מיכה TEMPLE MICAH
Vine
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2022
CHESHVAN/KISLEV/TEVET 5783

FROM RABBI ZEMEL

THE WELL-LIVED AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE: PRAYING OUR VALUES

DEAR FRIENDS,

At "Ask the Rabbis" on Yom Kippur afternoon, one congregant asked how Temple Micah clergy members consider taking stands on public issues. The question addressed a common concern about mixing politics and religion. Of the five rabbis on the bimah (including our two rabbinic fellows), four provided a response, which is itself an indication of the depth of interest in this question.

The question arose this year because of the prayer Rabbi Crawley offered on Rosh Hashanah to bless those who have had an abortion or who have provided aid or support to those who have had abortions. Rabbi Crawley and I made the decision to offer this blessing in the sanctuary service because we wished to publicly affirm the religious principle and belief that in our Jewish theology, the right to decide on abortion rests in the hands of the pregnant person. It is not a decision for the government or the courts.

This prayer elicited an unusually large response—the vast majority of it positive. There were people who took exception to the prayer. Some were uncomfortable with the public nature of what they saw as a very private act. I understand this concern, and the last thing that any of us would want to do is invade someone's privacy. Our goal is just the opposite: to defend the right to privacy.

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Learning to Teach: The Holocaust as a Story of Life

By Mckinley Edelman

This July, thanks to Temple Micah, I had the special opportunity to participate in an eight-day intensive hosted by Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies at their campus in Jerusalem. Our group of twenty-two North Americans was made up of museum guides, Religious School Education Directors, March of the Living coordinators, and many more, all Jewish educators active in our field.

My goal was to learn how to teach the Shoah to our Machon Micah students in a safe, age-appropriate manner. I knew it would be tiring and intense, depressing at times, and emotionally draining. I couldn't have predicted that I would leave the program with so much hope and excitement for the future. But this is exactly Yad Vashem's intention. Their pedagogical approach is starkly different from other Holocaust museums, memorials, and educational programs. Our lecturers spent eight days guiding us to the conclusion that the Holocaust is not a story of death. It is a story of *life*.

The Holocaust must be taught as a history of resistance in the face of incalculable evil. The resistance of our people and our faith: this is an accomplishment of which we should be ferociously proud.

The depravity of the Holocaust is familiar to the Jewish community. We have all seen photos and read testimonies that bring us to tears and make us feel sick. These may be the "easy" way to educate on the Holocaust—with shock value. But my goal at Machon Micah will be to reinforce that our people are a people of strength and will. No, the Jews did not go like sheep to

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Edelman (center) at the Western Wall with classmates Witnee Karp, Director of March of the Living Toronto, and Jasmine Kranat, a lawyer from Ottawa who designed her own Holocaust exhibit for public school students in New Brunswick.

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

Vine
Vol. 59 No. 2

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

REVISITING OUR THANKSGIVING HAGGADAH

By Rielle Miller Gabriel

What does it mean to be a Modern Jew? This is a complex question. It deserves deep thought and scholarship. While I am not such a scholar, I offer this small contribution to the dialogue—one I learned through the teachings of our Temple Micah clergy.

Many years ago (seven or eight I think), my husband and I joined the Parenting Group while our daughter attended Machon Micah. The focus of this particular group session was Thanksgiving, and in particular how we could celebrate it not just as Americans, but also as Jews. The rabbi led us through some readings—one of which I still have ("Did Sukkot help shape Thanksgiving?" by Robert Gluck/JNS.org)—and some discussion. All were provided a sort of Thanksgiving haggadah for us to use (or not) at our own Thanksgiving tables a few weeks later. As a young family, looking to create a meaningful holiday, we were willing to give the Thanksgiving seder a try.

That first Thanksgiving, it was...weird. Despite growing up in what I consider to be a pretty "Jewish" family, the most purposefully-Jewish thing about our Thanksgiving was having kugel or latkes with our turkey. So setting the Thanksgiving meal into a seder format, reciting Hebrew prayers, and ending in joyous song was certainly different.

But it was a *good* different.

It's not unusual to feel a bit awkward doing something new for the first time. We felt that, for sure. But there was also an appreciation of the new structure to the meal, the built-in participatory elements, and the focus on the meaning —not just "thankfulness" as we conceive of it in our well-off 21st century bubble, but a purposeful connection to the historical gratitude of that harvest in 1621. And of having the freedom to celebrate our gratitude in the way that we choose. Suddenly and intentionally, this very American holiday —and our Americanness when we celebrate it —became connected to our Jewishness.

And it felt right.

Every year since that fateful Sunday, our family pulls out our Thanksgiving haggadah to prepare for our Fall seder. This haggadah (much like our one for Passover) is marked up with pencil notes of our preferences and changes. And on the fourth Thursday of November, we light the (shabbat) candles, we say our traditional Hebrew prayers, we participate in readings about American liberty, and we tell the story —the nation's, our own, our guests' —of the journey to freedom in the United States of America. We remember where we came from, we share our gratitude for the country we became, and we share our hopes for the country we could still be.

And, of course, we eat.

I may not know exactly what it means to be a Modern Jew, but I am grateful to have this community with which to explore the complexities of this question and co-create our American Jewish lives.

Temple Micah members Jodi Enda and Dana Milbank with Rabbi Zemel. At an October discussion moderated by Enda, Milbank introduced members to his new book, *The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party*. (Photo: Martha Adler)

Holocaust FROM PAGE 1 ▶

the slaughter. It was a time of *choiceless* choices and everyone fought in their own way. Young women in the ghettos were spies, sneaking out in the night to gain intelligence, trade goods, and source weapons. Rabbis engaged in spiritual resistance, continuing to study and give guidance to those who came to them with halakhic dilemmas: is it permitted to build a sukkah with stolen wood? Can I say a bracha, or blessing, over food that isn't kosher? The answer: The Nazis stole the wood in the first place, and the food is kosher if it's the only food available to eat.

Artists continued to draw and paint, teaching children, giving them a way to explore their emotions. Writers continued to write, and organized such groups as the Warsaw Ghetto's "Oneg Shabbat," knowing they held the great responsibility of documenting life within the ghetto walls so that their history might be remembered. A few pregnant people carried their pregnancies to term, against all odds, while interned in ghettos and concentration camps.

As Yad Vashem phrases it, our people went above and beyond to "maintain a normal way of life in a completely abnormal world." This is the way we fought back.

Of the seminars, tours, and readings we participated in at Yad Vashem, no day was quite as powerful as when we met Rena Quint, proud great-grandmother, teacher, and Holocaust survivor. Rena is the embodiment of Jewish resistance. Born in Poland in 1935, her life was turned upside down when the Nazis invaded and occupied her hometown. Her mother and two older siblings were deported to Treblinka and murdered; three-year-old Rena, disguised as a little boy, managed to stay with her father. He, too, was murdered and by age seven, Rena was alone. She was deported to Bergen-Belsen. Various women, as she puts it, "adopted her," looking out for her, feeding her, and protecting her. At war's end she was adopted by another

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Rabbi's Message FROM PAGE 1 ▶

It is, therefore, important for the congregation to know that we did not make the decision to offer the prayer without serious discussion and deliberation. We had deep conversations with individuals who have had abortions and others who have suffered miscarriages. The individuals with whom we consulted were overwhelmingly supportive of our idea to offer a blessing. The powerful anti-abortion movement has for decades placed a stigma on this personal, moral and religious decision. In reciting this prayer—and offering people the opportunity to stand if they have had an abortion or provided support for those who did—we sought to undo the stigma that abortion-rights opponents created in politicizing this most personal of decisions. I believe that Rabbi Crawley's prayer captured our intent with eloquence, reverence and deep respect for the sacred.

It is true that in offering this blessing, we were taking a moral position on what has become a political issue. Doing so is a much-discussed topic among America's rabbis in our hypercharged political era in which even choosing to get a vaccine has become political dynamite. Certainly, some rabbis and congregations choose to avoid taking stands on social issues.

At Micah, that is not our way.

Judaism is about the lived human life. The well-lived Jewish life is not alone on a mountaintop, but speaks to the complexity of living in society. "Do not separate yourself from the public," taught Hillel about 2,000 years ago. The Shabbat table, the minyan (quorum for prayer), the kehilah (community) form the essence of our Jewish vocabulary. All are social constructs. In other words, any rabbi who does not address the social questions of the day, no matter how controversial, from a Jewish perspective is not living up to what the title demands. That is correct—what the title "rabbi" demands.

This is the tradition that we have inherited from the prophet Elijah and through the centuries to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Israel Salanter, in the 19th century, always supervised the baking of matzah for his community. According to folklore, when asked on his deathbed about his requirements for the kashrut of the matzah, the rabbi replied, "See to it that the women who bake the matzah are fairly paid." Our Jewish values cast a wide net.

Having said this, there is no question that the current era feels different. It seems as if every social concern is politicized. Hence, the question posed on Yom Kippur.

We are in the midst of what Micah member Rich Harwood has termed a national virus. Rich understands and interprets this country better than anyone I know. He is a national leader in rethinking how to improve politics and public life while generating the civic capacity to move communities forward. He says that this virus yields a "fight or flight" mentality, leaving communities struggling to embrace and act on our country's founding values. These values include the noblest ideas of the human spirit: tolerance, an open mind, a spirit of generosity, a belief that we are all created in God's image. As I have said before, there has always been something confluent about my American beliefs and my Jewish beliefs. They reinforce and strengthen each other. They mirror each other.

The Statue of Liberty, emblazoned with Emma Lazarus's poignant words, is simply another way of setting the Shabbat table or opening the door to the Passover Seder and proclaiming, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." American symbols and Jewish rituals reinforce each other.

The bedrock on which our values stand, the form of government that gives voice to them, is democracy. The fight to preserve democracy, so salient now, is the fight to preserve our social and moral values as Americans and as Jews.

For me, it is that simple. Any effort to restrict the vote, to ignore the vote or to lie about the vote is an attack on the very values of both Genesis and "We the People."

This is the religious message of Temple Micah. It is the Jewish message going all the way back to Sinai that echoes through us to this day. This is why we offered a prayer about abortion, a personal and moral issue that never should have been politicized in the first place. We pray our values. We will not be silent. We will, in fact, affirm our beliefs even and especially on the most sacred days of our year.

Shalom.

Holocaust FROM PREVIOUS PAGE ▶

Holocaust survivor in Sweden, but that survivor unfortunately passed away due to illness. At eleven years old, Rena emigrated to the United States with another survivor; three months later, Rena's second adoptive mother tragically died as a result of her time in the camps. Eventually, Rena was adopted by a Jewish couple in New York City, with whom she stayed until she went to college. She remained incredibly close to them for the rest of their lives.

Rena refers to all these women as her "mothers," each in a different way, at a different point in time, each as critical to her survival as the one before. Rena's story is, without a doubt, sad, gut-wrenching, and impossible to imagine. But sitting in a classroom with her, overlooking Jerusalem, as she apologized for leaving her cell phone ringer on just in case her umpteenth great-grandchild came into the world at that moment, I realized this is the way to teach the Shoah, *especially* to children. Many, many perished, but Judaism, strength, and the will to go on did survive. Rena is the proof. And as fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors remain with us, the task of telling their stories, both before, during, and after the Shoah, falls to us. It is a heavy responsibility—one I know I am now equipped to take on, thanks to this powerful program. ❖

Edelman (left from center) with Holocaust survivor Rena Quint and her classmates.

MICAH MEMBER HONORED WITH PRESTIGIOUS AWARD

Temple Micah is proud to announce that our member Randy Tritell is being honored with the American Jewish Committee's (AJC) prestigious Hyman Bookbinder Award. The award, named for former AJC Leader and adviser to many US presidents, Hyman "Bookie" Bookbinder, honors those who emulate Bookie's passion and commitment to the Jewish people. Randy is being honored for his service as president of the Washington, DC region, leading its work from June 2019 through December 2021.

Working with AJC's professional staff and lay leaders, Randy brought AJC's nonpartisan, centrist, fact-based advocacy to scores of members of Congress, ambassadors, and thought leaders. He also helped lead AJC's critical efforts to build and strengthen bridges with interfaith and interethnic partners including through the Greater Washington Urban League, AJC's Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council, and the AJC's regional Latino-Jewish Leadership Council, which Randy initiated.

AJC, the leading global Jewish advocacy agency, fights antisemitism and all forms of bigotry at home and abroad, for Israel's place among nations, and for democratic values and pluralism. AJC's international work includes decades of developing relationships that helped lead to the Abraham Accords, combating discrimination against Israel in the United Nations, and advocating for religious equality in Israel. Domestically, AJC was instrumental in the formation of the Congressional Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism and the Bipartisan Congressional Caucus on Black-Jewish Relations, and is deeply engaged in fighting hate on social media.

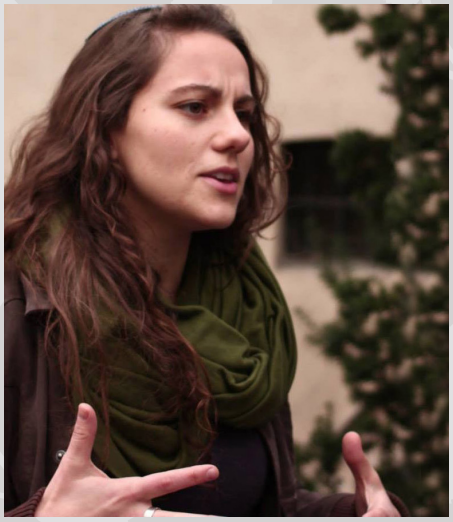
The award ceremony, which will also recognize the region's two immediately preceding presidents, Simeon Kriesberg and Toby Dershowitz, will take place at Washington Hebrew Congregation on December 6. Registration information is available on EventBrite at https://bit.ly/3AgEhfa.

A BLESSING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE HAD OR AIDED AN ABORTION

Dear Friends,

On the first day of our New Year, I gave this blessing—for anyone who has had an abortion, or helped someone access one. You can learn more about our decision to offer the blessing in Rabbi Zemel's column in this edition of the Vine. What we originally thought would be a declaration of a statement in support of reproductive rights became an embrace of agency made by holy souls in holy bodies. It opened up generational stories, honored an experience that is often met by hyper-politicalization, and aimed to create solidarity where there is often shaming or isolation. I hope this continues to open up a conversation —my door is always open.

Rabbi Stephanie Crawley



Mi Sheiberach Imoteinu - God of our Mothers -

Bless these brave ones
Who stand before you

Be with them now - as you were with our mothers

God of Sarah,
Who aided her to have a child when she wanted it - because she wanted it

Be with them now

God of Rachel
Who suffered and suffered for a child and then died while giving birth -
Ensure that no one is forced into that same reality

Be with them now

God of Dinah -
Do not abandon us when we have had our bodies stolen from us through violence and subjugation

Be with them now

God of Yocheved - the mother of Moses
Help us all maintain the ability to bring children into the world only when we want to - only when we've decided that the world is right

Be with them now

God of Hannah,
Who thought she only had worth because of her womb
Teach us all to see our value in our wholeness

Be with them now

Bless their holy bodies
And Bless their decisions -
The ones they had the ability to make
The ones that they fought to make possible
The ones that stood against immoral legislation
And the ones made in the embrace of freedom
May they always know agency and dignity and love
May this community never fail to rise in support
–
And Be with those who stand beside them in courage -
Who lend their voices and their funds
Who drive to clinics and accompany them inside
Who shout over protesters
Who ensure care and safety
Be with them now
–
And be with us all, now
Give us the strength to fight back and continue supporting women
Help us create systems of justice that serve every person
That center the souls that belong to bodies that others seek to ban
In this new year, help us build a new, just world
A world birthed of freedom and care.

TZEDAKAH

BUILDING IMPROVEMENT FUND

IN HONOR OF
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IN HONOR OF
Rabbi Crawley's officiating the wedding of Daniel Solomon and Sasha Mushegian, by Daniel Solomon

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MAZAL TOV

Eli Blum and Caitlin Watson, Jared Blum and Kate Kiggins, on the birth of their child and grandchild, Jonah Glen Harlow Blum

Larry Bachorik and Gail Povar, on the birth of their grandchild, Louella Katharina Herrmann

CONDOLENCES

The Temple Micah Community extends its deepest condolences to:

Sue Breitkopf, on the death of her mother, Muriel Marcus Breitkopf

Rebecca Claster, on the death of her father, Daniel Claster

Barbara Green, on the death of her companion, Frank Liebermann

Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin, on the death of her grandmother, Estelle Silverstein

Joshua Seidman, on the death of his cousin, Rabbi Jimmy Kessler

Jean and Steve Shulman, on the death of their granddaughter, Annie Waldman

Kenneth Simon, on the death of his mother, and **Jessica Daigle and Eliza Simon,** on the death of their grandmother, Jean Simon

Kathy Spiegel, on the death of her mother, Esther Spiegel

The Temple Micah Community, on the death of our member, Susan Landfield, and our longtime member, Victor Springer

May their memories be for a blessing.

EXPLORING JEWISH IDENTITY THROUGH THE PAINTINGS OF MARK ROTHKO

By Rabbi Marc Lee Raphael

When I visit the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, and walk to the Mark Rothko room, I pass by a lot of modern art. I see artists who combine real and unreal objects; who employ the cubist technique of breaking up nature into half-abstract, angular planes; or who explore the world of the mind, of the emotions, of the imagination—all the worlds inside us that the artist tries to make visible and external.

Like the uprooting of traditional societies (e.g., Eastern European Jewry), traditions have been broken up, flattened out, angularized, cut in sections, made transparent, viewed in novel ways, painted with unusual colors, molded into new shapes and sizes—until the traditional world is completely conquered and reconstructed.

Mark Rothko, a Russian Jewish immigrant raised in Portland, Oregon, clearly reflects this shattering. For Rothko, the sense of belonging is gone and cannot be recaptured: as he noted some years ago, "both the sense of community and of security depend on the familiar; free of them, transcendental experiences become possible." In his paintings, the surface of the canvas seems almost to have disappeared; in its place, mists of color seemingly float over it like impalpable translucent blinds drawn, one upon the other, down a magic window.

Thus, we witness both the personal estrangement of the artist from the mass culture around him, his discomfort if not disgust with the material world; and, in his abstracts, an acceptance of modernity and a yearning for an expansive, transcendent space. I feel a profoundly religious quality in that room, with its quiet horizontals and broad muted tones—immanence, serenity, and silence.

Similar in kind to the response of Rothko is the most modern of Jewish communities—American Jewry. Like a Rothko painting, traditional Judaism, or a religious civilization among the Eastern European Jewish immigrants, had already burst into pieces; it existed only as fragments. When they arrived in America, these immigrants immediately began to substitute new social and cultural mores for the older ones, to create a canvas of rich acculturation.

But the modern canvas they created was still visibly and intrinsically linked to the pre-modern fabric. As Kafka observed in a different context in a letter to a friend, the "posterior legs" of American Jews were "still glued to their fathers' Jewishness."

Perhaps the most durable link with the past were the fundraising campaigns for the needs of Jews all over the world. Beginning during World War I, in response to the needs of traditional communities, annual campaigns of organized Jewish philanthropy among (largely) immigrants and their children raised, by any metric, extraordinary sums of money. Imitating leadership patterns, decision-making, and organizational divisions in the larger (mainly United Way) community, American Jews harnessed a traditional religious obligation to the modern organizational forms, structures, and values of the American tradition.

So many of us, descendants of these immigrant Jews, are cultural schizophrenics, a concatenation of past and present, people blessed (and sometimes burdened) by the confluence of tradition and a vision of modernity. Like Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth's novel, whose mother wants him to look and act like a middle class gentile but come home every Friday night for Sabbath dinner, we all live in (at least) two cultures, something called "modern" and something called "traditional." It has never been easy.

Tzedakah FROM PREVIOUS PAGE ▶

Suzanne Saunders' grandson Augie, by Judy and Jack Hadley

IN MEMORY OF

Adolph Blumenfeld, by Norman Blumenfeld

Susan Landfield, by Jared Blum and Kate Kiggins

Marilyn Levinson, by Jane and Chaz Kerschner

Judith Rosen, by Bobbie and Ed Wendel

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This list reflects donations received August 1–September 30, 2022. 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.

A Poem for Our Time

After the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva (c. 50–135),
publicly tortured to death for continuing to teach when prohibited

They all watch
the martyrdom
in agitation
their unblinded eyes see
again, and again
the metal-headed Roman soldier
his fine-toothed comb
strokes, without rhythm, or beauty
the old shepherd's weathered skin peeled
thighs, calves
wherever raked
arms, breasts
nipple falls to ground

Akiva
eyes upturned with salted tears
his shepherd's lips crease
slight smile clear
to those gathered

Akiva
grateful to sound
the depths of himself
his late-life longing
the completed self
even as, slowly, under the sun
he bleeds to death

David Kobrin

ATTENTION: THE "NATURAL PRAYER OF THE SOUL"

By Rabbi Josh Beraha

Who hasn't had the experience of sitting in a movie theater, a lecture, or yes—services at Temple Micah—when an intrusion from the digital world robs us of our focal point? Even as we try to give our full attention to something, that moment of intrusion understandably diverts it. We might keep our heads straight, our eyes resting where they were, our bodies still, but despite our best efforts, we still hear the ring, the beep, the alarm, the vibration. And if the intrusion isn't coming from our own devices, it can still distract us; we hear the ring, the riffle in the bag, the checking of the pocket, the not-so-subtle attempt to silence the device.

Even on "silent," the digital world intrudes and distracts. Who hasn't had the experience of sharing a coffee with a friend when he or she says, "Excuse me for a sec, I just have to respond to this." The examples of digital distraction abound and in the attention economy, the fight is on for our headspace.

There's a Jewish story about a man who sat in the back of his synagogue during services and repeated the only Hebrew words he knew, which were "aleph, bet, gimmel," the first three letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Over and over this man would repeat them—sometimes to himself, sometimes out loud—no matter what else was being said or sung.

Eventually a congregant approached the rabbi after services one morning to complain: "Do you hear that person sitting in the back, always with the 'aleph, bet, gimmel'? Can't you tell him he has to participate in the actual service? It's distracting for the rest of us!" The rabbi kindly replied in the negative. No, she would not reprimand the aleph, bet, gimmel man, because in her estimation, no truer prayer had been said all morning. Though the man may have lacked any knowledge of the service, he repeated the letters with his full attention. The rabbi concluded her response to the kvetcher, "Our ancestors taught, 'Prayer without intention is like a body without a soul.'" If nothing else, prayer implies aim and deep purpose as the individual attempts to direct the mind to a specific end.

Walter Benjamin, the brilliant German-Jewish Marxist and media critic, was one of the first thinkers to recognize the ways in which new technologies rob us of our ability to fully appreciate a work of art, or a moment like sitting in a worship service. In an essay about Franz Kafka, whom he had admired for his ability to focus, Benjamin wrote that attention is "the natural prayer of the soul." When we are focused—Benjamin seems to imply—when we see fully and our minds are able to rest in one place, and when we turn our deepest selves away from distraction and toward a posture of awareness and noticing, this is prayer. Elsewhere as well, Benjamin—though he was not a religious type—explains how new technologies like photography (which was novel in his day) create unnatural images the eyes could never see if unaided by a device. In this way, he said, something of our humanness is lost when we give power to lenses that zoom in and out, freeze frames, and so much more.

The poet Denise Levertov (whose words are quoted in our prayer book, though unattributed) wonderfully describes the act of giving someone your attention as "a tenderness." The Hebrew words for attention, "l'sim lev," or, literally, "to put one's heart toward something," similarly capture the idea of attention as an act full of emotion, concentration, and even love.

We live in a moment in which our attention is actively being stolen from us, even as we try to concentrate. As Bill Maher comically explains, "[T]he tycoons of social media have to stop pretending that they're friendly nerd gods building a better world and admit they're just tobacco farmers in T-shirts selling an addictive product to children. Because, let's face it, checking your 'likes' is the new smoking."

If attention is vital to prayer—and therefore to a meaningful life as well—it is time to stop glossing over the seriousness of the matter and merely paying lip service to the issue. The tycoons of social media must take responsibility—but so must individuals and communities.

As I write these words, our sanctuary is being outfitted with new cameras, sound equipment, and two large screens on either side of the bimah. While I cannot deny the benefits of this new technology, I'm concerned with their unintended consequences. As we move forward, let us be ever vigilant in guarding our attention. May we learn to aim our hearts with focus, and not let our minds be distracted by the increasing invasiveness of our new technology, and to borrow a phrase from Emanuel Levinas, may we bring a "surplus of consciousness" to all we do.