

# Time

## Empathize, Organize, Mobilize: Meet Rabbinic Intern Evan Traylor

**FROM RABBI ZEMEL**

### MY JUDAISM IS A JUDAISM OF LIFE

DEAR FRIENDS,

As I watch events unfold in the West Bank and Gaza, I hear myself and those around me saying, “Jews don’t do that.” Didn’t Hillel teach that the entire Torah is captured in one simple sentence? “What is hateful to you, do not do to others.”



It is clear to me that Benjamin Netanyahu is pursuing an ill-conceived, brutal,

and harmful path simply as a way to preserve his government and avoid facing multiple corruption charges. His ethical shortcomings are glaring. In late 2022, the prime minister turned to Jewish fascists and ultra-nationalists to form a governing coalition. In so doing, he revealed himself to be a man who will stop at nothing to gain and hold power. His actions bear that out.

Now, at this hour of need, Israel is being led by the worst leader in all of Jewish history. May this government fall soon.

As I follow the devastating news, recurring questions haunt me:

Do I have anything in common with the ultra-nationalist Orthodox settlers whose ideology and politics drive Israel’s current government?

Are we of the same religion?

Following the sagacity of Hillel, the answers require extensive commentary. I have everything and nothing in common with the settlers. Yes, we are all Jewish, but as I learned as an undergraduate, at any moment in time there are many Judaisms being practiced. We are Jewish in the sense of Jewish peoplehood and heritage. We have shared

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BY STEVEN R. WEISMAN

EVERY PATH TO the commitment required of a rabbinical student is unique, but the one taken by Evan Traylor is especially unusual. Evan came of age in Oklahoma City, where his family’s small Reform synagogue was established in 1903, four years before Oklahoma became a state.

“My religious school class was only 12 or 15 students,” he says. “When it’s that size, it really matters that people show up. From that experience, I got from my parents the importance of being part of a loving and grounded Jewish community that was instrumental to my becoming a rabbi.”

This summer Evan has joined Temple Micah as its Tisch/Star Fellowship rabbinic intern, after which he returns to Hebrew Union College (HUC) in New York for his last year before graduation and ordination. Evan identifies as Black and Jewish, and a Jew of Color—his father’s ancestors experienced the horrors of slavery in North Carolina and his mother’s forebears escaped the Holocaust in Europe. His father, a physical therapy professor, was “Christianish” growing up in rural Oklahoma, but Evan was raised

in a Jewish home with his brother.

As a teenager, Evan became increasingly involved with Jewish youth groups, summer camps and other organizations while pursuing studies in political science, Jewish studies, and leadership studies at the University of Kansas. An



internship in the Washington, DC, public school system, inspired by the call to service of President Barack Obama, eventually convinced him that his emotional calling was spiritual, not politics or public policy, though Evan’s wife Lindsey Benjamin remains a public-school teacher in New York.

At Kansas, Evan had written an undergraduate thesis on Jewish “white flight” from cities to suburbs after World War II. After graduation, he joined the Union of Reform Judaism, working in New York and Washington with

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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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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# READING FOR PREPARATION (AND PLAIN OLD FUN)

By Rielle Miller Gabriel

As summer rolls around, many of us turn to our summer reading lists. While many adults pick up a beach read to seek an escape from the heaviness and stress of their daily lives, our school-aged kids tackle the books assigned to keep their young minds from turning to mush over summer break. Much like our young congregants, our Board and Transition Committee have some important reading to do this summer. See below for what's on our list to make sure we are set for Rabbi Zemel's



last year at Temple Micah.

### Discovery Circle Learnings

Our congregation has made its way through the first phase of our Transition Plan - the Discovery Phase. The Transition Committee and the Board will be spending time this summer diving into the learnings you all shared through participation in the over 20 Discovery Circle sessions held in March and April. We know, at a high level, that our congregation's values have remained the same since the Road Map project helped us articulate them five years ago. We are excited to dig deeper into your feedback and understand the nuanced differences that have emerged. It will be critical for the Board and Transition Committee to keep this feedback top of mind as we prepare for the hiring of a new senior rabbi in 2025.

### Transition Plan

Now that we have finished the Discovery Phase of our Transition Plan, it's a good time to re-read the Transition Plan in full. Our Board and Transition Committee will be doing just that this summer. We will focus on what our plan says about the next phases, what additional sub-committees are needed, and how to continue to engage the full congregation in these next steps. While we know

how important it is that we make the right decisions for our future leadership, we also understand the importance of getting this next year right—celebrating Rabbi Zemel and saying good-bye. Acknowledging what we are losing will help us take the necessary steps for the transition ahead. Transition is a process we will move through (perhaps individually at different speeds), and ultimately our Transition Plan will prepare us collectively for the new opportunities and exciting changes coming our way.

### CCAR Interim Rabbi Hiring Guidelines

Our Transition Committee and our Interim Rabbi Committee co-chairs will spend a lot of time this summer studying the hiring guidelines for interim rabbis set by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). This is the leadership organization for Reform rabbis in the U.S., and the organization through which we are required to conduct the interim rabbi search (we are bound by the rules of the Union of Reform Judaism of which our congregation is a member). Our committee already has a great head start, since much of the paperwork needed to describe Micah is similar to that which we created for our 2023 cantor search (also conducted through the CCAR). Additionally, the learnings from the Discovery Circles will help us provide updated language to describe our congregation and what we find important. We plan to have our application ready for submission around the high holidays; the timing recommended by the CCAR hiring support staff.

As you can see, the Board and Transition Committee have quite the reading list assigned, and we are looking forward to the time summer provides to get ready for the upcoming year.

On a personal note, I am excited to finally sit down and read Rachel Beanland's [The House is on Fire](#). I picked up a copy after attending her mesmerizing author talk on this book at Micah last October, and am eager to jump back into the story.

Whatever is on your reading list, I wish you all a summer full of happy reading!

**Rabbi Zemel FROM PAGE 1 ►**

ancestry, language, history, traditions, recipes, overlapping books in our libraries, and more.

But are we the same? No matter how I strain to shout **NO!** I cannot. Consider anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition of religion: "A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods ...by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence."

By this definition, we are the same religion. We share the same Torah, holidays, calendar and ritual life. We live with the same system of symbols.

Nevertheless, I oppose almost everything that West Bank Settler Judaism represents. I do not even wish to grace it with the modifier "Orthodox," which for me is a denigration of what Orthodox Judaism has historically stood for.

Sadly, West Bank Settler Judaism has invaded the world of American Orthodox

Judaism. For example, there was, in the not-so-distant past, near unanimous support in the Orthodox Jewish community for the prohibition against Jews ascending to or praying on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for fear of violating Jewish laws pertaining to ritual purity and priestly status. Today, even in Modern Orthodox circles, this prohibition has been whittled away in response to the messianic frenzy of Settler Orthodox Judaism. There is a vision of a united Jewish Jerusalem that displaces Palestinian Arabs and replaces them with Jews. In granting Jews ultimate control over the Temple Mount, they would usurp the right of Islamic hegemony granted by Israel decades ago.

We American Jews, with our liberal heritage, are engaged in an unwelcome, fierce family argument with Jewish forces that combine messianic delusions with a political disdain for liberal democracy. This is their philosophy; theirs are the values

that rule Israel today.

To solve the current crisis, we need strong voices of moderation to wrest control on both sides, Jewish and Palestinian. Some of you have criticized me for not calling out more frequently the heinous atrocities, extremism, barbarism, fascism and cruelty perpetrated by Hamas. I understand and acknowledge that. My response is that I can only work to make change on my side of the street.

In a recent post on his blog "Slow Boring," Matthew Yglesias wrote:

"When I visited the West Bank, someone told me that the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted 200 years, so Israel's durability wasn't so impressive... But it's (also) possible that (Israel will) find a way to maintain occupation indefinitely and/or encourage the bulk of Palestinians to eventually leave. When you have two peoples both insisting on moonshot strategies rather than trying to maximize their core interests, the result

is violence and death."

My Judaism, Micah's Judaism, is a Judaism of life. It demands that we pursue both justice and peace. This is my Zionism, the only path for an enduring Israel that my grandchildren could ever come to love.

As I wrote this letter, I was reminded by Jeannelle D'Isa, who edits the *Vine*, that I usually start the summer by sharing my reading list. In the past, I included such deep thinkers as Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, John Cottingham, Neil Postman and Terry Eagleton. Not this summer! An exhausting year has me yearning for a respite. My summer reading list proudly includes books by such wonderful detective novelists as C.J. Box, William Kent Krueger, Marcie Rendon and Adrian McKinty. Daniel Silva's almost latest Israel spy thriller is, of course, on my list. Isn't Jewish literature filled with good, old-fashioned storytelling? Go for it!

Shalom,  
Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

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*This list reflects donations received February 1–April 30, 2024. 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.*

## MAZAL TOV

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**THE TEMPLE MICAH COMMUNITY** extends its deepest condolences to:

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**JENNA UMANSKY**, on the death of her friend, Tiffany Bailey

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May their memories be for a blessing.



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## FOR YOUR SUMMER CALENDAR...

With July 4th being on a Thursday, this means an extra celebratory four-day weekend for a lot of people. But let's take a moment to look forward to a few of the lesser-recognized days of summer:

July 7 — World Chocolate Day

July 20 — International Moon Day (guess why)

July 28 — World Nature Conservation Day

August 8 — International Cat Day

August 12 — International Youth Day

August 17 — Nonprofit Day

August 19 — World Humanitarian Day

and to wrap up seasonal summer:

August 31 — National Eat Outside Day

# TURNING TO THE TALMUD: DARK HUMOR, DEFIANCE, AND REVERENCE

BY RABBI HEALY SLAKMAN

During the slower summer months, I make it a priority to catch up on the many books and texts that pile up on my nightstand over the course of the busier year. Mixed in with recommendations from the Zemels, Leonard Cohen's poetry books, and collections of short stories are printed passages suggested by friends and teachers who know I have a soft spot for the unsavory and absurd stories of the Talmud. I love finding and reading these passages because they are not only shocking and entertaining, but reveal dark yet profoundly wise layers of ancient Jewish humor.

One Talmudic tale of this genre has occupied my thoughts since October 7th. The Sanhedrin introduces a Jewish man named Sabbeta who gives rides on his donkey for a living. One day, as Sabbeta is giving a woman a ride, they pass "Peor," an idol-worshipping site. The woman requests a stop to worship the idol, leaving Sabbeta seething with outrage at the misuse of his services to support idolatry. When the woman returns, Sabbeta, consumed by anger, decides to enter the idol's abode himself. His passenger questions, "Aren't you Jewish?"

"What do you care?" Sabbeta mutters, already on his way. Inside, Sabbeta defecates before the idol—with the goal of demeaning the idol and the practice of idol worship to the fullest extent. On his way out, he runs into the priests of Peor, and to his surprise, they begin to praise him and thank him. "No person has ever worshiped Peor before with such excellent and creative form!"

Sabbeta's appeal is in fact valid—a drive to confront what's perceived as offensive or threatening, a quest for control and autonomy amidst uncertainty, and a steadfast resolve to challenge wrongdoing. However, since October 7th, amidst the flood of images and narratives from Israel and Gaza and the varied slogans and stances of different groups in the West, I have been thinking about the ways in which acts of vehement opposition can sometimes strengthen the very forces they seek to resist. In his rage, Sabbeta's fixation on the idol, even in disdain, even in his desire to eliminate it, paradoxically reinforced its influence. His degrading act required him to, in some sense,



degrade himself: he stands literally naked, exposed, and vulnerable before the idol. The story reminds us that profound acts of destruction often entail intimate engagement.

As we confront both literary and literal battlegrounds of summer, I'm left wondering—how do we inherently expose ourselves when we engage in acts of destruction? When do impassioned acts of destruction blur the line between defiance and reverence? What does it mean to worship if even an act as base as defecation can be considered a form of veneration?

In a world where anything without vitality can become an idol, faced with the impulse to confront offensive forces, maintain autonomy in unsettling situations, and combat injustice, how do we worship, act, and resist in ways that align with our deepest values? How can our actions bring us closer to holiness, peace, and who we aspire to be?

## Evan FROM PAGE 1 ►

students and young adults, with "a big focus on 'audacious hospitality,' changing the structures of Jewish life that keep people with marginal identities away from Jewish structure." He has served as North American president of NFTY, the Reform movement's youth organization, and started his studies at HUC in 2020, online, at

the height of COVID, mostly with professors based in Jerusalem.

While living in Washington some years ago, Evan visited Temple Micah a few times and has been recruited to serve as rabbinic intern by Rabbi Larry Hoffman, who runs the Tisch program and is a longtime friend of Temple Micah. "When I was growing up, I

didn't have cantors or rabbis who looked like me," Evan says. "If we want to build a Jewish community as strong as possible, broad representation has to be part of it."

A sermon by Evan posted on his website seems to summarize his approach to Judaism: "With hope, we will celebrate the truly inspiring diversity of our Jewish community. With hope, Israelis

and Palestinians will know a true and lasting peace. With hope, we will protect immigrants and refugees, and we will end the plague of gun violence in this country. With hope, young Jews will continue leading our community and world in remarkable ways. And with hope, we will empathize, organize, and mobilize to make our wildest dreams come true. ♦

# ALMOST WITHIN GRASP

By Rabbi Josh Beraha

To comprehend the complexities of the conflict in Gaza, one must delve into the pivotal moments of the region's history. These include well-known events like the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, the Six-Day War of 1967, and two Palestinian uprisings. But the origins of these conflicts stretch back decades, and a recent book offers insight into this foundational history.

The book, *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict*, by journalist Oren Kessler (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), is an indispensable and richly researched resource. In telling stories from the pre-state era, Kessler avoids advocacy for a particular side, instead providing immersive personal accounts of key individuals involved in the region's history, including the British Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald—"the one man in the world most singly responsible for Palestine," Kessler writes.

MacDonald was central to the events unfolding in the British mandate governing Palestine and in the wake of Lord Robert Peel's famous 400-plus-page report, released in 1937, which proposed a partition of the land, two states for two peoples (still the basis for peace negotiations today). Two years later, in 1939, there was still no partition, giving the young and newly appointed MacDonald an opportunity to try his hand at a resolution to the conflict.

Time was not in his favor. With violence escalating in Palestine and Hitler's aggress-

sive military actions causing anxiety across Europe, MacDonald wrote a memo to the Queen's government, declaring it was time to "alter radically our outlook on the Palestine problem."

He soon convened a conference in London to give each side an opportunity to argue their points. The Arab delegation refused to be in the same room with the Zionists, so the opposing factions took turns in front of MacDonald.

Representing the Jewish Agency, Chaim Weizmann spoke first, making the case for the Zionists. Though he had been making his argument for decades, he now cited the dramatic rise in violence against Jews across Europe and Russia as necessitating creation of a refuge for Jews. "Do you realize, Sir, that even if I were so bold as to ask for a very large figure of immigration—let me say 70,000-80,000 a year for the next five years—it would scarcely affect five percent of the people who are doomed to destruction." He added, "If Moses had chosen to bring us to America, our problem would have been easy, but he did not choose to do so, and he is not here to discuss it."

The Arab delegation, led by Jamal Husseini, a member of the Husayni family of Jerusalem, declared the next day: "The Arabs believe that their case was one of self-evident justice. It rests on the natural right of a people to remain in undisturbed possession of their country." He denied any ill feelings toward the Zionists and

added, "it was the case of a population, by nature peaceful and hospitable, trying to preserve the integrity of their country and to prevent the land to which they were deeply attached from being forcibly converted into a national home for another people."

After weeks of contentious meetings, MacDonald put forth a recommendation which limited Jewish immigration and recommended a process that would lead to Palestinian statehood where Jews would be a minority.

Though some in the Arab world welcomed MacDonald's recommendations, the Arab Higher Committee, led by Hajj Amin, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, rejected it outright, saying, "Palestine shall be independent within an Arab federation and shall remain forever Arab."

The Zionists also expressed discontent mostly because of the restrictions on Jewish immigration. Where might the Jews of Europe find sanctuary? Within weeks, Jewish underground military factions in Palestine abandoned their policy of restraint and began to assault Arab civilians of Palestine. David Ben-Gurion, the de facto head of Israel and soon to be the country's prime minister, adopted a new motto: "We are faced, in the age of Hitler, with the necessity of combative Zionism." Weizmann echoed this sentiment. "War is coming," he wrote, "Terrible tragedies are on our doorstep."

That summer, in August of



1939, Weizmann addressed a meeting of the World Zionist Congress: "We will work, fight and live, until the days of calamity are passed. See you in peace."

But peace was not in the near future. Several weeks later, Germany invaded Poland, and though some Jews were able to emigrate to the region (one of the only places that would take them), the calamity that Weizmann knew was coming soon claimed the lives of six million Jews.

After the war, the British handed over control of the region to the United Nations, and Israel declared itself a state. As we are aware, the dispute persists, growing more intricate with each passing day, like an endlessly unfolding fractal.

Reading *Palestine 1936* today, against the backdrop of the war in Gaza makes one realize that, at various points, the prospect of a two-state solution was within reach, or at the least, conceivable. May we live to see that day. Until then, it is upon us to read books like Kessler's that offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities shaping the region, fostering informed discourse amidst the continuing challenges.