
To Learn and To Teach

ללמוד וללמד

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Introduction to Volume III Number 2

In his moving essay Jeff Ruby, our Rebel Without a Clue, discovers a "first step toward" something crucial. The words resonate with all the other pieces in this issue. At this period in the Jewish year, as we recall our people's exodus from Egypt and movement forward to revelation at Mt. Sinai, we may contemplate our own personal journeys toward Judaism, toward this community, toward this congregation.

It is easy to fall into an assumption that we have all followed the same route – Maybe "my grandparents came from Germany to Chicago." Or "I was raised in a Conservative congregation and came to Hyde Park to work at the University." But in fact, our stories are far more varied and complicated. As we struggle with our "steps toward" we can find direction and inspiration in the accounts of others. In this issue Christine Achinger shares something of her background, the first article in a series on the many paths that have led people to Rodfei Zedek.

Of course, Jews have a guide to their path (halakha, הלכה) the teachings of the Torah. But in our "steps toward" Torah, too, we find challenges and perplexities. Law professor Tom Ginsburg presents some perspectives on how to use our texts. And in their divrei Torah, Sara Campbell, Rabbi David Minkus, and Sara Newman serve as examples. Writing from Israel, Danny Altkorn illustrates the interconnectedness of learning and teaching about language. In their writing, all demonstrate how, no matter our age or background, we can all continue to learn and we all have something to teach.

Our prayer traditions, too, can help us "step toward." But the Hebrew words of prayer are not always accessible to us. In a meditation on one of our most common words, Ed Hamburg offers a way forward. As we continue our journey from Pesach to Shavuot, we offer a prayer that we may continue to learn and to teach together. And let us say אמן!

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Interpreting Texts, Then and Now

by **Tom Ginsburg**



Tom Ginsburg is the Leo Spitz Professor of International Law at the University of Chicago Law School, Ludwig and Hilde Wolf Research Scholar, and Professor of Political Science, currently serving as the Deputy Dean. He and his wife Amber have been members of Rodfei

Zedek since about 2009. Two of their three daughters, Kayla and Natalia, have lived with them in the community, while the oldest, Zoe, studies medicine in New York.

As I write, the U.S. Supreme Court is getting ready to hear *King v. Burwell*, the case which threatens the viability of the Affordable Care Act. The case turns on a deceptively simple question about the meaning of four words in the statute, which runs nearly 1000 pages. On its face, the words seem to limit application of federal subsidies to the small number of states that have set up their own health care exchanges. Our best guess is that the phraseology was an oversight and that the drafters did not consider the potential implications. But whatever its origin, enforcing the text literally would throw the health care insurance market into deep crisis and leave millions uninsured, precisely the goals of those bringing the lawsuit.

Beyond the specifics of the case, *King* implicates much deeper questions of legal interpretation, and whether we ought to pursue a literalist or purposive approach to legal texts. The debate is most familiar with regard to constitutional debate. Textualists argue that without fidelity to constitutional text (or what is now called the original public meaning of the text), there is little to ground or constrain judges in interpretation. Opponents argue that the Constitution must be interpreted in light of changing social and political conditions to remain relevant. They point to absurd results that would obtain should we stick to the purely textual or originalist approach: the Vice-President, as presiding officer of the Senate, would get to preside over her own impeachment trial. While women would have the right to vote because of the 19th amendment, they would have no general equality rights under the constitution because of the original public meaning of the 14th amendment, which provides for the equal protection of the laws.

Should texts be interpreted literally or according to the needs of the times? While few believe the drafters of the Affordable Care Act were infallible, we tend toward hagiographic views of our founding fathers, and many continue to treat the constitution with quasi-religious reverence. It is not a far leap to believe that the Constitution ought to be interpreted with a primary focus on text, produced by these heroes. The constitutional convention, wrote Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Adams from his post as Ambassador to France, was “really an assembly of demigods.” James Madison

wrote that the provisions of the constitution deserved “more than common reverence for authority,” but instead should be treated as “political scriptures” protected against “every attempt to add to or diminish them.” Americans have taken those words to heart, it seems, and the Constitution has been described as a central element of American civic religion. By 1885, Princeton Professor Woodrow Wilson wrote of the “almost blind worship” directed at the Constitution.

Yet at the same time, the founders themselves recognized the need for change and modernization. In an 1816 letter, Jefferson decried those who would “look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence and deem them like the ark of covenant, too sacred to be touched.” In a 1937 essay, “Constitution and Court as Symbols”, Max Lerner tied constitutional reverence to religious ideas associated with Protestantism.¹ “The very habits of mind begotten by an authoritarian Bible and a religion of submission to a higher power have been carried over to an authoritarian Constitution and a philosophy of submission to a higher law.” The United States, whatever the prohibition of the first amendment on an establishment of religion, “ends by getting a state church after all, although in a secular form.”

If the Constitution is the foundational text of our civil religion, the Supreme Court is the set of high priests. Yet textualism and priesthood do not mesh easily. Protestant thought relies on an individual relationship to the text, so that interpretive power is dispersed throughout the community of believers. By analogy, as Professor Sanford Levinson has argued, a Protestant approach to interpreting the constitution tends to reject concentrated priesthoods, as well as unwritten traditions that gloss the text.² Strong textualists, whose current champion is Justice Antonin Scalia, follow this view, and frequently decry the role of judges in making law through interpretation.

Professor Levinson contrasts the Protestant approach with a “Catholic” approach that would focus on the unwritten extra-textual tradition, and the authority of the priesthood as agents of that tradition. Catholicism, he argues, does not follow textual literalism but supplements text with evolving rituals. This approach finds support among so-called “living constitutionalists”, such as my colleague David Strauss at the University of Chicago and Supreme Court Justices Ginsburg and Sotomayor, who tend to welcome judicial “updating” of the constitution to reflect the times.

What would be a “Jewish approach” to constitutional interpretation? We are surely the original originalists when it comes to theories of religious revelation. As we sing in the yigdal, “lo kam b’yisrael k’moshe od” (there will never be another like Moshe in Israel). But our approach to text and law is much more fluid. We wrestle with the sacred text each week as individuals and as a community, and take it seriously, yet we

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have authoritatively rejected textual literalism. No one seriously calls, ISIS-style, for a re-establishment of animal sacrifice or for the re-institution of biblical punishments. Our tradition is very much a living one, grounded in text but recognizing that interpretation evolves over time. In this sense, we are closer to Levinson's Catholic approach than to the Protestant one when it comes to text.

At the same time, we have no hierarchical priesthood who are the authoritative keepers of the tradition. The evolution of our tradition comes from a decentralized process of debate among a diverse rabbinate and communities. Judaism, it seems to me, is more Protestant than Catholic in whom we deem to be the authoritative interpreters of that text, even if we take a more Catholic approach to the text itself.

Of course, religious traditions, like schools of constitutional interpretation, are moving targets. In the terms laid out so far, some might argue that Judaism itself is becoming a bit more Catholic with regard to interpretive authority. Professor Haym Soloveitchik, in a justly famous essay called *Rupture and Reconciliation*,³ contrasts the world of our ancestors with the world of contemporary Judaism, and argues that interpretive authority is becoming more concentrated in the keepers of the written word. Quoting at length from his essay:

Authority was broadly distributed in traditional Jewish society, for the Torah, the source of meaning and order, manifested itself in numerous forms and spoke through various figures. It was expressed, for example, in the home where domestic religion was imparted, in the shul (synagogue) where one learned the intricacies of the daily Divine service and was schooled in the venerated local traditions, and in the local beys medrash (study hall) where the widest variety of "learning" groups met under different local mentors, to engage in various ways in the study of the Torah (lernen). These and other institutions were linked but separate domains. Each had its own

keepers and custodians who, in authoritative accents, informed men and women what their duties were and how they should go about meeting them.

The move from a corporate state to a democratic one, and from a deeply ethnic to an open society, meant a shift from a self-contained world to one where significant ways of thinking and acting received some of their impress from the mold of the environment. This acculturation diluted the religious message of home and synagogue, compromised their authenticity, and, finally, delegitimated them. Only the texts remained untainted, and to them alone was submission owed. As few texts are self-explanatory, submission meant obedience to their interpreters . . . The broad sway of their current prerogative stems from the shrinkage of the other agencies of religion, and it is the deterioration of these long-standing counterweights that gives this newly found authority its overbearing potential.

Soloveitchik's concern about over-reliance on textualism in Judaism echoes many of the critics of that approach in constitutional law. The concentration of interpretive authority, he seems to imply, carries real risks in the realm of religion. But the Supreme Court is, for better or worse, the institution to which we have given constitutional interpretive authority. Combining a "Catholic" style interpretive hierarchy, which is what the court system embodies, with an over-reliance on text is the inverse of what I have suggested would be the traditional Jewish approach of Catholic anti-literalism with "Protestant" interpreters.

What does all this mean for *King v. Burwell*? While I have my own views of the merits of the case, I close with a prediction: whichever way the case comes out, the high priests of the Supreme Court will be criticized. For our American civic religion has taken on not only Protestant and Catholic views, but the Jewish love of debate and critique when it comes to the meaning of the law.

¹ Yale Law Journal 46: 1290.

² Sanford Levinson, *Constitutional Faith*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³ Haym Soloveitchik, *Rupture and Reconciliation, The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy*, *Tradition*, 28 (4) (Summer 1994)

A European Engages with History: An interview with Christine Achinger

by **Richard Holbrook**



*Richard Holbrook holds masters degrees in in German and German and Renaissance history from the University of Chicago and a PhD in French history from the University of Illinois at Chicago. During his undergraduate studies he won a Fulbright Scholarship to study for a year at the University of Hamburg, Germany. A chapter by him appears in *French Historians 1900-2000: New Historical Writing in Twentieth-Century France* (2010). Rick has served as librarian and board member at Rodfei Zedek and has led classes at the JCC at*

Temple Shalom. He is married to Shirley; their children Daniel and Nina grew up in the congregation..

From time to time over the past years we have noticed sitting among us a visitor to our services. Christine Achinger, a German scholar, has come as a visiting professor to the University of Chicago, this winter teaching *The Holocaust: History and Interpretations*. In the following interview Christine describes the path that took her from childhood in Tübingen to where she is today.

RH: *You began your studies at the University of Hamburg in literature, philosophy, and physics in the 1980s. But then you shifted course.*

CA: I had been interested in the history of antisemitism, Holocaust memory in Germany and critical social theory early on, but during my time in Hamburg I pursued these interests mostly outside of university. That would only change later, when I moved to the United Kingdom.

RH: *What did you know about the Holocaust before attending Hamburg?*

CA: I knew a lot about it as part of German history in general, of course. When I grew up, in the late 70s and early 80s, there were already books for children and young adults about the topic, and I saw TV documentaries and read newspaper articles about different aspects of the Nazi period. Also, my mother, who was a small child at the end of the war, brought me up with a strong sense that the Holocaust was a crucial historical event that Germans of later generations have to confront. But this was not true of the grandparent generation. I never knew what exactly my grandparents did during the war. It was just not talked about, and they died when I was a teenager. My paternal grandfather was a pastor, so at least we know he never served in the army, but I don't know what his political positions were otherwise. My mother's father was in the Wehrmacht, but all I know is that he mostly served in an administrative capacity in France and Hamburg, but for a brief interim period was transferred to Belarus somewhere behind the front. I assume the unanswered question

of what her father might have done or seen, a common question for her generation, was one of the more personal reasons why my mother felt the German past must not be ignored.

RH: *What about life as a student in Hamburg in the 1990s?*

CA: It gave me the chance to engage more systematically with Germany's recent past, and in particular the Jewish experience. I also realized that there were ways of dealing with that past more actively, rather than being paralyzed by a sense that the Holocaust simply defies comprehension. I became a docent at the concentration camp memorial site of Hamburg-Neuengamme and a resource person in the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden [Institute for the History of German Jews]. I was also involved in organizing lectures and seminars and producing radio programs about related issues when I was running, together with some friends, a kind of community library project in Hamburg, and was working with a public radio station.

The legacy of the Holocaust remains a very complicated issue in Germany. That was vividly brought out for me in 1992, when excavations to expand a mall in Hamburg-Altona uncovered tombstones in what had been a Jewish cemetery that had been paved over during the Nazi period and turned into a parking lot. The property had been sold to the department store company shortly after the war by the then Hamburg Jewish community, predominantly displaced survivors from all over Europe who most likely were not aware of the true nature of the lot. Reactions to the discovery varied widely. Members of the ultra-orthodox 'Athra Kadisha' from the US and Israel came to occupy the site and demonstrate against any further desecration. Neo-Nazis distributed anti-Semitic flyers. Hamburg's Jewish community reacted uneasily, caught between the desire to save the cemetery and the fear of provoking anti-Jewish reactions. The Hamburg city government disavowed any responsibility, and a neighborhood initiative got in on the act, protesting the expansion of the mall as an emblem of consumerism, clearly oblivious or indifferent to the historical significance of the issue.

In response to the uproar, a few of my fellow students and I attempted to mobilize public opinion on campus in order to help put pressure on the Hamburg Senate to intervene. We put up posters announcing a meeting for information and discussion; the posters were torn down the same day. I remember angry voices asking how long would Germans be forced to feel guilty, a kind of defensive aggression that surprised me in people of my generation at a progressive university.

Eventually, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Yitzhak Kolitz, was called upon as a mediator. He found that

An interview with Christine Achinger - cont.

building over the graves was permissible under rabbinical supervision as long as no digging took place and the remains were not disturbed. So the expansion of the mall was built without the planned underground garage, and today, the only reminder of the cemetery is a plaque on the lower level of the mall – a ‘solution’ whose only virtue is its vivid symbolism for Germany’s relationship to its past (the German expression for a ‘skeleton in the cupboard’ is to have ‘bodies in the basement’).

But this past comes to the surface time and again, of course. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, for example, an exhibition about the crimes of the German Army toured German cities. Like the trial of Eichmann in 1961, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials 1963-65 and some other highly publicized events, that exhibition forced further acknowledgment of the Nazi past.

[RH: Viewed by more than a million visitors in Germany, the exhibition comprised official documents, letters from soldiers to their families, and soldiers' photos of their actions in the Balkans and Eastern Front. The exhibition catalog was published under the title Verbrechen der Wehrmacht (Crimes of the Wehrmacht).]

The exhibition was traumatic. No one could doubt now that the army had participated fully in genocide. They were not the "unblemished" fighters Chancellor Adenauer had praised. Many soldiers were freely describing and photographing their murderous role. And these were not SS volunteers or specially trained killers, but potentially everybody's fathers and grandfathers. Not untypical for her generation, my mother feared, when going to the exhibition, that against all odds she might see an older relative in the pictures.

RH: What were the reactions to the exhibition, besides the anxiety your mother felt?

CA: As with many such confrontations with the Nazi past, public opinion was deeply split. Many Germans, I recall, were indignant and angry, there were right-wing demonstrations and even a bomb attack. But it was precisely these reactions that made the exhibition more widely known and intensified public debate about the question of personal and general responsibility, a debate that was also welcomed by many. Such controversies continue, as, on the other hand, do the persistent – and so far, fortunately, futile – calls to ‘draw a line under the past’. But the patterns of denial and defense also evolve. In the first decades after the war, for example, it was mostly the reference to the Stalinist crimes or German suffering at the hands of the Red Army or during allied bombing raids that served as attempts at relativizing German crimes. Such patterns persist, but since 1967, and increasingly in recent years, those who don't want to confront a difficult past increasingly point at Israel in an obscene attempt to portray the former victims as the current victimizers, and on this basis to insinuate that a balance had been reached and discussions on the German past should be closed.

RH: You did your doctorate at the University of Nottingham. What took you to Great Britain?

CA: Initially I was planning to stay only for a year in London, working on an MA on the rise of bourgeois society and the modern state as reflected in Enlightenment debates on the emancipation of Jews and women. But the MA led to a PhD and eventually to my current position at the University of Warwick. I came to feel that it cleared my view to step out of the often entangled, bitter and unproductive German debates, and to step back in time with my research for a while. Leaving Germany also allowed me to look at Jewish life and Jewish history no longer mainly from the narrow perspective of persecution and destruction. A parallel change occurred in my personal life, as I quickly gained Jewish friends.

RH: How did academic life in Britain contrast with your university experience in Hamburg?

CA: English universities were not so constrained by academic boundaries, and that opened opportunities for cross-disciplinary work. Students also had greater access to professors than they did in the huge classes at Hamburg.

RH: You eventually wound up at the University of Nottingham, where you completed a dissertation on ideas of race, class, gender, and nation in 19th century Germany as reflected in Gustav Freytag's novel Soll und Haben [Debit and Credit]. What did you find?

CA: I realized that the nineteenth century was an excellent place to begin. Pre-unification Germany was the period when questions of national identity became a serious matter and the definition of what was authentically German hinged on definitions of race and culture and was shaped by the experience of rapid social change. The novelist and playwright, Gustav Freytag, [1816 – 1895, born in Silesia, which is now part of Poland] turned out to be an ideal subject for examining these questions.

RH: Can you tell us about this novel?

CA: *Soll und Haben* was published in 1855, as, among other things, an effort to define the social position of the growing middle class after the political and constitutional failure of the Revolution of 1848. It identifies middle class and German virtues, and promotes a notion of ‘German labor’ as productive, morally guided and community-building activity, an idea that can be traced into the 20th and even 21st century. Freytag's book was an immediate best seller. It ran through multiple editions, well into the twentieth century, and was even translated into English as early as 1857. It confirmed the middle class's view of itself. The middle class liked what it saw.

Most of the novel's Jewish characters are an early example for a specifically modern, secular form of antisemitism, very different from older, religious versions and in some respects a precursor of later, full-blown racial antisemitism. The text responds to the ambivalent experience of the rise of capitalist

An interview with Christine Achinger - cont.

modernity at the time, as both productive and destructive, as engendering concrete social and technological progress and as a system of abstract imperatives and compulsions that seems to develop a dynamic of its own. Freytag projects the two sides of this apparent contradiction on the Germans on the one hand, the Jews on the other. He portrays the German merchant as the builder of a national community, engaged in the distribution of useful things, caring about material quality of his products and about the greater good of all. The Jew, on the other hand, is concerned only with exchange value and engaged in a quest for profit that knows no natural bounds or moral controls; he undermines all community. This foreshadows the National Socialist distinction of – in German - *raffendes vs. schaffendes Kapital* [rapacious vs. creative capital], or put another way, acquisitive Jewish capital vs. virtuous and productive German capital. In Freytag's text, the egotism and social fragmentation found in capitalism can be traced only to the Jews.

In this way, the Jewish figures in the novel actually permit the author to paint a positive picture of 'German modernity'. Freytag was politically a Liberal, who in his journalistic writing advocated Jewish emancipation and later in life criticized the rising political antisemitism of his time. The book is therefore also an interesting study in 'liberal antisemitism', an antisemitism that does not recognize itself as such.

RH: *You used Freytag's novel as a way to understand the notion of "the other" in society. Can you elaborate?*

CA: My book [*Gespaltene Moderne: Gustave Freytags 'Soll und Haben' – Nation, Geschlecht und Judenbild* (Split Modernity: Gustav Freytag's Debit and Credit: Nation, Gender, and the Image of the Jew)] is an examination of the way different kinds of 'others' are constructed, and how these ideas emerge from a specific social and historical context. Debit and Credit is structured by a whole number of oppositions, not just the one of Germans and Jews. There is also the conflict with the lazy and rebellious Poles who have to be dragged into modernity through Prussian colonialism, the tensions between German middle class and an anachronistic nobility, and different images of masculinity and femininity. These various 'others' in the novel all play different roles, but all of them serve in their different ways to articulate a specific notion of modernity, identity, and of the boundaries of the national community.

RH: *Over the years your engagement with Jews and Judaism has grown. What about your relationship with Jews in Germany?*

CA: The Jewish population in Germany has grown a great deal since I left. When I was still there, very few Jews lived in Germany, roughly 30,000 in a population of 60 million. I therefore became familiar with any kind of normal Jewish life and gained Jewish friends only in the UK and the US.

Postscript: Dr. Achinger has become a sort of honorary member of Rodfei Zedek, where she has attended services and participated in classes, including David Feuer's "What Do We Believe and Why" and Cantor Rachel Rosenberg's course on the prayerbook.



Dr. Christine Achinger is Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Chicago and Associate Professor of German Studies at the University of Warwick in Coventry, England. At Warwick she has served as Director of Graduate Studies and taught German Culture; Culture and Politics in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich; Culture, the Text, and Identity; Germany and the Holocaust; and modern German language. In addition she held a Research Fellowship at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan (2013-14).

A few of her many publications include Antisemitism, Racism and Islamophobia (edited with Robert Fine); Allegories of Destruction: 'The Woman' and 'the Jew' in Otto Weininger's Geschlecht und Charakter; Evoking and Revoking Auschwitz; Kosovo, Remembrance and German National Identity; Colouring the Invisible: The construction of the "black drug dealer." She is a board member of the Research Network 31: Racism and Antisemitism, of the European Sociological Association, and a member of the Research Network Gender in Antisemitism, Orientalism and Occidentalism. She is also centrally involved in an international collaboration for graduate education in transnational German Studies between universities and institutions in the U.S.A., Germany, the U.K., Austria, and Israel.

Her current research focuses on constellations of images of femininity and Jewishness at important junctures in German and Austrian history between the Enlightenment and the Fin de Siècle. She is also preparing an edited volume exploring the contradictory and historically changing relationship between antisemitism and the political Left, broadly conceived.

Becoming Part of an Ancient Community in Israel

by **Danny Altkorn**



Danny Altkorn is the son of Diane & Bob Altkorn and brother of Emily Altkorn. Danny attended Hebrew School at Congregation Rodfei Zedek, became a bar mitzvah at CRZ in 2005, graduated from University of Chicago Laboratory School in 2010, and graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in mathematics in 2014. He is spending 2014-2015 as an English teacher in Israel, and shares something of his experiences with us in this article. (Danny is pictured with his cohort at the lower right.)

Beit She'an is the most historical place that no one has ever heard of. Established 4,000 years ago at the junction of the Jezreel Valley and the Jordan River Valley (in modern geography, just north of the West Bank and just west of the Jordanian border), it is one of the oldest continually inhabited locations in the world. Its population has halved since its peak 2,000 years ago, which has made it a very warm, welcoming place to be. It's about 160 times smaller than Chicago and less than half the size of the University of Michigan. And it's my home for the year.

I'm in Israel as a Masa Israel Teaching Fellow, participating in a program that brings native English speakers to underserved communities around Israel to teach English in elementary schools for ten months. It operates in eight different cities around the country, and although most of them are in the center, it goes as far south as Be'er Sheva and as far north as Beit She'an. Besides teaching English, each fellow takes on another volunteer project of their choosing, and participates in educational seminars on teaching English as a second language and about the history and culture of Israel.

There are nine of us in Beit She'an, teaching 2nd through 6th graders in seven different elementary schools. We all live in one house (two floors) in a neighborhood called Eli Cohen, named after the Egyptian-born Israeli spy. We represent nine different states in the U.S. and range from 22 to 29 years old. We have all come here at different stages of our lives (only one

of us was actually a teacher in the States), but we were all looking for similar things when we decided to come to Beit She'an.

This begs the question that we have heard countless times: Why did you choose Beit She'an?

There were a few reasons that Beit She'an piqued my interest: after growing up in a big city and studying at a large university, I wanted to try living in a smaller community. I thought that it would not only be a very different experience, but that it would be much easier to integrate myself. I also heard that not many people spoke English, which was a very attractive attribute. If I were going to live in a non-English-speaking country, I didn't want to speak English either (except when teaching English, of course). The last major reason I chose Beit She'an was that I was told it was a good place to go for those who like hiking and other outdoor activities. This has proven to be very true; in the immediate area there are natural springs, mountains, a valley and endless places to hike and bike around. And although two other Fellows and I spent part of Sukkot hiking from the Mediterranean Sea to the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee), I don't spend all of my time gallivanting around the wilderness! I have been kept quite busy here.

I volunteer four days a week in a small, religious school called Me'ir. I guess my time there can be split into two parts: class time and break time. During class time I take one or two students out of the primary classroom and we go to the "English Room," where I help them reinforce old concepts (especially the alphabet), work through recently learned topics, or, for the most advanced, teach them new material. Some of the students really need the individual attention, and it's amazing to be able to give it to them and then see how much progress they make as a result.

I have also been able to very objectively examine the English language, and it makes me feel very lucky that I don't have to learn it as a second language. For example: who thought it would be a good idea to have letters that make TWO sounds (C and G)!? Or give the letters names that don't immediately make it obvious what that letter sounds like? (I can't even count the number of times I've told a student that the letter they were reading was called En, or Ef, and had them think that it sounded like 'eh.')

And then there are vowels. Vowels are easily the most difficult thing to teach -- in every word vowels take on different sounds! All of this is very different from Hebrew, making it difficult for young Israeli children to grasp.

For break time, I usually go out to the courtyard and do whatever the students want me to do. I've run countless races up and down the courtyard, played tag for the first time since I

Ancient Community - cont.

was in elementary school, engaged in the struggles of tug-of-war and thumb wars, arm wrestled, and basically everything else the kids have come up with. Sometimes I think that I'm just a big toy to them, but as long as they're enjoying it, and maybe even learning some English, I don't care too much.

We fellows also engage in various other outside projects after school or on the weekends. Two are teaching an English-For-Adults class for the residents of Beit She'an, three volunteer as guides at the National Park (which contains the ruins of the thousands of years of history here), and everyone else has found their own unique way to give back.

For my project, I help coach basketball once or twice a week. The players are 1st through 6th graders from Beit She'an, and they don't speak English. This makes my job there very enjoyable, as it is a wonderful opportunity to practice my Hebrew, but also very challenging. No matter how much I want to help them, I can't always express myself through words. Most of my explanations are a combination of Hebrew and physical demonstration, saying "like this, like this," and hoping that they understand.

I mentioned earlier that I work in a religious school. I should add that in Beit She'an, five of the seven elementary schools are religious; it's a fairly religious town. This means that from Friday afternoon until Saturday evening, everything is closed and there are very few cars on the roads. Many people you see walking around wear kipot and tzitzit, but also many do not. Even those who consider themselves secular keep kosher and celebrate Shabbat weekly. The population is mostly Sephardic, particularly of Moroccan descent, so we have all been exposed to a variety of delicious new foods. Fish is a staple of every Shabbat dinner, followed usually by chicken, rice and/or bourekas (savory filled pastries).

We've been introduced to this food through our warm, welcoming host families. We don't live with them; they are just generous families who invite us over for *Shabbat* or to celebrate other holidays and make us feel at home in this foreign country.



My host family is religious, meaning that they keep kosher and they keep *Shabbat* (no electronics or driving for them!). There are six of them: my host mother is an artist and my host father is the principal of the religious high school in Beit She'an. Their eldest daughter is 14, and she attends a sort of religious girls' boarding school near Tel Aviv. Their other three kids are triplet 5th graders. Because I usually spend time with them when electronics are forbidden, I spend a lot of time sitting and talking or playing board games with the kids.

Another amazing opportunity that Israel affords, because it is so small, is easy traveling. By Israeli standards, Beit She'an is in the middle of nowhere, at the other end of the world, impossible to get to or to leave. But we're actually about an hour from Haifa and around two hours from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and this is by bus; you don't even have to fly! I fairly frequently find myself jumping on a bus after school on Friday and "just going to Jerusalem for the weekend" (something that I'll probably never get used to).



Living in another country and learning a new culture is a very special experience, and we were put in the unique position to give back to a community that has welcomed us with open arms. Even though we're only a tiny drop in Beit She'an's long history, I would like to think that we're making an impact. It might not be the impact that we're intending, but an impact nonetheless.

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Thoughts on Saying "Amen"

by **Edward Hamburg**



Besides serving as a corporate director of various high technology companies, Edward Hamburg is on the boards of Sichu, The Institute for the Next Jewish Future, and Congregation Rodfei Zedek (and was its immediate past president). He received a Ph.D. from the department of political science of the University of Chicago. Ed and Stacey raised their sons, Michael and Adam, in this community; they live in the South Loop.

“Amen: The Final Word in Faith” was the theme of a recent retreat held by Sichu, an organization dedicated to promoting ongoing dialogues between classical Jewish texts and lived experience.

In his introductory remarks to the three days of discussion, Sichu executive director Rabbi Steven Sager observed that:

Amen is, after all, a response, not an opening. An amen that stands alone invites questions: What does this amen confirm? To what is it an affirmation? Would we add our own amen to an unheard claim or blessing? To what claims and blessings are we prepared to say amen? Under what conditions are we not prepared to say amen?

He explained how amen embeds the root of other Hebrew words expressing faith, trust, belief, dependability, and artful practice; how it is a word “so engrained, so ready on the tongue, so familiar to the ear that we overlook the ways in which the word forms and informs our lives as individuals who live in communities that are both constant and changing.” Sager also reminded us that while sages and poets have extensively explored the meaning of amen, “they do not have the final word as to its meaning, its use, or its place in building community.”

Indeed. Or perhaps better said, “amen.”

Like others at the retreat, I processed the presented materials within my own intellectual and experiential context. Our discussions resonated for me at the intersection of my academic training as a political scientist and experience as a member and lay leader in the American Jewish community. For the very first time, the word “amen” – saying it, how it is said, or deciding not to say it at all – struck me as an important way Jews respond to each other; that it represents an essential, tangible expression of Jewish citizenship.

While few Jews may actually think of themselves as being “citizens,” I believe citizenship accurately describes the relationship between individual Jews and the collective Jewish people. The term captures the reciprocal nature of this relationship, how it involves having rights and responsibilities that are understood and exercised very differently, with very

different degrees of efficacy and intensity, by each of us, just like the rights and responsibilities we have as citizens of conventional polities.

When we become Jewish citizens by birth or election, we are presented with the rights to share a collective identity as well as participate in a liturgy, a host of traditions and conventions, a history, and a multitude of stories. How we decide to exercise the rights and accept the associated responsibilities of this legacy determines our position within the kaleidoscopic Jewish world that includes the disassociated and committed, the religious and secular, and the alchemical combinations in between. Among the ways we express these decisions is with the word “amen.”

Because amen is an affirmation; it is an expression of agreement and support.

But, as Sager asks, do we always know to what we are expressing agreement when “amen” departs our lips? Moreover, does the intensity of our expression – or our hesitation to express it at all – reveal the underlying truth of our convictions, if not the absence of agreement itself? Consider the following table describing very different ways in which amen can be expressed: a “Typology of Amens/ Amenim.”

Typology of Amenim		
Expression	Intensity	
	Passive	Active
Agreement or Supportive	Perfunctory	Affirmative
Ambivalence or Not Supportive	Directed	Withheld

In the upper right corner is the amen ideal-type: the intentional articulation of the word in an active expression of affirmation or support. This ideal-type is exemplified when we respond five times with “amen” to Jews as they recite the Mourner’s Kaddish. Some of us might be affirming the actual Aramaic liturgical statements confirming God’s sovereignty in the universe, while most of us are likely expressing our support for those who, with this venerable formula, are recalling the loss of loved ones. Prompted by faith, tradition, intellect, or emotion, these affirmative expressions are almost always made with active conviction, and the absence of such responses in a community is hard to imagine. Other examples of ideal-type “affirmative” expressions of amen might include our responses to the Shehecheyanu blessing said at rare and joyous occasions, or after hearing profound teachings from scholars, or even in reaction to occasional thoughtful statements made at congregational board meetings. Most importantly, affirmative

Saying "Amen" - cont.

amenim are expressions of efficacy and intensity emblematic of engaged Jewish citizens. They not only demonstrate considered agreement and support, but presence and commitment as well.

Complexity creeps in, however, as we move to the upper left corner of the table inhabited by “perfunctory” expressions of amen – when the word, “so engrained, so ready on the tongue, so familiar to the ear,” is said because, well, because it’s supposed to be said. Part of the reason for this is structural: amen at various points is actually embedded in the liturgy, as it is four of the five times we say it in response to the Mourner’s Kaddish. Yet more often than not amen can be a perfunctory response due to inattention, a lack of understanding, or simply the desire to go along with conventional thought and practice. Was my quasi-orthodox maternal grandfather really making an affirming statement when he said amen to the part of the traditional daily liturgy that thanks God for not making him a woman? Do I really understand what I’m affirming when I say amen to our regular requests for the coming of the Messiah or rebuilding the Holy Temple in Jerusalem? Do we ever think about to what we are assenting when we say amen to the various insertions increasingly added to Birkat Hamazon (Grace after Meals)? There is also a larger concern: how much of what is interpreted as agreement or satisfaction in Jewish communities is really drawn from collections of torpid, programmed, practiced, and risk avoiding expressions of support? Beware of the perfunctory amen. At best it may unwittingly perpetuate ideas and conventions in need of questioning or change; at worst it can make us accomplices to sophistry.

We confront even more complexity moving to the bottom left corner of the typology table containing exogenously influenced amens. Some clergy, for example, regularly conclude sermons with the familiar directive, “and let us say amen,” presuming that those in attendance actually agreed with or were positively moved by their remarks. While the amens they hear may in fact be expressions of genuine support, some of these directed responses may also come from congregants wrestling with confusion or disagreement. At Conservative synagogues in the United States, the prayers for the country and State of Israel also conclude with directed amens based on the presumption that congregants will affirm what is said in these passages. There are times, however, when many Jews struggle to articulate their faith in the nation’s “leaders and advisors,” as there are Jews unconvinced that Israel holds for them any “promise of redemption.” Beware of amens initiated by direction based upon presumption. At best they are expressions of affirmation in response to reminders or encouragement; at their worst they can dismiss the range of beliefs and opinions that often exists in increasingly diverse, independently-minded Jewish communities.

Finally moving to the bottom right corner of the table we find amens that are actively withheld, expressions that come

from Jews who, if you will, say “amen” to Sager’s earlier question about whether there are conditions under which one might not be prepared to say it. These expressions are the inverse of the amen ideal-types above them in the table: they represent intentional decisions to respond to what is heard with silence in active pronouncements of ambivalence or disagreement. Yet withheld amens are also identical to their affirmative counterparts in that they too are expressions of efficacy and intensity emblematic of engaged Jewish citizens. They demonstrate considered ambivalence or opposition, and do so in a context of presence and commitment. They show that our right to withhold an amen can sometimes be as important as our responsibility to say it.

Maimonides maintains that “anyone who hears one of Israel offering any of the blessings, even without hearing the entire blessing from beginning to end, and without being obliged to make that particular blessing, is obliged to respond amen.” He also provides careful instructions on how amen should be said – never rushed, never truncated, never with hesitation – to express it with optimal effect and respect. And he stipulates exceptions to when it should be said: to blessings offered by heathens, apostates, children while learning, or anyone who materially alters the text, we are told not to respond with amen (“Laws of Blessings,” 1:13-14).

While there is much to be interpreted in these passages, I contend that one message of Maimonides is clear: that we should be mindful of what we affirm and how we express our affirmations, whether in our homes, among our families and friends, or in our communities. They should be expressed with courage and conviction; they should never become perfunctory, nor should we ever allow ourselves to simply affirm what others, regardless of who they are and whatever their intent, encourage or direct us to do. I further contend that we should be mindful that our ability to withhold affirmations is both a right and responsibility of empowered Jewish citizenship, particularly when expressed with courage and conviction.

Perhaps these are thoughts to which some will respond with an affirmative “amen.”

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Torah commentary: Vayeira

by **Sara Campbell**



Sara Campbell is a seventh grader at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School. She and her family are members of Congregation Rodfei Zedek, and she and her older sister, Carolyn, are particularly enthusiastic participants in the Family Minyan. Sara loves swimming, math and spelling, but her greatest passion is for spending time with her family and friends.

When I met with Rabbi Minkus about this, I had no clue what I was going to end up writing about, but the first thing he asked me was if I am still glad that I chose Vayeira as my parsha. Some of you know that my birth parsha is not Vayeira. I remember how when I first learned about Sarah, I thought it was so cool that the first Jewish woman had the same name as me! So I decided that when my Bat Mitzvah came, I would do something with Sarah in it. That's why I picked this Parsha, but what I didn't know was that it is full of really dramatic and violent stories.

Two of the most gruesome parts are the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the sacrifice of Isaac. It is on these two stories that I would like to focus today. There is a Midrash that says that a lot of stories like these with Abraham in them were tests, to see if he was really worthy of being the start of a great nation. Some people think that in the Akeidat Yitzchak, or the binding of Isaac, Abraham did pass the test, by listening to Hashem. This is what seems to be most commonly thought. But some people say that he did not pass the test, and that he should have defended Isaac and argued it out with God.

My question is: How could Abraham have possibly passed his test with the Akeidat Yitzchak, when he tried to defend an entire wicked city, but not his own son?

Recall that when Hashem told Abraham his plans for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he thought that God was making a huge mistake. He asked Hashem to reconsider, if he could find fifty righteous people. He didn't want to see the good people pay for the evil actions of the others. When this failed, Abraham asked the same question, but with forty five people. Then forty, thirty, and so on. One thing to think about is that when Abraham argued to Hashem against destroying Sodom, he could not change what Hashem would do. He could sway His opinion, but Abraham wasn't the one destroying the city, so if Hashem's decision was already final, then Abraham's complaining would be like a little kid, whining about how they can't have dessert before dinner.

But in the Akeidat Yitzchak, Abraham was the one performing the sacrifice, so if he had rebelled, he would not

have followed through, which would have affected what happened. Therefore, maybe he passed both of the tests, by doing what Hashem said to do, or accepting Hashem's ways.

Another option is that he absolutely did not pass the test! He didn't even care about how his son was going to die; he just did as Hashem said to. It never says anywhere what the test was. Maybe Hashem was trying to see if he was capable of being a good family member, after he had just exiled Hagar and Ishmael, and almost gave away Sarah to another man. If that was the test, he failed miserably.

A third option is that this was not a test. After all, it's only a Midrash, which is simply a story to answer questions that we have about the Torah. There's no proof that any of them are even close to accurate. Maybe this isn't one of the tests, and maybe there aren't any tests at all. It's very possible that these actions were irrelevant to Hashem and Abraham.

These are all pretty good options, but based on my personal experiences, I can see something wrong with all of these theories. My first idea was that he passed both tests by doing, or accepting, Hashem's ways, but the fact is that he did not do, or accept, Hashem's ways. Abraham argued with God about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, so he did not accept His ideas. So that option is out.

I have a very big problem with the second option: that he didn't care about the fact that he was sacrificing Isaac, so he did not pass, due to not caring. My issue with this is that there is absolutely no way that Abraham didn't care. One thing that matters a lot to me is that family always comes first. It just wouldn't make sense for Abraham to not care. He probably was just holding in his feelings because he was scared of God. The love from parent to child is so huge, that this option certainly can't be right.

My third possibility is that this was not a test at all, and that it didn't matter. Now this also can't be right, since all of our actions matter. Hashem is always watching us, and deciding our future based on the past. That's what Yom Kippur is all about, looking at our actions. Life is basically one big test. Maybe it's not the type of test that we're thinking about, maybe it's not specifically a test, but it was definitely testing Abraham, just like everything else that he did. God is judging every one of our actions, so they are all adding up to one big grade. They aren't exactly labeled as tests, but they do matter.

So what is the answer? Did Abraham pass either of the tests? There are so many ways to interpret this Midrash, but what is right? My conclusion is that it is purposely unknown. Recently in my Jewish thought class, we learned about what the Torah is really made up of. It consists of three things: Laws, Stories, and Philosophy. All of these things are trying to teach us how to become better people.

Torah commentary: Va-ayra

by **Rabbi David Minkus**



Rabbi David Minkus and his wife Ilyssa came to the Congregation in June, 2014, where they were joined in September by baby Raia. He earned a BA with a major in psychology from the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana in 2008 and also studied at Hebrew University and at the Machon Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. In 2014 he graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary with a Masters in

Jewish Education and received ordination.

As we start the book of Shemot, I am struck by how important memory is to the Exodus narrative and thus how vital memory is to our tradition. It is not simply Pharaoh not knowing Joseph, or the institutional and national agenda that allowed for that lack of memory. I would like to focus on two small and often overlooked pieces of the story to demonstrate this point.

In the immediately previous parasha (Parashat Shemot, Exodus 2:1), Moses struck and killed the Egyptian taskmaster but just before he did, the text says “Moses went out to see his kinsmen.” And in the current parasha, God speaks to Moses and introduces him/herself as the God of the patriarchs. To me, there is a very obvious question we must ask: how did Moses know he was an Israelite? And how could he possibly know who Abraham, Isaac or Jacob were? He grew up in Pharaoh’s palace! I do not imagine that he had a bar-mitzvah or sat on Pharaoh’s lap learning about the feats of his Israelite ancestors.

We have to believe that somewhere between being saved by Pharaoh’s daughter and striking dead the Egyptian taskmaster he learned more than just his true identity. It was not simply that his mother or sister whispered into his ear that he was actually an Israelite (as the Ramban asserts). It was that he had to have been schooled. He had to have been taught Israelite history and lore, tasted the foods and learned the sanctity of their traditions.

We need to fill in these gaping holes with our own Midrashim. Perhaps he killed the Egyptian because he had a higher sense of justice, which is what many of the commentators believed. Perhaps he grew unsatisfied with his elevated status. But, either way, God summoning his leadership by using the names of the patriarchs is not calling upon his sense of justice but his sense of peoplehood, of shared memory and destiny.

I will return to the parasha but I want to tell you a story.

Whenever the Jews were threatened with destruction, the Baal Shem Tov would go to a certain place in the woods, build a sacred fire with just so many sticks, with stones arranged just

so, and there he would say a special prayer. He would open his mouth and raise his voice to the heavens, and always a miracle would occur, and disaster would be averted.

But the Baal Shem Tov could not live forever...

In later days, when disaster threatened, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, would go to the same place in the woods and say, “Ribono shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to build the sacred fire, but I can say the prayer. And this, this must suffice.” He would open his mouth and raise his voice to the heavens, and always a miracle would occur, and disaster would be averted.

But the Maggid of Mezritch could not live forever...

Still later, when calamity loomed and terror rained down on Jewish towns and villages, his disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the woods and say, “Ribono shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to build the sacred fire, and I do not know how to say the special prayer, but I know this place, and this, this must suffice.” And always a miracle would occur, and disaster would be averted.

But Moshe Leib of Sasov could not live forever...

Later, much later still, when innocent Jews suffered under evil regimes, his disciple Israel of Rishryn would say, “Ribono shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to find the place, and I do not know how to say the prayer, and I do not know how to build the fire, but I can tell the story. And this, this must suffice.” And it did.

A dear friend of mine told me this story. It was mid-September and I was looking for the obligatory Hasidic story to tell in between in the intense moments of Rosh Hashanah. When my friend, who is a brilliant rabbi and pedagogue, told me this story I thought “wow, that is the story!” Jazzed that I had all that I needed, I told this story to my aunt, Rabbi Benay Lappe. She interrupted me before I even got to the second Hasid and said how much she hated that story! Her disdain made me take another look at the tale, and I suddenly realized I hate it, too! It goes against my desire to further Judaism, to further a Judaism that is rich and meaningful. This story is about watering down our Judaism, about elevating kavannah/intention while minimizing, if not eliminating, keva/the fixed piece of Judaism. It is for this reason that I have a real disregard for the Hasidic story. Judaism is hard, and that is a good thing.

The Hasidic commitment to a Judaism that was full of personal meaning and joy was a reaction to Mitnagdim, an elitist group who tried to make Judaism a religion and movement for the intellectual 1%. And the Hasids were right to build a Judaism that was filled with joy. We should study texts with a historical and religious lens, but we must study a text

Va-ayra - cont.

with the intention of finding personal meaning as well. Yet if our Judaism is devoid of teaching Hebrew, of demonstrating the importance of Shabbat, of kashrut and of communal participation, than we will have nothing.

Some of us know the words to the prayer, some know how to build the fire, while some only know the story. And I would imagine that all of us know someone who can teach us the elements we do not know. But will the next generation? Will the next generation even know to go to the woods? We are not in a closed community as they were in Poland, thank God. But in the shtetlach there was the communal and religious infrastructure to learn the elements of this story simply by osmosis – that is now a relic of a time past. We must engage not with the story but the pieces that make the story worth retelling (the prayer, building the fire) - the pieces that make Judaism worth sustaining.

Recently, I spoke about my relationship to anti-Semitism (in light of the attack on the Hyper Cacher supermarket in Paris). I have made a conscious choice that it will not be the hatred of others that motivates me in my life as a Jew or a Zionist. It will not be simply the determination to maintain a tradition in the face of prejudice. Rather my life is made fuller through learning Jewish texts. It is made richer by celebrating Shabbat. Keeping kosher gives my life an order and purpose that I would not have without them. It is this richness that is meaningful, not the act of maintaining these traditions simply for continuity's sake.

The greatest threat to those who hate us is to further our people. And I do not refer to the old-school notion of mere biological continuity or contributing to Jewish charities. But to learning. To being a member of a community that challenges

you to learn the words. Being a member of a community that is safe, where you feel comfortable to gain the tools necessary for adding wood to the fire of our tradition. That is continuity and that is how our tradition has not only been preserved but has thrived in the face of on-going hardship.

When God asks Moses to confront the people and demonstrate his leadership, he again attempts to get out of it. He says that he “*arel saphatim!*” (has uncircumcised lips or that he has difficulty with speaking). So what does God do? Does God give Moses the ability to speak? Does God speak for him to Pharaoh and the Israelites? No! He gives him Aaron. Aaron will be his partner because it was not his speech that made Moses demur, it was the vastness of the task.

This is the parallel for all of us. If it was up to each of us to write the prayer, build the fire or even find the place in the woods, Judaism would cease to exist. We need each other. We need to be non-judgmental and we need to find the comfort to be each other's teachers. When confronted with anti-Semites who want to keep us from furthering our tradition or those Jews who say our tradition needs to look one particular way, we need to support each other, so that our effort to continue our brand of Judaism and our understanding of that Judaism can succeed. Our Judaism needs to encompass personal meaning, because without that the spark of our people will fade away. But we must continue to learn, to struggle through prayers until the language and the meaning reaches us. We need to struggle through the rituals whose meaning is not immediately apparent. We need to struggle with the texts that often seem archaic or too difficult. This is the best response to our enemies. A shared memory not only of our people but of our traditions as well.

Torah commentary: Shelach Lecha

by **Dr. Sara Newman**



Sara Newman is a graduate of Smith College and Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. She is married to Steven Newman MD, also an oncologist. Sara was one of the inaugural group of docents at the new Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. She now works in hospice and palliative medicine. Despite the distance from their Winnetka home, Steven and Sara and their two children, Rachel and Sam, joined Congregation Rodfei Zedek, where Steven had grown up in a family including his mother, Pearl Rieger, and the Handelsman, Horwich, and Epstein families. Steven, Rachel, and Sam all celebrated bar and bat mitzvah at Rodfei Zedek, reading the same parsha; and Thea Crook encouraged Sara to follow their example. In June 2003 she did so, offering a version of the following devar Torah.

Today's Torah portion tells the story of the twelve spies sent by Moses to explore the Promised Land. They return with glowing reports about the land itself, but ten of the twelve exaggerate the dangers posed by the inhabitants of the land, thus inciting the people to cry for a return to Egypt. Only Joshua and Caleb trust God's assurances that the land is theirs. You all know how this ends: because of their faith, Joshua and Caleb ultimately enter the Promised Land, while everyone else dies during the 40 years of wandering in the desert. During those years of wandering, a number of supplementary laws and rituals were worked out. Some of these are presented in the second part of today's portion and include three specific references to the treatment of strangers. In Numbers 15:14, the Torah states "And if a stranger sojourn with you, throughout your generations, and will offer an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord; as ye do, so he shall do." Further, in verse 15, it is written, "As for the congregation, there shall be one statute both for you, and for the stranger that sojourneth with you, a statute forever throughout your generations; as ye are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord." And in case you still haven't gotten it, verse 16: "One law and one ordinance shall be both for you, and for the stranger that sojourneth with you." As I prepared to become a bat mitzvah, these repeated charges for equal and humane treatment of strangers resonated with me in the context of my personal history as a Jewish woman by choice.

Who is this stranger identified in the Torah? A stranger broadly refers to anyone who is a foreigner, a newcomer or an outsider. In ancient times, as today, many people traveled through the Promised Land for trade or other business. These people were referred to as *nochri*. In contrast, the Hebrew word, *ger*, more specifically refers to any non-Israelite who became a resident and voluntarily joined the ranks of Judaism (Hertz). The fact that the Torah emphasizes the humane treatment of *ger* is a radical departure from the law of other ancient peoples. Before we can begin to understand why this is the case, it is helpful to examine some of the prevailing attitudes toward foreigners in other societies. For example, the

Greeks coined the term "barbarian", meaning one who is coarse or uncivilized, to identify all non-Greeks; the Egyptians frankly hated strangers (Hertz p.313-14); and the Romans used the word "hostis" to mean both stranger and enemy (Hertz p. 504). In fact, in Roman law, every stranger was initially classed as an enemy and, as such, had no rights and no protection under the law (Hertz p.527).

One of the most prominent examples of ancient law that ignored the rights of strangers is the Hammurabi Code, the ancient Semitic common law of Babylonia that was codified at about the same time that Abraham lived. In this system of laws, property was protected at the expense of people, and there was no consideration for the poor or the needy. In contrast, Mosaic Law, although sharing some common elements with the Hammurabi Code, placed the emphasis on humanity and righteousness. It transformed the existing code by adding "love of stranger, protection of slave, the Ten Commandments, and the law, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'" (Hertz, p.403-406). In the Torah, there was no distinction between the home-born and the stranger; an idea which is clearly stated in Leviticus 19:34, "The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself." Humane treatment of all people, including strangers, then, was just one way in which Mosaic Law differentiated itself from existing law.

A second major difference between Mosaic Law and that of other ancient cultures was its emphasis on equal justice for all people, regardless of status. Think back to today's portion, Numbers 15:16: "One law and one ordinance shall be both for you, and for the stranger that sojourneth with you." It has been said that one of the moral measures of a society is how it treats its weakest members. In ancient Israel, it was recognized that strangers, as outsiders with no support systems, were weak and more vulnerable to injustice. Special protection was therefore written into the Torah. One of many examples of this is found in Exodus 22:20, where it is written: "And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him." In Deuteronomy 27:19, this law is reinforced: "Cursed be he that perverteth the justice due to the stranger, fatherless, and widow" (p.864). I think you can see that this idea of equal justice for all is not just a suggestion. I like the way Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it: "Justice, people seem to agree, is a principle, a norm, an ideal of the highest importance. We all insist that it ought to be—but it may not be. In the eyes of the prophets, justice is more than an idea or a norm; justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be!" (*I Asked for Wonder*, p.83).

Unfortunately, throughout history, attitudes toward those seen as strangers have not always been consistent with the teachings of Mosaic Law. To understand how far short of those teachings we are, even today, one has only to look at the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960's, or California's Proposition 187 (passed in 1994 but since rescinded) which tried to prevent illegal aliens from receiving public services, or,

Shelach Lecha - cont.

more recently, changes in immigration laws since September 11th. With the daily newspapers full of stories about suicide bombers and other terrorist attacks, it is an ongoing challenge for all of us to see God's presence in everyone we meet, especially strangers, and to treat them with humanity and justice.

So, given the abusive treatment of strangers in multiple cultures throughout history, what is the explanation for the Torah's insistent repetitions that strangers be treated humanely and be given the same rights as home-born Israelites?

I believe that at least part of the answer can be found in these lines from Exodus 23:9 which are repeated in different forms in several other places in the Torah: "And a stranger shalt thou not oppress; for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Let me just repeat that—"ye were strangers in the land of Egypt". Why is this so important? Very simply: in Egypt, we experienced the acute feelings of isolation and vulnerability of people with no family and no supportive social framework. The Torah commands us to remember what this was like and, as a consequence, to identify and empathize with the stranger's position. Despite our bitter experiences, we were not permitted to hate even the Egyptian; rather, we were commanded to transform our bad memories into feelings of compassion for all the friendless and downtrodden of the world (Hertz p.504).

What is it that makes knowing the heart of a stranger so crucial to our moral development? In the Chicago Jewish News in April of this year, Dr. Lawrence Layfer expresses it this way: "The weak, the orphan, the stranger among us are among those whose distress God takes note, as it is said: 'For I shall surely hear their cries.'" He goes on to say that, from our experience as strangers in the land of Egypt, "we learn to identify with the cries, and see the commonality of humanity between us and those who cry". It is this recognition of the commonality of experiences among all people—whether stranger or home-born---that ultimately sets the stage for the development of one of the basic precepts of Judaism—that of loving thy neighbor as thyself. The German-Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen, expands this point. "This law of shielding the alien from all wrong is of vital significance in the history of religion. With it alone true Religion begins. The alien was to be protected, not because he was a member of one's family, clan, religious community, or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, man discovered the idea of humanity" (Hertz p.313, Exodus 22:20). Our intimate understanding of the heart of a stranger has given us a unique insight into the importance of humane treatment of all people, whether stranger or home-born.

The story of Abraham provides further insight into the Torah's emphasis on equal and humane treatment of strangers. After all, Abraham was the original stranger in a strange land. In Genesis 12:1, God said to the then seventy-five year old man: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee". In

other words, leave everything you know behind and become a stranger because I said so! Abraham doesn't even know where he is going. But God does soften the blow somewhat by telling him "Because of you, Abraham, the knowledge of me is going to the entire world".

Perhaps it is Abraham's firsthand knowledge of the heart of a stranger which results in his response to the three unknown visitors who approach his tent not long after he has been circumcised. He immediately offers them rest and a sumptuous feast (Genesis 18:1, p.63). As you all know, it turns out that these visitors are angels who bring the news that Abraham's elderly, post-menopausal wife Sarah will bear him a child. Abraham's actions in welcoming these three were non-self-serving; he took them in because he innately understood the moral way to treat other people. His hospitality ultimately leads to his blessing—Isaac is to be born. Through his actions, Abraham introduced the mitzvah of *hachnasat orechim*—hospitality—the welcoming of guests into one's home. In Jewish law, hospitality is more than just a social nicety; it is a serious legal obligation (Telushkin p.534). It is literally a spiritual state of being. As put by Rabbi Brant Rosen in the Chicago Jewish News of 10/25/02, "Graciously receiving all who approach our 'tents' is tantamount to bringing God's presence into our midst." By sharing our blessings with others, we create opportunities for personal growth which may result in blessings to our community and to our world.

In the *haftorah* today, we read about another example of *hachnasat orechim*. Joshua sends two spies into Jericho to explore the land. They meet Rahav, a non-Jewish woman, who welcomes them and then hides them from the King's soldiers who are pursuing them. By accepting these strangers without question and protecting them, Rahav places herself and her family at great risk. Despite this, her nascent faith in the power of the Hebrew God and her own strong moral sense guide her. As a result, her family is spared during the battle of Jericho, and afterwards, they are welcomed as part of the Jewish community. This incident demonstrates the ways in which the mitzvah of *hachnasat orechim* has universal implications for our lives and our world. As Rosen puts it, "Being hospitable is not only about opening our doors; it is also about opening our hearts...Open-heartedness is a path that inevitably brings blessing into our lives and our world". In a sense, Rahav's open heart and hospitality set the stage for the Israelites' victory at Jericho, thereby bringing blessings into the lives of the entire Jewish community.

Every day in our prayers we repeat the words of my *maftir* which tell us to wear the *tzitzit*, "that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them" (Numbers 15:39). In my Torah portion today, as I've tried to illustrate, we are commanded to treat strangers the same as we would home-born Israelites, holding them to the same laws and expectations and giving them equal rights. This is so important that it is repeated three times in this one portion alone! If I've learned nothing else during the past year, I have certainly learned that the lessons of the Torah will be repeated again and again to assure they become second nature to us.

Shelach Lecha - cont.

When I am called to the Torah for an *aliyah*, as a Jewish woman by choice, I am referred to as a daughter of Abraham and Sarah. I find that this designation has taken on a deeper significance for me because Abraham, too, was a stranger, just as I was. In Bruce Feiler's book *Abraham*, Rabbi Arnie Belzer states: Abraham's call is saying that "the relationship with God is not a relationship of belonging; it's a relationship of strangeness. We're all aliens. Abraham is blessed---the nations of the world are blessed---because he had the courage to go to another place and make himself a stranger. Because, believe me, at some time in our lives, all of us have to go to another place, too, and make ourselves strangers" (p.52).

Many times I have felt myself to be the stranger in the strange land of temple. I was raised Presbyterian, and although my great uncle had married a Jewish woman giving me Jewish cousins, I hadn't given Judaism much thought. When Steven and I became engaged to be married, we talked about raising our children Jewish, but I had not seriously considered converting to Judaism. And, with his usual keen insight, Steven did not ask me to convert, despite his own deep affinity with his Jewish roots. Similarly, his mother, Pearl, made no direct demands of me. However, not long before we married, she invited me to her home for a "little discussion". I wish I could remember her exact words, but the essence was this: "I promise I won't bring this up again, but I think you need to understand that Judaism is not just a religion. It is a culture, it is a history, it is a people, and it is something that embraces you. I'm not insisting that you convert"—and given her traditional upbringing, this was quite a concession—"but I want you to try to see how wonderful this would be for you and your family." True to her word, she never again mentioned religion to me. However, she then proceeded to put her words into action and overwhelm me with *hachnasat orechim*.

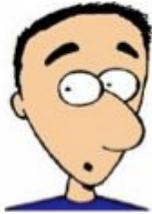
After we had been married for a couple of years, Steven celebrated the twentieth anniversary of his bar mitzvah by reading his *maftir* in our synagogue in Los Angeles. His two

partners, both of whom were observant Jews, came to the service. One read the *haftorah* and the other gave Steven a fountain pen. Something that day clicked with me. In the middle of this huge, seemingly impersonal congregation, there was a pervasive warmth and family spirit that made me decide to explore Judaism. For a year, I attended Hillel classes at UCLA which inspired me to go on to take a formal "conversion course" at the University of Judaism. I have been learning ever since!

I have to admit that even after I converted, I don't think I really understood what I had gotten myself into. I enjoyed the rituals at home, such as lighting the Shabbat candles and singing the blessings. My latkes became famous, my brisket is improving, and Rachel tells me I make a mean box of matzoh ball soup! However, I still felt that there was a huge G for Gentile emblazoned on my forehead when I entered temple, not because I wasn't welcomed by everyone (which I was). Instead I think this stemmed from my own sense of inadequacy (even though Pearl was now calling ME to check on candle-lighting rules and other ritual details). Only in the past year have I begun to grasp the enormity of my decision to choose Judaism all those years ago. The first step was chanting Torah at Sam's bar mitzvah last year. Instead of feeling like nothing more than a master event organizer, I became part of a tradition that has survived for thousands of years. It was an awe-inspiring feeling, and one that led to my presence on the *bimah* today. As I chanted the *haftorah* today, I echoed the words sung not only by innumerable people who have chanted them before me, but also by each member of my family. For today is the thirty-ninth anniversary of Steven's bar mitzvah, the fourth anniversary of Rachel's bat mitzvah, and the first anniversary of Sam's bar mitzvah. We are truly part of an extraordinary historical continuum of blessings bestowed on the Jewish people by God. This intense sense of tradition is one of the things that drew me to Judaism in the first place and which now embraces me, just as Pearl hoped it would!

Rebel Without a Clue

by Jeff Ruby



Jeff Ruby is the chief dining critic of Chicago magazine, his employer since 1997. He is a graduate of the University of Kansas journalism school and also has a bachelor's in philosophy from the University of Colorado. He is the husband of Sarah Abella, who grew up at Rodfei Zedek; and they are the parents of Hannah, Max, and Abigail.

“What happens when you die?” my friend asked his dad when he was four years old.

His father, a taciturn, bearded monolith of stern German stock, said: “Life is just a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.”

Yes, the man dropped some Nabokov on his four-year-old.

No heaven, no hell. No reincarnation. No karma. No rewards for good behavior or punishment for bad. Just . . . black silence forever. Then you turn to worms in your coffin, then bones, then dust, then nothing, and the world continues without you, unaffected by your life for the rest of time, just as it hadn't been affected during the eternity that preceded you.

Needless to say, this alarmed my four-year-old friend. I'm 43 and still coming to terms with the possibility that I could be so pathetically insignificant in the grand scheme of things. It's the great existential battle of my life, and yet I've never once entertained the notion of an afterlife. As frightening as the “brief crack of light” theory is, I believe it is true, and if my kids ask what I think, though I would try to be a tad more gentle, I would have a hard time telling them otherwise.

Then, last December, my grandfather died. He was 95 and I loved him. To others he was so many things: a war hero, a businessman, a boss, a drinking buddy, a practical joker, a pilot, a mentor, a proud Hoosier, a prouder Jew. To me, he was just Grandpa. The big, playful guy who obsessed over the buttermilk biscuits at Bob Evans, couldn't stop talking how great these biscuits were straight from the oven, how I *had* to order the biscuits, congratulated me when I did order them. Then he told the waitress he'd have an English muffin.

I've lost a few people over the years, but none hurt like Grandpa. He was the one I knew best, and the one whose absence leaves the largest hole. That hole hasn't shrunk in size—if anything it has widened and deepened. Not once in my life had I ever dreamed of heaven. Since December, I have twice. Both times Grandpa was there. And it felt good.

The Torah is pretty quiet on the subject of the afterlife. The emphasis is almost always on *now*, on this life and its concrete rewards and punishments rather than the obscure possibility of otherworldly consequences. We live moral lives simply because it is the right thing to do; we do good deeds

because it is our duty to repair the world. “One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world,” said Rabbi Yaakov, “is better than the entire life of the world to come.”

But the Mishnah and Talmud both mention this concept of “the world to come.” *Olam Ha-Ba* happens when the messiah comes and resurrects the righteous dead to bring them to a place of reward and punishment. There, they'll come face to face with God. “This world is like a lobby before the *Olam Ha-Ba*,” the rabbis say in the Mishnah. “Prepare yourself in the lobby so that you may enter the banquet hall.”

The Talmud describes it as a place with no eating, drinking, reproduction, commerce, jealousy, hatred or rivalry. Some banquet hall. On the other hand, the righteous “sit with their crowns on their heads, enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence.” I don't know exactly what that means, but it sounds more meaningful and long-lasting than the promise of something tangible and mundane from this world—something involving food or clouds or harps, or even 72 virgins.

As far as marketing goes, this is brilliant. If Judaism does not explain what happens in the World to Come, our imaginations are allowed to run wild and fill in the blanks with some indefinable, ridiculously profound experience. To me, “enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence” means those lucky souls would finally get to understand the truth of God's mysteries—whether he exists, what he means, and why.

That sounds pretty good. I want to believe that happens. But first it would require me to believe in God, and in the concept of a Messiah, and in some bizarre world in which someone or something has been keeping score for every person for millions of years and remembers which ones get to be with God, and which ones don't. And since, presumably, some of those people will have been dead and gone for ages, it requires me to believe in the concept of the soul, billions of which have been floating around in anticipation of this moment.

I don't believe any of that. Even if I did, my grandfather's body or soul could be waiting millions of years for the messiah. And what if, somehow, when that moment finally came, my grandfather was judged not to have lived a worthy life? (*Oh, sorry you had to wait so long. We've, uh . . . well, we've got some bad news...*)

The idea that my grandfather's brief crack of light has been snuffed out and now he's just another resident of the infinite darkness . . . that's too much for me to bear. I want to know he is somewhere other than in a cold hole in the ground in Indiana. I'd rather take comfort in the possibility that he's living on somewhere, somehow—that he gets to experience something profound in contrast to what he's doing right now, which is not the slightest bit profound. The promise of *Olam Ha-Ba*: answers to all of life's questions. I don't believe it, but I finally understand why others do. And maybe that's the first step toward filling the hole that my grandfather left.

