

Vine

A CHALLENGING TIME FOR ALL JOURNALISTS, ESPECIALLY JEWS

BY DAVID GREGORY

THROUGHOUT MY CAREER, as a journalist who also happens to be Jewish, I have faced occasional personal conflicts when covering issues related to Israel. Although I am not actively covering the painful events today, I recognize the unique emotion of this story for Jews who are. And as journalists, today we are torn between loyalties to Israel, to the frightened Jewish community in America, and the loyalties to the craft of journalism.

Jews in America are under threat amid surging antisemitism around the globe; we are frightened. Jews are also angry, feeling betrayed by the lack of moral clarity among those who would excuse the violence that started this war. I'm a father with three Jewish children on college campuses right now – my daughter proudly wearing a star of David around her neck. What threats will they face? I've wondered why more of my non-Jewish friends haven't reached out to see how I'm doing. I think they don't realize how we Jews feel at this moment: despair for the future of Israel, fear for our future as Jews and on the defensive as Israel is attacked for its response.

A horrific act of terror and yet it has been clouded by "whataboutism" concerning the larger context in the region, posing a particular challenge for journalists.

Any journalist must remember their primary mission: it isn't objectivity. No one is truly objective. We are all shaped by our backgrounds and

experiences. Rather, our obligation is to show detachment and independence. Our job is to get at what's true (much harder today, in an age of abundant false information online), to chronicle events: the suffering, the decision-making, yes, the larger context, and the history. We should not be taking sides. Tom Brokaw told me once when I was struggling on deadline, "Report out the story, don't make a judgment about it."

We also face daily pressures to get the story first and to be fast. These virtues often come at the expense of being complete.

As a White House correspondent and as moderator of *Meet the Press*, when covering events in the region and interviewing Israeli and Arab leaders, detachment was part of my discipline. I may have had opinions or emotions about the topic at hand, but my obligation was to report and challenge the views of everyone I covered. I always tried to do so.

That is the ideal, but today's media environment makes the mission of journalism much more difficult. The events triggered by October 7 make up an emotional and polarizing story. The Hamas attack versus the larger Palestinian cause, and Israel's response – these topics divide, and modern media has evolved dangerously into amplifying and reinforcing that division. Gone are the days of a mass audience. Today, our media outlets—including print and digital platforms,

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FROM RABBI ZEMEL

..... SHOWN BUT NOT SAID

DEAR FRIENDS,

I am regularly asked, most often by young rabbis at other congregations, to articulate what I think an American synagogue should be. Do I have a theory

that drives my actions? What has been my guiding principle as I helped to shape Temple Micah into the congregation that it is?

I have trouble answering these questions and have been known, with a cer-

tain degree of hesitancy, to refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein in formulating my response.

Wittgenstein, an early 20th-century philosopher, thought that the most important matters in human affairs could be "shown but not said." My hesitancy does not mean I doubt the importance of synagogues. There is no more essential institution in Jewish life. Rather, I am reluctant to cite this brilliant yet impenetrable thinker with any degree of certainty about what his words mean.

Wittgenstein attempted to clarify what he meant about important matters being "shown but not said." He wrote:

"...[W]hat could we be asking for, if we said to ...(an) artist, 'we want ...a picture of your way of painting things. Not an example of that way, mark you! A picture of the way itself!?' Patently, this is a request which no artist could fulfill...an artist's way of painting is manifest in his every picture, but it cannot (logically) be the subject matter of his pictures." (*Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, W. Donald Hudson)

Following the wisdom of Wittgenstein, I usually try to let my

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"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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TEMPLE MICAH:
A REFORM JEWISH CONGREGATION
2829 Wisconsin Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20007
Voice: 202-342-9175
Fax: 202-342-9179
Email: info@templemicah.org
vine@templemicah.org
Web: templemicah.org

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RABBI

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ASSOCIATE RABBI

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TOWARD THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

By Rielle Miller Gabriel

We are blessed as Jews to have multiple opportunities throughout the year to celebrate a new start. My family's favorite of the four Jewish New Years is this season's Tu B'shevat. Each year we hold a Tu B'shevat seder, moving through



the four seasons via representative food, and wine (and grape juice), and a festive meal celebrating the seven species.

I especially look forward to the opportunity to try a new food. This is an important part of our seder.

One of us picks a fruit, vegetable, or spice we have never tried before, and we introduce it to the family. We try to learn about where the new food comes from and, if we can, what culture features this food. It's a great opportunity to not only open our palates to something new, but also to open our minds and hearts to the wider world.

I've come to appreciate this annual reminder of how we all move through different seasons in life. Sometimes, we are in the thick of things and our bounties are plentiful. Other times, we have to let things end so that we can be ready for the new opportunities coming our way. And, as at our Tu B'shevat seder, sometimes we all need a little push to try something new.

Our Temple Micah Board also has a seasonal cycle. There is an annual refresh of officers after our congregation-wide annual meet-

ing. We move on to our board retreat, planning our priorities for the year. Then we start our monthly board meetings in late summer, with a close-out of the prior year's finances and an update from our Cemetery Committee. Through the fall we hear updates from our other Board committees and get Machon Micah updates from our education staff. In winter, we start preparing for next year's budget by checking in on key initiatives such as Storefront and Sukkat Shalom. Our spring-time budgeting process starts; we find our Nominating Committee so that by our May meeting we have both a budget and a slate of candidates ready for the Annual Meeting in June — making ourselves ready to start the cycle again.

Every now and then something happens and our Board is given a push. This often results in extra off-cycle meetings, like this winter's special meeting to discuss multiple communications from our members about how, as a congregation, we might address the Israel-Gaza war. Our Board reviewed members' requests and suggestions. We also evaluated how we are putting into action our Roadmap's lever of "Tackle Tough Conversations." This discussion was itself a "tough conversation" for us, leaving us with more questions than answers.

When we try something new — like at our Tu B'shevat seder — sometimes it's instantly enjoyable. Sometimes, we know immediately it's not for us. And sometimes, it takes a few more bites to figure it out. What's most important is that we are open to the newness, to the uncertainty, and to the experience of trying something for the first time.

Wishing you a happy new year and lots of new foods, and experiences, in your future!

Journalists FROM PREVIOUS PAGE ►

broadcast and cable channels, and of course social media — are more focused on reaching specific communities rather than the larger community as a whole. Often, their targets are like-minded communities. As a result, communications have come to embody

a lot more argument than education. Breaking news, outrage, and reducing complicated questions to a "one side versus the other" debate have become the lifeblood of modern journalism rather than fair-minded reporting which allows each side to understand the other.

The bias in media today takes many forms. It's not

as simple as one's point of view shining through. What to cover; how much weight, time or space to give it; what images you show or don't show; what questions are asked or unasked — these are all judgments being made by journalists, their editors, producers or heads of news divisions. And they can get

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Rabbi Zemel FROM PAGE 1 ►

vision for what an American synagogue should be speak for itself. It is “shown” in how people experience Temple Micah. They either “get it” or they do not. The theory of Micah is Micah!

Why am I writing this now?

I don’t have a “synagogue theory,” yet Temple Micah is the theory in action. Instead of a theory we do, however, have a Micah roadmap. Our roadmap includes such terms as “narrative,” “human project” and “tackling tough conversations,” which together are a way of describing our inherited Jewish legacy.

What do I mean?

As I am writing this, our Torah reading cycle has us in the final chapters of Genesis. I peeked ahead just to be reminded how the Book of Exodus begins:

“These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of persons that were of Jacob’s issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.”

Exodus begins just as Genesis ends, as a family story. The Genesis family story is one of murder, strife, violence, theft, cheating, parental favoritism and more. Genesis’s message is the difficult, sometimes deadly, tension present in the life of almost every family. With the Book of Exodus, we see what has been primarily (but not exclusively) the story of the nuclear family in Genesis expand to the extended family. “Jacob’s issue” now numbers seventy.

The emphasis at the beginning of Exodus is clearly on family. Israel itself is an extended family. Exodus provides us with the beginning of Jewish self-understanding, the source of the modern question: Are we a religion or an ethnic tribe, a faith community or a people? The answer is that we are both, and that is the source of the ever-present tensions inherent in Jewish life. Our internal quarrels are rife with the intensity of family arguments. Our differences are rooted in and even foretold by our biblical origin stories.

Our Micah roadmap guides us toward the creation of a New Jewish Narrative. We are writing the latest chapter of the Jewish story; we will decide whom and what to emphasize. The Jewish scholar Louis Newman cites the work of legal scholar Ronald Dworkin to describe how Jewish life and theology unfold. He uses Dworkin’s writings about legal precedent and judicial decision-making to illustrate how Jewish traditions and

self-understanding evolve:

“(Dworkin) asks us to imagine a series of authors who write a novel one chapter at a time. Each author (after the first) inherits the work of earlier writers in the series and so is given a kind of limited creative license, for the author’s literary imagination must work within boundaries (however fluid) which have been established by previous writers. The need to preserve a sense of coherence within the novel will provide a general framework within which successive novelists will do their work.”

This description of a novel written by successive authors is similar to the process we employ to create our religious life at Temple Micah. We take our inherited Jewish narrative, the sum of chapters written by earlier generations, and draft the newest chapter — the one in which we are now living. When we do not recognize this reality, and seek to repeat the previous chapter, our story becomes stale and we lose interest. If we are too radical, and veer too far from the script handed down to us, we become footnotes to the ongoing Jewish story. This was the experience of such groups as the Samaritans and Karaites before us. The creation of a new and compelling narrative that links the past to the future is our ever-present challenge.

The narrative itself is a reflection of how we, Jewishly, embrace the human project, the ultimate master story begun in the opening chapters of Genesis. The narrative tells us how we see ourselves in this era.

Genesis shows us the creation of the universe and Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, followed by fratricide: Cain murders his brother. The human project is laid out before us. We are challenged to learn how to become human. Cain asks God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In that moment, the notions of human responsibility, mercy, and conscience enter the human conversation. The human project has begun, and we see that the way to write the story is to constructively tackle the tough conversations.

Jews have been writing the story and having those difficult conversations from the start. It is our job to continue them, to push our collective story forward through the way we live, to advance the human project.

This is the closest I can get to a “theory” of Temple Micah. Our story is “written” in everything that we do. Our roadmap guides us in both creating and telling the story. To enter Micah is to enter the story, as it is being written and as it is being told.

Shalom,

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Journalists FROM PREVIOUS PAGE ►

it wrong. Consider the now notorious rush to judgment by the *New York Times*, which quoted Palestinian officials blaming Israel for an errant rocket that targeted a hospital in Gaza, without verifying or questioning the claim.

I know many excellent journalists at the *Times* and elsewhere, including members of our congregation, who always try to get it right even when caught up in the maelstrom of modern media. This is a difficult story to cover.

Criticism is inevitable when judgment calls take place every moment. Jewish journalists don’t have to take sides; they just have to get the facts right and bring moral clarity, balance and perspective to a topic that is often missing these values.

Just as journalists, whatever their faith, are obliged to be fair-minded in assessing fast-moving developments, we have our own obligations in the Micah community. The news media is messy, so act accordingly as consumers. Weigh what you read or watch and consider

where it is coming from. Avoid social media on this topic, learn what you can, consider other perspectives and remember that the truth is not always clear until the dust settles. What’s important is that information — vital reporting on this conflict from all sides — is the key to good decision-making and the best possible outcome. ♦

David Gregory is a journalist and author. He covered the White House for NBC News during the Bush (43) presidency and is the former moderator of Meet the Press.

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received*

October 1–November 30, 2023.

*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.*

CONDOLENCES

THE TEMPLE MICAH COMMUNITY extends
its deepest condolences to:

SUE BAUM, on the death of her stepmother-in-law,
Nancy Baum

TED BORNSTEIN AND LESLEY WEISS, on the death of
their grandchild, Judah Mattathias Bornstein Kona

BETSY BRODER, on the death of her stepmother,
Lois P. Broder

LARRY COOLEY, on the death of his brother,
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STAN SHULMAN, on the death of his brother,
Dr. Neil Barnett Shulman

HARRIETT STONEHILL, on the death of her brother,
Martin Mayblum

THE TEMPLE MICAH COMMUNITY, on the death of
founding member, Burton Greenstein

May their memories be for a blessing.

HELP ADULT ENGLISH LEARNERS AT THE WASHINGTON ENGLISH CENTER

The Washington English Center (WEC), a DC-based nonprofit organization, is looking for volunteers to teach and/or tutor adult immigrants and refugees who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students. WEC serves several hundred adult language learners each term, including many recently resettled refugees from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Consider joining our community of over 500 volunteers to teach either online and/or in person in downtown DC!

As a WEC volunteer, you'll have the opportunity to be exposed to new cultures, attend free teacher training, and meet like-minded people at monthly volunteer happy hour socials in-person and online throughout the term. No prior teaching experience is required, as you will be paired with a co-teacher and receive ongoing training and support from our staff.



WEC's tutoring sessions happen on a rolling basis and have flexible start and end dates. We also have the opportunity to substitute teach, which does not require a once-a-week 1-3 hour commitment, and provides volunteers with the flexibility to get involved at their own convenience. WEC will work with your schedule!

Volunteers must be 18 years of age and speak English fluently to participate. Non-native English speakers are also welcome to volunteer—in fact, many volunteers are former or current WEC students.

If you are interested in reading more about volunteer roles, descriptions, and responsibilities, please visit <https://www.washingtonenglish.org/volunteers/> or check WEC out in the *Washington Post*. For any other questions, please feel free to contact Yaritza Abrego, Associate Director of Volunteers and Partnerships at yabrego@washingtonenglish.org.

Mazel
Tov!

Tanya Cooley, Larry Cooley, and Marina Fanning, on the birth of their child and grandchild, Sofia Michaela Cooley

Liz Lerman, on having been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship

Nancy McKemie and Peter Maier, on their marriage

Libby Pearson, Sam Haltiwanger, and Sonia White, on the birth of their child and grandchild, Lillian Katherine Haltiwanger



MICAH CLERGY AND ALUMNI CELEBRATE 150 YEARS

Temple Micah clergy and alumni gathered December 15–17 to celebrate a century and a half of Reform Jewish life in America at URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) 150. The weekend brought almost 1,000 Reform Jews together in shared prayer and song, study, and interfaith panel discussions. These photos were taken following a special service which honored Rabbi Larry Hoffman for his lifelong commitment to Reform Judaism.



TOP: Rabbi Zemel with four past Temple Micah Tisch interns: (left to right) Rabbi Becky Jaye, Kelly Whitehead, Rabbi Slakman, and Rabbi April Davis.

ABOVE: Rabbi Zemel with Union for Reform Judaism board member Aaron Kaufman.