



CONGREGATION AGUDATH JACOB

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From the Desk of  
Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner

### THE PURPOSE OF TORAH

We often think of the Torah as a storybook. It tells us the story of G-d creating the world, forming a Holy Covenant with the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and, through Moses, leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness for forty years until they reached the land of Israel, the Promised Land. The Torah is the book that tells us our story.

That is true. Yet, the Torah is a great deal more than storytelling. The Torah also is a Book

of Mitzvot, commandments. In fact, Jewish tradition often puts more emphasis on the laws of the Torah than on those stories we learned as children. Torah, according to the Rabbis, is primarily about the Mitzvot. The Action. (As we are taught in the Ethics of our Fathers – Pirkei Avot: “**Lo ikar haMachshavah, Ella, HaMa’asseh**”, the thought is not the most important thing, but the action, the deed is”).

The Torah portion of Mishpatim, which means “laws”, appears immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (which we read a week ago on Shavu’ot), and it contains more than fifty specific Mitzvot ranging from the ritual, to the ethical, to the inexplicable.

For example, it contains Mitzvot for the ritual observances of Shabbat and the pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Sukkot and Shavu’ot. It commands that we eat only unleavened bread for the seven days of Passover and that we stop working on Shabbat and take time to rest.

The portion also has some well-known ethical Mitzvot: the prohibitions against bribery, gossip, bestiality, giving false testimony, and mistreating widows and orphans. It contains the requirement to provide food for the needy. It includes the most often repeated Mitzvah in the entire Torah: “**You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt**” (Exodus 22:20). Good rules, all of those.

In the category of Mitzvot that are “inexplicable” (or, at least, difficult to understand in the modern world), the Torah commands that Hebrew slaves who refuse to be set free at the end of their term of service must have their ears pierced with an awl and remain slaves for life.

It commands that a man who seduces a virgin must marry her. It also commands that children who insult their parents must be put to death. (Well, maybe that last one’s not so bad.)

There is no distinction made in the Torah between the different types of Mitzvot. The ethical Mitzvot, the criminal Mitzvot, the ritual Mitzvot, the sensible Mitzvot and the inexplicable Mitzvot (Chukim), all are given together as one. HaShem says that we are expected to observe them all.

This raises a problem for contemporary Jews. We are impressed by the wisdom of the ethical laws and feel their weight upon us. Even if we are sometimes tempted to gossip, we recognize the harm that gossip does and we recognize that this Mitzvah makes sense for living a better life.

We also acknowledge that the ritual laws are important, but most of us think of them differently. We know how lighting Shabbat candles, for example, helps us preserve continuity with our ancestors and keeps alive the collective memory of our people. Yet, most of us probably do not feel that rituals are as critical as ethical laws. Lighting Shabbat candles every week just doesn’t feel like it carries the same weight as refraining from bribery and mistreating widows and orphans.

Mitzvot of the third category—those that make little sense to us—may not inspire any obligation in us. None of us will be looking this weekend for an awl to pierce the ears of our slaves.

Those Mitzvot that offend us, like the commandment to put a child to death for insulting his or her parents, should make us feel an obligation to reject them.

We want to sort the Mitzvot into categories to know which are important, which are critical, which we consider, and which we reject. We want to pick and choose. Yet, the Torah does not admit a distinction. The Mitzvot are the Mitzvot. They are what HaShem expects us to do.

How do we deal with that?

In the early decades of American Traditional Orthodox Judaism, when there was one General Organization, the Reform movement decided to split, and their leaders attempted to answer that question by explicitly stating that the standards had changed.

### **They wrote in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885:**

We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization. The **Pittsburgh Platform of 1885** was a foundational document that explicitly defined the theology and practices of **Classical Reform Judaism** in the United States. Convened by Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler and presided over by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, a group of Reform rabbis met to formally align Jewish practice with modern, Western, scientific sensibilities.

The platform consisted of eight core principles that drastically broke away from traditional Orthodox Jewish law (Halachah) and defined the movement for the next 50 years.

#### **Core Tenets of the Platform**

- **Rejection of Ritual and Dietary Laws:** The platform explicitly rejected traditional laws regarding diet (Kashrut), priestly purity, and ritual dress. It deemed them "not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization".
- **Universal Moral Law over Ritual:** The authors declared that only the *moral laws* of the Torah were binding. Ceremonies were only valuable if they "elevate and sanctify our lives".
- **Rejection of Nationhood (Anti-Zionism):** The Rabbis stated, "**We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.**" Consequently, they rejected any expectation of returning to Palestine, restoring a Jewish state, or bringing back sacrificial temple worship.
- **Embrace of Modern Science:** It explicitly asserted that modern scientific discoveries and historical research were completely compatible with the doctrines of Judaism.
- **Focus on Social Justice:** The document established that a primary duty of modern Judaism was to actively solve social and economic inequalities, laying the early groundwork for what is now known as *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world).
- **Fellowship with Other Faiths:** It recognized Christianity and Islam as daughter religions of Judaism, helping to spread monotheistic truth, and extended a hand of fellowship to all monotheistic faiths.

#### **Why It Matters**

The Pittsburgh Platform created a **massive rift in American Judaism**. By abandoning ritual laws and Jewish nationalism, it triggered a conservative backlash. This directly catalyzed the formation of the **Conservative Judaism** movement, as more traditional Jews sought a middle ground between rigid Orthodoxy and the radical liberalism of the Pittsburgh Platform. The Reform movement eventually softened many of these harsh anti-ritual stances in later revisions, such as the Columbus Platform of 1937.

I have to recognize that since the times of the Pittsburgh Platform, the Reform Movement has backed away from such a bald rejection of some parts of the Torah. They have slowly tried to find a

balance between the concerns of the modern age that rejects the irrational, and the concerns of Jewish faith that hears the Torah as Divinely inspired, transcendent beyond the passing tastes and preferences of our times. If Torah the Word of HaShem and it is Holy, we must be willing to hear it even when it seems difficult or out of step with our times.

There is nothing new about this. Parts of the Torah were also a challenge to the ancient Rabbis. You don't like the way the Torah allows masters to treat their slaves? Neither did the Sages of the Talmud. However, rather than just saying that the Torah was wrong, the Rabbis used the power of interpretation to find deeper meaning in the Torah and justify it.

According to the Talmud, there is a hidden message in the Mitzvah to pierce the ear of the slave who refuses freedom. The Torah says that this slave believes "tov lo imach" (Deuteronomy 15:16). The simplest reading of the phrase is "it is good for him to be with you," meaning that the slave says he is happy to be your servant. However, the Hebrew could also be read to mean, "It is as good for him as it is for you." The Talmud jumps to this reading and states that a Hebrew slave must be treated as his master's equal—as good for him as it is for you. The Rabbis say a Hebrew slave must be fed the same food as his master and given a feather bed like his master's bed. They conclude from this that, "When you buy a Hebrew slave, it is like buying yourself a master" (Talmud Tractate Kiddushin 22a).

What at first seemed like a law for turning temporary slaves into a permanent slaves is actually, according to the Rabbis, a spiritual lesson about the price we pay when we force or coerce others to do our will. The price of enslaving others is that we become slaves ourselves.

This is not just gamesmanship, flipping around the words of the Torah to get it to say whatever we want it to say. It is, rather, an act of love. The Rabbis loved the Torah so much that they struggled to find meaning in it, even in the places where it seems harsh or difficult.

We do the same thing with the people we love. When you love someone who has a difficult personality, you take extra pains to know that person more deeply, to understand the experiences that have shaped him or her so you can respond compassionately and with forgiveness, even when that person is being difficult.

The Torah is like that, too. It was raised in an age when slavery was common, when men had tremendous power over women, and when most people had little control over their destiny. The Torah is shaped by those experiences. Because the Rabbis loved the Torah, they probed it deeply to understand it and to read it compassionately as a text that brings deeper spirituality and meaning into life.

In our own day, we continue the process of interpreting the Torah. We don't need to reject Torah to deal with its difficulties. In fact, we embrace the idea that Torah should be difficult. It should challenge us to find meaning in our lives. Life, we know, is not easy and we need to learn how to negotiate life's challenges and hardships while maintaining our ability to find joy in it.

The purpose of the Torah is not to instruct us in what to do and what not to do. The purpose of the Torah is to force us to be mindful about what we are doing and to hold it up to a standard that

does not originate out of our own heads. The Torah is about disciplining ourselves to recognize that our lives belong to something greater than ourselves, and to make us aware that the choices we make in life reflect that truth.

Rather than thinking of the Torah's Mitzvot as a kind of check list of things we have to do to please G-d (and things we have to refrain from doing), think of them instead as part of a conversation we are having with HaShem. Like a good teacher, Torah does not want us to just memorize facts that will be on the test. Torah wants us to consider what we are doing, learn to assess our actions against our values, to find new meaning in our lives by brightening our spiritual dimension, and deepening our relationship with HaShem by continuing the conversation.

The Torah is a body of wisdom that HaShem gave us as a wedding gift on the day we were married about a week ago on Shavu'ot at Mount Sinai. It is a book that wants to be read joyfully. It wants to be read actively, so the reader will draw upon his or her own experience and wisdom to interpret it. It wants us to linger over each phrase, and letter to discover hidden treasures that help us to understand ourselves more deeply, even in the difficult parts. Torah gives us Mitzvot, not to enslave us to a legal code, but to free us to discover who we really are.

In this way, we discover the real reason why there are no distinctions in the Torah between the ethical, the ritual, the sensible and the inscrutable.

All the Mitzvot are there for us to savor and consider, to awaken us and to prepare us every day for the journey of life. The Torah is the song we sing, and the Mitzvot are the path we walk, (Halachah from the Hebrew as a way to walk everyday life) as we travel toward our purpose.

*Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner*



## President's Message

Over the past couple years, I have mentioned on occasion that I believe very strongly in the value of starting each morning with a bit of, as my Baylor colleagues might term it, “devotional reading.” That is, after saying the *modeh ani*, the *shema*, and other blessings, I take a few minutes and track through a volume or two of writings from either the great sages or other rabbinic teachers or more contemporary rabbis. Some of these are lesson-of-the-day types of books—so many of which are published by Artscroll—while others are great works of *mussar* or other classic religious writings which I can read through a chapter at a time. Over the decades, this strategy has allowed me to work my way through a veritable library of traditional Jewish texts, one day at a time.

One of my favorites, which I revisit often, are the teachings of Yisrael Meir Kagan, the great rabbi known as the Chofetz Chaim. He is recognized for many essential works, but is probably most well-known to Jewish laypeople for his teachings on *lashon hara*. While vernacularly translated as “gossip,” this phrase more correctly stands for “evil tongue.” This concept is probably familiar, in broad strokes, to most Jews and should be familiar to all religiously observant Jews. But it is typically understood incompletely. There are several levels or degrees of this, at least this is how I was taught.

On the surface, the rules against *lashon hara* mean that it is forbidden for us to spread lies which slander another person, especially a fellow Jew. Whether we do this knowingly or unknowingly, we are not off the hook. But avoiding *lashon hara* also encompasses not spreading around, especially, in a public forum even mostly truthful reports that cast someone in a shameful light. Now, to be clear, this does not include providing someone with a true need to know (a business partner, a friend about to get married, one’s rabbi) with information that will protect them from physical, financial, or reputational harm. This should be done discretely, though, and not in a public way which can cause embarrassment, G-d forbid.

But that is not all. The true *tzaddikim* among us are careful to avoid publicly spreading even overly positive things about another person. This may seem like a strange bit of guidance, but there is a very good reason for it. For example, a rabbi or congregational leader praising someone in the *shul* membership a bit too heavily from the *bimah* might seem laudable, but it runs the risk of hurting the feelings of those who may wonder, “Hey, why wasn’t my contribution acknowledged, too?” In making someone feel special, we may inadvertently make someone else feel overlooked.

A moment of candor: this is something that is challenging for me as I read the Announcements each week. So many of us are doing so much for the *shul*, in time and labor and financially, that I am continually afraid that if I start to mention more than a person or two here or there, I will unintentionally leave someone out. That is why I prefer to save all that, in most cases (although with exceptions), for the annual congregational meeting. But, for the record, believe me, I am well aware of most everyone’s contributions and am incredibly grateful! We are blessed to be a congregation of folks who all go the extra mile.

Clearly, abiding by the *halachic* rules regarding *lashon hara* is a challenge, and, to be truthful, we all fall short at times, myself included. But I believe that striving to improve one's *middos* regarding the words that come out of our mouth, especially in a sacred setting like a *shul* or during a *shabbat* meal, is a worthwhile aim. We are of course not forbidden to have informed opinions about issues of the day, or about individuals or groups who wish to harm the Jewish people, or about folks who have done us wrong, nor are we expected to look the other way in the face of active threats to our well-being. That would be terribly foolhardy. But harshly judging folks who we perceive as offending us in some way, including fellow Jews, while perhaps not having all the pertinent information—this is not good form.

The benefit of daily or other regular *mussar* learning is that it reinforces, bit by bit, the kind of positive behavior that we should all strive for as religious Jews. The good news: there are so many places to start, and I am sure that either I or, especially, Rabbi Lanxner can direct you to all sorts of wonderful rabbinic works in translation that can guide you down the path of *tikkun hamiddot*, or character refinement. This is a pursuit for which there is no definitive end point to attain—wherever we are on the ladder, so to speak, there is always further that we can climb. An essential feature of living a religiously Jewish life is the recognition that we are on a journey of lifelong learning and self-improvement. Enjoy the journey!

*L'shalom,*  
Jeff Levin

### Next Lunch & Learn, Saturday, June 13th

Our next monthly Lunch & Learn will be following Shabbat morning service on Saturday, June 13th.

Our first event, on Shavuot, was a wonderful success with a terrific turnout. Let's help this be a regular monthly event for the *shul*. Each month our Lunch & Learn will be sponsored by an individual, family, or group.

Services will begin at the usual time of 10 am on June 13th, followed by a dairy *oneg* in honor of our previously day's *bet din* "graduates" along with some Jewish learning with Rabbi Lanxner.

Our July event, date TBA, will be sponsored by the Rabbi and Rebbetzin in honor of their upcoming anniversary.

Looking forward to seeing everyone at Lunch & Learn each month!

# June Service Schedule

Friday, June 5  
 Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm  
 Candle Lighting 8:13 pm

Saturday, June 6  
 Shacharit 10:00 am  
 Shabbat Ends 9:13 pm

Friday, June 12  
 Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm  
 Candle Lighting 8:16 pm

Saturday, June 13  
 Shacharit 10:00 am  
 Shabbat Ends 9:17 pm

Friday, June 19  
 Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm  
 Candle Lighting 8:18 pm

Saturday, June 20  
 Shacharit 10:00 am  
 Shabbat Ends 9:19 pm

Friday, June 26  
 Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm  
 Candle Lighting 8:20 pm

Saturday, June 27  
 Shacharit 10:00 am  
 Shabbat Ends 9:20 pm



June 3  
 Phillip Gordon

June 4  
 Yhoshua Via

June 7  
 Paula Farmer

June 8  
 Martin Schwartz  
 Schmuel Via

June 17  
 Ray Via

June 18  
 Susan Raphael

June 27  
 Hanna Harelik



June 20  
Rick & Melanie  
Bauer

**THANK YOU for your donations in May!**

**Shabbat**

Henry Hacker  
Susan Lanxner  
Susan Raphael

Jeff Levin  
Inez Bonneville  
Steve & Carrie Draher

George & Kathleen  
Keller

**In Memory of**

Mary Budin  
Florence Hersh  
Judy Hersh

Dorothy Harelík  
Harry Harelík

Ida Mae Machac-Keller  
George & Kathleen  
Keller

**Shavuot Donations**

Joseph Settle  
Ilsa Burns (Non -member)



The following names of dearly departed will be read aloud by the Rabbi preceding the Mourner's Kaddish on Shabbat morning. It is fitting and customary that the nearest of kin be present in the synagogue for the recitation of this special prayer in their memory. Attendance not only honors the departed but also enhances and guarantees that a Minyan is present to recite the Kaddish.

**Kaddish will be read on June 5**

Sivan 21 David Hoppenstein\*  
 Hannah Moser\*  
 Barnett Sachs\*  
 Selma Schulman\*  
 Evelyn Sherman

Sivan 22 Morris Goodman\*  
 Dorothy Gulman  
 Harry Rubel\*

Sivan 24 Isadore Budin\*  
 Bessie Taub

Sivan 25 Alvin Leonard Adelman\*  
 Edith Schwartz\*

Sivan 26 Joseph Gurkoff  
 Mary Haymann  
 Harry H Schwarz\*

**Kaddish will be read on June 12**

Sivan 27 Jack Chodorow\*  
 AJ Farmer

Sivan 28 Mrs. Nathan Zidman\*

Sivan 29 Mary Bertha Englander\*  
 Fannie Fogel  
 Milton Harelik  
 Bernard Wolstein  
 Barney R Goldberg\*

Sivan 30 Morris Novy\*  
 Hilda Ruttenberg\*  
 Abe Wietzman

**Kaddish will be read on June 19**

Tammuz 4 Robert Alpert  
 Tammuz 5 Annie Geetah  
 Gus Holste  
 Sadie Wolkoff Kaplan\*  
 Lt A F Englander  
 Tillie Goodman Goldstein

Tammuz 6 Hyman Fogel  
 Abe Wizig\*  
 Morris Ben Zoblotsky\*

Tammuz 7 Leslie Hoffman\*

Tammuz 8 Mary Robinson  
 Sam Marks\*  
 I Adams\*

Dora Kleiman\*  
 Morris Rosenberg\*  
 Mamie Sampson

Tammuz 10 Adolph Beerman\*  
 Isadore Dansky  
 Naman Lipinsky  
 Max Miller\*  
 Anna Neuwirth

**Kaddish will be read on June 26**

Tammuz 11 Israel Genecov\*  
 David Harris\*

Tammuz 12 Mrs. L Gershowitz

Tammuz 13 Fannye R Smith\*

Tammuz 14 Nathan Neuwirth  
 Max Siegel\*

Tammuz 15 Ben H Green\*  
 Matley Paley Harelik  
 Robert Settle

Tammuz 16 Mrs. M Adams\*  
 Phillip Koss\*  
 Marie Solovey Wangner

*\*Plaque on memorial wall.*