In this issue

Words and Music:

Jonathan Miller on Jewish Roots of Broadway
Mitchell Brown on Wagner
Stephanie Friedman on Etgar Keret

plus

Joanna Martin, Daniel Blumenthal, Andrea Frazier, divrei Torah, and more ...
On the cover of this issue is the Ayshet Chayil window, donated by brothers Sidney and Raymond Epstein in memory of their mother. The brothers led the architecture and engineering firm that designed our previous synagogue building and provided the window for its sanctuary. It now occupies a prominent position on the upper level of the atrium.
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Introduction to Volume IV Number 2

Aviv, aviv, hinei ze ba
Aviv, avivi, aviv chavivi

Spring has come/Spring, my spring, my beloved

Do you remember this children's song? Songs are powerful expressions, and they linger in the mind.

We again awaken to the blessings of spring, stirred by songs, by nature, and by our Pesach seders, all three interwoven.

In this issue we pause to appreciate music. Rabbi David Minkus helps us contemplate the interplay of music and nature, of music and words. He reminds us of their role in leading us into prayer. Conversely, Jonathan Miller meditates on ways the music of Jewish prayer and tradition reach beyond Judaism. And Mitchell Brown looks at the interplay between Jewish identity and music.

On the seventh day of Pesach, we look forward to the Torah portion that includes a very special song, "The Song at the Sea." One of the oldest texts and one of the oldest melodies we have, it is truly awesome. Rabbi Minkus notes in his essay that this song is a poetic expression of material the Torah also presents in prose.

So we celebrate literature, as well, in Stephanie Friedman's review of Etgar Keret and Rick Holbrook's thoughts on the Library. There are words of Torah, too, reflected through the lens of widely varying interests. So Susan Meschel reads Torah as a scientist, while Andrea Frazier takes a mixologist's approach.

Recognition that our congregation comprises people of such varied experience and knowledge – this, too, is a blessing we can celebrate this spring.

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This publication may also be accessed at http://www.rodlefei.org/To_Learn_and_To_Teach
Broadway's Jewish Roots
by Jonathan Miller

Most people at Congregation Rodfei Zedek know me as the High Holy Day cantor (and former choir director). For many years, though, I have been associated with Chicago a cappella, the choral group I founded in 1993. This year we launched our current season with Jewish Roots of Broadway.

The Jewish Roots program began to take shape in October 2014, when Matt Greenberg, Chicago a cappella’s wonderful executive director, told me excitedly about a PBS television special that was tracing the Jewish origins of Broadway musicals. “So,” came the question, “can we do a program about that?” “Sure,” I replied, “I’ll take that on.” I said this with trepidation, knowing that I had less background in musical theatre than anyone on our music staff.

As it turned out, most of the research for this program coincided with my taking several trips to Portland, Oregon, to visit my dad, Ephraim Moses Miller of blessed memory, who was struggling with liver cancer. We finally lost him on May 28th of last year, at the age of eighty-four. Dad was the sweetest man I have ever known. He was born in New York City to Russian immigrant parents. The family moved to rural areas for my grandfather’s work, which was helping Jewish immigrants settle as farmers in upstate New York and New England. My grandmother had been a concert singer, doing solos with the Freyheyt Gezang Vereyn, the choral wing of the Communist Party (really!) in New York City. Grandmother encouraged my dad to study classical piano. Dad also told puns, and he had a tremendous ear for languages. My uncle David, my dad’s brother, retains more of a vaudeville sense of humor—his hero is probably Groucho Marx—and my Dad’s older cousin Maish actually was a vaudeville actor back in the day. However, none of our family background gave me much confidence in building this concert program.

Needing help, I turned to colleagues. Marsha Bryan Edelman is probably the nation’s leading expert on the overall history of Jewish music. She is a professor at Gratz College and works at the Zamir Choral Foundation in New York. Marsha said, “Well, the book you need to get is Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish by Jack Gottlieb.” Gottlieb had an incredible ear, connecting all sorts of Jewish melodies to all sorts of Broadway tunes and even tracing the many variants of tunes through the years. It was through him that I started to learn about the Second Avenue Yiddish theatre.

With Gottlieb’s guidance, I started to piece some history together. I learned that Broadway musicals didn’t just pop out of nowhere. Prior to the surge in popularity for the genre in the 1920s, most American cities had experienced a mishmash of styles: operetta, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, the musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan, and more. However, in New York, a perfect storm occurred. It included a surge in Jewish population (roughly twenty-five percent of New Yorkers in 1920 were Jewish), a concentration of talent, a desire
of creative first-generation American Jews to get beyond *yiddishe* culture by defining something new and truly American, and a palpable sense of an American Dream.

The Jewish dream in America is very closely tied to the American Dream. Indeed, it can be (and has been) argued that the American Dream is actually an invention of the Jewish-born composers and poets who created the Broadway musical, embodied in songs like *Get Happy* and *Ac-cen-tu-ate the Positive*. But what’s so Jewish about Broadway musicals, other than the fact that virtually all of the creative material (pace Cole Porter) was written by Jews?

Jews who came of age in Manhattan were exposed to a world much more open, and much more filled with possibility, than the Europe they had left. Here in America, they felt, “you could be anyone,” not just a Jew. These lyricists and composers strove not to write “Jewish musicals” or “musicals just for Jews,” but rather stories and music to which everyone would relate… and productions to which everyone would buy tickets. Their desire for wider appeal helped create an art form that now has made its stamp virtually around the globe. Nevertheless, elements of synagogue music, the Yiddish theatre, and other parts of Jewish culture still seeped into the Broadway musical.

Next, I devoured Matt’s initial suggestion of the PBS special, *Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy*. That video features experts who enthusiastically sing and play their way through famous vocal lines. I delighted in the way they made melodic connections between Yiddish folk and theatre songs, synagogue tunes, Tin Pan Alley hits and Broadway show tunes – what fun. There are many specific musical connections, showcased there, that were featured in our concert; since this written essay is not a performance, I’ll include just a few of the juiciest connections here.

The theatrical song, “Di Grine Kuzine,” by Abe Schwartz and Hyman Priant, was hugely popular both inside and outside Yiddish music halls in the early 1920s. The lyrics refer to the disillusionment felt by immigrants, who, fed on stories that American streets were paved with gold, came to this country—only to endure sweatshop conditions. In print. Jack Gottlieb and on video Michael Tilson Thomas explained that “Di Grine Kuzine” was the progenitor of “Swanee,” George Gershwin’s first and biggest-ever hit song. “Swanee” is a great example of the innovative, “minor verse / major chorus” quality of many of the Jewish Broadway composers. (For a taste click on: [https://rodfei.org/GrineKuzineSwaneeClip](https://rodfei.org/GrineKuzineSwaneeClip))

Yiddish song was unrelentingly minor in key, and non-Jewish popular songs of the time were mostly major. The format of “Swanee” was a new hybrid. It kept a slightly heart-tugging feel (minor verse) while also providing a happy ending (major chorus)—happy endings being a significant part of the twentieth-century American worldview. The formula worked like a charm.

The musical material of *Porgy and Bess* has no exact source that we can trace, but we have help in the quest. Michael Tilson Thomas, a descendant of the renowned Thomashevsky family of Yiddish theatre, notes the interplay between major and minor melodic inflections in freygish* tunes, Chasidic song, cantorial
chant, and African-American music, including blues. [*"Freygish" refers to a scale used in Indian, Middle Eastern, Eastern European and Flamenco music and in Hebrew prayers and Klezmer music, where it is known as Ahava Rabbah. The scale consists of the following steps: half – augmented second – half – whole – half – whole]*

In the tune “Summertime,” the poignant flatted note on “don’t you cry” is a perfect example of this stylistic hybrid. And we’re not the first people to notice the similarities between “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and the blessing before and after the Torah reading. The Gershwins and Dubose Heyward, when writing Porgy and Bess, used some irony in taking the Torah-blessing melody and putting it into a song that mocks religion, saying, “The things that you’re li’ble to read in the Bible / It ain’t necessarily so.”

Despite all of my reading, listening, and intense work, there was a point in the program’s gestation when I still was not satisfied. I had the creeping feeling that the concert could end up feeling like the choral version of a “lit review,” informative but a little dry—and this would be death for our performance. What kept eluding me was a first-hand sense of connection. I started to feel (and wish) that, if one little thread could somehow actually connect the synagogue music that I knew as your shaliach tzibbur and the Broadway tunes that I was coming to love, it would be enough.

Then something magical happened, around the middle of June. For some stubborn reason, I wasn’t willing to settle for the opinion of others that Rodgers and Hart’s “My Funny Valentine” has no Jewish connection. I was searching in my consciousness for a “Valentine”-like melody from the repertoire that I daven on the High Holidays at Rodfei Zedek. I truly cannot say what precipitated it; but in any case, I’ll never forget it. I was driving back from the park where I walk my dogs almost every afternoon—and it hit me. I could make something work. I sang it in the car. My heart leapt for joy, really for the first time since my dad had died. I came home and wrote down what I had heard. It was a harmonic progression that is implicit in “P’tach lanu sha’ar,” that glorious melody from the N’ilah service on Yom Kippur. The same progression opens our choral arrangement of “My Funny Valentine.” At that point, I knew that something had clicked inside me, in my ear and heart and bones and nerves, and I could finish the project feeling like it had finally worked its way through me. There are few greater joys for someone who has spent decades programming choral concerts.

Jonathan Miller is the founder of Chicago a cappella, an ensemble of professional singers. He sang low bass and directed rehearsals for the group’s first fourteen seasons. In 2006 he stepped back from singing. Now Artistic Director, he concentrates on artistic oversight and programming. The ensemble presents an annual Chicago-area subscription series, produces studio recordings and live and broadcast-media musical content, and conducts educational outreach. On tour, the group has appeared in thirteen American states and Mexico. From its inception, Chicago a cappella has been a champion of living composers. More information and musical samples can be found at http://www.chicagoacappella.org
Can A Jew Listen to Wagner?

by Mitchell Brown

I was talking with some people about the classical music we liked. I mentioned that I loved Wagner and Mahler. One of the people got very indignant and told me, in a huff, ‘Well, I had relatives who died in the Holocaust, so I refuse to listen to Wagner and Mahler!’ I explained that Mahler was born a Jew, but he was having none of it. He was ready to boycott all German music and no one was going to stop him. As a Jewish Wagner lover, I have often encountered this kind of emotional response.

I believe it is quite appropriate for Jews, or any sensitive human beings for that matter, to be repulsed by the darker aspects of Wagner’s personality. He was unfaithful to his wives, traitorous to his patrons and exploitative of his acolytes. And, of course, he was anti-Semitic. But so were Chopin and Tchaikovsky, and they remain among the most beloved and most played of composers. In a letter to a friend describing the scene at a train station, Tchaikovsky writes that there was: ‘...mass of dirty Y**s with that poisonous atmosphere which accompanies them everywhere.’

However, I am sure my friend would not have said that he couldn’t listen to The Nutcracker because of what happened to his relatives in World War II.

There is no more beloved English language author than Charles Dickens. Yet his description of Fagin, master thief and corrupter of youth in Oliver Twist is certainly unambiguous about how the Jew is to be regarded:

In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shriveled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and the clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging.

So, not only is he a filthy Jew, but a bad one, as well (unkosher sausages!). Fagin is repeatedly referred to as ‘The Jew.’ His morals are slippery at best, criminal at worst. Upon publication of Oliver Twist, London’s Jewish leaders visited Dickens. They explained that, given his phenomenal popularity, any anti-Semitic portrayals in his books would be a disaster for the community. Dickens later made amends in his last complete novel, Our Mutual Friend, with the character of a Jewish toy seller whose goodness is as cloying as Fagin’s evil is repugnant. Despite this, it seems that Dickens remained a true Victorian his whole life, asserting a superiority of the white race. Yet, there is no popular outcry for the boycott of Dickens' novels.

The fact that Wagner’s music was very popular during the Third Reich seems a specious argument for boycotting it.
Wagner had been dead for fifty years by the
time Hitler grabbed power. We don’t stop
reading the Bible because certain fringe
groups have perverted its use, justifying
everything from slavery to the subjugation
of women.

So why the outcry against Wagner?
Wagner is to blame here. It was not enough
for him to make anti-Semitic remarks to
friends. He needed the big gesture. He
needed to publish.

When Wagner was struggling to get
his works before the public, the German
and French music scenes were dominated
by Jews. In Germany, Felix Mendelssohn
was recognized as the greatest composer
until his early death in 1847. In Paris, the
world capital of opera at the time, the
leading composers were Giacomo
Meyerbeer and Fromental Halevy.

Meyerbeer was very generous to the
new generation of composers. He was
instrumental in helping mount the first
production of Wagner’s early, very
Meyerbeerian opera Rienzi. He also
assisted in the premiere of Wagner’s first
mature opera, The Flying Dutchman.
Wagner was determined to create ‘the
music of the future.’ There would be a
complete reform of opera, a return to the
model of Greek tragedy. He would create
what he termed Gesamtkunstwerk - a
complete work of art. Lyrics, music, acting,
staging would all be of equal importance. A
new musical language would be created to
produce this new art. Tonality would be
stretched to its limits when the drama
necessitated it. Instead of arias and
separate numbers that would stop and start
the action, Wagner would create an endless
flow of melody, based on motifs for major
characters and concepts, that would propel
the work forward and integrate it into a
unified whole. And, importantly, this music
of the future would grow out of what is
essentially great, which in his terms was
essentially German art.

The problem for Wagner was that no
one was listening. People loved the
elegance of Mendelssohn’s music and the
spectacular crowd-pleasing operas of
Meyerbeer. In retaliation, Wagner published
the vitriolic pamphlet Judentum und die
Musik (Judaism and Music, 1850). Its
premise was as follows: Jews are incapable
of creating great art that will resonate with
the world because they have lived so long
outside the mainstream of society. They
cannot tap into the universal consciousness
that makes great art. This is Wagner’s
veiled way of pointing out the superficiality
of the music of Mendelssohn and Meyer-
beer. Ever one to bite the hand that fed him,
Wagner thus repaid Meyerbeer’s kindness.

It is true that up until the 1800s Jews
were segregated and not allowed to be part
of mainstream culture, but the thesis
Wagner puts forward seems to me to be
shaky at best. A Beethoven doesn’t arise
just because countless generations of his
forebears lived in the mainstream of history.
A genius like Beethoven arises through a
sensitivity to the art of his or her time. This
can happen whether one is living in a
Jewish ghetto with limited exposure, or in
Vienna the center of the musical world of
Beethoven’s day. What Wagner is doing
with the pamphlet is informing the public on
why their taste is wrong. Guess whose art
will correct this?

It seems to me that Wagner’s anti-
Semitic diatribes are motivated by petty,
personal grievances. Not that this excuses
them by any means, but perhaps it puts
them in some perspective.

So, reducing his anti-Semitism to the
petty, personal beef it is, what we are left
with is the music. In the end, this is all that should really matter. As music lovers, we need to know, and I would say revere Wagner’s music. Wagner completed the work started with the titanic compositions of Beethoven. He pushed the envelope of music theory leading directly to the twelve-tone revolution of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern of the Second Viennese School. His expansion of what the orchestra was capable of, sonically and emotionally, paved the way for the genius of Gustav Mahler. All music after Wagner was either a rhapsodic embrace of his sound world, or a vehement rejection of it. We owe the works of Bruckner, Mahler and Richard Strauss to the former, and the works of Debussy and Brahms to the latter. Listen to Debussy’s 'Golliwog’s Cakewalk' to hear a devastating send-up of 'Tristan und Isolde.'

Just as he assimilated all music that came before him in his operas, Wagner distilled the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the revolutionary works of Bakunin into his works. In fact, one could argue that Wagner’s operas are the doors through which the art which preceded him passes into the modern age. Everything is there. Everything, except anti-Semitism.

George Bernard Shaw wrote a book called 'The Perfect Wagnerite,' in which he set out to prove that 'The Ring of the Nibelung' was a vindication of the theories of socialism. German nationalists saw the works as the exaltation of ‘holy German art’. The nineteenth century romantics championed the works as the expression of a reality beyond our experience.” It is all there. The only thing we can’t find in it is anti-Semitism.

Perhaps no work since Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has had the seismic effect of Wagner’s 'Tristan und Isolde'. The opening chord alone, the so-called Tristan chord, plunges the listener into tonal chaos. The tension and yearning for some home key is not resolved until the very end of this five-hour work. The agony of the music, the frustration caused by the flowing into and out of conventional tonality, is not just a gimmick. It is what Wagner needed to describe the tortured lives of his two lovers. It serves the work, but at the same time changed the course of Western music forever by obliterating the constraints of major and minor keys. An argument can be made that all modern music can trace its genes back to the four notes that start the prelude of 'Tristan und Isolde.'

It is not my place to force anyone to like or even listen to the music of Richard Wagner. But I feel it is my place to say that if you are not familiar with the work, then you are missing one of the cornerstones of Western civilization. It is as simple as that.

With the ten music dramas of his maturity Wagner changed the course of modern culture. One cannot be a complete humanist without knowing this body of work. Not knowing it inevitably diminishes one’s understanding of art and probably what made the modern world modern.

Mitchell Brown is a long time Hyde Parker and a member of Rodfei Zedek. In addition to working in IT at The Northern Trust Company, he teaches Adult Hebrew classes at Temple Sholom in Lakeview. Mitchell has been invited to lecture on music at Purdue University Calumet as part of their on-going Friday University. He has also spoken at the Jewish Federation of Northwest Indiana. Mitchell also regularly hosts opera and movie evenings here in Hyde Park. His blog is at thediscreetbourgeois.wordpress.com
Nature, Wonder, Poetry, Prayer

by Rabbi David Minkus

Three of my closest friends from Camp Ramah formed a band, appropriately called The Northwoods. It started with three, went to two and now Camp Ramah has their version of VH1’s Behind the Music. But they put together one terrific album of folk music. My favorite song of theirs is called Tree. It is a simple and short song that, I think, is about nature. The character in the song is looking at a tree, feeling the whoosh of the wind, and reflecting about his place in nature - who we are relative to the earth. And the chorus asks, to the tree, the wind or perhaps God, when was the last time he got lost in nature and allowed that beauty to wash over him.

I love that the chorus does not tell us how beautiful the tree is, perhaps it is even dead. What the chorus, and the song, is asking us to do, is to allow nature, the outdoors, and, again perhaps God, to work on us. What is nature for if not wonder, awe and solitude - and it is solitude that often enables us to be in awe. I am not sure if they are asking a profound question or something superficial that, in the form of a pop song, feels substantial. Regardless, I know enough to know that poetry means so much more than what the poet intended. It may be that the band found a workable theme and rhymes and paired them with great instrumentals. But it does not matter because the song has left this listener wondering. It is music, it is poetry, which has a far greater effect than had they simply told me their experience of being in nature.

This year the Torah portion Beshallach came just before Tu B’Shvat, the fifteenth of the Hebrew month of Shvat. What is this minor holiday? And is it even fair to call it a holiday? Growing up you knew it as a day when your parents gave you eighteen dollars and some Israeli collected it for the Jewish National Fund in order to plant a tree in Israel. But the planting of a tree does not, on its own, warrant classification as a holiday. Originally it was celebrated as the song goes, “Tu B’Shvat higia, hag ha’elionot,” as a holiday or New Year for trees. What does that mean, a New Year for the trees? Rabbi Hillel and his students asked the question first. They posited that most of the rain from the previous year had already been absorbed, so all rain that fell after the fourteenth would lead to the blossoming of fruit that had grown in this New Year. The School of Rabbi Hillel created a day to thank God for the food we get from trees and gave it a biblical foundation.

It got a facelift a millennium later with the Kabbalists in Tzvat. They infused a mystical meaning into the day and created a seder with four cups of wine. They created a Hagadah by compiling passages from the Torah that dealt with the plants and produce of the land, as well analogous discussions in the Talmud and, the mystical book, the Zohar. The seder begins with a cup of white wine, the second cup is mixed with a little red, then a little more red and the final cup is mostly red wine. The white wine represented, according to the Kabbalists, hibernation and exfoliation, while the red represented nature’s reawakening.
And 400 years later, the early Zionists seized this day. They wanted a holiday that was about the earth, a day that would base and further their attachment to the land, while distancing themselves from their bookish past. They saw Tu b’Shvat as an opportunity to disregard many of the legal elements of Jewish history and reconnect with their roots, a day firmly tied to the land and the new Jew it created.

So we have a Rabbinic, a mystical/quasi-legal and a Zionistic approach to this day. Yet with each of these attempts, I still feel that calling it a holiday is a stretch. What was Hillel reaching for when he had us mark this day at the height of winter? Surely he knew something that has been lost in our historical game of telephone.

When you think about Jews and Jewish history you think of being indoors, often in urban centers. We are not a people, historically, tied to land and certainly not to working the land. The Rabbis in the Talmud spend far more time talking about the commerce of the market than they do about how those products/crops got there. It was not until the 18th century that some of the Hasidim in Poland began to leave the beit midrash/house of study and shul to seek God out in nature. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav pushed his disciples to practice hit’bodedut/seclusion, to go into a forest and experience God, and nature. This led to spontaneous prayer – another feature that is often foreign to us and most Jews.

But long before Hillel, we were a people who lived in nature. The Israelites of the Torah spent their time exposed to the elements and in the realm of God. Whether they were ready or able to accept that is another matter. The foundation of prayer in the Bible was spontaneous and outside.

The action of the Torah not only happens outdoors but with the backdrop of God’s wonders: seas, vast desert landscapes and mountains. Contrast that with life in Egypt, where the only way to experience God was by miracle; whether the slave was outdoors or indoors, he/she had little emotional energy or, possibly desire, to be moved to prayer. Yet in the wilderness the Israelites could see the hand of God in the profound and, also, in the mundane.

How and where do we experience profound wonder? I am not sure we do, I certainly do not, at least not enough. And is that because we live in a city, or, like the Israelites, we do not allow ourselves that emotional outlet?

Parshat Beshalach begins by God taking the Israelites on a roundabout path from Egypt, rather than the short and simple route to Israel. The Torah tells us that this was done in order for the Israelites to acclimate to freedom (thinks Brooks Hadlen and Red in 'The Shawshank Redemption'). The Israelites needed to embrace freedom in all of its forms. And perhaps the most important form of that freedom was the creation of a people, with a clear and coherent set of practices, which was achieved by knowing God in the wilderness.

Rashi in his commentary on the setting of the calendar for this burgeoning people, asked why was this not the beginning of the Torah? Why did the Torah start with Adam/Eve/Eden and not with the birth of the Jewish people? We could offer many possible answers, but one may be that before we could ever have been expected to buy into a precise belief and ordered system of practice, we needed to experience God in a broad sense; we needed to see the God of the Alps before
we experienced the God of the Library. In the end, for me, the latter is more compelling; but the God of Eden and the God of the Red sea is far more accessible and a much better Genesis of a relationship.

Tu b’Shvat is a reminder of this reality, this accessibility of God that is, too often, removed from our Jewish lives. Too often we see God fixed in a book in a large and, sometimes, overwhelming room. This holiday is attempting to bring us out into nature physically or at least spiritually, to provide the awesome spontaneity that nature allows for. Tu b’Shvat may require another facelift and we can achieve it by finding a path, direct or not, to the awe and humility we feel when confronted with physical beauty, the awe we experience on a hike, or a stroll around the Point. Not only the God of Shacharit but the God of a sunset. And while that may sound like a cliché, it is not obvious that that experience may enhance your journey through the siddur, your path towards finding greater meaning in Judaism or an awareness of God.

In Parshat Beshalach we hear the power of experiencing God in nature. That experience is captured not only through narrative but through song, poetry. The Song at the Sea is a profound moment, one which we may never experience, not in that form. But those moments, whether in nature or the profound experience of our existence, happen and ought to move us to song.

Bible scholar Robert Alter has said that when we have a poem in the Torah, it is often repeated in prose form. And we see that with the Shirat ha-yam/ Song at the sea (Shir = poem or song), which describes an experience then retold in prose form. As a people, as a community we are good at understanding and embracing the prose piece. We can break it down, cycle through the possible meanings and implications. We are not nearly as good with the poetry. But one of the explanations we must give is that that song/poetry, whether rehearsed or spontaneous, works on us differently and often more intensely.

The coincidence of beshalach and Tu b’Shvat is asking us to spend more time seeking out and understanding the moments of poetry in our lives, as a community and as individuals. Poetry can be hard to understand and equally hard to find in our lives, but the meaning is within us and we need to use Tu b’Shvat and Shirat ha’yam as the impetus to find that poetry.

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.
How to Start the Conversation: Planning for the End of Life

by Joanna Martin, MD

Discussing death and dying is not easy. But thinking and talking about these issues with loved ones before a medical crisis occurs can prevent confusion, anxiety, pain, and heartache. Advance care planning is an ongoing process of making decisions about the care you would want to receive if you become unable to speak for yourself.

Rabbis often recommend advance care planning in an effort to preserve family harmony. Difficult decisions about death and dying will be magnified if there is family disagreement and strife over how to proceed. Conservative Judaism believes that a patient can make decisions about treatment when risk or uncertainty is involved. It permits terminally ill patients to rule out certain treatment options (such as those with significant side effects), to forgo mechanical life support, and to choose hospice care as a treatment option.

Ideally, everyone over the age of eighteen would be engaged in some advance care planning. Unfortunately, as a physician specializing in geriatrics and palliative care, I have seen many cases in which there had never been any discussion about the patient’s wishes in the event of serious illness. Many patients suffer the burden of “overtreatment.” This often means extra days in an intensive care unit connected to tubes and machines while the patient’s family agonizes over goals of care. I have also taken care of seriously ill patients who want to discuss their wishes with family but find the family unready to listen.

Many doctors are also reluctant to bring up the subject with their patients. Much has been written about advance care planning in the medical literature, but, in truth, it’s still not widely practiced. A crisis is not the best time for advance care planning, but the reality is that a crisis is often the first time the question of the patient’s goals and wishes comes up.

Why you should

The U.S. Center for Medicare Services has recognized the crucial need for this planning. A recent change in federal law now allows for payment when physicians discuss advance care planning with their patients.

The most important component of advance directives is assigning a health care power of attorney, a person you designate to make medical decisions on your behalf in case you are unable to make your own decisions. If the patient has not designated anyone, a health care surrogate will default to some other person, based on state guidelines. In Illinois, the order of assignment is as follows: patient’s legal guardian, spouse, adult son or daughter, either parent of the patient, any adult
sibling, any adult grandchild, a close friend, the guardian of the patient’s estate.

Advance directives are an important component of advance care planning. Advance directives include a health care power of attorney and a living will. For patients with a chronic, serious illness, a POLST form (practitioner orders for life-sustaining treatment) is also very useful.

When there are multiple siblings or adult children, things can become contentious. In the absence of a clear advance directive from the patient, relatives may disagree over what the patient would have wanted. Medical decision-making can become an outlet for family rivalries and long-standing resentment. In addition, the failure to designate a decision maker also can cause health care professionals to spend hours or even days trying to track down someone with authority to make treatment decisions, while the patient is in health care limbo and may be suffering.

The other major component of advance directives is the living will. A properly executed living will is a legal document in which health care wishes can be specified in detail. The trouble with a living will is that it is impossible to anticipate all the various health care scenarios that can arise. I have been involved in the care of many patients whose living will was too vague to help with the situation at hand. If the patient does not want “heroic measures” what does that mean? That she only wishes for comfort care for a terminal illness (generally defined as less than six months to live)? Or does it mean that he only wants aggressive measures stopped in the final hours of life? The living will often doesn’t say.

I strongly recommend that anyone with a chronic, serious illness consider filling out a POLST form with his or her physician. The form is a signed medical order reflecting a person’s wishes that travels with the person across settings of care that must be honored by all health care providers. It allows a seriously ill patient to specify whether they want aggressive, life sustaining treatment or more comfort oriented care. It remains a valid medical order among different care settings such as home, nursing home, assisted living, rehabilitation center, and hospital.

Studies have shown that people like completing living wills as they get older, but sometimes they overestimate the control the document provides. In a setting where someone is seriously ill and unable to make decisions, a physician will look to a patient’s health care power of attorney to help make decisions. In this scenario, the physician and the patient's designee can consult the patient’s living will for guidance, but in the vast majority of cases, the living will only serve as a loose guide. The designee must meet with the physician and make decisions based on their close knowledge about the patient and his or her values. This is why it is so important for every adult to designate an appropriate health care power of attorney.

Over the years, I have helped counsel many health care surrogates or designees who are unsure what to do for their loved ones. My advice is always to think about what the patient would want if he or she were present in the room and able to make their own decisions. Choose a designee who has the capacity to make decisions based on your goals and not based on their own needs. Good advance care planning can help accomplish this goal. It can also lessen the psychological burdens on health care surrogates who feel
lost at sea trying to guess what their loved one would have wanted.

Living wills can be useful, but it is important that they contain language that further clarifies a patient’s values and desires for end-of-life care. That is why the conversation part of advance care planning (during which goals, values and health care issues are addressed between the patient and the health care power of attorney) is the best place to start.

**Initiating Advance Care Planning**

So how do you actually get the conversation started? The mere act of bringing up the topic can be the biggest hurdle. In fact, completing your own advance care planning may make it easier to facilitate these conversations with relatives. Advance care planning is urgent for anyone with a serious, chronic illness, but it is still recommended for anyone eighteen and older.

Some experts say that the best time to have these conversations is around the holidays, when families are gathered together. These conversations do not have to be a “downer,” and there are some wonderful online tools to help get them going. I like The Conversation Project, which provides free, simple tools designed to help start a dialogue about goals and values surrounding health care decision-making. It encourages the discussion of topics that people may not think about addressing with their loved ones, such as, in the setting of terminal illness, how much should care focus on comfort? Or, at the end of life, would the preference be to remain at home versus in the hospital? Open-ended questions can also be very useful, such as “What matters to me at the end of life is . . .” The Conversation Project toolkit also gives suggestions about how to “break the ice” with reticent family members. I like their suggestion of,

“Remember how someone in the family died – was it a ‘good’ death or a ‘hard’ death? How will yours be different?” Importantly, the toolkit also includes useful suggestions about how to communicate with your physician(s) about your health care wishes.

As a clinician-educator, I frequently say that palliative care can be considered a “procedure-based” specialty just like cardiology or gastroenterology. However, in the case of palliative care, our procedure is “the conversation.” There is nothing technical or mechanical about “the conversation.” The tools for excelling really rely upon the ability to listen carefully and help patients and families process medical information as it relates to their goals and values. No individual can know what the future holds, but investing time in discussing goals and values about health care wishes clearly makes people better prepared for any serious health care crisis.

In the Jewish tradition, we are encouraged to think about the well being of our family and to try to preserve family harmony. We hope that initiating these conversations will inspire open dialogue and preserve harmony in the years to come.

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Lake Michigan is a beautiful backdrop to the city skyline, an escape from city life and yes, a source of wind and snow. What we can often forget is how important Lake Michigan was to the founding of Chicago and to its growth, from the ports to the water that nourishes the surrounding region. The founding story of Abraham and his descendants, however, is quite different. Why did our forefather choose as arid an environment as the land of Israel?

Anyone who has visited Israel knows of its diverse natural beauty, from the shores of the Mediterranean, to the hills of Jerusalem, to the desert in the South and even occasionally snow-capped mountains in the North. However, as the Israelites found out thousands of years ago, most of the land is desert. In fact, more than 60 percent of it. That meant scarce water, and scarce water meant scarce food.

Fast forward a few thousand years, and the land of Israel is still mostly a desert, with scarce water supplies. Israel’s largest source of fresh water is the Sea of Galilee in the North, a Sea roughly 1/1000th the size of Lake Michigan by volume. Fertile land is limited to a coastal strip and several inland valleys mostly in the northern part of the country. But one important thing has changed: today, more than eight million people call Israel home, and that home is everything we’d expect from a modern, developed country. So, how has Israel done it?

Lacking in most natural resources, Israel has been forced to rely on its one free natural resource: brain power. Today, Israel is well known as the “Start-Up Nation,” with the most start-up technology companies in the world outside California’s Silicon Valley. Israeli technology is powering everything from our computers to our cars to our shopping experience. And while Israel’s technology prowess benefits people around the world, often as its primary market, its ingenuity when it comes to water and agricultural infrastructure was directed primarily toward the survival of its own people.

Globally, (and Israel is no exception) about 70 percent of the water we collect goes to agriculture, driving home the point that water is synonymous with food, just as it was in biblical times. Israel realized, from the time it was founded in 1948, that in order to grow it would need to be efficient in its use of water. Agriculture, the top user, was, and remains, the primary target for efficient water usage, and this has led to the development of some of the most advanced agricultural inventions and practices in the world.

Israeli agronomists developed a drip-irrigation system which, instead of spraying the land with water from overhead, essentially injects water at the root of a crop. This process not only limits waste, it actually promotes stronger plant growth. Drip irrigation alone accounts for thirty to fifty percent water savings. It also allows for fertilizers to be delivered directly to the plant root, limiting toxic runoff, which damages natural water systems around the world. Today, drip irrigation in Israel is
coupled with computer systems which measure the soil conditions to determine optimal times for watering and fertilizing. Ongoing attention towards water efficiency has led to other innovations, including the use of greenhouses to control for optimal growing conditions and tarping of the land around crops to protect the soil.

Water efficiency is also important in urban areas, and public awareness about Israel’s water shortage has made Israelis some of the world’s most efficient users of water. But more than that, Israel designed its water infrastructure back in the 1950s, together with U.S. engineers, to be able to carry not only freshwater and sewer water, as we have under our streets in Chicago, but also treated sewage water. Israel leads the world in water recycling, with over eighty percent of its once-treated water recollected, treated, and used again, mostly for agricultural purposes. To give perspective, in the U.S., less than five percent of water is recycled and reused.

The story, however, doesn’t end there. Israel’s growing population required more than just efficient water usage. It required finding new sources of water. Initially, this included groundwater reserves, deep below the surface. These are often expensive to harvest but provide much-needed water, especially to areas far from freshwater sources. Some of it is brackish, or slightly salty, and requires ingenuity to use for agricultural purposes, leading to the development of crops which can tolerate the salty water.

Today, the main new source of water in Israel is the Mediterranean Sea. Israel leads the world in desalination technology, the process of removing salt from water, which in the past decade with new advances has become cost-effective enough, and environmentally friendly enough, to be widespread in Israel, accounting for nearly half of the water used.

Altogether, Israel’s efficient use of water and its ability to tap into new sources of water has led to something of a miracle: Israel is one of only two countries in the world replenishing its natural water reserves. That is, Israel is putting more water into the land than it is taking out. Israel’s drought stricken land is no longer a threat to its survival.

Israel’s solutions for its water shortages are no secret. In fact, Israel has focused on sharing its ingenuity with the world. This is especially important for the growth of Israel’s economy, as its own market is too small for expansion. The U.S. is Israel’s largest trading partner, accounting for about a quarter of Israeli exports. The U.S. is also Israel’s leading research and development (R&D) partner. U.S. companies and government agencies come to Israel with challenges and Israeli entrepreneurs work with them to develop solutions, and vice versa. This has been most prominent among high-tech industries, with companies such as GM, Google, Intel, and Microsoft building large R&D centers in Israel, which is now home to over 350 such multinational R&D centers. It extends to areas such as agriculture and water: this year, the U.S.’s largest desalination plant will start operating near San Diego, California, designed by the Israeli company IDE.

California, like Israel, has long needed to develop more efficient uses of its water and likely utilize new sources of water as well. Yet California has waited to tackle this issue until the problem has threatened the survival of its citizens and all who rely heavily on its agricultural exports, which includes you and me. And California is not alone. Water scarcity is nothing short of a
global crisis, threatening more than one billion people today, and worsening rapidly.

According to the Torah, this is the same global crisis that led the Israelites to slavery in the land of Egypt. Drought in the land of Israel forced Joseph’s brothers to travel to Egypt in search of water and food. As the story continues in the land of Egypt and the journey back to the land of Israel, water and food remain a constant issue.

As the Jewish religion evolved, water and food have remained integral (with only slight changes from manna to my grandmother’s delicious baking and cooking). Whether it’s our more ancient history of harvest holidays or our more current liturgy in which we pray for rain daily during the fall and winter months, we are constantly mindful of our relationship with the land.

Living on the shores of Lake Michigan, we can feel pretty lucky. We have a seemingly endless supply of freshwater. Although a trip through Illinois may seem rather dull, we should appreciate that what is below the cornfields is some of the richest soil in the world. It is nonetheless important, in fact essential, that we are conscious of our good fortunes and mindful of what our neighbors in this country, let alone around the world, are facing. Ignoring the value and fragility of the water and the land has dangerous outcomes.

Israel’s ingenuity, just as our good fortunes in Chicago, is something to celebrate. Visit Israel, experience the diverse landscape and the delicious foods. Go swimming in Lake Michigan, drink our water and enjoy our produce. Be conscious of it, be proud of it, and above all else, share it. As we fulfill the prophecy of being a light unto the nations, it is our duty to not only celebrate our achievements and our fortunes, but to share them to make our world a better place.

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Daniel Blumenthal is Deputy Director of the Government of Israel Economic Mission to the Midwest, having recently served as the office’s Interim Director in 2015. In his position, Daniel engages with companies, government agencies, organizations and universities throughout a thirteen-state midwest region, initiating trade, joint ventures, investments and collaborative R&D between the U.S. and Israel.
Cataloguing Our Culture

An appreciation of the Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Library
by Richard Holbrook, Rodfei Zedek librarian

“Clinic of the Soul” was the inscription one ancient Greek historian saw over the entrance to an Egyptian library. Libraries for him were the place to find humor, wisdom, guidance, inspiration, and knowledge. Our synagogue library, today, is likewise a place the reader can find the companionship of great minds as well as intellectual and religious tools for working through life’s experiences.

A Jewish library, and our library – the Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Library, is a place to study the religious and biblical springs of our faith, not only the texts of the Bible, but also the commentaries – modern and ancient – on the Bible. Together they preserve the continuity of memory and reveal and sustain the history – personal and collective – without which a society cannot thrive. The books the library holds show us our responsibilities to each other, help us question our values and erode our prejudices as well as lend us support for living together. Their insights encourage us to imagine better times and lead the way to compassion and empathy. They demand, and this is central to Judaism, that we study and question.

Libraries play a central role in a civilized society. They form the core of a culture. In libraries we find society’s memory and the symbols of our identity.

Libraries are resilient institutions, and they have quickly adapted to the electronics of information collecting, retrieval, and distribution. The Abbell Library has computers and high-speed internet access for research and reading. Sending texts by email attachment or doing research on the web is commonplace and can now be done at the synagogue library as well as at home. Synagogue courses are already exploiting these computer capabilities. With widespread availability of computers comes an adjustment in the role of our library as well as of every other library. Does that shift detract from the centrality of the book? Not at all. How many of us enjoy the convenience of an e-reader?

Our library follows the path set by many great libraries. Like Northwestern University, we use the Dewey decimal cataloguing system. (The University of Chicago uses the Library of Congress system.) The Abbell library has an excellent collection of books, about 5,000 volumes, which naturally revolve around all things Jewish. These include reference materials and encyclopedias, fiction, biographies, commentaries, sports, music, and history as well as magazines and newspapers. We have guides to Jewish practices, from keeping kosher and cooking to end-of-life matters and mourning customs. The Abbell Library also houses the synagogue’s special collections, which include a
Chumash printed in Warsaw in 1848, prayer books for GIs in World War I and World War II, and scrip from the Lodz ghetto.

Books circulate regularly and frequently. Generous people closing out their own collections have made valued donations to the library, which have included rare books. In addition, using book reviews and readers’ recommendations, we have purchased numerous books in all fields. The library has greatly benefited from the efforts of Louise Abbell Holland. Bequests from her family further the mission of the library in a number of ways, including providing new shelves for non-fiction and reference books.

There is another service the library performs. We collect books and other printed material for burial.

The Abbell Library is always available during regular building hours and is staffed, generally on Sunday mornings, by our volunteer librarian; please contact him through the synagogue office (773-752-2770) with special requests or questions.

Our recent acquisitions include:

- Mark Kurlansky’s biography of Hank Greenberg in the series “Jewish Lives”;
- The Act of Love and The Finkler Question by Booker Prize winner Howard Jacobson;
- The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict by Jonathan Schneer;
- To the End of the Land by David Grossman;
- The Book of Psalms translated with commentary by Robert Alter;
- My People’s Passover Haggadah, edited by Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnow;
- Yehuda Halevi by Hillel Halkin.
- The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem by Jeremy Dauber;
- Lincoln and the Jews by Jonathan Sarna and Benjamin Shapiro;
- Marx by Isaiah Berlin;
- Mazel by Rebecca Goldstein; and
- Just Say Nu: Yiddish for any Occasion (when English just won’t do) by Michael Wex

Richard Holbrook holds masters degrees in German and French history from the University of Chicago and a PhD in French history from the University of Illinois at Chicago. 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 Sholom. He is married to Shirley; their children Daniel and Nina grew up in the congregation.
This American Shabbat: Chayei Sarah

The talks printed here represent another installment of This American Shabbat. Created by Rabbi David Minkus in his first year at Rodfei Zedek, the concept grew from the NPR program, This American Life. Rabbi Minkus selected three congregants to study the parsha with him for a few months. Their conversations culminated in presentations during services on Nov. 7, 2015.

by Brian Schwartz

Earlier this week, when I took a ride home in an Uber, my driver turned out to be from Hebron - which is where the first part of this week’s parsha occurs. I couldn’t tell whether this was the signal from the Almighty or the all-knowing Google that This American Shabbat was upon us. I can say definitively that it was the encouragement I needed to write my d’var Torah. In the car ride back from a date with my wife with the Hebronite driver, I elected to keep my thoughts about the acquisition and ownership of the cave of Machpelah and Hebron to myself. It just didn’t seem as though my driver would be interested in my analysis on that contentious topic.

I can tell this audience is different. Unlike with Fadi, the Uber driver, I sense an overwhelming interest in my take on the transaction in Hebron palpitating throughout the room.

I’ve actually been to Hebron. I’m not sure if a Jewish tourist could safely visit there today, though. The security situation in Israel and environs seems less clear now than when I visited the city in the early 2000s. But then, the first intifada had ended a decade prior, and Ariel Sharon had not made his visit to the temple mount and Camp David hadn’t fallen through yet. I recall it being a hopeful time, when a permanent peace seemed inevitable. It felt safe enough for a couple of American students to just hop into a cab with Palestinian plates in Jerusalem and say “take us to Hebron” (as well as other cities in the West Bank).

The parsha this week, spoke to me at first on the basis of that geography. Hebron, and specifically the cave of Machpelah, continues to be a major pilgrimage destination for many religious Jews. In addition to Sarah, whom we read of this week, all the Patriarchs and Matriarchs except Rachel would end up buried in the same place, according to our tradition.

When I went to Hebron I was excited to visit what had been strictly “off-limits” for Jewish tourists… or at least Jewish tourists travelling in organized groups with an emphasis on safety. Come to think of it, now that I look back on the experience with older and wiser eyes, who knows how safe it was to have visited when we did? Nonetheless, I saw what I could and I am happy I did. It was the first time the sensitivity of the situation was in clear view for me. Even during those relatively safe and peaceful times, the precision of the lines of demarcation at the Tomb of the Patriarchs between Jewish and Muslim areas was a vivid demonstration about the importance of the place.
So for me, to read this week of Abraham negotiating over - and ultimately acquiring - a place to bury his wife Sarah is a reminder of that physical place. So too is it a reminder of my, as well as all of Abraham’s descendants’ relationship with that place.

The parsha not only reminds me of a place - it also, at least according to Wikipedia, contains the first commercial transaction we read about in the Torah. We all buy things, and sometimes we even negotiate for them. There is something about Abraham’s negotiation, if we could even call it that, that was even more relevant for me.

In my professional life in the last couple weeks, I’ve taken a keen interest in all sorts of less than kosher transactions… among these is "spoofing," entering and quickly canceling large buy or sell orders in an attempt to manipulate prices. It’s a topic that is in the news today in financial circles. I’m quite sure Abraham was not engaged in spoofing when he sought out a place to bury his beloved wife. On the contrary, he was the world’s first anti-spoof. The portion tells us Abraham was mourning his wife, not exactly the time anyone sets off to engage in shenanigans… but something tells me even if he were completely level-headed and not torn apart by emotions he would have been equally fair in his business dealings.

What I like about Abraham’s behavior is that it sets a standard that both exceeds “fair” and is more profound. Ephron offers the cave, and the field around it, for free. Working under the assumption this was not a super-fund site with a liability built into it, we’ll call Ephron’s a pretty generous offer. What does Abraham’s refusal of a “too good to be true” offer mean? Was he too proud to accept the property as gift? Did he know accepting it would be unfair to Ephron? Was Abraham keen to establish a more formal title to the land? Did he think having a formal title would in some way help in the event he had to legally defend his rights in an environment where he was “a resident alien” as we read earlier? To me, it’s not clear, nor is it at the core of the lesson.

The principle lesson I take from the interaction is that he assesses the offer and determines it’s flawed. He determines - on the basis of fairness, legality, or something different but indisputably important to him - that at a price of zero, the transaction is no good. At a price of 400 shekels, it’s a kosher transaction.

What is the implication for us? My read of it is that, while in our time we are presented incessantly with offers to buy things, we may still want to pause and consider the transaction on a different level - as Abraham did. We know, as Abraham did, that there is more to a transaction than price. It’s unclear to me - as it was to the rabbis - why a price of zero was not a good one for Abraham; but for me when I see a price that is too low I’m reminded it may be that not all the costs are reflected in the price. And I - and we - are fortunate enough to be able to seek out deals in which we can be like Abraham in satisfying our conscience as well as our needs.

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Brian grew up in St. Louis, Missouri where he was raised at Temple Israel. A relative newcomer to Rodfei Zedek, he and his family discovered the congregation through the Jewish Enrichment Center. Brian works in technology and finance. He studied Computer Science and History at the University of Wisconsin - Madison and earned a Masters in Accounting at Depaul. He, his wife Meg, and children Marty and Ellie plan to move to Hyde Park from the West Loop later this spring to be closer to the community.
Rabbi Minkus told us (or I took him to mean) that *This American Shabbat* has a two-fold purpose for us. We must focus on the parsha, and we must own it. We allow it to elicit from us, and we offer to it, by virtue of its very sketchy open-weave nature, our own learning and anxieties, joys or expectations. The gaps in the text both welcome and expose us... our needs and concerns and understanding. The hope is that we get to know one another better as we show how a text... shows us; how our tradition speaks to us, claims us...in this moment. Even more than in a standard drash, we narrate a bit of ourselves, and perhaps thereby are knit more fastly into the fabric of Torah, and of community. Beyond the parsha itself, I will also draw on some Holocaust reflection, in anticipation of the Kristallnacht remembrance.

My mother-in-law, Larry’s and Lisa’s mother, Claire Edwards, whose memory is a blessing, passed away on the Shabbat of Chayei Sarah. So I tend to think of it as Chayei Claire. She was a very gracious and elegant woman, full of humor and kindness and good will.

Claire passed away on the Shabbat of Chayei Sarah in 2001. Larry was in NYC on September 11 and we spent some very anxious hours waiting to hear that he was safe and finding his way home. In the following month, when we were given her diagnosis, Claire was accepting, saying she didn’t really care to stay around to see how 9/11 turned out. She had seen enough, having lived through two world wars and the Depression.

Ironically titled, Chayei Sarah begins with the death of Sarah. Since this parsha starts immediately after the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, there is much Rabbinic speculation as to how to read that sequence... what happened to Sarah? The Rabbis begin to fill in the space between the Akedah and Sarah’s death. Satan figures prominently in many of these imaginative accounts: appearing to Sarah and telling her what Abraham has done, letting her believe Isaac has actually been sacrificed, or that he had come very close; and there is at least one version in which Satan appears to her as Isaac himself. But Satan/Isaac does not get to finish the story in this telling; Sarah dies before he reaches the conclusion. In fact, in all of the versions, one gets the unsettling impression that Sarah dies not because of any particular ending. Sarah dies because she cannot endure the story of the Akedah itself.

Reading Chayei Sarah, I was drawn this time around to the abrupt announcement of Sarah’s death in the first line of the parsha, and to all of that conjecture with which the Rabbis surround (and maybe try to contain?) Sarah’s death. There is more than a little anxiety lurking in their speculations. Rashi says Sarah dies of the news that her son was all but killed...of her immediate experience of the hair’s breadth that separates life from death, of her radical contact with life on the knife’s edge. Sarah died, and as we are keenly aware, and especially as we approach the commemoration of Kristallnacht, Jews are all too familiar with direct contact with that ‘little thing that decides one’s fate’, of the singular importance of a yes or a no, the
implication of being told to turn right versus left. Jews have known, and in some places still know, the bodily toll of living so perilously close to death, in a constant state of fear.

This leads me to think about the conversation we had at Hillel on Yom Kippur on the topic of Jonah and racial justice. Rabbi Anna Rosen described a southside women’s group she belongs to and the listserv they use. She said the women are increasingly focused these days on the stark fear they live with regarding their children’s safety, especially perhaps their sons’ safety. How different it is for her, said Rabbi Rosen -- her worry, for example, that her child wears his bike helmet. Safety concerns for sure, but on a whole different plane. It makes me think more generally of the fear some communities are saturated with, day in and day out. And how different it is for me, day in and day out.

In the course of that Yom Kippur conversation, two wildly differing views of the Jonah story were articulated. One person saw it as a very optimistic tale. A whole city can change, can repent, is willing to alter its course on a dime. And that turning comes not from a dictate by the officials; it comes from the citizens of the city, it rises from the ground up. The opposing view that someone expressed was what he called this pessimistic story. Jonah doesn’t seem to have learned much from his undertaking. We see him at the end of the story sitting with a view of the city, removed, judging and waiting to see what will happen, grumbling about his own comfort.

Jonah put me in mind of a story by Elie Wiesel. In *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Wiesel teaches us the difference between being a witness and being a spectator. He confronts and condemns “those who were permanently and merely spectators.” In the novel, Wiesel sets up his protagonist to serve as witness against one of these spectators. The spectator (who has watched as Jews were rounded up and taken away) is simply present at that scene, an onlooker who happens to see, but who remains aloof, separate, uninterested and seemingly uninvolved in outcomes. In Wiesel’s telling, the protagonist confronts, and the spectator is forced to listen, as his blind seeing hears itself being unmasked. The pretense of innocence, of “I have nothing to do with it” is uncovered and shown for what it is, exposed as self-absolving fiction. For Wiesel, there is no neutral no-man’s land on which to stand above the fray, secure and untouched. The illusion of the aloof onlooker is revealed by Wiesel to be a sham; the spectator is as complicit and protected in his role as any of the more active participants in the roundup.

The work on my doctoral dissertation, from which this little Wiesel reference comes, has had a lasting impact on me. My sense of obligation to others is surely heightened. And the need to respond, to not remain silent when my conscience, or my sense of responsibility urges speaking ... or acting ... has been intensified. As they say at Holocaust Museums, in ‘Facing History,’ and in anti-bullying campaigns, “Don’t be a bystander, be an upstander.”

I want to share a quick, and I think convincing, endorsement of simply speaking up. As some of you may remember, I wrote my dissertation (back in the day) on the Holocaust, with an eye toward what a post-Holocaust ethics might look like. As I was writing, I took a trip to Israel and Egypt. I returned just in time for Yom HaShoah. I was in upstate New York and decided to go out to Cornell University for their program. I learned they had a
practice of alternately inviting Christians and Jews to give the Yom HaShoah address. This particular year, it was a Jesuit, from Loyola University, actually. I had read something of his not long before and thought hearing him might be helpful to my work. As it turned out, the presentation really disturbed me. I sat for a long time after the program ended contemplating whether I could exit through the door where the speaker stood greeting people. I felt so emptied, I decided I could not.

Several days later I was still troubled about it. I was in the midst of reading Wiesel and Primo Levi...how could I not speak up? I finally decided to write a letter, and thought even if the recipient simply threw it away, I would have done something. But to whom would I write? I had saved the Yom HaShoah program, and as I scanned the list of names involved, I came upon one person whom I thought would surely be sympathetic to my concerns. So I sent my letter of complaint to a Rabbi Edwards. He wrote back to me saying that while he hadn't personally been troubled by the speaker’s remarks, others had indicated to him that they had been. Could we meet and discuss it? So we met…and well, we continue to discuss….

You might say that I am feeling more acutely these days, in the expression of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The mettle that it takes to look away…." And the phrase that now runs more urgently through my mind and troubles my beautiful and peaceful walks to work. Do not stand idly by.…

As Director of Administration and Operations for the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost at the University of Chicago, Susan Boone manages a wide array of responsibilities including support for new initiatives on campus, oversight of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, and day-to-day operations on behalf of the fifth floor of Levi Hall. She has a background in economics and finance and has worked for the Treasury Department and later as a stock broker and a bond trader. She holds a master's degree and a Ph.D. in ethics. Susan, and her husband Rabbi Larry Edwards, have long been members of Rodfei Zedek. Susan has served on the Board and the Executive Committee in years past.

... you are troubled about this vine, about your safety and comfort. “Should I not be concerned for Ninevah?” And, by implication... shouldn't you?

And Sarah died. A mother’s response to the near-death of her son. Claire and 9/11. A mother’s dying concern for her son’s, for Larry’s, safety. And the mothers of the south and west sides of Chicago. The daily toll of a dreadful watchfulness.

Jonah watches too...in the manner of Wiesel’s spectator. God challenges him
When Rabbi Minkus, Susan, Brian and I first met to discuss this week’s parsha, the Rabbi asked us for our initial reactions. Although I don’t remember Susan’s and Brian’s exact thoughts at the time, I am sure they were deeply insightful. Mine, on the other hand, was this: “Gee,” I thought. “I wish my dad could just send his manservant down to the watering hole to pick me out a husband!”

All joking aside, when prompted further, really what I was initially struck by was how Abraham’s servant Eliezer seemed so certain of what he was looking for. He makes a very particular request in his prayer to God: “let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ – let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.” (Genesis 24:14).

Eliezer could have asked for any type of sign from God, but he asked for this one. The commentator Abravanel maintains that Eliezer was not simply looking for a divine signal, but applying a test of character to the woman who was to become Isaac’s wife.

This led me down another line of questioning: What is this week’s parsha trying to tell us about how we choose our partners? Granted, Isaac did none of the choosing, and Rebecca only gave a brief “I will” before she was whisked off to see what indeed she had agreed to. But Eliezer knew exactly what he was looking for.

His character test revealed that of all the qualities he could have assessed, kindness and generosity were must-haves. God seemed to agree because, even before Eliezer had finished his prayer, Rebecca was making her way down to the well.

So kindness and generosity make it onto the short list. What else?

How about love? Earlier in the parsha, we see Abraham mourn Sarah – not just mourn but also “bewail” her after her death. Abraham’s grief reveals how profoundly he loved Sarah. And it is only after her death, in his mourning, that he seems to be reminded of the importance of such a love, a love that he wishes for Isaac, and one that he sends Eliezer out to find.

Another value is exemplified in verse 67: “Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.” Although Isaac is the actor in this verse, I have to give Rebecca credit here. Rebecca married Isaac while he was still in mourning and although Rebecca had never met Sarah, and barely knew Isaac for that matter, somehow she was able to comfort him. While the text isn’t explicit, I believe that it was Rebecca’s empathy and warmth for Isaac that ultimately helped him cope with the loss of his mother.

So our matriarchs and patriarchs are the biblical examples of marital relationships, but the Torah is not the only source of information I generally consult. I’m a
visual and experiential learner and I find direct observation particularly useful. So how do these values play out in real-life?

I happen to live with a married couple at the moment, and for the last twenty-five years, I have been absorbing information on exactly this subject. It is no coincidence that kindness, generosity, profound love, and empathy are qualities that my parents model in their marriage all the time. (I would also say humor plays a large role in their success, but I have yet to find biblical evidence to support that value). They figuratively water each other’s camels all the time.

I know many of you are all settled in terms of romantic relationships, but I think the values transcend. How do we choose the people with whom we surround ourselves? What informs the guidelines we use to make those determinations? Whether it’s the Torah, our personal experience, advice from a trusted source, it all has merit and it’s all worth considering.

Reading this parsha through the lens that I have at this particular time in my life gave me a glimpse into the ways in which marital relationships in the Torah and marital relationships I’ve seen in real-life agree on some fundamental rules. But it also left me with questions. The values I pulled from the text—kindness, generosity, profound love, and empathy—are these the only qualities that are supposed to be important to us or are they simply a starting point upon which to build? If I were Eliezer, would I have prayed for the same things?

In social work school, we were taught a phrase to help us maintain neutrality and avoid answering personal questions about our values, but I find it useful at other times, as well: “For some, for others, for you.”

For some, like me, this parsha prompted me to consider some biblical answers to my relationship questions.

For others, like Susan and Brian, this week’s parsha served as a launching point into discussions that I may never have considered had I not had the privilege of studying with them.

And for you, it’s up to you to extract the meaning. Perhaps you’ll consider what sources you consult when making relationship decisions, what values you hold dear and how you came to learn them, and ultimately what your version of Eliezer’s prayer might look like. Whatever conclusions you come to, I hope God sends you your Rebecca.

Hillary Gimpel grew up in Congregation Rodfei Zedek and has relished the opportunity to participate in the community as an "adult." Hillary earned her Master's of Social Work from Washington University in St. Louis last year and returned to Chicago in search of her next chapter. Hillary currently works as a therapist with children and youth in foster care, and enjoys consulting with her inner child when engaging with her clients. Hillary enjoys anything that makes her laugh, or think, or both, and finding meaningful and creative ways to practice Judaism.
The ability to forge iron and to make tools and weapons was a sign of technical development in ancient society. Early books of the Torah deal with manufacturing objects from silver, gold, and copper, which have relatively low melting points and are therefore much simpler to fashion than iron artifacts. The temperature needed to melt copper or bronze (bronze is 90% copper and 10% tin) could be reached in the ancient furnaces through the use of bellows, which provided the necessary forced draft of air to facilitate combustion. The production of iron implements was possible only with the development of carburized iron (0.8% carbon) and the progress in quenching and tempering technology. Current chemical analyses are able to show if the iron in excavated artifacts was carburized and thus prove the level of technology. Could our ancestors have possessed the technical know-how to produce their own plowshares, axes, spears, and other iron objects without the help of neighboring craftsmen?

The blacksmith was called nappah (user of bellows) or pehami (user of charcoal). These terms indicate that there was some activity involving smelting and the use of ovens, and that blacksmiths had some idea of the need for blowing air to increase the temperature of their ovens. The Torah recognizes the significance of craftsman of copper and iron (Gen. 4:22), one of only three early professions singled out in Genesis 4 (herdsman, musician, metalworker). The Bible also appreciates the value and importance of having ore deposits. Canaan is described as a land you can mine copper (Deut. 8:9). The Book of Job (28:1-6, 9-10) even describes the difficulties of the mining process.

Many of the citations of metalworking in the earlier books of the Torah refer to silversmiths or coppersmiths, for example:

*His mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave it to a smith. He made of it a sculptured image and a molten image (Judg. 17:4).*

*He was the son of a widow of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father had been a Tyrian, a coppersmith. He was endowed with skill, ability, and talent for executing all work in bronze . . . now the pails, the scrapers, and the sprinkling bowls, all those vessels in the House of the Lord that Hiram made for King Solomon were of burnished bronze. The king had them cast in earthen molds, in the plain of the Jordan between Succoth and Zarethan (I Kgs. 7:14, 45-46).*

The last two citations refer to a named person, Hiram of Tyre, who was invited to create copper or bronze objects for the Temple of King Solomon. They also prove that the Israelites were familiar with the sand-casting method used for bronze. Working with iron was much more difficult, however, since its melting point was too...
high for the technique established for bronze objects. The prophet Samuel relates:

No smith was to be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears. So all the Israelites had to go down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, their mattocks, axes, and colters sharpened. The charge for sharpening was a pim for plowshares, mattocks, three-pronged forks and axes, and for setting the goads. Thus on the day of the battle, no sword or spear was to be found in the possession of any of the troops with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and Jonathan had them (I Sam. 13:19-22).

This indicates that the Israelites had to pay the Philistines to do their iron work for them at the time. It is not clear whether the Israelites lacked the technical expertise to forge iron or whether they had the knowledge but were prohibited by the Philistines to make use of it. However, if the Israelites took their farm implements to the Philistines for repair, they must have had such iron tools to begin with. Even so, there is no way of knowing if these tools were originally made by the Israelites or purchased from the surrounding nations.

King Uzziah of Judah (c. 785-734 BCE) provided his army with shields, spears, helmets, and mail (II Chron. 26:14), but the Bible does not say who produced these items. However, during the reign of Hezekiah (727-698 BCE), a major tunnel was cut through the rock to the Pool of Siloam (II Kgs. 20:20). The apocryphal Book of Ben Sira (175-200 BCE) refers to the tools used for this project: Hezekiah fortified his city and brought water into the midst of it. He tunneled the sheer rock with iron and built pools for water (Ben Sira 48:17). The construction of Hezekiah's tunnel indicates that the Israelites had by then acquired an expert knowledge of ironworking.

Isaiah the prophet confirms the activity of Hebrew ironsmiths in remarkably poetic detail: The woodworker encourages the smith; he who flattens with the hammer encourages him who pounds the anvil. He says of the riveting, 'It is good!' and he fixes it with nails, that it may not topple (Isa. 41:7). The craftsman in iron, with his tools, works it over charcoal and fashions it by hammering, working with the strength of his arm (Isa. 44:12). It is I who created the smith to fan the charcoal fire and produce the tools for his work (Isa. 54:16).

This last citation clearly refers to the technique for producing carburized iron, forging and perhaps making wrought iron objects, with heat treating the metallic surface by means of a carbon source. If we accept the traditional date of Isaiah as the pre-Exilic era, we will have evidence of solid progress in ironworking by the seventh-eighth centuries BCE. However, many scholars attribute these passages to Deutero-Isaiah, dating from the sixth century BCE.

The Bible famously compares Egypt to an iron crucible: The Lord took and brought you out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people (Deut. 4:20); I freed them from the land of Egypt, the iron crucible (Jer. 11:4).

In the Book of Kings we read that Nebuchadnezzar deported thousands of skilled workers: He exiled all of Jerusalem, all the commanders and all the warriors – ten thousand exiles – as well as all the smiths and artisans (II Kgs. 24:14). The Hebrew term harash ("smith") is the same word used in I Samuel 13:19, where we are told: No smith was to be found in all the
land of Israel, for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears. Thus, by the time of the First Temple's destruction in 586 BCE, Jews had become familiar with the work of a blacksmith.

From this overview it remains unclear as to when the Israelites became skilled in ironworking. The early books of the Bible indicate that the Philistines were more skilled in the technique, but the Israelites may have acquired it by the time of Hezekiah and certainly by 586 BCE.

Susan Meschel attended the Technical University in Budapest, Hungary. In 1956 she escaped from communist repression and antisemitism in Hungary and immigrated to USA, where she studied chemistry at the University of Chicago (M.S., PhD). She taught chemistry at the University of Chicago and Roosevelt University and is currently Adjunct Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the Materials Science Department. In addition to active involvement in research at the James Franck Institute (University of Chicago), she pursues the study of the scientific aspects of Biblical text, her long term hobby. In this interest she was encouraged by Rodfei Zedek's Rabbi Gertel whose suggestion led to publication in the Jewish Bible Quarterly.
Some of us are born with souls that turn toward Torah. Some of us find comfort in its words after a tragedy, or are inspired to study with a great teacher. And some of us watch the weekly parade of deception and kindness and slavery and heroism and reversals and strange revelations, all the while thinking, “I sure hope these people drank.”

We are all artists in search of a medium and a story to tell. My subject is Torah and I execute my works in alcohol, with the occasional addition of sugar, juice, or pickles (and once Bac-Os, but that was a terrible mistake). For all of 5776, I’ve committed to creating a drink that reflects each week’s Torah portion—with occasional bonus drinks for holidays! You can find each week’s recipe, and a few words of Torah, at http://www.TipplingThroughtheTorah.wordpress.com.

Like most of the great artists, I don’t work alone. The Kiddush Club, as we call ourselves, meets to wrestle with the Torah portion, swap recipe ideas, and sample the eventual drinks. We sit around a table covered with bottles and Bibles (at least two—a chumash and the Bartender’s Guide), taking notes and wrestling with the text. “Just how many plagues can you fit into a single drink?” we’ll ask ourselves (answer: seven, see our entry for Va-era); or, “How does one appropriately celebrate the Torah’s first mention of wine?” (Read the post covering Noach if you’d like to learn how we did it!)

Here’s a truth I’d never considered, until I started writing about booze and the Bible: when you blog about the weekly parsha, you actually have to study that portion—even if your commentary makes you tipsy. You have to look at the words with a critical eye, even when your goal is to find a catchy phrase that makes a great drink, or a visual effect that can be re-created in a glass. To use flavors to illuminate a passage, you first have to understand the nuances of the story and place the narrative in context: “Should this story taste bitter or spicy?” the Kiddush Club will argue, using our interpretations of a passage to argue for a particular alcohol. (I know we’ve all heard of looking for the proof for a text…why did it take me so long to figure out that, sometimes, 100 proof was most appropriate?)

I still get angry every time Rebecca appears in the Torah, but now I associate her with “Hey, Baby, Nice Camels!” and I try to understand why she wanted to pit son against son. (The recipe—and my thoughts on Rebecca—are in my online entry for Chaye Sarah.) I’m still horrified at the treatment of Ishmael, but I hope that somehow he knows that there’s a drink celebrating his existence—we created one for Lehk Lehka. Most weeks, I can’t make my peace with everything I read in the Torah. Now, at least, I can comfort myself with a drink.
Recipe: "Rodfei Zedek" (One Community, Many Alcohols)

Layer the following, in order (approximately 1/2 oz. of each, but adjust so that there are 5 equal layers in the glass)**

- Homemade crabapple syrup (to celebrate the local produce in Harold Washington Park... or substitute grenadine)
- Midori (green, a symbol of growth and newness, as well as the color of several faces in Kiddush Club after we sampled this shot)
- Full-pulp orange juice (like you drink, just before leaving for minyan!
- Blue Curacao (the blue of Lake Michigan)
- Tequila (to celebrate our south of the border...or, at least, south of Roosevelt Road...location)

L’chaim!

** To create a layered shot, slowly pour liquid over the back of a spoon so that it drizzles into the glass.

After a dalliance with North Side life, Andrea Frazier is now a committed Hyde Parker (which makes it much easier to stumble home after Kiddush Club). She is the Vice President for Synagogue Management. When not mixing drinks, she stirs up the numbers at Presence Health, where she is System Manager for Population Health Analytics.
Seven Bittersweet years

Stephanie Friedman reviews a memoir written from the perspective of difference


How to explain the complex and contradictory dynamic of the Biblical family of Jacob and Joseph, with its feuds and trickery and falling each other’s necks and weeping?

The opening of Anna Karenina famously claims that “happy families are all alike, but unhappy families are each unhappy in their own way.” One has to wonder (with a probably ironic Tolstoy), if any family in this world so shaped by human faults and frailties could be considered happy. Surely each family, whether it would consider itself happy or not, is defined by its woes and worries, its foibles and failures, as much as its joys and strengths. The same elements that differentiate a family act as the glue that binds it together, so that any attempt to separate the good from the bad, the happy from the unhappy, would deprive the family of its distinguishing characteristics. We might even say that the sources of a family’s unhappiness also forge its connections, even its affections, and Joseph would likely agree.

The Israeli writer Etgar Keret alludes to Joseph’s ambivalent family saga in the title of his memoir, The Seven Good Years. Best known for his absurdly comic “parables without a moral,” as Keret has described his short fiction, in this work of nonfiction he turns his attention to the unhappiness that has happily differentiated his own family: parents, siblings, wife, son, and the author himself. Joseph built up a store of grain to sustain both his family and the Egyptians during his “seven good years.” For Keret, the seven good years are those between the birth of his son and the death of his father. The store of memories and reflections he builds up in these years will sustain and define him and his family, even with – or, as I’ll discuss below, because of -- “the frightening, black, existential cloud” that hangs over Keret, his country, and the world. If that last quote makes the book sound gloomy, rest assured that it isn’t, for its comic heart and intelligence depends upon a simultaneous accounting of and affection for human flaws.

The “good” of Keret’s seven years is not unalloyed, marked as they are by war, illness, injury, and more mundane annoyances like irate cabbies. Keret’s father sums up the book’s theme when he responds to the news that he has a fatal case of cancer of the tongue, and what’s more is too elderly and frail to undergo the surgery and subsequent chemo and radiation that even then would likely not reverse it, by insisting on undergoing treatment anyway. In a scene characteristically Keretesque in its blending of humor and humanity, his father flirtatiously dismisses the concerns of the “young
oncologist,” telling her: “At my age, I don’t need a tongue anymore...The worst that can happen is that instead of telling you how pretty you are, I’ll write it down.” He then assures her with “his obstinate smile” that “I love life...If the quality is good, then great. If not, then not. I’m not picky”. Over the course of his memoir, Keret implicitly considers this embrace of life, whether good or bad, so that it comes to define his project as a writer as well as his understanding of his relationships in his family and the world beyond; it connects Keret to the people he writes about, and, ultimately, the audience that he writes for.

At a recent conference on his work at The University of Chicago, Keret said that his aim in writing has increasingly been to get inside the consciousness of characters he dislikes, not so that he will like them, but so that he can understand them. In The Seven Good Years, he makes a similar claim regarding the stories his father used to tell about the drunks and prostitutes he encountered while staying at a Mafia-run hotel in Italy after World War II. Their point, Keret realizes as an adult, “was not to beautify reality but to ... create affection and empathy for every wart and wrinkle on its scarred face”. These stories were ones he cherished as “mine alone;” because they were not written down in books for other children to hear at bedtime (and neither were his mother’s stories about “dwarves and fairies,” which were darkened by her wartime experiences), further underscoring how pain can be transmuted into a source of love, even as it retains its aura of loss and violence. The understanding that his family is outside the boundaries of normalcy, yet all the more precious for its improbable existence and quirky expressions of affection, creates a sense of identity for the child Keret was and the man he becomes. This off-kilter center provides the place from which his writing can simultaneously laugh at and cherish a broken world.

In every chapter, Keret writes from a place of difference – between himself and his countrymen, his siblings, his wife, his father, the people he meets in his travels in Italy or Poland – but never from a place of disaffection or alienation. He always comes around to seeing his own flaws as well as the humanity of his antagonist, so that every chapter comes to a resolution that opens up possibilities, rather than boxing complications up in a tidy but limiting conclusion. This resolution can be darkly comic, such as when Keret deals with the dread of a nuclear Iran by relating how he and his wife use their fear of the imminent bombing of Tel Aviv as an excuse to avoid cleaning their apartment and taking care of the leak in the ceiling. When Keret subsequently dreams that former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad embraces him in the street and says, “in fluent Yiddish, ‘Ich hub dir lieb’ -- My brother, I love you,” he awakes to reassure his wife that “if peace is what fate has in store, we’ll survive it too.” The resolutions can also be poignant, such as when he returns to Poland, the place that draws him to it because “most of my family had perished under horrendous circumstances there, [but it] was also the place where they had lived and thrived for generations.” He goes to take up temporary residence in the Dom Kerete (the Keret House), a small dwelling tucked into the oddly shaped space between two other buildings, designed by a Warsaw architect in dimensions meant to resemble those of one of the author’s stories. On the day he moves in, an old woman (with whom he cannot communicate without the assistance of an ambivalent passerby as translator) brings him a jar of homemade jam of the same type her mother used to make sandwiches for the woman’s childhood
friends when the two girls were sent away to the ghetto. That night, when he is “in the kitchen of my narrow house drinking a cup of tea and eating a slice of bread and jam that is sweet with generosity and sour with memories,” his mother calls, worriedly asking where he is, and, “in a choked voice,” he replies, “I’m here, Mom…in our home in Warsaw.” Keret can be at once generous and clear-sighted about the people and situations he addresses, recognizing their shared humanity without discounting their differences and the difficulties they might present.

Keret’s seven years might be bittersweet, but he insists on their goodness even as he recognizes the bad, mining them both for comic and human potential. He embraces the absurdity of his family’s characteristic differences as a bulwark against the outside world when it seems set against it. In turn, that understanding born of belonging to a family where love is assured if not always easy informs a worldview that can be both clear-sighted and generous, as accepting of a father’s love as of his propensity for making bad deals and carousing past the bounds of good taste and legal limits. (And as honest about his family’s flaws as he is protective of its vulnerabilities -- while Keret wrote the book in Hebrew, it has only been published in translation, which Keret claimed at the conference was his way of protecting his son’s privacy at home in Israel.) No matter how they define their own family identity, readers the world over can learn from that.

Stephanie Friedman holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MA in English from the University of Chicago. She teaches writing and serves as Associate Director of Summer Session Programs in the Graham School at the University of Chicago. Stephanie and her family belong to Rodfei Zedek, where Stephanie chairs the Adult Education Committee.
Why I Should Cry More  
*by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby*

When’s the last time you cried? Mine wasn’t at my grandfather’s funeral, or when my wife and I argued over whatever trivial emotional blip had bubbled up at the moment. Nor was it even the countless times I’ve been hit in the tenderloin by any number of toys and/or sporting equipment hurled by my children. No, my most recent tears came while watching the movie *E.T.*

Sniffles bubbled up during the scene near the end when *E.T.* starts dying and Elliot starts living. I quickly wiped my eyes and laughed at how pathetic I was for allowing myself to be manipulated again by an animatronic puppet and nostalgia and John Williams’s swelling strings. Then when the boy and E.T. say goodbye, warm tears welled up again, and began to overflow for real as the credits rolled.

The soft sobbing felt good, and I vowed to let it out more often, even if I had to set aside time to do so, like working out or meditating. But I probably won’t cry again until the next time I watch *E.T.*

As a child who grew up in the warm liberal cocoon of *Free to Be You and Me*, I’m programmed to tell my kids it’s all right to cry. In fact, I say, it’s terrific and healthy, and people who don’t do it are somehow less human because they are not fully experiencing life’s highs and lows. And yet, I do not cry in front of my children. They were fascinated to watch me lose it over a 33-year-old movie I’ve seen more times than I can count, because they know I can be silly and embarrassing and even willfully dumb, but they have never seen me vulnerable.

Take a look in the Torah. It’s filled with stories of unreasonably stout men capable of withstanding preposterous tragedies and stresses. And yet: water works, everywhere. A lot of it is understandable. Abraham cries when he learns that his beloved wife, Sarah, has died; King David cries at the death of his infant child. But also, Jacob weeps when he meets Rachel for the first time, which seems a bit extreme. Mordecai goes into blubbery emo drama at the news of Haman’s plan for the Jews of Shushan. Even Esau, who’s painted as the manliest of men until he finds out that Jacob has stolen his birthright, whimpers as only a guy who loses to his brother could. Twice. He also weeps when they reunite.

And then there’s Joseph, the biggest crybaby of all time. He cries when revealing his identity to his brothers, and again when they worry about their younger brother, Benjamin—and again when he finally sees Benjamin in Egypt, and *again* when his brothers plead for his forgiveness. The guy cries so much Noah has to build an ark whenever he comes to town.

The Torah takes pains to make sure we understand that no matter how strong these men are, they are not strong, silent types. They are human beings, and human beings are emotional creatures no matter how strong they are.
So, why do I protect my children from my tears? Probably for the same impossible reason I protect them from anything in the world: I want them to believe that in this big scary world, Dad Is A Rock and Will Not Let You Down. Even if it’s not realistic, or true. The alternative is too scary.

My own father, a clinical psychologist and gushy hugging mushpot, is as gentle as any man I know. But I don’t recall seeing him cry very often. When I did see it, it felt like when you see one of those videos of a criminal overpowering a police officer, and it hits you that the people in positions of authority are not really in control after all, and maybe Earth spins on an axis of chaos. It’s one of the most terrifying feelings imaginable, and I’m reluctant for my kids to experience it. So I cling to the old-fashioned ideal of a good father as a man forever in control of his emotions, a strong, silent type, because I am generally weak and loud.

When one of my children was born, though I can’t remember which one, I thought for some reason of the moment that Sarah and I stomped on the glass at our wedding. Under the chuppah and in the delivery room, I understood in some far-off way what the act symbolized, that with every joy there is always a hint of sadness. But both times, I thought: Jeez, what a bummer. Can’t I just enjoy this one moment of pure happiness? Thank you, Judaism.

Of course, I overlooked the bigger picture, which was the fact that the moment would be gone soon, the party would be over, my friends and family would leave, and real life would begin again for Sarah and me. Was I resilient enough to face it—not just with sturdy resolve but genuine, vulnerable emotions? If, as the Zohar states, “Weeping is lodged in my heart on one side, and joy is lodged in my heart on the other side,” then I have only been showing half of myself to my children all this time. And there’s nothing strong about that. Only silent.

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.