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TEMPLE BETH HILLEL
 תּוֹרָה • לִיב • קוֹמִיטָה

The Shofar



TEMPLE BETH HILLEL, RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Volume 17 Issue 1 October 2010, Tishrei 5771

A Message from Rabbi Dean

Keeping It Real



October, or the Hebrew month of Heshvan is a quiet time after all the holy days packed into the Hebrew month of Tishre, which fell in September this year. After the intense four weeks beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Simchat Torah it is a blessing to have the time reflect on the spiritual experiences of the High Holy Days. This year I have been thinking a lot about Kol Nidrei. It

seems so strange to begin Yom Kippur with a prayer that nullifies all the vows we will make in the coming year, as if the prayer violates the very spirit of the day.

If you stop to think about vows, or resolutions as we call them today, they are easy to make and difficult to fulfill. The entire health and fitness industry business model is based on this fact. Every January 1, millions of Americans make a resolution, a vow, to get healthy, to lose weight, and to exercise. They go out and join a gym or a health club. If the gyms were to retain all these new members, they would be filled to overflowing and couldn't serve them all. But the health clubs know that by the middle of March many of these new members will quit after having used the gym only a couple of times. However, vows were very serious acts to our rabbis. When one made a vow, it was as if one were creating a fact, and to fail to fulfill the vow would unmake a promised future "fact." Failure to fulfill a vow created a rip in the fabric of reality. For this reason our sages urged people not to make vows at all.

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by

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But people continue to make vows. It is human nature. We have a vision of how we would like to be and who we want to be so we resolve to change, to improve, to become better people. Kol Nidrei is a recognition that we make commitments with the best of intentions but often fail to fulfill them. Not because we are bad people but because old habits are hard to break and new habits are hard to build. It is hard to change. So is failure inevitable? Should we just give up?

The antidote to Kol Nidrei, to that pessimism that says we nullify all vows in advance because they are too hard to fulfill, is Sukkot. Immediately after Yom Kippur we build our sukkot, our fragile booths, and five days after Yom Kippur we dedicate them and for the next seven days we spend as much time as possible in them. Why seven days? What purpose can be served with this extended period of time? There is a dispute, a *mahloket*, between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer over what the sukkah symbolizes. Rabbi Yehoshua says it symbolizes the tents in which our ancestors dwelled when they wandered in the desert. Rabbi Eliezer disagreed, saying the sukkah symbolizes the Clouds of Glory which rested above the Tabernacle and in which God dwelled. I think the meaning of this argument is that the sukkah is a mediating space. It reminds us of the reality of the world as it is but it also shows us the world as it could be. Thought of this way, the sukkah becomes a symbol of the desire to change, to grow, and to become the people we truly want to be and of how difficult that can be. Dwelling in the sukkah for seven days reinforces this message and hopefully enables us to carry the symbolism of the sukkah – of holding our real selves and our hoped-for selves in dynamic tension all year long. If we can do that then we have a shot at fulfilling our vows.

Finally, the sukkah can help us fulfill our vows in another way. One of the main acts of Sukkot is to invite guests into our sukkah, reminding us to always think of others, to be generous with what we have and to share it with others. When we turn our attention to others and help them we always grow as people. Sukkot teaches us to have a clear sense of reality, a belief in the possibility of changing that reality for the better, and a commitment to others. May we all fulfill our vows in the coming year.

Rabbi' Dean Kertesz

The congregation extends our deepest sympathy to Saralynn and Helen Nusbaum and their families on the death of Joe Nusbaum, their father and long term beloved member of our community.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT BY LAURA TAUB

It was wonderful to see so many of you at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. I hope the services were meaningful for you and provided you with the opportunity to reflect upon the past year and the year to come. Please join us throughout the year for our services, educational and social events.

As I look to the coming year, I hope I will be able to work better with everyone in the community. If I have hurt, angered or offended you, please forgive me and give me an opportunity to make peace with you. I may not realize I have hurt you, or I may think I have when I have not, so please talk to me.

Although the Days of Awe are over, we still have opportunities for tzedakah. We collect for the Richmond Emergency Food Pantry all year. We always need help at the Souper Center. And if you have not yet signed up to walk or sponsor a walker for the GRIP Harmony walk on October 9, it is not too late. You can contact walkers Jane Durango, Carol Katz, Alan Marks and Carl Nelson.

To start the new year, our Beit Midrash Religious School began at the end of August with a Rosh Hashanah seder, a Persian tradition led by our new teacher Malka Helfman. Our new Mazel Tots preschool class began at the end of September. We still have openings in both, if you know anyone who may be interested. For adults, Rabbi Dean will be starting his class on the prophets on October 17. Don't know anything about the prophets? Come and find out.

We have several special events this month. If you read this before the Dinner Dance on October 2, please come. It's an opportunity to enjoy a delicious dinner, music and dancing, getting to know people in our community, and benefiting the Temple. We hope to have another festive occasion next month with an evening of songs by Stephen Sondheim and desserts.

You will have the opportunity to worship at two Shabbat morning services this month, in addition to our regular Friday night services. Please join Emma Van Hoy as she becomes a bat mitzvah on October 9. Also, there will

be a Shabbat morning service and potluck on the fifth weekend, October 30.

Sunday, October 24 is our Special Membership Meeting. As you may remember, at the General Membership Meeting we postponed decisions on two bylaw changes, and we will be voting on them at this meeting.

One will change the definition of a (voting) adult as a person over the age of b'nai mitzvah. This is in recognition of our value of inclusiveness. We tell the b'nai mitzvah teens that they are now adult members of the community, but this is not true. We expect them to take on the responsibilities of mitzvot and to teach us Torah, but we do not give them the opportunity to participate in the decisions of the congregation.

Young people can make valuable and innovative contributions to our community. This is also a way to keep our teens involved. There is less incentive to be involved in a group that shuts you out of its important business. Many organizations include young people on their boards, and we have had a youth representative on our Board who has made thoughtful and helpful contributions. I believe that any teen who takes the time to come to our meetings and consider the issues will make an informed and considered decision when voting.

The other bylaw change will give each member household, rather than each adult, a vote. If more than one adult in the household is present and voting, the household's vote will be divided equally among them. This will mean that each household's vote will have the same weight, that one household will not have more votes than another. A member is defined as a household, and each household is asked to pay the same amount of annual dues, but currently a two-adult household has twice as many votes as a one-adult household.

The proposed change will not disenfranchise anyone. If two adults in the household are voting, they will divide the household's vote. If they agree, they will vote the same way, and the household will vote that way. If they disagree, they will vote differently and the votes will cancel each other, just as they do now. But under this

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President's Message: continued from page 3

system each dues-paying household will have the same say in congregational affairs.

The Board recommends these changes and believes they will make the voting process fairer and more inclusive. I urge you to vote for them. But most important, make sure to come to the meeting so your views and your voice may be heard.

I wish you all a good and sweet year. May you be inscribed in the book of life, blessings and peace.

Laura

NOTES FROM THE BOARD September 1, 2010

Upcoming Events

- **Dinner dance, Oct 2. Neoma Kenwood** requests assistance with food preparation.

Programs and Events

- Movies, Arts, and Public Health Adult events are under discussion.

Operations

- Several sources of **revenue** anticipated, including members' dues and Montessori School rent.
- Potential **rentals** of our facility to Richmond Rotary Club may contribute needed revenue.
- **David Brown** and **Larry Fox** attended **Jewish Federal Security Task Force** meeting with several regional law enforcement agencies. Overarching topic: the philosophy of vigilance. Note: Richmond Police Dept, 510-233-1214 for reporting security concerns.

Buildings and Grounds

- The Board is investigating cell tower improvements for continued and increased revenue stream.
 - **Signage** increased prominence and quantity continues under review.
-

SPECIAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24 at 10:00 AM

VOTE ON CHANGES TO BYLAWS

- 1. Change "adult" to include people over the age of B'nai Mitzvah.**
- 2. Change voting from one vote per adult to one vote per Household, divided equally among the adults from that Household present at the meeting.**

EVERYONE IS URGED TO ATTEND



NOTES FROM THE BOARD RETREAT

August 22, 2009

Congregational Feedback

- Twenty-six responses to questionnaire received so far.
- Most people were attracted by the community and its people – the size; sense of community, caring and support, openness and welcoming feeling; space and time for Jewish identity, and values.
- Many also valued the Rabbi, Cantor, and religious services.
- For many, areas of concern were community outreach and increasing membership.
- Other concerns were financial issues; growing and strengthening the Religious School; increasing member involvement; and organizational issues.
- Many specifically suggested more social activities and more adult education.
- Prior to receiving the summary of members' responses, the Board discussed what they valued about our congregation, and the results were quite similar to those of the general membership.

Goals for the Coming Year

- Board brainstormed numerous potential goals.
- Five major areas were identified:
 - Member involvement and recognition
 - Outreach and increasing membership
 - Programming
 - Religious School
 - Facilities
- Board recognized that these are all inter-related; focusing on one will involve most of the others.
- Board voted top two priorities for the coming year will be Programming and Member Involvement and Recognition. This does not preclude working on the other goals.

Accomplishing Goals

- Board brainstormed many possible ideas.
- Initial plans for specific activities
 - Bagel Brunches (3) – Jane Durango and Doug Freifeld
 - Concerts (2) - Dana Meyer and Josh Genser
 - Outings (1) – Jane Durango
 - Evening Events (3 - 4)
 - Food event (e.g. cookoff, tasting) – Louise Snitz
 - Film – Marilyn Hertzberg
 - Game night – Laura Taub
- Develop a clearer list of volunteer needs and ask members to help
- Recognition of volunteers



Anniversaries:

Laura Taub & David Kline	10/7
Michael & Alice Chanowitz	10/17
Allan & Phyllis Sagle	10/29

Birthdays

James Goldwyn	10/1	12th birthday
Janet Neiderbach	10/3	
Jonas Specter	10/5	18th birthday
Fran Welstand	10/5	
Shane Faerber	10/7	
Judy Freeman	10/9	
Morris Benezra	10/11	
David Seskin	10/11	
Jane Kemp	10/14	
David Kline	10/14	
Michele Waxman	10/15	
Kim Mack	10/18	
a woman called Sam	10/18	
Michelle Husby	10/19	
Rachel Marks	10/19	
Allan Sagle	10/23	
Benjamin Kessler	10/24	20th birthday
Carl Nelson	10/25	
Pearl Wolffs	10/31	

Welcome Back

We welcome back to membership long-time former members Bea and Morris Benezra. Their sons Neil and Seth grew up at TBH, and were Bar Mitzvah, and confirmed here. They have a granddaughter and a great granddaughter. Bea was active in the TBH Sisterhood, and contributed to the beautiful needle-work projects. Morris is a retired teacher and artist and is responsible for many of the beautiful sculpture works around TBH, including the brass handles on the sanctuary doors.

COMMUNITY BULLETIN BOARD

Are you looking for services? Housing? Employment? Or do you have these available? Do you have something to buy, sell, rent, exchange?

This is your space to contact members of our community. Please send your notices to Louise Levinson-Snitz

New home needed for 1999 HP Scanner 3200C. Connects via parallel port. Won't work with Windows 7 or Vista as HP has not provided drivers. I previously used it successfully with XP and Windows 2000. Free. If interested, send e-mail to: brweid@yahoo.com.

.....
One large (approximate 30" x 24") black wrought iron bird cage. FREE to someone who can use it. It can be used for any large birds, We had cockatiels. If someone is would like to have it, I can bring it to the temple for pick-up. Questions, E-mail or Call Arlene Lisby at tbh@aol.com or see roster for her phone numbers

.....
CHARMING FURNISHED ROOM for rent in a 2 bedroom bungalow in quiet neighborhood in downtown Richmond. Shared kitchen and bathroom with access to living room. Short walk to BART or AC Transit 71 bus, and easy access to both of the 80 and 580 freeways. Separate entrance. Off and on the street parking. Prefer quiet, mature, single female. No tobacco or drugs, social drinker only, no overnight guests without prior permission. No pets, house already occupied by one cat. Must be responsible, pick up after yourself, and, most important, pay rent on time.

**\$500 a month includes all utilities, Wifi. No cable currently, but open to negotiation. \$500 refundable security/cleaning deposit. Available immediately upon credit and reference check. Call Marilyn (see roster for her number) for more information and to set up an appointment to see the room.
Marilyn Hertzberg**



Welcome to our new Hebrew teacher, Malka Helfman

Malka Helfman brings the traditional Jewish education she received in a religious school in Jerusalem to TBH, where she will work with the older students.

Malka's teaching philosophy is to draw on her students' experience, "and go from there. That way they are connected to what they learn."

For example, if she knows her students are technologically savvy, she'll use that to build a teaching model they can participate in, perhaps using Facebook or a blog.

"I help them self-learn," she says.

She expects to use "games and fun" to teach them about Jewish culture, history and modern Israel.

Not that they'll cover the entire history: Lessons will be tied to the season, or weekly Torah portion, or preparing for the bar or bat mitzvah, or the next holiday, she says,

The Israeli native started her higher education at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, majoring in philosophy and theater, and continued her education in the U.S.

She is employed by Cal State University, East Bay, where she teaches information literacy, and also works part time managing the visual resources

library of the university's art department.

Her teaching experience includes private Hebrew lessons for adults.

This busy schedule prompts Malka to admit that in five years she hopes to be a fulltime teacher of Hebrew.

When she's not working she's busy with the arts.

For one thing, she is a member and board member of the Kol Truah Jewish Choir of the East Bay. The choir is a nonprofit organization with a mission to preserve, disseminate, and perform Jewish music for the benefit of the community at large. The Richmond resident admits she cannot read music, a handicap in this choir that she tries to compensate for with assiduous attendance.

She and her husband like to dance, noting that he has a good-sized collection of 78s Many of them are jazz.

She also paints, her latest project being the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So far 20 are done, and Malka is also developing a website for them in order to share some of the many stories behind the letters.

It would not be surprising if not only the children learn a few things from this multi-talented teacher.

Special thanks to:

The Ritual Committee: Jane Durango, Maggie Jacobs, Henry Linker, Alan Marks, and Carl Nelson for organizing our High Holy Day Services.

The Choir: Howard Cohen, Rosemary Gerber, Maggie Jacobs, Carol Katz, Jane Kaasa, Dana Meyer, Ellen Seskin and Pat Trumbull

Jane Durango, Alan Marks, Carl Nelson and Gordon Raskin
for learning new Torah and Haftarah portions.

Josh and Elaina Genser for hosting the Temple Open House.

Larry Fox and all those who helped with the Solano Stroll.

Michele Waxman, Alan Marks, and Marilyn Hertzberg
for organizing Chevrah Kadisha and the meal of condolence.



Yahrzeits

May Their Memories Be For A blessing

Charlotte Fischer		10/1
Frank Flint Rogers	Friend of June Maberry	10/3
Fannie Silverstein	Grandmother of Joel Chernoff	10/4
William Polikoff	Husband of Barbara Polikoff	10/5
Phil Rubinstein	Husband of Paz Rubinstein	10/6
Esther Schwartz	Grandmother of Beverly Lesch	10/6
George David Hudson	Father of Nori Hudon	10/8
Samuel Kessler	Father of Joyce Kessler	10/8
Lillian Schmuckler	Aunt of Helene Class	10/8
Alan Sagan	Son in law of Sherbie Aberle	10/9
Ben Rust		10/10
Herman Hotzner	Father of Edith Kiefer	10/12
Arthur Romm	Father of Jeff Romm	10/12
Barney Schwartz		10/12
Walter Wolffs	Husband of Pearl Wolffs	10/12
Florence Blakeley		10/13
Robert Woody	Son of Joe & Janice Malailua	10/14
	Nephew of Arlene & Bob Lisby	
Augusta Wolffs Brody	Daughter of Pearl Wolffs	10/15
Martin Burton	Step-father of Meg Freifeld	10/15
Marjorie Freeman	Mother of Jim Freeman	10/15
Freda E. Rosen		10/15
Marilyn Bearson	Mother of Dann Ozer-Bearson	10/17
Cheryl Moreiss	Mother of Marcia Delgadillo	10/17
Sherry Tamkin Stone		10/17
Jo Clayre Brown		10/18
Albert Jaffe	Father of Arlene Lisby	10/18
	Father of Janice Malailua	
Anne R. Goldberg	Mother of Clara-Rae Genser	10/20
	Grandmother of Josh Genser	
Sarah Linker	Mother of Henry Linker	10/20
Abe Mason		10/21
Albert Friedman	Uncle of Hallie Friedman	10/22
Murry Marks	Father of Alan Marks	10/22
Robert Katz	Father of Michael Katz	10/23
Dottie Freeman	Aunt of Judy & James Freeman	10/25
Fred Berger	Husband of Audrey Berger	10/26
	Father of Daniel & Liv	
George W. Dains	Father of Barbara Ball	10/26
James L. Blymeir		10/28
Richard A. Dains	Brother of Barbara Ball	10/29
Samuel Sweet	Father of Pearl Wolffs	10/29
Bernice Weinberg	Aunt of Beverly Zell	10/30



Tzedakah

*"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?"*

General Contributions

Sherbie Aberle: in memory of Thornton Hardy
Debra Dane & Carl Ware: in memory of Norman Dane
Jay & Barbara Weidenfeld: in memory of Sylvia Leben
Judy Windrix & Bill Hartman: in memory of Freda Caplan
Neil & Roxann Zarchin: in memory of Julius Zarchin

High Holy Day Flowers

Douglas & Meg Freifeld: in honor of Howard Cohen
Ruth Fremes & Zak Sabry: for a Happy New Year to all my friends
Hallie Friedman & Kim Mack
Clara-Rae Genser: in memory of Joseph Genser & Mori Genser-Pagle
Marilyn Hertzberg: in memory of Sy Hertzberg
Frida Hilsabeck: in memory of Sarah & Aron Svidorsky
Ken & Evelyn Hooker: in memory of Carl & Ed Nusbaum, Moe & Celia & Anne Nusbaum
Dana Meyer & June Kamerling
Bobbi Nadler: in memory of Rhonda Mlodinotf
Janet Neiderbach: in memory of Arnold Neiderbach
Joel Rosenbaum & Wendy Roth
Ellen & Michael Stephens: in memory of Meyer & Charlotte Zuckerman
Jay & Barbara Weidenfeld: in memory of Irma Stern
Judy Windrix & Bill Hartman: in memory of Freda & Gershon Caplan

Tzedakah-Tikkun Olam

Roberta Alexander: in honor of Evelyn Hooker's Birthday
Steve & Fran Welstand: in memory of Leon Kolb

Office Equipment

William Weiss: in memory of Fanny Gabin

Sherry Stone Scholarship

Steve & Fran Welstand: in memory of Marcy Ann Binder

Kitchen

Lynda & Ben Cohen-Curtis: in memory of Tillie Cohen

Cantor's Discretionary Fund

Andre & Libushe Moskowitz: in appreciation of basketball court dedication

Rabbi's Discretionary Fund

James & Deborah Koenig

High Holy Day Appeal Fund

Paula Ho-Wolper

Choir/Music

Ellen & Michael Stephens: in memory of Stephen Zuckerman





With great love and pride
 we invite you to share
 in our joy
 when our son



Kyle Alexander ~ טוב

is called to the Torah
 as a Bar Mitzvah

Saturday, December 11, 2010
 ten o'clock in the morning

Temple Beth Hillel
 801 Park Central
 Richmond, California

Kiddush luncheon following services

Kathleen and Chaz

It is the tree of life for those who hold fast to it
 and all of its supporters are happy
 כל ימיך עץ חיים היא לחוזקים
 ובה ותטובה תאשר

Shoah Memories (Part 3) by Sam Genirberg

Editor's Note: This is Part 3 of Sam's memoir of survival during the Nazi occupation of his homeland.

I had a roof over my head. My landlady was an elderly widow with only one other boarder. Her house was old and rundown with only the most minimum plumbing facilities. After cleaning up, I went to a nearby flea market and bought myself an inexpensive meal. I had very little money, but it was enough to carry me for several days.

After the meal I felt pleased with the progress I had made so far.

The following morning I went to the leather shop to report for work. I was immediately put to work, stitching various leather articles together. I worked on a table in a long hall, in which about seventy five people were employed, including some Jews who were recognizable by the yellow badges they wore. I found myself working next to Jewish people on one side and gentiles on the other. Naturally, I was pleased to find that there were still Jews alive in Ukraine, though I was careful not to show an emotion of kinship.

I overheard two Jewish women talk about me, as they conversed in Yiddish, one woman saying to another, "you know, Reina, I have a suspicion that this boy, Andrey, who sits near us is Jewish".

"What gives you such an idea", responded her friend with a frown.

"I don't mean anything bad," said the first woman. "He just looks like such a nice boy".

"Well if he is Jewish, may God help him", said Reina.

I found it reassuring that no hostility was shown towards the Jewish employees by the foreman. They told me that they are living in a Ghetto, though they manage to obtain enough food to survive. The Jews as well as the Russians were hoping to be liberated by the Red Army from the tyrannical German occupation soon.

I was still hoping to find a contact that would get me in touch with a partisan group, but every time I brought up the subject directly or indirectly during a conversation with fellow

workers they refused to talk about it.

Soon my landlady informed me that I must register with City Hall as a new arrival to Winnitza. She handed me the house registry book, and she gave me instructions how to proceed. When I reached the offices of the City government, the clerk advised me to go to the office of the German military governor, the Gebitscommisar. I walked into the office of this major official. It was a large room, lavishly furnished. One of the Russian secretaries took my information, asked me to wait. I felt apprehensive about a face to face meeting with the powerful German official, yet remained outwardly calm.

The Gebitscommisar walked into the room. He was a tall, aristocratic looking man dressed in the official brown uniform of the Nationalist Socialist German Workers Party, the Nazi Party, for short. He wore a swastika band on his arm and he looked imposing and daunting. Feigning self assurance, I stood up, looked him straight in the eyes, and said, "Sir, I have just returned from German Ostarbeiter worker's camp, and I wish to settle in this city. I have a job and a place to live." He looked me over and promptly signed my registration in the registry book. As I walked to the door, I felt elated that I accomplished the requirement without causing any suspicion.

The next Sunday, I treated myself to a movie. It was a good German comedy that gave me a couple of hours of relaxation, and laughter that I desperately needed. This was especially true after viewing an anti-Jewish skit shown before the main feature movie that blamed the Jews for all the human and economic problems in the Soviet Union. I was pleased to note that the depiction of Jews as world conspirators and evil people was greeted with little applause.

To be Continued.

CHEVRA KADISH

A Message from Evelyn and Michele

Chevra Kadisha, are two words I had never heard before five years ago. Congregation Beth El in Berkeley was organizing training for a Chevra Kadisha society. They wanted to do this together with our synagogue. Elisabeth Miller asked me to go. I went to the training and learned about T'ahara, the ritual preparation of the body for Jewish burial. I was a little scared when I got a call for my first T'ahara. The other women there were experienced and were very helpful. When the T'ahara was finished, I felt so blessed. It really is a mitzvah to do T'ahara for someone. Since that time I have done many T'aharah. Each one was special, I always came away feeling blessed that I was able to do this mitzvah. As you all know I was diagnosed with ALS in December, 2009. As the disease has progressed I can no longer perform Tahara. We need others in our TBH community to train how to do this. Congregation Beth El is again organizing training. Would you think about volunteering for this? You will not regret it. You will be blessed. B'Shalom, Evelyn Hooker

Evelyn taught me all I know about T'hara and I echo her sentiments completely. I want to thank her, Elizabeth Miller and Alan Marks (he organizes shmirah) for their help and commitment to Chevra Kadisha, and all our members who have participated in Shmirah over the years. There are many ways we care for others in our community and supporting each other in times of grief and mourning is one of the most significant.

Congregation Beth El is again organizing training for Chevra Kadisha. Rabbi Reuben Zellman will lead a four-session class on Jewish traditions, rituals and beliefs surrounding death and mourning. This class will address questions such as:

- What Jewish decisions might I face when someone I love dies?
- What are my responsibilities?
- What actually happens at a Jewish funeral, and why?
- How long is Kaddish said, and for whom is it OK to say it?
- How do Jewish death and mourning traditions incorporate loved ones who are not Jewish?
- What should I be doing to prepare for my own end-of-life needs?
- What do Jews think about burial and cremation?
- Organ donation?
- As a member of a Jewish community, what can I do to be supportive when someone else experiences a loss?

The classes will highlight the kinds of decisions we all face, and how Judaism guides us in making them. Classes are scheduled for Thursdays: October 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th 7:00 - 8:30 pm at Congregation Beth El. You are encouraged to attend all four sessions, but welcome to join the group on whatever dates you are able.

Following the class sessions, two additional 'hands-on' sessions will be held. One will focus on those interested in leading shiva minyanim. The other will focus on performing the rituals of t'aharah and shmirah, the preparation and accompaniment of the body. The T'aharah session is scheduled for Sunday, November 7th.

Please contact me at mlwaxman@hotmail.com.

B'Shalom, Michele Waxman



My mother wanted me to become a teacher. It was what many parents wanted for their daughters. They might have been secular, but they valued education as much as any family in the shtetl.

Teaching was, as they said in those days, “a good profession for a woman.” That meant you would have your summers off, just like your eventual children.

Did I reject the idea because it was being shoved down my throat?

Maybe a little. But I’d like to think that I’d have pursued it anyway if it had resonated with me.

This may be why, in my junior year of college, I took a social work class. It was a yearlong commitment that included both class and field work.

My mother was at that time the office manager in the social services department of a large hospital. I had met a few of the social workers from her office, and I knew she admired them. I was intrigued. These women had an aura of strength I didn’t see very much of. Plus the idea of doing good, of making people’s lives better, was appealing.

What can I say? I was 19 years old and idealistic.

The class work portion of the course turned out to be extremely interesting. I loved reading the case histories and imagining the families. I realized a long time later that my interest was voyeuristic rather than strictly compassionate, which really made sense for the writer I didn’t know I was to become: writers like stories.

I read those case histories with the same intensity I devoted to the New York Times every fall when it published its 100 Neediest Cases. These were little vignettes full of drama and pathos, soliciting pre-Christmas donations. It was Dickens in a few hundred words.

In the course, the classroom represented theory. Practice was done out in the city. Each student had to choose a social agency from a list we were given, where we would spend time every week working under the supervision of a social worker.

Great idea, but the execution left something to be desired. Several of the openings, particularly those that were most geographically convenient, were Mickey Mouse assignments such as babysitting for children whose parents were seeing a therapist. I wasn’t taking this class to do childcare.

I selected a posting nobody else wanted—in an agency in Spanish Harlem. Not easy to get to, not anyplace I’d been, not anyplace my parents wanted me to be.

I don’t remember if I was cocky about my choice. If so, it wasn’t a feeling that lasted long.

The agency was a couple of blocks from the subway. I was as unnerved on that first walk as any tourist from Suburbia. I didn’t look like, dress like or sound like the people I saw on the street.

My supervisor at the agency turned out to be a 40-ish woman who wore bright colored suits and gold jewelry. Call her Miss Adams. She welcomed me warmly and gave me paperwork on three cases: a woman trying to move into city housing with her

two children, a child who needed to go to camp and a family where the children were chronically truant.

I was immediately engaged. This sounded a lot more interesting than what most of my classmates were doing.

But when Miss Adams said we were going to visit these three families, and after that, they would be my cases, my enthusiasm turned to terror. I wasn’t ready for “my cases.” But Miss Adams, whom I later discovered was chronically overworked because of staff shortages, assured me she’d be available for consultations.

I didn’t think that was nearly enough but, short of running back to the subway, I didn’t know what else to do.

So began several terrifying, overwhelming, intense months. I visited “my” families, climbing stairs in decrepit and vile-smelling buildings, sipping tea in overcrowded living rooms and trying not to make promises I couldn’t keep. Every week Miss Adams had suggestions on things I could discuss and resources I could tap.

Here’s what happened to my cases:

- I couldn’t help the woman who wanted to move into the projects because the city restricted eligibility to families that had no “illegitimate” child under age nine. In my family, the child was seven.
- After making a zillion phone calls, I got the kid into a month-long camp in the Adirondacks.
- I got nowhere with the truant kids. The household was beyond chaotic; the mother was an alcoholic, there was some suggestion the oldest boy was drug dealing and there was rarely food in the house. What was truancy compared to all that?

I had a lot of mixed feelings about the whole experience.

For one thing, I have never been so aware of my own incompetence. For another, I was wildly uncomfortable with the discovery that, because I was white and educated, my clients thought I had power to accomplish things.

As it turned out, I decided social work was not my chosen field. As a result of the report I wrote for class detailing my experiences, my instructor removed my agency from his approved list. So for me, it was a reasonably happy ending. For my families, not so much.



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October 2010

Tishrei-Cheshvan 5771

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November 2010

Cheshvan-Kislev 5771

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