

*Building an Inclusive Community*

The year 2022 has come and gone. Already a week into 2023, we might be tempted to forget what we experienced last year. And, while we don't always like to reflect on the past, there are a few things worthy of our attention and focus. Although there was a lot of good to remember, there were also many challenges. Despite improved COVID vaccination rates, 2022 did see a decline in the overall age of life expectancy. While we've been able to advance in the areas of technology and science, there are other areas that need work. The decrease in life expectancy raises concern, especially as mental health challenges continue for many Americans. Perhaps as we welcome our new secular year, we can consider our own physical and mental well-being and the changes we wish to make in the coming days.

For us, the best place to begin is with Torah. Torah continues to guide and support us, and this week we read the last portion in the book of Genesis, Vayechi. This is the second time in the book of Genesis where we find a portion that includes the word for life, "chai" - only to discover that the end of life has come for one of our ancestors. On this Shabbat, we read about Jacob's death. Earlier in Genesis, we read Chayei Sarah, which notes the death of Sarah. This week includes many details of Jacob's life, emphasizing his legacy. Jacob, also known as Israel, continues to be a source of inspiration. Torah tells us that Jacob was ill. Joseph receives word of his father's grave condition and leaves Egypt to pay his respects. Despite years of distance and much challenge, Jacob and Joseph come together one last time. Jacob shares his wishes not only for his sons, but also for two of his grandsons – Ephraim and Menasheh. The powerful blessings that Jacob shares with them remain part of our tradition today. When Shabbat enters each week, traditionally, we offer a blessing in the names of Ephraim and Menasheh.

Typically, this blessing is reserved for our male children. Similarly, we have a blessing for our female children, which is offered by invoking the names of our matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. For many of our traditional rituals, we have inherited customs that have been divided into two binary categories: male and female. But, today, there is more. It isn't always possible to divide people in one way or another. In fact, a new generation is at the forefront of teaching us about the importance of looking beyond a single gender. For many families, typical gender divisions are cause for great pain and concern. They can be serious triggers that result in significant struggles and challenges. Today, we see this reality growing more and more in our community and within our own congregation.

We began the book of Genesis with a detailed description about the creation of the world. As the first human was created, "Ha'Adam," - the human - we read that "both male and female" God created "them." The primordial human being, according to our tradition, was one being with both male and female parts. God created them, "otam" in the Divine image and in the Divine likeness. In using the pronoun "otam," them - our tradition holds that both aspects of a person, male and female, should be honored and respected equally. This, of course, has not often been appreciated and recognized by many in the larger Jewish world. However, we continue to make strides towards equality among the genders. And today, gender identity and gender fluidity have become major topics of discussion and exploration by our children and teens. They are helping to educate us in our understanding that although we may be born into one category, it might not truly reflect who we are when we look at ourselves in the mirror. In safe spaces here at Beth Israel, both at the Miriam Browning Jewish Learning Center and in Kehillah High, our children and teens are guiding and directing us. More and more families are coming forward, sharing that while we may celebrated the naming of a son or daughter, years later that same child has discovered something different from within. They may not see themselves as male or female any longer. Some have taken on a new name and even a new gender. How are we responding to them?

These topics are timely and sensitive. Through education, respect, and listening, we strive to establish and maintain a safe environment for every family and every child in our sacred congregation. As Rabbi Denise Eger, past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and friend of Beth Israel noted some years ago, this is “Inclusion Plus.” Our work on the Inclusion Committee has extended to areas beyond physical accommodations. By engaging with important issues such as these, we stand on the front lines supporting each member where they are and who they want to be.

We don’t do this alone. There are Jewish sources to help us as we continue exploring and learning. The SRE Network dedicated to safety, respect, and equity is one such resource. This group includes over 150 organizations from around the country who are equally committed to these efforts. It inspires meaningful change in workplaces and congregations by bringing people together to address gender bias, discrimination, and inequality. By focusing on the value of “kavod hahabriut,” honoring every person’s health and well-being, the SRE Network is motivated in promoting gender justice. They model for us the sensitive and intentional ways we must understand each person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Each of our ancestors, from Abraham, Sarah through Joseph and beyond, worked at crafting their own spiritual identities. They sought to find their own relationships with God. Regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or other lifestyle choices, the same rights and opportunities must be present for all members of our community. While we wrestle with these issues and so many others, like Jacob, we must also prevail. Engaging in the process is the goal; it remains as important today as it was in ancient times.

We live in one of the most diverse cities in the country and our congregation reflects this. We must remain committed to welcoming all with care, honor, and justice. Now is the time to re-examine and sharpen our commitment to this process. As we reflect on our patriarch’s death, let us also appreciate the journey of Jacob’s

life. Through challenge and continued hardship, Jacob becomes a strong leader. Despite his shortcomings, Jacob teaches the important values of honesty and humility.

Jacob's legacy is an enduring gift, and we have inherited the name, B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, in his merit. We strive to make our days count in meaningful ways. Despite divisions and separations, we are sustained by opportunities to honor one another. The length of our days is not about the number of years lived, it's about the quality of our actions, measured by our deeds. We can't delay in welcoming the whole person, the real identity of another, full of complexities, colors, and beauty.

We bless our children on Shabbat evening so that they will know their truest potential. Regardless of gender, we must maintain a community that promotes respect, kindness, and security. With an emphasis on gender justice, we will be a kehillah kedoshah, a sacred community, where everyone feels safe and protected. With support from our leadership, Congregation Beth Israel will thrive and grow. In becoming a partner organization with the SRE Network and fully investing in the inclusion of every member of our congregational community, we will remain relevant, modern, and joyful.

At the end of a book of Torah, we conclude with an important and meaningful phrase. Hazak, Hazak, v'nithazek, let us be strong, be strong and together be a source of strength for one other. We take these words to heart, especially at this time of year. We remain strengthened by our past, as we reflect on the important stories of our ancestors. These are the tools that enable us to better prepare for a future that is sensitive and timely. These are our values today, which inspire and strengthen our steps towards greater action, justice, and peace. May we continue to educate ourselves, learn from one another, and grow together as we say, Hazak, Hazak, v'nithazek, Amen.

