

Remember us unto Life, O King who delights in life and write us in the book of life-

In the last Torah portion of the year, which was read last Shabbat, Moshe cries out, "I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life."

Of course we want to choose life. But what is the life that Moshe tells us to choose? Life is more than a beating heart, more than material abundance, more than accruing experiences. Choosing life means choosing a life of meaning, a life that aims beyond itself. Our pre-teens, teens and young adults are now asking themselves life's hardest questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do with my life? As adults, too frequently we lose sight of these questions amid the responsibilities of the every day.

Where do we discover meaning? It is not a commodity. It is not a quality or a thing that can be given by one person to another. Meaning can be found in mysterious places. Sometimes it is found in life's most challenging circumstances. But when it's found, it can transform your world in an instant. Sometimes finding meaning can take a lifetime. Not everybody can express the meaning of their lives in words; meaning speaks the language of action.

When we say Katveinu B'sefer HaChaim- write us in the book of life- we are saying grant us a healthy life, but also grant us a life that has meaning. How do we find meaning? As Jews, we look to our Torah. Jacob, Ya'acov, through his lifetime showed us three different metaphors for infusing life with meaning.

The first metaphor is that of a ladder. In his youth, Ya'acov dreamt of a ladder that reached up into heaven. There is a strange Midrash that asks what God has been doing since the creation of the world. The answer? Making ladders. A ladder is meant for climbing, for elevation. The view changes from rung to rung. At the bottom, all you see are the four cubits where you stand. The higher you go, the more you see, the more you comprehend of the big picture. Each of us is challenged to climb our personal ladder, to go up and not down; to go toward greater knowledge, greater commitment, greater involvement and greater vision. We are taught not to spend too much time on a single rung, for no rung is very strong. The longer we spend there, the greater the chances it will break.

From Ya'acov's youth we learn that we must become ladder climbers. There are times, like Ya'acov experienced, when we become blocked, stuck on a rung or even forced to descend. Sometimes it feels like we've been stuck forever at one place, but change, time and will help you resume the climb. The point is to keep looking to the next rung. If you are in a bad place now, look up.

In his adulthood, Ya'acov's life was filled with conflict. His struggle with his brother Esav, the cruel hunter, represents the Jewish people's rejection of violence. Lavan, his greedy father-in-law, symbolizes consuming materialism, which Ya'acov also rejects. The night before his climatic encounter with Esav, Ya'acov battled with a

Divine Being. He was transformed and became Yisrael- which means fighter with God, a spiritual warrior.

This is the second of Ya'acov's metaphors for finding meaning. We are the children of Israel. We too must become spiritual warriors. As spiritual warriors, we must be prepared to engage and confront injustice whether in ourselves or in our society.

The Rambam, Moses Maimonides, says that on Rosh HaShana the whole world is weighed in the balance between life and destruction. Each of our deeds and their consequences fall on one side or the other. Clearly, the deeds of some Jews this year weighed heavy on the side of destruction.

Bernard Madoff's deceptions caused harm to many people both in and out of the Jewish community. His greed damaged Jewish organizations, including the Eli Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, which lost more than fifteen million dollars, nearly all of the fund's assets. Many of us from Temple HaTikvah heard Professor Wiesel speak at Drew University about the impact this bad deed had on his life's mission of world wide advocacy for human rights.

Also this year, headlines of the involvement of some New Jersey Rabbis in money laundering schemes and the nightmare of organ donation brokering brought shame on the entire Jewish community. This is a terrible chilul HaShem- a desecration of God's name.

Ya'acov taught us that as spiritual warriors, we must engage with the world. It is not enough that these individuals were brought to justice. We must balance their deeds with deeds of our own; deeds of Tzedakah, caring, involvement and goodness are needed to tip the scale toward life.

In his old age, Ya'acov finds the third metaphor for meaning. He travels to Egypt with his clan to reunite with his son Yosef. He meets Pharaoh, leader of the greatest military superpower in the world. The two, paradigms of spiritual and physical power respectively, have little to say to each other. To break the silence, Pharaoh finally asks, "How old are you?" Ya'acov's response reflects his perspective on life: *the years of my journeys have been one hundred and thirty years.*

No longer climbing a ladder, no longer a spiritual warrior, Ya'acov now sees his life as a journey. From Be'er Sheva to Haran, from Beth El to Bethlehem, Ya'acov and his family build an altar at each encampment. Their action transforms each place into a community of holiness, a place where God's presence may dwell. They have begun to understand that it is their task and the task of the people they will establish to transform the world.

This is the final of Ya'acov's metaphors for finding meaning. Life is a journey; a series of encampments. At each dwelling, we build an altar by establishing a Jewish

community which sanctifies life through ritual and social action, education and acts of kindness, Hesed.

When people in our HaTikvah community are in need, whether the struggle is one of illness, death or financial hardship, we respond. Our board of trustees and executive board understand the meaning of the holy task entrusted to them and reach out with support, compassion and care to all who need.

Building the altar that is Temple HaTikvah goes beyond formal leadership: it requires a shtetl to maintain a shul. In recent weeks, many have stepped up to the ladder of responsibility. Some have taken this literally: thank you Jeff Wells and Steven Jacksier for climbing a real ladder to effect repairs in our sanctuary. Thank you Jay Monka for taking the lead in landscaping our entrance. Thank you Toby Monka, Linda Perkins and all of the volunteers for creating a beautiful Shabbat for our Temple Family last weekend and membership chair Brenda Kohn for an amazing family concert bringing new members into our synagogue family.

Thanks to Steve Kohn for organizing Shirei Simcha, our new band of talented musicians and singers: Audrey and Robin Wells, Karen Kamenetsky, Lynn Cutler, Robert and Nathan Werner and Rachel Kohn. Book by book, our library also is being renovated and will soon be ready to resume its function of educating our children and adults. Thank you to Leine Ayala and Cindy, Elyse and Carly Abrams for their hours of sorting, cataloguing and shelving. Thanks to Larry Lichter, Rick Tabakin and Marty Okun who have responded to the need for greater awareness by setting up an active security committee. Thanks also to Eileen Applebaum for her kindness in facilitating our Nehama grief support group, to Dr. Cathy Ostroff for her work in publicizing shul events and to Lynn Cutler for editing our bulletin and for acting as liason to the Hebrew Academy of Morris County. Toddah Rabbah to Nancy Delman, Rozzie and Alan Cohen and the dedicated faculty of our Talmud Torah, religious school. And heartfelt thanks to our sisterhood, men's club and all of our members for their devotion and support in building this Altar in Flanders.

Ladder climbers, spiritual warriors, travelers. These are some of the frameworks that our heritage offers us to fill with personal meaning.

In our tradition, before someone sets out on a journey, it is customary to give them some money with the instructions that they give it as Tzedakah to the first person in need they encounter when they reach their destination. In that way, the traveler becomes a *shaliach mitzvah*- a messenger with a holy mission. The Talmud says that such a one is sure to arrive at their destination safely.

As you go out now into the new year of 5770, as you begin your journey, I would like to appoint you as my shlichei mitzvah. I have asked the ushers to give to each person here an IOU for the sum of one dollar. I had to use this method because Jewish law prohibits the handling of money on a holiday, but this is no sham. I will be happy to make good on this debt anytime after Yom Tov. I ask that you donate

the dollar, preferably during the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, to a Tzedaka cause that has personal meaning for you. In that way, we begin the year with meaningful action.

L'shana tova tikateivu v'tichateimu- may you be written and sealed for a good year- a year where you find or fulfill your life's meaning- Amen!