

The State of the Shul: Temple Aliyah in 5768

Rabbi's Report, May 2008

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Temple Aliyah

INTRODUCTION

The famous Talmudic sage, Akaviah ben Mahalallel, said the following in Pirkei Avot: “Ponder three things and you will not fall into the hands of transgression: Know from whence you have come, toward where you are walking, and before whom you will one day have to present an accounting.”

I am about to enter my 18th or Chai year with the congregation. When I first visited Temple Aliyah, my kids were in pre-school; they're now in college. The rabbi's office and the school classrooms were in an old, converted farmhouse; they're now in a modern building. When I came to Temple Aliyah, there was only one other full-time employee—our Temple administrator, Jan—but the activity level in the shul was such that she used to take almost the whole summer off! This past year we have had, essentially, three other full-timers on our staff (Jan, Dr. Bev and Rabbi Berkman), and this coming year we hope to have four. There are other dramatic differences between the congregation I met eighteen years ago and the one I serve today, some of which I will take note of in my remarks.

But as Akaviah reminds us, it is appropriate not only to look back, but to look forward as well. We need periodically to reflect on our goals and dreams, as well as to see how far we have come. That's one of the purposes of our annual meeting.

Note that Akaviah's concern in that passage from Pirkei Avot is not happiness; it's staying on the right path. In reflecting on the state of the shul, yes, of course we want to think about how many events take place here during the year, how many people show up, and how happy people are. But we also should reflect on our mission, our reason for being.

The fundamental questions we should be asking ourselves at an annual meeting like this are: How well are we, as a community, fulfilling our mission? How enthusiastically are we embracing our collective legacy, Torah, and transmitting it to the next generation? How well are we serving God? How much Torah are we studying? And what have we learned from that study? How much are we growing Jewishly? How well are we reaching out,

beyond our walls, and welcoming newcomers? How well are we reaching in, within our walls, to those in need? How well are we helping the less fortunate, whether here in town, in the New England area, in Israel, or in places as far away as Darfur?

These are the kinds of questions we have to ask, if we are to hope to keep our congregation on the proper path, and if we hope to walk along that path. Only these questions will keep us focused on what it is we're here to do, and help us build a kehillah kedoshah, a "holy congregation."

I will try to organize the core of my review, as usual, by addressing, in turn, our shul's activity in its three great roles: shul as educational institution, worship center, and community center. Nonetheless, as always, this strict organizational division is tough to maintain, because, as I'm fond of saying, the most successful programs and events that take place here straddle all three of these areas: they have educational content, they inspire us spiritually, and they consciously build community.

A perfect example is our Morashah Torah Writing Project, which is nearing completion. What a day we had here today, as Rabbi Surazski finished writing just about all of the letters in our new sefer torah and sewing the three portions of parchment together! What category could we possibly put that project into? For all of us, it has been educational, for many of us it has also been enormously inspiring, and in many ways, large and small, it has also built community. And so, in describing our congregational activity, there will be some blurring of these boundaries.

After reviewing this year's congregational activity, I will review my own work as rabbi of the congregation.

I would like to begin with some thank you's, for I do not work in isolation. Our shul is a non-profit organization with lay and professional leaders working in tandem. Let me speak of each in turn.

We have a history of strong lay leadership. Ever since I came to Temple Aliyah, it's been my privilege to work with capable, energetic, hard-working and caring lay leaders, and this past year has been no exception. I cannot name, acknowledge and thank all who have given of their time and expertise to further the good of our shul. What I can do is to acknowledge and to thank **Peter Seresky**, who's completing his first year as president of the congregation. Peter has tried hard always to see the forest, and not just the

trees. He tries to keep his eyes on the horizon, on the ultimate goals of our congregation, and to remember that, unless we remain a warm, friendly, inviting and accepting place, it's not worth our getting anywhere. Peter has a naturally warm, engaging and caring manner, which has, I believe, helped him in his demanding role. I look forward to working with him for another year, after which I think he's going to relocate to Beijing.

To everyone with whom I have worked: to all of our officers and members of the Board of Trustees, to the many committee chairs and committee members who serve our congregation, to our Sisterhood and Men's Club leaders: thank you all for your efforts on behalf of our congregation!

I also work with a capable, hard-working staff, without whom I could not accomplish very much. Let me mention them by name.

The two full-time members of the educational staff with whom I have worked closely this year are **Dr. Beverly Schwartz-Katsh**, our Director of Education, and **Rabbi Jethro Berkman**, Director of Community Education. Beverly, who is completing her tenth year with us, is experienced, capable and caring. She is committed to Conservative Judaism and to giving our children the most comprehensive Jewish education possible within the constraints of the supplementary school. For the second year in a row, Beverly was responsible for organizing and executing our grade-based family education programs as well as administering our school. I would like to thank her for her commitment, her hard work, and her educational vision.

I hope I'm not the only one who has come to appreciate Rabbi Berkman's hard work and talent. In his work with our Bar/Bat Mitzvah kids, his supervision of our Youth Advisors, Shanna and Courtney, his partnership with our Family Education Committee, and his leadership of our Torah and Chocolate programs, he has excelled during this, his first year with us.

As an aside, let me mention that it's enough to make one wish for an assistant rabbi! Rabbi Berkman is not an assistant rabbi; he's here as an educator with carefully delimited hours. But think what we could do if someone like him were to be hired to share responsibility with me for providing rabbinic leadership within our community? It is exciting to contemplate, and perhaps one day it will come to pass.

Speaking of the value of having other rabbis on our staff, think of the wonderful contributions that **Sonia Saltzman** has made to our congregation

during the past year! Sonia has been our rabbinic intern, working here approximately ten hours per week as she has been completing her rabbinical studies at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School. Sonia has brought several dozen bar and bat mitzvah kids through the final stages of their preparation. She has created and conducted services, delivered divrei torah, and has taught, among others, the members of our adult bar/bat mitzvah class. Most of all, through her warmth, caring and maturity, she has reached out and embraced us.

I mention this not only to praise her and to wish her well in her future career, but to point out the value of hiring a rabbinic intern. Yes, there's a cost involved. Yes, it demands time from me to supervise and to guide the intern. But the rewards can be—as we've seen—great.

I therefore would like to urge that we not forget this experience and we consider doing it again. Given the anticipated costs and time demands involved in integrating a full-time cantor into our congregation, the decision was made not to pursue a rabbinic intern next year, but I would hope that this is only a temporary hiatus. If there is one thing that people join synagogues to access, it is rabbinic guidance. Congregations our size often seek to engage more than one rabbi. Fortunately, though not in a rabbinic capacity, we have Rabbi Berkman on staff, and fortunately, our congregation is blessed with the presence of Rabbi Gordon, a classmate of mine from the Seminary, who, among other things, has done so much to enhance our Torah Writing Project. We should be asking ourselves: When are we going to engage a full or part-time assistant rabbi to do so many of the things that we cannot do at present?

I work closely with our teaching staff, who I also would like to acknowledge at this time. It isn't easy to recruit, train, cultivate and retain good teachers. As was the case last year, we have had to juggle several of our teachers' schedules; fortunately, we have retained our core teaching staff of capable and loyal teachers.

I also work with our office staff, who I'd like to acknowledge and thank at this time. **Rachel Abramson** primarily serves as my administrative assistant, scheduling appointments for me, handling correspondence, and typing my sermons and other written work—though she is also always willing to lend a helping hand to do general office work when called upon to do so. Rachel is industrious, thoughtful, careful and caring—and has a deep understanding of the particular demands and subtleties of rabbinic work. **Sally Kepnes** is our calm and amiable school secretary, and she also handles the phones and greets

visitors when she is here. Many thanks, as well, to our bookkeeper, **Rufina Kotlyer**, who's always willing to extend herself on behalf of the congregation, to **Tony Whittemore**, who smoothly and dependably maintains our building, and to **Nelle Whittemore**, who cares for our kitchen so lovingly, and with so much good cheer.

Last but not least, is **Jan Zidle**, who has been here for over twenty years. Jan is our very capable synagogue administrator and office manager, upon whom we depend for so much. She is capable in many ways; chief among these is her understanding and empathy for people and her remarkable ability to organize us and keep us on track.

I. A Shul is an Educational Institution

“Give our hearts the wisdom to listen, to learn, and to teach” (a selection from the Ahavah Rabbah prayer, recited every morning before the Shema). These words, which are engraved in stone alongside the entrance to our shul's administrative and school building, aptly express what the rabbis who composed our liturgy wanted us to desire, namely, to learn and to share that learning with the next generation. Jews have always believed in life-long learning. Successful Jewish communities are communities where Jews continue to learn—from the cradle to the grave.

How well are we doing? Well, in some ways we are doing very well indeed. We have a well-run religious school. As you can see from Beverly's report, the curriculum of our school presents a fine introduction to Torah, Jewish values, the Hebrew language, tefillah (prayer) and Israel. And we provide good support for kids with learning issues. Kids who enroll in our school in kindergarten and continue on through to the 7th grade—attending along the way the grade-based Shabbat morning youth services—should be able to read Hebrew, understand the contours of the Hebrew calendar and the flow of the Siddur, be able to participate in our Shabbat and weekday services, appreciate the importance of Israel, understand some of the complexities of applying Jewish values to real-life issues, and—perhaps most important—understand that we expect them to continue their Jewish studies at Prozdor, Hebrew College's high school program. A high percentage of our kids enroll in Prozdor and remain there through graduation, if not beyond. This may come as a surprise, but we have more than eighty kids from our congregation enrolled in Prozdor between the eighth and twelfth grades. We are the shul

with the second-highest representation at Prozdor, second only to Temple Emanuel, which is conveniently located only about a mile away from the Hebrew College campus and happens to have almost a thousand more families than we do.

We also have strong and growing adult and family educational programming, including courses that I teach, such as my Tuesday evening series, my post-kiddush study sessions on Shabbat afternoons, and our sixth grade pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah family ed series, as well as our annual Shabbaton, our Sunday morning Coffee and Israel programs, our adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, our adult Hebrew courses and other events as well.

But what about the education of our kids from the cradle to kindergarten? Here, we have to admit that we do fall short. Yes, thanks to a very energetic group of young families, we offer a wonderful array of Temple Tots programs for pre-schoolers, including musical programs. But virtually all of these pre-schoolers, and many others who live in the area, are enrolled in Jewish pre-schools elsewhere. This represents our greatest educational deficiency with, as many of us are aware, serious consequences for our membership and for our health as a congregation.

Let me share with you a story. A few years ago, I was speaking to a couple that had just joined the shul. I asked them, "Why now? Why did you decide to join at this time? And why Temple Aliyah?" The answer they gave me was that their child had just finished pre-school and was ready to enroll in kindergarten, so they felt it was time. And they decided to join Temple Aliyah because they had grown up as Conservative Jews, and they wanted to join a Conservative congregation. "But," they added, "it wasn't an easy decision to make." "Why?" I asked. "Because," they said, "our daughter really loves the synagogue where her pre-school is located. She loves the rabbi. She didn't know what she was missing by not being here. And she was very upset that we were pulling her away from 'her rabbi' and 'her Temple!'"

Is it any surprise that this family was the only one within its cohort that decided to join our congregation rather than the one in which that pre-school was located? This story teaches us a very simple lesson: We have to stop thinking that the potential members of our shul are in their twenties or thirties; we have to realize that they are three and four years old. And we have to ask ourselves, How well are we reaching out to them, and how well might we reach out to them?

Now, it is true that our congregation cannot do everything. No congregation can. But during those precious early ages, kids—and their families—form their most powerful, emotional connections with their congregations. Each year, we miss out on wonderful families who might wish to join us but don't, for the simple reason that we don't have a pre-school. And we miss out on the opportunity to better influence those pre-schoolers who are members of our shul. Instead of seeing them here as many as 15 or 30 hours a week, we might see them here only one or two hours a week, at most.

If, then, there's one medium-range goal that I'd like to urge our congregation to focus on, it's to create the Temple Aliyah Pre-School. Yes, it will cost money. Most worthwhile things do. Yes, as with every endeavor, it will be risky. ("If we build it, will they come?") But each year that we fail to create our pre-school is yet another lost opportunity. I am heartened that this remains on the radar screen of many of our congregation's leaders—hopefully, it will one day become a reality.

Speaking of the education of our youth, let me remind everyone that not every one of our school-aged youngsters is enrolled in our religious school. Our congregation is much more diverse than many people realize. Consider, for a moment, the fact that this year 140 children were enrolled in our religious school between kindergarten and 7th grade. Given that figure, think for a moment: how many children in our congregation do you think are enrolled in a Jewish day school?

When I first came to Temple Aliyah in 1991, there were **eight** children enrolled in day school; today, there are about **eighty**. Eighty is a big number. Since that number includes a bunch of eighth graders and about ten students attending Gann Academy (the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston), the actual percentage of our kids enrolled in Jewish day schools is about 30%. That has a profound impact on our community.

Fundamentally, it presents us with the challenge of integration. If 30% of our kids are not here on the days that religious school meets, then how can we build a strong, cohesive, inclusive community among our youth? One way is by remembering how important it is for kids—all of our kids—to be engaging in Jewish activities on Shabbat. **Shabbat** is a wonderful time for kids from all backgrounds to meet and interact with others and to become attached to our shul. Second, we can and should put a lot of effort into helping our youth groups be successful socializing organizations.

We have the challenge of integrating families as well. Families sending kids to religious school and families sending kids to day school don't meet in the carpool lane. They don't meet on the edges of the town soccer fields. Where do they meet? How do they get to know one another at our shul? These are serious systemic challenges.

I was recently invited to appear on a panel with, among others, Barry Shrage, President of CJP; Jeff Summit, Tufts Hillel Director; and Jerry Silverman, from the Foundation for Jewish Camp; at the national conference of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE). The topic was how to break down the walls between the various institutions that educate Jews, particularly young ones. If we agree, as Barry Shrage put it, that all Jewish kids should get a Jewish education, go to Jewish summer camp, participate in a teen trip to Israel and eventually end up at a college or university with a strong Hillel, then how do we make that happen? His answer was to point to me. "The synagogue," he said, "is the gateway institution par excellence into the Jewish community." It is the one and only one Jewish institution through which almost all Jews pass. Over their lifetimes, over 80% of American Jews affiliate with a synagogue. Not only should those of us who lead synagogues help our members make full use of the other Jewish institutions in our area, but we should seek to integrate within our walls as well. We don't have our own congregational Jewish summer camp. It therefore becomes our duty to steer kids to one or another of the excellent Jewish camps in our area. Similarly, we don't have a day school on our campus. It is therefore our job to steer our families who are considering day school to one or another of the excellent ones in our area.

When we make those referrals, we must remain committed to the task of integration within the congregation, so that families who send their kids to Rashi or Schechter or JCDS or Gann can expect that they will remain as much a part of the fabric of our shul as families who send their kids to our religious school. Or that families who send their kids to Bauercrest or Yavneh or Ramah or Tevyah or Tel Noar or Pembroke or YJ—or any of the other fine Jewish camps in our area—will feel that they have a place here. And that whatever Israel program of the many that exist that our kids participate in, they will find our shul to be the place where they can process that and explore what it has meant to them.

Responsibility for educational and social integration—in particular, the integration of our youth—is a task that we hope our Director of Community

Education, Rabbi Jethro Berkman, will be focusing energy on during the coming year.

Additionally, he and I have discussed the possibility of conducting interviews with our member families to reflect on where they are Jewishly and where they are going: What Jewish educational, religious, or communal activities they want to get involved in—whether here or outside of the shul—during the coming years, and what might be a worthwhile path to get there from here.

I've long dreamed of conducting these interviews here at Temple Aliyah; it is only possible to contemplate conducting them now because our Director of Community Education happens to be a rabbi who has training and skill in this area. These interviews can not only contribute to "breaking down the silos" by helping to make each congregant's Jewish journey as seamless as possible, but can also strengthen our congregants' attachment to our shul as it becomes the pole around which revolve their Jewish educational experiences.

II. A Shul is a Religious Center

As we all know, Cantor Gelman, who served our congregation for 36 years, became Cantor Emeritus this past July. That meant that our shul's leadership had two short-term responsibilities: (1) to address in 2007-2008 the tasks for which Cantor Gelman had been responsible—leading services on holidays and Shabbat and teaching bar and bat mitzvah students; and also (2) to put in place a process to determine how to serve those and other needs in the future.

Concerning immediate needs, the decision was made to train lay leaders to lead our services on the high holidays and also, through the year, on Shabbat mornings. To achieve this goal, I met with four members of our congregation with prior high holiday davening experience and worked with them over the spring and summer of last year to help them prepare to lead high holiday services here. For many years before I became a rabbi, I had served as a cantor for High Holiday services, and so this was a welcome opportunity to re-explore the music and the high holiday liturgy in depth. I myself took on the responsibility of chanting the Neilah service, which I hadn't done for many years, which was a gratifying experience.

I want to thank those volunteer daveners for their commitment. We should be proud that our community was willing to assume responsibility for leading high holiday services, and grateful for what we experienced.

As far as Shabbat morning services were concerned, we already had a pool of men and women able and willing to lead us, yet this presented an opportunity for others as well to come forward to learn this skill. The chair of our Ritual Committee organized a calendar and filled in the names, and off we went. Not only should we be very proud of that, but we should try to continue to provide opportunities for our lay leaders to lead us in worship. Such participation strengthens the communal nature of our worship.

To train our bar and bat mitzvah students, we engaged David Wolf, an educator well-known to many in our community because of his long-standing positions at SSDS of Greater Boston and Camp Grossman, and his previous work here. David is a gifted bar/bat mitzvah tutor, and he shared responsibility with Rabbi Berkman for tutoring our kids to recite their torah and haftarah portions until about a month before their simcha, when Sonia Saltzman would take over and teach them how to lead parts of the service. Independently, Rabbi Berkman met with all of the children to help them craft their divrei torah. As always, I met with all of the families celebrating upcoming bar or bat mitzvahs collectively (two years before, one year before, and six months before) and individually (about six weeks before). I also met with our three bar/bat mitzvah educators throughout the year, to be sure that we were all on the same track.

I am grateful to all three of them. Our bar/bat mitzvah training this past year went exceedingly smoothly. Our children were well trained, engaged and enthusiastic. Training went at the proper pace, and was responsible and professional. In addition to chanting their haftarah and torah portions well, the kids participated very nicely in our Shabbat morning services. It was, as we say in French, a mechayeh!

To address the future, a group of lay leaders met and made the recommendation, subsequently adopted by our Board of Trustees, to pursue hiring a full-time cantor to perform the duties that Cantor Gelman had performed, as well as to teach music within our religious school and help music permeate our congregation. A search committee was appointed, which worked very hard to fulfill this mandate. They have presented a candidate to the congregation, **Cantor Gaston Bogomolni**, who — assuming, of course, a favorable vote later this evening—I look forward to welcoming as a colleague on August 1st.

Since we are on the eve of welcoming a new cantor to our congregation, let me pause to say a few words about such a transition. First, transitions aren't

always easy. According to the literature on transitions, you can't really say "Hello" before you say "Goodbye." To that end, I am grateful that last year at this time we held an event honoring Cantor Gelman, at which we presented him with a plaque, and at which the Temple Aliyah chorus sang a song in his honor. As a capstone to this year of transition, we are planning yet another celebration: a festive brunch on June 22nd to say farewell. Thirty six years represents a significant period of time in the life of our congregation, and it behooves us to reflect on that era and to wish Harry and Phyllis well on this occasion.

In August I invite you to come and to get to know Cantor Bogomolni. Cantor Bogomolni will be conducting Kabbalat Shabbat services on September 5th, on which we'll hold the last of our five "Torah and Chocolate" events to celebrate this year's focus on the Torah.

(That evening, incidentally, we will also introduce next year's educational programming theme, which is Avodah—i.e., "Worship." As Pirkei Avot teaches us, "The world stand on three things: Torah, Avodah, and Gmilit Hasadim (Acts of Lovingkindness)." This past year has been the Year of Torah at Temple Aliyah, next year will be the Year of Avodah—a year in which we will devote ourselves to exploring worship—and the year after that will, God willing, be the Year of Gmilit Hasadim (Lovingkindness), when we will explore how we can better fulfill the Jewish mandate to reach out and help others.)

As we welcome Cantor Bogomolni, let's try to remember a few things. First, everyone who prays is unique and every prayer leader is unique. Even the same melodies sound different when they are sung by different people. It is inevitable that Cantor Bogomolni will sing old melodies differently and will introduce new ones. That's what we would want him to do! Second, just as it will take us time to get to know him, it will take him time to get to know us.

One of the things that attracted Cantor B to Temple Aliyah was our high level of lay participation in worship. The fact that we can provide daveners and Torah readers and haftarah readers throughout the year and the fact that we value that level of participation are strengths of which he is well aware. I look forward, during Cantor B's tenure here, to seeing many more members of our congregation learn how to conduct services, read Torah and read haftarah. My highest hope is that more of us will recognize how precious weekly communal engagement with traditional worship and text can be. If that happens, then our worship can truly become compelling and alive.

III. A Shul is a Community Center

Our shul has always valued *menschlichkeit*. We have worked hard to build community here, and we should be proud of that.

Strong, well-functioning committees such as our Kehillah (community building) Committee, our Hesed (Lovingkindness) Committee, which reaches out to members who are in need, and our Outreach (Keruv) Committee (serving the needs of interfaith families within and outside of the congregation) are vital to our mission. So are groups like Sisterhood, Mens Club and 45+. We depend on them to build and maintain community. We are currently exploring ways to strengthen and reorganize our Hesed Committee so that it can better express our congregational imperative to support members in need. And we've also recently revived the Keruv Committee, which has held a few productive meetings and events this year and hopes to build on its success next year.

We shouldn't stop there. We can and should put our heads together and devise additional means of becoming more "warm and welcoming" to outsiders (to quote Ron Wolfson, this past year's Shabbaton speaker), and more supportive and embracing to insiders—without, of course, becoming smothering or cloying. (Shul should, after all, be a place where you can be left alone, where you don't have to spill your guts, where you can meditate in solitude and silence—as well as a place where someone will give you a shoulder to cry on.)

A few weeks ago, I sent out an email to the congregation inviting women who've been experiencing women's health issues to attend a meeting to discuss ways that the congregation could help support them during such a difficult time. About a minyan of women attended, and follow-up is planned.

There are other creative ways we can reach out to and provide support to our individuals and families.

And we should always remember that, as important as the programs and the formal work of committees are, every one of us has to see ourselves as an ambassador of the congregation, representing its essence and values. Every one of us should be reaching out to members and to visitors as well.

A few weeks ago, a couple that was visiting our shul on Shabbat morning told me how much they like those name badges that members of the board were wearing. That allowed them, they said, to feel comfortable approaching a board member to ask a question about the shul. But, they said, none of those folks who were wearing badges actually approached them! The couple did say that they were grateful that people were giving them plenty of space to breathe, but that they certainly would not have minded it if one or two board members—or even non-board members—had approached them and introduced themselves.

IV. Rabbinic Responsibilities

Having shared a few reflections on the functioning of the shul as a whole, let me now focus more specifically on my role as a rabbi in the congregation and in the broader community. Some members of the congregation have no idea what a rabbi does. (One congregant once said to my wife, “I know what the rabbi does on Saturdays, but what does he do during the rest of the week?”) It is valuable to pause and reflect on how I spend my time and how well my own work as a rabbi furthers the mission of the shul.

The core of a rabbi's work is preaching, teaching, public speaking, officiating, pastoral work, and representing the congregation in the community. Usually, these roles (particularly the latter) overlap, but let me explore them in turn.

Teaching and Preaching. A rabbi is first and foremost a teacher. One particular form of teaching is usually referred to as “preaching”—i.e., delivering a dvar torah on Shabbat or holidays, in which classical texts are cited and brought to bear on a contemporary issue and/or concern. I care very much about this role. I value it. I believe that, whether or not they pray, whether or not they feel an obligation to observe Shabbat, whether or not they consider themselves intellectuals, all of our members should come to shul on Shabbat morning to hear the reading of the Torah and the weekly Torah discussion. It should be a top priority for our congregation to encourage and facilitate this. This is how Judaism has been transmitted for two thousand years. Only by remaining loyal to the Torah as our central source of moral and historical meaning and constantly bringing its insights to bear on the world in which we live can we, on the one hand, remain authentically tied to

our tradition and, on the other hand, allow it to continue to live and grow and influence us today.

I spend a fair amount of time choosing a suitable topic to speak about or to lead a discussion about on Shabbat and holiday mornings and I spend a great deal of time researching the topic and preparing my remarks. (It can take much more time to prepare a topic for discussion and to prepare an accompanying study sheet than to write a sermon.) During the past year, I have spoken about or led discussions concerning a wide variety of issues, ranging from the controversy over the ADL's refusal to label the Armenian massacres "genocide," to "The Distinction between Crimes and Sins"; from the importance of remembering that "Jews Come in All Colors" to "Four Questions to Ask on the 60th Anniversary of the State of Israel." My goal is to stimulate discussion on the core issues facing Jews today: Who are we? What are our duties as Jews? How can the words of the Torah influence our decisions at work, at home, at school?

I try to steer clear of purely political discussions. I never want to suggest that Judaism lines up with one and only one particular point on the political spectrum. It doesn't. And yet it is also true that Jews can and should bring their Jewishness and their Judaism with them wherever they go—even into the voting booth. But different people may draw different political conclusions from our Torah discussions—and we should always be respectful of those differences.

During the past year, I participated in a research seminar at the Mandel Center for the Study of Jewish Education at Brandeis University. My research project centered on how I decide each Shabbat what to speak about and how to present it. This culminated in an oral presentation at the Mandel Center on January 27, 2008—a video copy of which is available at www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/TRLVideos/D2_CH1.mov, and a 35-page written report of my findings, which will shortly be published by Brandeis. The hope is that studies such as mine will help other rabbis and other teachers as they seek to make rabbinic literature accessible and relevant.

In addition to my weekly drashah on Shabbat morning, I offer a weekly adult education class. This past year, given that it was the Year of the Torah, the focus of my class was on the weekly Torah portion. The class, I'm delighted to report, developed great liveliness, enthusiasm and spirit, and we therefore twice extended it.

Incidentally, one of the frustrations that I've come to feel year after year is that, because of my other congregational responsibilities, I'm too busy to devote more than one night a week to my teaching here at the shul. (I generally have meetings at the shul on Monday and Thursday nights.) Since, until this year, I've been the only rabbi working here, that has resulted in a limited amount of rabbinic teaching in our synagogue—much less than I think our congregation desires and deserves.

In addition to my weekly Tuesday evening adult education class, though, I also offer post-kiddush study sessions throughout the year. Between Passover and Shavuot, these focus on Pirkei Avot; at other times of the year, they may focus on other subjects, such as on this past April 5th, when I spoke about "Texts and Techniques to Enhance Your Seder," a program I usually offer every other year.

I lecture or give other presentations to various groups within the congregation throughout the year. For example, on April 1st, I gave a presentation on Hebrew calligraphy and scribal arts to the Sisterhood. Last December, I gave a presentation to our "empty nester" havurah on "God and God Language." At our Retreat last year, as scholar in residence, I gave several presentations on the role of Torah in the Jewish religious imagination, and I will be delivering several similar presentations at this year's retreat, which will begin in less than one week.

In addition to these, I also teach most of our family education programs. For example, I do all of the teaching for our sixth grade pre-bar/bat mitzvah programs, and also teach our fifth and fourth grade programs. I generally teach a Sunday morning course every other year entitled, "Finding Your Way through the Siddur" or "Finding Your Way through the Torah" and take part in numerous other programs in the religious school as well. In addition, I frequently visit the classrooms to give short presentations to address questions or issues that have arisen. (For details concerning my involvement in our religious school, consult the document I prepared several years ago.)

Sometimes, my teaching extends far beyond the classroom. For example, I led our congregational trip to Israel this past February. Throughout the trip, there were numerous opportunities for informal educational discussions with young and old on topics such as contemporary Israeli society, the historicity of the Biblical narratives and the nature of the obligation to wear tefillin.

Public Appearances and Interfaith Work. I am often called upon to attend, and/or deliver invocations or speak at various events. Whether it is a 9/11, Veteran's Day, Memorial Day or Labor Day gathering, or the Needham Town Meeting or the annual meetings of the Needham Community Council or those of any of a number of other community organizations, I am often called upon to represent the congregation or the Jewish community through my participation and/or speaking. I try to be judicious with these invitations. Otherwise, they would overwhelm my calendar.

Recently, I gave a talk at JF&CS to interfaith couples on the variety of perspectives toward Israel within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Just before Yom HaAtzmaut, I led a seminar on "The State of Liberal Judaism and Religious Pluralism in Israel" for teachers at the Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton (where fifty-one of our children are enrolled). A few weeks earlier, I led two workshops on human rights for eighth graders at the Pollard Middle School as part of their "STA" (i.e., "Students Taking Action") Day program. (Of the fifty kids in my workshops, probably over a dozen were members of our congregation.) A few weeks before that, I taught a seminar for chaplains at Hebrew Senior Life on Jewish legal perspectives toward end-of-life issues. Next week, I will be teaching in a pre-Shavuot program at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School (where five of our kids are enrolled). Once a year, I am the guest speaker at an ecumenical program at the Fox Hill Village retirement facility, where several of our members live.

I feel strongly that, as a congregational rabbi, I have a duty (a) to support local and regional Jewish organizations (such as Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Bureau of Jewish Education, the Jewish Community Relations Council, Jewish Family & Children's Service, the Anti Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, the JCCs of Greater Boston and Hebrew College); (b) to participate in local rabbinical organizations (such as the New England Region of the Rabbinical Assembly, of which I am a vice president, and the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis); and (c) and to work with interfaith organizations, both lay and clergy, locally and regionally to further the interests of our congregation, the Jewish community and the broader community. Regarding the last of these, I regularly attend meetings of the Needham Clergy Association, of which I have served as president, and also participate in other interfaith activities. For example, just last week, I participated in a historic gathering of rabbis and imams in Cambridge. (Usually, when I meet with non-Jewish clergy, they are either Protestant ministers or Catholic priests.) In previous years I have attended interfaith

clergy dialogue groups sponsored by American Jewish Committee, and have participated in other interfaith gatherings, such as a workshop on Christian anti-Semitism sponsored by ADL following the production of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," and a scholarly seminar (entitled "Fuller Meanings: Christian and Jewish Readings of the Bible") sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College.

Officiation. I officiate at Shabbat morning services throughout the year, except during the weeks that I am away from the congregation for professional reasons or because they coincide with my vacation. I also officiate at all holiday services: e.g., the High Holidays, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot. During the first few years after I initiated Minyan Shira, I led each of these services as well. On several occasions during the past year, after reviewing our practice with me, Rabbi Berkman has led Minyan Shira. Next year, we will share this responsibility with Cantor Bogomolni.

I officiate at services at which our children become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, whether these are on Shabbat morning or at other times, such as on Shabbat afternoon or Rosh Hodesh. I also, of course, officiate at baby namings, britot milah ("brises"), weddings and funerals.

Pastoral Work. I do a great deal of counseling. Generally, several hours each week are devoted to meeting with congregants or others to address personal issues. Among those whom I counsel are: individuals or families facing illness or loss, couples prior to marriage, individuals whom I am sponsoring for conversion, individuals contemplating separation or divorce and those confronting other issues as well. I often make referrals. In addition to formal counseling sessions, I frequently have informal pastoral encounters with individuals throughout the day, whether in person, by phone, or via e-mail.

I devote a good portion of my time to visiting the sick, whether in the hospital, a rehab facility, a hospice or in their homes. (Managed care has resulted in shorter and shorter hospital stays.) I also try to stay in touch with the homebound and the elderly, and to visit them periodically.

Study. Study is an essential component of a rabbinic life. Last summer, I finished my three year course of study at the Hartman Institute and officially became a Hartman Institute Senior Rabbinic Fellow. As indicated above, between 2006 and 2007, I participated in a seminar on the Teaching of Rabbinical Literature at the Mandel Center at Brandeis University. This required me to attend a seminar once every other week and to write and deliver a paper at the conclusion of the program. During the past several years, I have taught a one-semester course entitled "Laws of Mourning" at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School (for which I prepare on my day off). This course has helped my own rabbinic practice by requiring me to keep up with the Jewish and general literature on death and dying. Periodically, I enroll in the Rabbinic Training Institute jointly sponsored by the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis and Hebrew College.

Throughout the year, I participate in professional seminars designed to hone my leadership and professional skills. For example, last fall (November 4-6, 2007) I was invited to participate in a CJP-sponsored Leadership Training Institute. During the past few years, I have attended seminars on, among other topics, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, divorce, the changing American Jewish family, neonatal and perinatal loss, interfaith outreach, and healing.

Administration. In addition to the teaching, speaking, officiating and pastoral work that most people associate with rabbis, congregational rabbis also occupy a critical place within the professional leadership structure of the congregation. As the senior member of the professional staff, the rabbi should be made aware of and be invited to offer guidance on the entire span of congregational activities and initiatives. It is, therefore, very important that there be full and timely communication between lay leaders and the rabbi so that the rabbi can be brought into all major policy discussions at an early stage. He or she should supervise the work of the other professionals on the staff. This includes the educators and, inasmuch as he or she is responsible for the religious services and practices of the congregation, the rabbis, cantors, rabbinic interns and bar/bat mitzvah tutors on staff as well.

The rabbi should work hard to keep the organization properly aligned. The rabbi's job includes helping the congregation to envision and clarify goals, conceptualize approaches to those goals, and nurture new initiatives.

The rabbi should help make the values of the institution permeate its decisions, interactions, and programs. Obviously, given the natural amount of decentralization in our—or any — synagogue, it is virtually impossible to achieve this, but is worth striving for. For example, when a program's timing on a Saturday night fails to take note of the departure of Shabbat, when a meeting conflicts with minyan, when there is duplication of effort, or a failure to communicate, when a lay leader is slighted, or a professional mistreated, when a visitor to the shul gets the cold shoulder, or a teacher speaks to a child in a manner not in keeping with derekh erez (proper mannerly behavior)—then the shul suffers. The rabbi, through his or her influence, should try to prevent these from occurring.

I spend a great deal of time going over various aspects of synagogue management with Jan, our synagogue administrator, with the other members of our staff, and with our lay leadership. I conduct regular staff meetings. I meet with and/or speak with the president frequently, and confer regularly with the chair of the Ritual Committee. I frequently confer with Dr. Bev and the leadership of the School Committee. This year, I supervised and mentored Rabbi Jethro Berkman and our rabbinic intern, Sonia Saltzman. Next year, I anticipate supervising and mentoring Cantor Bogomolni as well. I attend virtually all meetings of the Board of Trustees, the Executive Committee and the Ritual Committee, and most meetings of the School Committee. In addition, I generally keep in touch with the leaders of Sisterhood, Men's Club, key committees and the various other groups within the synagogue, to offer guidance and support.

In addition to the standing committees and auxiliaries, during this particular year, I have been heavily involved in the work of the Strategic Planning Committee, the Cantors Search Committee, the Morashah Torah Writing Project Committee and the Morashah Endowment Campaign. In addition, I worked extensively to resurrect the Keruv Committee and to examine ways to strengthen and broaden the scope of our Social Action Committee.

A FEW PARTING WORDS OF TORAH

The first verse of this coming week's parashah (B'hukkotai) reminds us of the importance of leading an observant Jewish life. The metaphor that the Torah uses for doing this is an interesting one: it is **walking**. To introduce the consequences of leading a proper Jewish life, the parashah begins by saying,

“אם בחוקותי תלכו” — “Im b’hukkotai teleichu,” —literally, “If you **walk** in God’s laws.”

What a beautiful image. It reminds us of God’s call to Abraham. “לך לך” — “Lech Lecha,” God says to Abraham, “Go forth and **walk** from your homeland and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

It also reminds us of that passage in Pirkei Avot that we examined at the beginning of this presentation: Akaviah was counseling us to know toward where we are **walking**.

When we think about religion as a set of beliefs, practices and relationships that can lead us to personal fulfillment, it can motivate us to become religious. But at its essence, religion isn’t about personal fulfillment. It’s about **walking** on a path, following a trail that lies before us. We did not blaze that trail; rather, as we might put it in religious language, it is a path that has been put there for us. It’s a path that our ancestors were told to take, and that we are told to take and that our descendants will also be told to take. It’s one that came long before us and will endure long after us. We call the mitzvah of following this path—ללכת בדרכיו “lalakhet bidrachav,” “to walk in God’s ways.” It’s no coincidence that הלכה (halachah) which is similar to הליכה (halichah)—i.e., “walking,” is the word used to describe the norms of Jewish practice.

My hope is that, long after the Year of Torah—which has been such a joyful year—comes to an end, our congregation will continue to strive to learn Torah, and that, long after the Year of Avodah comes to an end, we’ll strive to infuse our worship with passion and commitment. And I hope that even after the year after that, after the year when our congregational programming will focus on the Jewish passion for social justice, we will still strive to fulfill mitzvot and to try our best “l’taken olam b’malchut shaddai” — “to perfect the world through the influence of the divine” (from the Aleinu prayer).

I hope that our congregation will always be a community that not only takes care of us, but which motivates us to take care of others. Even as all of us continue to pursue our own individual spiritual paths—as we should—let us, as a congregation, try to walk together, in step, in the same direction. Let us ללכת בדרכיו—lalechet bidrachav—to walk in God’s ways.

Amen.