

For Your Consideration



A Special Issue of the Sinai Temple Bulletin

Celebrating Rabbi Mark Shapiro's 25th Anniversary as our Rabbi

1988-2013

Dear Sinai Temple:

One of our Rabbi's most amazing attributes is his deeply meaningful use of words. Throughout the past 25 years, he has shared his words through sermons, stories, classes, song, laughter and conversation. In preparation for his special anniversary celebration here at Sinai, we wanted to highlight some "words" that are truly timeless and poignant. After reviewing some 200 Bulletin articles written by Rabbi Shapiro through the years, we provide you with a collection of his writings. Organized by themes, these articles define who our Rabbi is, what he believes in and which ideas ignite his passion regarding Judaism and Sinai Temple. We hope you find them as beautiful and touching as we do.

—Marlene Gordon & Liz Leshine, Chairs, 25th Anniversary Committee

Dear Friends:

I am honored to present the following articles taken from many years of Temple bulletin articles. The first article printed here is literally the first I ever wrote for Sinai. I began working at Sinai on November 1, 1988 and the article appeared in the Temple bulletin of that month. After that...please read on. I've chosen to reproduce the articles from these 25 years that best reflect my enduring values and commitments.

As you'll see, the articles don't appear in chronological order. Instead of that, I've gone thematically, which sometimes requires a jump in time to convey the message. From thoughts on Reform Judaism to Shabbat, Jewish identity, Israel, faith, the role of religion, and responding to adversity, I think these articles tell my story. I hope you find them important.

I have written all of them as always – for your consideration.

—Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro

Celebrating 25 Years Together: Anniversary Weekend... October 25-26, 2013

Behind Closed Doors:

What rabbis talk about when they think congregants aren't listening!

Shabbat Service

Friday, October 25 at 7:30 p.m.

Many of us first met Rabbi Shapiro on Friday, November 4, 1988 at his first service. This October we'll have a gala service to launch our weekend - complete with several of Rabbi Shapiro's closest friends in the rabbinate. No sermon tonight. The five rabbis will have an unscripted and very open conversation about life as a rabbi.

Speed Torah:

What's your favorite bit of Torah?

Shabbat Morning with Luncheon

Saturday, October 26 from 9 to 11 a.m.

Neither a typical Torah Study nor a typical Service, this will be unlike anything ever done at Sinai. We will start with what looks like a standard service, but then comes the extra fun. Our guest rabbis will each offer a ten minute presentation on their favorite text of Torah. It will be "speed" Torah.

Home-made luncheon to follow.

Gala Celebration

Saturday evening, October 26 at 7 p.m.

The weekend will culminate with a festive dinner and gala celebration. Invitations have been mailed. With limited seating available, prompt RSVP's will be necessary.

November 1988 – When We Began

Sitting down to create my opening Bulletin article, I realize that this article will be the way in which most members of Sinai Temple first encounter me. You will form your impressions and begin

*...words about
Judaism, how it can
affect us, and where
we can go with our
lives as Jews*

your assessment on the basis of the words that unfold on this page.

Perhaps I ought to tell you, therefore, what I think about words in general.

I ought to tell you that in the years

ahead I am very much going to value each and every word I address to you. I am going to value the words because they are going to deal with the most precious possession we share. They will be words about Judaism, how it can affect us, and where we can go with our lives as Jews..

Not because I write them, but because they are words about Jewish life, these words are going to matter to me. And because of that I will make a request of you. I will ask that you respond to the words, that talk of Judaism never be a monologue in this congregation, that talk of Torah becomes a common concern and responsibility for all of us.

This year and over the years ahead, we shall need each other. That is so because there is too much to be written, said, and done for one Jew to go it alone. Consequently, we shall need to listen to each other, to learn from each other, and ultimately to help each other become better Jews.

My family and I look forward to beginning the process when we meet you in person this month. Although almost six weeks have passed since the High Holidays, for all of us November will mark the start of a new relationship and all its possibilities.

Our fondest hope is that the first year we share together be a sweet and productive one for us as individuals, as a community, and as members of the people of Israel.

October 1991 – When Sinai Temple Celebrated its 60th Birthday

Happy Birthday, Sinai Temple! You've come a long way since that first gathering of newly married couples in the home of Helen and Samuel Simons.

Back then, in 1931, it took vision and courage to find a new synagogue, especially a Reform synagogue, in Springfield. The depression was dragging everything and everyone down. As Samuel Simons, the congregation's first president, later wrote. "It was a time of darkness, pessimism, and hopelessness." What's more, New England was not yet a home for innovation in Jewish life. Sinai's pioneers met with ridicule and vilification as they began to build their congregation.

Fortunately, for us today, our founders did not despair. They were committed to Judaism and modernity; they were insistent about finding a path in Judaism that was honest and relevant.

What Rabbi Herman Snyder wrote in a 1952 sermon about the founders of Reform in Europe holds true for the founders of Reform in Springfield. "It was because of their love for Judaism that they wanted to save Jews for Judaism and to save Judaism for Jews."

Those are powerful words, but they are also true. For Reform Judaism did not develop in the early 1800's in Europe and then America because some Jews were looking for a way out of Jewish commitment. On the contrary, if those who gave birth to modern Reform had wanted to leave Judaism, they could have simply done that. The fact that they stayed within the community to cultivate a new approach for Jewish expression indicates that their hearts and souls were bound up with Judaism.

They wanted Reform in Europe of 1831 and Springfield of 1931 not because it was easy, but because they believed it was necessary.

It was necessary to embrace the reality that change in Judaism was natural, proper, and even traditional.

It was necessary to modernize prayer services, to rediscover the real meaning of the words of the prayers, to study the sources of all Jewish practice, to reject some observances of old, to create new ones for the future, to highlight the prophetic concern for social justice, and, most certainly, to establish the equality of men and women.

The work was not simple. In only a few generations Reform Judaism itself has changed. From discomfort with Zionism to love of Zionism and from dismissal of ritual to a much deeper engagement with ritual, we Reform Jews have never been afraid to adapt as required.

What has remained constant, however, is our conviction that Judaism is not a finished tale. Like a beautiful tree that requires pruning to be maintained, Judaism is our tree of life. We tend to it and nurture it in Reform so that its beauty and power never stop developing or enriching our lives.

Happy Birthday, Sinai! You have done beautifully! May you go from strength to strength, from generation to generation, from 60 to 120!

January 1994 – Every Question is a Good Question

It was meant to be a simple, opening question.

Parents of Third Graders had joined their children for a morning of learning, and I had a few moments alone with the parents. Since our program was focusing on the children and the fact that they were all just beginning Hebrew, I asked the parents, “How do you feel when I mention the word, Hebrew?”

*Don't be shy.
Speak up.*

The response was quite telling.

As we went around the circle, some parents spoke about their interest in Hebrew or their respect for Hebrew. But others reacted very differently. They spoke like this, “I feel embarrassed because I don't know Hebrew. I feel guilty. I feel incompetent.”

To say the least, it must have been painful for these parents to speak so honestly, although it was also very important for them to say what they did. For by admitting that Hebrew (and sometimes even entering the synagogue) evokes feelings of inadequacy, the Third Grade parents were exposing an often unspoken Jewish reality. It is the feeling many adult Jews have about formal Jewish life. It is the feeling that they are failures at something they actually love a great deal.

The problem has roots which trace back to the Jewish education of many adult Jews. Their education was often limited. It ended when they were 13 or perhaps 16 years of age, while their secular education continued way beyond that into college and more. That not only means adult Jews often have very little Jewish knowledge at their disposal: it also means that their knowledge is undeveloped when compared to the sophisticated knowledge they have in other fields of endeavor.

All of which begins to “explain” why people may not know much about Judaism, but doesn't address the feelings of people who feel awkward in the very place where we want them to feel at home.

Which leads me to a direct appeal: Friends, if you're one of those who is embarrassed by your lack of Jewish knowledge, please know that you're not alone. Know as well that Sinai Temple wants you to claim a secure place in Jewish life. If we speak jargon or confuse you by assuming knowledge you just don't have, don't be shy. Speak up. Ask your questions. This isn't school anymore where you pass or fail. It's life. It's your Jewish life, and helping you live a Jewishly successful life is precisely what your synagogue wants to do.

Don't be afraid. Whatever you want to learn we can learn together.

March 2000 – Being a Reform Jew with Pride and Purpose

I know Reform Judaism is alive and well. I know it because I recently attended the biennial convention of our national movement. 5000 other Reform Jews were there along with our Sinai delegation, and we were moved and delighted by the energy and creativity that surrounded us for five solid days.

I know Reform Judaism is bubbling with ideas because, as I told you on Yom Kippur, the Reform rabbinic association is preparing to address the issue of same gender marriages later this month. The e-mails are flying among my colleagues as each of us prepares to take a stand on the way in which Judaism ought to respond to the authentic love that brings gays and lesbians together. This is not an easy issue, but I am proud to be associated with a movement that doesn't shy away from controversy or innovation.

Look to the State of Israel if you want to see other indications of promise. After years of delay, the building of the Reform congregation in Ra-a-nana is finally happening. Two years ago Sinai raised \$25,000 towards the construction of this center for Reform Judaism in the suburbs of Tel Aviv, and now the bricks and mortar are on the ground. Even before it has a building, the Ra-a-nana congregation is thriving. Israelis are eager for a modern approach toward Judaism. They want the same kind of experiences that you and I count on at Sinai Temple.

(By the way, I am pleased to report that our own Springfield Jewish Federation recently voted to send \$18,000 to Israel for the support of projects that enhance religious pluralism. The funds will be split three ways: 1/3 going to a modern Orthodox daycare center, 1/3 going for the Conservative movement's outreach to Israeli public schools, and 1/3 going to Ra-a-nana.)

There are even Reform outreach efforts taking place in the Former Soviet Union. Thousands of Jews in Russia and elsewhere are looking for a Judaism that will speak to their minds and hearts with a contemporary accent. Many of them are only beginning to discover that something called “Reform Judaism” might be for them.

It is possible to become a Reform Jew by default. One can “back into Reform.” On the other hand, I hope many of you feel very differently. For me, Reform is an approach toward Jewish living that I take with pride and purpose. Reform is my way of living a joyful and meaningful Jewish life.

*Reform is an approach
toward Jewish living
that I take with pride
and purpose.*

March 1997 - Can a Busy Family Find Time for Shabbat

I had an important conversation with parents of students in Kindergarten and First Grade recently. As we talked about Shabbat, most parents expressed a great deal of interest about bringing Shabbat into their homes. However, some parents wondered if they could really find time for Shabbat.

One parent explained the dilemma this way, "I want to welcome Shabbat with my children, but I'm divorced and I only have the children every other Friday. When we finally sit down to eat around 8 p.m., haven't we already missed Shabbat?"

A little bit is better than nothing. A small start is better than never starting.

Another parent had the reverse problem. "I have to work as a waitress every Friday night. That means leaving the children

as early as 4:30 p.m. I'm not even able to be with them when Shabbat arrives."

A third parent topped off the concerns in these words, "I'm so busy I can barely manage to order pizza for Friday night, let alone prepare a Shabbat meal."

Not everybody in the conversation reported problems. Many parents described Shabbat experiences that were positive and satisfying. Nevertheless, other parents were disappointed, and I think I know why. It has to do with a fundamental misunderstanding. It's the erroneous assumption that unless Shabbat is done the "right" way, it can't be done at all.

But that isn't so. True, Judaism has traditions of great depth and detail, but Judaism has also never been frozen in its ways. As the Talmud teaches, "We are not given over to Shabbat, Shabbat is given to us." Which I take to mean that Shabbat can and should be adapted to suit our modern lifestyles.

Especially where some people feel the choice may be between all or nothing (Shabbat or nothing), I urge people not to force the choice. *A little bit is better than nothing. A small start is better than never starting.*

As long as candles, wine, and challah are present, you can, as necessary, eat pizza early or late and still have Shabbat.

Forget the chicken soup, forget the setting sun if you must. They are nice; they are closer to tradition. But if you can't manage so-called "perfection," at least go for the essence. Do your blessings. They will speak for themselves, brighten your home, and enrich your life.

November 2009 – Homework and Football: Where Do You Stand?

I heard a story about Longmeadow High School. It may not have happened, but it's the kind of thing that could very well happen.

Around the time of the High Holidays (LHS closes on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), a teacher handed out an assignment. A student said it would be hard for the Jewish students to do the assignment because of the holidays. The teacher replied, "Most of the Jewish kids are secular; they won't be at services anyway."

Whether or not an LHS teacher actually said those words, I suspect a good many teachers and other Longmeadow residents who are not Jewish must wonder about Jews and how we live our Judaism. As some of you know, one of the football leagues for younger students pretty comfortably scheduled games this past Rosh Hashanah on a Saturday. Last year, I think it was an LHS team that had an unofficial practice on Rosh Hashanah.

And the problem is twofold: On the one hand, we Jews expect not to be put in a situation where our kids are expected to break away from family (and synagogue) on our holy day. On the other hand, there always are Jews who do play the game or do the homework on the holy day. Non-Jews looking at our community can fairly be confused by the mixed messages our community sometimes sends.

You'll see this same phenomenon when Passover arrives and some Jews want to attend services on the first morning. Many Jews will at minimum ask that there be no major tests that morning because their children will have been at the First Seder the previous evening.

One problem – There will be other Jews in our community who see no conflict. Some children will dare to ask teachers for consideration because of the Seder; other Jewish children in the same classroom will say they have no problem either because they have no Seder or their families move it to the weekend or their families don't attend synagogue on Passover.

What's a non-Jewish person supposed to think? Actually, I'm proud of our Jewish diversity. Jews come in all shapes and sizes and with all varieties of belief. It's just that non-Jews have a hard time understanding a particular brand of Jew who claims the title but manifests virtually no involvement in Jewish living.

If you belong to Sinai Temple, the good news is that you are already not one of those Jews. Your belonging and your commitment do us proud. With so much history and so much wisdom in our tradition, you already know that we Jews are remarkably blessed.

We do ourselves a favor (and the larger community as well) when we take ourselves seriously and live full Jewish lives that are worthy of the title – Jew.

November 1994 – Why I am a Jew

Why does being Jewish matter? What does Jewish continuity mean? On Yom Kippur these are the questions I addressed in my morning sermon via the following “credo.” I welcome your responses...

I am a Jew because the Torah’s story of creation assures me that our world has purpose and direction. This is a decent world which can be made better.

*Holiness can be found
anywhere we recognize it.*

I am a Jew because the Book of Exodus teaches me that holiness can be found in

all places. Moses found holy ground before a humble bush: holiness can be found anywhere we recognize it.

I am a Jew because of Abraham’s courage. When God planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham challenged God and demanded that the world be just.

I am a Jew because of Moses. He stood before Pharaoh to demand freedom. “Let my people go.”

I am a Jew because the commandments that come from God can transform the world:

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. Leave the corners of your field for the needy.

Justice, justice shall you pursue.

I am a Jew as well because the rabbis added to the wisdom of my people. Hillel taught: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when? Rabbi Tarfon taught: You are not obliged to finish all the work of the world, but neither are you free to desist from at least starting.

I am a Jew because these teachings and so much more came from the Land of Israel and because Jerusalem symbolizes the ideals of my people’s last 2000 years.

I am also a Jew because Shabbat beautifies my life. Candles, wine, and challah make one day different than all the rest.

I am a Jew because Judaism is a wise and steady compass as I wind my way through life.

Through Judaism I can welcome my children into the world and even leave the world with dignity and sensitivity.

I am also a Jew because I love my people’s history and because I treasure my connections to the community of Jews around the world.

I am a Jew because Judaism is joyful and passionate.

I am a Jew because Judaism is a source of structure and purpose, spirit and meaning in my life.

June 2002 – Yahrzeit and Other Jewish Resources

I was very moved when a congregant told me he was worried that he had missed the Friday night for his father’s yahrzeit. (As you know, the office sends out yahrzeit reminders on a regular basis. We tell you when to light a memorial candle at home on the exact date of your loved one’s passing. We also tell you which Friday evening is closest to the yahrzeit. That is the Friday evening when we read your loved one’s name out loud before the Kaddish.)

*In our frantic world, I
would not overlook any
opportunity for a time and
place of peace.*

Meanwhile, I was moved by the congregant who was concerned he had missed saying Kaddish for his dad. I reassured him by saying I would check our records. If we had already read the name aloud, I promised we would read it again on a Shabbat when he could be there for the Kaddish.

It sounds like a simple problem with a simple solution.

Except I didn’t read it that way. I was touched because the congregant who spoke with me was searching for a traditional Jewish way to capture the memories of his father. Of course, each one of us who has lost a significant relative remembers in very personal and powerful ways. We never forget the one we loved.

Sometimes, however, we do forget the resource Judaism has given us. We overlook the power of formally honoring the memory of a loved one. For that is what we do with yahrzeit at the Temple. We take a moment that strikes your heart privately and we allow you to articulate the loss with community. When we say someone’s name in the Kaddish list, we give that person’s life and meaning a touch of immortality. The name is read. The name is heard. All of us acknowledge that we only live our own lives because others laid the groundwork for us.

Should you come to Temple to say Kaddish?

I think you should. I think you’ll find comfort and security at the Temple. I think you’ll find some peace.

In our frantic world, I don’t think I would overlook any opportunity for locating a time and place of peace. You might say, it’s one of Judaism’s specialties. Come join us this month and other months too - for yahrzeit and so much more.

May 1992 – Roots after the Holocaust

Through the magic of videotape, I recently had the opportunity of once again seeing the television classic - Roots: The Next Generation.

One of the most compelling scenes portrayed the young Alex Haley just after his mother had died. Seeking comfort from his grandmother, he listened to her reminder that although an individual might die, others were still responsible for going on with life.

There she stood, the granddaughter of Chicken George who in turn was the grandson of Kunte Kinte, the African. She herself was living proof of the power of continuity. But for emphasis she made her point by reviewing for Alex the whole family tree of Kunte Kinte tacked on the kitchen wall.

I try to keep alive what remains and to create new vessels for Jewish living in the future.

The scene was touching and made me wonder if I could do such a history for my own family. I thought about it, and then realized that for all the richness of Jewish tradition, I, like so many descendants of East European Jews, could not do what Alex did. I could not go back to Lithuania (my father's parents' home) or Romania (my mother's parents' home) and find an old Lithuanian or Romanian who could tell me of generations past. I could not do that because all that was there is gone.

The Nazis took it away. They destroyed the memories.

Of course, there is no point in romanticizing the shtetl. Still, whatever it was, it was home...and I will never see it. I cannot reclaim it.

That truly is a tragedy. It is a tragedy, which if nothing else, has a powerful thrust. As philosopher Emil Fackenheim maintains, the tragedy gives rise to the commandment, that because so much of the past is gone, I, as a Jew, must try that much more to keep alive what remains and to create new vessels for Jewish living in the future.

As a Jew, many of my roots have been lost in scorching fires. Nevertheless, my roots run deeper than Hitler could have imagined. In shaping the future, I draw on those ancient roots while praying that new roots take hold in my own lifetime. All this to ensure that generations from now, my own descendants will know who I was and what it means to be a Jew.

March 2010 – From Stories of the Cape to Stories at the Seder

I recently read Senator Edward Kennedy's autobiography, True Compass, and many adjectives come to mind as I reflect on the story he tells: impressive, fascinating, honest, and smart.

More than anything else, however, the book is tender! As much as it is the tale of a powerful, no-nonsense politician, it is also the story of Teddy, the youngest child of nine, the littlest one whose affection for his family shines through every page.

There is plenty of politics. The book focuses on decades of Washington personalities and issues. But, from the prologue onward, the Senator is clear: "My life has always been inseparable from that of my family. When I sit on the front porch of our Cape house, in the sunshine and sea-freshened air, I think of them often...I remember how each of us, distinct and autonomous from one another though we were, melded wholeheartedly into a family, a self-contained universe of love and deepest truths. My story is their story, and theirs is mine. And so it shall be in these pages."

Of course, the Kennedys never brought their energy together around a Seder table at the Cape. But as Passover approaches this year, I'd like to think that each of us at Sinai is looking forward to an event that will make memories.

We may not write books about our Seders in years to come, but hopefully whatever we do at our Seder tables can be significant. For the Seder and the Haggadah are quite extraordinary opportunities for family, friends, learning, history, values, dreams, laughter, and eating. At its best, you could say a Seder combines the spirit of Rosh Hashanah dinners, Thanksgiving, and a little bit of Super Bowl night.

Our Jewish story becomes the occasion for making Jewish memories that can last a lifetime. Once again this year, our website will link you to new insights, readings, games, and even recipes for Passover. You know I would love to see you at our congregational service on the first morning. Most of all, make the Seder count. It's your opportunity to shape a Jewish moment with your heart and soul.

The Seder and the Haggadah are extraordinary opportunities for family, friends, learning, history, values, dreams, laughter, and eating.

April 2002 – 5:45 a.m...Good Morning, Israel (During the Second Intifada)

It's 5:45 a.m. on Thursday, March 7, 2002. I'm awake in a Jerusalem hotel room, and I've just heard what sound like four giant firecrackers. The sound comes from Bethlehem, as does the roar of airplanes.

I suppose someone or something is being bombed as I sit here in the growing light that begins to fill my room. Fifteen minutes pass by, and now it's the sound of chirping birds under a brilliant, blue sky that keeps me from sleeping.

This is Jerusalem – except that's not really so. For inside this room all I have is Jerusalem without any context. It's like sitting at home in Massachusetts and only having access to CNN or the headlines from the newspaper.

Each media source portrays a slice of Israel's reality (however skewed the reporting may be), but the slice of life conveyed in a breathless headline is news about Israel from out of a vacuum.

Israel does mean violence today. It's dangerous to walk the streets of the ancient city where I find myself. But it's also glorious to walk the streets. It's inspiring to meet Israelis who are going to work this morning, Israelis who are dropping their children off at school, Israelis who are arguing about the latest political developments, Israelis debating what is fair for the Palestinians, Israelis in traffic jams, Israelis laughing, crying, mourning, and carrying on with life.

From inside my solitary hotel room, it's all a question of context. It's a matter of looking out the window to sense the pulse of life that beats steadily, strongly, and proudly in this country.

There are my people. This is our story. In fact, it's not only March 2002 as I write these words. It's Adar 5762 – almost Nisan, and all I want to do is thank God that I'm here in Jerusalem as spring begins and Passover approaches with its promise of hope.

It's a matter of looking out the window to sense the pulse of life that beats steadily, strongly, and proudly in this country.

September 2007 – A Boat Ride I'll Treasure Forever

The boat ride across the Sea of Galilee may have been the highlight of Sinai Temple's recent trip to Israel. It was Thursday, July 5 for our group of 36 travelers. We had visited the Golan Heights that morning followed by touring the city of Sfat and then kayaking on the Jordan River. The group had even celebrated the beginning of the day with a Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the ancient synagogue of Katzrin.

All this was on the printed itinerary. The big surprise came when the group made a last minute decision to go to Tiberias for dinner by traveling on a boat!

The sun was getting ready to set. The hills around the water were beginning to soften as evening approached.

The boat itself had a big open area around which the group members took seats. And then came the surprise:

The Israelis navigating the boat loved music.

They especially enjoyed loud recorded music, which they began to play as the boat left the shore. One of the crew grabbed a Middle Eastern tof/drum, placed it between his legs, and began to beat out the rhythm for each infectious song.

Without even realizing it, everyone on board began to clap. A few people got up to dance. Then more began dancing. Then the drummer brought out several drums so that group members could bang away to the music.

It was a magnificent moment. Joyful. Total. It was as if the boat was flying on its own magical path toward Tiberias. The boat ride captured all the emotion and excitement of a perfect day on what was a fabulous experience in Israel.

Of course, lots more took place on our trip to Israel, but the Tiberias evening captured so much of the trip's spirit. The glow still remains with me. I'll have more to say when we all meet for the New Year in a few days.

Meanwhile, my sincere wishes for a New Year that brings all of us sweet and enriching memories. Shana tova – A good year for us, our community, and, most certainly, for our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Magnificent. Joyful. It was as if the boat was flying on its own magical path...

September 2000 – When It’s Hard to Believe

What are you going to do on the High Holidays if you get to services and do not believe the words of the prayerbook?

It could happen. I know it could happen because, over the years, different congregants have told me they have great difficulty believing some of the words in our regular Shabbat prayerbook.

Your questions and your doubts leave you in a remarkable place – if you take them seriously.

Towards the end of last season, our Adult Bar/Bat Mitvah

class spent many weeks discussing this very issue, and the class members were wonderfully honest in admitting how problematic some of the prayers were for them. Although there were prayers which “spoke” to these adult students, there were other prayers that made them feel uncomfortable. For better or worse, these prayers were the more traditional prayers. They were the prayers that “spoke” to God as “Ruler of the Universe.” The hard-to-believe prayers were the classic prayers. They were the prayers that praise God and thank God and petition God.

These hard-to-say prayers in the Shabbat prayerbook are, in fact, the kind of prayers which multiply for the High Holidays. God as “King,” “Judge,” and “Father” is everywhere in the holiday liturgy. We turn to this God again and again asking for forgiveness and hoping for renewal.

But what if you don’t believe in a God who has the kind of power described in the prayerbook? Or what if you aren’t sure what you believe? Where does that leave you when the shofar blows us into the New Year?

You are asking if there is an organizing principle behind our lives.

I believe your questions and your doubts leave you in a remarkable place – if you take them seriously.

For when you ask questions about God, I believe you are asking the best questions anyone can ask. You are essentially asking if there is an organizing principle behind our lives. You are wondering if the universe has an overall purpose. Does anything or anyone beyond us shape our lives or affect them, and, if so, how does our praying make any difference.

These are not easy issues to confront. But if you’re intrigued by the notion that prayer and faith can be problematic, I’ve got an idea. Spend some time exploring these ideas before the High Holidays. Study with me in

a six-week course entitled...When It’s Hard to Believe: Overcoming the Obstacles to Faith at the High Holidays. The course is described in this Bulletin as well as on the insert describing other courses offered this month through the Alliance for Jewish Education.

You are not the only one wondering about God and prayer. Many, including me, pursue the matter passionately. Come join me, then, along with a host of other teachers so that we can all together prepare for the challenges and rewards of worship on the High Holidays.

June 2009 – Contemplating the Stars

Star Wars & Star Trek – Some thoughts about the movies.

First and foremost, isn’t it interesting that each set of films has worked its way around to a similar theme? The final Star Wars film from 2005 is similar to the current Star Trek film of 2009 insofar as both are movies about origins. The last Star Wars film imagined how Anakin Skywalker became Darth Vader. The current Star Trek dramatizes the origins of James Kirk, captain of the starship Enterprise.

In some sense, both movies touch on a universal subject. It’s the search to discover how each of us became who we are. Related to that, there is the ongoing process of refining who we are.

Journeys as big as the stars.

We Jews have a name for this self-evaluating process. It’s called Cheshbon Hanefesh, which means “taking account of the soul.” Or to put it more idiomatically, figuring out who we are and what we need to become.

You might even say that, just as the Enterprise was on a journey across the galaxies, each of us is on our own journey across the span of a lifetime searching for the best way to live out our time on earth.

Some of us find our greatest meaning as spouses or parents. Some find meaning at work. Some find purpose in volunteer activities, social justice, politics, gardening, reading, music, or theater.

What I love about the synagogue and prayer in particular is that, during services, I find myself free of distractions and able to focus on where I am going and where I have been. Services are my time for dreaming big thoughts, for contemplating the “stars” and the quality of my journey in life.

I assume many of you will see the new Star Trek movie in the next few weeks. I would love to hear your response to the film. Come visit on a Friday evening when we’ll be thinking big thoughts anyway. Prayer is the perfect vehicle for journeys as big as the stars.

January 2000 – The Story Behind that Tapestry in the Lobby

The congregation has commissioned an artist to create a tapestry for our new lobby.

As many of you already know, the renovated lobby has become a wonderful programming space for bringing Bar/Bat Mitzvah families together when we do Kiddush. The circular space is larger than what we had before, but still creates a feeling of intimacy. People naturally stand in a circle and the sense of community simply happens.

Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it.

The space also works beautifully for bringing children together on Sunday mornings.

During December, the lobby even provided a gracious setting for two Friday evening services.

Praying and singing in the circle over the mosaic, I felt as if we had almost built a small chapel for ourselves.

We truly have a new space at Sinai that serves us in a variety of ways. And now we plan to make that space even more beautiful. Temma Gentles, a textile artist from Toronto, is designing a tapestry for the lobby's concave wall. The tapestry will highlight the verse from the Book of Genesis where Jacob awakes after having spent a lonely night in the desert. The patriarch is running away from his brother, Esau; Jacob is worried and frightened. The setting is anything but exalted. Nevertheless, Jacob has an extraordinary dream, and when dawn arrives, Jacob exclaims, "Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it."

This is the verse which will be the focus of our tapestry. The verse will welcome people to the Temple because it speaks so beautifully about the way in which matters of faith sometimes surprise us. When we least expect it, sometimes we are touched by a sense of the holy.

Ordinary events can become extraordinary. God's presence is felt by those who might never imagine themselves to be religious.

Watch for the tapestry. It should arrive towards the end of May. Watch too for Jacob moments. Maybe you will be able to affirm, "Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it."

September 2004 – After Surgery

"I'm back at work." Who would ever think those four simple words could hold such meaning?

But they do for me this year as the High Holidays approach.

"I'm back at work" means that I survived. Since I am not prone to worry, I mostly assumed that the surgery to remove my brain tumor in June would go well. Then again, one never knows, and I am blessed and fortunate to have come through the ordeal successfully and without complications.

"I'm back at work" also means that I can now thank the many congregants who expressed their

concern in so many touching ways. The cards and notes and other unexpected gestures of affection truly meant the world to me. Honestly speaking, I was overwhelmed in a wonderful way. Opening the mail after I came home from the hospital became a powerful part of my day. You were there for me and I so much appreciate all that you did.

"I'm back at work" also means that I have had the opportunity to experience something else: many of you prayed for me; many people outside our own congregation also told me that I was in their prayers. And this mattered. The prayers didn't magically cure me, but the prayers and the general sense of spirit surrounding me did help me heal.

In fact, I wondered myself how I would want to pray in the hospital and I discovered (especially before the surgery) that the praying was natural and intense. When we meet on the holidays, I may want to tell you more about that, but for now the sweet news is I'm back to tell the tale.

I'm looking forward to a productive year for our congregation. I'm very happy to wish you all a sweet New Year. May we find many opportunities for healing ourselves and the very needy world in which we live. Shana Tova!

The prayers didn't magically cure me, but the prayers and the general sense of spirit surrounding me did help me heal.

January 1994 – Religion Ought To Disturb Us

At the end of November I gave the sermon at Springfield's Interfaith Thanksgiving Service. The event took place the night before the festivities of turkey which we all rightly love. The event also took place in Old First Church, which stands at Court Square precisely where so many of Springfield's homeless congregate.

That contrast between our comfort inside the church and the discomfort outside led me to wonder about the purpose of our religious service. I wondered how "religion" relates to the dilemmas we face in the "real" world.

What if religious services were just an escape from the realities of a brutal world? As William Blake suggests, it may be all too easy "to speak the laws of prudence to the homeless wanderer" and then rejoice in our own "tents of prosperity."

At the Thanksgiving Service, here is how I tried to define why being "religious" matters to me...

All religions are at their best when they disturb our comfort. It has to be that way because it is so easy to turn our backs on the world. We naturally want to carry on with business as usual. But prophetic religion fights that human impulse. We come to religious services to run up against Amos who says, "Let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream." Other times we read Isaiah because it stretches our souls. "This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness...to share your bread with the hungry...when you see the naked to clothe him..."

When we see the world through "religious" eyes, we visualize Abraham arguing for justice with God at Sodom and Gomorrah.

We fill our hearts with images of the very best humans can be so that sometimes, at least more often than might otherwise be the case, we can act at our very best.

Hillel put it best when he taught this message of religious conscience:

In a place where no one behaves like a proper human being, you must try to behave like a proper human being.

That sense of responsibility is what religion conveys. For it is all too easy to reduce Thanksgiving or Passover to family dinners a la Super Sunday. A powerful part of us wants to do that. We want to forget the outside world.

But another part of us, the part we nurture in our religious settings, resists that inclination.

It says it's not permissible to shut out the cold. In fact, our reveling in family and friends only has merit when we remember that just outside the door a world of pain requires our concern.

Good faith means never forgetting that other, colder, broken world. True religion means remembering to be better and to do better.

We fill our hearts with images of the very best humans can be.

April 2004 – Let Us Be Humble

The appearance of the movie, "The Passion," has occasioned more conversation between me and various congregants about Christianity and faith than I can ever recall.

At meetings and during informal encounters everyone over the last several weeks has wanted to talk about the film. As many of you know, I have shared my responses to the movie in several settings. But this month I would rather not address the movie once again. I would rather share with you a prayer that I wrote a few months ago for an interfaith service at the Catholic cathedral in Springfield. When "The Passion" makes us wonder about the differences between us and Christians, I think it's worthwhile to remember how far we have come in terms of interfaith dialogue during the last forty years. We have friends in the official Christian

world our ancestors could never have imagined. We have broken down barriers and begun to establish interfaith relationships that would amaze

previous generations of Jews.

Here, then, are the words I shared at the cathedral. I was asked to create a closing prayer for the service based on the citation from Micah – "What does the Lord requires of you – only to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God"

I wrote as follows –

Dear God –

Please don't give us strength. We don't need to be much bigger than we already are. Please don't make us smarter. We've probably got as much information as we need.

Just give us, or, at least, help us cultivate humility.

Help us stand in awe before Your universe - from the stars and galaxies all the way down to the human beings who populate this earth. Help us marvel at the variety of humanity. Help us marvel at all the different beliefs, different colors, different languages, different foods, and different ideas.

Make us humble so that we truly act as if our way is not the only way.

Make us humble so that we hear, see, and love the differences in our neighbors.

Let us be humble enough to love of all your creations. The rest will come easily after that.

We don't need to be much bigger than we already are.

November 2010 – I Got a Present

Someone gave me a wonderful present a few weeks ago. Or perhaps it wasn't so much a present for me as it turns out to have been a present for her adult child. Let me explain.

One of our congregants came to see me to talk about her son. He grew up here at Sinai, became a Bar Mitzvah here, and was confirmed. Life then moved along so that,

*The doors to Sinai
and Judaism are
always open.*

in his late 20's, our congregant's son married a woman where he lived in a small New England town. Together, they had a baby boy.

However, Mom didn't come to see me just to share the good news. Mom visited with me to share her concern about the Jewish future of her son and grandson because her daughter in law is not Jewish and their choice about religious identity for their family is not decided.

We had a long conversation, the details of which I won't share. What matters most is that I asked if it was OK for me to contact her son and talk. Permission granted. I made the call. Her son (my former student) and I talked. Again, the details of the conversation don't matter as much as what I was able to say at one point as the young man and I talked.

After we had discussed lots about life I commented, "Steven (fictional name), we don't need to come up with any decisions today. You don't need to do anything that you and Barbara (fictional name) don't have lots of time to consider. I just want you to know that if you want to talk more in one week or one year or three years I am here. I'm here for you forever because I am your rabbi for as long as you want a rabbi."

That was the gift to me!

I was able to let this Jewish boy who grew up at Sinai know that no matter where he was or how many years ago he was at Sinai I would be there for him. That was a gift because it allowed me to be someone's rabbi in a very sincere way. I think it may have been a gift to this young man because it allowed him to hear that the doors to Sinai and Judaism are always open. Once we form the bond, the bond stays.

Here's a final note: If this situation sounds at all familiar to you, give me a present. Get in touch, let's talk, let me be in touch with your child or you so that I can affirm our covenant: I am your rabbi and that's a commitment for life.

September 2011 – I Have a Dream

Every once in a while someone asks why I read Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" every Rosh Hashanah evening service.

You know the text, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream...we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. Let freedom ring from every mountainside...

*We read the words
because we haven't yet
fulfilled them.*

And when this happens, we will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

I read the words at the end of our opening New Year service as a perfect introduction to the prayer book's phrase from the prophet Zechariah, "On that day, o God, You shall be one and Your name shall be one."

The two texts fit together liturgically, poetically, and Jewishly because Dr. King's words were prophetic just like Zechariah's. Dr. King's words capture the spirit of hope that lies at the core of Judaism.

"But, Rabbi, why read the words year after year? We've heard the speech. We know it already."

Let me flip the question back at you. "Why read the Shema or any other prayer year after year? We know those words too. Why do we repeat them?"

Because we don't come together for services in order to gain information. We pray together in order to affirm our convictions and bolster our faith.

I don't read Dr. King's words annually because they are new. I read them because they are important and challenging. The words focus and inspire me.

And that's what we do in Jewish worship altogether. We challenge, focus, and inspire. We read old (and sometimes new) words because we haven't yet fulfilled them. We're still rehearsing. We're still working to fulfill the dream.

That's what happens on Rosh Hashanah. Actually, it's what happens at every service. I look forward to the journey as September arrives. I look forward to dreaming our best dreams as our New Year approaches.

September 1994 – Responding to Evil

First there was Bosnia with terrifying echoes of the Holocaust. And then came Rwanda where the rivers ran with blood.

As I write these lines early in the summer, it's difficult to know what other news may come our way. I suspect, however, that Bosnia and Rwanda will not be outdone. Their evil will continue to haunt us.

I think about the academic who wrote an influential article just after the Soviet Union collapsed. He predicted we were about to witness "the end of history." With the world's major instigator of unrest no longer a player, the idea was that history would be transformed. The world could anticipate a new and brighter era.

Tragically, the author was wrong. What we have seen instead, since the end of the USSR, is a glut of horror. What's worse, the violence has frequently been a one-on-one, person-to-person bloodletting.

It is enough to make one despair and lose faith in humanity.

Except that it is not where I find myself. For despite all the evil, I can't forget what was said about a rabbinic colleague when he retired at age 75. In an anthology of the rabbi's sermons stretching back to the 1940's, the editor pointed out that the rabbi had never given up. Through the disappointments and the setbacks that history regularly presents, the rabbi remained constant on one matter. In sermon after sermon, there was hope. There was the possibility of change.

In a sense that is also the great theme of the High Holidays. Of course, there are no guarantees. The very thought of finding myself in Kigali holding only a prayerbook terrifies me.

I shudder to imagine how my theology would hold up in Sarajevo.

Nevertheless, when I begin to lose faith, I remember that my colleague and all those who shaped Judaism over the centuries were not armchair theologians. They knew evil on a personal basis and still managed not to lose their bearings. Out of the depths, they resolved to dress the Torah in white and to wish each other a sweet year.

In a profound way, they were optimists.

And that knowledge gives me strength. I realize that as a Jew I'm not alone. Others have confronted and carried on through evil. Other Jews have been nourished by the ideals that give Judaism its incredible staying power.

I'm not naïve, then, if I still believe our gathering together has meaning. I'm not foolish for believing that our prayers and dreams are significant.

In some mysterious way it will matter when we see each other at the High Holidays. We are going to be touched by Judaism and, when it is all done, we will be the better for it.

God willing, our hope will be renewed. We will be ready for the year 5755!

December 1995 – To Sum It All Up

One of our Religious School teachers laughs with me sometimes. She says she can always predict what Torah verse I'll choose if I need to make a point. Apparently, experience teaches her that my text will come from Leviticus 19. Time and again, she has heard me say: "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor."

Come to think of it, she is right. If I had to cite my "top ten" Jewish quotes, that verse from Leviticus would go straight to the top. In fact, I don't even mind being predictable in my use of the verse. I would be tremendously gratified if everyone at Sinai could quote the verse by heart and feel as passionate as I do about the importance of the verse.

While I'm at it, however, there are several other Jewish texts I also adore. If I were designing Jewish T-shirts, I could imagine placing some of these insights front and center. They capture for me the wisdom and beauty of the Judaism I try to live.

From the Book of Deuteronomy, "Justice, justice, shall you pursue."

From the Book of Amos, "Let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

From the Book of Micah, "They shall beat their swords into plowshare and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall sit everyone under their vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid."

From Pirke Avot in the Mishnah. "The day is short and the task is great... You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it."

From the Mishnah again, "Whenever two people sit together and words of Torah pass between them, God's presence rests between them."

From Abraham Joshua Heschel, "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments."

From Elie Weisel, "What then are we humans? Hope turned to dust. But the opposite is equally true. What are we humans? Dust turned to hope."

And perhaps the most beautiful blessing we Jews recite also contains a wisdom worthy of repetition. "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, she-he-che-yanu who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this day."

Sometimes it's good to be predictable. If you hear me repeating myself, I'm probably doing so because I believe in what I say. I believe it so much I want to share it with you in every way possible.