

# Jumping Into the Pool

It is so wonderful to see so many people gathered together today to join us in worship. Parents are united with children, grandparents with grandchildren, uncles and aunts with nephews and nieces. I want to be sure that everyone knows that you always have a place here at the Jericho Jewish Center. The program sheet that we provide is just the tip of the iceberg of what we are offering during this year. Please be frequent visitors and please give me your input as to what you'd like to see at your Jericho Jewish Center.

What I consider to be the most exciting initiative at the Jericho Jewish Center this year is the creation and dedication of a new Torah.<sup>1</sup> The 613<sup>th</sup> Commandment is that each person writes his/her own Torah Scroll. According to Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the *Rema*), this

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<sup>1</sup> This is based off Deuteronomy 31:19 “And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for Me as a witness for the children of Israel.” Nedarim 38a takes this as the command for each person to write his/her own Torah Scroll.

commandment is fulfilled by each individual writing at least one letter in the Torah.<sup>2</sup>

During the 2018-19 synagogue year, each of us will have the opportunity to fulfill this *Mitzvah*, thanks to the generosity of Neil and Sherry Cohen. Neil's parents, Norman and Harriet z"l were members of the Jericho Jewish Center for almost 60 years. When Norman z"l passed away last year, Neil and Sherry sought to honor him through a gift to his spiritual home, the Jericho Jewish Center. Their generosity enables us to acquire a new Torah at JJC, a welcome addition, as the vast majority of our *Torot* are very heavy, and four of them are *pasul* (unfit for ritual use).

Each of us will have the opportunity to fulfill this commandment by donating a letter, a word or a more substantial gift to be given in memory of a loved one or in honor of a *simcha*. All donors will receive a certificate of appreciation for their donation and a special kippah marking this momentous occasion. Donors will also get to write a letter

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<sup>2</sup> Rema on Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah Siman 270 Seif 1; This is based off Babylonian Talmud Menachot 30a.

in the Torah with the *Sofer* (scribe) and will have a photo taken with the scribe as this is done.

My goal is for this to be a FUN-Raiser in addition to a Fundraiser and to have 100% participation from the Jericho Jewish Center. Please see the sheets printed on resume paper in the Cocktail Lounge about the writing of the Torah as well as available donation opportunities. Please also join us on Sunday October 21 from 1-3 pm for our Torah Kickoff. Lastly, please bring in your pennies, as the Religious School is trying to collect 304,805 pennies-corresponding to the number of letters in the Torah. Check out the “Torah thermometer” downstairs to see how far they’ve gotten.

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“COME TO THE EDGE”

“No we will fall.”

“COME TO THE EDGE.”

“No we will fall”

They came to the edge.

He pushed them, and they flew.-Apollinaire<sup>3</sup>

How often have we wanted to do something so badly it terrifies us? One of the most profound spiritual truths is “so long as we cling, we are bound.”<sup>4</sup> We want to jump, to pursue greater heights, yet at the same time we are afraid of the unknown. We long to be released yet we also feel security in the status quo. There’s no such thing as a free lunch in life-with every action there’s an equal, opposite reaction.

In her book *Hope Will Find You*, Rabbi Naomi Levy writes about her daughter Nomi being diagnosed with A-T.<sup>5</sup> This was a devastating diagnosis for both mother and child, and Rabbi Levy took time off of the rabbinate in order to care for her daughter. She writes that as the worries about her daughter eased up, as her faith grew, she began to think about returning to the rabbinate, saying “*I just didn’t quite have the courage to take the plunge. Sometimes you think you want something, but you don’t*

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<sup>3</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire was a French poet who lived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and start of the 20<sup>th</sup>. I found this poem in Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* (US, Bantam Books, 1992), p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> A-T, or ataxia-telangiectasia syndrome or Louis-Bar syndrome, is a rare, neurodegenerative, autosomal recessive disease causing severe disability.

*want it badly enough to risk discomfort for it. As the Yiddish proverb goes, 'The cat likes fish, but she doesn't want to wet her paws.' And sometimes you want something badly, but still there are forces preventing you from taking action. Forces that keep you standing on the dock when you so want to jump in the water and start swimming. Sometimes, every once in a while, you get lucky and somebody gives you a push just at that moment when you need it the most. You're standing there hesitating on the dock and someone just pushes you into the water-not in a cruel way, but in a way of caring."*<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Levy includes another Yiddish proverb: "If you lie on the ground, you can't fall."<sup>7</sup> If we just stay where we are, as comfortable as that might be, we will not grow or mature. We paint a perfect picture in our head, hiding certain details or "fudging" them to fit our depiction of our lives. We resist change because we find it threatening or because it brings us out of our comfort zone. Things become a 'kishke issue' and we draw lines rather than facing reality.

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Naomi Levy, *Hope Will Find You: My Search for the Wisdom to Stop Waiting and Start Living*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), pgs. 161.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

One of our regular minyanaires has shared many comments about his father Irving z"l. One that stuck with me because of its jarring nature is 'If you want security, go to jail.' We long for a sense of security and permanence, thinking that we are in control; that our fate is in our hands. We hold onto physical possessions never touched in years, as what if we will need them tomorrow. We hold onto emotions, both good and bad, clinging to our past and what we know. Yet ultimately what security is there? Life takes twists and turns we couldn't have possibly envisioned. We think we are in control and then all of a sudden something happens that makes us realize we have no idea what the heck we are doing. We make plans as if our lives will be a certain way forever and yet ultimately everyone's physical body leaves this world.

Too often we think nostalgically about our past, longing to return to "the good old days." That line of thinking applies directly to what we just did: we returned the Torah and said the words **הַדָּשׁ יְמֵינוּ כְּקֵדָם**, renew our lives as in the days of old. A colleague of mine, Rabbi Rob Schienberg of Hoboken, New Jersey, wrote the following in a sermon:

*Hadesh yameinu ke-kedem*' is of course a paradox. If our days are to be 'renewed,' then they will not be 'as of old.' And if they are restored to be 'as of old,' then they will not be 'new' as the word '*hadesh*' implies.

*Eikhah Rabbah*, not surprisingly, associates this verse with the Garden of Eden - because the word '*kedem*' occurs twice in the opening chapters of Genesis.

But curiously, *Eikhah Rabbah* declines the opportunity to quote the verse that would make an association between '*kedem*' and the Garden of Eden explicit: '*va-yita adonai elohim gan be-eden mi-kedem.*'<sup>8</sup>

What does *Eikhah Rabbah* do instead?

כאדם הראשון כמד"א (כל מה דאמר) (בראשית ג':כד) ויגרש את האדם וישכן מקדם לגן  
עדן-חדש ימינו כקדם<sup>9</sup>

The word '*kedem*' in Genesis 3:24 - '*va-yigraresh et ha-adam, va-yashken mi-kedem le-gan eden et ha-k'ruvim, ve'et lahat ha-herev hamit'hapekhet...*' - is not a word associated with the Garden of Eden itself, but a word associated with the EXILE from the Garden.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:8

<sup>9</sup> Eicha Rabba Parsha 5

The decision to quote the word '*kedem*' from this verse, rather than from the creation story, indicates that, from the perspective of Eikhah Rabbah, "*hadesh yameinu ke-kedem*" does NOT mean "renew our lives as they were in the Garden of Eden." Rather, it means, "Renew our lives, as you renewed our lives after we were exiled from the Garden of Eden."

"*Hadesh yameinu ke-kedem*" is then not a plea for restoration of a formerly perfect condition, but rather it is a plea for resilience, a plea for the ability to renew ourselves after future crises and dislocations, just as our lives have been renewed before. As Elie Wiesel said, "God gave Adam a secret - and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again."<sup>10</sup>

Too often in life we are afraid to begin again. Yet that is precisely what G-d does each and every day. We read every morning in the liturgy *המחדש בטובו בכל-יום תמיד מעשה בראשית*, G-d renews in His kindness the works of creation EVERY DAY. Our G-d is not a Deist, setting the world into motion and then stepping away, but rather one who is actively involved in creation at every moment of every day. So too are we

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<sup>10</sup> Sermon by Rabbi Rob Schienberg

involved in creative acts of reinventing ourselves at every moment of every day as we are בצלם אלקים, made in the image of G-d.

Rabbi Naomi Levy, whose first book is called *To Begin Again*, writes, “An ordinary day is filled with all sorts of setbacks and challenges and confrontations and disappointments. We can let these setbacks stop us in our tracks. We can allow them to shake us. Or we can see them as opportunities for living a holy life.”<sup>11</sup> She offers the following prayer to those who feel shook up, either by news they have heard or by the current condition of an aspect of their lives: “*When I panic, God, teach me patience. When I fear, teach me faith. When I doubt myself, teach me confidences. When I despair, teach me hope. When I lose perspective, show me the way-back to love, back to life, back to You. Amen.*”<sup>12</sup>

Spirituality is ultimately about surrender, a letting go, a letting be.<sup>13</sup> After all, we are human *beings* not human “doings.” **Our ultimate**

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Naomi Levy, *Hope Will Find You: My Search for the Wisdom to Stop Waiting and Start Living*, pgs. 192-93.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Naomi Levy, *To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 168.

**success is not measured by what we did but rather by who we are.**

Soon after the death of Rabbi Moshe, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk asked one of his disciples: ‘What was most important to your teacher?’ The disciple thought and then replied ‘Whatever he happened to be doing at the moment.’<sup>14</sup> It wasn’t his success with *Daf Yomi* (the daily study of Talmud), his *devekut* (clinging) in closely reaching G-d while at prayer or his *Divrei Torah* (sermons) but rather whatever he was doing, moment-by-moment and breath-by-breath.

Too often we focus on the “bottom line outcome” rather than the reality of the present. As someone who has transitioned from being outcome-oriented to being process-oriented, I have noticed this more and more and have had to let go of the desire to know the final outcome of everything. It has helped me recognize that there is indeed a spirituality to imperfection, to seeing that there is no one perfect answer to everything and that by virtue of our being humans we are imperfect beings.

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<sup>14</sup> The Spirituality of Imperfection, p. 151.

As we begin the New Year 5779, let us take an honest reflection as to where our lives are currently at. May we appreciate the level we have reached in year 5778 in terms of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth and may we aspire to reach an even higher מדריגה (level) in the coming year. For those who feel that they have taken a step back, I offer the following aphorism: “Spirituality involves continually falling down and getting back up again.”<sup>15</sup> For those who feel that they still have too far to go and that it is insurmountable, I offer the following prayer, also from Rabbi Naomi Levy:

*Please, God, help me to recognize my frailty. May I always remember that no matter how far I have fallen, no matter how bleak my life may seem, no matter how lost I may feel, I can always begin again. Amen.*<sup>16</sup>

Wherever we find ourselves at the present moment, let us close our eyes and take a deep breath in...and a deep breath out...

I invite us all to stay in the room together and continue with *Hineni*, a prayer lead by our Hazzan, acknowledging that no matter

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> To Begin Again, p. 112.

where we are at in terms of inner peace, intellectual aspirations or emotional well-being, we are present at this very moment. The word **הנני** means “here I am.” It means ‘I am present, just as I am, at this given moment, ready to engage in a dialogue with my Creator. The Cantor is saying, ‘Even if I do not feel worthy to do so, that I am insignificant among all of G-d’s creations, nevertheless will I, a mere human being, step before G-d to intercede on behalf of my **קהל**, my congregation, just as my ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, did. In so doing, may my prayer be accepted before you, **שומע תפילה**, The One who Hears Prayer.’

We continue with Hineni on Page 124.