford’s death, Stu Spencer, a friend of Ford and a longtime political consultant to Ronald Reagan said: “He could disagree, but he disagreed agreeably, and he always had respect for both sides of the aisle.”

Bill Carrick, a Democratic consultant in Los Angeles, said that “the polarization we've come to know and loathe was nonexistent in Ford's day...in many ways his politics were...much more tolerant and open-minded than we see now.” (Steve Lopez, LA Times, 1/3/2007)

And finally Ford sacrificed his own political ambitions because he thought more of

the needs of the country than his own electability.

One of the reasons that I am a Conservative, and not an Orthodox or Reform Jew, is that I am a firm believer in seeking the middle path, a path of moderation, compromise, and pluralism. It is what Rambam, Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish scholars and theologians of all time called the *shvil hazahav*, “the golden path” or “the golden mean.” I do not believe the truth lies on the right or on the left, but somewhere in between.

It is no secret that the Conservative Movement has been facing demographic challenges over the last decade or so. I believe one of the reasons for the decline in numbers is the polarization of society in general, and the Jewish community in particular. Jews no longer value the *shvil hazahav*, the golden mean. They no longer tolerate ambiguity or wish to wrestle in the gray areas. They see things as black and white and paralleling American culture, not only rejecting opposing views, but vilifying those who hold them.

In June of this year *Chareidim*, extremist ultra-Orthodox Jews, rioted in Jerusalem over the city opening its municipal parking structure on *Shabbat* to those visiting the Old City on Saturdays. On June 27th, the Israeli newspaper “Ha’aretz” reported: “Four police officers were lightly hurt during the protests, as was a six-year-old boy...Near the site of the demonstration, thousands of secular Israelis held a counter-protest...Police had deployed a large force to secure the area amid fears that the secular rally could spark a violent clash with ultra-Orthodox protestors, who bitterly oppose the opening of the lot as a violation of the biblical command to rest on the Sabbath.

“... the officers...scuffled with ultra-Orthodox demonstrators who hurled soiled diapers and rotten fruit and vegetables at them.

“Police arrested the ultra-Orthodox protestors for disorderly conduct and illegal assembly. Earlier, undercover policemen arrested four Haredim who damaged passing cars on Jerusalem's Bar Ilan Street.” (Ha'aretz - Internet Edition, 6/28/2009)

Of course, ultra-Orthodox protestors turning to violence is not that common, but their protests and visible disdain of secular Israelis are well known.

I also want to make it clear that it is not only Orthodox Jews who draw lines and reject compromise and a middle ground, but liberal Jews as well.

Many of you may be aware that an ad-hoc group of Jewish organizations tried to organize a “Walk for Israel” in downtown San Diego on Sunday, September 13th. Unfortunately, due to problems of logistics and security, the walk was postponed. However, a controversy arose during the planning having to do with the inclusion of Christians United For Israel as a sponsor of the walk.

A number of rabbis in San Diego did not want to support the walk because of Christians United For Israel's participation. They were worried about proselytization and the theological motives that they believe underlie Evangelical Christian support of Israel. Since I had at one time shared their concerns, I do understand them. However, another issue raised was that the social and political agendas of Evangelical Christians do not always mesh with those of the Jewish community, particularly the liberal Jewish community. Among other concerns voiced was that the Evangelical community was not supportive of Gay and Lesbian rights, therefore Jews should not join them in marching in support of Israel.

Even after Christians United For Israel voluntarily offered to withdraw its sponsorship rather than allow its participation to undermine the walk, several congregations still declined to join because the walk coincided and appeared to support “A Night to Honor Israel” that was staged by Christians United for Israel the same evening. It was a kind of “guilt by proximity.”

I was surprised by the decision and its logic. Does that mean we have to agree with someone else’s social and political agendas in order to join with them on matters of mutual concern? Does that mean we cannot celebrate those things that unite us because of those things that divide us? Can we be friends only with people who share all, and not just some of the same opinions?

I not only attended Christians United For Israel’s Night to Honor Israel but was privileged to deliver the opening prayer and introduce Gil Artzyeli, the State of Israel’s Deputy Consul General in Los Angeles. As the members of our congregation who attended can attest, it was an incredibly exciting and moving event. There was cheering, singing, dancing, and celebration. I wish more Jews loved Israel with the same depth of feeling and emotion as I experienced from our Christian friends that night.

There are many Jews who do not agree with much of the Christian Right’s social and political agendas, but we do agree on the need for a strong, safe, and free Israel. That is what Christians United For Israel is about and that is why this organization deserves our thanks and support. What’s more, by coming together on those things we share, we open up an opportunity to dialogue about those things about which we disagree, and perhaps even may learn from each other.

Before the Night to Honor Israel began, I was chatting with Bishop George

Ben Zoma taught:

מִי הוּא הַחָכָם, מִי הוּא הַיָּשָׁר

“Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone.” (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

Although Jewish tradition is far from monolithic, I am sure you get the drift. Judaism has strong opinions of right and wrong and inviolable moral values, but Judaism also prizes friendship, respect, dignity, and harmonious human relationships.

Judaism also places a high value upon listening over speaking. The most important prayer in our tradition, the *Shema*, is really not a prayer but a statement:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ יְיָ

“Hear, O’ Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord Alone.” The Torah does not tell us to speak about, argue about, or defend God, but rather to listen, and not to God – but to each other. “Hear O’ Israel” the verse begins. Before we can pronounce God’s name among the nations of the world, we must first be prepared to listen and learn. Only after we listen, hear, understand, and internalize the concept of one God, are we adequately prepared to share our beliefs with others.

Similarly, before we argue the veracity of our own opinions and beliefs we must be prepared to listen and to understand what those with whom we disagree believe. When we share mutual goals we must demonstrate a willingness to compromise and meet halfway, even with those with whom we most violently disagree. We would do well to remember General Moshe Dayan’s famous words: “If you want to make peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.”

The renowned Rabbi Hillel taught: “Be a disciple of Aaron – loving peace and

pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and attracting them to the study of Torah.”
(Pirkei Avot 1:12)

Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai were colleagues. They lived and taught together during the first century C.E. They were also adversaries when it came to principles of Jewish law. Their disagreements, which were often ferocious in nature, were preserved and continued by their students. *Beit Hillel*, the disciples of Hillel, and *Beit Shammai*, the disciples of Shammai often disagreed on essential principles of Judaism. Nevertheless, they still worshiped and celebrated with each other, and they even married with members of each other’s families despite the fact that they disagreed fundamentally over some of the marriage laws. In other words, they did not allow their disagreements to grow to be barriers separating them.

Eventually, the decisions of Hillel and his students were accepted as authoritative, but not because they were inherently better or more reasonable than Shammai’s. Rather, the Talmud teaches, it was:

.i`ny zia ixace odixac oipeye ,eid oiael re oigepy iptn
.odixacl i`ny zia ixac oinicwny `l`cer `le

“Because they [the disciples of Hillel] were pleasant and humble, teaching the opinion of both sides, and they always stated *Beit Shammai’s* view before their own.” (BT. Eruvim 13b) That is, they respected and honored their opponents.

As you can see, I am not talking about healthcare today...but if I was, this is what I would say: I would say that one of the reasons we have not arrived at any solution for

this moral challenge and imperative is because there is too much talking and not enough listening going on. There is too much demonizing and not enough humanizing of those who disagree, too much posturing and not enough compromising, and almost a complete absence of tolerance, respect, and *menshlichkeit*.

But if I was going to talk about healthcare this is what I would want you to do: After sundown tomorrow night I would ask you to write your president, congressperson, and senator and state the obvious: that a solution needs to be found to this country's healthcare crisis. Then, instead of urging them to take an immovable stand on a specific plan, I would ask them to begin to listen to those with whom they disagree and find a *shvil hazahav*, a golden mean, a compromise, that most of us can live with. What will that compromise be? I make no recommendations, but I am confident that those whom we have elected to public office have the ability to put aside their ideology and self-interest and to come up with something to get the ball rolling. Whatever it is, it will not be a perfect solution, and there probably will never be one, but at least it will be a start, a beginning, and hopefully one that will begin unifying our country instead of continuing to tear it apart.

And as for us, on this Yom Kippur, this day of reflection, atonement, and forgiveness, may we begin to listen to those around us without shutting them down or shutting them out. There are lots of people with whom we disagree and who disagree with us on all kinds of issues, both big and small. But that doesn't mean we cannot respect them, listen to them, learn from them, honor them, and even befriend them. We must tone down our rhetoric and reintroduce civility into our relationships with others. We must learn how to listen, how to be patient, and how to compromise. We must learn,

as Rabbi Hillel advises, to

מי שרצה שיהיה לו תלמידים יתחיל ללמוד

ללמוד מכל אדם

“Be disciples of Aaron – loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and attracting them to the study of Torah.” (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

Let us look for that which we share and have in common, that which unites us, instead of focusing and fixating on that which divides us. Let us live the lesson of Rabbi Ben Zoma who taught:

מי חכם? למינין

“Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone.” (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

JUSTICE, DIVINE AND HUMAN

For almost as long as I have been a rabbi I have taught a class called “Basic Judaism.” “Basic Judaism” is a class for potential Jews by Choice, non-Jews who are curious about Judaism, and Jews who have forgotten everything they learned in Hebrew School or never learned it to begin with.

Judaism is a timeless enterprise whose roots go back over 3,500 years, so I don’t think I will be giving away any secrets if I tell you that I have pretty much used the same teaching notes for the last 30 years. But I am never bored because students bring their own backgrounds and insights to class and ask excellent questions. Sometimes I can answer them, sometimes I have look things up, and sometimes I am challenged to review and reconsider my own beliefs.

This past year I was challenged in a way that left me at a loss for words. One of the course topics is death and dying and Jewish funeral and mourning practices. I always explain the most commonly held Jewish beliefs on the existence of an afterlife. I said that while classical Judaism believes in heaven, it does not believe in eternal damnation or an eternal hell. While Christianity asserts that once sinners die they are incapable of redemption and spend eternity in a fiery netherworld, Judaism believes:

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“The wicked are punished in *Gehenna* for twelve months.” (T.B. Shabbat 33b)

The Talmud teaches that after we die nearly every human being goes to *Gehenna*, or purgatory, to be punished for our earthly sins. However, with rare

exception, the time of punishment is limited, and after being punished and atoning for our sins, almost everyone goes to heaven. The maximum amount of time one can spend in purgatory is twelve months. After that, all except the very worst sinners are redeemed and go to heaven. This explains, by the way, the custom of saying Mourner's *Kaddish* for only eleven months after the death of a parent. There is a tradition that the *Kaddish* serves as an appeal to God to shorten the time one's loved one is punished in *Gehenna*. If you said *Kaddish* for a full year you would be implying that your parent was a very bad person and deserved the maximum sentence!

After I finished my presentation one of my students was visibly shaken and upset. "That's not fair!" she blurted out. She shared the following story with us:

She told us that her ex-husband was abusive, a liar, a bigamist, and a criminal. He had done all kinds of horrible things to many people, and to her in particular. She was constantly in fear and had moved around the world to elude him. She could not risk him finding her.

He had almost ruined her life and she was in the process of healing. One of the ways she had come to terms with all of the hurt and misery she had suffered was her conviction that one day God would punish her abuser for his sins, and that he would rot in hell for eternity.

I had just shattered her hard and laboriously achieved peace of mind. "Does this mean," she asked, "that since Judaism does not believe in eternal damnation, that after all my ex has done, he will only be punished with a few short months of suffering in *Gehenna*? How could he possibly pay for all of the evil he caused in such a short time? And then he will be forgiven by God and go to heaven? And possible end up sitting next

to me? How is that just? How is that fair? How is that right?”

There was silence in the room. What had begun as a rather routine, logical, and systematic discourse on Jewish views of afterlife had turned into deeper questions about life and death, good and evil, reward and punishment, damnation and redemption, and the nature of God.

Since that day I have spent a lot of time thinking about this woman’s pleas for justice, if not in this world, then in the next. A basic tenet of Judaism, one which is reflected in the prayers of these High Holy Days, is that God is always willing to forgive and welcome the truly penitent. Everyone is capable of *teshuva*, of making up for their sins and returning to God. But is there a hypothetical line over which someone may step that makes forgiveness, even divine forgiveness, impossible?

There are some people who are so evil and do such terrible things that it is difficult to understand how they might ever atone for their sins. Hitler, for example, comes immediately to mind. But there are others as well. A few weeks ago I, and most Americans, were horrified when Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill released convicted Lockerbie terrorist Abdelbaset al Megrahi from prison on “compassionate grounds.” Al Megrahi had been serving a life sentence for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 which killed 270 innocent people. To make matters worse, Al Megrahi never expressed sorrow or regret for his act. Despite the evidence and his conviction, he continues to claim innocence.

When releasing Al Megrahi, who has terminal cancer and only a few months to live, MacAskill said: “Our justice system demands that judgment be imposed but

compassion available. Our beliefs dictate that justice be served but mercy be shown.”
(CNN on-line updated 9:10 a.m. EDT, Thu August 20, 2009)

Most people, with the exception of his Libyan compatriots, were angered by this showing of compassion. They agree with the sentiments expressed by Susan Cohen whose twenty-year old daughter Theodora was killed in the bombing: “This is mercy? Do you know what I've been living with for over 20 years now? This man deserves no compassion. He is a convicted mass murderer and terrorist. What have we come to, that this man is released?” (CNN on-line updated 7:37 p.m. EDT, Thu August 20, 2009)

Most people I know believe that Al Megrahi did not deserve compassion and should have died in jail. This would have been what was just and right.

It would also seem just and right that a terrorist and murderer such as Al Megrahi never be allowed in to heaven. But God is not bound by human perceptions of justice. That's one of the privileges of being God. Why wouldn't a good and loving God give even unrepentant murderers, such as Al Megrahi, an opportunity to do *teshuva*? Who are we to say that he is beyond redemption? Perhaps in *Gehenna* Al Megrahi will come to see the error of his ways, confess his sins, and take responsibility for the death and pain he caused.

If he truly does *teshuva* shouldn't God welcome him to heaven with open arms? We believe that God is compassionate and willing to forgive those who repent. Not only do we believe this, we count upon God's forgiving nature during these holidays:

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“O God, our Ruler, enthroned in mercy,

You rule with lovingkindness.

You pardon Your people's transgressions,
Forgiving them again and again.

You are generous in forgiveness to sinners;
You deal mercifully with all creatures
Not according to the evil of their deeds.”

We appeal to God to overlook our sins and shortcomings. We claim that no matter how horribly we may have acted or how awful our deeds, we are deserving of forgiveness. We believe that *teshuva*, heartfelt repentance and a change of internalized values, attitudes, and actions, is possible and efficacious.

Shouldn't we, therefore, believe that others who do wrong can also repent? Shouldn't they also be given additional opportunities to atone for their sins? Shouldn't they also benefit from God's forgiveness, mercy, and compassion?

Although logically and intellectually this seems right, emotionally it lands with a thud. Although God may be ever ready to forgive the sinner, we humans are not. It seems to be part of human nature to want retribution. We want those who have hurt us punished. We want them to suffer for the pain they have caused us. We want, as the Bible says,

“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” On some level, we think that this will somehow balance the scales of justice. Even those who say “In my heart I have already forgiven the person who harmed me” usually do not ask that a

criminal not be punished.

But on some level, doesn't **עין תענה עין וטעם תענה טעם** "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," diminish us as human beings? What does this desire to physically hurt others say about us? The rabbis of the Talmud wanted to diminish our "blood lust." Long ago they interpreted this verse, **עין תענה עין וטעם תענה טעם** "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," non-literally. They said that an "eye for an eye" means monetary and not physical punishment. You don't literally take out someone's eye if they hurt your eye, they pay a monetary fine instead. The rabbis of the Talmud understood that direct and "equal" physical punishment lowers us to the levels of our abusers.

Additionally, while we may derive some modicum of satisfaction when evil doers are punished, their suffering does not remove the pain from our hearts. In fact, focusing on justice and retribution as a way of assuaging our own pain may have the opposite effect. Raging at the injustices of life, both real and imagined, usually does not solve the problem. Our desire for revenge instead becomes an acid that gradually eats at our hearts and souls. The simple fact is that there is often nothing we can do to right the wrong, fix the hurt, or adequately punish our oppressors. The only thing we will achieve is to push away those we love and destroying ourselves. For our own good, we need to let go of our anger, turn away from our hurt, and transform our negative energy into creative, good, and Godly acts.

But what about all of those deep religious and theological questions with which I began this talk? Questions about God, about fairness and justice, good and evil, reward and punishment, and redemption? How does letting go of our desire for revenge answer

them? It doesn't. For better or for worse, the answers to these questions are out of our hands. We can't make sense of or resolve the inequities of the world. Existential fairness and justice are in God's hands, and not ours.

Every time we want to seethe and rage over the hurt and pain we receive at the hands of others, I suggest we turn instead to the prayer expressed by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

“God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.”

As I said last year at this time. We can't change others. The only one we can change is ourselves.

I recently read an advance copy of a book by Mitch Albom of “Tuesdays with Morrie” fame. It is called “Have a Little Faith” and is scheduled to be released this Tuesday. I have already selected “Have a Little Faith” for my annual Sisterhood and Men's Club Book review.

“Have a Little Faith” tells the life stories of two men of faith: Rabbi Albert Lewis, z”l, who was the rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom in Cherry Hill, New Jersey for 44 years, and Pastor Henry Covington, who still serves Pilgrim Church in Detroit, Michigan.

Of the two, I found Pastor Covington's story more compelling. Henry Covington was a criminal in his youth and early adulthood. After a near brush with death at the hands of drug dealers from who he stole, Henry turned his life around and now devotes

himself to serving the poor, hungry, and homeless in Detroit.

In his dialogues with Mitch Albom, Henry Covington expressed his own questions and concerns about ultimate justice, not from the victim's side but from a one time criminal. I found his words moving and helpful and would like to share an excerpt from "Have a Little Faith" with you.

"Mitch, I am an awful person," Henry said. "The things I have done in my life, they can never can be erased. I have broken every one of the Ten Commandments."

"Come on. Every one?" asked Mitch Albom.

"When I was younger, in some ways, yes, every one."

Stealing? False witness? Coveting?

"Yes."

Adultery?

"Umm-hmm."

Murder?

"I never pulled the trigger, but I was involved enough. I could have stopped things before a life was taken. I didn't. So I was involved in murder."

He looked away.

"It was a cutthroat business, dog eat dog, the strong preying on the weak. In the lifestyle I was in, people were killed. It happened every day.

"I hate that person I was. I went to prison for a crime I did not do, but I did things out here that I should have gone back for. I was cowardly. I was hard. That may not be who I am now, but it's who I was."

He sighed. "It's who I was."

His chin dropped to his chest. I heard his nasal breathing, in and out.

“I deserve hell,” he whispered. “The things I've done, God would be justified. God is not mocked. What you sow, you reap.

“That's why I tell my congregation, don't put me on a pedestal. I sermonize about wanting cherries when you're planting lemons, but I've planted many lemons in my life...”

His eyes were teary now.

“...and I may not have reaped all that harvest.”

I don't understand, I said. If you think you're going to be punished—

“Why still serve God?” He smiled weakly. “What else can I do? It's like when everyone was turning away, and Jesus asked the apostles, 'Will you go, too?' And Peter said, 'Where can I go, Lord?’

“I know what he meant. Where do you go from God? He's everywhere.”

But, Henry, all the good you do here—

“No.” He shook his head. “You can't work your way into heaven. Anytime you try and justify yourself with works, you disqualify yourself with works. What I do here, every day, for the rest of my life, is only my way of saying, ‘Lord, regardless of what eternity holds for me, let me give something back to you. I know it don't even no scorecard. But let me make something of my life before I go...’”

He exhaled a long weary breath.

“And then, Lord, I'm at your mercy.”

Nothing we do or say will insure a just and fair world. Ultimate justice is up to God

and God alone. We have no say in what is ultimately just and right. All we have is faith, faith that in the end God will do what is just and right.

The only thing in our hands is our own lives. We can't add or subtract from the heavenly scales of our fellow human beings. But we can make sure that at the end of our life, our good deeds outweigh the bad.