

FROM RABBI ZEMEL

THE MICAḤ PROJECT: A JEWISH EXPERIENCE ROOTED IN OUR AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE



DEAR FRIENDS,

About 20 years ago, Louise and I took a two-hour taxi ride from the Israel-Jordan border crossing near Eilat, Israel, to Petra, in Jordan. The Jordanian driver was listening to an Arabic radio station. When we

got out of the car, I told Louise that the radio station played the same song over and over for our entire ride.

In reality, though, my ears were deaf to the nuances of Middle Eastern-Arabic music. My guess is that a person unfamiliar with Western music would have a similar experience in a New York taxi. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones or Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, for example, would sound the same as would Mozart, Chopin and Beethoven. My takeaway? Our senses are educated and defined culturally.

I thought of this recently as I left a funeral service at an out-of-town synagogue. The sound and tone of the service was entirely Ashkenazic. It was familiar to me from my Conservative Movement upbringing, and I clearly knew the prayer texts and Psalms that were chanted.

Despite my background and knowledge, no part of the experience touched my emotions. This cultural sound has become, for me, remote and distant rather than second nature. My takeaway? Emotions are triggered by sensory experiences and the texture

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A Cause for Celebration: The Road Traveled Together By Rabbi Zemel and Temple Micah

BY FRAN DAUTH

ONE MEMBER OF the search committee that hired Danny Zemel years ago was worried. After all, he was just 30. He'd only been a rabbi for four years. Was he too young to be the spiritual leader she wanted for her daughters?

On Dec. 7, Temple Micah will celebrate Rabbi Zemel's 36 years as its senior rabbi and the 40th anniversary of his ordination with a festive havdalah service and a Chicago-style pizza party.

"We will be celebrating what Rabbi Zemel has achieved here so far, and looking forward to what we, as a congregation, will accomplish under his leadership in the coming years," said Jodi Enda, the chair of the celebration committee.

And what about the search committee member who long ago worried about the age of the young rabbi? Adrienne Umansky, the long-time leader of Micah Cooks, now readily admits her mistake, exclaiming, "How wrong I was." She said Rabbi Zemel's spirituality has always been there for her daughters. And for her.

Part of the celebration is the publication of a book of selected sermons and writings by Rabbi Zemel. Called "A Time to Speak," the hardcover book will be included in the suggested \$18 donation for the Dec. 7th pizza party. It also will be available later from the Micah office for \$20.

Micah member Martha Ransohoff Adler, who helped select the sermons and writings, edited the book. (See story on page 7 for more on the book.)

"To read the sermons in this book is

to engage the mind, heart, and soul of a visionary come of age," Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, a professor of liturgy at Hebrew Union College in New York City, noted in the introduction of "A Time to Speak."

Throwing Out the Rule Book
"Micah would not be Micah without Rabbi Zemel," said Enda, a former board president. "He will tell you that the founders and the leaders who hired him had the foresight to create the environment that allowed him to experiment, to try new things that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't, to break things that weren't broken. And I'm

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6 ►

DOUBLE CHAI

...AND COUNTING

Join us as we celebrate Rabbi Zemel's 36 years at Temple Micah and 40 as a rabbi.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2019
5:30 pm • Temple Micah

THE EVENING INCLUDES:
Festive havdalah service
Chicago-style pizza party
Book launch of *A Time to Speak*, a collection of Rabbi Zemel's sermons

\$18
Suggested donation for dinner (includes one book per family)

RSVP BY NOVEMBER 15TH

"Every person shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to make him afraid."
MICAH, CHAPTER 4, VERSE 4

Vine

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WHAT RABBI ZEMEL MEANS TO ME

BY MARCIA FINE SILCOX

I heard that the play "What the Constitution Means to Me" was really phenomenal, and tried to get tickets, but it was sold out. So here's a script for a new Broadway hit, "What Rabbi Zemel Means to Me."

In September 1995, our family joined Temple Micah as it moved into its new building. We had barely gotten to know anyone, least of all the rabbi, when my mother died in upstate New York after a long illness. I hesitantly called my new temple, eight weeks into our tenure. Soon, Rabbi Zemel was on the line with comforting words and talk about how

Micah can add my mom's name to the *yahrzeit* list. It was the first, but of course not the last time I would feel this profound connection to Rabbi Zemel.

Rabbi Zemel's daughter Shira was in my daughter Sasha's bat mitzvah class. There were four girls and two boys, as our classes were tiny back then. Louise and Rabbi Zemel invited the other five families over to their home so that we could get to know each other, and plan the b'nai mitzvah year. They were warm and fun and thoughtful about the meaning of this important time. We immediately felt we were taking this journey together, along with our eldest children who all became good friends.

Since those good old days, I've had so many opportunities to work with Rabbi Zemel, to listen to him, to learn from him, to rebut him, and to respect him.

One of my favorite reasons to be invited to the rabbi's study is to scan his bookshelves. Books are also piled high on every table and on chairs. I want to see what he is reading, what texts are at arm's reach, and which require the sliding ladder, which rolls from near the ceiling to the floor. It's easy to admire a learned man, but even better to know one who so readily shares his learning and enthusiasm for a book or text. I mostly had forgotten about poetry and how it makes us feel until Rabbi Zemel read the words of Yehuda Amichai to us.

A long association with a synagogue, as any 25- or 50-Year Club member can attest, provides opportunities to celebrate happy and sad times. Rabbi Zemel performed the b'nai mitzvah of our children, and 30 years later, named our first grandchild in the same sanctuary. He comforted us on losses, and we all sobbed as a community during times of national tragedy. He made us laugh. He did not convert us to White Sox fandom.

In my tenure on the temple board, I've been able to see just how important Rabbi Zemel is not only to our community, but also to the broader efforts of Reform Judaism in America, and in supporting the strength of Israel. He is tireless, and his schedule is exhausting. Likewise, his mind runs at light speed. His demand for creativity and innovation, rooted in tradition, are marvelous to behold.

It has been an honor, and delight to play any role in enabling the success of his past 36 years at Temple Micah. Like a child who wakens smiling each day, knowing it will bring something amazing, I can't wait to see what Rabbi Zemel does tomorrow.



Micah members look out over Mexico from a vantage point along the southern U.S. border. See and read more about the trip, led by Rabbi Stephanie Crawley, on page 9.



The Feast

THE FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE EDITION

BY ALEXANDRA WISOTSKY

ONE OF THE best things about writing these articles is that I get to chat with a variety of members, and often get to catch up with friends. Shellie Bressler has been a friend since our families joined Micah at about the same time (we think in 2006).

She and husband Andy celebrated the b'nai mitzvah of their twin boys, Adam and Casey, at Micah in 2014. Over the years, Shellie has been involved in various tzedakah and fundraising projects, such as the Share Your Hanukkah project, the Underwear Drive and the Micah Auction. More recently, she has been a Micah board member since 2017.

She, Andy, and her now college-age boys have also volunteered in many ways at Micah, such as donating “meals with members” items for the Auction, including a Rooftop BBQ in the past, and currently, the Micah Trivia Night. (See photos from this year’s Trivia Night on page 6.)

The recipe she shared with me for this issue has been in her family for 30-plus years. Her mother Janice made it for the Yom Kippur break-the-fast that she hosted annually for more than 40 people.

“People would come and eat in shifts depending on which synagogue you belonged to and what time services let out,” Shellie said.

“They called it ‘Aunt Janice’s French toast casserole;’ people tended to come back for seconds,” Shellie said of the dish.

Now, it is Shellie’s go-to brunch item as it allows for more time with

guests. It can be prepared the night before and put into an oven right before people turn up.

It is also a good choice to take to a potluck, to a shiva, or to a house with a new baby. It could even be served as a dessert, perhaps with a vanilla sauce, since it is “a cross between a cheesecake and a bread pudding.” Yes, it is rich, so you might get more than 8 to 10 servings out of it, depending on how you cut it.

And one more thing, my own PSA: please contact me if you have a recipe (or two) you would like to share.



Shellie Bressler

FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

Serves 8-10

Ingredients:

- 1 loaf French bread or challah (stale is fine)
- 8 eggs
- 8 oz cream cheese, cubed
- 2½ cups milk
- 6 tablespoons butter, melted
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- ¾ cup sugar
- Additional maple syrup or powdered sugar to serve

Steps:

1. Grease large casserole/baking dish (lasagna size 9"x13") and cut bread into cubes.
2. Put half of the cubed bread into the baking dish and top it with the cubed cream cheese, distributing as evenly as possible.
3. Cover with remaining bread cubes.
4. Mix all other ingredients together and pour over bread and cream cheese. Using a spatula, press down on the mixture so bread will soak into the liquid.
5. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours.
6. Pre-heat oven to 325F.
7. Bake uncovered at 325 degrees for 35 to 40 minutes. Serve with maple syrup and powdered sugar.

JEWS UNITED FOR JUSTICE HONOR TWO MICAH MEMBERS

Two long time members of Temple Micah, Susie and Bruce Turnbull, recently received the Heschel Award from Jews United for Justice.

In describing the Turnbells' contributions, the JUFJ noted that the pair has been a “power couple in Maryland politics and in the Montgomery County Jewish community for decades.”

Bruce Turnbull is on JUFJ's Montgomery County Leadership

Council and serves on the JUFJ Campaign Fund Board of Directors. Susie Turnbull has been a national leader in social justice and women's leadership. She was the Democratic nominee for Maryland lieutenant governor in 2018.

JUFJ as founded 20 years ago to move the Washington D.C. region closer to social, racial and economic justice. JUFJ was created, the founders said, after they attended a class on the teachings of Rabbi Joshua Heschel.

SPEAKING AT MICAH

Micah features two monthly lecture series — on Sundays and Wednesdays. For more information, go to templemicah.org.

SUNDAY SPEAKER SERIES



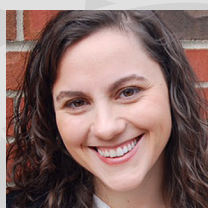
Dec. 8 at 10:15 am – Aaron Press Taylor on “Out from Ramallah: Jewish Reflections from Palestinian Jerusalem and Beyond.”

Taylor, an alum of URJ Camp Harlam and the Reform movement’s high school in Israel program with a Brandeis BA in philosophy, moved to Israel on a professional fellowship with the New Israel Fund. As a young American Jew, Taylor will share his observations on his seven-year sojourn in Israel.

LUNCH & LEARN

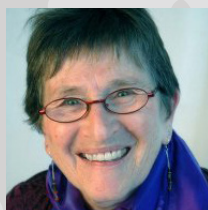
Wednesdays from noon to 2 pm

A monthly program sponsored by the Aging Together Team. Reserve online at templemicah.org. For details, contact Robert Seasonwein at lunchandlearn@templemicah.org or the temple office at 202-342-9175.



Nov. 13 – Rabbi Stephanie Crawley on “Addiction, Repentance, and a Jewish Path of Recovery.”

Rabbi Crawley, who returned to Temple Micah as assistant rabbi last year upon her ordination, served as a spiritual counselor at Beit T’shuvah, a Jewish addiction treatment center in Los Angeles.



Dec. 11 – Evelyn Torton Beck on “Hidden from History No More: Jewish Women’s Activism in Second-Wave Feminism.”

A professor emerita of Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland, Beck has authored numerous works including *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* that explored homophobia among Jews and anti-Semitism among lesbians.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

A preview of upcoming speakers in 2020:

Jan. 8 – Susan Subak

Feb. 12 – Ari Roth

Mar. 11 – Jacqueline Simon

Apr. 1 – Jean Nordhaus

May 13 – Johanna Forman

Randy Tritell Named Washington Area AJC President

Micah member Randy Tritell has been elected president of the Washington D.C. Regional Board of the American Jewish Committee.

Tritell had been first vice president of the Washington region AJC for the past two years and a member of the executive committee of the board for the six previous years. In all he has been a part of the local AJC for 11 years.

"AJC's mission is to build a secure future for the Jewish people, Israel and all humanity," Tritell said in discussing his new position.

"Our priorities are combating anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, defending Israel's place among nations, and promot-

ing democracy and pluralism.

"My job is to work with our board and staff to implement that vision through advocacy to domestic and international officials and thought leaders and by building and strengthening bridges with religious, ethnic and other partners."

Tritell is the director of the Office of International Affairs of the Federal Trade Commission in his working hours. His wife, Harriet Tritell, is the secretary of the Temple Micah Board of Directors.

— Fran Dauth



Rabbi's Message FROM PAGE 1 ►

of the sound is critical. The worship sound with which I was raised was never really culturally mine. I am today emotionally distant, unable to be inspired or deeply moved by the prayer settings of my youth. In other words, my sensory/emotional world is not that of 19th-century Eastern Europe.

This captures for me a kind of Jewish conundrum. I suspect there is a sizable percentage of Jews whose primary Jewish worship experiences feel distant to them. They might go to temple, but they feel removed from what they are experiencing. It just doesn't speak to them personally. It fails to move them.

The Temple Micah project is, in part, attempting to

change the aesthetic experience of Jewish life. We seek an aesthetic that captures the cultural language that American Jews speak in order to inspire and stir hearts and souls. It is a complicated project.

Our challenge is several fold:
— As we create an

American Jewish aesthetic, we need to keep in mind the balance between contemporary meaning and historical fidelity. Our Judaism is rooted both in our personal memories and our collective narrative.

— Some Jews are unable to see the contemporary aesthetic as "authentic." For them, Jewish authenticity requires a "certain," perhaps Ashkenazic, sound. This is an ongoing project of education.

— There are those whose formative Jewish prayer experi-

ences were defining and emotionally uplifting. They will not always connect to what we are trying to create.

No matter the challenge, it is imperative that we understand that the aesthetics of prayer are critical and that they define the worship experience for each individual.

A defining conviction of my brilliant teacher, Professor Jacob Neusner z"l, was that a vibrant religious life cannot be rooted in foreign experiences. Religious life is, by definition, personal. Neusner wrote that no lasting American Judaism could be centered on remembering the Shoah or supporting the State of Israel. For my teacher, the great American Jewish project was to create a Judaism based on who we are, how we live and what we

aspire to be and do.

If, as Pirkei Avot ("The Ethics of the Fathers") teaches, the world stands on three things — Torah (learning), worship, and acts of loving kindness (social justice) — we seek to create a Jewish life that is rooted in our own contemporary American experiences, most clearly in Jewishly-motivated social-justice activism, Jewish learning that inspires and a prayer life that inspires our souls. At Micah, I like to believe that we are engaged in that effort.

I don't want our worship experience to leave anyone feeling like I did in that Jordanian taxi. We seek to create a Judaism that speaks to every part of our soul and spirit.

Shalom,
Daniel G. Zemel

2nd Annual Micah Trivia Night

PHOTOS BY GARY M. SMITH



▲ Imagine Alex Trebek reading these words: "This popular event benefits a Washington D.C. synagogue." Correct answer: *What is the Second Annual Micah Trivia Night?* Next question: "Besides answering tricky questions, the event also included this activity. What is it?" Correct answer: *What is enjoying dinner and dessert first, not a trivial matter at all?*

▲ Calling themselves "Trea Turner's Trivia" team, winning members celebrate their victory at the Micah Trivia Night in October by showing off their prize—movie tickets. Pictured from left to right are Mark Weinheimer, Emily Cloyd, David Braverman, Randi Braverman and Stacy Cloyd; Cecelia Weinheimer is behind Stacy Cloyd. The Trea Turner team included a couple of pros, as it were. Emily and Stacy Cloyd met while both were contestants on "Jeopardy."

Cause for Celebration FROM PAGE 1 ►

sure that is true.

"But Rabbi Zemel had the vision, the drive and the sheer chutzpah to make it work. He threw out the rule book and turned Micah into a laboratory of innovation and, along the way, he became one of the great rabbis of his generation," she said.

Long-time member Bobbie Wendel, also a former board president, was more succinct: "Danny always operates on at least three rails at once and you never know for sure which one is electrified."

Rabbi Zemel says he did not grow up wanting to be a rabbi, even though his grandfather, Solomon Goldman, was a rabbi who was renowned internationally for his oratory, writings, his efforts on behalf of Zionism, and was so innovative that a small faction of his congregation in Cleveland took him to court in 1924 over what it said was a departure from orthodoxy. The plaintiffs lost at trial in 1927 but then sought relief from the

Court of Appeals. The appellate court dismissed the lawsuit in 1929 and the Supreme Court subsequently declined to hear the case.

By the time Rabbi Zemel was born, his grandfather had been presiding over a Chicago synagogue for nearly a quarter of a century. But his grandfather died in 1953 when Rabbi Zemel was 6 months old, and therefore never knew him.

It was not until he was an undergraduate at Brown University and studying under Jacob Neusner, an academic scholar of Judaism, that Rabbi Zemel began to think of the rabbinate as a career. Rabbi Neusner, who died in 2016, served on both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

As Micah members know, Rabbi Zemel often talks of his professor in his sermons. A quote cited in online articles about Rabbi Neusner, a self-described Zionist, is an indication of his influence on Rabbi Zemel's approach to

American Judaism. "Israel's flag is not mine. My homeland is America," Rabbi Neusner said.

Reflecting recently on his three decades at Temple Micah, Rabbi Zemel said: "What I want to create here is a Judaism that speaks in an American cultural aesthetic while remaining implicitly fully Jewish."

He said he wants people who come to Micah to "encounter an American Judaism that makes sense."

Many Micah members, asked to discuss Rabbi Zemel's contributions, also talked about those themes. "When we count our blessings in life, they include the fact that Danny Zemel is our rabbi. No rabbi is more thoughtful or compassionate or committed to challenging us to reflect on how we live our lives and live our lives as Jews," said Thomas Green.

"He is in search of new and consequential Judaism for America," Rabbi Hoffman wrote in his introduction to "A Time to Speak." ♦

“A Time To Speak”: Memorable Sermons Over Three Decades

By Fran Dauth

A couple of days after the 2016 presidential election, one Micah member called a friend to suggest they should go to Friday services to hear Rabbi Zemel's response. “I want to hear what Danny has to say,” the caller said.

When they arrived at Temple Micah they found so many others had the same reaction that they would have to park blocks away.

The sermon that night is included in “A Time To Speak,” the collection of Rabbi Zemel's sermons and writings published in connection with the celebration of his 36 years at Temple Micah and the 40th anniversary of his ordination.

Martha Ransohoff Adler, a Micah member who edited the collection, said the 2016 election sermon joins others that were delivered to a standing-room only sanctuary because they illustrate Rabbi Zemel's “guidance during momentous national events,” such as the 9/11 terrorists attacks and the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

“To me those were obvious times when we as a congregation needed him,” she said.

Working with Rabbi Zemel, Adler selected 25 pieces that range from b'nai mitzvah letters to High Holy Day sermons to his message to the congregation about interfaith marriage. Adler says the selection process was one of “give and take.”

For most Micah members just reading the titles elicits a knowing smile or a nod. They include these: “Judaism and Baseball Are One” or “Israel: The Place I Love That Does Not Love Me in Return or I Am Still a Zionist.”

Here is a taste of the sermon on Israel:

“When it comes to American Jews and Israel we become black or white, for or against, hawks or doves, J Street or AIPAC. It drives me crazy. Personally, I find myself to be either none of them or pieces of all of them. My love for Israel is the only constant.”

And the sermon on Jews and sports: “To be Jewish is to live within the season, always anticipating the next season. What word fits baseball more than season?”

That sermon, like several in the collection was inspired by a question from a b'nai mitzvah candidate.

Listening to Rabbi Zemel's sermons and reading them are different experiences, Adler noted, adding, “One of the challenges was how to retain the flavor of the spoken word while making (the piece) readable.”

Adler says in her Editor's Note that she had been thinking of creating a book of Zemel sermons for several years but got serious about the project after she retired in 2016.

“Rabbi Zemel has been my rabbi for nearly 25 years. He and Temple Micah have wholly altered my life as a Jew and as a citizen. I came to Micah expecting to “get” a Jewish education for my children. Over the years, I have found a Judaism I never knew I needed, and a community that has become my home.

“I thought that a book of selected writings would encapsulate Rabbi Zemel's innovative leadership over the years, and remind us all of how he has led us through so many temple celebrations, national storms, and baseball seasons, with wisdom, vision, and humor.”

In 2017 she and Rabbi Zemel began searching for the sermons to be included. The work then began in earnest, as she immersed herself in editing the sermons. Adler, whose career was in social work, had little experience in editing beyond a social work newsletter she edited.

Her initial sense of what it would take to complete the task was “ridiculous.” Now that the book has gone from idea to print, she is amazed to have pulled it off.

She notes that one of the things that has impressed her the most is how sermons written in the 1980s are as challenging today as they were then.

In his introduction to “A Time To Speak,” Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman writes: “To read the sermons in this book is to engage the mind, heart and soul of a visionary come of age.”

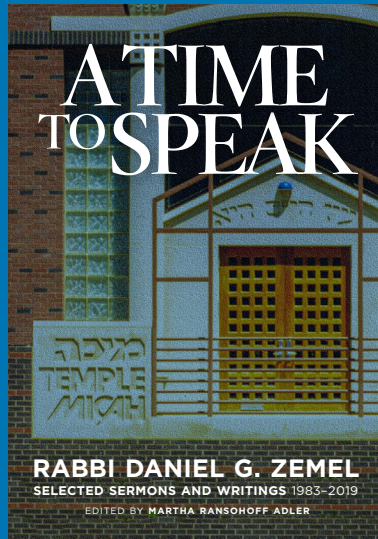


PHOTO OF MARTHA ADLER BY DAVID ADLER

TZEDAKAH

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and in honor of Dr. Stanley Foster's special
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thanks to Rabbi Zemel, by the Silcox family
Marcia and Clark Silcox' grandson, Ellis
Irving Rollinger, by anonymous
Storefront and Young Family Shabbat,
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and Lawrence Bachorik
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Edward Oppenheimer, by Martha and David Adler
Veronica Sanchez, by Jeffrey Bornstein
Ida Weinstein Schotz, by Ellen and Stan Brand
Mark Snyderman, by Douglas Grob and
Hiromi Maruyama, Harold and Carrie Singer
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THE RABBI DANIEL GOLDMAN ZEMEL FUND FOR ISRAEL

IN HONOR OF
Jeannelle D'Isa becoming b'nai
Torah, by Michelle Sender

IN MEMORY OF
Susie Blumenthal, by Debbie and Jim
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Jason Taylor, by Myra and Mark Kovey

*This list reflects donations received August 16–
October 22, 2019. Every effort has been
made to ensure its accuracy, but if
there are any errors or omissions please
accept our apologies. For corrections or
clarifications, please contact Rhiannon
Walsh in the temple office. Thank you.*

THE LIFE OF TEMPLE MICAH

BEARING WITNESS ON THE BORDER: PART OF A JEWISH TRADITION

BY RABBI STEPHANIE CRAWLEY

I and a small group of Temple Micah members spent a week at the end of October on the US-Mexico border. Specifically, we had traveled to El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

From above, the two cities appear to be one large city, and for much of their history, have operated as one community — a true border town.

We were there because after a year working to help resettle an Afghan refugee family, the Sukkat Shalom group is looking for new ways to engage with immigration and refugee issues in our country.

Guided by an academic who specializes in immigration issues and an immigration lawyer, we spent our days meeting with human rights organizations, observing immigration cases in federal court, and visiting shelters.

Our group will continue speaking about the trip and what we learned in the weeks and months ahead, and I hope that you will join us as we determine how to move forward and to act.

It was a powerful and often painful experience. Abstract stories became real, with faces and names attached. What our group was doing was more than just learning and trying to figure out how to act: We were bearing sacred witness.

This idea of bearing witness is very much part of Jewish text and tradition. We are encouraged to be a witness, in Hebrew, “eid.” Witnesses are required to sign the ketubah, and must be part of criminal or monetary proceedings. Witnesses are required for someone to repent — as testimony must be heard as part of the process of repentance.

Although each of these come from different parts of Jewish law, they are all drawn from the same core idea: Everyone deserves to be seen.

In a beautiful coincidence, the day after I returned from El Paso, the Canadian Broadcast Corporation featured a story on this very topic. The host, Piya Chattopadhyay, began her show saying, “Bearing wit-

ness, that is observing others experiences, often of trauma, can breed empathy, and understanding, and can spur action. But it can also have profound personal effects on the one who is watching.”

In Pirkei Avot 4:1, the sage Ben Zoma is quoted saying, “Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as it is said in Psalm 119:99, ‘From all who taught me I have been enlightened, for your witnessing has been conversation to me.’ ”

This idea also emerges in modern Jewish philosophy, most evident in the thought of Emanuel Levinas. For Levinas, it is the coming face-to-face with a person that removes any abstraction or anonymity, and requires the person witnessing to become responsible. As soon as you witness, you are in fact, obligated towards them.

Witnessing is the first step toward action. It reminds us that behind every fact or number, there is a human and a story, and that even if our instinct is to look away, we must not turn our heads.

In looking face-to-face, we learn how to help and act. It is our witnessing that makes us wiser, more empathetic, and more responsible. As we learn in Leviticus 5:1, if you witness something, you must speak out.

Please join our Sukkat Shalom team, as we share the stories we heard, and move toward action.



◀ Micah members toured a memorial for victims of the Aug. 3 mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso. The 22 who were killed and the 24 injured in the shooting were residents of both sides of the border.

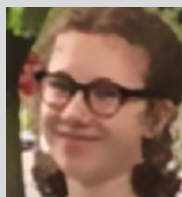
B'NAI MITZVAH



BENJAMIN DAVID HELLMAN
NOVEMBER 2 / 4 CHESHVAN
PARENTS: Jennifer and Matthew Hellman
TORAH PORTION: Noach



SOPHIE ROSE GLUCK
NOVEMBER 23 / 25 CHESHVAN
PARENTS: Adam and Carolyn Gluck
TORAH PORTION: Chayei Sarah



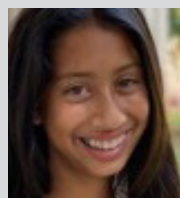
WINNIE SPECTOR
NOVEMBER 9 / 11 CHESHVAN
PARENTS: Jeffrey Spector and Molly Spector
TORAH PORTION: Lech-Lecha



BENJAMIN WOHL
DECEMBER 7 / 9 KISLEV
PARENTS: Alex and Allison Wohl
TORAH PORTION: Vayeitzei



JOSEPHINE CAPLAN AND NORAH CAPLAN
NOVEMBER 16 / 18 CHESHVAN
PARENTS: Greg and Julianna Caplan
TORAH PORTION: Vayera



ROHINI MUTHIAH KIEFFER
DECEMBER 14 / 16 KISLEV
PARENTS: Stuart Kieffer and Shanthi Muthiah
TORAH PORTION: Vayishlach

CONDOLENCES

The Temple Micah community extends its deepest condolences to:

JILL BERMAN, on the passing of her brother, Edward Oppenheimer

BRYNA BRENNAN, on the passing of her husband, Eliot Levinson

LOIS ROSEN, on the passing of her husband, Mark Snyderman

LESTER SILVERMAN, on the passing of his wife, Patty Abramson

May their memories be for a blessing.

MAZAL TOV!

Margaret and Jeff Grotte, on the birth of their grandson, Clement Douglas Grotte Jacobs, son of Miriam Grotte-Jacobs and Ben Jacobs

Judith Capen and Robert Weinstein, on the marriage of their son, Owen C. Weinstein, to Margaret A. Rew

Stan and Beverly Frye, on the birth of their grandson, Mason Leo Frye, son of Bradley and Elissa Frye

KateLyn and Joshua Smith, on the birth of their son, Meyer Wolf Smith

BERAHA'S BLACKBOARD

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND JEWISH PRAYER PROVOKES MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

BY RABBI JOSH BERAHA

I have to work hard — emotionally, mentally, spiritually, in just about every way — to understand the practice of Jewish prayer, the way it existed historically and the way it exists now, at Temple Micah in particular. There are times when I think (heretically?) that our efforts at congregating in our lovely sanctuary for hours each week, singing through parts of the prayer book, with poetry interspersed and a sermon, could be time better spent on something else.

What that “something else” would be, I do not know, and so with the lack of a specific “something else,” I return time and time again to my questions about the current state of Jewish prayer.

What are we doing when we gather to pray? What's the purpose of our prayer? How should I understand the what and how and why of prayer?

We ask our b'nai mitzvah students to ask the rabbi a question, to practice inquisitiveness, and so this is my query to myself. What are we doing when we assemble in rows, prayer books in hand, facing forward toward the bimah, toward Jerusalem? What is the purpose in weekly, year-round, gatherings around Jewish prayer?

No doubt, I have many canned, rehearsed answers to these questions. I've studied Petuchowski, Elbogen, Heschel and more, and of course, Larry Hoffman, our teacher who, in part, invented the modern study of Jewish prayer. But often I want something more, something I can believe in, which is to say I want to connect with prayer at the deepest level, and truly feel that standing as I do in front of the congregation each week, that what I am doing is worthwhile, that what I am doing means something for you and for me. Maybe I can connect more to what I've been taught, or maybe I need a new answer altogether. I simply do not know.

The challenges to prayer are many, and I can see this on the faces of congregants, especially guests. Or maybe I'm simply reading my own thoughts into the minds of others — I'm not sure. But it is clear to me that the practice of prayer does not come easily to the average person who normally

comes to Temple Micah. How could it?

To begin, prayer is a practice, and it requires just that — practice. Who among us practices daily, or weekly? And I could spend the entirety of this column with a litany of challenges to prayer in the modern age, so I'll just ask you: Do you think of your last time in our sanctuary or another house of prayer? Did you feel “prayerful”? Did you connect with an unseen order? Did you make a request that was granted? Were you moved to a new place of consciousness? What state do we hope to be in when we leave prayer? Could you articulate why you were there? I have so many questions.

Recently I read an essay by a software engineer named Andy Matuschak entitled, “Why Books Don't Work” in which Matuschak argues that for most of the books we read, we don't remember them years, or even months later. Books can be entertaining, he says, and can provide intrigue and wonder as we read them, but, he asks, are we actually absorbing what we're reading? The answer is no, according to Matuschak, and so he concludes, “as a medium, books are surprisingly bad at conveying knowledge, and readers mostly don't realize it.”

I think the ancient rabbis, like Matuschak, understood as well, that books don't work (if by work we mean conveying knowledge). They knew that even for The People of the Book, possession of The Book, and a weekly reading of The Book, was not enough to inspire and form its people into a People. A book alone does not live in the way of the world, they understood, for what is a book, really?

I think here of Jean-Paul Sartre's notion that “existence precedes essence.” A book exists as nothing but little shapes of ink organized in a specific way on a little piece of tree. And yet—we ascribe meaning to that ink, and it becomes The Book. In other words, we give those pages an essence when we say, “this book is a holy book, given by God to the people Israel on Mt. Sinai.”

But just because we ascribe meaning to our Book, and search its content for



how to think and be in the world, this in no way guarantees that we will absorb its content. Even the books of Genesis and Exodus, which are written mostly in narrative form, if read year after year as we do, may not convey much of anything beyond momentary entertainment.

In reading Matuschak I realized, herein lies a purpose, maybe, for what we're doing when we gather to do this thing called prayer. The Jewish prayer book is mainly a collection of verses from various places in scripture. We gather to repeat it, over and over again, because that is how we absorb the words. True, we might not readily understand them, or find them meaningful or particularly relevant to our lived experience, but at least by repeating them, they become part of who we are in a way that simply reading them would not accomplish.

For now, I think absorption of our ancient words is enough, or a beginning at least, for my queries on the purpose of prayer. How much other junk do we absorb daily in the secular world? Yes there are times when I think it's important to make sense of what we absorb, of course, that's part of it, too. But after thinking about this concept of absorption for some time now I take comfort in the fact that when I leave our sanctuary on a Friday night or Saturday morning, I leave with the sticky words of our prayer book swirling around in my head.

What to do with these words, how they will shape and transform us—these are good questions to ask, too. And yet, for now I'm fine with the answer that one thing we're doing when we pray is allowing the time and space for the ancient words of our tradition to find their way into our consciousnesses. To fill our minds, to fill our souls, to fill our hearts with words *that matter*—this is who we are, and this is part of how we become.



Temple Micah Sixth Graders gather for their annual Yom Kippur campaign to collect underwear for the homeless.



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