We are Made in These Times

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

— Wendell Berry, Collected Poems

I am grateful to have returned a month ago from sabbatical to be with all of you, albeit in the same home office I had been in since mid-March when the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated this. I also share with many of you I have spoken with, the disorientation and challenge of our times, As a more extroverted and social person I find my wings clipped without interacting with you face to face as a community notwithstanding the blessing of being able to connect through various screens.

At the same time, what has been wonderful to see, out of these weeks turned months, is that so many of you have found the creativity and energy for offerings and ways of connecting in general and through Mishkan Shalom in particular. We continue to find our stride through on-line means, food drop-offs and safe “people-pods” of our choice. Community Pastoral Care, Torah for Our Times, Solo Tuesdays, Afternoon Healing Meditation, community gatherings as needed, rugelach baking sessions, on-line Tot Shabbat with animal puppet friends, and so much more along with the regular offerings, have emerged and will continue through the summer. Rabbi Yael and I, the High Holy Day team and Spiritual Life Council are already into planning our on-line High Holy Day offerings as our building remains closed until in tandem with health officials, we feel it is safe to return and a deep and ongoing cleaning is possible. I try to remind myself and everyone I speak with that we are not having “virtual” encounters- these are real experiences with each other through electronic means. All of this to support, engage and encourage our connections as a sacred and diverse community in the uncharted Covid-19 impacted times ahead.

Then came a series of killings by officers of African-Americans and the broad daylight execution of George Floyd--another in the four hundred years of public lynching and racist oppression black people have been subjected to in the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” For many of my black clergy (continued on the next page)
colleagues, friends and Mishkan members of color I have spoken with who have endured racism and micro-aggressions for a lifetime, the 8 minutes and 46 seconds watching the officer’s knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck was shattering on a whole other level, even as it horrified us all.

For those who are and benefit from being white, (and the majority of Ashkenazi heritage Jews are considered white in the U.S. and benefit from this, regardless of how those of us in this category see ourselves), a curtain of complacency or illusion of equity has been torn down. The oppression and the ensuing responses or lack thereof, are and will be televised!

We speak the names of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Sean Reed, Tony McDade, Jameek Lowery. As each of the lives of these African-American men and women have been erased in public murder or in the “safety” of their own homes, another unique soul has been torn from the fabric of the world by officers and individuals informed by white privilege and white supremacy.

Devastating grief needs space and individual pace. Listen deeply to each other without rationalizing or defending. Open into our own broken hearted-ness and determined hopefulness before each action-though we must act. Learn when good-willed attempts to do something without checking first misfire and do not ask to be made to feel okay by those most affected by ongoing trauma. Acknowledge and be with numbness, fears and internalized oppressions without shame and blame, and with each other’s support- move forward together.

The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b, states: “Whoever can protest for their household and does not, is accountable for their household; if they could protest to their townspeople, they are accountable; if they could protest to the whole world, they are accountable for the whole world.”

Protest will look different for each other. This is not a time, especially in the middle of a pandemic to judge or assess each other on what the form of protest and action looks like uniformly. Some of us with underlying conditions or who are responsible for young ones and/or elders need to find other forms of involvement or become more activated than we are used to. Those of us who are used to taking the lead might need to witness and support our young leaders or people of color up front. I’d like to share the words of one of our members, David Love, who sent this to me with permission to include here:

“This is a time both of tremendous fear, anxiety and uncertainty, but also of possibilities and transformation. On the one hand, I feel as if we are in the last days of the Weimar Republic in Germany in 1933. On the other hand, we are witnessing an awakening, a movement for justice we haven’t seen in this nation before. George Floyd was the catalyst, but this is about something more than Floyd and even more than police violence. We see multiracial coalitions and class solidarity building. We also see a frightening government response, blatant authoritarianism, and brute force to stop this new movement for justice.

This moment in time reflects years of failing to come to terms with racial injustice. But now that so many eyes are opening up, I believe it is a prime opportunity to confront Dr. King’s evil triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism. Black people always were and always will be on the front lines of this struggle, but I think it is time for white people to take the lead and reach their own white brothers and sisters. Black people have been the focal point of the police violence, but it is clear that they will not remain the only targets of violence.

The Jewish community can relate to this, and I’m reminded of the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller and his poem “First They Came...” which dealt with his criticism of the cowardice of German intellectuals and clergy for not speaking up during the rise of Hitler. I’m also reminded of King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail, where he took the moderate white clergy to task for preferring order to justice and wanting the civil rights movement to wait until a more convenient time to fight for freedom.

I think this is the time to put our ideals to work. It is the time to deal with white privilege and white supremacy and racism, but also the ways society wages economic and social violence against people. Even as we socially distance and organize simultaneously, we all need each other more than ever.”

Listen and Pay Attention,
Lift up the Ideals and the Visions We Long For,
We Are Here Together and We Need Each Other,
Keep Justice and Love- the Sacred at the Center

In this time of ongoing shattering, unrest, and uncertainty, we as a community, as we have many times before, look to one another for support and wisdom, to our Jewish and other traditions for guidance, and to all Earth. Rabbi Yael and I, Acts of Caring, the Community Pastoral team and our staff and leadership are here for you. We are here for each other. We are being made anew in these times.
Selected Resources to Explore White Supremacy, Privilege and Anti-Racism


JTA: [Black Jews respond to murder of George Floyd](https://www.jta.org/2020/06/01/black-jews-respond-to-murder-of-george-floyd)

**Confronting white supremacy as a Jewish community** by Jared Jackson, Philadelphia, Jewish African-American founder of “Jews in all Hues” - The Forward

Melanie Roth Gorelick from the Forward, "My Fellow Jews, Get in the Fight" - The Forward

**Jewish Prayer for Black Lives Matter** - Maria Pulzetti, (RitualWell.org)

JTA: [How White Jews can Support Black People Right Now](https://www.jta.org/2020/06/02/how-white-jews-can-support-black-people-right-now), Rev. Anthony A. Johnson

Statement of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Philadelphia clergy, including specific actions to take: [Interfaith Response to Murder of George Floyd: Letter of Solidarity and Commitment to Action](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org)

Eric Ward, Executive Director of Western States Center (an organization that works to strengthen inclusive democracy, so that all can live, love, worship and work free from fear). [Authoritarian State or Inclusive DecDemocracy: 21 Things We Can Do Right Now](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/21-things-we-can-do-right-now)

T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, has compiled a [variety of resources](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/resources).

Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia [Statement of commitment](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/statement-of-commitment)

Mishkan Shalom member Ali Michaels writes on “What Can White People DO?”

From Jillian Best, a child development expert, partner of Rabbi Jake Best Adler (RRC grad and our teen coordinator for a year). In this Facebook video, she discusses George Floyd and Black Lives Matter with their oldest.

The “Conscious Kid” (Parenting and Education through a Critical Race Lens) posts research on overt and covert white supremacy.

Irwin Keller, rabbi-to-be: “To Breath Free”

[Protest Prayer](https://ritualwell.org/prayer/protest-prayer) by April Baskin (RitualWell.org)

[Authentic Voices](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxdFj0bJvWw): Lauryn Whitney (YouTube video)

[I’m a Black Rabbi](https://www.forward.com/rabbis/01-black-rabbis-292290): Rabbi Sandra Lawson, The Forward

[Not Free to Desist](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/not-free-to-desist): Re-Imagining our Collective Jewish Covenant.

[12 Movies to Watch to Educate Yourself on Racism and Protest History](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/12-movies-to-watch-to-educate-yourself-on-racism-and-protest-history)

[Anti-Racism Resources List](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/anti-racism-resources)

[26 Ways to be in the Struggle Beyond the Streets](https://www.jewishprayerforblacklivesmatter.org/26-ways-to-be-in-the-struggle-beyond-the-streets)

[The 1619 Project](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/04/opinion/the-1619-project.html)

Support Black-led organizations and Black organizers in Philadelphia by donating to and amplifying their work.

- Black Lives Matter Philly
- Philly for REAL Justice
- Philadelphia Community Bail Fund
- Black Brown Workers Cooperative
- Youth Art Self Empowerment Project (YASP)

Interested in donating to bail funds across the country?

Here is an updated list of funds supporting organizers in the streets
Dear Friends,

In the wilderness of these times, I find it helpful to listen to stories of our ancestors and remember that our tradition grows from a wilderness journey. From the tales of those who came before us, some of what I hear:

**Listen and Pay Attention**
We will get lost. The wilderness is a place of uncertainty, a land unknown. The Israelites were taught again and again that in the times of not knowing – of not being able to see where to go – they had to stop, pay attention and listen. We need to do this as well. It is important to listen to our own hearts, souls and bodies and to the experiences of others, especially those among us who are hurting and in pain. Pausing and listening steadies our souls and calms the mind. It encourages our empathy and helps us discern where and how to go.

**Lift up the Ideals and the Visions We Long For**
As we are present with all that is broken it can be easy to become discouraged and disheartened. It is important to raise up our visions and hopes, to share good news, to notice moments of healing, to be encouraged by each other. Our ancestors lifted up a vision of a Promised Land. Let us raise up what we love and value and walk toward these visions with all our heart and souls.

**We Are Here Together and We Need Each Other**
Don’t try to do this journey alone, the tradition teaches. Even Moshe asked for help. And when he did, 70 elders and the Levite tribe stepped forward to help carry the burdens and discern the way. Let’s remember to ask for help, to offer help. This strengthens us all.

**Keep the Sacred at the Center**
In the wilderness, our ancestors carried the Mishkan with them. And wherever they camped, they placed the Mishkan at the center of the community. We too are called to carry the sacred with us wherever we go. To remember again and again the Life Force that flows through all, the Sacred Mystery that weaves us together. And to place this awareness at the center of our attention so the sacred is our guide.

I am so grateful for our Mishkan and for the many people who raise up and carry this community. I am grateful for what we nurture in each other and what we send out into the world. As time and circumstances call us, we will continue to be here for and with each other. As the wilderness beckons, we will continue the march with people from all over the country and world, walking together for love and justice, healing and peace.

Love and Blessings to all,
Rabbi Yael
Dear Community:

This past week as my wife Grace and I walked briskly at the back of the March for Racial Justice through Mt. Airy, I thought “I’ve got to catch up.” I don’t think I have ever been to a protest march that started on time, and I was behind! And all through the march, as we gradually caught up, and as I took in the signs, chants, and snippets of conversation, I could feel myself “catching up” to a movement that is growing and reshaping itself every day.

I thought about my knees as we knelt together on Germantown Avenue for eight minutes and forty-five seconds. As I got more and more uncomfortable, I thought about what human knees are really for. In our tradition there is a word-connection between a blessing (beracha) and a knee (berech), and thus we connect our knees to sacredness. During those moments on the pavement I had a visceral feeling of disgust at the way a human knee was used to extinguish George Floyd’s life.

As we are a multi-racial and multi-cultural Jewish community, some of us don’t need to “catch up” as I did. Members of our community who are people of color experience the daily reality that there is no safety for black and brown people from institutions steeped in a racist history or current reality, which includes all of our public institutions. Some of us experience the fact that “personal” racism takes on terrifying power when it is joined with an individual’s institutional power within the police, the courts, or in government.

But for those of us Jews who are identified as white, our response to racism is an open question. As a liberal community, I hope we do not congratulate ourselves too much on our progressive credentials or assume that racism is someone else’s problem or something that originated with the current administration in Washington. I know that many of us are considering what we can do, as Jews, and therefore as people committed to justice, as pain and violence swirl around us.

I believe that in this moment our whole Mishkan community can find a way to respond by reaching into the communal resources that have sustained the Jewish people in the face of oppression, of ourselves, and of our neighbors.

What is the most fundamental prayer in our tradition? Some would say, as our siddur confirms “below the line” that “the core of our worship is not a prayer at all, but a cry to our fellow-Jews and fellow-humans. In it we declare that God is one -- which is also to say that humanity is one, that life is one, that joys and sufferings are all one -- for God is the force that binds them all together. There is nothing obvious about this truth, for life as we experience it seems infinitely fragmented.” [Arthur Green]

And what does this fundamental prayer, the Shemah, require us to do? It is not to explain, to justify, or to equivocate: it requires us to begin by listening, to the voice of the divine. We would say that the same divine voice that roused us out of our mythical bondage in Egypt is the same voice calling out through people of color this very day. As Jews, it is our sacred obligation to listen to this voice, and after listening, to act.

And what are our central mitzvot, divine calls to connection? Some would say that pikuach nefesh, the preservation of life (literally, breath!) comes above all other demands on us. When people inside and outside our community say “I can’t breathe,” we have to listen, and then prepare to act.

Normally in this early-summer edition of Kol Shalom, we would focus on reviewing the rich set of future tasks, simkhot, and sorrows that make up our communal life. I would be writing to you about the summer community meetings and our work on our budgeting, our sustainability campaign, our plans for the religious school in the fall, and our strategic direction for the coming years. I would be writing about our common response to the ever-shifting pandemic. Be assured that teams of leaders, formal and informal, are focused on these tasks, and that information and opportunities for discussion will be available to everyone through electronic means.

But at this moment, in the midst of doing all that necessary work, I feel I should encourage us to listen, and to consider how we will not go back to a “normal” in which some of us can’t breathe.
Mishkan Shalom’s 2020 Yad L’Yad Recipients

On June 12, with joy and gratitude, we honored (via zoom) Jean Brody, Marc Jacobs & Abby Ruder with Mishkan Shalom’s Yad L’Yad Award, given to recognize those whose contributions and service to Mishkan Shalom have helped to make our community stronger, more vibrant and a better place.

The award, Yad L’Yad (“hand-to-hand”), is named for the image of hands grasping hands. Mishkan member and ceramic tile artist Karen Singer created the original tilework to place on Mishkan’s first Ark.

Jean Brody

At Mishkan, Jean realized, their family would not stand out.

“Lian is adopted and not the same race as we are. The other places we looked, particularly when I would look at the [Hebrew] schools, Lian might have been the only non-white kid…At Mishkan, I could see that families of every kind were welcome and were integral parts of the synagogue.”

That was 17 years ago. Jean would carpool on Saturdays, then sit in a circle with Lian on her lap, singing and listening to stories as part of Gabby’s Tot Shabbat. “That was a sweet way to start our interactions with Mishkan.”

It also provided the ramp to further involvement: first, helping with fundraising for the school, then co-chairing a fundraising committee for Mishkan as a whole. That work drew on her background as a professor of arts management; until her retirement in December, Jean ran the arts administration and museum leadership online graduate program at Drexel University.

“What was great was feeling that we were serving the community and helping to keep it healthy,” she says, though she also recalls the exasperation of community meetings in which projections of Mishkan’s growth seemed more wishful than realistic.

“This is the only way in which I’m ever conservative,” Jean laughs. “You can’t budget on faith. You budget on actual dollars. That was one of the frustrations: trying to apply management principles to a congregation.”

For several years, the auction was Mishkan’s big-ticket fundraiser, sometimes netting as much as $30,000. But the event was extremely labor-intensive, and interest began to flag. Jean and a few others dreamed up the Night of Many Dinners instead—a way to seize on the ever-popular auction items of home-cooked meals while skirting the work of a huge event.

Raised Reform in Teaneck, New Jersey, Jean co-chaired her synagogue’s youth group chapter and was active in Israeli dance troupes. As a Yale undergraduate, she helped found a Reform havurah.

She could read Hebrew—in her childhood congregation, not even the rabbi chanted Torah with trop—but only recently learned to leyn. Jean and two of her “Learn to Leyn” classmates, Jennifer Coburn and Lisagail Zeitlin, chanted from parasha Behar on May 16.

“It’s been nice to have study buddies,” Jean says of the trio. Learning trop, she says, “is like learning to crack the code—a thing that has been this sort of mystery.”

Though she’s been in regular Zoom contact with Mishkan friends through that study group and through Shabbat services, she misses the richness of in-person gatherings.

“I miss something simple like singing one of the prayers together and hearing everybody’s beautiful
voices. You cannot sing together on Zoom. Instead, you sing at home, and you hear yourself.’

While Philadelphians remain under stay-at-home orders, Jean is taking voice lessons, doing some consulting and planting vegetable seeds: tomatoes, peppers, cantaloupe, cilantro, carrots. ‘I’m going on socially distant walks with friends. We have enough food, I’m in the process of putting a garden in: things that make me feel very fortunate, in spite of everything.’

Marc Jacobs

Three members of Mishkan were going to speak, during a Friday night service, about their experiences surviving cancer. One of them was a friend of Marc’s. ‘She kept saying, ‘Come and listen to this. I think you’d fit in here. I think you’d like it.’’

Marc went. Then he began attending High Holiday services. Then, Shabbat morning services. Finally, he scheduled a meeting with Rabbi Brian Walt and said, ‘I think I want to join.’ But there was a caveat. ‘I was quite a believer in bootstrapping. I said, ‘I think I might be the most [politically] right of anybody in the congregation,’ and Brian said, ‘Well, that might be good for us.’’

As a child, Marc was raised with a “strong Jewish identity” but little observance; as an adult, he spent twelve years in the Catholic Church—even attending daily Mass—and later explored New Age beliefs and the spiritual program, A Course in Miracles.

“I think I was searching,” he says. “I have, all my life, had a belief in God. That has evolved, but it’s never gone away.” As an adolescent, he didn’t like the sense of being “different” as a Jew; later, watching the movie Cabaret and learning about the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics altered his sense of identity.

“Those two events said: You’re Jewish, whether you like it or not.”

Marc became one of Mishkan’s first greeters—a practice that grew from his own sense that we needed to do a better job of welcoming people as they arrived. He offered to help with the logistics of Yamim Noraim services, a role that morphed into what Marc jokingly calls “High Holiday schlub.” For six years, he served on the board as representative for spiritual life; for one year, he was the Board’s vice-chair.

Later, after a hiatus from that level of leadership, Marc rejoined the Board and agreed to take on the building as his portfolio—work that involved hustling for new tenants, negotiating with the C.B. Community School and recruiting committee members, including several younger, newer Mishkaners with expertise in building design, rental and management.

“I’m proud that those guys got involved,” Marc says. “Having people get involved to keep the thing going is a big part of legacy work.”

Marc also founded Men of Mishkan, which he describes as “a process group, not a traditional men’s club of going to ball games and playing golf or poker. It’s a group where men come to share their struggles with life, and their joys, to create what a brotherhood ought to be.”

And he was the first to reach out, in the early days of the pandemic, to create a Zoom Shabbat experience—initially, about 20 people fumbling their way through the technology and now a regular feature of Mishkan’s online offerings. In addition to those, and the men’s group meetings, Marc Zooms with the interfaith group every other week and joins Rabbi Yael’s Monday Torah study sessions.

When services were still happening in the sanctuary, Marc sometimes found himself davening in a rear row. “I’d think: How did I become the old guy in a tallis in the back of the synagogue? How did that happen? And I’m pleased. I found a place where I really felt that I could live the spirit that is in my heart and soul.”

Abby Ruder

When Abby attended Mishkan’s first Rosh Hashanah service—the venue was the Swarthmore Friends Meeting House—Rabbi Brian Walt invited congregants to raise their tallitot into a communal canopy during the Torah service.
Then he talked about Israel/Palestine and about growing up in South Africa during apartheid.

“I remember sitting there, weeping,” Abby recalls. “At the time, I was the mother of a two-year old child who is African-American. We were an inter-racial family with two women at the helm. I had never imagined that there would be a place where not only could we flourish, but where we could bring the gifts of our experience to the entire congregation.

“It’s not an overstatement to say I felt like I was coming home.”

Mishkan has been Abby’s spiritual home for the past 32 years—just a few years shy of half her life, she points out. Raised in a Conservative family, strongly rooted in both Jewish life and social justice, Abby initially came to Philadelphia to become a rabbi. But after two years at what was then the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, she left, frustrated with the lack of interest in feminist perspectives on Judaism.

“Ellen [Tichenor] and I got together soon after that. I became a stepmother to Ellen’s children. About eight years later, when Eliza came home, I said, ‘We don’t have a community to raise her in.’ Then I found out about Mishkan.”

In those first years, Abby gave her energy to the school, helping rewrite curricula to be more multi-racial. She proposed a revision to the Statement of Principles—that specifically named Jews of color as a group to be welcomed and embraced at Mishkan.

Another high point was Eliza’s bat mitzvah and the back yard mikveh that preceded it—Eliza’s request, as part of affirming her Judaism. She and Abby studied together, and both read from parasha Bereshit on the day of her service.

Abby served on the transition committee when Rabbi Brian left; she was on the Board for five years and co-president along with Rod MacNeil. A 2008 trip to Israel/Palestine with Rabbis for Human Rights became a life-shifting experience—one that led Abby, Ellen and a few other congregants who’d traveled with them to create a presentation about what they’d witnessed. “My sense of being Jewish in terms of my connection to Israel was really torn apart,” Abby recalls.

Mishkan, she says, has taught her about acts of tikkun olam in the larger world and about the power of caring within the community. During and after surgeries and illnesses, and following the deaths of dear friends and longtime Mishkan members Libby Harmon and Gene Bishop, Abby witnessed the power of deep connection throughout the life cycle.

She has served on the Spiritual Council for the past seven years; lately, during Rabbi Shawn’s sabbatical and then, through the pandemic, she’s helped lead the new pastoral care group, a team of twelve that, early in the quarantine, called every member household to check in. That support is the essence of Mishkan, she says.

“At Mishkan, we greet people, we welcome people, we comfort people, we inspire each other; we act for justice, we join with other faith communities and our neighbors. We create connection—our best medicine, especially these days. I do think we really make a difference.”
Engaging with the Wisdom, Reflections and Insights of Mishkan's Young Adults

Isaiah Weekes and Joel Simon
Kol Hakavod and mazal tov!

I. Isaiah Weekes, Age 16 - Confirmation Speech
Shabbat, May 23, 2020

This place is like a home to me, except different from a home. It is a Mishkan, a sanctuary. It’s a place where I’ve always felt comfortable, welcomed, curious, and trusted to be a valued member of the community. It didn’t matter if I was six or sixteen. My questions were always answered, and my opinions were always heard. I remember constantly raising my hand in class, assembly, and services. The rabbis and teachers always were genuinely receptive to my responses. My words were a springboard for conversation to arise and ideas to be challenged. And it wasn’t just my words, it was everyone’s words. I always loved how our community has valued its youngest members and seen them as teachers as much as any adult member of our community.

I’ve been really fortunate to be in learning environments where, as a child, I’ve been allowed to be a leader, a teacher, a clown, and a friend. Although I’ve been to preschool, elementary school, middle school, and now high school, Mishkan is the place where I’ve been the longest. Over ten years of my life have been lived at Mishkan. I have gained so much from the community that has allowed me to learn in the way that I learn best...being allowed to ask lots of challenging questions, explore my own areas of interests, and work both individually and collaboratively. I truly appreciated all the ways the teachers engaged us...through music, stories, theater, games, debate and discussion. Just like the Torah that we read every year, the stories and holidays were revisited with greater depth and nuance the older I got. We were encouraged and expected to face more difficult, real-life issues and allowed to have our own opinions about them. We were able to agree to disagree in kind and respectful ways. We were shown kindness and consideration and learned to show that to others, no matter what their point of view or belief.

At Mishkan, we also learned to “walk the walk,” not just “talk the talk.” Like my namesake, the prophet Isaiah talks about, we live our Jewish values through our actions. Every year, the entire congregational school participated in the Mishkanathon, taking care of our natural environment. We would make sandwiches for people and families at the shelter. I remember when we used to house homeless families and the classes would help the families feel at home by making welcome baskets, providing meals, or hanging out with them. Although all of these acts seemed like a normal part of my growing up, I recognize that this is not the way every child is raised, or every community operates. I credit the consistent practice of these Jewish values with my own willingness to help in other communities I am part of. It’s really second nature for me.

Since becoming a Bar Mitzvah over two years ago, I’ve had a different feeling about my role in the Mishkan community. As a younger child, coming to Mishkan was a part of our family’s routine. I didn’t see it as a choice...it was just something my mom, my brother, and I did. But since becoming a Bar Mitzvah, being a part of this community is my choice. It’s been easy to make the choice to stay involved because of all the values and practices that were part of the Mishkan culture when I was younger. Those values and practices have shaped me. Being part of a community feels easy; it feels good. Being acknowledged as a valuable member of a community, regardless of age or position, feels good. Being asked to step up as a leader at times, feels good. I cannot think of a better way to live a life. Those things that are good - good for me, for you, and for all of us - also feel good. I feel at home in all of these roles. I feel at home as a member of this community. I feel at home at Mishkan Shalom. Thank you.
Shalom! (Pause). I have literally written my dvar Torah THREE times since I started in October. Our world has changed so often, it feels like we are flipped in a different direction every two days between the global pandemic and racial and societal upheaval. Luckily, my family has been safe and healthy, and relatively privileged, but watching the world rock from side to side from the back row is dizzying and feels apocalyptic. Through these times of turbulence and confusion, we need to stay hopeful.

The name of my parsha that I just read from is from the book of Numbers or Bamidbar and is named Beha’alotcha- or “when you go or rise up”. We see all around us Black and Brown and White Americans, Jews of all colors all doing just this in our time. In this same parsha, is a healing blessing that we say today: “Ana El nah, refah na”. Please God heal us now!

WOW- who would have imagined that something from thousands of years ago would be the same prayer we need so badly now! Rising up together against injustice and bringing healing are both needed- just as they are in my parsha.

Many things today need justice and healing. Everyone’s lives have screeched to a stop without any warning. Our entire society has been turned upside down. All of the areas that make up our world today have been affected- the economy, peoples’ mental and physical health, our police and justice systems. The murder in broad daylight of George Floyd as the most recent death of African Americans at the hands of the police has brought long-standing racial inequity in our country to the forefront.

The pandemic exposed problems we have had for so long. Now people can think about these problems and act on them because they have time, since they have got no work to do and nowhere to go. The economy has been heavily affected by these crazy times, as this has been the worst economic situation America has faced since the Great Depression. We humans were made for interaction, so this is very difficult for some of us social people, even though many have braved these restrictions to stand together in Philadelphia and across the world in socially safe (or not so safe) distance to press for racial justice and an end to white supremacy and privilege.

There were many different things in my parsha that I found interesting and that we all can relate to in these chaotic times.

At the very beginning of my parsha, it begins with all the people at the front of their tents crying for meat. They all were complaining about their food supply, and how they had things better in Egypt- even though they were slaves! Just like our ancestors, we are all in this together feeling the effects of the virus and of the recent unrest. Just like in this parsha people were suffering and needed help with food and shelter- and the Torah shares that God did respond. For us today, though it may feel like we are helpless and pulled by the strings of our local situations and various governments. Some of you today may be living alone- we are all still together across the world figuring out not only how to deal with the pandemic, but how to survive into the future in a better way- with wisdom and action from everyone!

The Torah has something to say about this as well. Moshe/Moses brings 70 elders together under the Mishkan or Tabernacle, they have a spiritual awakening or experience of the Mystery. Moshe knows that to make it through the challenges ahead, we need wisdom now from as many people as possible. Then these two dudes Eldad and Medad also start prophesying and Joshua gets nervous and runs back to Moshe and tells him.

Moshe responds by saying “Would that all my people be prophets!” This means to me that Moshe doesn’t have his heart set on being the only leader...
or the only person that God talks to and that each of us has access to the Mystery. Now more than ever we need each other’s wisdom and help, to avoid saying reckless things that can endanger everyone. There isn’t only one leader or group doing their part, it’s all of us.

God comes down on a cloud in the Tabernacle where Moshe and 70 elders meet. God says that he will supply everyone in the tribe with meat for a month. Moshe finds this claim impossible, and challenges God with a “If all the fish in the sea were to be gathered together, would it suffice them?” God manages to pull through and provide food, but one thing I found interesting was that Moshe had the audacity to challenge God. Most of us would never dare, but Moshe just does it, just as he pushed back against the Egyptians and even God before. It shows that Moshe is a brave man but is also confident in his place and answers.

It also shows to me that our tradition invites us to challenge authority when we feel wrong is happening. I’m sure all of us have questioned decisions made by our leaders. Most recently, I have questioned our president’s decision of deploying our National Guard on citizens. I know that our police departments need to change, and I wonder how we can make changes now for our future. Now, as an adult in the Jewish community, it is my responsibility to help make these changes happen. I know I have a lot to learn, but so do we all.

My question that I’d like you to respond to: “What has this pandemic and the additional racial turbulence in our country shown you about how you live your life? What are some things you are surprisingly grateful for? What are some things you’re glad you feel obligated to do more of now?”

With sadness and a longing for camp, we are letting you know that our Weekend in the Woods has been cancelled. Due to covid19, Camp JRF will not be able to host us the weekend of June 5-7.

Normally you would have been hearing from us talking about the fun we plan to have, hoping to tempt some of you into trying this for the first time, or to come back home to camp, after an absence of a year or several. We’d also be reminding the regulars to put in their registrations, and to start packing for our favorite weekend of the year.

The committee is continuing to meet to figure out ways that we can capture that special feeling with our community before next summer. We welcome your ideas as well.

Please reach out to us via email at Mishkanweekendinthewoods@gmail.com

-- Lisa Moss and the entire WITW committee
B’nai Mitzvah

Joel Simon
June 13

When Joel first read his parasha, he had no idea how relevant it would become.

Beha’alotecha (Num. 8:1-12:16) chronicles what happened after the flight from Egypt. “At the beginning, all the people in front of their tents are crying for meat. All they got to eat was manna, every day, three meals a day, for a bunch of years.

“Moshe...gets really stressed out and frustrated with the people. Moshe goes to God for help: ‘What am I supposed to do with these people? Am I their father? Are they all mine? Why can’t other people help me?’

“God also hears their complaints and gets very angry at them. God gives those 600,000 people meat to eat. The people are excited, but as soon as they bite into the meat, God strikes up a terrible plague, and they die with the meat still in their mouths.”

It wasn’t only the plague that struck Joel as ironic—and resonant—as he and his family planned for a bar mitzvah service in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic; it was also the way Israelites despaired about their circumstances.

Before COVID-19, Joel says, people may have longed for uninterrupted hours at home. “Now, all they’re doing is being stuck at home, and that’s the thing they’re complaining about.”

Joel’s been part of Mishkan ever since landing, as a 1st-grader, in a 2nd-grade Hebrew School class. He remembers reading Jewish books with Gabby, sampling apples and honey each Rosh Hashana and getting his hands dirty in the annual Mishkanathon.

“My family isn’t super-religious, but everyone had a bar or bat mitzvah,” Joel says, and he knew he would be next in line. “I’m normally a fast learner, and languages are my strong point. I was nervous and excited for the experience of it all.”

Once he began working with a tutor, he learned Hebrew quickly, but the trop—some of it intricate, with multiple notes attached to a single word—took longer to grasp.

Stay-at-home orders not only altered plans for his bar mitzvah service—it will be a “Zoomitzvah,” live-streamed from home with just immediate family present and Rabbi Shawn officiating from his house—but also up-ended his tikkun olam project. Last year, Joel volunteered with the Challenger Division of Little League, a team for kids with special needs, and he hoped to reprise that or volunteer with the Special Olympics. Both events are in limbo for now.

In early May, Joel’s days consisted of a few hours of school work (he’s a 7th-grader at Bala Cynwyd Middle School)—perhaps an online game about how ecosystems revive after natural disasters, or a dynamic class led by his history teacher.

Joel fills the rest of his time with video games, playing outdoors with his “quarantine buddies,” the kids in three families who live on the block, and cooking—crepes, red lentil pasta (“it kind of tasted like sand”) and cookies.

“I feel like I’ve learned to be more grateful for things I didn’t normally pay attention to, like family.” Each night after dinner, they hang out for an hour: playing games, talking or watching a comedy special. “This time has brought us all together,” he says.

Joel’s parasha offers one more lesson that seems pertinent. “Two people start prophesizing in the camp after God comes down to speak with Moses. Moses wants everyone to be a part, for everyone to have access to God. We can all use that. We can all be a divine presence at this time.”
B'nai Mitzvah

Eddie Simon
June 20

In *parasha Sh’lach* (Num. 13:1-15:41), when ten of the twelve spies sent out to assess the land of Canaan return with grim news—the country “devours its settlers” and the inhabitants are the size of giants—Eddie could relate to their disappointment, anxiety and fear.

His family would have spent spring break on a road trip to New England, ticking three more states (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine) off Eddie’s goal of visiting all 50. But COVID-19 squashed those plans; living through a pandemic means living with uncertainty.

“How do I stay positive when I’m afraid or nervous?” he says. “Like the quarantine thing…what do I do to make myself happy? I play video games. I sometimes have game nights with my mom and dad. Currently, for my birthday, we’re converting one part of the basement into a mini movie theater.

“Sometimes I just go outside and get some fresh air on my deck and stand there and just look.”

Eddie started Hebrew School at Mishkan in 4th grade, when his family moved to Roxborough. He loved his first teacher, Julia Weeke—‘she let us make up our own names,” he recalls—as well as hooogim (electives) in gaga and cooking.

“I remember we made matzah pizza and chocolate matzah,” he recalls. Now he brings some of those skills home, helping his parents make brownies or spread the sauce and cheese over homemade pizza. He’s become even more involved in the kitchen during this stay-at-home stretch. “Food is one of my favorite things in the world,” he says.

That’s why, for his tikkun olam project, Eddie wanted to raise money for World Central Kitchen, the organization launched by chef José Andrés to foster creative solutions to poverty and hunger, especially in the wake of natural disasters, and to “change the world through the power of food.” Through Facebook and e-mail, Eddie will invite donations from family members and friends.

Eddie plays piano and loves synthesized music; during *bar mitzvah* tutoring sessions, Cantor David Acker would break the *parasha* into parts and show him the musical notes for each trop sequence.

He felt nervous when he thought about chanting *Torah* in a sanctuary full of relatives and friends—“I’m the kind of guy who, any time I stand up in front of a bunch of people, that’s when all my anxiety comes in”—so he was relieved to settle, instead, on plans for a “Zoomitzvah” live-streamed from his family’s living room, with relatives tuning in from New Jersey, New York, Maryland and California.

“Two things make a virtual *bar mitzvah* better,” Eddie says. “There can be many people there. And having it at home.”

Meantime, he’s finishing 7th grade at Cook-Wissahickon School—favorite subjects are gym, art and science—having occasional socially-distant visits with friends and hoping, once stay-at-home orders lift and travel is safe, for a family trip to Disney World.

On the day of his *bar mitzvah*, he’ll pose a question to congregants—a question relevant to the anxious Israelites of *parasha Sh’lach* and to our pandemic-roiled selves. “In times of uncertainty, when you’re scared or nervous, how do you stay positive?”

In *parasha Sh’lach* (Num. 13:1-15:41), when ten of the twelve spies sent out to assess the land of Canaan return with grim news—the country “devours its settlers” and the inhabitants are the size of giants—Eddie could relate to their disappointment, anxiety and fear.

His family would have spent spring break on a road trip to New England, ticking three more states (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine) off Eddie’s goal of visiting all 50. But COVID-19 squashed those plans; living through a pandemic means living with uncertainty.

“How do I stay positive when I’m afraid or nervous?” he says. “Like the quarantine thing…what do I do to make myself happy? I play video games. I sometimes have game nights with my mom and dad. Currently, for my birthday, we’re converting one part of the basement into a mini movie theater.

“Sometimes I just go outside and get some fresh air on my deck and stand there and just look.”

Eddie started Hebrew School at Mishkan in 4th grade, when his family moved to Roxborough. He loved his first teacher, Julia Weeke—’she let us make up our own names,” he recalls—as well as hooogim (electives) in gaga and cooking.

“I remember we made matzah pizza and chocolate matzah,” he recalls. Now he brings some of those skills home, helping his parents make brownies or spread the sauce and cheese over homemade pizza. He’s become even more involved in the kitchen during this stay-at-home stretch. “Food is one of my favorite things in the world,” he says.

That’s why, for his tikkun olam project, Eddie wanted to raise money for World Central Kitchen, the organization launched by chef José Andrés to foster creative solutions to poverty and hunger, especially in the wake of natural disasters, and to “change the world through the power of food.” Through Facebook and e-mail, Eddie will invite donations from family members and friends.

Eddie plays piano and loves synthesized music; during *bar mitzvah* tutoring sessions, Cantor David Acker would break the *parasha* into parts and show him the musical notes for each trop sequence.

He felt nervous when he thought about chanting *Torah* in a sanctuary full of relatives and friends—“I’m the kind of guy who, any time I stand up in front of a bunch of people, that’s when all my anxiety comes in”—so he was relieved to settle, instead, on plans for a “Zoomitzvah” live-streamed from his family’s living room, with relatives tuning in from New Jersey, New York, Maryland and California.

“Two things make a virtual *bar mitzvah* better,” Eddie says. “There can be many people there. And having it at home.”

Meantime, he’s finishing 7th grade at Cook-Wissahickon School—favorite subjects are gym, art and science—having occasional socially-distant visits with friends and hoping, once stay-at-home orders lift and travel is safe, for a family trip to Disney World.

On the day of his *bar mitzvah*, he’ll pose a question to congregants—a question relevant to the anxious Israelites of *parasha Sh’lach* and to our pandemic-roiled selves. “In times of uncertainty, when you’re scared or nervous, how do you stay positive?”
Ben Fernandez-Sheinbaum
July 18

Here’s how the cycle of revenge works, on the microcosmic plane of middle school: Someone gets mad, so he punches another kid in the arm. The kid who got hit punches back. The first kid swings again. And so on, in what Ben calls a “payback loop.”

That’s what he thought of when contemplating his parasha, Matot-Masei (Num. 30:2-36:13), in which the Israelites wreak vengeance on the Midianites, slaughtering their kings, stealing their animals and burning their towns.

“I’m focusing on how revenge can feel good in the moment but doesn’t really resolve anything,” Ben says. “The Israelites took revenge on the Midianites. It took them away from God and Torah.”

Whether the parties in conflict are individuals or nations, Ben’s counsel would be to “talk it out. Try not to resolve it by doing the same violent thing back.”

Ben’s been part of Mishkan since Tot Shabbat; he has clear memories of drinking grape juice, eating challah and singing with Gabby on Saturday mornings. But when he began to think about a bar mitzvah, he felt nervous. “I thought it was a lot to learn in such a short period of time.”

Working with Rivka Jarosh, though, Ben learned to break down each verse into trop families, then record the sequences on his phone for practice. “Once I learned most of the trop, it was easy because I recognized the symbols.”

His project was a clearer call: Ben’s devoted to the family’s dog, Kiwi, a mixed-breed rescue who was nine months old when they adopted her last August. “I want to try to start up a community dog park in my area [of Germantown], because a lot of people on my street have dogs and the nearest dog park is pretty far away.”

Ben has his eye on a large, vacant field near his house, where the back area could be fenced. He plans to e-mail the Pomona Cherokee Civic Council, the local neighborhood association, to propose the project and set up a meeting.

The months leading up to Ben’s bar mitzvah brought disappointments—a scotched school trip to Guatemala, the cancellation of all his summer camps—along with chances for self-sufficiency. Finishing 7th grade online at Independence Charter School, he says, meant more freedom to design his own schedule. “My parents both had to work during that time, so I had to sometimes make my own lunch.”

He also learned to use power tools to help with a back yard renovation; they’re expanding the patio and building a fire pit. When he anticipates the day of his bar mitzvah, a Zoom service with a still-in-the-planning-stages celebration, Ben imagines his relief when the chanting is finished, “and I can feel like I’ve finally done it and can relax.

“I definitely have learned more about the Torah. Before I thought it was just that scroll, but I didn’t know what it meant. Now I know the deeper meaning, how it tells so many stories.”
February 18 to May 31, 2020

Todah Rabah to all our contributors

General Donations

---

Kol Shalom is published monthly, September through June.
Editor: Eilen Levinson
Layout: Maralin Blistein
Distribution: Maria Paranzino

Contributors include:
David Calloway, Steve Jones,
Eilen Levinson, Yael Levy,
Maria Paranzino, Stephanie Shell,
Gari Weilbacher,
Arielle Weiss and Shawn Zevit

Email articles by the 15th of each month
to levinson@yahoo.com

---