



# Bulletin

## Rabbi's Message

by Rabbi Sam Gordon

In the D'var Torah for her March 1st Bat Mitzvah, congregant Melanie Samuels spoke about how powerful it was for her to realize that on that same Shabbat, in services throughout the world, the same Torah portion was being read. Every oth-

*“The narrative is largely the same, but the way in which we tell the story is always different.”*

er child celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah on that date was reading the portion, *Vayakheil*, from Exodus 35. She felt the incredible power of being connected to others her same age in synagogues that morning from Moscow to Jerusalem to Buenos Aires, Paris, and Chicago.

Melanie also recognized that, while each of those young people would be reading the very same verses from the Torah, each one would also offer a unique interpretation of the reading. The Torah would be the same, but each D'var Torah would be unique. No two people would understand the Torah reading in the same way.

In thinking about this insightful truth, I also began to think about this issue from a more personal perspective. Over nearly 30 years of being a rabbi and a teacher I have read the same Torah portions each year, yet my own interpretations have also changed each time I delved into the text. The Torah never changes, but I do. I see the text in a new light and with fresh eyes each time I study it. I am reminded

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## *My Journey*

I will observe my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. Looking backwards, can I discern a path? I believe I can. I also believe I can see how that path has led me here, a new convert, to Sukkat Shalom. At our first meeting two years ago, Rabbi Gordon remarked, “You will be joining not only a religion, but also a people.” “That,” I said, “is exactly what I want to do.”



For many years I understood myself to be most deeply defined by religious faith. My father was an American Baptist minister -- an Italian immigrant who had learned to read when he was 19 years old, fought in the American army in World War I, converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, gone to college and then to divinity school. My mother had grown up in a relatively prosperous family in upstate New York and, as a missionary working with Italian immigrants, had been his English teacher. When, as an adult, I asked about their courtship, he told me, “Your mother? I fell in love with her faith.”

*“I had no contact with Jews or Judaism, aside from writing a paper in eighth grade on what Jews believed.”*

I was an only child, born when she was 48 years old. My parents' strongest dream for me was that I become “a fine Christian woman.” I did try. I worked hard to make personal sense of this faith that my father embraced so completely and that was my mother's sole sustenance. Only as an adolescent did I

realize that what for me was metaphor, for them was real. I knew then who I was not -- and what I could never be.

My father was initially a missionary pastor to an immigrant Italian community in Newark, New Jersey. When I was 12, we moved to an English-speaking congregation in a rural community -- part of the town of Hanover, New Hampshire. The move was my great good fortune. The schools were excellent, since Hanover is the town not only of Dartmouth College but also of the Dartmouth Medical Center.

Unlike my rural classmates, I had no cows to milk and no hay to throw from the loft to the cattle below. I had time on my hands -- and access to the Baker Library at Dartmouth. I read voraciously, often with questionable understanding. Emerson and Thoreau made me a Transcendentalist; Kierkegaard made me an existentialist. Martin Buber's *I and Thou* touched something else. Maybe I did not even know he was a Jew. I had no contact with Jews or Judaism, aside from writing a paper in eighth grade on what Jews believed.

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## My Journey, cont'd

In my world, one could not be without at least an external association with a religious tradition. But, for me, nothing felt right. In college I worked first with the Quakers and, by the time I was a junior, decided that Buddhism made sense. I considered a life in which I would learn Japanese and translate Japanese poetry. The closest I came was in my marriage to a Korean student whose Zen inscrutability, I discovered, was not that at all; it was simply his poor English. However, the birth of our son changed everything. No text could begin to compete with the urgency and excitement he brought with him. My years of religious and philosophical exploration took a different turn.

We were living in Chicago by then and I had begun to teach English at Von Steuben High School.

The school in Albany Park was largely Jewish and noted for its academic rigor. The atmosphere was intense emotionally, as well. I had, by then, met Jewish people, but it was not until I became engaged with these Von Steuben adolescents and the predominantly Jewish faculty that I began to sense a culture and a people. I went to a *shiva*, then a *bris*. I ate dinner and prayed in a *sukkah*. I shared Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. I taught a unit on law and civil disobedience and one of the two rabbis on the faculty provided me with books on *halakah* (Jewish law). I felt embraced by this community. Only recently have I become familiar with the Torah's teaching regarding the treatment of "the Stranger

in your midst."  
I was a lucky  
Stranger.

*"I was accepted as I am --  
doubts, disbelief and all."*

Eight years ago a chavura, organized by friends at Congregation KAM Isaiah Israel in Hyde Park, invited me to join them. I did so. Like the Jewish community at Von Steuben, the remarkable members of this chavura have been generous teachers and supportive friends. I found that, although I no longer define myself as a person of faith in the traditional sense, I was accepted as I am -- doubts, disbelief and all. I had close Jewish friends and I became aware that, internally, I had long considered myself Jewish.

Years ago one of these friends had casually offered to find me a rabbi whenever I decided to convert. I tucked that thought away. "Just the rabbi for you!" he said, excited when I did finally call. And so I came to find Rabbi Gordon and Judy Buckman and so many other welcoming friends at Sukkat Shalom. When I entered the *mikvah*, Rabbi Gordon's voice led me in the prayers. Cantor Abramson sang for me from the Book of Ruth. *Amech, ammi*: "Your people shall be my people." I gained a Hebrew name -- Talia, meaning "dew" -- given by a friend. It was a week before Shavuot -- the week when the Book of Ruth is read; the holiday

that celebrates the offering of the first fruits and the giving of the Torah. On a Friday evening almost a year ago I stood before this congregation and proudly declared: I am a Jew.



My current husband and I have been married for almost 40 years. He has dementia and has been in an assisted living facility for the past two years. I am pleased that he seems to understand and approve of the decision I have made. An amused nurse called me about six months ago to tell me that he was refusing to eat unless they brought him a *kipah*! Our children, as well, are happy for my choice. Months before my formal conversion, my son and his wife brought me a gift from the Jewish Museum in Prague -- a delicate, antique *hannukiah*. I wonder whose it was. I feel humbled by its presence.

"Amech, ammi," said Ruth to Naomi. And so it is.

### Rabbi's Message cont'd

that I change and mature. I can never see the story in the same way twice.

The Torah allows us to do this. I suppose if we go back and read the books of our high school years, The Great Gatsby, Moby Dick, All the King's Men and so forth, we would quickly discover that we would have new insights and understandings. We have aged and gained new experiences, and so our outlook on life has changed.

My three-year fellowship at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem is providing me with the opportunity to engage in serious study of Torah, Rabbinic texts, Modern Hebrew literature, and philosophy. Much of this material I have learned before, but with new teachers and some new colleagues, I am reading these great books in new and surprising ways. It is a challenging and stimulating endeavor. I have been trying to share some of those new understandings with you, whether in Family School or at Friday night Shabbat services.

As we celebrate Passover we can also appreciate that on that night, in households throughout the world, the Seder meal is being shared, and the Haggadah is being read. The narrative is largely the same, but the way in which we tell the story is always different. The people at our tables also often change. No two Seder observances are alike, whether in different homes or in different times. I suggest that you take a moment to reflect on the changes another year has brought and ask participants what new insights they bring to the ancient story and ceremony.

May this season of spring be one of blessing.

## My Mitzvah Project: Pop Tops for Sick Tots

Both my mitzvah project and my Torah portion taught me that when we work together and give as a community, we can make a difference and great things can happen. But you can't just give. You have to give with a true heart. The Hebrew word *hesed* means kindness. *Gimilut hasadim* are acts of lovingkindness. It is our responsibility as Jewish people to engage in *gimilut hasadim*.

The Ronald McDonald House is a charitable organization that provides a temporary home for families while their children get medical treatment for serious diseases far from home. But the Ronald McDonald House cannot do it alone. They need help from people like us. While also accepting cash donations, they accept soda pop-tops. For my Bat Mitzvah project, I collected pop-tops for the Ronald McDonald House.

Ronald McDonald House sends the pop-tops they receive to United Scrap Metal, which pays a certain amount of money per top. They use the money for things needed to keep the houses running. Last year, they raised \$40,000 from pop-top collections!

I chose this mitzvah project because everyone can participate: old, young and in-between. Everyone drinks soda -- or knows someone who does. Offices, schools and other places can help. And, for me, they did. We collected thousands of pop-tops!

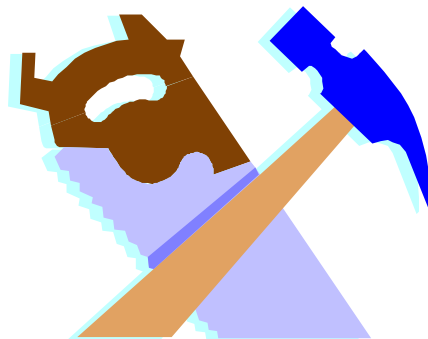
I was lucky to be able to visit the Ronald McDonald House near Children's Memorial Hospital and prepare dinner for the families staying there. I paid for all of the food using the money that I earned from babysitting. It was a wonderful experience and I learned a lot.

I have learned that I must do these things because I truly care and truly want to help. Though giving and helping are important, I want to make sure I am doing them with a true and kind heart.

# Tikkun Olam: Repair the World

## High Schoolers Needed for Summer Tzedakah Project

First Congregational Church of Wilmette (FCCW) has had a mission relationship with the people of Edisto Island, South Carolina since the summer of 1986, when its high school youth group traveled to the island to repair homes. Since then, adults and youth from FCCW have gone to Edisto on spring break or summer trips to repair homes, offer a day camp for island children, and learn more about the culture of its people who trace their ancestry to the Geechee/Gullah heritage.



Edisto is a sea island off the coast of Charleston that lies in a protected river basin. There has been little vacation or golf development compared to other local islands. Edisto remains distinctly segregated with a largely rural and impoverished population. Island residents and churches formed the Edisto Island Outreach Center to assist residents with home repair, health care, job and literacy training and legal assistance.

Young people from FCCW are traveling to the island from July 25-August 2, 2008 to offer a day camp for local children. High school members of Sukkat Shalom are invited to join this project. If you are interested, please contact Jane Rothschild of Sukkat Shalom or Reverend Stephanie Perdew of FCCW at (847) 251-6660, ext. 11 or [sperdew@fccw.org](mailto:sperdew@fccw.org).

## April 27th Social Action Day to Feature Prominent Jewish Thinkers

Two preeminent Jewish scholars will discuss the connection between Jewish thought and social justice when they appear as keynote speakers during a conference on social action on April 27<sup>th</sup> in Highland Park.

Addresses by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, widely regarded as one of the most creative religious writers in America, and Rabbi David Saperstein, Director and Counsel for the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, will bookend the Chicago area Consultation on Conscience, "Moving from Ideas to Action." The event will be from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Lakeside Congregation for Reform Judaism, 1221 County Line Road in Highland Park.

Between their talks, participants will discuss, share and learn how they can engage themselves and their congregations in education and advocacy around divestment, socially conscious consumerism, health care, gun control and improving Jewish-Muslim relations. A broad spectrum of experts will lead the hour-long workshops.

The day's activities will be open to congregants from any of the 60 local URJ affiliated member congregations, including Sukkat Shalom. It is coordinated by the Union for Reform Judaism-Great Lakes Council.

For more information, contact Claire Pensyl of Sukkat Shalom's Social Justice Committee: [pensyl@bellpensyl.com](mailto:pensyl@bellpensyl.com).

# Social Justice Committee Planning Speakers Series

Congregation Sukkat Shalom's Social Justice Committee is planning a series of speakers for the 2008-2009 year to explore topics affecting domestic policies, international events and the future of Israel. The Committee is reaching out to the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, the American Jewish World Service, the New Israel Fund and the Jewish Fund for Justice to help identify topics and speakers.

The speakers will appear at Friday night services, Family School and at informal gatherings throughout the year. Please contact Claire Pensyl of the Social Justice Committee ([pensyl@bellpensyl.com](mailto:pensyl@bellpensyl.com)) if you want to help organize these events or if you have ideas for speakers.

## **“Until All Have Plenty and No One is Left in Need”**

Our family began our little bit of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) with Rabbi Mofic and Cantor Wolman as a part of the Sukkat Shalom Youth Group (SuShY) program. SuShY helped serve meals at the Good News Community Kitchen (GNCK) in Rogers Park on the second Sunday of the month.

GNCK is the only community kitchen in the Chicago area that offers a hot meal each night of the year. It serves an average of 120 men, women and children each night—at least 43,000 dinners a year. But the GNCK does more than serve food. Its director of operations, Norm Clearfield, ensures that the atmosphere is welcoming and safe, and that its black, white and Latino patrons—and they are referred to as patrons—are treated with the respect and dignity they are due.

Each patron receives a numbered ticket as he or she enters. They store their belongings and seat themselves. Before the meal is served, Norm calls for quiet, and discusses how grateful he is to the volunteers who are serving and in some cases have also provided the dinner. He mentions the volunteer groups in attendance, and we are treated with a huge round of applause from the patrons.

A prayer is typically offered. (Cantor Wolman recited a beautiful prayer for the volunteers, which thanks God for the opportunity “to pursue justice.” And Rabbi Mofic enjoyed the privilege of leading the public grace before eating.) The meals are then served, with children and families eating first. Norm calls out the ticket numbers and each patron raises his or her hand. If there are enough volunteers, the diners are served at their seats just like in a restaurant; first the meal, followed by milk, water or very sweet coffee.

Some of the patrons are regulars, some not. Most of the people are dressed casually, although we have seen men in suits and women in their finest. Most of them are friendly and happy to see the new faces present on a given night. A few are lost in their own worlds, like the woman who came a bit late one night and insisted over and over again that my son Zach bring her an orange, not an apple, even as he explained that the oranges were all gone.

Some touch your heart in a special way -- like the man who smiled at me broadly and said, “Hey, I remember you! You’re the one with the pretty smile.”

That’s a pretty nice reward for a little bit of Tikkun Olam!

[GNCK serves dinner from 5:30 to 6:30 pm on weekdays, and from 5 to 6 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Call or email Nadine Proserpi ([prosfive@aol.com](mailto:prosfive@aol.com)) for more information on volunteering.]

### Sukkat Shalom By The Numbers

People who attended  
“Tailgate with the Temple” fundraiser: ..... 100  
Items up for auction: ..... 82  
Amount raised for  
Sukkat Shalom: ..... More than \$20,000  
Hotdogs consumed (estimated): ..... 245



# Why We Learn Hebrew

by Rabbi Ari Moffic, Director of Family Education

Why do we pray in a language we largely do not understand? Why do we teach our b'nai mitzvah students to chant from the Torah even though they may not be able to translate what they are reading? Why do we spend hours each month learning to read Hebrew and developing some basic grammar and vocabulary when it might not be enough to understand everything we hear in synagogue?

Prayer is more than the sum of its Hebrew words. Prayer is poetry. It is about sound. It is about a feeling we have when hearing or reciting the ancient text. Hebrew prayer connects us with past and future generations and with Jewish communities all over the world. Often, the sound of Hebrew creates a mantra-like quality. I think, for example, of the kaddish -- "yitgadal, v'yitkadash..."

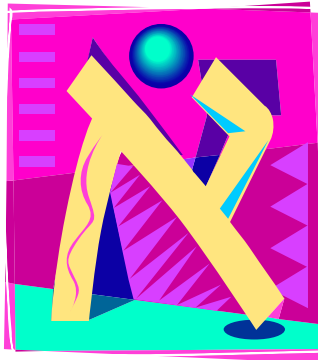
Hebrew also has a power of its own. Standing and proclaiming Shema Yisrael is different than saying "Hear, O Israel." We teach children as young as two years old to say and memorize the Shema in Hebrew. These are the last words we say before we go to sleep at night. We say these words upon awakening in the morning. We may even utter this statement of our faith before we die. Saying the six words of the Shema in Hebrew has a sacred quality that cannot be captured in the English, alone.

Hebrew is also the language of our ancestors. Hebrew is a bridge that connects all in the Jewish family -- whether part of a Reform community, Orthodox, American or Israeli. We recite certain prayers in Hebrew because the meaning and syntax of the words are less important than the familiarity we feel when we hear the sound of the words. The words are our tradition. They connect us to our ancient roots. The words create a sacred sound and space for us to sense the presence of God.

While Hebrew prayer retains power even if we do not know the literal meanings of the words, we can still benefit from learning. Towards this end, the goal of our Hebrew program is, first, to learn the sounds of the letters and vowels and to practice reading words fluently. Next, we build a basic prayer and modern vocabulary to increase our Hebrew literacy.

Beyond this, we aim to teach root words and basic grammar so that we can be detectives -- finding clues in the words of prayer. Three- and four-letter roots are at the core of all Hebrew words. The roots appear in a variety of linguistic and grammatical forms, but all relate to the basic meaning. Baruch, bracha and brachot, for example, all have the same root: bless. It is less important to know exactly what grammatical form the word is taking than to recognize that the word has to do with blessing.

At Sukkat Shalom, there is a balance between praying in English and Hebrew. Next time you attend services, try to soak up the sound of Hebrew. Imagine people from centuries ago reciting the very same words. We can always read the English translation and the creative poetic interpretations based on the message of the prayer. But reciting the Hebrew language can carry us to a different place.



# Cantor's Corner

by Cantor Ross Wolman

Every family has its Passover traditions. One family eats from grandmother's china, another makes a unique dish, while another reads from the same 30 year-old *Haggadah*. These traditions are what make our celebrations special and meaningful. Our families rely on each person to play their role as the seasons turn and the family grows.

One such tradition is that of Passover singing. The holiday is filled with many opportunities to sing -- from "*Dayeinu*" to "Go Down Moses" to "Who Knows One?" Many American families who may or may not be familiar with the traditional tunes have opted to sing parodies to lighten the mood. The oldest of these is "The Ballad of the Four Sons," which is sung to the tune of "Oh My Darlin' Clementine," an American folk tune popularized by the cartoon character Huckleberry Hound. To some, this song is considered an essential part of the *seder* -- and is even written into some versions of the *Haggadah*. It begins:

Said the father to his children,  
"At the seder you will dine,  
You will eat your fill of *matzoh*,  
You will drink four cups of wine."

In the ongoing debate between traditional or authentic music and adapted traditions, this is an incredibly powerful example. Those who would argue that this melody should not be part of the *seder* must recognize its ability to incorporate itself into many households nationwide. Is that not how folk traditions spread in the first place? What is also remarkable is the genre in which the parodies are written. They usually come from well-known tunes in our popular culture and today there is a great number ranging from Broadway to The Beatles to Disney to a parody of "Who Let The Dogs Out?" (Who let the Jews out, Oy Oy Oy Oy)

With our easy access to information, the forming of these traditions is changing. In one email after another, I already have a slew of Purim and Passover parodies flooding my inbox. I invite you to browse the extensive list of songs found at this website: <http://kosher4passover.com/parodies.htm>. Or you can contact me for more ways to make the music at this year's *seder* joyful and meaningful.

# Living our Mission, Planning our Future

by Liz Sciortino

Over the last six months, Sukkat Shalom leadership enthusiastically and thoughtfully participated in a series of discussions on our future, projected growth and related needs. We assessed our fundraising capabilities through a feasibility study and attended a two-day strategic planning session to help determine how best to fulfill our mission of openness, respect and acceptance for all members of our community and their extended families.

These extensive conversations and thought-provoking exercises confirmed that Sukkat Shalom is driven by its mission, vision and congregational needs. There is tremendous member support for our leadership, community, and spiritual relationship with First Congregational Church of Wilmette (FCCW). In addition, our feasibility study determined there is significant untapped financial support for our congregation with a clear willingness to invest in its future. Using these findings as a foundation, we are focused on exploring the following challenges:

- Discuss and consider options to improve comfort and accessibility for our sanctuary space at FCCW. Develop financially fair arrangements for these improvements, based on our continued role as a tenant.
- Identify potential new Family School locations allowing enhanced programming, meeting, classroom, gathering, office, youth group and/or musical practice space. Assess the new options and determine possible relocation.

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One of the most compelling reasons to pursue these goals is the vision we share and the desire to create a stronger sense of home, community and identity for our Sukkat Shalom family. Due to limitations of space in our newsletter, and the importance of communicating a more detailed outline of our plan, you will receive a letter from the leadership as our exploration continues.



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## Hineinu Committee Members Receive “Kavod” Award

Four members of Sukkat Shalom’s Hineinu “Caring” Committee have received the Jewish Healing Network’s Kavod Award for their efforts to help a local family in distress. Congregants Anne Ryan, Suzanne Epstein, Barbara Mahany and Rachel Seidman were honored with the award.



The Kavod Award was created last year by the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago (JHNC) to recognize outstanding efforts of “caring committee” volunteers from synagogues throughout Chicago and its suburbs. According to the JHNC, the award “honors the unsung heroes who have substantially contributed to improving the quality of life in Chicago by their dedication to the cholim (ill people) in our community.”

The four women received the award in the category of “Service to the Jewish Community” for providing speech and physical therapy, information and resources, and emotional support for a local family since May, 2006. The family has been in crisis since the husband was seriously injured in 2005.

Tracey Lipsig Kite, Director of the JHNC, presented the award to the recipients at a recent Shabbat service at Sukkat Shalom. Mazel tov to Anne, Suzanne, Barb and Rachel for their good works.