

FROM RABBI ZEMEL

MY LOVE FOR ISRAEL IS NOT RETURNED BUT THRIVES STILL

DEAR FRIENDS,

I am writing this column from the Tel Aviv apartment Louise and I have rented



for our sabbatical stay. By the time you read it, we will be back in Washington and I will be back to my Micah routine.

I love Israel even as she “refuses to love me in return.” That’s how an Israeli doctor once described my lop-

sided relationship with a country that I love, but that does not recognize my – or any non-Orthodox forms – of Judaism. The statement has become a metaphor through which I view my relationship with this place that I am unable not to love.

The politics here have taken a hard-right turn. Israelis increasingly view the West Bank as part of Israel. That attitude is clearly reflected in President Trump’s new peace initiative, which would allow Israel to annex the settlements. In the last Knesset elections, the left-of-center Jewish parties received a mere 11 seats out of a possible 120. Ben Gurion’s once-dominant Labor Party won just six of those seats. “How the mighty have fallen” (Samuel II 1:19). This is simply an indication of where things stand politically in this simultaneously fascinating and confounding place that I cannot help but love.

Very few Israelis talk about peace with the Palestinians or a two-state solution or even stability in the region. The real concern here is Iran. At a recent dinner, an avowed leftist told me that most Israelis, including himself, thought there was a 50 percent chance of war

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The Purpose of Literature May Be a Way to Understand the World and Ourselves

BY FRAN DAUTH

IN THE FALL of 2019, the Micah congregation was led in a discussion of Paul Beatty’s novel, “The Sellout,” by Gayle Wald, a Micah member who teaches African American literature at George Washington.

Many of those who were there in November, asked for a repeat with Professor Wald. They have gotten their wish. Wald will lead a conversation at Temple Micah at a future date of “Friday Black,” a short-story collection by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah.

Rabbi Zemel says Gayle Wald is “a treasure for us. Gayle is a brilliant teacher with a wicked sense of humor. She makes me want to go back to school all over again.”

A look at her professional history makes it clear why she gets that kind of an accolade.

Wald earned her bachelor’s degree in English and French from the University of Virginia and a Ph.D in English from Princeton University.

Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and two National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships.

Wald has taught and written about African American literature, music, gender, race theory and feminism.

She has been teaching African American literature at GW since 1995.

“Even as I was working on my dissertation about racial passing (pretending to be something other than your given identity, but also light-skinned people who passed as white to avoid racism and

discrimination), I was developing expertise in 20th century music.

“These interests crossed when I wrote a biography of Rosetta Tharpe, a crossover gospel star.”

That book, “Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll



Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe,” was published by Beacon Press in 2007. It was the basis for the 2011 documentary film “Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll.” It also is the basis for a musical that premiered in 2017. Last year, Beacon released an

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"Every person shall sit under
his grapevine or fig tree with
no one to make him afraid."
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Vine

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TO YOU, MY MICAH COMMUNITY, I EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE: YOU ARE AMAZING

BY MARCIA FINE SILCOX

A Harvard HEALTHbeat newsletter says,
"In positive psychology research, gratitude
is strongly and consistently associated



with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity and build strong relationships."

You can find plenty of science and a lot

of popular writing making such claims. Stating and writing thoughts of personal gratitude are said to have significant and lasting effects. We have some formal opportunities to be grateful, in prayer, at Thanksgiving or in our Passover Dayenu. But here is my opportunity to express my gratitude to all of you, my Micah community.

Before my time on the board and as president ends in June, I want to reflect briefly on the many things I have gained, and give you my thanks, both publicly and privately.

I'm Okay With Elitism

First, I am grateful for the people who elect to make themselves part of Micah. I'm okay with the elitism inherent in saying we are amazing. Some of my dearest friendships are with other parents in our epic midweek Hebrew school carpool, 20 years ago. Some of my newest friends were born of a Micah Israel trip and my board duty. I deeply admire, and hope to emulate those of you who simply make programs happen here every day.

I'm of course grateful for the soulful

music, the brilliant worship leadership of our rabbis, the depth of thought, the sheer variety of content and opportunity. I know of no other entity so small that offers so much. Thank you for bringing depth and intellectual challenges to every encounter.

Stepping Outside

It would be easy to have gratitude only for what goes on inside our walls, but we all must be increasingly thankful for how gracefully we have managed to step beyond our threshold into the worlds of need. These efforts provide clean underwear, support for an immigrant family, or share Shabbat joy with young families in their own neighborhoods.

When you serve on the board you get to see what it takes to run a successful nonprofit: the budgeting and funding, answering the phones, maintaining a calendar or website, managing a school, typing those service sheets, and attending to the needs of congregants. I am beyond grateful to our executive director, education director and their staff. They sweat the big stuff and the small stuff.

I extend my gratitude to my fellow board members as well. We, and the shoulders of those upon whom we stand, created a living institution that is a model for its peers. Board members give their time, thoughtfulness and energy unstintingly.

Thank you Micah, for being a place to share the joy of our children's b'nai mitzvah, and to share sorrow in reciting Kaddish. Thank you for accepting all who want to step inside.

I am deeply grateful.

The Feast

THE APRICOT-PINEAPPLE NOODLE KUGEL EDITION

BY ALEXANDRA WISOTSKY

BEFORE JOINING TEMPLE Micah, Jennifer Kaplan and her husband Tom Trendl met with Rabbi Zemel to learn more about the place. Tom, a Chicago native, began the conversation. “I need to ask you a question,” he said. It was a baseball question. To which Rabbi Zemel responded by showing him the White Sox screen saver on his laptop. That sealed the deal.

Their time at Micah started years earlier, however, when they began attending children’s services at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, finally joining in 2012.

Once they joined, Jennifer said, it was like joining a family – not only is she the pediatrician for many of Micah’s youth, but she said the temple had the most warm and welcoming environment of anywhere she had been.

Since joining, Jennifer and her family have been involved with the Micah community in various ways, including going as a family on the Israel trip in 2018. Daughter Sophia will be called as

a Bat Mitzvah in May, and son Devin is in the youth choir.

The noodle kugel recipe is a go-to of Jennifer’s mother who always made it for break-fast. “It reminds me of my great-grandmother because she used to make things with lots of heavy dairy,” Jennifer said.

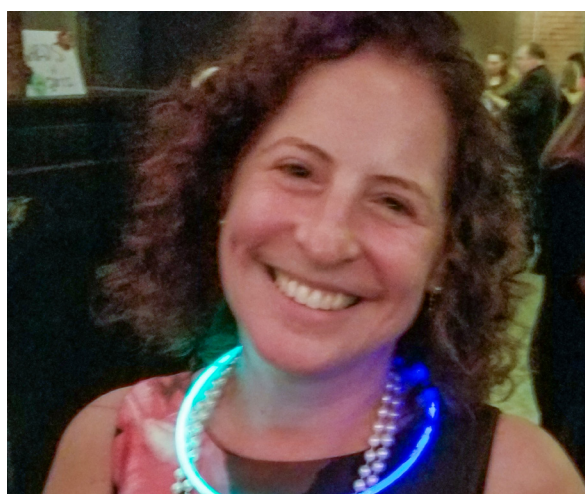
She has been asking her mother to compile the family recipes for years, even getting her an app to do so. “I just collect them little by little when I go to visit,” she said.

The first time Jennifer made this kugel was when my family went to her house for a break-fast several years ago. Since then, my son requests it whenever there is mention of seeing the Kaplan-Trendl clan, regardless of the occasion, becoming a favorite for my family too.

Fortunately, Jennifer

has shared the recipe with me. If we are lucky enough to have leftovers, I fully admit to noshing on it, one forkful at a time, directly from the fridge. (There are no calories that way, right?).

Jennifer says her mother has yet to compile all of her recipes, but she is still working on her. Next up on Jennifer’s “to cook” list is her grandmother’s homemade gefilte fish.



APRICOT-PINEAPPLE NOODLE KUGEL

Serves 12

Ingredients:

- 1 lb wide egg noodles, cooked and drained
- 1½ pints sour cream
- 1½ cups melted butter
- 1½ cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 5 eggs, beaten
- One 1-lb can crushed pineapple, well drained
- 4 oz dried apricots, diced (may substitute dried peaches, diced)
- A teaspoon of cinnamon and sugar mixed

Steps

1. Preheat oven to 350F.
2. Grease a 9x13-inch baking pan.
3. In a large bowl, blend sugar, eggs and vanilla.
4. Add butter and sour cream.
5. Add diced apricots and crushed pineapple.
6. Stir in the cooked noodles.
7. Pour the mixture into the prepared pan.
8. Sprinkle cinnamon-sugar mix on top.
9. Bake for 45 minutes.

NOTE: If freezing, bake for 30 minutes. Defrost completely, and then reheat at 350F, until heated through.

YOU CAN LEARN TO BAKE CHALLAH FOR FREE

They are skilled challah bakers and they'd love to teach you how to bake challot yourself. They are Micah members who gather one Friday each month to bake challot for members of the congregation who are ailing or grieving or celebrating a simcha.

Recently, in addition to the traditional loaves, the bakers turned out a heart-shaped challah for the oneg on Feb. 14.

Now the bakers, led by challah master David Pansegrouw, are looking for new bakers to join them. Never baked challot? Don't worry, the veteran bakers will show you how. Besides, they need your help.

Veteran challah baker Geri Nielsen says on those Fridays when baking gets underway "we are sending the warmth from our ovens to our community and braiding thoughtfulness into the lives of people who need it the most. And, we have a great time doing it."

Baking begins at 10 am in the Micah kitchen and usually ends about 2 pm. Volunteers are needed also to deliver the challot, either on Friday afternoon or Saturday.

To be notified of the next Friday baking session or for more information email challahbaking@templemicah.org.

The challah project is done in coordination with Hineni, which identifies challah recipients.

Rabbi's Message FROM PAGE 1 ►

with Iran sometime this year. Moreover, they did not view Israel as the likely instigator. Iran longs to be the dominant power in the region. Israel is the barrier. Iran's proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, have Israel encircled. In this person's view, the Middle East is increasingly unstable with no outside adult working to bring calm.

It is as if Israelis assume "the conflict" is something they will always have to live with. Life, in the meantime, goes on.

Each time I am here, most every year, I am swept away. Israel has a vitality that I do not experience anywhere. The streets pulsate with an energy that is hard to describe. The cafes are teeming with people. The streets are crowded, the markets full. Life here is lived daily in the fast lane, as if there is no time to spare.

I have come to think that the frenzied pace is due, in part, to the surrounding — and very close — instability. It is as if the country's small size magnifies the intensity of everything that goes on within it. I only somewhat jokingly said to Louise that some worldwide consortium of car manufacturers must have made a pact: As cars come off the assembly line in plants from Michigan to Japan to Germany, the

horns are tested. Those with the loudest and most annoying horns are earmarked for export to Israel.

There is more.

When here, I cannot help but remember the Zionists who dreamt of and worked to create the reality that surrounds me. Some, like Herzl, simply wanted a place that would be a safe haven for Jews from the deathly virulence of European anti-Semitism. Indeed, I feel very safe here. Others wanted a place where Jewish culture could flourish, free from the implicit judgment of a majority host culture. Jewish culture in so many forms does flourish here.

I believe the founders also wanted to create a country that would be guided by the noble principles of Jewish justice as articulated in the Bible, rabbinic literature and medieval philosophical thought. However, this remains a struggle, a work in progress.

The tragic Jewish history of 20th-century Europe had an enduring and unforeseeable impact on the Zionist project. Israel might have been inspired and founded by ideologically committed Zionists, but at the end of the day, it was built by refugees. Those who fled Hitler's Europe were very soon followed by exiles from Arab lands. Years later,

they were followed by Russian refuseniks and Ethiopians, all seeking refuge. A great aliyah of inspired American Zionists never materialized. Years of war, hostile neighbors and suicide bombings all took a toll and had a profound impact. How could security not dominate the politics of a country that has mandatory military service for men and women, especially in light of an intractable, uncompromising negotiating partner? Living in a tough neighborhood hardens the soul.

Despite all this, Israel is alive like no other place I have been.

And many Israelis give me reason to hope. The sheer number of institutions and people working on behalf of social change is staggering. They provide a bright and shining beacon of light for a different future. Even as this country is beset with challenges and what for me is a disturbing politics, Israel is overflowing with heroes who have committed themselves to fulfilling the earliest Zionists' dreams of a just society based on Jewish principles.

Givat Haviva is a shining star of this vision. I could not be prouder of our Micah community's strong relationship with this oldest of Israeli institutions devoted to creating a shared society of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.

We spent time with Yaniv Sagee, the institute's executive director, whom many of you have met in either Israel or at Micah. We also visited the institute's newest project, Givat Haviva International High School. This school is an International Baccalaureate high school for Israeli and foreign students. Half of the students are from outside Israel. Of the Israeli students, half are Palestinian, half are Jewish. Many of the foreign students come from conflict regions around the world, such as South Sudan or Kosovo. We met some of the students, who are inspiring, positive and filled with hope. Givat Haviva is brimming with the promise and energy of a new Zionism.

Givat Haviva is one of the institutions that receives annual contributions from our Temple Micah Israel Fund. Yaniv Sagee and other justice leaders deserve our most generous support.

We live in a time when it is tempting for many of us to disconnect from Israel. I am unable to do that. The twists of history have brought about two great experiments in how to be a Jew in the 21st century: American Jewish pluralism and Israeli nationalism. I want Jewish liberalism to thrive in both.

Shalom,
Daniel G. Zemel

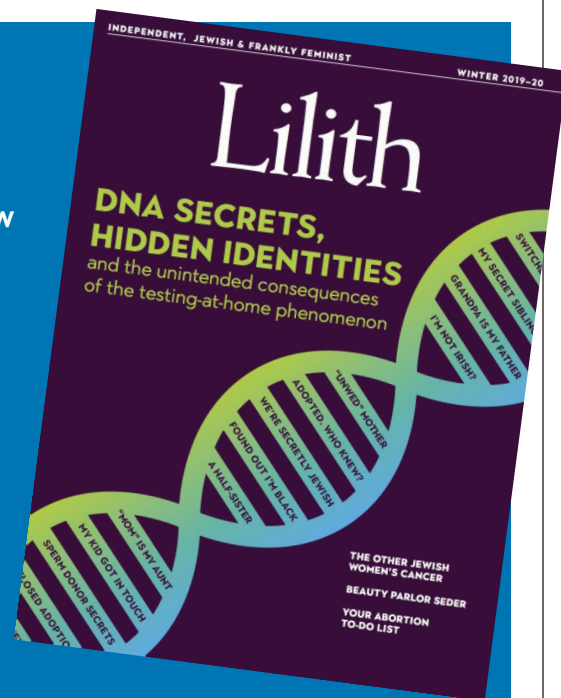
NEW IN THE TEMPLE MICAH LIBRARY

The Temple Micah Library's new subscription to *Lilith*, a Jewish feminist journal, has arrived. In addition, several new books are now available.

Evelyn Torton Beck, a Micah member who specialized in women, Jewish women, and gender studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, calls *Lilith* "a must read for anyone interested in gender issues which are salient to everyone in our community. *Lilith* has a history of bold reporting, while publishing memoir, original fiction and poetry, as well as reviews of books and films."

Rebecca Mazur, the Temple Micah librarian, notes the magazine will be available to read at the library, but can't be checked out.

New books of interest at the Micah library, according to Mazur, include "Antisemitism: Here and Now" by Deborah Lipstadt; "Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast" by Aaron W. Hughes; and "1944 Diary" by Hans Keilson.



Gayle Wald FROM PAGE 1 ►

audiobook of "Shout, Sister, Shout," featuring Leslie Uggams.

Wald said she is now working on "a biography of Ella Jenkins, an African American woman who is sometimes known as the First Lady of Children's Music.

"She is 95 and has made over 40 albums. She essentially invented children's music as we have come to understand it as a distinct enterprise related to children's developmental needs."

Asked about the upcoming encore session with Temple Micah members, Wald said "the request for an encore has made me think about what the purpose of our reading is.

"I think novels give us ways of understanding the world — they literally are a form of knowledge."

It was Rabbi Zemel, not Wald, who suggested the congregation read "The Sellout," by Paul Beatty. Rabbi Zemel had read the book and wanted to know more.

Wald said she had been teaching Beatty's work since the mid-1990s, but hadn't had a chance to read "The Sellout" until she was asked to lead the Micah conversation.

In retrospect, she said, it was great to invite the congregation to read a novel that was written as satire "because it is supposed to make you uncomfortable, as all satire does. It doesn't give readers an easy way to distance themselves."

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE ►



Jan Greenberg holds song lyrics for the youth choir as it rehearses for Shabbat Shirah on Feb. 8. The “Sabbath of Singing” service featured the Micah orchestra and both the youth and adult choirs. (Photo by Martha Ransohoff Adler.)

Gayle Wald FROM PREVIOUS PAGE ►

She added she “was pleasantly surprised by how passionately people responded to the novel – whether they loved or hated it.”

This time the selection of “Friday Black” was her choice.

“Someone told me to read the book and I did and was blown away. Since I read it I’ve been recommending it to everyone and am teaching it in a course this semester. The stories are powerful, cutting-edge, and challenging.”

In the New York Times 2018 review of “Friday Black,” Tommy Orange, author of “There There,” first notes that he believes “fiction can change minds, build empathy by asking readers to walk in others’ shoes, and thereby contribute to real change,” and then Orange suggests the stories in “Friday Black” are “strange and beautiful” and “meant to be read right now.” The book, he said, “is an unbelievable debut, one that announces a new and necessary American voice.”

A New York Times profile of the “Friday Black” author, Adjei-Brenyah, notes he took a writing workshop with George Saunders, author of “Lincoln in the Bardo.” Of Adjei-Brenyah, Saunders has said: “This is a person who’s using fiction to ask and answer big, urgent questions.”

Rabbi Zemel, in an email to the congregation, said “This collection of short stories, selected for us by Professor Wald, would seem an excellent follow up ...as the author of “Friday Black” explores themes surrounding black identity as it relates to a range of contemporary social issues.”

Wald and her husband Scott Barash, who is general counsel for the D.C. Public Schools, joined Temple Micah when their son was a toddler. Zachary is becoming bar mitzvah in March. ♦



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THE LIFE OF TEMPLE MICAH

A MORAL IMAGINATION FOR THESE TIMES

BY RABBI STEPHANIE CRAWLEY

On Dec. 31st, 2016, clergy members and leaders across the religious spectrum gathered for a late-night prayer service at the Metropolitan AME Church in Washington. Having watched and witnessed the hate that had been revealed and growing during America over the 2016 election, the speakers offered comfort and wisdom, on the eve of 2017.

I watched the service on live-stream, and found myself particularly moved by the words of Valarie Kaur, a Sikh civil rights lawyer and activist. She asked, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

Kaur asked all those listening to see the potential of the moment. In a time of growing hate and moral crisis, she asked “what if?” What is waiting to be born? What is next for us? Can we imagine?

What Kaur was speaking of, is the idea of moral imagination.

What if, imagination is our way forward?

Amos Oz, the Israeli author and poet, wrote on the subject:

“I believe that imagining the other is a powerful antidote to fanaticism and hatred. I believe that books that make us imagine the other may make us more immune to the ploys of the devil, including the inner devil, the Mephisto of the heart. ... Imagining the other is not only an aesthetic tool. It is in my view, also a major moral imperative.”

Imagination, according to Oz, is the first step in creating a new reality. Imagination is a uniquely human trait. Through imagination, we understand ourselves as greater than our animalistic instincts. We put words to what is ineffable, we express what is eternal. The ability to create, perpetuate, and evolve ethics and values is one of the things that makes us human.

Imagination is an exercise in empathy. Although I can not know what another is feeling or needs, we employ imagina-

tion, and by doing so, the other becomes human themselves.

In Oz’s words: “Perhaps activating one’s imagination, being forced to look at the suffering of one’s victims at close range, may have the power, here and there, to act as an antidote to simplified cruelty.”

David Bromwich, in his introduction to his book of essays on this topic defines moral imagination as:

“The power that compels us to grant the highest possible reality and the largest conceivable claim to a thought, action, or person that is not our own, and not close to us in any obvious way. The force of the idea of moral imagination is to deny that we can ever know ourselves sufficiently to settle on a named identity that prescribes our conduct or affiliations. Moral imagination therefore seems to me inseparable from the freedom that is possible in society.”

Moral imagination is the act of seeing a world that is beyond the one we are living in, the world of our aspirations. And thus, cultivating moral imagination is the first step of building that world. Moral imagination helps us see the womb instead of the tomb. It is what activist Adrienne Maree Brown calls “science fictional behavior,” that is, “believing it is possible to create the next world...” and then owning that future as our own, “to practice the future together.”

Practicing the future together — this is the cultivation of moral imagination.

It is Harriet Tubman declaring, “My people are free,” when slavery was still legal.

It is civil rights protesters marching with signs proclaiming, “I Am a Man,” when dominant society was trying to demean and demoralize them.

And moral imagination is ever-present in our Torah, especially in the story of the Exodus. When the Israelites prepare for freedom without having ever experienced



it, they are cultivating moral imagination.

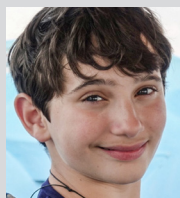
And it is this act of moral imagination that we engage in each time we repeat the story on Passover. As we say each year, “In every generation, each one of us must see ourselves as though we personally went out of Egypt.” This is moral imagination, to imagine ourselves as slaves, and then use that imagined experience to alter how we act in our current world.

There is a Midrash (Jewish legend or interpretation) about Miriam. She is living in a world with very little hope, where Pharaoh has decreed that all young boys must be thrown into the river. Despite this, Miriam declares in a prophesy, “my mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel.” Here, she literally imagines the womb that is creating the future redemption for the Israelites. Miriam’s father, Amram, is only able to see the world as it is, decrees to all the Israelites that no new children should be conceived, because of Pharaoh’s decree. He says, “Why bring children into the world for nothing?” Miriam responds, “Father, your decree is more harsh than Pharaoh’s! He only decreed against the male children, and your action is preventing any child, male or female from life!”

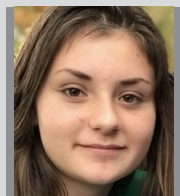
Ultimately, Amram finds the wisdom of his daughter’s moral imagination. He reverses his decree, which allows Moses to be born and create that imagined future of freedom.

Our task is to cultivate this kind of imagination, to use our current moment as an opportunity to ask “What if?” “What might be born out of this moment?” and to then work to build from there.

B'NAI MITZVAH



ZACHARY ADAM BARASH
MARCH 7 / 11 ADAR
PARENTS: Scott Barash and Gayle Wald
TORAH PORTION: Tetzaveh



ELODIE FLEURENCE
MARCH 14 / 18 ADAR
PARENTS: Olivier and Rachael Fleurence
TORAH PORTION: Ki Tisa



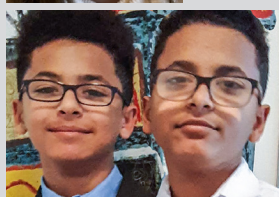
MATAN JOSEPH JI NUO FERGUSON
MARCH 21 / 25 ADAR
PARENTS: Laura and Ronald Ferguson
TORAH PORTION: Vayakhel-Pekudei



JAKE GENTIN
MARCH 28 / 3 NISAN
PARENTS: Andrew and Kim Gentin
TORAH PORTION: Vayikra



HANNAH RAE GOLDBERG
APRIL 4 / 10 NISAN
PARENTS: Laurel and Oren Goldberg
TORAH PORTION: Tzav



EITAN POLANCO
OMER POLANCO
APRIL 11 / 17 NISAN
PARENTS: Juan ("Tony") Polanco and Mieka Brand Polanco
TORAH PORTION: Chol Hamo-eid



MAGGIE ROSE MCLAUGHLIN
APRIL 18 / 24 NISAN
PARENTS: Mark Levine and Amy McLaughlin
TORAH PORTION: Shmini



LAILA EMELIA OKO
APRIL 25 / 1 IYYAR
PARENTS: Jennifer Cohen Oko and Michael Kuhn Oko
TORAH PORTION: Tazria-Metzora

The 44th Annual



Will be held online! Details coming soon!

CONDOLENCES

The Temple Micah community extends its deepest condolences to:

ERIC ALBERT, on the passing of his grandfather, Carl Messinger

BETSI CLOSTER AND ARLENE REINIGER, on the passing of their Father, Past President of Temple Micah, Gerry Liebenau

STACY DAVIS, on the passing of her mother, Anita Bernard

JUDY HOROWITZ, on the passing of her mother, Shirley Simon

SANDER LURIE AND ELLEN LURIE HOFFMAN, on the passing of Sander's mother and Ellen's aunt, Lois Lurie

AMY MCLAUGHLIN, on the passing of her mother, Wendy McLaughlin

MIEKA POLANCO, on the passing of her father, Shimon Brand

LEARITA SCOTT, on the passing of her husband, Bob Friedman

MICHAEL SEWELL, on the passing of his father, John Williamson Sewell

DAVID STERMAN, on the passing of his grandmother, Betsy Serman

Yael Traum, on the passing of her father, Freddie Traum

BOBBIE WENDEL, on the passing of her sister, Debbie McKerrow

May their memories be for a blessing.

BERAHA'S BLACKBOARD

THE MORAL RELEVANCE OF JUDAISM AS RELEVANT TODAY AS IN 1885

BY RABBI JOSH BERAHA

If you were a reform-minded Jew living in New York City during the summer of 1885, you might have had the privilege to hear Rabbi Kaufman Kohler deliver a series of sermons he called *Backward or Forward*.

At the time Kohler was 42, and 16 years in America, and 16 years into his rabbinate, the last six of which he spent as the rabbi of Beth El in New York City. He was at the time, on all accounts, at an intellectual peak of his career.

Born in Bavaria, a major center of Jewish learning, and a descendant of rabbis, Kohler received a traditional Jewish education and even studied with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, an early proponent of what is now Orthodox Judaism.

But upon studying biblical criticism and other post-enlightenment ideas at a secular university in Berlin, Kohler was unable to square his early education with this new learning, and was consequently also then unable to lead any community in Europe where there was, at the time, no room for the type of reform Kohler certainly had in mind for Jewish practice. He did however find a home overseas at congregations in Detroit, then Chicago and eventually New York, where he experimented with ideas that would become our modern Reform movement.

A Living Judaism

In *Backward or Forward*, Kohler promulgated the idea that modern American Jews had “outgrown the guiding strings and swaddling-clothes of infancy.” If at one time rabbinic law guided our people, he argued, what we need to move forward is a “living Judaism.” (In Chicago he had even experimented with moving Shabbat to Sunday!)

After 16 years in America, Kohler was

smart enough to know that this “living Judaism” needed definition, a framework, lest it devolve into no religion at all and lose its particularity. Thus, in an effort to draw lines in the sand, and also to respond to those who saw the new reformers as heretics to the “Tradition,” in November of 1885 Kohler convened a conference in Pittsburgh for like-minded, progressive rabbis who were concerned with the future of American Judaism.

Together with Kohler they asked themselves:

If rabbinic Judaism was like a baby learning to walk, what would Judaism be like if it could stand on its own two feet, untethered from the restrictions of an outdated law code?

How could the Jewish spirit continue to burn if the Bible is not the actual word of God? How can we account for the lived experience of modern man?

How can we withstand criticism from traditionalists on the one hand, and ethical humanist Jews on the other? And most of all, how can we not move backward, and establish a positive, forward looking, American Jewish experience?

The Pittsburgh Platform

What emerged from their retreat was the Pittsburgh Platform, a document with eight principles that outlined the major tenets of Reform Judaism. A document — to quote from the fifth principle — for “the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect.”

In 2020, the name “Pittsburgh” used in a Jewish context is inexorably linked to the shooting that took place at Tree of Life Synagogue. When I hear the name of the city, however, I sometimes try to force myself to think about the Pittsburgh Platform, because there is a connection between the two in more than language.



What Kohler brought to light in 1885 was the moral spirit of Judaism. To be sure, Kohler was one among many reformers, who raised this notion. Isaac Mayer Wise once beautifully described the God of Israel as “Ethics’ Primeval Rock,” noting “God is and always was the most sublime ideal of human perfection.” In Kohler’s words, “The soul of the Jewish religion is its ethics. Its God is the fountainhead and Ideal of morality.” To this point the platform beautifully speaks of “the indwelling of God in man,” and “the divine nature of the human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness.”

Our Continued Gift

The attack at Tree of Life — but more broadly the ongoing struggles of our country to see and treat all people with dignity — says to me that as a Jewish community we need to find more ways to raise up and embody what Kohler preached, and what Kohler helped establish (or re-establish) as core to the Jewish story — that all human beings are infinitely worthy, created as animals, but animals with the ability to hold a moral compass. If nothing else, this can be our continued gift to the world, as well as — in the closing words of the Pittsburgh Platform — an attempt “to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.” May it be so.